*H-France Forum*

Volume 19 (2024), Issue 8, #4

John D. Lyons, *Women and Irony in Molière’s Comedies of Marriage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. xi+253 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, line drawing. $100.00 (cl). ISBN 978-0-198-88737-9. $99.00 (eb) ISBN 978-0-198-88739-3.

# Review Essay by Helena Taylor, University of Exeter

John Lyons’s deft and accessible study examines how Molière’s use of verbal irony reveals the struggle of his female characters against the restrictions of marriage choice. Lyons analyses eleven comedies—*L’École des maris*; *L’École des femmes*; *Le Misanthrope*; *Don Garcie de Navarre*; *Les Femmes savantes*; *George Dandin*; *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*; *Les Précieuses ridicules*; *Le Tartuffe*; *Amphitryon*; *Dom Juan*—to argue that Molière pays sustained attention to women’s disadvantage when it comes to choosing their spouse, and that this feature of his writing has not received the attention it deserves. Through nuanced close readings, Lyons shows that these comedies each represent in a positive light women’s quests to avoid forced marriages and to choose their partners. Marriage is a key concern for Molière both because of its traditional place in dramatic comedy and—as Lyons delineates—because of the specific social and cultural conditions of this institution in this period of French history. By looking at how the female characters speak and by placing this in historical context we “may arrive at a different view of their situation than we would if we simply began with standard assumptions about the apparent power positions according to gender, class (early modern ‘condition’), wealth, age, and traditional family structure” (p. 24). This focus reveals the ways in which Molière’s female characters were able to frustrate the plans of fathers, guardians, and other authority figures, thereby supporting the argument that Molière mocks and so subverts the institution of marriage as it was enforced by Church and state.

The book’s preface delineates the methodological questions at the heart of this study, engaging with key debates in Molière scholarship: whether to read Molière as proto-feminist or as anti-women, and, relatedly: “Is there an ideology or doctrine in these comedies? Or is there perhaps primarily a sympathy? How should we deal with the challenge of meaning in literature? Is the meaning of a work a message that the author intended to convey?” (p. vi). Lyons takes a subtle route described as “closer to Gadamer’s in *Truth and Method*” (p. ix), suggesting that while we need to pay heed the context, ultimately “it is up to us to connect the dots and to construct a coherent, plausible meaning out of what the playwright has given us” (p. x). Where the playwright may have painted a picture rather than drawn a conclusion, critics, reader, actors and students are bound to do the latter—and therein lies the interest.

Indeed, this study as a whole itself performs an exemplary close reading of Molière’s texts: I have already selected chapters of this work for undergraduate students, urging them to learn from its clarity of argument and adroit textual analysis. The Introduction offers some background to the institution of marriage in this period, showing that the notion that a woman might choose her husband freely was a subversive idea in a culture that viewed marriage as primarily dynastic, political and economic; and women, in most cases, as under the authority of their parents. Other writers who were concerned with these questions are mentioned, namely Madeleine de Scudéry, Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette and Gabrielle Suchon; and the quest for pleasure, whether bodily or intellectual—often aligned with two different groups, the *libertins* and the *précieuses*—is examined as a way of subverting normative approaches to marriage. The Introduction then turns to a definition of irony (verbal irony in particular) as a rhetorical device. Lyons pegs his definition to Leo Strauss’s description of “writing between the lines”, that is, coded discourse intended to hide its meaning from one interlocutor and communicate it to another; and reads this as a sort of preterition (saying something while denying one is saying it), showing the necessity of irony to circumvent or defeat an oppressor. The discussion of irony in the Introduction is instructive in establishing the key approach of this book as rhetorically-orientated formal literary criticism.

The study is then divided into four parts which trace different representations of marriage: Part I, “Schools for Marriage”, examines plays in which two women are to be forced to marry their guardian (*L’École des maris*; *L’École des femmes*). While we see that, for the female protagonist, “ultimately her words are not by themselves enough to get her out of this bind, they do at least for a while hold her oppressor at bay until finally, she gets a lucky break” (p. 28). Although, as Lyons shows, contemporary readers did not necessarily all grasp that the satire was directed at the male attempt to control women, he argues, after Leo Strauss, for an interpretation open to the conception of a writer who “intends to reach a distant audience while deceiving his immediately present listeners” (p. 88). The textual analysis in this section—for instance of Agnès’s “le petit chat est mort” and the misunderstanding in the “avec…là” exchange—masterfully delineates the tension between the limits and powers of words, and the multiple perspectives of irony, innocence and understanding.

The second part, “Courtship and Therapy”, looks at the work considered to be Molière’s greatest comedy, *Le Misanthrope*, and one less-known play, *Don Garcie de Navarre*, to explore texts in which the female protagonist is free to choose the man she will marry and in which the men suffer from a mental or emotional illness in the form of an excessive jealousy that the women attempt to cure through the courtship. The rich analysis of *Le Misanthrope* orientates attention to Célimène, often overlooked or dismissed as the deceitful “coquette”, making her instead a key figure—indeed, as Lyons explains in the preface, Célimène, a widow and so apparently emancipated, free to choose her own husband, was the starting point of the whole study. Lyons shows that Alceste, usually seen as the truthful one, is less so than Célimène, if a distinction is made between truth and sincerity, and he stresses the way Alceste harbours dreams of controlling her. In an illuminating comparison with *Don Garcie de Navarre*, a play never printed in Molière’s lifetime, Lyons examines how the female protagonist, Elvire, likewise tries to cure her suitor, whom she has freely chosen, of his jealousy.

The third section, “Freedom to Marry”, considers *Les Femmes savantes*, *George Dandin*, *Monsieur de Pouceaugnac* and *Les Précieuses ridicules*. These are comedies that operate in the space between the extreme poles of forced marriage and freedom to choose; this section also analyses the two comedies that at first glance seem to convey most clearly “anti-women stereotypes” (p. 123): *Les Précieuses ridicules* and *Les Femmes savantes*. With *Les Précieuses* *ridicules,* Lyons suggests that laughing at Cathos and Magdelon does not necessarily mean Molière is ridiculing the freedom of women to choose the men they marry: “Could the *Précieuses ridicules* exemplify Molière’s inventiveness in devising variations on the use of an ironic mode to express serious and even grave social concerns? Or in other words, could the ridiculousness of the dramatic figures who are speaking serve the same function as more obvious and traditional forms of preterition?”(p. 165). Lyons supports this reading by stressing the predatory entitlement represented by Du Croisy and La Grange. Lyons’s analysis of women’s use of ironic language in *Les Femmes savantes* enables the reader to take seriously the linguistic mastery of characters who are primarily seen as figures of ridicule (Philaminte, Bélise, Armande), even as he acknowledges that their pedantry and pretension are satirised. This focus adds layers to, rather than necessarily resolving, the question of where Molière’s sympathies lie in relation to women and learning. Lyons argues—and this section amply demonstrates—for reading Molière’s comedies of marriage together, as the comparison of the four plays in this section is illuminating in particular for interrogating the polemical aspects of the lesser-known *George Dandin* and the use of humour in *Monsieur de Pouceaugnac*.

Part IV, “Being Married” turns to two plays in which women are already married and they seem to have chosen their spouse, but things are not going well: *Le Tartuffe*, and *Amphitryon*, Molière’s version of Plautus’s comedy of the same name. Scrutinising the marriage of the parents, Orgon and Elmire, and their disagreement over their daughter’s suitor—Orgon wishes her to marry the apparently devout Tartuffe, whom Elmire knows to be attracted to her—Lyons shows how Elmire’s attempts to prevent the marriage are not necessarily motivated only by her daughter’s interest but may reveal her own attraction to Tartuffe (and dissatisfaction with her husband). Similarly, Lyons explores how the distinctions between “husband” and “lover” that Jupiter, disguised as Alcmène’s husband, Amphitryon, insists on when he deceives her into having sex with him, imply that married men should remain lovers of their wives.

The conclusion contains an illuminating comparison of Don Juan, *libertin*, and Célimène, *coquette*, showing how in their subversions of the norms of courtship they are perhaps more similar than they might first appear. This discussion is couched within a contextual analysis—that would not have been out of place in the Introduction—of the complex categories of *libertin*, *précieuse* and *galant(erie)*, including a brief examination of the limitations of *galanterie* for women: for all the prominence it afforded women, it was still not appropriate for women to determine norms. Overall, Lyons’s analysis is comfortable leaving open the questions that might precede or provoke resolution: was Molière *libertin*? How far can we ascertain an ideology in his plays?

Some readers might wish for a little more context and reference to the works of other writers, perhaps especially women, given that this is promised in the Introduction and chapter summaries (for instance, of Chapter 4, p. 109). To be sure, writers other than Molière do feature in all the chapters, but it is primarily (the very canonical) Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette who receives the most attention among women writers. While this is partly justified given the importance of marriage in Lafayette’s work, at times a wider range of writers could have been included, lest it seem that women writers are a single or essential entity: this might have included other dramatists, such as Molière’s own collaborator, Marie-Catherine Desjardins (Madame de Villedieu), who was so invested in rewriting history to focus on the question of love, marriage, and the untold stories of women. Madeleine de Scudéry, though mentioned, might also have been given a much more prominent role as a key intertext with her work discussed in textual detail. Although Lyons directs attention away from the social critique of the pedant in the chapter on *Les Femmes savantes*, Scudéry’s own—hugely influential—satire of the “femme savante” in the character of Damophile in her 1649–53 novel *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* is a key point of reference. And relatedly, in this portrait, as across her work, Scudéry emerges as a significant figure for theorising (and policing) women’s language in public, as well as elaborating a sort of humour, a gentle satire or “raillerie” suitable for women. It might have shifted the focus too far from Molière’s plays to engage with questions of women’s speech so prominent in the context of the language reform of this period; however, a little more consideration of some seventeenth-century writers’ views of women’s language, and the gendering of polite discourse (that proved both enabling and restrictive for women) might have enriched the discussion of Molière’s engagement with contemporary debates. The occasional slippage between the way the women as represented by Molière and the way historical women engaged with these questions (e.g. p. 231) might also have been unpacked further.

But these are not core concerns with regard to the work’s primary intention, which is to show Molière’s representation of the question of women’s marriage choice and to do so using a close rhetorical analysis of his plays. Lyons’s lucid study is structured in such a way that individual plays receive their own chapter, making it an instructive scholarly and pedagogical companion that will enable less-known plays by Molière to be taught and studied and new light to be shed on his canonical works.

Helena Taylor

University of Exeter

H.Taylor@exeter.ac.uk

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Forum*  
Volume 19 (2024), Issue 8, #4