

The Vertigo of Relativity and Molière's Comedy of the Modernizing Self: Dominance, Narcissism, Masterful Discourse, and Repression from *Arnolphe* to *Argan*

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Abstract: This article argues that, in constantly reminding us of the relational, the contingent, and the physical in human experience, Molière anticipates more recent analyses of the modern “possessive individualist” self. His comedies undermine both the supposedly—ideally—“autonomous” individual and the epistemology of mastery. Taking place in the real, organic, vertiginously dramatic space and time of comedic performance--not in the virtual, homogeneous, fixed space and time of abstract representations--and literally subverting hegemonic discourse by bringing it to life, the comedies remind us that the body, social entanglements, and the physical world are the grounds of the mind.

Keywords: vertigo, narcissism, mastery, individualism, cognition

I am committed to making connections between seventeenth-century French studies and interdisciplinary theories of modernity. This approach seems promising, not only for interpreting Molière and other early modern literary figures, but also for the Humanities in general. Mainstream modern epistemology and individualism, and the cognitive style associated with them, were being established during the seventeenth century. In this article, I will explore some ways in which Molière's major comedies anticipate social critiques of modernity developed by Ulrich Beck, Nikolai Genov, Bruno Latour, Peter Berger, Zygmunt Bauman, Ernest Becker, Alasdair McIntyre, and others. Molière critically examines tendencies of his time, elucidating negative aspects of modern ideologies and mentalities, and anticipating later figures who are routinely regarded as critical observers of the modern (Riggs Modernity).

Molière's critiques of narcissistic, would-be masterful, “self-fashioning” (Greenblatt) individualists can be read productively in the light of Beck's analysis of modernity's individualizing tendencies and of their consequences. Stephen Greenblatt's elaboration of the concept self-fashioning illuminates a crucial problem at the heart of individualist “liberation,” which I see as central to Molière's comedic dramatizations: the self-fashioner “produces” a self through what amounts to theatrical display—the creation of “prestige,” in the etymological sense. This not only places others—as audience—at the

core of supposedly emancipated “individuality,” it also denounces would-be autonomous selfhood as an imposture. As McIntyre puts it, not only our self, but our knowledge of that self, depend on the responses of others—on what we “learn” from them about ourselves (94). Michael Call, too, gives productive attention to the modern myth of the autonomous, self-seeking individual who denies dependence on others and obligations to them. Call also shows clearly that Molière intended to be taken seriously as a writer, and not to be dismissed as a “mere” *homme de théâtre*. The plays are clearly to be taken seriously as literature with important themes. This paradox at the heart of the modernizing self is, as I will attempt to show, especially salient in *Le Misanthrope*, but it is central to Molière’s dramaturgy in general.

In his superb study of paradox in Molière’s plays, James F. Gaines says that dramatizing the lack of a criterion of truth is fundamental to Molière’s comic technique. The plays undermine every dogmatic pretense of certainty and every effort to achieve absolute control. The ambition to know and control, shared by molièresque *ridicules* and a number of early modern philosophers, as well as by would-be absolutist rulers, leads to the conclusion that might makes right, that successful manipulation is a sign of epistemological and moral correctness. Molière’s relentless comic deconstruction of dogmatic speech and of efforts toward absolute control—of self and other—directly challenges the belief that Truth—with a capital “T”—can be found, and therefore that it can justify any kind of authoritarianism. The plays lampoon by implication what Gaines calls, in one of his many felicitous formulations, “an age of Absolutism that was trying to free itself from the contingencies of ordinary life.” Indeed, paradox is a crucial element in the plays, since efforts to achieve definitive knowledge and secure control are shown to be self-defeating, to lead, often literally, to vertiginous pirouettes.

The unity of the Subject is always already compromised by the fact that domination over the Other also requires domination over the otherness within the Subject (Benhabib). This “domination” is, actually, repression, which is always precarious and ultimately self-undermining. Subjects tend to be blinded by their narcissistic quest for ontological certainty, and that quest requires rejection—repression—of vulnerability and fallibility. The quest for unity thus requires *division* as a first condition. Combined with growing individualism, and with the reinforcement of patriarchal authority under absolutist monarchy (Hardwick), commitment to this binary worldview produced the misogyny, the hostility to nature and the body, and the narcissistic hypertrophy of the individual self that are demolished in Molière’s plays, and that still haunt us, today. The allegedly transcendent, knowing Subject of mainstream modern epistemology, and the inflated, narcissistic, would-be autonomous individualist, converge in Molière’s *grands ridicules*.

Berger writes that the comic has a cognitive function: it enables perception and criticism of dimensions of ourselves and of the world to which we are ordinarily inattentive (Redeeming, 6). He adds that one of the functions of humor is to encourage cognitive flexibility, by deliberately outraging conventional moral sentiments, by subverting orthodox claims of “Truth” (Redeeming, 19). Gérard Defaux also argues

for taking Molière seriously, attributing a didactic function to the plays. Of course, in the critical enterprise of taking Molière seriously, and certainly in my own beginnings as a Molière scholar, Judd Hubert's *Molière and the Comedy of Intellect* is a seminal work.

Timothy Murray provides yet more support here, saying that laughter is a violation of interpretive authority (114). Murray adds that the narcissistic Subject is blinded by the quest for security and permanence (31), and that dramatic performance is a traditional means of reminding us that vicissitude or relativity is inescapable (7). Molière directs attention to what mainstream modernizing culture has been inclined to ignore: the ineluctable intermittence—what Montaigne called the *branloire pérenne* (“Du repentir”)—of the world, and of the self who claims to know and control it. Jean Duvignaud, I believe, supplies support for my linkage of modernizing selfhood and epistemology by showing that comedy deconstructs systems and codes, and that incongruence is central to comic drama. The epistemology of mastery and control, along with its psychological motives and problematic consequences, have been given unusually systematic consideration in Benjamin Fong's *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and the Subject of Late Capitalism*. Fong's bold analysis was actually anticipated, I believe, by the work of Ernest Becker (Denial 181).

Like Becker, Fong finds the roots of the impulse to achieve mastery in the fear of death, and in the delusional ambition to escape it. Along with that fear and ambition, go rejection of the body and the emotions, and misogynist distrust of and hostility to women. What is connected with the body, the emotions, and physical nature—typically conceptualized as female—is feared and repressed; it becomes the object of active hostility. The repression, predictably, perpetuates and intensifies the fear. Since a human being is a bodily and emotional entity, the hostility becomes hostility to the real self, since it is that bodily self that will die.

I would add that substitution of a represented “world” for the intractably resistant real one is also inherent in the epistemology, and the concomitant style of cognition, that became dominant during the seventeenth century in Europe. This cognitive style involves heavy investment in hierarchical binaries: masculine/feminine, human/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body. The “upper” halves of these dichotomies were, and to a significant degree remain, identified with knowledge, culture, control, and progress. The “lower” halves are conflated, denigrated, and dominated in the interest of knowledge, control, and progress (Benhabib). They are perceived as threats to the fulfillment of the modern epistemological promise: parlaying certain knowledge into successful manipulation of nature and masterful autonomy for the Subject. These hierarchical binaries are constructs, or representations, fabricated for the purpose of acquiring material and social power. Investment of the sense of individual identity in this ideological construction of world and self is a cognitive style that disables true critical thinking. Max Vernet points out that this substitution of an abstract, controllable world for the unpredictable, real one is a defining foible of the molièresque *ridicules* (263).

Molière's pathologically narcissistic solipsists strive to establish what Bauman and Stanislaw Obirek have termed “vertical societies”: rigid hierarchies dominated by

a single authority, and buttressed by a unitary, hegemonic “Truth.” (13-14). Molière’s ridiculous tyrants are the dupes of what seems to both hide and serve their lust for power and security. Beck usefully suggests that adherence to and attempts to impose rigid moral codes articulated in authoritative normative discourses are actually illusory remedies for the anguish of individualization (Beck, *God* 35). It would be instructive to imagine that narcissism and other symptoms of extreme individualism are reactions to the vertigo and insecurity that accompanied the atrophy of once both confining and comforting collective entities. Self-fashioning is a chronically precarious, ultimately self-defeating enterprise. Individualization requires recognition by others, so the modern self, while lacking some of the traditional supports and dimensions of identity, remains a social construct. The self is thus always existentially situated; sociality, empathy, and reciprocity are more fundamental than individuality in human behavior (Riggs, “Paradoxes” 443).

In the “Préface de *Tartuffe*,” Molière says, “. . . on doit discourir des choses, et non pas des mots. . .” This injunction declares Molière’s intention to deconstruct the represented “world” of repressive normative discourses, where mastery and ontological security are believed, mistakenly, to reside. The *choses* about which we are advised to speak and think presumably include the body; emotions; social interdependence; and the given, natural world.

A new book by Anne-Laure de Meyer evokes brilliantly the deep sense of crisis that haunted the period during which Francis Bacon and René Descartes elaborated the new epistemology. Molière’s great comic types aspire to establish and dominate what Bauman and Stanislaw Obirek call a “vertical society”: one in which everything and everyone is organized around an authority figure legitimated by a single universal Truth (13-14). Bauman and Rein Raud have called modernity the era of certainty and argued that certainty is always rooted in some form of coercive power (13). As de Meyer demonstrates, the launch of an epistemology intended to produce knowledge in the interest of establishing and legitimating social and material power took place in an era of perceived disorder, of cognitive panic.

Attempting to control the vicissitudes of ordinary life is the hallmark of Molière’s *grands ridicules*. Attempting to escape the “vertigo of relativity” (Berger and Luckmann 13) by asserting the existence of a universal Truth has actually been the dominant tradition in Western thought, at least since Plato. It is well to remember that Plato banished both laughter and drama from his Republic. Linda Martín Alcoff denounces the Western philosophical canon’s quest for conclusions about “universal” human experience. This Western epistemological universalism requires ignoring the specifics of context and embodiment. Plato’s *Timaeus* endorses the ultimate rationalist fantasy: that the passions and the body can be made subservient to reason. Plato contends that a man dominated by his passions will be *reincarnated as a woman*. There we have it: in the Western philosophical canon, emotions and the body are identified with the feminine or female, and all are denigrated by the association.

Arnolphe’s systematic repression of Agnès, in *L’Ecole des femmes*, is an attempt to parlay his supposed expertise in matters of cuckoldry into dominance of a vertically

structured domesticity. As the play develops, we learn that it is Agnès's body and sexuality that Arnolphe is enclosing and repressing. His desire to deprive Agnès of independent subjectivity is demonstrated by his selection of her when she was a malleable four-year-old child: "Un air doux et posé, parmi d'autres enfants,/M'inspira de l'amour pour elle dès quatre ans" (ll 129-30). Arnolphe's *méthode*--to infantilize Agnès permanently--will be legitimated by a moralistic discourse of misogyny and repression—*Les Maximes du mariage*. (III, ii). The fact that the *maximes* are copied from an actual Church-sponsored manual of "proper" female behavior widens the significance of Molière's critique. The *maximes* represent perfectly the transformation of particular motives and interests, of a desire to seize and exercise power, into a "universally" valid normative discourse. Arnolphe intends to go beyond, to short-circuit, the usual patriarchal practice of using female sexuality to consummate a deal between men. He comes close to committing incest: having reared Agnès as a perfectly "innocent" and obedient daughter, he plans *to give her in marriage to himself*.

In the play's opening debate, Chrysalde points out the futility of trying to eliminate completely the risk of cuckoldry. However, he also suggests that a generous, respectful demeanor toward one's wife significantly reduces that risk. Moreover, stultifying and stupefying one's prospective wife, as Arnolphe proudly proclaims that he has done to Agnès, will eliminate one's own pleasure in being married.

The upshot of Arnolphe's *méthode* (l. 123)), is that he transforms Agnès into precisely what he fears most: a *femme habile* (l. 84). The naiveté he has imposed on her, with the help of a convent "education," has made her vulnerable to her first experience of gallant compliments, and his obstruction of her desire turns her into a clever actress and a strategic communicator—a *femme habile*. In Act III, scene 4, Arnolphe learns that, directly under his nose, and while appearing to obey his command to drive the seductive Horace away by throwing a rock at him, Agnès has attached an inviting note to the stone. Not only has Agnès become a *femme habile*, but she has also joined Molière as a writer who can subvert authority, even while performing prescribed gestures.

The method by which Arnolphe has sought control is, therefore, the means by which his attempt is foiled. This point is emphasized by the fact that Arnolphe gives money to Horace, thinking that he is thereby financing another man's marital disgrace (I, iv). In fact, he is bankrolling the comedy in which he will be reduced to ridicule. Arnolphe wants to believe that he can be a spectator, observing safely and knowingly from outside the action (l.44). Chrysalde tries to warn him that he is *in the play* (ll. 45-46). Abusive power exercised in service to an inflated, fragile ego, and underwritten by religious "Truth," is demolished.

In *Tartuffe*, Orgon's repression of his own natural emotions, and those of his family, seems to provide the keystone of dominance. In fact, though, that repression creates a void that is more than filled by the gigantic lusts of the false *dévo*t, Tartuffe. Analogous to divine right monarchy, Orgon's household is a vertically organized microcosm ruled by what he takes as the ultimate, unitary Truth: that of the Church,

as supposedly represented by Tartuffe. Orgon seems, already in the seventeenth century, to illustrate Beck's point that, in modernizing societies, many individuals have invented a "God" to serve their own private purposes (God 22). Both Orgon and Tartuffe look like excellent examples of this phenomenon.

Orgon's desire for control makes him easy to manipulate. He ignores real, bodily desires and motives, especially his own and those of his *dévo*t seducer. Despite describing Tartuffe as "un homme" (l.270), Orgon does not consider that having motives, or desires, is part of the definition of a man.¹ Orgon must ignore or deny motives, for the usual Molièresque reason: he wants his own motives, disguised as adherence to absolute Truth, to be the environment in which others must live. He wants to be *their world*, even as he pretends to have no desires, at all.

This brings us again to the nemesis-effect, to what Chrysalde called a *revers de satire* (l. 55) in *L'École des femmes*: the desire to absorb all into the narcissistic self does not eliminate vulnerability; it greatly increases it. It is a fundamental cognitive error to believe that the desire to know Truth and thereby achieve control somehow transcends the contingencies in which all desires actually arise and entangle us. Molière's great comedies work to correct this error.

Orgon disguises his desire for control, perhaps even from himself, by imposing a false asceticism. *Dévo*tion seems to provide cover for the pursuit of dominance. Molière shows that *dévo*tion can be exploited to "alchemize" desire, disguising it as adherence to Truth. Paradoxically, it also allows Tartuffe's quite earthly desire for sex and wealth to replace Orgon's repressed emotion, just as Tartuffe literally takes possession of his dupe's house. Orgon's pseudo-ascetic rejection of love for his family does not make him powerful; it makes him susceptible to the substitution of Tartuffe's desire for his own.

The material manifestation of Orgon's narcissism, the key to his seduction by Tartuffe, is made clear in Acte I, scène v. In explaining to his brother-in-law, Cléante, his deep regard for Tartuffe, Orgon, as if savoring a beatific vision, describes how Tartuffe took up a position in church facing Orgon--"Tout vis-à-vis de moi" (l. 284)—and attracted all eyes by praying with spectacular ardor. Then, the impostor, whom Cléante denounces as one of the "fanfarons de vertu" (l. 388), who "Font de dévotion métier et merchandise" (l. 366), hurried to flatter Orgon as they left the church. This image shows Tartuffe worshipping Orgon, making him, like the King, the manifestation of God on earth. Michael Hawcroft is among the Molière critics who agree with my reading of this scene (95). Tartuffe recognizes that Orgon can be seduced by flattery of his grandiose self-conception, of his ambition to be, in his household, a microcosmic absolute monarch, even a domestic god.

Orgon goes on to join Arnolphe in Molière's gallery of fools obsessed with control over women. First, he proudly cites Tartuffe's zeal in spying on Orgon's wife, Elmire (ll. 3-1-3-4). Then, he announces his intention to marry his daughter, Mariane,

¹ Molière implicitly reminds us, here, that all versions of truth are embodied, and can therefore never be absolute or universal.

to the impostor (II, i). Fear of women, and treatment of their sexuality as both a threat and a commodity to be traded between men are shown here to be central to Orgon's sense of power and security. Orgon intends to use his daughter's body to enhance his own power and status by cementing his connection with Truth. In convincing Orgon that true piety requires withdrawing emotion from his family, Tartuffe has created "space" into which to project his own desire.

Only when Orgon is literally *brought down to earth*—he is hidden under a table (IV, iv)—does he see and hear the truth about Tartuffe. Until this point, with Orgon's eyes directed "heavenward," or, rather, with Orgon effectively blinded by the glorious *vision* of himself composed by Tartuffe, the latter was free to indulge his very earthy desires for Orgon's wife and property. From his humiliating, and no doubt physically uncomfortable, position, now, Orgon's perception of Tartuffe is corrected, as the hypocrite tries to talk Elmire into having sex with him. Orgon receives a comic corrective of his cognition, and the lesson depends on his being forced to occupy a humble position.

Psychologist Joshua Greene agrees with Berger's idea that comedy makes for better cognition, saying that it increases our ability to make sound judgments (126). Orgon exemplifies Greene's point that emotional input is required for realistic, pragmatic judgments (137). It is, I think, worthwhile to refer again, here, to Beck's point about modern religion: it amounts to individualized theology to serve and legitimate an individual's selfish interests: God of one's own to make oneself, in effect, a god. Molière's mockery of the *maximes du mariage* and of Tartuffe's showy *dévotion* denounces conventional moralistic discourses as serving male desire for dominance and control, first of all over women.

In *Le Misanthrope*, Alceste's demand that Célimène be "sincere" reflects the modern conception of knowledge as clarity, power, and control. It is a demand that a woman be transparent, subservient, and fully knowable. It is another instance of attempted self-fashioning through distrust, condemnation, and domination of a woman.² Alceste's conception of sincerity is an assertion of power. To be perfectly sincere would amount to being transparent and static; to being without independent desire or motive; to being subservient to the desires and motives of another; to being, in effect, perpetually dissected, with one's interior fully revealed to a knowing, commanding gaze.

Alceste exemplifies perfectly the contradiction at the heart of individualized self-fashioning: his effort to be unique, to be distinguished from the rest of his society, requires *their recognition*. Hawcroft points out the contradiction inherent in the fact that Alceste wants his departure from society to be spectacular (170). His egotism must have an audience. Moreover, Alceste's demand that others be perfectly sincere is a

² Mieke Bal, in "His Master's Eye," says that the Ideal Object of the modernist appropriating subject is a literally or metaphorically nude woman, immobilized and unconditionally available to the dominant and possessive male gaze (390).

futile absolutist attempt to escape the realities of ordinary life. Alceste is surrounded by atomized individuals, like himself, who are competing for distinction. The “world” of Célimène’s household is a microcosmic dramatization of the one implied by the modern myth of individualism. Like Arnolphe, despite his effort to be a detached spectator/judge, Alceste is inescapably in the play. Alceste’s own performance is strategic, rather than perfectly sincere—it is *performative*. His misanthropy is a role, an effort at self-fashioning that cannot be independent of others’ reception. The egomaniac is always dependent on approval. Alceste’s obsession with being distinguished—“Je veux qu’on me distingue” (l. 63)—enmeshes him tightly in the social circle he professes to abhor. As McIntyre puts it, language has no meaning apart from its social use (31).

Alceste’s attempt to dominate and control a woman is even more hopeless than Arnolphe’s, since Célimène is already a *femme habile*. He wrongly assumes that sincerity is a virtue that transcends the specific contexts and relationships, the environment of motives, within which people actually communicate. When he compares Célimène’s alleged perfidy to “le déchaînement de toute la nature” (l. 221), Alceste echoes the association of woman with the threatening elements of nature, which modern epistemology promises to penetrate and control. Alceste aims to domesticate Célimène by reducing her to a fully visible display. She will speak and act only in order to open herself to Alceste, and to affirm his superiority. Knowing her, mastering her, will, he believes, confirm his status as a transcendent Subject.

Sincerity is clearly linked by Alceste to subjugation (Horowitz). In fact, the intensity of Alceste’s attack on Célimène, featuring references to flames and purification, evokes the Inquisition, a synthesis of confession and dissection if ever there was one: “... et sans doute ma flamme/De ces vices du temps pourra purger son âme” (ll. 233-234). Alceste sees himself, not merely as a severe judge of social mores, but as a full-fledged Grand Inquisitor. His misanthropic pose is obviously intended to place him outside and above his social milieu, while making him admired and feared within it, and while also compelling Célimène’s obedience and “love.” His use of the gallant cliché *flamme* to refer to the morally cleansing power of his love is one of the many examples in Molière’s plays of psychological truth breaking through the “surface” of a hackneyed metaphor.

Alceste’s desire for and fear of a female causes him to think of Célimène as a kind of witch. She allegedly makes him love her, against his will, through what amounts to a spell—“En dépit qu’on ait, elle se fait aimer” (l. 232). He ascribes his love for her to her fearsome, diabolical power. His quest for dominance over Célimène requires knowledge of her that is both penetrating and comprehensive. This is precisely the “pleine lumière” (l.1126) promised by Arsinoé when she offers to prove Célimène’s perfidy by showing Alceste a letter written by Célimène. That this putative revelation is both a betrayal and an effort to seduce Alceste, by a rival of Célimène, ought to make the former skeptical about it. However, as he will proclaim, he wanted and needed a pretext to play the Grand Inquisitor: “Je cherchais le malheur qu’ont rencontré mes yeux” (l. 1292).

The letter, supposedly conclusive evidence of Célimène's perfidy, is read by Alceste as if it were a combination of confession and dissection. Linda Williams, in her study of visual pornography, speaks of modernist knowledge as relying on the staging of involuntary confessions. It seems that the knowledge of Célimène sought by Alceste is akin to that of a pornographer, or a voyeur. Are we not here well on the way to the Marquis de Sade's fantasies?

Using language strategically, or performatively, as one always does in social communication, cannot be perfectly "sincere" as Alceste defines it. This is why Alceste's reading of the letter as if it were a revelation of Célimène's inner, shameful truth reveals his own pathological desire for power over her. Only if the truth about her is shameful can he purport to judge her definitively. Paradoxically, Alceste must regard the letter as perfectly "sincere," rather than as just another instance of the same socially contingent, "insincere" communication he has been fulminating against.³ Like Arnolphe and Orgon, Alceste tries to attach his ego to what he posits as a universal, moral imperative: sincerity. However, in another Molièresque *revers de satire*, his desire for distinction merely underlines his resemblance to the other competitive individualists in Célimène's circle. (Riggs Convergence).

Alceste undermines the legitimate social criticism for which he has so often been given credit. His reduction of others to the status of unambiguous representations, analogous to definitive and reproducible texts, would make them essentially interchangeable. It is thus difficult to see him as a hero of resistance against the leveling effects of absolutist power. He is clearly a would-be *imitator* of that power. The critique of absolutism resides in Molière's creation of the character of Alceste, not in the actually quite absolutist desire and rhetoric Alceste deploys.⁴

Alceste assumes that knowledge confers manipulative dominance, making the potentially dangerous object subservient to his will. The success of the manipulation would be taken as validation of the knowledge. Such knowledge seems all the more powerful because it is acquired despite resistance. Thus, another masculine, patriarchal fantasy, motivated by the desire for control, and by abhorrence of the feminine within and without, requires abolition of independent female subjectivity. Alceste's rhetoric makes it clear that he aspires to be an Inquisitor discovering shameful truths against the will of the dissected object. In this play, too, then, the motive for seeking power is control of a female's desire as a means to achieve dominant, transcendent subjectivity. Again, we are not far from Williams's pornographic gaze, nor from de Sade's erotica of torture.⁵

³ The fact that much of Alceste's role is borrowed from Molière's *Dom Garçie de Navarre* can add delightfully to our interpretation of *Le Misanthrope*. Alceste is doubly a theatrical production, and therefore a doubly deluded individualist. He cribs his performance from a play that failed. Furthermore, not only does he fail, or refuse, to acknowledge that he is in the play, but he does not realize what *kind* of play he is in.

⁴ Louise Horowitz's reading supports my contention that there are, in fact, no significant differences between Alceste and the other characters.

⁵ Pierre Force emphasizes that vision, itself, is a matter of exchange, undermining the idea of a unilateral, dominant, all-knowing gaze.

Harpagon, in *L'Avare*, imposes a regime of scarcity on his household. He is the embodiment of nascent capitalism, with its competitive materialism, its encouragement of insatiable desire, and its use of usury to colonize and profit from the future; at the same time, the miser indulges his own grotesquely excessive desire for profit. Like Orgon, he substitutes a “higher” value—money, in Harpagon’s case—for his family. Harpagon’s house is even more like a prison than Arnolphe’s, and the miser is every bit as obsessed with control. Also like Arnolphe, he is determined to use relentless vigilance to prevent surprise attacks on the property—his *cassette*—in which he has invested his entire sense of self.

For the miser, property has replaced family as the object of his emotion. Possessions best perform their psychological function when they are thought to excite envy. Property is often valued because its possessor perceives it as something everyone else is trying to get. As Arnolphe feared cuckoldry, and as Alceste feared female perfidy, Harpagon fears theft. The value to the “owner” thus depends on the threat of theft, or of infidelity, and therefore on fear. The would-be master is alienated from his own desire, and welded to his fear, by the will to mastery, which requires the idea of triumph, not only over the object, but over rivals for possession of it/her.

In *L'Avare*, Molière dramatizes modern, “self-maximizing” economic individualism that has become truly rapacious. Harpagon seeks to extend his ownership and control into the future; he wants to dominate both space and time. The miser profits from the same desire that he fears. As MacIntyre puts it, the vice of acquisitiveness makes the vice of intemperance in others desirable (88), but it also makes it fearsome. The supposed threat to his sacred *cassette* is, of course, Harpagon’s excuse for exerting rigid control. The effects of his system are revealed by both his daughter’s curious lassitude and his son’s desperate effort to obtain money.

L'Avare’s version of the Molièresque nemesis effect has Harpagon forcing usurious lending rates on a desperate borrower who turns out to be his own son (II, ii), and threatening to arrest himself for stealing the *cassette* (IV, vii). When he understands loving speech about his daughter to be about the *cassette* (V, iii), we understand how completely property has been substituted for other values, becoming another transcendental Truth. Harpagon tries to achieve control and autonomy by substituting methodical financial calculation for bodies and emotions—his own and others’. His regime of scarcity has the effect of greatly intensifying the desires he is trying to repress, and from which he wants to profit. Also, of course, he intends to dispose of his daughter’s body in a marriage advantageous to his own financial interests.

Being a woman, Philaminte, in *Les Femmes savantes*, has always been a controversial figure among Molière’s *ridicules*. Because this play mocks female characters, and because those characters superficially resemble real women who were fighting for cultural influence in the France of Molière’s time, some commentators have seen the play as misogynistic (Beasley). When we read the play in the context of Molière’s work as a whole, however, we can see that it is not misogynistic. Molière does not criticize narcissistic pretensions only in women. In fact, *Les Femmes savantes*,

like the other plays we have looked at here, affirms again that it is *women* who are most harmed by the combination of patriarchy and the ethos of mastery. Philaminte's effort to achieve dominance by imitating "masculine virtues" represses nature and the feminine as surely as does any other oppressive, self-aggrandizing method in the plays. She intends to dispose of her daughter's body as unilaterally and selfishly as any of Molière's male would-be patriarchs.

In this play, as in the others, the repressed always returns and subverts grandiose pretensions. The learned ladies disguise their particular, personal motives—perhaps even from themselves—by speaking an abstract language of purported universal validity. They speak like books, laundering their social ambition by pretending that it is an ascetic devotion to "higher" ideas, which are to be spoken of only in "refined" language. Philaminte cites Plato, and the seventeenth-century grammarian, Vaugelas (l. 462), as incontrovertible sources of Truth to buttress her pretensions.⁶

We have noted Plato's hostility to femaleness and his definition of reason as exclusively masculine. Moreover, grammatical rules are abstracted from usage, but never completely. Usage is primary (Ong 7). However, the *savantes* make of grammar another universalistic normative discourse intended to legitimate dominance, to buttress a vertical society. Grammar cannot be a value in itself, however; it must serve communication, not be a pretext for exclusion or condemnation of "unorthodox" language-users. However, the *savantes* deploy grammar as a means to high status and power, and as a pretense of being above communicating with certain others, who do not speak grammatically or sufficiently respect "philosophy." Like Alceste's sincerity, the ladies' devotion to grammar invalidates, and would silence, others' speech and guarantee their own hegemony.

The learned ladies want to become prestigious and to dominate the cultural process within which others must live and communicate. Grammar; mind; poetry; ostensible transcendence of sex and the body; and an aggressively therapeutic, repressive pedagogy are tightly connected by the *savantes*' tendentious rhetoric with law, sovereignty, and high social status. In fact, as Armande makes clear in her debate with her sister, Henriette (I, i), she sees the hierarchical distinction of mind and body as a key instrument of her social ambition: "Et, traitant de mépris les sens et la matière/A l'esprit, comme nous, donnez-vous toute entière" (ll. 35-36) she admonishes her sister, Henriette. *Titre, vulgaire, étage bas, petit personnage, nobles plaisirs, mépris, encens, and pauvretés* are among the words and phrases used by Armande in this scene to distinguish what she regards as a new aristocracy from what is low and common. A more systematic statement of the ambition lying behind the hierarchical mind/body binary is hard to imagine. Armande, like her mother, Philaminte, sees the hierarchical distinction of mind and body as a key instrument of her social ambition. This dichotomy, of course, is itself what creates the possibility of hierarchization, and thus serves as

⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue persuasively that there is really no such thing as entirely abstract, "disembodied" thought or speech.

an instrument of patriarchal denigration and exploitation of women. The work of a number of feminist theorists is relevant here and has been foundational in the development of my own approach to early modernity. Carolyn Merchant, Karen Warren, Alison Jagger, and Evelyn Fox Keller have been formative for me, especially as regards the tyranny of dichotomization.

The ladies' enterprise reflects the *précieux* practice of erasing the body and its desires from "refined" speech, of replacing the world of concrete experiences with abstractions. Such idealization of abstractionist discourse, which is also a self-idealization by the user of the discourse, is a fantasy of definitive meaning (Cottom 34). Arnolphe's effort to imprint on Agnès the injunctions in the *Maximes du mariage* prepared us to understand Molière's critique of the learned ladies' normative discourse, and of their repression of female desire. Moreover, the metaphors on which abstractionist discourse is inevitably based constantly reiterate, even as they try to hide, the physical basis of all meaning (Lakoff and Johnson). *Les Femmes savantes* shows that personal motives and physical desires are disguised, disfigured, and, ultimately, intensified by hiding them in abstract, normative language intended to create and confirm status and power. Armande's denunciation as *vulgaire* (l. 4) of the coupling of bodies in marriage—which obviously preoccupies her—shows that she understands denigration of the body to be a precondition for belonging to the "elite."

Armande's particular predicament, and a problem at the heart of *préciosité*, are also revealed in the play's first scene. Armande's expression of revulsion at the "sale vue" (l.12) of the physical aspect of marriage turns out to be motivated by jealousy: Henriette is planning to marry Clitandre, who had once been Armande's admirer. Armande claims to be nauseated by the mere mention of marriage—"Et sans un mal de coeur peut-on l'écouter?" (l. 6)—but she wants to be wanted: "Et l'on peut pour époux refuser un mérite/Que pour adorateur on veut bien à sa suite" (ll. 103-104). It seems, then, that Armande's sense of her value depends on both attracting and resisting a man's desire. Paradoxically, her feeling of having a virtuous, powerful subjectivity is entirely based on being an object, and on repressing her own bodily desire. The loss imposed by that repression obviously haunts her.

The *précieuse* must, then, substitute a *male's* desire for her own, by identifying her ideal self with unsatisfied, but somehow still persistent, male desire. Armande is motivated, then, by the loss of what her mother's "philosophy" denigrates: her own desire. There is a double repression here, since it is, in fact, *male* desire with which Armande actually identifies, and which she has internalized. By affecting a lack of interest in physical pleasure, Armande cooperates in the denial to the female of the right to be a subject of desire and satisfaction. She actually identifies with her own oppression. As Armande's sister, Henriette, seems intuitively to recognize, self-abnegation it is another deluded strategy of self-aggrandizement.

Of course, the most spectacularly self-defeating aspect of the *savantes's* ambition is their worshipful relationship with the hack poet, Trissotin. It is clear that Molière's learned ladies, like Orgon, are the dupes of their revered authority figure.

It is Trissotin through whom they lust after unquestioned authority for themselves. They are seduced by Trissotin's mastery of *précieux* rhetoric, as Orgon was duped and blinded by Tartuffe's discourse of *dévoition*. Like the other comic types, they disguise their particular, personal motives by a familiar expedient: they identify themselves with, and insist on speaking in, a language of supposed normative power. Trissotin, however, makes clear his intention to use the ladies as cultural breeding-stock, saying that his poem is an "enfant tout nouveau né" (l. 720) and that their approval "lui peut servir de mère" (l. 724). In reality, what Trissotin actually intends is to take financial possession of a share of the family wealth, and sexual possession of Henriette, by marrying her. Philaminte's ambition makes her an instrument of a male's desire.

"Ne faites point languir de si pressants désirs" (l. 717), says Philaminte, and Bélise echoes her: "Faites tôt et hâtez nos plaisirs" (l. 718). The sexual subtext that has haunted the ladies' discourse from the beginning bursts through the surface, here. Moreover, what is going on is *literally* sexual, since Philaminte intends to marry Henriette to Trissotin, in order to cement her membership in the new, bookish "aristocracy." Like her male patriarchal counterparts, Philaminte wants to dispose of a young woman's body in order to fulfill her own ambitions. Her contempt for the body is clear: in one passage, she reproaches her husband's love of bodily pleasures by referring to the body as a *guenille* (l. 539). Like Orgon, she will find that the authority who seems to guarantee her power is a hypocritical seducer. Another normative discourse turns out to be the vehicle for male dominance.

Argan, in *Le Malade imaginaire*, is yet another Faustian narcissist. He expresses his desire for control and transcendence of his body through endless counting, medical jargon, and ritualized purging. The entire opening scene is an incantation, in which Argan, mesmerized by numbers and medical jargon, speaks reverently of himself in yet another "prestige dialect" (Easthope 35). At the same time, Argan's obsessive recourse to enemas keeps him close to his "lowest" bodily functions. His fear of death actually has him mired in his "earthiest" bodily manifestations.

Argan is a large, old baby, whose invariable ritual amounts to playing in his own excrement. His Mephistophelean doctors and pharmacists convince him that they hold the key to power, and, even, perhaps, to escape from death. Argan's endless calculations, and the medical discourse which seems to him to protect his inflated ego, are actually about nothing other than his body and its functions. Meanwhile, his obsession has converted his body into a natural resource for doctors and pharmacists. The latter are Argan's Tartuffe and Trissotin, the Mephistophelean seducers who flatter and exploit his self-inflation. The servant, Toinette, makes this clear: "Ce monsieur Fleurant-là et ce monsieur Purgon s'égayent bien sur votre corps; ils ont en vous une bonne vache à lait" (I, ii). From his exploiters' point of view, Argan resembles the donkey in Charles Perreault's "Peau d'âne": he excretes gold.

Argan's obsession with control over his daughter's body, as well as his own, is expressed by his constant enumerating, his love of doctors and pharmacists, and his determination to use Angélique's sexuality to his own advantage. Like the other

Molière types that we have studied here, he is linked to the bookishness, calculation, and abstractionism of modernizing culture; his numeromania is complemented by the Latinizing jargon of his medical exploiters. He finds it flattering to be the subject of both endless calculations and diagnoses and prescriptions delivered pompously in a prestige dialect.

The hypochondriac intends to use his daughter's body as a resource for perpetuating his excremental transcendence by marrying her to Thomas Diafoirus, the son of the doctor who is exploiting Argan's body. It seems particularly egregious that Argan actually recognizes Angélique's sexual desire: "Ah! nature, nature! A ce que je puis voir, ma fille, je n'ai que faire de vous demander si vous voulez bien vous marier" (I, v). Argan, like Molière's other tyrannical patriarchs, including the "phallic mother," Philaminte, intends to use Angélique's sexuality by marrying her to a man whom she does not desire, and thus guaranteeing that Argan will continue to enjoy the ministrations of his exploiters. As usual, the daughter's body is a commodity to be disposed of profitably by trading it to a man, and her own desire does not matter. Also as usual, the attempt to oppress actually requires repression of the would-be master's own emotions.

Argan's narcissistic infantilism is emphasized by his substitution of Béline for his mother, as well as for his first wife--"Qu'est-ce donc qu'il y a, mon petit fils," she asks him, and he replies by calling her "Mamie" (I, vi)-- and by his jealousy at the prospect that his children will inherit his wealth: "Comment puis-je faire, s'il vous plaît, pour lui (to Béline) donner mon bien et en frustrer mes enfants?" (I, vii). Like Harpagon, he opposes the succession of generations and rejects the inevitability of his death. The overtones of incest that we found in *L'Ecole des femmes* are echoed in *Le Malade imaginaire*. Arnolphe wanted to marry the woman whom he fell in "love" with when she was a child, and whom he reared as a daughter, and Argan has married a substitute for his own mother. We are reminded of the weakness of masculine separation from the mother, and of the consequent narcissism, misogyny, and paranoia of masculine identity (Badinter).

As in the case of Harpagon, the children's legitimate inheritance is threatened by the father's obsession, and here it is a false mother who stands to benefit. Like Arnolphe, Argan threatens to "bury" a disobedient young woman, in this case his real daughter, in a convent.⁷ Blind to the motives of those who manipulate him, Argan must be made to *hear* the voice of his second wife's real desire. Hidden within his "dead" body, (III, xii) as Orgon was hidden under the table, Argan hears the truth.

This ultimate, though feigned, acknowledgement of his body, and of his death, reveals, through an act of theatre within the play, the futility of Argan's Faustian bargain with medical discourse. Acknowledging death, though only by pretending to be dead, releases the truth about Béline's self-serving manipulation. Argan himself does not escape the world of words, however; he finally evaporates in the burlesque

⁷ Here, again, Molière refers clearly to the mutually reinforcing power alliance of religion and patriarchy.

ceremony that closes him definitively into his solipsism by making him both imaginary doctor and make-believe patient. Self-fashioning is thus equated with pure fantasy, with deluded hallucination. Argan's effort to transcend his body by controlling it medically condemns him to bury his nose in bodily effluvia, and to learn the truth about his domestic impotence only by playing dead.

The subject of burlesque ceremonies refers us to another play which, I believe, could be profitably analyzed along the lines developed here: *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. In fact, I can envision a future study pairing that play with Molière's *Dom Juan* as a way of developing further the examination of narcissistic individualization begun here.

Monsieur Jourdain epitomizes the ambition for higher social status that motivates most of Molière's ridiculous characters. In fact, Jourdain is very much a farcical Faust, and his *maîtres* play a Mephistophelian role: he seeks knowledge that will give him social and sexual gratification, and they pretend that their expertise can provide it. Jourdain wants to oblige others to recognize and confirm his self-*refashioning*. The *maîtres* purport to supply what he needs to transcend his condition, to escape the identity with which he is dissatisfied. Jourdain is thus another excellent example of would-be self-fashioning individualism, as manifested in social ambition and exploited by caterers to delusion. Jourdain's relationship with his *maîtres* lampoons the relationship between professionalized knowledge, or expertise, and modern dreams of self-improvement and power. Like Argan, Monsieur Jourdain is finally seduced into permanent residence in a world of words. His carnivalesque apotheosis as a *mamamouchi* ("Quatrième intermède") makes him the hopeless creature of his delusions as they are exploited by others. The play suggests that high social status, even when it is real, is a matter of display, of trappings. That point leads us to *Dom Juan*.

Molière's *Dom Juan* is yet another fascinating study of narcissistic individualism, particularly interesting because Dom Juan is, superficially, so different from the other *ridicules*. The present comments on this play build on my "Dom Juan: The Subject of Modernity." As a nobleman, Dom Juan has what Monsieur Jourdain and the others want so desperately. He seemingly has no need of transformed social status. The maniacal seducer makes effective use of the trappings of his status to manipulate others, to stifle any opposition to his words and actions, and to overcome any resistance in the women he targets. As his servant, Sganarelle, puts it, Dom Juan speaks "tout comme un livre" (I, ii). He is the master of authoritative discourse and imposing display; there is no arguing with him. His clothes, themselves, are irresistibly attractive to common women.

Dom Juan treats Woman as an abstraction and sees every particular woman as an opportunity to exploit the power of his noble status, and to exercise his discursive virtuosity. He is the master of a prestige dialect, including the language of romantic seduction. Moreover, his noble status, displayed in clothing, words, and gestures, is an element in a powerful *semiotic* system, in a kind of discourse. Dom Juan's promiscuous deployment of his "lendings," as King Lear called them (III, iv), actually works to reveal their ultimate detachment from substance. As Jean Baudrillard contends, the rapid, unfettered circulation of signs empties them of meaning (11-12).

Dom Juan would seem to have no need to fashion a potent self. He was born with one; and yet, he treats every encounter, especially encounters with women, as an opportunity for self-assertion which he must not fail to exploit. It is interesting that this character is both a Subject and an Object of modernizing desire: he claims unfettered freedom for himself, and every interaction with him—especially marriage!—is a self-fashioning occasion for the other. Dom Juan’s particular narcissism seems symptomatic of an excessive emancipation from defining constraint; he is lost in his freedom. His obsessive reenactment of this freedom links him to both Monsieur Jourdain and Argan; his life is a ritualized repetition of ultimately meaningless language. As he says, himself, of his mastery of women, “Mais lorsqu’on en est maître une fois, il n’y a plus rien à dire, ni rien à souhaiter” (I, ii). In the end, Dom Juan is another user of a self-defeating method. He is alienated from his “conquests” by the fact that they are achieved through the manipulation of spectacle, not by virtue of any inherent qualities of a stable self.

This underlines two major points: first, that his conquests are matters of language and theatrics; and, secondly, that each one is unsatisfying. So, our interpretation of the character must include the recognition that Dom Juan is alienated by his privileges, that his desire for women is insatiable because their response to his *display* of status prevents him from receiving their recognition as an individual person. His ability to exploit his status as socio/cultural capital implies his alienation from it, and makes each success a failure. In the end, Molière appears to dramatize the final futility of all the major types’ ambition: whatever the pretenses and strategies, and even despite apparent success, the inflated self is inescapably empty and insecure. Narcissism is a symptom of a malady that is worsened by narcissistic methods themselves. Dom Juan’s treatment of women as interchangeable objects makes *him* an object. The display of semiotic qualities as a method of seducing or coercing admiring recognition can produce only endless dissatisfaction, futile repetition, and more of the narcissism born of loss.

For now, I finish where I began: Molière’s comedy constantly reminds us of the social, the contingent, the physical/natural, and the relational. In doing so, it functions at the expense of both the autonomous individual and the epistemology of mastery. Taking place in the real, organic, vertiginously dramatic space and time of bodily performance—not in the virtual, homogeneous, fixed space and time of abstract representations—and literally subverting hegemonic discourse by *bringing it to life*, the comedies remind us that the body, society, and the physical world are the indispensable grounds of the mind. As Edward O. Wilson puts it, our “highest” impulses, on examination, turn out to be biological activities (21). Mind is a bodily function! As incisively as any more recent social theorist, cognitive scientist, post-modernist, or post-structuralist, and, I think, more eloquently and persuasively, Molière puts modern individualism and the epistemology of mastery back in the *branloire pérenne*.

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