In this interesting and persuasive study, Larry Riggs revisits Molière's plays in the context of emerging modernist univocalist culture. He views Molière's theater as a response to the tensions within modernity, e.g., as a critical answer to pretensions to power and secure knowledge and to the antinomies and hierarchical binary master models of "modernity:” the mind/body dichotomy, the division between man/woman, and culture/nature. Through a reading that is inspired by postmodernist criticism, and that incorporates ecologically oriented thought and ecofeminism, the author advocates a pluralistic, polyvocal reading of Molière's comedies.

Riggs' main preoccupation lies with cultural and intellectual issues but he also broaches questions of genre and perceptively examines comedy with regards to its subversive function. In advocating plurality, Molière's comedies debunk paradigms and definite versions of order, in accordance with Jean Duvignaud's conception of comedy.

Overall, readers of this fine and complex study will profit from a combination of insightful and persuasive readings of major comedies, as well as insightful borrowings from cultural material, performance theory, postmodern theory, and even Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The extensive introduction outlines much of the conceptual groundwork that will reappear in the following chapters, and the emphasis is placed on the early modern context. Addressing the “cultural and political trends and tensions that produced what we call ‘modernity’” (ii), Riggs wants to show how Molière is “anti-modern.” For the playwright critically examines the ideology of “progress,” aspirations of mastery and autonomy, the mind/body antinomy, the rational “production” of culture, and the exclusion of emotion along with the body and nature, as well as the gendering of mastery or autonomy. In his reading of the early modern context, Riggs juxtaposes many of the tensions of modernity that so far have been analyzed individually by scholars.
According to Riggs, Molière’s *ridicules* are modernists in their attempts to follow codes of modernity. Each of his authoritarian characters embodies a certain kind or version of modernity: Arnolphe reveals a paranoia about women and chance; Orgon unfolds absolutist tendencies; Dom Juan relies on rationalism and mathematics; Alceste attempts to control others and strives for complete knowledge; Harpagon can be described as a nascent capitalist; and the *femmes savantes*, enforce an abstract form of knowledge that resembles coercive universalism. Molière himself critically rethinks the supposed superiority of masculine “master models,” dramatizes their dangers, and opens a vision that anticipates many of the preoccupations of recent theoretical work dealing with the impasses of modernity.

Chapter one discusses the underlying fear and loss of control that prompt Arnolphe to rely on rage and repression of women. The character’s preoccupation with control is placed in the context of modernist culture, as we encounter as the central theme of the play the “disorder” in nature and an imperialistic appetite within modernity to “engrave,” “colonize” or “inhabit” space. To existing scholarship that has defined the wish to control and repress as key elements within modernizing forces, Riggs adds a new insight into the question of motherhood and “masculine birth.” On the one hand, Arnolphe tries to confine Agnès to patriarchal power by compelling her to internalize authoritarian culture and submit to it. On the other hand, the banishment or repression of female figures fails in the play. We witness the return of the feminine in the form of the absent and excluded “mother.” For Agnès is not the daughter of a peasant woman; her real, biological mother was Chrysalde’s sister Angélique, secretly married to Enrique. Even if the mother is physically absent, she is represented by her husband and her brother, and is thus surprisingly “present.” In that way, while the traditional marriage practice reinforces masculine control, the reappearance of the biological mother presents to us a return of the biological, natural order. This interesting reading of the ending is a great asset to the study.

In chapter two, Molière’s attempt to denounce “masculine (re)birth” becomes even more clearly visible in a discussion of *L’Avare*. Once more, the absence of the mother of Harpagon’s children is telling. The character avoids passing the maternal patrimony on to his children, as he refuses a natural (female) generational succession. In addition, his substitution of money for all other values can be explained in the cultural contexts of his time. First of all, it shows how materialism and emerging competitive individualism become increasingly powerful in the seventeenth century. Secondly, that substitution, as Riggs contends, is a clear response to loss. Harpagon is trapped in his solipsistic life, grieves the death of his wife, and tries to assuage that sense of loss by punishing the female sex, as well as the
body, for his own sense of vulnerability. Riggs provides the reader with new insights into grief and reactions to it, within the context of modernity, and he identifies important textual passages and supports his argument through a close reading of the play.

Chapter three adds new elements to Riggs’ earlier readings of *Le Misanthrope*. He develops the topics of speech and text, the nature of sincerity, epistemological projects of fabricating a “superior world” and the critique of that project in Molière’s play. It is here that psychoanalytic theory informs the chapter. In order to be utterly convincing, Riggs could have explored this direction more closely. In contrast to the previous chapters, he also spends relatively very little time explaining the closure and the importance of Alceste’s final isolation. Yet in *Les Femmes savants*, Riggs shows once again convincingly how Molière consistently rejects univocal thinking and critically envisages centralized political power, culture, and language. The question of motherhood and biology is convincingly brought up through the study of the character of Philaminte and through a subtle investigation of the split between mind, body, nature, and culture.

Rigg’s analysis of *Dom Juan* is very persuasive in that he demonstrates the multiple paradoxes of modernity that, here, come together. Riggs starts out by contending that *Dom Juan* is Molière’s most proto-postmodernist play, as it is marked by ambiguity or ambivalence. Dom Juan “anticipates the postmodernist portrayal of modern man as a frenzied self-seeker, lost in a proliferating chaos of means, given neither limit nor meaning by any generally acknowledged end” (160). His figure incarnates modernity itself: he is associated with patriarchal rage and power, the preoccupation with and ambivalence toward women, modern capitalist economy, calculated self-interest, misuse of language to achieve mastery, and the rejection of ethical constraint. In that way, this important figure synthesizes the various tensions discussed in the earlier chapters. While Donjuanism certainly can be seen as “the engine of progress” (194) in that it challenges its very limits, it also claims a price: the character manifests an unbridled desire and reveals an unrelieved dissatisfaction.

Overall, Riggs insightful work offers a successful conflux of literary, theoretical, and critical readings of Molière. The author’s personal voice clearly stands out and thus allows for stimulating reading. Readers will not find the study too dissonant or unsettling, as it convincingly manages to consolidate the theory and cultural commentary with textual insight.

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