Speaking Folly to Power: Molière’s Moebius Saraband

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Entertaining Louis XIV and his court was never a neutral affair, but instead, always and inescapably a political act, as Julia Prest among other commentators observes. All art, ultimately, and certainly that presented to or performed before the king and court, was expected to glorify the state in some form. As for comic endeavors, it was no simple undertaking to amuse a king who, in Mme de Motteville’s anecdote, was so serious as a child that he apparently never laughed at games; who apparently needed outright folly as an adult to break through the majesty of his public demeanor, which reduced so many to a ‘terrified silence’, as when Lully jumped onto an ill-starred harpsichord in order to return to the king’s good graces. The handful of anecdotes surrounding the king’s laughter shows a persuasive portrait of a monarch whose personal sense of kingship was so deeply serious and defended (as well as devious) as to be penetrable only by the sneakiest of sneak attacks, in particular the comic antics confected by Molière and Lully. The king dedicated vast sums in order to create these entertainments—half of Versailles’s 1668 budget was expended on the evening in which George Dandin was premièred—and to show the world how magnificently he could command entertainers and indeed the whole court to perform in the service of his own pleasure and power.

There would appear to be particular danger, as well as particular rewards, involved in this most delicate of enterprises. The court’s view of itself, after all, was to be put on display; its collectively convulsive laughter would either cement its solidarity, its sense of itself—or, potentially,

1 See her preface to Le Mariage forcé (Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1999), p. vii.
3 The characterization is again Mme de Motteville’s, cited in Olivier Bernier, Louis XIV: A Royal Life (New York, Doubleday, 1987), p. 77.

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undermine that sense. After the ballet de cour ceased to employ noble dancers around 1670, following the king’s lead, the comedy-ballet inherited some of the function of representing the court to itself, although as a hybrid genre, it remained at one remove from the earlier form. And that remove created a significant space for irony, which in the valence of the Sun King’s power could easily be counted as subversive. Folly, however, could substantially disguise that space of ironic freedom, at least for a time. When that time was up, however—and one must suspect that Lully had a large hand in advancing the clock’s hands—the folly of folly, or its truth, depending on one’s perspective, was revealed to its primary destinee, the indefatigably alert king.

The comedy-ballets were of course from the beginning a court-based form of entertainment, but Molière always worked hard to make them viable in Paris too, and with markedly increasing success. These works thus bore what we could call a doubly refracted ironic potential, playing with images of court and town before each audience. Unfortunately, though, comedy-ballet as a genre has often been treated rather dismissively as ‘mere’ court entertainment, an inferior, almost humiliating endeavor for a classical artist devoted to an immortal and demanding muse; or else left to the side as a hybrid puzzle, either reduced to its verbal text or else largely ignored. This sort of classicizing attitude, however, ignores various factors. As a handful of critics have argued, court entertainment need not exclude subversiveness which, if John Cairncross (invoking P.G. Wodehouse) is correct, is in any case inherent in comic phenomena across the board (409-10). It is even possible that disguising it, as was obviously necessary, might magnify its reach, and thus produce work which would be unsettling in an obscure manner while avoiding the risk of outright rejection.

This paper will explore certain aspects of the late comedy-ballets in the context of a probably gradual, but at the end more or less inevitable, and in any case I believe unmistakable disillusionment with the crown, following Louis’s permission to let Lully squeeze Molière out of performing their collaboratively-conceived and executed works, which had also become increasingly vital to the sustenance of La Troupe du Roy. The positive

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influence of the king’s protection on Molière’s art which C.E.J. Caldicott notes persuasively can scarcely be said to continue after March 1672.

In trying to make a bridge between laughter in late comedy-ballet and its political context I will argue that certain factors, in particular the transformations of plot and character in the *Bourgeois gentilhomme* and *Malade imaginaire*; the multiplication of fictional worlds from the former to the latter; and the thoroughgoing absurdity resulting from these dramatic processes constitute an implicit challenge to the prevailing political and social order, in forms which are less than obvious, but arguably present.

Between the heightened anxiety and instability at court resulting from the *recherches de noblesse*, on the one hand, and on the other the king’s greater demands than any of his predecessors that art serve the state, or rather the monarch’s own glory, Molière’s Parisian career coincided with, and indeed placed him at the center of a critical turning point in French history overall, certainly the most dramatic period since the Fronde. He could not help but swim in its turbulent waters.

Another factor of major importance was that the court’s, then the public’s attentiveness to issues of their time brought those issues to new focus in the theater. The rapid and profound changes in society, especially at its upper levels, sensitized an incipient public sphere to their representations in art. Molière honed satire’s cutting edge to new incisiveness, and instigated deeper debates. The *querelles, critiques, lettres*, pamphlets and sustained discussions of his theater were ample evidence of such a lively public engagement, all the while under the state’s watchful eye. In Dominique Bertrand’s view, in this period ridicule became a newly powerful force for social conformity, a veritable sword of Damocles against nonconformity with the newly-empowered norm of *honnêteté*:

L’enjeu ultime de la chasse aux ridicules pourrait être politique. Contribution notable à l’assujettissement des nobles frondeurs dans le carcan de la monarchie absolue, le ridicule apparaît comme l’émanation d’une société de cour qui édicte des modèles [....] Le nouveau code mondain qui détermine la hantise obsessionnelle du ridicule est celui de l’honnêteté.7

By turning comedy into a sport capable of drawing blood, Molière managed to incur the wrath of various powerful groups that felt themselves ridiculed: devots, doctors, courtiers, perhaps the king too with *Amphitryon*. The king was at the very least placed in an awkward position with *Tartuffe*, then *Dom

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7 Dominique Bertrand, *Dire le rire à l’âge classique: Représenter pour mieux contrôler* (Aix en Provence, Université de Provence, 1995), pp. 280-81.
Juan and again Amphitryon. The reception of these plays may well have played some role in Molière's eventual, definitive fall from grace.

From the beginning, then, Molière had to confront deep currents of change whether social, political, or artistic. Whether or not he literally believed in reforming society through comic castigation—and no unambiguous evidence supports that idea since his prefaces, placets and the like served polemical purposes, not some disinterested personal expression—by the later 1660s he could only have seen that any such program was quixotic. In the meantime, classicism was implanted more deeply by the various academies as (very nearly) the only acceptable official art. But Molière's drama was taking a profoundly anticlassical turn: after 1669 he abandoned writing grande comédie entirely except for Les Femmes savantes. While brilliantly polished, the latter is not an innovative work but instead a throwback, especially when in view of the vast experimentation of Molière's entire career, which saw the rapid move from little farces to early, then perfected grandes comédies, and in parallel the revue-like beginnings of comedy-ballet leading to its rapid emergence from L'Amour médecin on to the later, highly elaborate works, not omitting the handful of machine plays or the tragedy-ballet Psyché. The breadth of creation is astounding, especially considering the short duration of the career; and a marked anticlassicism pervades nearly every aspect of Molière's greatest late-period works. They begin a truly new chapter in Western theatre—a chapter, however, which was closed almost immediately upon his death. I would like to focus now on two of its main features as they relate to the overall topic.

One main feature of the late works is that Molière increasingly tosses plot as such out the window: it is reformulated entirely. Given Aristotle's consecration of plot, mythos, la fable as the inexorably beating heart of tragedy, one could scarcely imagine a more radically anticlassical move, although in fact I think that there are others of equal importance. Let us note for the moment that as W.D. Howarth observes, Les Fâcheux's plot was 'of the slightest'. For a reader, that might constitute a defect; but it did not prevent the work from becoming one of Molière's most popular both at court and in town.

Antoine Adam complained that Le Bourgeois gentilhomme was ‘bâtie à la diable’; others are put out that there is no identifiable plot until act III.

8 It was conceived no later than 1668, and possibly as early as 1663. See Cairncross, pp. 409-10.
Instead we have a series of ‘sketches’ or tableaux representing M. Jourdain in various, increasingly fully-rounded dimensions: Jourdain the would-be singer and dancer, fencer and pupil, sartorial pinnacle and galant. But these tableaux serve a completely different dramatic purpose than plot or even character construction, a point to be developed shortly.

Plot was in truth never a main focus as such of comedy-ballet—and it becomes less important over time, despite the works’ increasing length and complexity. Indeed the Malade’s plot is like a farcically reductive parody of the plot of a grande comédie, a gossamer thread around which to weave the fantastically multiplying interventions from commedia dell’arte in the form of Polichinelle; French farce in Fleurant, the Diafoirus pair, and Purgon; the pastoral-opera amateur show (II, v); ballet de cour’s elegant charms in the second intermède; on to the carnivalesque final ceremony which converts medicine from a quasi-theological rite (covering, of course, a number of spectacularly exposed venial sins, most indelibly by M. Purgon, III, v) into a millenarian but thoroughly secular fantasy of joyfully imagined care, carousing and carnage (‘Et manget et bibat, et seignat et tuat’ III, xiv). In both the Malade and the Bourgeois, what plot there is, is much less resolved than dynamited, exploded into festive fireworks. The ordinary world is left behind, forgotten, irrelevant. Satire, too, has reached the end of the road in complete absurdity.

The dismantling of neoclassical esthetics and its attendant high seriousness could not be more complete, and this at the very moment of its official triumph: L’Art poétique was well underway by Molière’s death and after extensive revisions was published eighteen months later. Boileau’s frowning therein upon Molière’s farcical predilections helped cast a lengthy shadow over later recognition of the centrality of farce in all its many-splendored forms to the art of the just-then-defunct premier farceur de France, whose image was soon recast as the august, burnished statue of the grand auteur de la nation.11

If plot is no longer used in a conventional sense to structure the late works, what takes its place? Returning to the use of farcicality in those tableaux in the Bourgeois, I think that its implications for raison, vraisemblance and audience expectations will help to show why plot no longer operates as in earlier, nonmusical works. In these tableaux we can observe the intimate relationship between farcical folly and raison: they are, most comically, at war.

In grande comédie, the workings of plot eventually reveal the necessity of the ordinary world, with which the protagonist is forced to reconcile him-

self. A spokesman for this necessity (although not really its instrument) is the *raisonneur*. Molière’s *raisonneurs* grow in didactic earnestness as well as discursiveness from Philinte to Cléante to Béralde, with less than no effect on the respective *monomanes* berated with so much reasoning. The inverse correlation between earnestness and effectiveness widens rapidly in the late works as the protagonist’s folly grows exponentially. Can one imagine Orgon definitively leaving his family behind (as he threatens to do, and nearly accomplishes despite himself) for an imaginary change of identity, or Alceste forsaking his *rubans verts* for some sort of exurban attire to wear in his allegedly dearly-longed-for désert? Although these characters push themselves toward society’s margins, they really can’t let go of society at all, however difficult their comic personalities make living in it. As the *Lettre sur la comédie de l’Imposteur* puts it, they ‘manque[nt] extrêmement de raison’, falling far short according to the gold standard of *raison* against which ridicule operates in *grande comédie.*

As folly in Jourdain and Argan takes off like a Roman candle, however, the role of *raison* changes fundamentally: it is specifically and manifestly ridiculed, rendered worthless next to the spectacularization of absurdity, which latter is rendered delicious, seductive, total. There is no official *raisonneur* in the *Bourgeois*, of course, but I submit that there is a very telling substitution: the various masters collectively fulfill a similar function as representatives of their socially-honored arts and sciences. They are however defeated *seriatim* by Jourdain’s folly. And not just defeated: by flattering him and ignoring or playing along with his unfathomably great mania—this brilliantly radiant buffoonery, this spectacular stupidity — they lower themselves from their own self-images as highly accomplished, proudly individual professionals to the level of comic pedants no better (despite initial appearances) than the farcical types Molière so loved to ridicule. Of Jourdain’s query concerning his ditty ‘Janneton’, the *maître de musique* and *maître à danser* are at pains to flatter his taste and artistry: ‘N’est-il pas joli?’—‘Le plus joli du monde’—‘Et vous le chantez bien’ (I, ii). Similarly, the *maître de philosophie* turns on the spot, without a trace of protest, from proposing a variety of serious subjects to a no-holds-barred exposition of the pronunciation of individual vowels and consonants (III, iv). Before our eyes they turn themselves into so many *maîtres malgré eux*, their learning quickly converted into matter of farce by the joyful contamination of their pupil’s farcicalizing folly. Like with Uncle Remus’s tar baby, that folly won’t come unstuck and once they touch it, they’re stuck for good—and, most comically, without even realizing it (they think they’re

still in charge). On the battlefield of raison (or savoir) and folie there is really no contest.

We might compare the Bourgeois to a sort of Moebius band of paradoxicality and playfulness in which the shimmering of surfaces, of paraître in all its forms from the gorgeous (Dorimène) to the grotesque (Jourdain’s clothes and antics), twists and turns into apparent être, in complex theatrical dimensions. In this sense, in this work paraître does indeed turn into être. We need scarcely note how deeply this process, eluding all precise determination by an unequivocal application of conventional vraisemblance, violates classicizing norms: Molière was clearly at that point no congregant in Boileau’s chapel. Are not the Ballet des Nations’ forty minutes of unalloyed pleasures, after all, the work’s extraordinarily extended true conclusion, designed to convince us (esthetically, of course, not by reasoning!) that all that truly counts are the manifold pleasures of paraître?

Although following a real Moebius band we return to the same spot, here the simile breaks down, because the same spot is really no longer the same at all. Instead, something astounding has happened. The paradoxical premise of Jourdain’s folie, never explained, no doubt since it’s the comic linchpin of the entire work, is playfully developed in the context of all available representatives of ordinary reality. In other words, vraisemblance itself has been gradually twisted into something ambiguous: ordinary vraisemblance has become the plaything of a playful, ludic vraisemblance, a sort of meta-verisimilitude. Jourdain is the main instrument of this deeper playfulness, de-equalizing all equations, upsetting all balances, converting things into something different, beginning with the masters.

In other words, what we can call vraisemblance ludique has started definitively undermining vraisemblance ordinaire, which we often simply call vraisemblance without further examination. The realistic-seeming surface of vraisemblance ordinaire can at most just barely cover over the farcical energies of vraisemblance ludique, which bubble up through that surface at every chance (e.g., ‘Il y a du mouton dedans.’—‘Du mouton?’ (I, ii), ‘O, O, O. Vous avez raison’, or ‘Fa, fa. C’est la vérité’ (II, iv)). But to the extent that one clings to a realistic viewpoint, this process—a veritable ballet des incompatibles—remains at best unclear, puzzling, and quite likely imperceptible. It is nonetheless central in my view to what is going on. We simply can’t take Jourdain literally and understand anything at all about him, he’s too paradoxical. If we adopt Mme Jourdain’s viewpoint, we have to share her alarm at a husband who’s run off the rails and is throwing away the family fortune. But no one is likely to identify with such a killjoy. Nicole, who unlike the masters has no pretention to authority, and unlike Mme Jourdain no claim to bourgeois status either, shows a deeper, more pleasurable grasp
of the situation: she laughs. She not only laughs, she laughs uncontrollably. This laughter, literally beyond all reason, while nominally an enforcer of *vraisemblance ordinaire*’s norms by mocking Jourdain’s craziness, is in fact theatrically, by its own unstoppable, stage-grabbing excess, another force leading toward the triumph of *vraisemblance ludique*.

Jourdain’s clownlike high spirits make him a creature of pure play—and he plays off all those around him. He thus cunningly exposes the limits of conventionally-treated reality, of *vraisemblance ordinaire*: of mimetic art, finally. Supposedly attempting to imitate others, he instead *creates* his own fantasy of happiness, into which we are increasingly drawn as participants: he creates of himself a spectacle which becomes our figure of collective fun also. We gradually quit laughing at him to join in laughing with him. Jacques Morel’s broadly true assertion that there is never audience complicity with a protagonist of Molière’s therefore meets its limit in Jourdain.\(^{13}\) Such an elusive, complexly theatricalized protagonist as Jourdain is not designed to, and cannot support a conventional plot—except as some sort of parody. And beyond the deeply enjoyable spectacle created with these sophisticated and elusive means, there is a certain social and political implication discernible therein.

Molière’s new cultivation of joyful, festive fantasy from the overworked soil of the nominally real world is the chief dramatic substance of these late works; and music and dance are consubstantial with this flowering. The nonchalant cynicism of the masters serves as a foil to the deep innocence of Jourdain. The much deeper cynicism of Béline, Purgon, and the *notaire* serves as a foil to Argan’s implied basic, if self-interrupted and self-denied, decency (to speak of these protagonists for a moment as more of the real world than they really are). Words, however, must be bent, warped to fit the profoundly warped world-view of these main characters, which amounts to the desire for another world entirely, a world of complete wish-fulfillment. In this process, music and dance gradually invade the verbal texture and eventually take over with the imaginary languages of the Turkish ceremony or the kitchen Latin of the medical ceremony, or for that matter the equally coded languages of spectacular pleasures in the *Ballet des Nations*. In this veritable comic revolution nothing remains at face value: *raison* is reduced to mere rhetoric, a farcicalized simulacrum of itself (rather as the nobles at court were being converted into *simulacres* of themselves, in La Bruyère’s or Saint-Simon’s views); ordinary *vraisemblance* is playfully undermined and eventually converted into thoroughgoing *invraisemblance*; grotesque stupidity and bumptiousness or equally gross bodily functions are

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converted into the sources of literally world-changing festivities. We cross through a spectacular looking-glass into another world in which nothing remains as it seemed before. A satirical interpretation of this dramaturgy may try to get a grip on things, but winds up unable to grasp the slipperiness of theatrical transformation: all is theatricalized and creates, in effect, a second nature which reveals a deeper nature than a basically mimetic version would. As Harry Barnwell observes, Molière is more than ever in these late works ‘true to nature, but not realistic’. As Charles Mazouer observes, Molière starts out with a basis in the ordinary world—or *vraisemblance ordinaire*—but moves into a fantasy world, a world of what I call *invraisemblance merveilleuse*.

This art simply cannot be reduced to service to the state any more than to unambiguous mimesis of the world in order to reconsecrate its presumptive necessity, as one may infer, however tenuously and problematically, from the endings of *grandes comédies*. We therefore have a notable irony: the most critically aware, informed, and incisive of audiences were tickled into dropping their intellectual faculties in favor of festive laughter, far more deeply ambiguous—literally world-changing—than the everyday laughter so frequently denounced as dangerous. They were drawn into participating in a kind of unauthorized Carnival the very existence of which trod on prerogatives of both Church and state which these institutions had guarded jealously for a very long time, and probably never more strongly than during the Counter Reformation and final consolidation of absolutism. As Bertrand points out:

> L’ordre du rire reste en définitive fragile et illusoire, au plus fort de l’imposition classique. Soumis aux discours de la Loi, le rire fait l’objet de manoeuvres de légitimation, qui s’attachent à contourner les interdits. Molière a pris parti pour une liberté des éclats à la comédie. Le triomphe de ce ‘Môme’ a opposé un contrepoids brillant et ironique aux tentatives contemporaines d’interdire ou de réguler le plaisir.

In recreating human experience by harnessing the theatrically unlicensed energies of carnival to his own purposes, Molière was undoubtedly staging ‘tout ce qu’il y a de plus opposé à l’ordre ludovicien’ in Claude Abraham’s

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16 Bertrand, p. 142.
17 Bertrand, p. 314.
formulation. Considered merely an entertainer by most of his contemporaries, recognized by only a few as the greatest comic dramatist of all, Molière was able to carry off more than once these sneak attacks on orthodoxy—but just barely, and not indefinitely.

In conclusion, then, it seems fair to state that folly may carry its own kind of truth along with its own kind of power, and in Molière’s hands a transcendent truth. Molière’s unwillingness to conform other than superficially may be read within the very substance, the dramatic language and structure of these late works. And by speaking folly to power Molière was not just entertaining in a wildly successful and deeply innovative manner: he was also staking his own claim to artistic freedom in an increasingly unfree world.

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20 Abraham, p. 69.