

BOOK REVIEWS



Harold C. Knutson. *The Triumph of Wit. Molière and Restoration Comedy*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988). xi + 192 pp. with 29 illustrations.

Harold Knutson, a professor of French at the University of British Columbia, is a very well-known *dix-septième*iste. His major publications have dealt largely with classical French theatre, especially the plays of Rotrou and Molière. His scholarly work reveals his ability to utilize diverse critical methods in order to express the complex nature of classical French theatre. His 1976 book *Molière: an Archetypal Approach* developed a thoroughly creative Jungian interpretation of Molière's major comedies. In this comparative study on Molière and English Restoration comedy, Harold Knutson made effective use of sociocriticism in order to explore and define similar representations of social reality.

Although scholars have long since recognized Molière's obvious influence on such important English Restoration playwrights as William Wycherley, George Etherege, and William Congreve, no book since John Wilcox's 1938 *The Relation of Molière to Restoration Comedy* and very few essays since then have explored the reworking of Molière's comedies by English dramatists of the late seventeenth century. Harold Knutson proposes a reasonable explanation for the paucity since 1938 of studies on Molière and English Restoration comedy. During the six decades before the publication of Wilcox's book, many comparatists had limited their analyses to identifying the number and nature of imitations of passages from Molière in English Restoration comedies. Most studies before Knutson's book rarely examined similarities in both comic techniques and the representation of social classes in these acknowledged masterpieces of English and French comedy.

In *The Triumph of Wit*, Harold Knutson argues persuasively that sociocriticism enables us to describe quite accurately the comic representations of social re-

ality by Molière and English Restoration playwrights. In his 1952 book *The Restoration Comedy of Wit*, Thomas Fujimura divided the comic characters of Wycherley, Etherege, and Congreve into three major categories: "Truewits, Witwouds, and Witlesses." Harold Knutson borrowed these categories from Fujimura and used them to show how three very different character types reacted toward contemporary social practices and conventions. In agreement with such specialists of French literature as Paul Bénichou and Ralph Albanese, Harold Knutson argues that Molière portrays more favorably an aristocratic and not a middle-class perception of society. Harold Knutson further shows that the most sympathetic characters in English Restoration comedies are refined noblemen and noblewomen and not members of the middle class.

The "truewits" are those "honnêtes hommes" who possess a fine sense of humor and always act unpretentiously but never in a harsh or boorish manner. They adhere to the social conventions of their day and conform freely to "The Way of the World," as Congreve called the practices of the cultured members of the upper classes. In *The Triumph of Wit*, Knutson discussed at length Brissart's engravings for the 1682 edition of Molière's *Oeuvres complètes*. Brissart consistently depicts "truewits" in fashionable clothing whereas "witwouds" (pretenders to wit) or "witlesses" (boorish outsiders) are portrayed in terribly outdated clothes. The unattractive outfits worn by such "witless" characters as Arnolphe and Sganarelle contrast clearly with the modish costumes of such sympathetic "truewits" as Dorante (from *La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes*) and Philinte. In a fascinating chapter entitled 'The Wages of Incivility: the Outsider Figure,' Harold Knutson proposes that we consider Alceste as an uncompromising outsider and Philinte and Eliante as the exemplary representatives of "truewits" in *Le Misanthrope*. This chapter will encourage many readers to view these three characters from a new point of view.

Although specialists of English Restoration theater may feel that this excellent book analyzes Molière

much more than English playwrights, Knutson's socio-critical approach helps us to understand more precisely the relationship between wit and representations of social diversity in such comic masterpieces as Molière's *Le Misanthrope* and *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, George Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, and William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. *The Triumph of Wit* is an important contribution to the history of French and English comedy in the last four decades of the seventeenth century.

Edmund J. Campion