The Molière Myth in Nineteenth-Century France

RALPH ALBANESE, JR.

Upon examining the literary and cultural fortunes of the great classical authors—Corneille, Racine, and Molière, to mention only this universally recognized triumvirate—we see clearly that a particular myth has developed around each one. Whereas Corneille evokes a moral myth appropriate to an aristocracy enamored with heroism, and Racine is the very incarnation of the myth of classical perfection, a symbol of purity, the case of Molière takes on even greater dimensions, attaining a mythological stature that far exceeds that of the tragic authors. In fact, "Moliérism" represents a veritable French institution, one created by the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie but still pervasive even today. To write the history of the various interpretations of Molière in the nineteenth century is to expose a profoundly laudatory critical position that contributes to the national canonization of the Molière phenomenon. Thus, the pious affirmation of Jean Anouilh, according to which those who are indifferent to the great comic author lack any "contact charnel vrai avec la France," is revealing: the process of institutionalizing Molière stems from a unanimous desire to integrate him into the national patrimony. Thus, Lanson, like many other critics, saw Molière as the seventeenth-century author who was "le plus complètement français." The models for Molière’s theater being of a clearly national stock—authors of fabliaux and farces, Rabelais, Régnier, and so forth—with respect to those of Corneille and Racine, this theater, by raising problems that were more immediately recognizable to the French, addresses itself directly to the everyday awareness of the country. This desire to place the author of the Misanthrope on a purely French pedestal assumes, as we shall see, numerous meanings.

Within the scope of this essay, it is hardly possible to give a complete list of the multiple interpretations occasioned by the Molière myth in France in the nineteenth century. Rather, our purpose is to draw upon a certain number of examples taken from the abundant critical corpus: spread throughout the century, the successive visions of Molière—romantic, academic, and positivistic in turn—manifest an incontestable historical and ideological significance. To differing degrees, these various interpretations reveal the extent to which
the secular bourgeoisie honored Molière in order to appropriate him better, at the same time conferring particular value on the constitutive elements of his value system. And, from the point of view of nineteenth-century pedagogical practices, this bourgeoisie managed to transform the great comic author into both a subject for scholarly investigation and an object of privileged knowledge.

The lukewarm reception accorded to the Molière repertory by the general public in the first half of the century is well known, and Musset bemoans this general negligence:

J'étais seul, l'autre soir, au Théâtre français,
Ou presque seul; l'auteur n'avait pas grand succès:
Ce n'était que Molière . . .

["Une Soirée perdue"]

How paradoxical that Musset, Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert, whose antibourgeois biases are evident, took it upon themselves to communicate to the public of their era their admiration for Molière, who, himself, would eventually become the spokesman for the bourgeois values of this very public. The romantic interpretation of the comic poet, which, in fact, persisted throughout the century, presented a somber image of the poet, fallen prey to a sublime melancholy. Musset saw in the Misanthrope a "... mâle gaiété, si triste et si profond / Que, lorsqu'on vient d'en rire, on devrait en pleurer!" The same was true of Goethe, who considered the comedies to be a projection of Molière's own personal suffering, an expression of his own unconscious desires. As such, Arnolphe, Alceste, and Harpagon become eminently tragic figures; and numerous actors (Perlet, Guitry) portrayed these roles by insisting on their pathetic nature. Hugo and Michelet, whose interpretations also belong in part to this strongly subjective school, admired in Molière the libertarian spirit, which castigates all forms of imposture. They saw in him a progressive who contested the alliance of church and state, in short, the apostle of oppressed humanity. They were particularly aware of the political implications of Tartuffe, for example, a play that became the object of a veritable infatuation under the Restoration.

This play, whose performances provoked uprisings in the provinces, constituted a focal point of opposition under the reign of Louis XVIII, rallying the romantic, anticlerical youth of the Globe and the Constitutionnel, for example, around their hostility toward the Jesuits and the Congregation. In the case of Stendhal and Balzac, we notice a certain posthumous rivalry that operated between the comic poet and those who tried to be the "nouveaux Molières" of the nineteenth century. Both authors exhibited a conscious desire to imitate the playwright; this mimesis was a challenge that was both tempting and discouraging. Stendhal tried unsuccessfully to write a sequel to Tartuffe, and Balzac dreamed of undertaking the same endeavor. Although Molière's
portrayal of hypocrisy and *arrivisme* must surely have tantalized Stendhal, the massive enterprise of *La Comédie humaine* betrays Balzac's concern for transposing into his novelistic universe a breadth of vision and a typology of characters that are very much a part of Molière's comedies.

However, it is undoubtedly the scholarly criticism of Nisard and Saint-Marc Girardin, as well as that of Sainte-Beuve, that, between 1830 and 1848, provided the greatest impetus to the development of Moliérism. It is important to go back to this criticism in order to appreciate the extent to which the scholarly myth of Molière became codified. On the whole, this myth, which has been transmitted from one generation of students to the next, can be defined on the basis of these principles: carefully avoid originality, respect prudence as a cardinal virtue, and do not go beyond the bounds of the cherished golden mean. All these elements of the famous shopkeeper's morality—which we are tempted to call "petty bourgeois"—were endowed with a clearly didactic value by numerous nineteenth-century critics. Wishing to reduce the moral and philosophical ideas found in Molière's theater to simple academic and moralizing pronouncements, these critics were able to impose a fundamental image of the comic poet that persists even today. Thus, in the tradition of Villemain, Nisard attributed an essentially literary and moral obligation to criticism, making the seventeenth century an object of absolute, dogmatic veneration. One could hardly exaggerate the importance of his role as "intellectual regent" in the domain of criticism under the July Monarchy. Emphasizing the relationship between genius and moral goodness, Nisard advanced the notion of Molière's generosity, placing him at the same time in moral revolt against Tartuffe. Having a taste for "universal truths," he praised the profound morality of the *Misanthrope*, which, according to him, placed a sort of distributive justice in the balance. Finally, Nisard took pains to establish the connection between the preoccupations of the seventeenth-century bourgeoisie and that of the nineteenth century, a connection that was firmly cemented by Molière's comedy: "De toutes les conventions elle [i.e., comedy] est le plus près de la réalité: ce sont nos mœurs, nos scènes de famille, nos travers; c'est nous. . . . Ces mœurs ont été celles de nos ancêtres; leurs travers nous appartiennent. Nous revendiquons nos marquis d'autrefois, si peu différents d'ailleurs des marquis d'aujourd'hui dont les parchemins sont à la caisse du sceau."

Along these same lines, Saint-Marc Girardin stated that the task of criticism is to communicate good taste, which is indissolubly linked to the moral order. Assigning a privileged status to Molière, he was the first to draw attention to the moral exactitude characteristic of *Psyché*. Attentive to the interests of the bourgeoisie, he also undertook a certain moral rehabilitation of M. Dimanche: "[Men] sont plus sages dans leurs affaires que dans leurs idées. . . . M. Dimanche se moquera de vous [i.e., of Dom Juan], aujourd'hui surtout que M. Dimanche est élu élection, député ou ministre, et que vous, de notre côté, vous
Sainte-Beuve demonstrated an acute critical understanding of Molière. Throughout his praise of the playwright runs a strain of Moliérophilia: each repetition of his refrain “Aimer Molière” introduces yet another justification—dramatic, moral, political, and humanitarian—for his adulation. This famous triumphal hymn—the nec plus ultra of the laudatory epithets applied to Molière in the nineteenth century—constitutes, as we shall see, a vast source of inspiration for other admirers of the comic poet.

As Sainte-Beuve’s criticism became more and more “une critique bourgeoise de jugement,” a classical criticism on the whole, based on restraint and common sense, it extended the critical lineage of Villemain, Nisard, and Saint-Marc Girardin, who systematically denounced contemporary works then viewed as decadent. The resurgence of classical criticism went hand in hand with the bourgeois recovery of political power by means of a kind of literary police force. Stated differently, we may call this a transposition of the conservative ideology of de Maistre and Bonald in the domain of literary criticism to a collective desire to use the critical function in the service of political restoration.

To the extent that literary positivism represents the official scientific doctrine of the university system of the second half of the nineteenth century, we can see the early outlines of this positivistic interpretation in the extraordinary outpouring of works on Molière dating from the 1860s. Committed to a method of thorough documentation, scholars such as Bazin, Soulié, and Compardon set out in search of the “vrai Molière.” These relentless researchers succeeded in establishing a “scientific” critical position based on the patient analysis of provincial archives, in short, a biographical approach to the comic poet that was especially concerned with correcting the numerous errors that had been transmitted by his legend. This desire to establish a sort of corpus moliericum is best expressed by the creation of the Moliériste, a journal whose monthly publication extended from 1879 to 1889. Directed by G. Monval, a librarian and archiviste at the Comédie-Française, this journal became an instrument of official propaganda devoted to the cult of Molière. In his preface to the first issue, Monval pointed out that the Moliériste was directed not only to the “grands prêtres et adorateurs du Dieu,” but also to the “chercheurs obscurs, moliéristes, moliérophiles, moliéromanes mêmes.” To establish with meticulous precision the various peregrinations of the of the Molière troupe in France and abroad; to verify, with the help of civil status documents, the identity of those who were related to the comic poet; to propose a new, unpublished source for a given play; and, finally, to present a purely dramatic criticism: these were some of the numerous aspects of the research undertaken by the team of Tascherau, Truffier, Mesnard, Souday, Lacroix, Lapommeraye, and others. A clearly hagiographic inspiration characterized a good number of these essays. One by
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One, the "pèlerinages" undertaken in the name of Molière, "le Maître," for many long years, were evoked; the Moliéristes considered themselves to be the dévots of their idol, invoking at the same time their "violente amour pour celui qui [leur] paraît être la plus complète incarnation du génie français." Occasionally they took exception to a critic who disparaged their spirit of fanatic coterie and staunchly upheld their claim to the title of "Moliériste." Confronted with the virulent criticism of E. Scherer, the editors of the journal came to the rescue of their hero by alluding to Sainte-Beuve's famous passage, which, in fact, they designated as their "Credo." Other articles scrutinize various objects that attain the status of relics and thereby reinforce the purely legendary dimension that crystallized around the comic poet. It is thus that Molière's famous armchair, the house in which he died, his tomb, his signature, and even his jawbone were all transformed into objects of erudite piety. There were also highly laudatory speeches delivered at commemorative banquets, to say nothing of the sonnets that were written to glorify the poet. Finally, an analysis of the Moliériste reveals a tendency to emphasize the anecdotal. The following story of "un cocher moliérophile" is one example: "Je passais, le lundi 28 novembre dernier, rue de Richelieu, et j'étais occupé à regarder la fontaine Molière, lorsqu'un cocher de fiacre, qui se dirigeait vers la place du Palais Royal, me cria du haut de son siège: 'Inclinez-vous devant le Monsieur!' Puis il fouetta ses chevaux et s'éloigna, après avoir tiré un grand coup de chapeau à l'auteur du Tartuffe." In spite of the uneven quality of certain pages of the Moliériste, the reader is forced to recognize the demonstrative rigor that characterizes several of these articles. Due to the growing number of public lectures—Sarcey, Faguet, and Lemaître delivered their lectures before publishing them as articles—the role of journalists, and especially the impetus provided by this partisan journal, the "Moliériste" movement managed to become organized, and it acquired an exceptional amplitude during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. The Despois-Mesnard publication of 1882 can be considered justifiably the crowning glory of this prodigious scholarly activity on Molière.

To grasp the Molière phenomenon in its totality is to take into account a certain politicizing of this phenomenon in the course of the century. Although it was exploited for ideological purposes under the July Monarchy, this practice was resumed with particular vigor from the advent of the Third Republic on. A satisfactory understanding of this practice could hardly exclude an overview of the sociohistoric facts in question.

A turning point in the intellectual and moral history of France, 1870 inaugurated an era of national urgency: the crushing defeat of the Franco-Prussian War and the anguish of the Commune came as a highly emotional shock to the French, a profound moral jolt that forced upon them an attitude of meditative introspection. The shame and humiliation of an entire generation of
young Frenchmen—represented by such diverse authors as Faguet, Lemaître, Sarcey, Lavisse, France, Bourget, Barrès—who experienced the defeat of 1870 as a stinging moral wound has not been sufficiently analyzed. The fruit of their collective meditation is what C. Digeon calls "a new intellectual structure," coinciding with the advent of the Third Republic. Republican ideology postulated the ideal of national regeneration as the supreme value. In this perspective the cult of the "unhappy homeland" and the reestablishment of institutions such as the family and the university dominated the thought of many intellectuals of the period. Thus, in its probe of the origins of the catastrophe of 1870, Taine's analysis of contemporary France was an essentially moral one. The philosophical writings of A. Fouillée proposed the moral and intellectual reunification of the country as the necessary remedy. Renan, describing the defeat as a "frightening moral collapse," attempted to console the national consciousness with his historical analyses. In short, it was a time of powerful patriotic resurgence characterized by the forging of a nationalistic ideology whose avowed purpose was the moral recovery of the country.

In this general crisis of conscience, the radical insufficiency of the national educational system came under particularly heavy fire. While Fouillée exhorted the French not to submit to an "intellectual Sedan," Renan, like many others, deplored the defects of the educational institution, to the point where he held it responsible for the defeat of 1870. In fact, there existed an abundant corpus of philosophical and pedagogical literature that dealt not only with numerous reform proposals but also with the moral function that the university should fulfill, a function that was seriously questioned after 1870. Seeing themselves, from that time on, invested with a moral obligation, teachers sought to mobilize the vitality of the nation's youth by inculcating in it the principles of a strongly developed sense of republican civicism. To the extent that moral and civic instruction formed an integral part of the academic curriculum—the teaching of history, geography, and literature were especially affected by such preoccupations—the system of national education became the privileged domain of a profound patriotism, a patriotism that "fut ainsi élevé à la dignité d'une véritable religion laïque."

Within this network of sociological and historical factors, the function of the Molière myth appears more clearly to us. In the first place, everything points to the fact that the development of a cultural nationalism nourished the Molière fervor. This strong, albeit paradoxical, confusion between nationalism and Moliérism is manifest in the writings of D. Saurat, for example, who exalted, with a dash of chauvinism, the Moliéresque notion of common sense. In a pastiche of Sainte-Beuve's well-known eulogy, F. Flutre glorified the patriotic mission fulfilled by the author of the Misanthrope: "Aimer Molière enfin, qui possède à un si haut degré toutes les qualités de notre génie national, c'est comme nous le disions en commençant, c'est aimer, c'est servir la France."
In still another domain Rageot summarized a speech delivered by E. Haraucourt on the occasion of the tricentennial of Molière. Acknowledging the therapeutic effect the latter had on France, the speaker stressed the necessity of turning to the comic poet “toutes les fois que nous avons à nous refaire. Il n'y a rien qui remette la France comme une cure de Molière.” Thus, according to this point of view, Molière’s popularity increased in proportion to the moral concerns born out of profound social disturbances.

Such testimonials clearly demonstrated that in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, Molière was becoming more and more the object of national glory, the epitome of France’s cultural heritage. This phenomenon of hero-worshipping of Molière is firmly linked to the efforts on the part of the Catholic and secular bourgeoisie to establish an ordre moral (1873) that would imply “la restauration des disciplines monarchiques, religieuses, éducatives.” In this search for a purely national culture, the bourgeoisie was particularly reliant upon the erudite culture of the seventeenth century and drew from it the idealization of the grand siècle, a nostalgic return to a somewhat fantasized past; the siècle de Louis XIV thus became a privileged moment in French history, a period of cultural perfection characterized by clarity, restraint, and good taste. This search for past glory stems, in my opinion, from a defensive reflex typical of the bourgeoisie after 1870. For this bourgeoisie that still maintained classical values, Molière was made the object of a kind of cultural authority, in truth, the object of a veritable national celebration. If at this time the myth of the comic poet acquired a profoundly bourgeois stature, it is because its function, according to A. Ubersfeld, was “installer rétrospectivement la classe bourgeoise dans l'éternité de la grandeur, de l'ordre et de la beauté classiques.”

Being the most capable of transmitting seventeenth-century classical humanism, Molière, by his essentially human orientation, increasingly incarnated the specific cultural values of the génie français.

To the extent that the bourgeoisie assumed responsibility for the system of national education in order to ensure its own social mobility and class identification, it follows that the academic culture of the nineteenth century reflected these immediate preoccupations. An inventory of the literary history manuals of the nineteenth century demonstrates to what point this bourgeoisie insisted upon the pedagogical usefulness of Molière’s works. It endeavored to make of Molière an instituteur national, to extract from his works the constitutive elements of an inalterable morality capable of preserving national cohesion. Before examining specific examples it is necessary to review several basic postulates of classical humanism, a philosophy that permeated the manuals and, as a result, the various levels of education in nineteenth-century France.

As Villemain, Nisard, and Saint-Marc Girardin perceived it, the literature of the grand siècle, like that of Greco-Roman antiquity, offered eternal models of humanism. The classical works presupposed a transcendental metaphysics: the
indissoluble alliance of truth, beauty, and goodness as well as the existence of a
static, unchanging human nature. This classical vision was thus predicated on a
fundamentally moral representation of the world, and it is hardly surprising that
the school textbooks were devoid of historical specificity; rather, as we shall
see, their purpose was to expose commonly accepted truths, to extract the
timeless quality of these truths, a fact that explains their constant reliance upon
selected passages, found in the vast majority of the anthologies of this period.

It is within this perspective that we find the academic clichés inspired by
Molière in the nineteenth century: above all, what was sought in him was a
canonical authority, implying the existence of an absolute truth; a sort of
bourgeois bible was constructed from the numerous moral maxims found in his
work. Apostle of the “golden mean,” Molière thereby succeeded in teaching a
secular philosophy based on moderation, wisdom, and common sense. He was
often seen as the source of cleverly drawn proverbs; Faguet, in fact, referred to
him as “the Sancho Panza of France.”¹²⁹ The prudhommesque truths ponderously
voiced by the bourgeois characters in his theater were often cited. We see
here the origin of the excessive role attributed to his raisonneurs, those
spokesmen of universal reason who faithfully translated the bourgeois moral-
ism of their author. Sometimes perceived as enlightened philosophers, some-
times reduced to a series of normative models, the raisonneurs had, for some
time, occupied an important position in Molière criticism.³⁰

Another lesson drawn from this eminently practical morality is the utter
futility of heroic virtue. Faguet, having drawn up a list of all the postulates of
bourgeois common sense in Molière, gave preferential treatment to the notion
that it was necessary to shun extremes systematically, to avoid risk carefully. It
is true, of course, that this critic was struck by the mediocrity of these
teachings, to the point that he saw in them, if not an antimorality, at least one
“d’assez bas degré.”³¹ Other manuals insisted upon the ideal of mental
hygiene, a veritable therapy contained in Molière’s comedies. Des Granges and
Doumic both felt that this morality was worthwhile precisely because of its
healthy attitude, and Lafenestre praised the “salubrious” work effected by the
comic poet.³² Merlet and Lintillac portrayed the Misanthrope as a procession of
characters each of whom represented a particular moral trait; their admiration
for the moral perfection and truth of this play aside, they justified the filial
indignity of Cléante by Harpagon’s greed, believed to be a “degrading
passion,” invoking at the same time the implacable law of retribution: “like
father, like son.”³³ Although the comic poet did not dogmatize, according to
Fournel, a good number of his plays illustrate “living models of dramatic
morality.”³⁴ Finally, in Lanson’s famous manual we are told that in the work of
Molière, the representation of the truth is always “pleasing and moral.”³⁵

Thus, owing to the oversimplified approach that characterized numerous
nineteenth-century literary manuals, the image we are given of Molière is, of
course, manifestly bourgeois: an evocation of his name immediately conjures
the image of homemade soup, earthy language, and the homilies of everyday
life that form an integral part of his philosophy. Moreover, the celebration of
bourgeois virtues (such as marriage viewed as the natural result of love and
family cohesion) being another essential component of the nineteenth-century
image of the comic poet, we can agree wholeheartedly with the following
comment by A. Albalet: "Il ne s'agit dans Molière que de position sociale,
testaments, mariage, dot, notaire, contrat. C'est, on l'a dit, l'avènement du
bourgeoisisme et du pot-au-feu au théâtre."36

Complementary to the role of the manuals in the formation of the Molière
myth are the various critical editions of his theater in the nineteenth century. It
is not difficult to understand the objection of Louis Jouvet to these editions,
which, according to him, were characterized by "des soucis pédagogiques
imbéciles."37 On the whole, the editors were careful to relegate the purely
entertaining aspect of the Molière repertory to a secondary position. Hence,
arbitrary excisions were made in the farces, whose vulgarity was deemed as
hardly edifying. With little concern for historical specificity, they preferred to
deal with considerations of the psychology of the comic characters who were,
in fact, nothing less than representatives of man envisioned sub specie aeterni-
tatis; clearly, then, they were attempting to capture a timeless Molière.
Furthermore, the moralizing intent of the editors is particularly striking. Although
Despois and Mesnard praised the excellence of the lessons in the Misanthrope,
they deplored the insufficiency of the moral study implicit in Les Femmes
savantes.38 In the Louandre edition we find a synthesis of nineteenth-century
critical judgments that reveals, for example, that since farce is only acceptable
when it does not offend morality, the moral intention of Sganarelle consists in
correcting the sentiment of jealousy between husband and wife; in addition,
one finds a justification of the treatment of ethical problems in Les Femmes
savantes; Louandre presented Molière as "a great moralist," not only because
of his depiction of vice, but more so because of his canonization of the virtues
of Philinte and Chrysalde.39 The Jouaust edition, annotated by G. Monval,
begins with L'Etourdi, for farces were considered unworthy of the Molière
repertory. Though being utterly scandalized by Angélique's wickedness,
Monval ended up by sententiously justifying George Dandin's position.40
Although his edition appeared somewhat later, Faguet also relegated the court
diversions to a secondary level and focused instead on the morality of the
Mariage forcé.41 In all, the nineteenth-century editors of Molière's works
generally discredited anything that stemmed from the purely aesthetic domain
(elements of farcical gratuitousness, fantasylike dénouements, and so on) in
order to heighten the ethical dimension of his work.

If the critical interpretations presented here tend to favor the development
of the Molière myth, it is no less true that those who constituted the teaching
establishment in the nineteenth century played an equally decisive role in this development. Thus, it would be appropriate to show the relationship between Moliérism and the nineteenth-century academic institution; that is, the articulation of the curriculum, pedagogical reforms, official directives, and the nature of examinations. Exactly what place did Molière occupy in the national educational policy of this period?

At this point we need to examine several salient features of nineteenth-century academic culture, a vast institutional complex to which Moliérism was closely linked. First, we know that this culture, throughout the century, accorded primary importance to the teaching of literature, and especially French literature. Believed to be an instrument of intellectualism and moral elevation, the study of French literature profited from the official decrees of 1821, 1863, 1872, and especially those, even more numerous, that extended from 1880 to 1902. The purpose of rhetoric, a discipline replaced by literary history in 1880, was essentially to encourage students to assimilate works by the classical authors and to internalize these works by means of imitation. In theory, this mimetic practice was supposed to result in an admiration for the exemplary authors of the past. At the secondary and university levels, the curriculum was characterized by a preponderance of seventeenth-century authors; Renan emphasized the extent to which his teachers, namely Nisard and Saint-Marc Girardin, were able to present, between 1830 and 1850, the classical authors as heroic models to generations of French schoolchildren. Lavisse, Brunetière, and Lanson, recalling their own experiences as students, stated that the majority of their readings were drawn from a book of classical theater and a book of texts selected from seventeenth-century moralists. Furthermore, the various ministers of public education in the nineteenth century, from Villemain to Ferry, advocated the pedagogical virtues of classical French literature.

The university was thus permeated with works of the past; the fact that it exalted them as models was the result of a secular bourgeoisie desirous of recapturing the heritage of the grand siècle. This bourgeoisie created a pedagogical apparatus that allowed for the acculturation of its own fundamental values, a type of self-integrating culture in which this class could sing its own praises. The abundance of academic legislation enacted during the last thirty years of the century can be explained, to a great extent, by the policy of cultural nationalism adopted by the bourgeoisie. Especially after 1870, with patriotism believed to be the supreme remedy for the ideological battles between public and congregationalist schools, many professors, notably those wishing to establish a new type of pedagogy, took nationalistic considerations into account. Thus, in the name of national unity, A. Fouillée recommended a return to the study of French classical culture and the simultaneous study of French and Latin, both of which were to be undertaken within the context of an essentially
moralistic approach. The course in civics that he proposed to elementary school teachers first studied the duties and obligations of the seventeenth-century honnête homme (classe de quatrième) and then those of the good citizen of the time (classe de troisième). Proclaiming the moral bankruptcy of all the aspirations that had animated his era, Brunetière maintained that classical French literature must remain the gravitational center for academic curricula. This apologist of patriotic and social duty was sensitive to the “vertus éducatrices tout à fait singulières” offered by this literature as well as its undeniable originality and universality. For his part, G. Boissier proposed a new plan of study wherein French—the discipline most capable of nourishing nationalistic fervor—occupied a privileged position in the secondary curriculum.

The functioning of the Molière myth at every level of French education in the nineteenth century is thus clearly perceptible. And, if one further takes into account the importance of the classroom assignments of this period, such as French composition and explication de texte, the myth assumes even greater proportions. In 1872 prizes were awarded for compositions in language and literature. By 1880 this type of exercise replaced the Latin composition required for the baccalauréat. Even more importantly, French composition was invested with an ideological function within the academic machinery, in the sense that it represented the ideal means of attaining high moral truths and internalizing them. A. Labuda cites an academic anthology of the period that is particularly enlightening in this respect: “Chaque morceau . . . , en offrant un exercice de lecture soignée, de mémoire, de déclamation, d’analyse, de développement, et de critique, est en même temps une leçon de vertu, d’humanité ou de justice, de religion, de dévouement au Prince, et à la Patrie, de désintéressement ou d’amour du bien public. Tout dans ce Recueil est le fruit du génie, du talent, de la vertu; tout y respire et le goût le plus exquis et la morale la plus pure.” It is thus not difficult to imagine the extent to which the tirades of Molière’s raisonneurs were used as exemplary models of proper moral conduct.

As for the modus operandi of the explication de texte, a fundamental exercise at the secondary level, an analogous mechanism can be seen. In 1890 the minister of public education lauded the pedagogical virtues of the explication de texte, and C. Falcucci pointed out the originality of this reform, which ultimately rendered this exercise indispensable to nineteenth-century academic culture. Teachers were encouraged to choose carefully the passages to be explicated, and preferably to choose those that would allow the students to reflect upon the moral nature of man; at the same time, these passages would transmit the values of the national patrimony. Thus conceived, the explication de texte, officially established by the reform of 1902, purported to extract the universality of the works of classical authors, thereby constituting a masterful lesson in the moral philosophy of esteemed authors.
This official process of moralization by the indirect means of the teaching of literature is especially noticeable in the area of topics concerning Molière proposed for various competitive examinations. It would be helpful, therefore, to show the rather tendentious orientation of such subjects; in this respect, the following list is revelatory:

1. “Que pensez-vous de ce vers de Molière: ‘Je veux une vertu qui ne soit point diablesse’ et quelle idée personnelle vous faites-vous de la vertu?” (composition on morality, subject proposed in a lycée, third year, 1893).

2. “Que pensez-vous de ces paroles de Molière: ‘Rien ne reprend mieux la plupart des hommes que la peinture de leurs défauts’?” (French composition, proposed at Sèvres, 1895).


An inexhaustible source of examination questions (for compositions and explications de texte), Molière also figured prominently in most curricula. In 1893 Lanson, having examined the academic programs from the class of sixième to the class of rhétorique, recommended the extension of Molière’s comedies to the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth years of secondary training.52

Many authors from Renan to Taine, including C. Bigot, attempted to ascribe to the teaching of literature of kind of therapeutic or moral function at work in the interest of national unity. This was due in part to a progressive dechristianization, which was a salient feature of nineteenth-century French institutions. As Thiers so aptly stated: “Les belles lettres seront toujours pour moi les bonnes lettres. . . . Quand la religion est affaiblie en un pays, la morale s’appuie avant tout sur les grands exemples que donne l’exemple du passé.”53 The legislative contribution of J. Ferry, minister of public education after 1871, becomes even more significant when viewed from this perspective. Partisan of the laicization of the educational system and of morality itself, Ferry proposed, in 1872, his famous law concerning secularity, legislation that aimed at inculcating a child with the constitutive elements of universal morality (obedience, duty, virtue, and so forth), that is, the morality exemplified by decent men of all times and in all countries. Thus, in order to ensure the national unity that had been imperiled by the war and the disastrous experience of the Commune, it was absolutely essential, according to Ferry, to establish the unity of a positivist morality stripped of all religious trappings, in short, a morality that meets the requirements of republican ideology:

La vraie morale, la grande morale, la morale éternelle, c’est la morale sans épithète. La morale, grâce à Dieu, dans notre société française, après tant de siècles
de civilisation, n'a pas besoin d'être définie, la morale est plus grande quand on ne la définit pas, elle est plus grande sans épithète.

C'est la bonne vieille morale de nos pères, la nôtre, la vôtre, car nous n'en avons qu'une.54

From here we are only a step away from the secular philosophy that nineteenth-century critics tried to extract from Molière’s works. And, as we have seen, the nationalistic sentiment that they evinced, especially after 1870, served only to nourish further their belief in the Molière myth.

In the course of this essay, I have tried to point out the specific nature of the Molière myth in its various manifestations in nineteenth-century France. The progressive codification of the various elements of the comic poet's moral system corresponds, both historically and sociologically, to periods of political recovery: from 1830 to 1848, and, in a more striking manner, from 1870 to the First World War. Under the July Monarchy and the Third Republic, the official bourgeois ideology sought to transmit a clearly codified image of a Molière inspired by classical reason and clarity, one intent on depicting characters motivated by the psychology of "eternal man." The reification of Molière, his transformation into a privileged academic subject, and the efficacy of pedagogical practices at all levels tend to make of the playwright an excellent instrument of moral and civic education, while at the same time articulating at the national level the bourgeois virtues of order and authority. The ideological motivations that underlie the structure of such an educational system are thus easily discernible.

That this essentially nineteenth-century image of Molière persists into the twentieth century, and even, although in a somewhat mitigated fashion, right up to the present, can be ascertained not only by the continuation of traditional pedagogical approaches but also by the fact that many French people today, educated in the last thirty or forty years, are more than reticent about rereading the classical authors in a new light. Their disaffection stems, in my view, from the moralistic and, at times, stultifying presentation of these authors to which they were subjected during their years of intellectual training. Is it surprising? Cultural myths die hard.

3. The 1,278 performances of Tartuffe at the Comédie-Française give a clear indication of the enormous popularity of this play from 1815 to 1829. In addition, Hugo praised the poetic merits of Molière; he particularly admired the versification of L'Etourdi. In Michelet’s view, however, the poet would also have suffered from being reduced to the role of a mere court entertainer for Louis XIV.


6. Translation mine, here, as in subsequent quoted examples.


22. Je prends tout bonnement les hommes comme ils sont . . .

La parfaite raison fuit toute extrémité
Et veut que l'on soit sage avec sobriété.

"C'est là, en somme, ce que la France a appris au monde. Et dans la pratique, c'est ce bon sens d'apparence médiocre qui s'applique le mieux sur la réalité, qui donne le plus de résultats. Ce peuple de bon sens et de mesure compte, à cause de cela, parmi les grands soldats, les grands constructeurs, les bons fabricants, les meilleurs colonisateurs du monde. C'est donc que ce bon sens n'est pas 'superficiel,' mais correspond à quelque chose d'essentiel et mord sur le monde extérieur" (D. Saurat, Tendances [Paris: Editions du monde moderne, 1928], p. 9).

23. F. Flutre, Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1926), p. 62. Within this same perspective, F. Sarcey dealt with Molière's beneficent influence on contemporary society in an article that was written at the very time that Paris was under siege by German troops. Depicting the Germans as sadistic barbarians who, in their desire to demoralize the Parisian populace, would not hesitate to destroy the Comédie-Française, Sarcey made the comic poet a war horse that remained invulnerable to the
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26. On this point see Isambert-Jamati, p. 113.


30. Such views are proposed and discussed, for example, by E. Blondet in his "Une Erreur à propos de Molière," Moliériste 4 (1882–83): 274–75.

31. Faguet, p. 15.


34. Fourmell, p. 227.

35. Lanson, p. 386.

36. A. Albalet, Comment il faut lire les auteurs classiques français (Paris: Colin, 1913), p. 179. Gauthier, for his part, denounced this narrow "bourgeois" interpretation of Molière: "C'est un grand événement de la Bourgeoisie que Molière, une solennelle déclaration de L'âme du Tiers-Etat. J'y vois l'inauguration du bon sens et de la raison pratique, la fin de toute chevalerie et de toute haute poésie en toutes choses. La femme, l'amour, toutes les folies nobles, galantes, y sont ramenées à la mesure étroite du ménage et de la dot. Tout ce qui est évan et de premier mouvement y est averti et corrigé... Molière est le premier poète des bourgeois" (Journal des Goncourt [Paris: Charpentier, 1891], 1:315).


39. Œuvres complètes, ed. Louandre, 1:lxix: "Philinthe est le maître absolu de la morale sociale, et Chrysalde, le maître souverain de la morale domestique."


41. Faguet, 2:357.

42. On this matter, see Falcucci. The official decrees of 1890 exalted the role of literary studies in the national education program. See Instructions, programmes et règlements (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale) (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1890), pp. 32, xi.

43. Quoted by H. Peyre in Qu'est-ce que le classicisme? (Paris: Droz, 1933), p. 29: "Ce sera, je crois, une époque qui marquera dans l'histoire littéraire que celle où les écrivains du siècle de Louis XIV ont été définitivement reconnus comme classiques et comme tels panthéonisés parmi nous."


45. F. Villemain's famous speech, quoted by Falcucci (p. 179), represents a stirring tribute to seventeenth-century French literature.


50. Falcucci, p. 417.

51. These questions appeared in the *Revue universitaire* (1893-98). For further examples of similar composition topics dealing with Molière from the 1880s, see F. Hémon, *Cours de littérature*, vol. 5 (Paris: Delagrave, 1893).


54. Sénat, 1881; quoted by Prost, p. 196.
Interpréter un texte, ce n’est pas lui donner un sens (plus ou moins fondé, plus ou moins libre), c’est au contraire apprécier de quel pluriel il est fait.

Barthes