

Gretchen Elizabeth Smith. *The Performance of Male Nobility in Molière's Comédies-Ballets: Staging the Courtier*. Hampshire, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005. xiv + 257pp + illus. \$94.95. Review by JAY M. SMITH, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA.

The Performance of Male Nobility can be read, like a Molière performance, on multiple levels. The book casts new light on a performance genre whose structure and dynamics are conveyed only incompletely by extant sources, it highlights Molière's clever manipulation of the social stereotypes, and it analyzes these subjects in light of the critical first decade of Louis XIV's personal rule, when the royal court was being reconfigured as a site of representation and negotiation. Smith succeeds best when she describes the complicated internal mechanics of the *comédies-ballets* and reveals the inventiveness of Molière and his collaborators. Her efforts to relate those performances to the contexts of court life between 1661 and 1670, however, yield uneven results. Critical elements of the context are lacking, and in some ways Smith's representations of contemporary social and political relations serve to reinforce misleading perceptions. Nevertheless, Smith's evidence is sufficient to show that the staging of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* in 1670 marked a conservative turn in Molière's writing that reflected the changing cultural politics of Louis XIV's court.

Smith provides close analyses of eight *comédies-ballets*, beginning with *Les Fâcheux* of 1661. The performance took place at the notorious festival held in Louis XIV's honor at Nicolas Fouquet's lavish chateau, Vaux-le-Vicomte. Fouquet's impolitic display of wealth and cultural capital, reflecting his personal successes as the king's *surintendant des finances*, is widely thought to have excited the king's envy and suspicion, and Fouquet was arrested on charges of corruption only weeks after the August extravaganza. For Smith, though, the principal significance of the festival is that it marked the beginning of an active collaboration between Molière and the Sun King, whose appreciative suggestions to Molière after the initial performance eventually inspired changes to the script and branded the *comédie-ballet* as a genre fixated on the identity of the "male courtier." The action in *Les Fâcheux* was dictated by a straightforward plot device—two noble lovers are prevented from meeting at a secret rendezvous because a series of irritating personalities, the *fâcheux* of the title, take turns disrupting the lovers' plans. By populating the stage with recognizable

courtier “types,” and by punctuating the presentation with meta-theatrical *gestes* and ballet interludes with noble dancers, Molière implicated his audience in the action and turned the production into a commentary on the role(s) of the courtier.

Smith develops this theme in discussions of subsequent *comédies-ballets* performed at Versailles and other royal chateaux throughout the 1660s. She shows how Molière, using a variety of fictional settings and combining inter-class and intra-class dynamics, both mirrored the social values of the courtly audience for whom the performances were staged and also subtly challenged the terms in which nobles—especially male nobles—defined themselves. Most of Smith’s observations are unobjectionable, though they will also be generally unsurprising to specialists of the period. Characters’ costumes, speech, and control over codes of etiquette signaled their social status. Interactions between noble but duplicitous characters, on the one hand, and common but virtuous characters, on the other hand, highlighted the “hierarchies and anxieties of masculinity” in an evolving court culture (88). The ideal of *honnêteté* demarcated the established elites from the laughable pretenders, but it also drew attention to the mutable character of the qualities that increasingly came to represent *noblesse*.

The analysis of the scripts and staging of the *comédies-ballets* is consistently astute, but Smith frequently stumbles when she fills in the context that allegedly shaped Molière’s thinking and behavior. For example, she refers repeatedly to royal servants as “bureaucrats,” which few political historians of the period would accept, and she describes the *noblesse de robe* as being “located socially between the *noblesse d’épée* and the merchant class,” positioned somewhere beneath self-described *honnêtes homes*—a characterization that historians of the seventeenth-century nobility would regard as a gross simplification (98-9). Although Smith acknowledges and draws from some of the revisionist literature that has emphasized the reciprocal benefits that Louis XIV’s “absolutist” style bestowed on monarchy and nobility, she remains frustratingly one-sided in her depiction of “Louis’s transformation of the nobility” (213). By granting nobles limited but valued rights to participate in theatrical spectacles, Smith suggests, Louis “directed and seduced his aristocracy onto his stage at Versailles” (69). The king himself, by contrast, always appears unconstrained. His personal influence on Molière, too, is consistently emphasized—even though the clearest evidence for this seems to be Molière’s own published testimony,

the rhetoric and purposes of which are unfortunately never subjected to scrutiny.

Louis XIV is still seen here, in other words, as the prime mover, the agent of change whose views and perspectives are most worthy of attention. Curiously, Smith never attempts to provide a profile of the typical courtly audience that witnessed Molière's performances. The reader is told that the *fâcheux* of 1661 were "specifically chosen to appeal to and parody [the] audience at Vaux-le-Vicomte" (14), but no systematic effort is made to assess the social composition of that audience, which apparently numbered in the thousands. Smith assures us that the noble audience "was familiar with the conventions of both the farce and the pastoral" (95), that the rural setting of *George Dandin* "would certainly resonate with courtiers" (126), and that the signifiers of fashion and conversation "were certainly recognizable to Louis's courtier audiences" (130), but the voices of actual courtiers are never heard, and Smith uses little contemporary evidence outside the world of the theater to cast light on the nobility's concerns and priorities. This is a serious problem for a book that purports to show the dynamic interplay between the "real" and "staged" representations of the male courtier.

Despite these deficiencies of context, Smith's final chapter presents a compelling account of the transformation, and decline, of the *comédie-ballet* in the early 1670s. The turning point came in February, 1670. Molière's playful challenging of social types in *Les Amants Magnifiques*—where gods and kings were revealed to be actors and creators of illusion—ultimately exposed the dangers inherent in comedic explorations of social representation. Louis XIV, in the role of Neptune, evidently refused to perform in the *intermède* after the initial performance, and Smith argues plausibly that *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*—with its affirmation of traditional social roles and its elimination of open-ended meta-theatricality—represented Molière's effort to make amends. The performance went over well with audiences in the fall of 1670, but the king's tastes had moved decisively toward the more conservative genre of *tragédie-lyrique* in the months that followed the debut of *Les Amants Magnifiques*. Already in the two years before his death in 1673, Molière recognized that he had been displaced by his one-time collaborator Lully as Louis XIV's favored court entertainer. Thanks to Smith, readers will now have a fuller sense of the richness and complexity of Molière's collaborative productions in the decade before Lully's ascendancy.

Charles Sorel. *Description de l'île de Portraiture et de la ville des Portraits (1659)*. Critical edition by Martine Debaisieux. Preface by Michel Jeanneret. Textes Littéraires Français, 582. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2006. 199 pp. + 8 illus. SF 38.00. Review by VOLKER SCHRÖDER, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

1659 was the banner year for verbal portraiture in France, marking the apogee of a *mondain* vogue that impelled seemingly all members of polite society to “paint” each other and/or themselves. Illustrated first and foremost in the novels of Mademoiselle de Scudéry, the craze culminated in the publication of several collections of stand-alone portraits, in prose and in verse, placed under the auspices of Mademoiselle de Montpensier, cousin of Louis XIV. A shrewd observer of social and literary trends, Charles Sorel (best known, then as now, as the author of the immensely successful *Histoire comique de Francion*, 1623-33) wasted no time in (de)riding the wave of portraiture and presenting his personal take on this “bizarre and agreeable constellation” (73). Despite its highly topical and precisely dated character, however, Sorel’s *Description de l'île de Portraiture et de la ville des Portraits* is more than a mere *œuvre de circonstance*: as Martine Debaisieux’ superb edition makes abundantly clear, this novella-length capriccio encapsulates the prolific writer’s entire career and reflects his lifelong preoccupation with art, truth, and society.

The *Description* is in fact a “little story” (67), that of an imaginary voyage to an island “in the middle of the world” (69) whose inhabitants all share the same single obsession and occupation, that of producing, commissioning, and distributing portrait paintings. The narrator-traveler Périandre is accompanied by two of his “old friends” (69), named Erotime and Gélaste, and guided by the wise and expert Egemon. They explore the island’s capital, where each street is dedicated to a specific type of portraiture: heroic, amorous, comical, satirical, self-portraits, etc. Egemon gives a lecture on the history and general utility of portraits and leads Périandre to the old painter Mégaloteknès, who laments the public’s frivolous lust for novelty and its disregard for serious and instructive works, such as his own latest productions. They return to the center of the city to attend a judicial ceremony during which “bad” portraits (i.e. offensive, scandalous, or simply “useless” ones; 108) are publicly burned and their authors reprimanded, whereas the “good” painters in each genre are crowned and rewarded. Finally, Périandre learns about the political organization of the island-state (a senatorial, meritocratic