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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.

# Response by John D. Lyons, University of Virginia

First of all, let me express my thanks to David Harrison and Hélène Bilis for the splendid gift of this Forum and thus for the attention to the small book that signals the end of my career as a teacher. One synonym of gift is “present,” and this seems to me significant, for to be present means devoting time and attention to something. In today’s busy world it takes effort to pause and reflect on a single object. Here four persons with great knowledge of Molière and his world have given me the gift of their attention. To thank them, what can I give in return? Mauss’s *Essai sur le don* teaches us that every gift is an exchange of some sort. What form can my thanks take?

We all come to Molière through the efforts of others. Michael Call quotes my teacher Henri Peyre and Claude Bourqui mentions another of my teachers, Jacques Guicharnaud, but there were, of course, many others who initially led me towards Molière. Bourqui is kind also to recall the late and much regretted Georges Forestier, who honored me with his friendship ever since our first lunch together in 1985. If I have not written about Molière in all these decades, it is not because the playwright is intimidating. After all, millions of people have gone to the theatre to see his plays or have read printed versions. He is, in short, the most inviting and least intimidating of authors. But what is frightening is the amount written about Molière, about the theatre of his day, about the reception of his works through the centuries and across cultures, not to mention the huge number of contemporaneous early modern documents that can be marshalled to help understand them. It is easy to see how a student or other young scholar—or even an elderly one like myself—could be swept up in the vertiginous realm of Google Books and all the other resources that can not only intimidate but also can deflect attention from the reading and performance of the works themselves. Thus it is with the utmost respect that I salute the four reviewers for having taking up the challenge in their own contributions to the field.

It is not easy to respond to reviewers with whom I am in total agreement. As I look at the four reviews, I am struck by the sharp divide between the three scholars in English-speaking universities and the scholar in a French-speaking one. Perhaps I should simply mention a few of the points made by the largely positive reviewers, the places where I felt happy to have found my ideal readers. “Conversations with students” (Goldstein), such as the one that provided the impetus for this book, is something Claire Goldstein, Michael Call, and Helena Taylor value, as do I. “Close engagement with the text” (Goldstein) or “close reading” (Taylor), also seems to be something we appreciate. The simplicity of an approach with a narrow focus in a study that has “ready applicability” (Call) is good in that it “leave[s] ample space for scholars to explore” similar issues in other plays. My preference for “leaving open […] questions” (Taylor) seems not to be bothersome and perhaps is even advantageous. I am happy to think that *Women and Irony* could serve as “an instructive scholarly and pedagogical companion” (Taylor). Yes, that is my hope.

When the reviewers locate opportunities to add to what I have said, their ideas are wonderfully constructive. Call, for one, points out that women characters are not the only ones to make extensive use of irony. Yes, indeed! Another book project? “Men and Irony in…”? Well, I shall not be the one to write it. However, in passing, I do recognize Alceste as a major ironist. Moreover, it seems to me that we can discern a gendered aspect to his irony. Over the centuries many have noted that Alceste and Célimène are not only partners in a courtship but that they are also rivals for attention. Is it too far-fetched to suggest that Alceste, like Célimène, craves to be courted? If, in the traditional practice of Western courtship, the male “pursues” the female, who then “retreats,” it seems to me that Alceste’s behavior encourages those around him to pursue him and to win his favor. Hence Arsinoé’s attempt to win him over and also the very ending of the play, when Philinte and Éliante are about to run after him.

It is very reassuring to read Helena Taylor mention that I could usefully have given “more context and reference to works of other writers, particularly women” (p. 3). The more I worked on this project, the more conscious I became of Molière’s indebtedness to contemporary women writers and *salonnières*. And yet, when I made limited descriptions of comparable situations from contemporaneous works, I began to wonder whether readers would tolerate what many would consider digressions. I am glad to hear that such pages in *Women and Irony* did not appear to range too far away.

To sum up, my English-speaking colleagues find value in a work that engages in close reading, is conducive to classroom discussion with students, has a relatively narrow focus, suggests interpretations but does not claim to give a final, authoritative answer, calls into question traditional interpretations of certain major plays, brings minor plays into dialogue with the most canonical ones, and takes the form of an essay. If I summarize thus rather crudely the points of convergence that are much better expressed in the reviews themselves, I do this to emphasize the contrast with Claude Bourqui’s view, which finds all of these characteristics essentially negative.

Sometimes commentaries come from readers, such as Claude Bourqui, who do not belong to the expected public of a book. It is entirely natural that he finds little useful here, though *Women and Irony* does allow him to illustrate the divergence between French and non-French scholarly practices and values. I am grateful that he has devoted such close attention to a study that offers little to him or to his colleagues and students. His close attention manifests itself in the form of performative criticism. I use the term performative to mean that a critic adopts either the form or a central idea of the target text to shape his or her commentary.[1] One inspiration for my book was the passage from Leo Strauss in which Strauss mentions the practice of “writing between the lines.”[2] Rather than say in a perfectly explicit way how bad *Women and Irony* is, Bourqui skillfully signals (between the lines) the extent of his disapproval. In this way he is able to show that the aspects of *Women and Irony* that seem customary, useful, and even praiseworthy in the English-language world, are on the contrary undesirable in the French university milieu. The book, as he notes, is founded on “les principes du *close reading,*”assumes a form “familière aux lecteurs d’*essays* américains” (p. 2), has throughout an “ambiance de *classroom*” (p. 2), and manifests an “orientation « pédagogique »” (p. 2). The choice to refer to these aspects with English terms is a clear stylistic marker of the exotic and distasteful character of the book he describes. And the *guillemets* that enclose the word *pédagogique* hold this objectionable adjective at a safe distance.

I sympathize with Bourqui, because I have been in his shoes. I have had to write reviews of publications that were clearly not meant for me and that have not had an evident applicability to my teaching and writing. This is neither my fault nor his. Despite the partial overlap of the texts we study, it would be a real stretch to say that we belong to the same discipline. We function in different languages, different cultures, and different institutions and we teach and write for different audiences. Over the decades, I have gotten used to this, but Bourqui still finds it bothersome. This dissatisfaction is summed up in his comment, “Le constat, on ne le cachera pas, est un peu amer pour des collègues français à qui on a souvent reproché de faire peu de cas des recherches menées outre-Atlantique, ou pour l’auteur de ces lignes, organisateur en 2018, avec Christophe Schuwey, d’un colloque de la SE17 à Fribourg (Suisse), destiné à rapprocher les deux mondes de la recherche américaine et française…” (p. 3).

Far from me any *amertume*. But I return to my gratitude for this *H-France Forum*. As I wrote earlier, the value is in the attention, and for me attention is not only the basis of what I do in the classroom but also what I encourage my students to do. They, who always have their mobile phones and their laptops at hand, are all too inclined to engage in endless searching instead of concentrating on what is presently in front of them. Close reading and the essay form are practices of attention. They are deliberate limitations. And although some essays are relatively long, they are delimited. Bourqui—as well as, I think, many others writing for scholars in the French-speaking world—privileges the large over the small, the ever-beckoning quantity of *more* things one could look up and read. When he mentions Google Books, I cannot help thinking of the “Library of Babel” as described by Jorge Luis Borges. “When it was proclaimed,” writes Borges, “that the Library comprised all books, the first impression was of extravagant joy. All men felt themselves lords of a secret, intact treasure. There was no personal or universal problem whose eloquent solution did not exist—in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly expanded to the limitless dimensions of hope.” [3] Claude Bourqui invites me and, by extension, the readers of his *compte rendu*, to explore (the italics are mine), “les *infinies possibilités* de parcourir, feuilleter, scruter, des *milliers de pages* contemporaines de Molière” (p. 2); to make use of “un répertoire intertextuel et contextuel à *plusieurs milliers* de passages des comédies” available through MOLIERE21 (p.3); to be cognizant that the “bibliographie moliéresque est *immense*” (p.2); to realize that “On peut *gloser à l’infini* sur la transformation psychologique que vit le personnage et sur les effets que produit, dans l’esprit de la jeune fille, l’évolution de sa représentation de l’union conjugale” (p.4); to ponder the “*vaste répertoire* de structures d’intrigue” (p.4) available to the playwright; to take into account the “*innombrables variations* sur les références et structures pastorales qui émaillent la production des années 1660” (p.3); to find with the help of Google Books “la quasi *intégralité* des nouvelles et petits romans parus dans la décennie de 1660” (p.2). Bourqui consistently favors increase in quantity, as, for instance, in the “nécessaire *maximisation* des connaissances contextuelles” (p.3).

In Borges’s story, however, this apprehension of limitless availability “was followed, naturally enough, by deep depression.”[4] The vertiginous and ultimately paralyzing experience of all the possible combinations of plots, characters, themes, contexualizations, and performances constitutes precisely the challenge that readers, stage directors, and actors confront when they come upon a play by any playwright. What to do? One response is to do nothing—not to perform the play; not to write about it. Another is the endless suspensive accumulation of materials and references. Or, instead, one can create *one* production of a play, make *one* interpretation of the text, consider *one* instance of contextualization. And then, one can start again. But each time one escapes, if only momentarily, from the curse of infinite possibility. Mallarmé brought this to our attention—the realization that *un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*. And yet, we throw the dice, each time proposing one instance, one view, a limited interpretation, knowing that elsewhere there will be others.

Having taken my first course at the Sorbonne in 1964, far into the past century, I feel in some ways like the Forrest Gump or the Zelig of early modern French studies. I can still feel the excitement of discovering French scholarship, which seems to me to have been very different from current publications in France. Claude Bourqui writes of the “analyse détaillée fondée sur les principes du *close reading*” as if this practice came from the English-speaking world, but I discovered textual commentary through French literary studies as well as in French film analysis. The French writers who influenced my generation were primarily writers of what Bourqui would surely call essays: Gérard Genette, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Louis Marin, Tzvetan Todorov, Vincent Descombes, Simone de Beauvoir, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Lucien Goldmann, Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, Georges Poulet, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Christian Metz, Michel Serres, Jean Starobinsky, Jacques Lacan… and the list could go on. Needless to say, I was not equally attached to all of these writers, but they wrote essayistically, suggestively, provocatively, often exploring in depth one revealing text or case at a time. None of them seemed to wish to exhaust a topic, but rather to open it. They were not respectful of disciplinary boundaries, but to those of us coming from the English-speaking world they belonged to what we called “French studies.”

Those writers and the intellectual effervescence that attracted so many of us to France are now part of the past. Bourqui is right to draw attention to the distance that now exists between the French university and those in other countries. But I see no reason to deplore distance and difference. I have many friends in other disciplines, and I have friends in other countries. Occasionally something of theirs sparks an idea in me. Sometimes something I say or write might be useful to them There is reason to think that in the future our two cultures may draw closer together. As an example of waxing and waning contact, let me point to the Centre Américain du Cinéma à Paris, which was affiliated with the film and media studies department of the Université de Paris-3 (at the time called the DERCAV). This was an entity in which the teaching faculty were all French. The students were from the U.S. The purpose was to allow Americans to learn about the French approach to cinema and television studies. Many American academics currently teaching were formed at the Centre (I was one). The Centre was a great success, and therefore it no longer exists. Why? Because the Americans learned so well that they were able to teach another generation of American students what they (the teachers) had learned in France. And things evolved from there.

My greatest profit from visits to France and the visits of my French colleagues here in the U.S. has come from the conversations we had about a specific text, a specific theme, a specific concept. With Georges Forestier, with Hélène Merlin-Kajman, with Myriam Dufour-Maître, with Emmanuel Bury, with Danielle Haase-Dubosc, we did not talk about Google Books. We just practiced close reading and close listening.

# NOTES

[1] An example of such performative criticism is Célimène’s response to Arsinoé in *Le Misanthrope.* See Molière, *Œuvres complètes* II(Paris: La Pléiade, 2010), act III, scène iv.

[2] Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952; reprinted 1988), 24.

[3] Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1962), 83.

[4] Borges, p. 84.

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