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H-France Review Vol. 8 (March 2008), No. 51

Larry Riggs, *Molière and Modernity: Absent Mothers and Masculine Births*. Charlottesville, Virginia: Rookwood Press, 2005. 234 pp. \$45.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-188-63655-51.

Review by Julia Prest, Yale University.

Larry Riggs' preface reads rather like a personal manifesto: he is quick to tell us that he will emphatically not be offering anything masquerading as a definitive reading of Molière's plays because he does not believe that such a thing is desirable or possible. *Molière and Modernity* is thus an anti-canonical account of one of France's most canonical authors; it is an opening up, not a closing down. Furthermore, Riggs' belief in the openness of literary texts is, he claims, shared by Molière himself: Molière famously ridiculed rigidity of all sorts, including that of the reader of texts who believes that language is eminently decipherable and unequivocal. This, we are told, is Molière's lesson in interpretation. It is also a response to an emerging modernity (that of the absolutist state), which itself depended on the authority of the single, indisputable reading.

Despite Riggs' commitment to plurivocality, his book does not lack coherence. We do not find here a series of different possible interpretations of the plays, each placed inconclusively on an equal footing; rather, Riggs offers something new that is to be considered alongside all that has already been written about Molière. In so doing, he seeks to add to the wealth of Molière criticism rather than to overthrow or replace what already exists. *Molière and Modernity* is an intensely personal reading that reflects Riggs' own broad interests in literature, philosophy, and critical theories. The latter include psychoanalysis, feminism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism, as well as (intriguingly) ecology. His book is about Molière's plays; but it is really, ultimately, about man and society. In that sense, it is political, and sometimes openly *engagé*. One of Riggs' key observations, for instance, is that greater social mobility, commonly identified as a symptom of modernity and widely considered to be A Good Thing, is paradoxically dependent on the continued existence of a social hierarchy. At the same time that one thinks of Molière's bourgeois gentilhomme, one can't help thinking of the American Dream. As he sheds light on Molière's texts, then, Riggs invites us not only to appreciate Molière's relevance to contemporary society (be it modern, post-modern, or something else—it is not always clear), but also to reflect more deeply on that society. Whether or not that was Molière's intention is something that we can never know, but it makes for interesting and provocative reading.

For Riggs, *Dom Juan* is the play that best encapsulates the multiple paradoxes of modernity; as such, it is also the one that elicits from the reader and audience member the most post-modern (by which he means ambiguous) response. Not without some qualities that might be deemed admirable (notably his heroic defence of Dom Carlos), the Don himself is a rampant individualist who plays on the class system, exercising his *droit de seigneur* and promising upward mobility to his peasant lovers. He is a man of discovery and conquest, who consumes—and then discards—women as if they were disposable commodities. It is in this commodification of women, alongside a striking absence of mother figures, that another important feature of Riggs' modernity is to be found.

Repression and control of the female sex are, according to Riggs, defining characteristics of modernity, borne of a wish to tame and control unruly nature (itself identified as feminine or female) in the interests of legitimizing masculine authority and power. It is certainly the case that mothers and mother figures

are strikingly lacking from Molière's comic universe, a fact which Riggs takes as evidence of Molière's engagement with contemporary modernizing tendencies. Their absence contributes to a climate in which the central (male) monomaniac (who is perhaps *the* defining characteristic of Molière's theatre) can pursue his dream of "masculine birth." Arnolphe, for instance, attempts to give birth to Agnès in *L'Ecole des femmes*. Having bought the four-year-old Agnès from an impoverished mother figure and imprisoned her in the "masculine womb" of the convent, he hopes that she will now be born again as the fully-formed, perfect wife. Riggs' preoccupation with the question of motherhood leads to an interesting reinterpretation of the play's dénouement, in which we learn that Agnès is not the child of the peasant woman from whom Arnolphe bought her, but of Chrysalde's sister, Angélique, who was secretly married to Enrique. The return of Agnès' real mother in the form of a conscious reactivated memory in the final scene of the play can be understood to represent the restoration of a world in which mothers *do* once again exist. The reappearance of the biological mother symbolizes the rejection of masculine birth and the failure of Arnolphe's modernist, masculinist project. If the traditional marriage ending is patriarchal, it also brings with it the welcome return of the natural, biological order.

Riggs' analysis of *L'Avare* is particularly interesting, and I find it utterly convincing. As was the case with Arnolphe, Harpagon's tyrannical project is facilitated by the absence or weakness of the play's mother figures. The absence of his children's mother (she is dead) permits Harpagon to threaten the misappropriation of their inheritance from her as well as from him. More significantly, though, it provides a key to understanding Harpagon's motivation. His substitution of money for all other values is not only a reflection of the modern capitalist economy, but also a response to the loss of his wife. Like Harpagon's money, his dead wife is buried in the ground; his obsessive visits to the garden to check on his money may usefully be recast as those of a grieving widower visiting the grave of the person he has loved and lost. Such an interpretation deepens our understanding of Harpagon's reaction when his precious *cassette* is stolen: he speaks of the theft as a murder and of the loss of his money in terms that might more commonly be employed for the death of a loved one: "j'ai perdu mon support, ma consolation, ma joie." Furthermore, in response to the demise of the mother of his children, it seems that Harpagon has, in his devotion to usury (a form of masculine birth par excellence), replaced his devotion to her reproductive capacities with a passion for the reproductive capacities of money. Here too, Riggs' reading brings new insight to bear on the ending of the play: motherhood is restored to a greater degree than in *L'Ecole des femmes* with the news that Anselme is to be reunited with a wife who is still living. In response, Harpagon seeks in his own way to be reunited with his wife when, in the last line of the play, he declares that he will go and see his "chère cassette."

Riggs' readings of *Le Misanthrope* and *Les Femmes savantes* are equally insightful, if somewhat less original. In his analysis of the former, Riggs examines the familiar theme of how we are to read texts, paying particular attention to the vexed question of where Truth is to be found if it is not an inherent feature of language. *Les Femmes savantes*, notably in the figure of Philaminte, lends itself more easily to an exploration of the question of motherhood. Recalling Cartesian dualism, the artificial nature of language is seen here to be in conflict with biology as the young women of the play mistakenly reject one in favour of the other. As Riggs reminds us, the separation of body from mind and spirit tends in practice to mean simply the repression of the body—another hallmark of his modernity.

This is a book that is amply aware of the criticisms that might be levelled against the methodology adopted by its author. The threat of anachronism, in particular, looms large over a study in which it is repeatedly asserted that Molière or one or other of his plays anticipates some aspect of post-structuralism or post-modernism. Some readers will be uncomfortable when Riggs claims, for instance, that his reading "places Molière in agreement with Jacques Lacan" (p. 111). Sometimes Riggs overstates his case, as when he declares that "neither Freud nor Lacan was more aware than Molière of repression and sublimation" (p. 140). There are also times when Riggs runs the risk of taking comedy too seriously. The analysis as a whole might have benefited from a greater insistence on the comic context of these plays alongside an examination of how that affects our understanding of the social criticisms contained

within. The question of satire seems particularly pertinent to Riggs' discussion: is satire *always* a criticism? How is that criticism to be interpreted? Does the humor merely soften the blow? In a similar vein, I would have liked more discussion of how and why comedy is, as Riggs asserts, a fundamentally anti-modern genre. For all its idiosyncrasies, though, this is a bold and intelligent study: there is no doubt that Riggs has succeeded in his aim to provide an "interesting and fruitful" reading of Molière. And much more besides.

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