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The comic war: Moliere and the quarrel of the School for wives

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Patrick Dandrey has taken great pains in this book to offer us all the elements of the polemic that surrounded and celebrated Molière’s *L’Ecole des femmes*. This particular “querelle” is the most literary one imaginable because the devices used by both sides are plays or criticisms of plays. Indeed, one of Dandrey’s conclusions is that both *La Critique de l’Ecole des femmes* and *L’Impromptu de Versailles* are no longer to be considered as mere arrows in Molière’s rhetorical quiver but as full-fledged comic texts in their own right: *La Critique* defines the new form of comedy and *L’Impromptu* shows how to stage it. To allow the readers of *La Guerre comique* to decide for themselves who wins the arguments, Dandrey gives full details of the lives and literary productions of Molière’s opponents, distinguishing between, for example, the passionate (Montfleury) and the peaceable (Chevalier). In the process, Dandrey enlarges the circle of documents and plays that Georges Mongrédien had presented in his magisterial *La Querelle de L’Ecole des femmes* in two volumes (Paris, 1971). In fact, Dandrey’s book is filled with quarrels of his own intention. He answers the
objections by Jean la Guardia and Claude Bourqui who found fault with Dandrey’s *L’Esthétique du ridicule* (Paris, 1992), on which much of the discussion of comedy in *La Guerre comique* is based. He also clearly disagrees with some of the hypotheses and chronology of Georges Forestier in his recent Pléiade edition of the complete works of Molière (2010). But the main thrust of the book lies in its enlightened demonstration of the quarrel as a multi-act spectacle that, at critical moments, Molière seems to be directing from the wings, whether it be his own plays or his adversaries’. In the face of attempts by his enemies to create a “succès de scandale” that would enhance their own image, Molière triumphs by turning their own ideas and devices against them in a deeply “dramatic” way. His genius for imitating others’ arguments and style is such that “le renouvellement de la querelle a procédé de retournement, de détournement et d’enveloppement, de simultanéité et de dépassement, de tuilage et de court-circuit » (p. 216). There are, therefore, moments when, without the context, one would have difficulty in confirming who was speaking. Yet, it is clear that Molière succeeds in two important ways: he developed a new “staging” for winning polemics, and he used the quarrel to justify his innovative conception of comedy, that had the extra, positive effect of drawing the Court’s attention to what could easily have passed as a petty dispute between rival theater companies. For those interested in a model of research into the culture
of the theater and society in classical France, one can do no better that Patrick Dandrey’s brilliantly-argued and amply informed investigation.

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