

## Enjoyment and Subversion in the Comedy-Ballets

by  
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I. This paper will address certain aspects of the comedy-ballets' theatrical workings in order to suggest that enjoyment of the late comedy-ballets came to be linked with an implicit subversion of basic aspects of the prevalent social order. The genre's special pleasures are produced through the juxtaposition, in *Les Fâcheux*, and eventually—in *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, *Le Bourgeois gentil-homme* and *Le Malade imaginaire*—through the amalgamation of the comic, music and dance. Following work by scholars such as Louis Auld—to whose pioneering studies all later students of the genre owe a large debt—Gérard Defaux, Claude Abraham, Charles Mazouer, Buford Norman, Robert McBride, Nicholas Cronk and John Powell in particular, I take it as well demonstrated that the music and dance are central to those late works, not detachable superfluties. Alongside the large-scale employment of music and dance to introduce the festive and the carnivalesque into these works, there exists also a far less noticed phenomenon: the meticulously handled undermining, and eventual dissolution, of the comedic.

The subversiveness under consideration is therefore in the first place the subversion of comedy itself, and thus the undermining of the “real world” of the *raisonneurs* triumphant in Molière's “comédie première manière” (Defaux 273). In the late “comic” comedy-ballets, to use Forestier's term (as opposed to “galant,” *Molière* 83), the world of comedy yields the stage in various ways to a topsy-turvy, upside-down world, as in the *Cérémonie turque* and the *Cérémonie des médecins*, and also, in the *Ballet des Nations*, to a vision of the entire world elevated to the level of *fête de cour*.

Four points should be mentioned now, to be taken up again in conclusion. First is the new phenomenon in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century of a unitary personal identity (with the law as the ultimate enforcer of this status), as Jean-Marie Apostolidès has discussed the matter recently, replacing the earlier conception of an unstable personal identity always subject to melancholic upheavals or heroic transformations, traditionally labelled baroque (18-19). He also observes that along with this unitary identity goes a new importance accorded to linear time, an orientation toward a logical production of the future without

radical change from the present (28-29). The third point is the new relationship to the body, as discussed recently by Jean Serroy (89). This relationship suppresses liberty of bodily expression and labels the body, its needs and desires as virtually unspeakable. The fourth point concerns Will Moore's observation that *Le Malade imaginaire*'s plot is based on something like "suffusion rather than deduction" (78-9), and Judd Hubert's concomitant remark about the difficulty of analyzing style in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (219). The questions raised by these two critics about Molière's late dramaturgy remain less than fully answered, in part because basic evidence contained in the musical scores has been insufficiently evaluated.

II. With these points in the background, I would like now to discuss some relations between comedy-ballet's comedic aspects and its musical and danced *agrément*s, especially in *Le Bourgeois* and *Le Malade* (these relations are analyzed more extensively in *Music, Dance, and Laughter*).

From the comic dystopia of *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* to the festive near-utopia of the *Ballet des Nations*, there is an enormous advance in the construction of the comedy-ballet. This advance is twofold, consisting first in a new kind of protagonist, one whose mania surpasses that of all previous comic *monomanes* (Forestier, *Esthétique* 558-60); and second, in the completed passage from an apparently comedic world into a joyfully crazy world where celebration is all (Abraham, *Unity* 89-90).

Like Pourceaugnac, who tries to pass himself off as a *gentilhomme* in Paris, Monsieur Jourdain desires to exchange his identity for something grander—precisely what can never happen in *grande comédie*, or in comedy-ballets before the *Bourgeois*. Unlike Pourceaugnac, who is mercilessly driven back into his lackluster identity as a *noble de province*, Jourdain will succeed in gaining a new identity grander than all the *gentilshommes* in the kingdom, unique in all the world. Whereas Pourceaugnac must be chased away, his aspirations destroyed in order for festivities to take place, Jourdain will inspire general festivities precisely through his aspirations and his own presence on-stage. If Pourceaugnac is a comic zero, whose garish clothes advertise his nullity (Despois and Mesnard 7: 227, 252), Jourdain is fairly bursting with his effervescent "folie généreuse" (Gutwirth 198). He is eventually able to share that craziness with the whole world because he is not simply a comic *monomane*: he is also—at first inchoately, then in spectacularly full-blown fashion—"le roi de la Fête" (Defaux 280). Comedy's double per-

spective is thus itself doubled in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* by a festive point of view introduced at every moment through the effects of Jourdain's mania. Seen from a comic perspective, he is indeed fantastically crazy; but seen within the encompassing optic of *fête*, through which we quickly come to view him, his mania looks quite different, since it embodies the desire to celebrate.

That mania is at once imitative, theatrical, and amorous: Jourdain tries strenuously to imitate noble airs, while remaining totally ignorant of both their mechanics and the *ethos* presumed to underlie them. What he attempts to imitate, furthermore, is a consummately theatrical ideal, the *honnête homme*'s daily performance before the audience composed of his peers. Specifically, Jourdain wishes to perform for Dorimène, who incarnates erotically his idea of noble elegance in female form.

This “moule en creux” of the *honnête homme*, in Jacques Morel's formulation (187), chases after a fantasy of nobility of which tantalizing fragments are omnipresent. The real thing, however, a *gentilhomme* who is also an *honnête homme*, is nowhere present. The only possible *gentilhomme*, Dorante, is quite contented to fleece Jourdain ignobly, both for money and for the object of Jourdain's affections. The genuine *honnête homme* in the work, Cléonte, specifically denies being a *gentilhomme*. The ideal of the *gentilhomme* which is present thematically near the heart of the work is thus entirely absent from the stage, and quite possibly implied to be hollow (as initial reactions to the work at court might indicate; cf. Cairncross 411-12 on Dorante as practically a “chevalier d'industrie”).

Variouly deformed reflections of that absent ideal, however, are present everywhere, especially in the music and dance, which prefigure, embody, extend or echo comic action. These reflections are often subtly parodic, as in the overture itself which Margaret McGowan hears as “mock-solemn” (184) and in “Je languis nuit et jour” in which first the song's elaboration, then its final presentation slyly reveal the banality of the words, a process soon greatly extended in the *Dialogue en musique*. By enjoying these musical allusions to an aristocratically ideal elegance—so many variations on an absent theme—we are drawn into sympathizing with Jourdain's attraction to it. In this process, our laughter begins to change from one of superiority to the “rire complice” which Catherine Kintzler very justly notes (12).

In addition to parody, juxtaposition of varying levels of artistry helps to establish a texture of comparison, as in the dancing abilities of mere *garçons tailleurs*, whose stateliness at first, then joyfulness in their dancing should, on the evidence of Lully's score, leave nothing to be desired compared with the *maître à danser's* professionals, and may well have been intended to surpass them in audience appeal. The work of Jourdain's masters is thus subtly undermined by being drawn into comic tensions established through ambiguous comparisons. The *élève de musique*, for instance, although presented as the composer of an *air de cour* with pleasing aspects, is *not* equal to "the greatest masters," and the *maître de musique* is comically diminished for so claiming. Together, imitation, parody, and comparison weave an apparently seamless texture composed by turns of dialogue in word and in song, of dance and *dépit amoureux*, of *airs à boire* and the *Cérémonie turque*, and composed finally by Monsieur Jourdain's ultimate intended gift for Dorimène, the *Ballet des Nations*. Moment by moment, music and dance relativize, plasticize, and undercut comedic action and consequence, suggesting at first, then eventually realizing a transcendently festive solution of pleasure and celebration.

The burlesque transformation of Jourdain's identity in the *Cérémonie turque* is therefore necessary not in order to chase him away as a comic scapegoat, but in order to destroy the real world, to dissolve it in a bath of inebriating nonsense ("Ha la babala chou...") so that his desired world of pleasure can arrive. With his elevation to the exalted rank of Mamamouchi, Jourdain has in effect married his true love, not Dorimène herself but his fantasy of nobility; and with this fantasy thus fantastically gratified, he is ready to consent to any number of marriages—why not three? Drawn kinesthetically into the festivities along with M. Jourdain, the audience is increasingly prepared to wave farewell to the real world. No one wishes to prevent the collective celebration which crowns Jourdain's individual fantasy; there is thus no turning back to the "real world," and it is entirely appropriate that a carnivalesque cornucopia of marriage leads immediately to the *Ballet des Nations's* virtuosic cornucopia of music and dance, a summation of the possibilities presented earlier in fragmentary or shorter form, in all the previous music and dance. Jourdain's transformation into Mamamouchi allows the comedic plot itself, and the real world which it implied—the drab world in which *raison*, *argent*, and *prose* speak in the single-mindedly hectoring voice of Mme Jourdain—to be gracefully laughed, danced, and sung away in the festively poetic, many-voiced celebration of our

pleasures, now elevated above human comparison since “les dieux mêmes, les dieux n’en ont point de plus doux.”

III. *Le Malade imaginaire* functions quite differently. The comic aspects of the intrigue, especially its final impasse, are so heightened that nothing, it would seem, could bring together the world dominated by Argan with those of the pastoral prologue, of Polichinelle, or of the Gypsy/Moorish dancers. But these various worlds rub up repeatedly against Argan’s world, and the friction thus produced finally ignites the carnivalesque fireworks of the *Cérémonie des médecins*.

Unlike *Le Bourgeois*, in which we are happy to leave the “real world” because the increasingly realized world of Jourdain’s fantasies is so much more delightful, in *Le Malade* we have *only* what John Powell has called “shifting realities” (225). Every suggestion of a real world, and thus of the validity of a verisimilitude-based action and character structure, has already been undermined before it is presented, sometimes subtly, at other times with abrupt changes of register, time and place. Even more than in *Le Bourgeois gentil-homme*’s seamless textures, all comic action in *Le Malade* is sharply relativized through the pervasive and explicit use of illusion, disguise, theater (Cronk, “Play” 17; Powell 225).

The original work begins, of course, not in Argan’s world but with a festive, *fanfaresque* overture. The long pastoral eclogue immediately following contains beautiful music written with subtle comic touches, in which shepherds are reprimanded for singing too much like ordinary shepherds, instead of like genuinely pastoral, musically cultivated “bergers;” in which Louis’s return conflicts with the normal timelessness of the pastoral world; and which is followed not yet with Argan’s world, but with a repetition of the overture. The curtain is thus raised twice before the recostumed pastoral characters return to the stage to play the comedy entitled *Le Malade imaginaire*.

Argan’s entrance is all the more strange, quiet, and alone, after the dramatic brilliance, then svelte dancelike character of the overture’s two halves, and after the praise of Louis “aux échos” in a magnificent chorus. The contrast is so great that one could easily think, with Pierre Melese (64), that there is no relationship here at all. But Argan will himself be praised “aux échos” in the concluding chorus of the *Cérémonie des médecins*, in which much like Jourdain, his comedic persona will be dissolved through his coro-

nation as a carnivalesque king. In the work's total course, we pass therefore from praise of one king to praise of a very different one, but on a similarly festive scale (see Powell 228-30 for specific musical parallels also).

Three moments of *Le Malade* will serve for illustration: first, the opening scene. In this imaginary dialogue between an enema-giver and -receiver, we have a clear exposition of Argan's *imaginaire* quality; but other factors are in play, in particular a sort of time warp. Argan is already up to the twenty-fourth of the month when we meet him; he has obviously been carrying on his dialogue for some time. His dramatic time thus conflicts with that of the eclogue, which had apparently been delineated neatly by the overture's repetition; but then the eclogue, set in a timeless world, had its own sense of time placed in question also, by praise for the most powerfully present of kings. At the very outset of *Le Malade*, we have already a double undermining of unity of time.

Second, the *petit opéra impromptu*: this virtuosic scene depends for part of its effect on its ironic contrasts with the eclogue, in which the two shepherds attempting to sing in praise of Louis were quite rightly judged insufficient, since their singing contains some amusing touches of amateurishness, but were nonetheless awarded their beloved shepherdesses' hands in marriage. In the second act, Angélique's and Cléante's status as amateur singers will produce genuinely touching effects from within their impersonations of the most artificial of genre clichés. Their realistically-presented need to play-act explicitly in order to speak love's truth is the inverse of the typical pastoral situation. In the prologue and second act, we thus find a double undermining of the pastoral mode, still the chief mode of the court's pleasures.

As for the third example: Argan's folly drives him to believe only those who play-act with him, such as the "sympathetic" Béline, Louison playing dead, or Toinette pretending to be an itinerant doctor. But Argan's *folie* still bars the door to rejoicing since as Defaux observes (297), the comic plot can relieve Argan of Béline, but not of himself; all of Béralde's reasoning is useless against Argan's desire for treatment. The magnitude of Argan's folly, which wishes to refuse all "reality" other than peristaltic, pushes the comic intrigue to its limits. Argan's comedic world, however, has already been surrounded, penetrated, and highly relativized by various other theatrical worlds —pastoral and *commedia dell'arte*, farce, *ballet de cour*. Once Argan accepts Béralde's super-theatrical solution, therefore,

Argan's world is ready to be transformed completely as the doors to celebration are flung open. His carnivalesque coronation is then free to put the comedy in its place, showing it up for a genre of "reduced laughter" (Bakhtin 120) by exploding it into irrelevance in the crazily joyous choral magnificence of the *Grands* and *Petits Vivats* which initiate Argan's reign as a doctor of self-medication.

IV. In these two late works we have therefore not so much a dénouement as a spectacular carnivalization of the dénouement which laughs at the intrigue and its world. Jourdain's and Argan's manias are so great and so unstable that they burst open the limits of the comedic world. These characters have to change worlds—and therefore identities—in order for their manias to be satisfied. That transformation of identities implies the end of comedy, the end of the world of the "raisonneurs," and its displacement by a festive world created through a poetic distillation of carnival's energies.

Returning now to the four background points, we can see first that the transformations of identity are directly opposed to the "unitary personal identity" which Apostolidès sees as basic to the social order. Second, in these works the linear time implied by the comedic plot with its aimed-for resolution is warped or broken, and drawn into a circular dimension. In the kinesthetically heightened moments of musical and danced repetitions such as we find in the long finales of *Le Bourgeois* and *Le Malade*, circularity is reinstated, we can relive and re-enjoy time and space; we are granted temporary reprieve, but symbolically permanent relief from time's linearity. From our physical restrictions as well (the third point), since in this festive transformation the highly circumscribed, constrained everyday body is liberated, delighting in its newfound and effectively eternal freedom (Serroy 89, 97). Jourdain's ludicrous self-appointed freedom to ape noble movement is seen to inspire festivities more elegant than Dorante by himself could ever produce. In place of the increasingly rationalized and constrictive world about him, Molière stages in these works an absurdist vision of freedom—a vision so appealing that the king himself could not resist joining in, whatever liminal apprehension he may have had that these works celebrate "tout ce qu'il y a de plus opposé à l'ordre ludovicien" (Abraham, "Farce" 3).

If these intimations of subversiveness are correct, then we arrive at a paradox: the more the work pleased the court, the more subversive it became of the world view which upheld that court. From being the court's chief clown, Molière had evolved into its foremost

dismantler by revealing with inimitably resonant laughter its increasing rigidity, falsity, and brittle incapacity to evolve in a manner consonant with its own long-term survival. By inviting his audience to join in that unrestrained laughter, Molière also induced it to look beyond the limitations of its immediate surroundings. Nothing could be more enjoyable, or in the long run more subversive.

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