

Stephen Fleck. *L'ultime Molière. Vers un théâtre éclaté*. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2016. 144 pp. €49. Review by DAVID HARRISON, GRINNELL COLLEGE.

In a recent Parisian *mise-en-scène* of Molière's final comedy, *Le Malade imaginaire*, actor Daniel Auteuil (who also directed the production) brought great pleasure to the audience with his playful rendering of the clueless hypochondriac Argan. Eschewing any melancholia—an idea based on the fact that Molière nearly died on stage while performing the title role—Auteuil interpreted Argan as a joyful nincompoop, ready to bend over and get his umpteenth enema as if receiving an invitation to the *lever du roi*. Stephen H. Fleck, who emphasizes the infectious pleasure of Molière's final comedies, would have undoubtedly enjoyed Auteuil's performance while regretting the director's choice—standard practice—of eliminating the musical and dance numbers that precede Argan's entrance and follow each of the play's three acts. For *Le Malade imaginaire* is a *comédie-ballet*, a theatrical genre invented by Molière that combined music, dance, and acting in a proto-operatic form. As Fleck points out, Molière's untimely death cut short the development of this new genre, as did the monopolistic privileges on musical performance, which Louis XIV granted to Jean-Baptiste Lully. Had he lived longer, Molière might have been defined principally by the *comédie-ballet* rather than the genre of *grande comédie* for which he is largely known today.

In five succinct chapters, Fleck argues that Molière's *comédies-ballets* represent a fundamentally different theatrical experience than that given by the *grandes comédies*, one that obeys its own logic of verisimilitude and character development. Shuttling back and forth between *grandes comédies* like *Tartuffe* and the later *comédies-ballets* like *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Fleck makes many insightful comments that, together, form a persuasive argument about the esthetic evolution of Molière and the need for critics to consider (and, presumably, for actors to perform) the musical and kinesthetic aspects of these later works. While Fleck is certainly not the first to discuss the unique elements of the *comédies-ballets*—and, indeed, his book draws from the considerable bibliography of studies that have examined these

works—he proposes an original comic theory to analyze the works and uses this to great, if somewhat repetitive, effect.

After an Introduction that discusses the abbreviated history of the *comédie-ballet*, in which both Lully and Nicolas Boileau have a hand in strangling the genre, Fleck uses his first chapter to review the many different theories of the comic heretofore applied to Molière's work. Finding all of them incomplete, Fleck identifies the work of English anthropologist Gregory Bateson as having the greatest promise for understanding the comic world of the *comédies-ballets*. This is because Bateson gives great importance to the notions of play and paradox, which Fleck sees as essential to Molière's later work. As opposed to the *grandes comédies*, such as *Le Misanthrope*, in which the foolishness of a main character is disciplined by the corrective laughter of other characters, the *comédies-ballets* present protagonists whose folly engulfs the other characters, and laughter becomes a form of participation in these protagonists' absurdity. The sense of festivity—of contributing to an upside-down world, such as when Monsieur Jourdain in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* is transformed into a *Mamamouchi*—is enhanced by the presence of music and dance. Hence, theories of comedy that propose the audience's superiority over the comic "victim" must be revised to account for the fact that everyone at the end of a *comédie-ballet* takes part in the victim's lunacy.

Chapters Two and Three fit nicely together, since one analyzes the evolution of the comic character from the *grandes comédies* to the *comédies-ballets*, while the other analyzes the evolution of *vraisemblance* from the earlier comedies to the later ones. In both chapters, Fleck identifies a sort of "liberation" in the *comédies-ballets* for both the main characters and for the plays themselves, since neither are constrained by rules governing behavior or esthetic verisimilitude. Thus, Fleck suggests, "les protagonistes de ces dernières comédies-ballets se libèrent progressivement de leurs attaches initiales à une vraisemblance conventionnelle" (77). Instead, these characters enter a new form of playful verisimilitude, "une vraisemblance ludique" (86). Developing this latter idea in a nice turn of phrase, Fleck says that "la célèbre *lucidité* satirique des grandes comédies se voit remplacée par une *ludicité* reflexive de plus en plus déclarée" (92, Fleck's emphasis).

Chapter Four discusses the creation of a “spectacle total” in the *comédies-ballets*, in which the action of the play becomes subsumed to a carnival-like atmosphere of noise, movement, and artifice. Words themselves, as with Argan’s gibberish Latin sermon pronounced at the end of *Le Malade imaginaire*, become a series of sounds, equal to the sounds produced by the orchestra accompanying the play. This festival of notes, phonemes, and physical gesture brings the *comédies-ballets* into dialogue with the farcical tradition of Molière’s earliest comedies, while also suggesting the development of modern opera. In his conclusion, Fleck sees in the eccentricities of the *comédie-ballet* the signs of a new dramaturgy that celebrates illusion and perplexity, pointing toward the plays of Beckett and Ionesco.

While the thematic organization of Fleck’s book allows him continually to compare different works from Molière’s career, this organization also reveals Fleck’s preference for *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and *Le Malade imaginaire* over all the other *comédies-ballets*. Had Fleck adopted a linear chronology for his study, he would be forced to give equal attention to *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* and *Les Amants magnifiques*, explaining how these works fit within his general theory of the genre. Instead, Fleck consistently returns to *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and, especially, *Le Malade imaginaire* to illustrate his ideas. This leaves one wondering whether Fleck’s analysis truly applies to the *comédie-ballet* in general or only to certain of its most interesting examples.

Moreover, given Fleck’s well-justified critique of literary scholars who ignore the musical and dance components of Molière’s later works, the author spends remarkably little space analyzing the prologues and *intermèdes* of these works. Argan’s relationship to his family in *Le Malade imaginaire* gets considerable treatment, but what about Argan’s relationship to the Egyptian women who entertain him during the second *intermède* of the play? How does the musical encomium to Louis XIV, which opens the play, fit within the carnivalesque atmosphere Fleck attributes to the work as a whole?

The fact remains, and Daniel Auteuil’s production demonstrates, that excising most of the music and dance from a *comédie-ballet* still leaves a decent comedy that most audience members will enjoy as a unified work that represents the spirit of Molière. While this may violate

the playwright's intentions, it nonetheless testifies to his enormous skill as a comic writer, whose words continue to entertain even outside of the multidimensional spectacle in which they were originally placed.

Francis Assaf. *Quand les rois meurent. Les journaux de Jacques Antoine et de Jean et François Antoine et autres documents sur la maladie et la mort de Louis XIII et de Louis XIV*. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2018. 322 pp. €68.00. Review by DENIS D. GRÉLÉ, UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS.

In *Quand les rois meurent*, Francis Assaf focuses on the two kings who dominated most of the seventeenth century, Louis XIII and Louis XIV, and more specifically, on their deaths, which seem to have nothing in common. Louis XIII, a pious king, lives his last moment fearing God, while Louis XIV, ever the master of himself, rules almost to the end. And yet, in *Quand les Rois Meurent*, a book presenting the many manuscripts that depict the last few days of Louis the Just and Louis the Great, Assaf shows that many similarities can be drawn. While Henri III and Henri IV were both assassinated and had little time to present the spectacle of their death, Louis XIII and Louis XIV died in plain view. As Assaf explains, both kings—affected by fatal diseases of the era (Louis XIII from Crohn's disease and Louis XIV from diabetes)—expired almost as though on a theater stage, propped up on their beds, surrounded by their doctors and families, and closely watched by their court. In his book, Assaf retells the dramatic events through the journals of renowned memorialists, inept medical practitioners, or the unassuming servants of those two kings.

In the first part, Assaf looks at the death of Louis XIII, using the writings of some of the celebrities of the time: Anne-Marie-Louise d'Orléans, better known as "La Grande Mademoiselle," Françoise Bertaud (Madame) de Motteville, Olivier Lefèvre d'Ormesson and, of course, Saint Simon, who was not even born yet, but whose father was a close acquaintance of Louis XIII. More interestingly, he includes the more modest figures of Pierre Porte and Richard de Bury. By means of Jacques Antoine, Assaf is able to retell in precise details the careful staging, almost hour per hour, of the king's long agony. One of the most fascinating aspects of this presentation is the cultural atmosphere