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Patrick Dandrey, *La Guerre comique. Molière et la querelle de L'École des femmes*. Paris: Hermann, 2014. 416 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, index. 27€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-7056-8955-1.

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It is one of the ironies of literary history that a period famed for its fondness for decorum and order, and known under the serene name of “French Classicism,” should be equally notorious for the explosive literary controversies that regularly unsettled its supposed orthodoxies. It is a reminder that an intense belief in shared poetic and aesthetic ideals tends to produce more conflict than consensus. And proof that, more specifically, the age of absolutism barely concealed under its veneer of conformity and hierarchy a deep struggle over its fundamental values.

In the realm of literature and the arts, these conflicts—or *querelles* as they were called—regularly erupted with great fanfare and transfixed the reading public. Their history is in many ways that of French culture in the seventeenth century. The rise, for example, of theater as a kind of official state art under Richelieu was marked by the celebrated *querelle du Cid* which in 1637 accompanied Corneille’s rise to stardom. The development of the modern psychological novel likewise occasioned the quarrel that greeted the 1678 publication of Mme de La Fayette’s transformative *La Princesse de Clèves*. And the rise of an early Enlightenment assertion of unlimited human progress through critical reason led to the most sustained, and internationally prominent, debate of them all, *la querelle des anciens et des modernes*, whose various episodes gripped Europe at the end of the century and into the beginning of the next.

Vying for the most consequential of these cultural conflicts is the *querelle de L'École des femmes*, the subject of Patrick Dandrey’s masterful study of the polemics that swirled around Molière’s 1662 breakout comedy. After his return to Paris in 1658 Molière had made a specialty of shorter comedies, but *L'École des femmes* (*The School for Wives*) represented a bold leap into the full-fledged five-act verse form associated with the highest traditions of tragedy and learned comedy; the play’s mix of social and psychological observation with intense comic verve announced a new ambition for comedy, one that would be further realized in the playwright’s next two five-act verse comedies, *Tartuffe* (1664-1669) and *Le Misanthrope* (1666). The shape of French, indeed European, comedy would never be the same.

Dandrey’s book marks a major achievement due, in part, to the comprehensive nature of his 400-page study, the first book devoted entirely to this groundbreaking *querelle*. He tells the story with a dramaturgic flair that will appeal to both the non-specialist and the deeply initiated Moliériste. The introduction provides the backdrop for the action to come, while the first chapter lays out the crucial issues under debate in the controversy, notably concerning the relation between comedy (and the raucous laughter it produces) and literary, moral, and philosophical values. The exposition continues with three chapters analyzing the dramatis personae engaged in the conflict, sketching the sociological types at play, including playwrights, actors, and the rising class of proto-journalists (*nouvellistes*) who populated the period’s literary and theatrical world. The stage thus set, Dandrey then tackles the unfurling action or (to keep with the theatrical analogy) the “plot” of the *querelle*. He begins by examining the origins of the conflict. Dandrey here distinguishes himself both from those scholars who have long portrayed Molière as an

innocent victim suffering at the devious hands of envious rivals who first launched the attacks, and, conversely, from more recent scholars who contend that it was Molière himself, as a wily master of public relations, who created the quarrel out of whole cloth in order to exploit the controversy and promote his play as a *succès de scandale*. Rejecting (or at least nuancing) both views, Dandrey instead employs the paradigm of the “self-fulfilling prophesy” to argue that Molière’s early preemptive moves against potential future criticism pushed his opponents into action; Molière thus did in a sense create and manage the quarrel, but the virulent opposition facing him was in fact real, and motivated by powerful personal, professional, aesthetic and ideological interests. The *querelle*, according to Dandrey, cannot thus be reduced to a conniving cabal or to a publicity stunt, but represents instead a cultural and aesthetic controversy of the highest order.

The second half of the book examines the fundamental structural elements guiding the debate. Dandrey contends that Molière largely succeeded in representing the debate according to two contending models: *chicane* and *prouesse*. The first of these Molière slyly alleges is the modus operandi of his critics: they are interested only in the “chicanery” of poetic technicalities, in decrying Molière’s petty infractions against the byzantine legalistic codes governing dramatic unity and decorum. Against this paradigm, Molière employs in his favor another model of judicial evaluation, that of “prowess,” of the judicial duel, of—to return to Dandrey’s title, *La Guerre comique*—trial by combat. And it is here that Molière has the upper hand because he chooses for the combat the ground most favorable to his own talents, namely that of staged comedy. Molière’s genius in the *querelle* was to wage the war not with the weapons of traditional criticism, but with the arms of art. Rather than riposte with a polemical treatise, he authored and staged two innovative metatheatrical comedies, *La Critique de L’Ecole des femmes* and *L’Impromptu de Versailles*, in which he dramatized, or rather satirized, his opponents. In short, he won by making the audience laugh at his critics and by proving his comic mastery in a joust of theatrical wit. Pursuing this path, Molière crafted new models of comic dramaturgy that his opponents could at best imperfectly imitate. Dandrey thus examines with a keen eye for dramatic and rhetorical structure the dynamics of rewriting and hypertextuality at work in a polemical battle which itself becomes, as he phrases it, something of a “comedy with one hundred acts...whose stage is the world of theater” (“comédie à cent actes...dont la scène est l’univers du théâtre,” p. 387).

Taken together, the rich suggestiveness of these analyses, the sweep of the canvas, and the impeccable erudition and attention to historical detail, would alone make *La Guerre comique* essential reading for anyone interested in French classical theater. And yet Dandrey’s book makes an even greater contribution, of quite broader significance, than such a comprehensive history of a single literary polemic might suggest. To appreciate the importance of this contribution, a quick sketch of the long history of Molière criticism will prove helpful. The reception of Molière’s comedies is a bifurcated one, and Molière himself did much to establish the two contending traditions that have defined views of his work. The first tradition celebrates Molière as a master of social and psychological observation, indeed a moral and political philosopher, whose comedies offer both penetrating analyses and forceful prescriptions concerning human failings. Molière did much to promote this view of his work, arguing famously in the preface to *Tartuffe* that the aim of comedy is to correct morals and manners. The view of Molière as an artist-thinker, generally considered of the epicurean kind, is still very much alive in Molière criticism.[1] The second view of Molière’s comedies largely dismisses such elevated aims as either irrelevant or obscurantist: Molière is above all a theater professional, an actor, director and author aiming only to craft stage works designed to be enjoyed. Here again, Molière laid the groundwork, arguing at times that he aimed only to please his public and that his plays were meant more for performance than reading. This pragmatic and at times anti-intellectualist approach particularly flourished in the mid-twentieth century, when René Bray dared to ask with some skepticism “Does Molière think?” (“Molière, pense-t-il?”), and it continues to thrive today among both scholars and theater professionals.[2]

Dandrey has long worked to bridge these two approaches, or rather to transcend their opposition. He did so most influentially up to the present book in his seminal 1992 work *Molière, ou l’esthétique du ridicule*,

where he argued that the playwright's achievement resulted from fusing laughter and moral penetration, from uniting probing scrutiny of human failings with the hilarity resulting from their inherent ridiculousness.^[3] Terence was thus reconciled with Plautus; five-act verse drama with hearty laughter, with *vis comica*. Dandrey thus devotes much of the first chapter of *La Guerre comique* to reviewing the key points of his earlier work, because to understand the ferocity of the polemical battle unleashed by the "Copernican revolution" (p. 45) of Molière's new comedy, the playwright's innovative synthesis must be situated in a theatrical tradition starkly divided between the elegance of Corneille's not-so-funny comedies and the popular raucousness of farce and *commedia dell'arte*.

One now understands why comic success, why producing audience laughter, should be such a crucial concept in Dandrey's analysis, the key in fact to the trial by combat through which Molière's comic "prowess" triumphs. Laughter's role as supreme arbiter is no longer simply limited to judging questions concerning theatrical talent, popular favor, or commercial success. Laughter is also an indicator of broad social and moral "value," to use one of Dandrey's most frequently employed terms. Once the source of laughter, *le ridicule*, is posited as an inherent deformation in human reason or character, laughter becomes not just an effect produced by comedy; it is a tool advancing understanding. In terms of the *querelle*, this elevation of laughter means that the criticisms that Molière renders ridiculous are not simply, as impediments to his career, effectively demolished; it also means that their intellectual and aesthetic foundations are equally exposed and debunked.

It is crucial to note, however, that what we might call Dandrey's idealization of the *querelle*, his excavation of its literary, philosophical, and social value, does not entail any dismissal of the concrete linguistic and theatrical forms employed in the "comic war." Far from it. Dandrey's favorite terms are variations on the idea of synthesis, such as "fédération," "conciliation," and "fusion." In somewhat Hegelian fashion, Dandrey works here to transcend the age-old opposition between form and content. The laughter of the ridiculous provides the exemplary model for such conciliation, for its revelation of human nature can only be effectively expressed in a pleasing, and thus digestible, form through the mediation of the comic work of art; the idea of the ridiculous must be incarnated in concrete poetic and theatrical forms.

This dialectical approach leads Dandrey both to study in detail the specific rhetorical and theatrical practices at play in the *querelle* and to situate their meaning in a broad artistic and philosophical landscape. The discussion for example of self-portraiture, a key element in Molière's metatheatrical comedies, thus includes illuminating excursions that range from Montaigne to Velázquez. It also leads Dandrey to mount a forceful defense of the idea of valuation in literary criticism, one that is not based on a cult of tradition (embodied in a French worship of Molière often equal to the greatest excesses of Bardolatriy), but instead grounded in a critical examination of works and their reception.

Such a position, expressed with the supreme erudition, elegance, and acumen of *La Guerre comique*, will of course encounter responses. Voices of resistance will find herein powerful new material against which to contest the intellectual and moral import of Molière's plays. Industrious allies of Dandrey's approach can further extend the domain of analysis opened by the book, moving to territories left untilled here, such as the future impact of the *querelle* not only on later French theatrical culture, but also on the broader European scene where Molière's influence was to prove determinative. All will be deeply indebted, as will every reader, to this exemplary work fusing insightful literary and dramaturgical analyses with the most capacious and illuminating view of cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic history.

NOTES

[1] See for example Antony McKenna, *Molière, dramaturge libertin* (Paris: Champion, 2005) and Olivier Bloch, *Molière/Philosophie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000).

[2] René Bray, *Molière, homme de théâtre* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1954), p. 32.

[3] Patrick Dandrey, *Molière, ou l'esthétique du ridicule* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992).

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