Comic and Marital Frustration in Molière’s George Dandin

PAUL SCOTT

The first words spoken by the protagonist in George Dandin detail the misery of an incompatible marriage. It is, however, also clear that he is a victim of his own social ambitions: “j’aurais bien mieux fait, tout riche que je suis, de m’allier en bonne et franche paysannerie” (1.1). The sight of a wealthy man so lacking in common sense does not greatly elicit audience empathy, despite his dramatic debut being doubly emphasized within the framework of the play’s first (spoken) scene and delivered as a soliloquy. The play holds a unique place among Molière’s output; it has been described as “peut-être la plus sombre des pièces de Molière,” and “one of Molière’s most problematic comedies.” The work has generated some lively debates among scholars, but by and large, critical attention has focused on three issues: the differences between the play performed with, or without, the accompanying ballet; the question of social station and marriage; and the very dark, almost tragic, vein that underpins the work. Close affinities draw together these essential strands. I would like to suggest that the play’s strikingly idiosyncratic features and structure may represent a prompt to provoke audiences

1 I am grateful to the Cramer Professorship and to the University of Kansas General Research Fund allocation # 2301250 for having supported this investigation and allowing me to undertake research in Paris.


PFSCL XXXVII, 72 (2010)
to assess and reassess what they observe. Moreover, it is my contention that Molière engages in an astutely crafted meta-joke centered on the concept of *dénouement*, which is employed as both a hermeneutic and linguistic pun, which should not surprise us greatly since, as Charles Mazouer has contended, the dramatist’s endings differ both in their variety and in the extent to which they stray from traditional closures. The extensive flirtation with tragedy is purposeful in this work, as Molière invites us to question not only the connecting elements that link tragedy and comedy, but also their distinct identities.

Despite an uncomplicated plot and many familiar comic elements, there are several authorial pointers that this constitutes a work that is not altogether typical. First, there is the very title, *George Dandin, ou le mari confondu*. While the subtitle has a Molieresque hallmark, the inclusion of the protagonist’s full name seems to confer an almost tragic status on him. Furthermore, there are a number of soliloquies given by George, again a feature more associated with tragedy than comedy. The absence of the figure of the *raisonneur* in this play results in there being no enunciation of the voice of reason. Additionally, the lack of a single sympathetic character leaves the audience lacking a creation to which they can relate. Crucially and above all, the most striking characteristic of this play is that, for all means and purposes, there seems to be no neat ending, since the comedy finishes leaving the spectator with an almost identical situation as that at the beginning. The play concludes with a despondent soliloquy delivered

---


8 “The final victory of characters who have been shown in an unsympathetic light puts *George Dandin* in a unique position among Molière’s comedies […]. The defeat or discomfiture of characters who have been shown in a critical light is part of the comfortable happy ending we look for in comedy; here, the rules of the game appear to have been broken, and this is one of the features that help to make *George Dandin* a somewhat disturbing play,” W. D. Howarth, *Molière: A Playwright and His Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 177.

by George during which he contemplates drowning himself off-stage, a somewhat empty declaration given his impotency to bring anything to fruition throughout the plot. In fact, his comment that “le meilleur parti qu’on puisse prendre, c’est de s’aller jeter dans l’eau la tête la première” (3.8) is not so much a declaration of intent as a detached articulation of despair. Notwithstanding the more upbeat register of the dialogue and dance of the ballet that immediately follow, George remains irrevocably dejected. The work is structured like a chiasmus consisting of three acts, which Edith Potter aptly labels a “circular premise of irresolution.” On face value, then, the comedy seems to fall short of a clear demarcation of a beginning, middle, and ending. It also seems to counter Aristotle’s assertion that “In comedy even people who are the bitterest enemies in the story [...] go off reconciled in the end.”

Social realism, incompatible spouses, and feminine emancipation all pale before the overwhelmingly prevailing sentiment of the play: frustration. This is a work in which every character, and ultimately the spectator, is left wanting. George and Angélique are both dissatisfied with their mismatch; Clitandre at being, albeit temporarily, hindered from closer contact with Angélique; the Sotenvilles with having sullied themselves with the pecuniary pimping of their daughter to enter into a socially disadvantageous union. The parents are undoubtedly the most antipathetic people of this cast of unlikeable types. They have mismanaged their own affairs, are obsessive about their aristocratic privilege, and treat their daughter as expendable. In this they surpass being merely risible and assume a more sinister air. It is true that children had to comply with their parents’ decision in arranged marriages, but their elders also had

10 Peacock terms George’s irascible outbursts as “des hypothèses ou des menaces impuissantes,” which are significantly only uttered as asides and expressed towards women; Molière, *La Jalousie du Barbouillé et George Dandin ou le mary confondu*, ed. Noël Peacock, Textes Littéraires, 55 (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1984), pp. xxi-xxii.


13 Gayle K. Brunelle, “Dangerous Liaisons: Mésalliance and Early Modern French Noblewomen,” *French Historical Studies* 19 (1995), 75-103, claims that there was “extensive intermarriage of noblewomen with roturiers during the early modern period,” owing to the need of noble families “to strengthen their financial foundations” (p. 80).
a duty to avoid a *mésalliance*, which would be potentially catastrophic for all involved parties.14

When George bemoans his nuptial dilemma in the play’s opening moments, we are presented with a depiction somewhat removed from his namesake of a warrior defeating a dragon and saving a virgin threatened with sacrifice; rather, he is progressively unraveled as a martyr to her progressive sliding scale of infidelity. There is the immediate question of the reason for which George is so dissatisfied, of what it is precisely, other than his spouse’s attitude towards him, which has resulted in this patently anguished state. Molière consistently hints throughout the play, with perhaps a subtle nod to both the sexual frustration of the Athenian husbands in Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* as well as to its bawdy tone, that the principal source of frustration for the newly-wed young man is in the sexual domain.15 This implicitly suggested state of affairs is reinforced by the looming symbolism of the door.16 The entrance to which George cannot gain access is exploited at many moments during the play, visually synthesizing that he has not ventured into intimacy with Angélique while at the same time serving as a metaphor for his incapability of conforming to the high society to which he aspires.17 The portal analogy is interesting when considered within the context of a certain ecclesiastical rhetoric of misogyny which deemed women to be the gateway of the Devil, an interpretation that has particular resonance with George’s deep-seated dread of the opposite sex.18 An impassioned show-down between the couple is the liveliest scene in the whole play, occurring almost in its very middle. At this juncture, George exasperatingly exclaims: “Je veux que vous y fassiez ce que fait une femme qui ne

---


17 See Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman’s Theatrical Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 41-47, for a discussion of the erotic significance of the spatial metaphor of the house and entrance. A door is similarly emblematic of access to the household’s mistress in *Amphitryon* (ll. 1498 and 1584), a play written only months before *George Dandin*.

veut plaire qu’à son mari” (2.2), as much a plea for docility as it is for sexual availability. During the final act, when he hears his wife creeping out of the house in the middle of the night, it is apparent that they are sleeping in separate beds during the earliest stage of their marriage, rather than enjoying each other’s nocturnal company (3.3-4). It is not only visually but also verbally that we glean this detail, with several puns on “satisfaction.”

In a very temporary moment of reversal, when it is Angélique who is stranded outside the main door, she implores George in a display of utter desperation to allow her to salvage her reputation from being destroyed, holding out intimacy and subservience as bait: “Oui, je vous donne ma parole que vous m’allez voir désormais la meilleure femme du monde, et que je vous témoignerai tant d’amitié, tant d’amitié, que vous en serez satisfait” (3.6). George detects a ruse in her promise to grant him physical and emotional recompense in return for opening the door, another palpable instance of portal imagery; Noël Peacock has rightly drawn attention to the young woman’s talented propensity for acting and deception.

The impression that George and Angélique have not enjoyed their conjugal rights is further reinforced by a repeated specific insult that George hurls at his wife and her servant, Claudine, namely “carogne”, 21 The first edition of the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française defines this as “femme de mauvaise vie,” but it shares a common etymology with the almost homophonically “charogne” (which occurs as a suggestive tongue-twister in the third act: “une méchante carogne”). This exemplifies his attachment to a homosocial world uncontaminated by female contact in which the prospect of intimacy with women is filthy. George tellingly exposes his inherent prejudice towards women in his unsettled retort to her threat to engineer her own “assassination”: “La méchanceté d’une femme irait-elle bien jusque-là?” (3.6). Ralph Albanese has highlighted the intensity of the “rancœur

---

19 The bawdy wordplay is typified by George’s protest to his parents-in-law: “Je vous dis donc que je suis mal satisfait de mon mariage” (1.4).


21 It occurs in every act: “Taisez-vous, carogne que vous êtes” (1.6); “la subtile adresse de ma carogne de femme” (2.8); “Voilà nos carognes de femmes” (3.5); “une méchante carogne” (3.7). This insult is only used in four other places by Molière: see Charle-Louis Livet, Lexique de la langue de Molière comparée à celles des écrivains de son temps, 3 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1895), I, 337-8.


23 On male anxiety concerning physical contamination by the opposite sex, see David G. Gilmore, Misogyny: the Male Malady (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 36-56.
haineuse” with which George rejects Angélique’s apparent attempts at reconciliation in the third act. Nonetheless, it seems more appropriate to view George as belonging to a monosocial world that is as misanthropic as it is gynophobic, which results in his social and emotive alienation.

In the confrontation between the protagonist and his bride, Angélique delivers a remarkable and spirited speech which, temporarily at least, attracts empathy towards her predicament:

Car pour moi je vous déclare que mon dessein n’est pas de renoncer au monde, et de m’enterrer toute vive dans un mari. Comment? parce qu’un homme s’avise de nous épouser, il faut d’abord que toutes choses soient finies pour nous, et que nous rompions tout commerce avec les vivants? C’est une chose merveilleuse que cette tyrannie de Messieurs les maris, et je les trouve bons de vouloir qu’on soit morte à tous les divertissements, et qu’on ne vive que pour eux. Je me moque de cela, et ne veux point mourir si jeune.

George, on the other hand, reminds her of the sacramental and legal character of the promises they have solemnly made:

GEORGE DANDIN

C’est ainsi que vous satisfaites aux engagements de la foi que vous m’avez donnée publiquement?

ANGÉLIQUE

Moi? Je ne vous l’ai point donnée de bon cœur, et vous me l’avez arrachée. M’avez-vous, avant le mariage, demandé mon consentement, et si je voulais bien de vous? Vous n’avez consulté, pour cela, que mon père et ma mère; ce sont eux proprement qui vous ont épousé, et c’est pourquoi vous ferez bien de vous plaindre toujours à eux des torts que l’on pourra vous faire. Pour moi, qui ne vous ai point dit de vous marier avec moi, et que vous avez prise sans consulter mes sentiments, je prétends n’être point obligée à me soumettre en esclave à vos volontés; et je veux jouir, s’il vous plaît, de quelque nombre de beaux jours que m’offre la jeunesse, prendre les douces libertés que l’âge me permet, voir un peu le beau monde, et goûter le plaisir de m’ouïr dire des douceurs. (2.2)

This is an astonishing moment crystallizing the pair’s mutual incomprehension and constituting the dramatic high-point of the play. In her address to husbands in the plural, we might be tempted to see a determined and singular rail against patriarchy on behalf of other young women. Notwithstanding Angélique’s brazenly subversive stance, this speech also acts as a de-wedding ceremony in which her voice is at last able to be heard. Publicly, before witnesses, her prospective lover, and her husband, she declares that she has no intention of being bound by sacred vows, purposely withholds her consent, and flatly repudiates any notion of loving, honoring, and obeying. This is one of several parodies of religious ceremonial in the play, such as the direct referencing of the sacrament of penance when George kneels, not before his father confessor but rather his father-in-law, and almost ritualistically repeats a formula that closely resembles an act of contrition (3.7). The fact that the depiction of the performance of any sacrament on stage ran contrary to the strictures of the bienséances also contributes a frisson of sacrilege to the inclusion of these caricatures of ecclesiastical form.26 This uxorial wrangling between George and Angélique is a sort of confessional moment, perhaps the first and only occasion where they both speak freely and frankly to each other, which evidences that there is more than merely George’s lowly status behind Angélique’s loathing of him underpinning this show of blatant insubordination to her parents, her husband, and society’s expectations. While her stance may be interpreted as striking a blow for filial rebellion, feminine emancipation, or quite simply hedonism, there is no room for doubt about the absence of her personal assent to this wedding.

This demarriage, occurring as it does at the heart, the nœud, of the action, signals Molière’s most insinuated joke in the work. Socially mixed partnerships, misalliances, and seemingly on occasion the very institution of early modern marriage are all mercilessly pilloried at various moments of the play; yet, while facilitating the scheming infidelity of a calculating woman who has succeeded in inflicting extreme humiliation on her husband, marriage is not mocked or subverted at all, since there is, in fact, no marriage to begin with.27 First and foremost, there is the question of

27 Marie-Claude Canovas-Green suggests that more is afoot than a mismatch: “[George] n’est plus que mal marié; et le terme même est synonyme d’une incompatibilité non seulement d’humeurs mais d’états entre sa femme et lui, vite transformée en un déni de sa qualité de mari”; “Je, tu, il... ou le déboulement du moi dans le George Dandin de Molière,” Littératures Classiques 38 (2000), 91-101 (pp. 94-5).
consent; as I mentioned earlier, Angélique unambiguously announces that she did not, and does not, agree to being married off to George. She has simulated her acquiescence, and she pronounces that the entire match was not a free choice on her part as soon as George wants to know what is amiss. Canon Law baldly sets out the crucial issue of internal consent: even if both parties go through the motions of the proscribed ritual before a priest, no sacrament takes place as long as one party does not freely desire to enter into the arrangement. As Basil Courtemanche observes, “From the beginning of its history, the Church has taught at least implicitly that the element of consent is essential to matrimony.”28 The same specialist defines the nature of this consent:

The essence of total simulation is that of a lie. In simulating marital consent a person signifies that he has the intention of marrying, whereas his true intention is precisely the antithesis of this, namely, the intention of not contracting marriage. Total simulation thus implies the existence of two acts of the will on the part of the simulator. In the first place, there is the intention of not marrying. Secondly, there is the intention of making a false manifestation of consent. (p. 68)

This could have been composed with Angélique in mind. Writing in 1647, Claude Maillard comments: “Le mariage estant un contract, et le consentement des parties estant une chose necessaire à tout contract, il s’ensuit que le mariage ne peut estre mariage sans le consentement, qui doit estre mutuel, libre et franc, fait avec deliberation et raison, veritable, et non feint.”29 This canonical opinion has been consistently reinforced by Church pronouncements, notably during sessions of the Council of Trent.30 Aquinas teaches that “If mental consent is lacking in one of the parties, on neither side is there marriage, since marriage consists in a mutual joining together,” specifying that consent is assumed unless there are “evident signs”

---


amounting to “proof of the contrary.”[^31] In unburdening herself of her inner sentiments about how her parents and George have, for their own fiscal gain, bypassed Angélique’s sentiments, she also discloses that the marriage is a sham, despite having been carried out according to the requirements of legal and sacramental form.[^32] This announcement is invested with particular potency as it is the only occasion on which we will encounter Angélique being unconditionally sincere and laying bare her soul without the slightest taint of subterfuge.

Intimately related to the impediment to her free-will is the threat of violence, which is especially pertinent to Angélique’s situation, for her husband expresses his desire to pulverize her face at one point.[^33] Furthermore, her mother pledges to strangle her with her own bare hands, and her father resolves to run her through with a sword if she does not conform to her wifely responsibilities and cease to dishonor her station.[^34] In all respects, she is subject to an ominous menace of violence from those who are closest to her, and even if there is not any physical force actually used against her, there is an obvious moral violence “influant indirectement sur la volonté par la crainte d’un mal physique ou moral, présent ou futur.”[^35] Indeed, the occurrence of violence that could invalidate a marriage encompassed the prospect of loss of rank or being excluded from the family home.[^36] The


[^33]: “Il me prend des tentations d’accommoder tout son visage à la compote, et le mettre en état de ne plaire de sa vie aux diseurs de fleurettes” (2.2). The use of “tentations” in the plural suggests that this is not the first time George has experienced these dark thoughts.

[^34]: It is striking that these methods of harming Angélique, together with her own “threat” to stab herself with a dagger, are all varied. Paradoxically, this affords her an almost tragic aspect in her otherwise egotistical preoccupations: “violemment les femmes tragiques meurent. Plus exactement, c’est dans cette violence qu’une femme conquiert sa mort,” Nicole Loraux, *Façons tragiques de tuer une femme* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), p. 28.


[^36]: “Aussi doit-on considérer comme produisant sur une jeune fille une crainte grave: la menace de l’enfermer dans un couvent jusqu’à sa majorité, de la chasser de la maison paternelle, de la faire vivre à la campagne et de la priver de toutes ses
farcical element of Angélique beating George in the pitch-black of night may consequently be viewed as momentarily expressing a release from sustained domestic and familial brutality. While the simulation of consent was a relatively rare cause for parties to seek annulments before ecclesiastical tribunals, it is far from being marginal. Taking the diocese of Cambrai as an example, Alain Lottin notes that three-quarters of marital cases presented to the official during the early modern period ended up being nullified, demonstrating that, if held up to scrutiny, the union of Angélique and George would undoubtedly be dissolved.\(^\text{37}\) This scenario would, significantly, only be complicated by *copula carnalis* having subsequently taken place, which was usually held to ratify a previously invalid union.\(^\text{38}\) As may be inferred during the course of the play, the marriage has not been consummated, which, in itself, was also a cause for seeking, and invariably being granted, an annulment. A delay of two months was considered to be the maximum tolerated threshold for intercourse to have been accomplished.\(^\text{39}\)

Far from the marriage being consummated, we know that Angélique will almost certainly lose her virginity in an adulterous liaison. During the last moments of the play, George is forced to kneel with a candle in his hand, like a felon during the *amende honorable* or a penitent in the context of a religious rite of reconciliation (3.7). There is, however, to be no execution or no absolution following this demeaning act. We will not see the consequences of this final topsy-turvy world, in which the biblical narrative of Christ forgiving the adulterous woman is turned on its head (John 8:1-11), since the transgressor does not ask for clemency, and, unlike her scriptural counterpart, the less than angelic Angélique positively relishes going forth to sin. Indeed, this is not comedy about a cuckold, or someone who imagines himself to be one, but rather depicts an embryonic cuckold who takes shape before our very eyes. Nevertheless, it is perhaps more appropriate to talk of a stalled dénouement rather than a missing one. It is inescapable that the marriage will now never be consummated, despite the tantalizing moment where Angélique holds out the offer in return for his silence. Therefore the union will not fulfill the sacramental end of pro-

---


creation and uniting the couple as one flesh, though the extent of the marriage’s hollow core is not fully appreciable until the last scene of utter dejection and the confirmation of the abjection of George.\(^{40}\) Like the marriage itself, Molière teases us with the seemingly limp conclusion, for the realization that the union is not only no longer viable but perhaps also never existed in the first place, is a profound shift from the initial muted hope of breaking the deadlock of the couple’s wedlock.\(^{41}\) In a pun that is sustained throughout the course of the play, the bonds of holy matrimony, the \textit{nœuds}, have been well and truly loosened (dénouer).

There is no \textit{deus ex machina} resolution, nor does Molière proffer any glimmer of the contingency of happiness, either through separation or reconciliation, for the dramatist defiantly flouts comic norms.\(^{42}\) The conclusion of the third act closely resembles the identical situation of the previous two acts, during which Angélique outwits her hapless husband and George is compelled to make a forced and unjust apology (1.6; 2.8; 3.7).\(^{43}\) Instead, the impetus of this comedy resides in the comic situation itself. Through the framework of frustration that sustains the whole plot right until its close there is the reminder that this comedy, clothed with so many

\(^{40}\) A renewed emphasis on carnal interaction took place during the Middle Ages, to the extent that “le consentement des époux doit être \textit{ad copulam carnalem} pour que le mariage soit valide,” Claude Schahl, \textit{La Doctrine des fins du mariage dans la théologie scholastique}, Études de Science Religieuse, 6 (Paris: Éditions Francis-caines, 1948), p. 101.

\(^{41}\) For a counter argument on the nature of the play’s close, see Peacock, who opines that “Far from leaving a disquieting impression, the ending brings the self-centredness of Dandin, which lies at the heart of the play, to a most satisfying climax for the audience. Ironically, it confirms beyond doubt the comic status of the play” (151). See also Therese Malachy, who argues that “Le code qui régit implicitement l’univers de la comédie est perturbé par le personnage comique le temps de la pièce, mais il est rétabli miraculeusement dans le dénouement,” “George Dandin: un personnage comique malgré lui,” \textit{Lettres Romanes} 36 (1982), 287-93 (p. 288).


tragic echoes, does not require a comic ending to be what it is: a comedy. Faced with this somewhat subdued conclusion, the spectator cannot but reflect on the nature of theater, particularly as we are denied the “source of satisfaction” resulting from the “defeat of fools and villains whose crimes against reason and humanity have aroused our strong disapproval.”

We might be tempted to speculate that Molière is making a point about the nature of comic drama in a surprisingly unhistrionic fashion. A tragedy may contain the prerequisite conflict, intermediate characters, and noble action, yet still necessitates a tragic ending to be a tragedy. It is, above all, the dénouement that gives tragedy its defining identity and in this respect the genre is essentially a slave to its ending. A tragedy may be sustained all the way through a work, yet is dependent on “un aboutissement logique” in order to be complete. The outcome of the comédie-ballet is spectacularly low-key, yet the intricate meta-joke of the play’s dénouement being replaced by the marriage’s dénouement undermines the spectator’s expectations. Indeed, the audience will only later appreciate the spoiler provided in George’s early complaint to Monsieur and Madame de Sotenville: “Comment? ma femme n’est pas ma femme?” (1.4). All in all, as Nicholas Paige perspicaciously comments, “La comédie n’est donc pas aussi innocente qu’il y pourrait paraître” (481).

---


45 John D. Lyons summarizes the tragic ending as being comprised of the “end of the hero’s peril” together with “the completion of any impending business concerning the secondary characters,” Kingdom of Disorder: The Theory of Tragedy in Classical France, Purdue Studies in Romance Literatures, 18 (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), p. 197.