révéler alors les secrets les plus intimes. Parfois même à son destinataire privilégié, sa fille, Mme de Sévigné dissimule sa profonde angoisse, telle celle qui l’êtreint par exemple à l’occasion d’un voyage périlleux que la comtesse entreprend, encore convalescente. Angoisse qu’elle laisse au contraire transparaître tout entière dans un billet adressé à son ami Guitaut où la marquise le supplie d’aller à la rencontre de sa fille avec un brancard et sans lui parler surtout de son intervention. Si la marquise renonce souvent à prendre des précautions lorsqu’elle rapporte des nouvelles parisiennes, elle emploie alors des chiffres, des codes, des citations littéraires connues des deux seules correspondantes, tout un système de références qui rend le contenu des lettres obscur aux non-initiés et plus étroit le lien qui les unit. Elle rapporte des « fagots », des « lanternes » et des « folies » dans un jeu de dit et de non dit, d’allusions voilées, de trucages onomastiques que sa fille s’amusera à deviner.

Dans un siècle où la représentation est la règle du comportement et où le genre épistolaire obéit à un système de conventions littéraires, Mme de Sévigné a su donc créer un nouveau rapport dialogique qui réussit à ne pas renoncer à l’intimité du privé tout en respectant les codes de la société mondaine.

Paola Placella Sommella


“Follow the paradox”, Will Moore exhorted students, as a major, if not the royal road into the heart of Molière’s plays (“Molière: The Comic Paradox”). James Gaines’s new study on Molière and paradox is based mainly on a half-dozen previously published articles (1992-2003), but expands on them in scope and depth. It involves a wide-ranging reconsideration of Molière’s œuvre from the perspective of skepticism as formulated by Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160-210 CE) and later followers up to Gassendi and La Mothe le Vayer. At a very minimum, the study takes up the considerations presented in Robert McBride’s study Molière’s Sceptical Vision: A Study in Paradox (1977) by aiming, as the book cover states, to update Molière studies with the ‘major philosophical research of the past twenty years’ on skepticism.

The study begins by defending the linking of Molière’s work and philosophy, a defense one might have thought unnecessary. After a very brief review of Sextus Empiricus’s thought (a bit too brief, perhaps, for an area
which remains controversial among philosophers) and its great impact on Montaigne, Pierre Charron, Jean-Pierre Camus and other thinkers, and especially of Agrippa’s five “modes” or “tropes” of argumentation and correspondingly flawed arguments as set forth by Sextus Empiricus—“disagreement”, “infinite regression”, “relativity”, “hypothesis”, and “circularity”, none of them mutually exclusive, in all of which “paradox plays a central role” and which altogether form an “important rhetorical arsenal” for writers (15-16)—the author reviews aspects of Molière’s career before launching into applying these forms of skeptical thought to Molière works.

Having noted that Molière’s “very vocation as a comic writer and satirist stood opposed to much of what was happening in Louis XIV’s new society, even as he was required to praise it. How to give vent to these subversive tendencies became the main concern of Molière’s career [...] from 1662-1668”, the author argues that Molière’s “main answer” to the dilemma of expressing subversive tendencies under an absolutist regime “was provided in part by skepticism, that is, the construction of epistemological puzzles in the body of his theater” (19-20). In the case of the *Précieuses ridicules*: “Where real préciosité stopped, if anywhere, and false began was left to the spectator to determine. The epistemological refusal to identify a criterion of truth persists throughout his work. Many a character takes refuge behind the statement, ‘Je ne dis pas cela,’ as does Alceste in his equivocal critique of Oronte’s bad verses.” (20) The extensive use of such aporias permitted bridging the gap between *particulier* and *général*, the individual and a social group, in a most ingenious and, of course, deeply paradoxical fashion: “Molière was the first comic writer to exploit with consistency this [satirical] property” in which, as the author notes by invoking Jonathan Swift, “beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own” (20).

Separate chapters on the “tetralogy” of *L’Ecole des femmes*, *Dom Juan*, *Le Misanthrope*, and *Tartuffe* as well as *Le Malade imaginaire* are buttressed with chapters on more general themes. Striking observations on varieties of almost certainly skeptically-derived uses of paradox are shown through analyses of Molière’s onstage philosophers and early protagonists such as Mascarille and Sganarelle (chapter 2); of Alceste’s “Cartesian nostalgia for simple knowledge” and Philinte’s “classical skeptical approach” to human relations (chapter 3); of the dépit amoureux in *Tartuffe* embodying “a form of natural transcendence, faithful to the Lucretian theories expressed by Éliante in *Le Misanthrope*, that figures divine grace, permitting fallible human lovers to rise above their egotism and fear” (102) versus Orgon’s status as “a believer who doesn’t really believe” (104); and of Molière’s possible debts to both Calderón (*Life is a Dream*) and, most interestingly, Quevedo (*Dreams* and *Visit of the Jests*) along with Descartes’s *Médi-
Regrettably numerous typographical errors, such as “theodocy”, “extension”, “existance” or printing “Argan” for “Argas” (pp. 96, 104) or “exulted” for “exalted” (p. 25) mar this study’s presentation. More editorial care would have obviated other errors, too, such as the statement that “Skepticism does not deny a priori that it is impossible to establish any truth...” when surely the opposite sense was intended (p. 14); attributing the line “J’enrage d’avoir tort lorsque j’ai raison” to Alceste instead of George Dandin (35); or the inconsistency from chapter to chapter of citation and documentation of both primary and secondary sources.

The reader may also be surprised to find in a work devoted to updating research in a field that remains a topic of lively controversy among philosophers, that except for a title from 2008 by the financier George Soros, the latest bibliographic reference dates from 2005. Too, while the “fine Latin edition” of Sextus Empiricus’s Hypotyposes (Outlines of Skepticism or of Pyrrhonism) produced by Henri Estienne in 1562 is mentioned in the text, no Greek, Latin or French version finds its way into the bibliography, just Julia Annas’s and Jonathan Barnes’s translation — and that, misleadingly, listed under the translators’ names. The forme, in sum, does less than justice to the fond; the author’s long-established erudition is not always shown to best advantage in this volume.

Moore noted also that “paradox is everywhere in Molière”. Despite the flaws and questions noted herein, Gaines’s slim volume offers a very knowledgeable and useful, often thought-provoking successor to McBride’s study, thanks to its generally coherent working approach to this ubiquitous, yet also—paradoxically—central feature of Molière’s works. As such it should stimulate discussion and, quite likely, application in Molière studies.

Stephen Fleck