

Routledge Studies in French and Francophone Literature

WOMEN IN MOLIÈRE'S COMEDIES

HOW LITTLE DO YOU KNOW A WOMAN'S HEART!

Diana Koloini



“Diana Koloini’s *Women in Molière’s Comedies* is a groundbreaking study, which will soon become a landmark not only in Molière Studies but also in feminist readings of the image and role of women in (French and European) classical theater. It should become a ‘must-read’ in every curriculum in the humanities.”

Professor Patrice Pavis, *University of Paris;*
Honorary Fellow, University of London

“Koloini’s *Women in Molière’s Comedies* does not fall into the trap of trying to make a plea for or against Molière’s feminism. Instead, it focuses masterfully on the often overlooked complexity and diversity of his female characters. This makes it not so much a book about Molière, but de facto a book about women—through the spyglass of Molière’s comedies.”

Alenka Zupančič, *The European Graduate School*



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Women in Molière's Comedies

This book proposes a new approach to the work of the great classical author. Molière's is obviously a patriarchal universe where what is expected of women is submission. Yet, in a number of his central plays women display ample resourcefulness in countering the patriarchal rule, often managing to outwit it. To explore this topic, the book closely scrutinizes some of Molière's most important comedies. *The School for Wives*, *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope*, and *Don Juan*, all of which feature an array of female characters of great complexity, psychological finesse, rhetorical prowess, passion, and intelligence—in this respect, Molière is hardly surpassed by any other classical author. Molière's woman figures were hitherto surprisingly neglected and underrated, and the book argues that their scrutiny can offer unexpected resources also for contemporary feminist struggles. The book also critically deals with his contentious plays, *The Ridiculous Précieuses* and *The Learned Ladies*, that provoked feminist controversy.

Diana Koloini is a dramaturge and theater scholar based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, with a 30-year career in theater, most of it in the Slovene National Theatre Drama Ljubljana.

Routledge Studies in French and Francophone Literature

Animal Rhetoric and Natural Science in Eighteenth-Century Liberal Political Writing

Political Zoologies of the French Enlightenment

Andrew Billing

Women in Molière's Comedies

How Little Do You Know a Woman's Heart!

Diana Koloini

For more information on this series, please visit: <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Studies-in-French-and-Francophone-Literature/book-series/RSFF>

Women in Molière's Comedies

How Little Do You Know a Woman's Heart!

Diana Koloini

First published 2025
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2025 Diana Koloini

The right of Diana Koloini to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Koloini, Diana, 1962- author.

Title: Women in Molière's comedies : how little do you know a woman's heart! / Diana Koloini.

Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2025. |

Series: Routledge studies in French and Francophone literature |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024018912 (print) | LCCN 2024018913 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032578057 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032578064 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781003441076 (ebook) Subjects: LCSH: Molière, 1622-1673--

Criticism and interpretation. | Women in literature. | LCGFT: Literary criticism.

Classification: LCC PQ1864.W7 K65 2025 (print) | LCC PQ1864.W7 (ebook) |

DDC 842/.4--dc23/eng/20240502

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024018912>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024018913>

ISBN: 978-1-032-57805-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-57806-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-44107-6 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003441076](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003441076)

Typeset in Sabon
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>viii</i>
1 Where are women in Molière's comedies?	1
2 Can Molière be accused of misogyny? Comedies about women	23
3 Agnès: The dramaturgy of liberation	46
4 Women facing Tartuffe	72
5 Célimène, an independent woman	114
6 Women and Don Juan	155
Conclusion	172
<i>Index</i>	<i>175</i>

Acknowledgments

This book would not be possible without my theatrical experience in the Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana, with several Molière productions over the years in which I took part as a dramaturge. I have been very fortunate to have worked with wonderful artists, among whom I would like to thank especially the directors Mateja Koležnik, Dušan Jovanovič, Slobodan Unkovski, and Ivica Buljan, and the actresses and actors Polona Juh, Saša Pavček, Barbara Cerar, Jernej Šugman, Janez Škof, and Igor Samobor. It was on the basis of this experience that I could pursue my academic work. My greatest thanks go to Mladen Dolar for his support, constant encouragement, and willingness to endlessly discuss with me all the elements of this work. I owe special gratitude to the publishing house LUD Literatura, Ljubljana (and especially to the editor Matevž Kos), which published the Slovenian version of this book (*Slabo poznate naših src tančine*, Ljubljana 2021) and granted permission for the revised English version.

1 Where are women in Molière's comedies?

When we say Molière, we first think of Tartuffe, Don Juan, the misanthrope Alceste, the hypochondriac Argan, the miser Harpagon, the cunning Scapin, Arnolphe, or Sganarelle—and how many Sganarelles there are! But where are the women? Indeed, Tartuffe cannot be imagined without the intriguing Elmire or the witty maid Dorine, the hypochondriac Argan without Toinette, Alceste without the enigmatic Célimène, and Arnolphe without Agnès, behind whom there is a series of young girls in love, all of whom look alike. Or do they? A closer look will show that young girls and women of different ages and statuses appear in a wide variety of positions in Molière's oeuvre. Their role in his comedies is extensive and important, actually more extensive and complex than in the works of the majority of classical theater and other literary authors. Some of them stand out for their individuality and surprising expressive power. Rarely, however, do they feature as protagonists.

The famous protagonists of Molière's theater, those who define his comic universe, are men. At the heart of Molière's oeuvre lie great emblematic figures who form a gallery of human failings and are, at the same time, fascinating characters that represent the human condition as a whole in the comic genre, foregrounding Molière's *comédie humaine*. They are so imposing that they sometimes seem to embody the whole of comedy in themselves—as noted by Alenka Zupančič (2008), they are “powerful, fascinating, brilliantly constructed Characters, who almost carry the entire comedy in themselves” (103). They are often attributed an “eternal” or universal value. At first sight, it seems that women have no place in this universality. Although Molière did write a few comedies that put women at the center and in the title, these comedies and their protagonists are by no means as famous as those focused on the male “heroes” listed above. Some of them we hardly know about, while others display faults only women could have. For this reason alone, they cannot have a properly universal value. So was Molière a misogynist? If not a woman-hater, at least one of those canonical authors who deny women

2 *Where are women in Molière's comedies?*

access to universality? Some misogynist critics as well as some feminists (with different emphases, of course) think so.

I don't think so. I don't think so because of the few but imposing female figures that stand out from the logic of Molière's universe and defy the role society assigned to our gender, because of their complex plurality, which exceeds the standards of female presence in classic literature, and because of the affection that Molière's comedigraphic strategy most often shows toward their efforts to make their own choices. The women in his comedies are by no means reducible to being the objects of men's games, their gaze, or their desire, as is often the case in traditional literature. As a rule, they have an autonomous role and voice, even though—in accordance with the laws and practices of their time—they are placed in a distinctly patriarchal world and forced into submission by their male partners. They escape it, they evade it, they sometimes resist it vigorously, finding different ways and strategies to do so; they strive to live their own lives and often succeed at it. The conflict between the imposed role of object and women's subjectivation (the ability to establish themselves as autonomous subjects) will be one of the central themes that I intend to address in this book.

The Molièrian protagonist and the conception of the comic

First, however, we must ask why Molière staged the great problems or paradigmatic figures of his universe with protagonists who were usually men. One might think that he used them to perform “man in general,” a universal figure in which he naturally—in accordance with the canonical patriarchal view—placed a man. But universality—attributed to his work because of the artistic power with which it has persisted on theater stages for three and a half centuries, and is known even among those who do not go to the theater—is not the real key to their significance. One of the reasons for the prominence of male characters is probably the fact that Molière, who was not only an author, director, and theater manager but also an actor, played the protagonists mostly himself: from the servants who dominate some of his early work to the emblematic figures of Arnolphe, Orgon, Alceste, Harpagon, Jourdain, and Argan (only the non-comic Don Juan was entrusted to a colleague, while Molière himself played Sganarelle). This comic oeuvre is largely based on the author's virtuosity as an actor practicing the art of comedy (the importance of his expressiveness as an actor in the conception of his comedies has been pointed out by many). But that is not all.

Molière, considered the most important comedigrapher of all time, was first and foremost a playwright of his time. He knew well that comedy is inscribed in actuality. In his metacomedy *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (*The Impromptu at Versailles*), he says, “The task of comedy in general

is to represent all human faults, and especially the faults of the men of our century" (*L'affaire de la comédie est de représenter en général tous les défauts des hommes, et principalement des hommes de notre siècle*). His century was the century of classicism, the turning point in the shaping of the modern mindset: the time of absolutism, the Counter-Reformation, and the new figuration of Catholicism, but also the time of the establishment of the Cartesian cogito and the formation of modern individualism. This decisive moment, in which new social and subjective structures were taking shape, was marked by the rise of Enlightenment and bourgeois culture, which coincided with the reign of absolutism and the end of the old aristocratic world. Molière's precise analysis of this historical moment is inscribed in the encounter between two worlds, which laid down the structures of thought in modern Europe. His characters, conceived as representatives of the "flaws of the century," embody the rupture of their time, as they themselves are torn between the inherited privilege of authority and a newly conceived subjectivity. This "folding of time" is also highly significant for the position of women, whom Molière situates precisely at the break between the still reigning patriarchal order and the rise of autonomy. In a certain sense, this break—which would be repressed by the bourgeoisie of the following centuries—is still present today (perhaps it is this break that is universal).

The faults that characterize Molière's figures are, of course, manifold. In the case of supporting roles, which are more closely tied to traditional comedy, they are often linked to a particular profession or status, to which they adhere so rigidly that it engulfs them and transforms them into a comic figure (such as the famous Marquis and the equally famous doctors, as well as poets, philosophers, etc.). Molière's main characters, by contrast, are "distinguished" by their individualism. In fact, Molière's conception of them is one of his main inventions: their subjectivation takes place through an individual obsession bordering on personal pathology, making them at once similar to old comic types and to modernist figures. They are personas of a single passion, to which they subordinate everything, which is why they are great and dangerous to their surroundings, but also vulnerable and, according to the author's particular logic, above all ridiculous. These complex figures have been interpreted in various ways and called by different names: in contemporary French scholarship, the term *ridicule* predominates, which refers not only to individual funny characters but also to the concept of the comic as a whole, while in English, they are often referred to as fools. They are also accurately described by the old label that suits my discussion best: the obsessed. Though Molière's rich and varied oeuvre also includes works conceived differently, with pastoral plays written for court festivities, a couple of *comédie-ballets*, two metacomédies, farces, and reworkings of ancient classics, his most outstanding comedies

4 Where are women in Molière's comedies?

are the ones where an obsession flourishes front and center: as Arnolphe is obsessed with fear of female infidelity (*L'École des femmes/The School for Wives*), so Don Juan is obsessed with seducing women, Harpagon with a box of pennies (*L'Avare/The Miser*), Jourdain with a desire to be ennobled (*Le Bourgeois gentilhomme/The Bourgeois Gentleman*), Georges Dandin with misery over his wife, and Argan with his imaginary illness; Orgon is obsessed with another person, Tartuffe, and Alceste with his passion for sincerity (*Le Misanthrope/The Misanthrope*). All of them strive to shape their surroundings according to their individual passions. It is no coincidence, then, that they are all patriarchal figures who subordinate others to their obsession, first of all—because it is the easiest—women. Perhaps Molière's social comedies and his “eternal” figures are above all that: parables about an individual who wants to shape his own universe and finds his limit in the other (indirectly, this can also be understood as a parable about absolutism and certainly as a parable about a patriarchal universe).

It is not difficult to understand why a woman can't appear as a figure of such marked individuality. In Molière's time, women were completely dependent on men for their existence and status. By law, a woman was the property of her father and later her husband; she had no property of their own, except in special cases, nor the legal right to decide about her own life (see [Offen 2017](#) for a detailed discussion of this point). Women, then, did not have the possibility to shape the world to their own liking, let alone to subjugate others. In Molière's comedy, they could therefore only do so through the subversion or usurpation of the patriarchal position. Such is the story of Molière's *Les Femmes savantes (The Learned Ladies)*, the most controversial of his comedies whose protagonists are women. It ridicules women for appropriating science and mocks the matriarch seizing power in the house. More innocent, but also more comic, are the two girls in the short farce *Les Précieuses ridicules (The Ridiculous Précieuses)*, who want to rule with their youthful arrogance and passion for fashion literature. These two comedies, both of which are situated on the periphery of Molière's oeuvre (the first written late in his career, the second early, and neither considered to be of paramount importance), have led the author to be harshly reproached for his anti-feminism, especially since they indirectly ridicule the contemporary female culture, which campaigned for the expansion of women's rights in society. Indeed, the comedies raise a number of doubts, not least because they seem to deny women the rights that Molière's other comedies acknowledge. I will deal with this in greater detail later.

Another matter altogether are Molière's pastoral and fairytale comedies—ballets he wrote for court festivities. It is no coincidence that it is here that women play a large part. In *La Princesse d'Élide (The Princess of Elid)*, *Psyche*, and the unfinished *Mélicerte*, female protagonists are

placed at the center of romantic rivalries (*La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas/The Countess of Escarbagnas* also belongs in this category). However, love—along with women—is presented in purely conventional terms, serving primarily as the basis for lavish entertainment enriched with ballet and spectacular effects. In recent decades, marked by an enthusiasm for post-modernism, a great deal of attention has been paid to this genre, recognizing Molière as the creator of a total theater that relies on the triumph of theatricality (which concludes Molière's opus in *Le Malade imaginaire/The Imaginary Invalid*). This enthusiasm, which partly inverted the “hierarchy” of Molière's most important works, is interesting, if only because it testifies to the diversity of an oeuvre that offers itself to as many different interpretations and emphases as possible.

Singling out women in Molière's oeuvre, which is certainly not the traditional approach, it becomes evident that the most interesting ones appear in his central works, which are most often described as high or grand comedies (also problem comedies) and are clearly dominated by male protagonists. In them, women are placed in the background, most often as objects of the male protagonist's willfulness or obsession, but they mostly rise beyond this. As a rule, they take on the role of the other positioned against the passion of wild individuality. What I mean by the other—who is of course not the big Other, but is certainly also not secondary—is the person who, in a dialectical relationship with the protagonist, demonstrates the “truth” of his individual enterprise. For no matter how dominant Molière's protagonist is, he always actualizes himself in relation to others, his monologue (since he likes to speak at length and as if he were alone) is put into dialogue, just as his intentions strike at the intentions of others, who have their own aspirations, desires, and convictions. This place (in traditional comedy usually occupied by the disobedient son) is most often held by women.

In the role of the other, servants are also important, playing out the master-servant relationship in countless variations. This relationship has often been highlighted, sometimes (especially in Marxist criticism) by pointing out the superiority of the servant (Scapin demonstrates this with his comic intrigues), but never to the point of it being revolutionary (this is only achieved in the following century by Beaumarchais's Figaro). In Molière's central problem comedies (with the notable exception of *Don Juan*), this relationship changes when the valet is replaced by a female servant, who, as a rule, emphasizes the feminine perspective, thus markedly “feminizing” the staged universe as a whole (in *Tartuffe* and other plays). Appearing in the role of the other, who stands opposite the protagonist, are also characters traditionally described as *raisonneurs* (reasoners). They usually appear as friends, brothers, or brothers-in-law who try to contain the protagonist's passions with sober, reasonable arguments

6 *Where are women in Molière's comedies?*

(today many question the role of the reasoner, in particular the traditional assumption that they express the author's own point of view or the moral of the comedy). These characters, who oppose the obsessions of the central figures, lead principled disputations with them, their main function being to conduct rational dialogue with the monomaniac. What happens in the comedy does not really concern them; they intervene to mediate for others, but they are not themselves victims of the protagonist's passion. The role of victims—or those who have to set themselves up to oppose the protagonist's monomania in order not to become his object—most often falls to women. All these protagonists, who conceive of women as their property, pursue their passions by giving their daughters up for marriage in accordance with their own interests and against the girls' will, and by denying their wives and mistresses the right to an autonomous life. The aspirations of Molière's great characters are, as a rule, refracted through the woman, her sexual body and her fate, so the comedies hit on a few central motifs that are commonly taken to pertain to the woman question: access to education and to public life, mastery of writing and the power it provides, the right to freely choose a spouse and direct one's own life. Women in Molière's oeuvre generally succeed at surpassing the role of victim and become subjects. They assert their own desire and shape their own attitudes and discourse; they achieve at least some type of autonomy and often (at least up to a point) direct the action.

Overview of female characters in Molière's comedies

Most of the female characters in Molière's oeuvre are *ingénues*, young women who are yet to be married. These are characters that originally belong to the comic tradition and appear with the typical story of a girl in love with a young man, whom she is denied while being forced to marry another; in the denouement, she usually marries her chosen one. Among these are a few underprivileged girls, truly or supposedly without parents or property, who are entirely at the mercy of the plans of others; they are often saved by a miraculous coincidence (*Les Fourberies de Scapin/The Tricks of Scapin*, *L'Avare/The Miser*), but some of them resolutely pursue their desire and radically transcend their traditional role (Agnès in *L'École des femmes/The School for Wives*). It is worth noting that while in traditional comedy based on competition for a woman, it is usually the conflict between father and son that is placed at the forefront, Molière most often centers on the girl. This relocates the question of authority and interrogates the position of woman (prominently in both *Schools*). The stories and dilemmas of girls are often part of another story. In *Tartuffe*, where Orgon demands that Mariane marry his favorite against her wishes, the daughter becomes an object for the father to

pursue his own passions; this is also the case with Élise in *L'Avare*, Lucile in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Angélique in *Le Malade imaginaire*, and Henriette in *Les Femmes savantes*, where it is the domineering mother who destines her for her protégé. Although they originate from the comic tradition, these characters don't provoke laughter; rather, the comedies offer them sympathy and alliance. It is mainly the young women who refuse love who are comic (the *précieuses*; the Princess of Elid becomes laughable when she falls in love against her will).

Alongside the predominance of *ingénues*, women in Molière's oeuvre appear in a wide range of other social and familial roles, with different statuses. They are aristocrats, bourgeois women, peasants, maids, and servants, but also goddesses; among mature women there are single, married, and widowed ones; they figure as wives, sisters, cousins, confidantes, but also as rivals; they are rarely friends (a female friendship develops between two helpless young women in *L'Avare*, and the absence of a confidante particularly marks Célimène in *Le Misanthrope*) and mothers are surprisingly few in number (Waterson 2002). Some like to point out that Molière lost his mother in childhood. But there is another factor to consider here: at the time, older women were played by men (including Mme Pernelle, Mme de Sotenville, Mme Jourdain, and Philaminte). It was a common prejudice that older actresses were unsuitable for the stage, which also explains the absence of maternal warmth in Molière's oeuvre. A mother is not necessarily warm (whereas in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Lucile's mother campaigns for her happiness, in *Georges Dandin*, a mother, together with her husband, has sold her daughter unscrupulously, and it is only Élise in *L'Avare* who laments her deceased mother) and a stepmother can be benevolent (Elmire in *Tartuffe*) or wicked (Béline in *Le Malade imaginaire*, who is a true caricature of a wicked stepmother).

Throughout Molière's opus, there frequently appears the figure of a badly married woman, who usually outwits her husband by cunning or wisdom, but cannot escape his power (from Martine, whom Sganarelle beats in the opening scene of *Le Médecin malgré lui/The Doctor in Spite of Himself*, to Dandin's unhappy Angélique). The image of a dysfunctional marriage, in which husband and wife live in constant conflict, embroiled in opposition and hatred, has its origins in medieval farce, where it was a source of comic situations. In Molière, it becomes bitter. As Vanesoen (1990) writes, Molière invested it with "phallocracy and feminism" already in his first comedies (*La Jalousie du barbouillé/The Jealousy of le Barbouillé*); the antagonism here is "ideological" (13). The dysfunctional marriage reaches a specific and distinctly modern dimension in *Tartuffe*, where Elmire and Orgon barely care about each other. The exception is Alcmène in *Amphitryon*, the only wife in Molière's opus

who sincerely loves her husband (the story stems from antiquity); but it is she who—unknowingly—spends the night with a lover, the deceitful god Jupiter (adultery was otherwise considered a sin not to be performed in the public theater, according to the rules of decorum, *bienséance*). It is worth noting that in his time, Molière was by no means an exception in depicting a dysfunctional marriage; on the contrary, eternal conflict was the dominant image of marriage. Gibson (1989) argues that according to various writings, marriage in the seventeenth century was above all torment, most often described as slavery by salon women (who were in fact the only women writing) and as martyrdom by men (42). The blame for this is mostly attributed to the legal institution of arranged marriage, designed by parents in accordance with their own interests and against the will of their children (which also threatens the majority of Molière's young lovers).

Yet, marriage—a marriage of love, of course—is a great desire in most comedies, their happy ending usually marked by a wedding. In Molière, women who don't wish for love and marriage are mostly presented as ridiculous (with the notable exception of Célimène). They can also be fake (Armande in *Les Femmes savant*). Some speak openly of their desire (Agnès), while others, discreet according to the established notions of decorum, are spoken for unscrupulously by their maids. Their retorts, too, make it clear what marriage means. “Believe me, there is nothing like having a husband at night by one's side,” (Scene 2) says the maid in the farce *Sganarelle ou le Cocu imaginaire* (*Sganarelle, or the Imaginary Cuckold*). And Jacqueline in *Le Médecin malgré lui*: “a husband is the plaster that cures all the ills of girls” (II, 1). In *Tartuffe*, Dorine refers to female desire more boldly and wittily, though at the same time more subtly, linking the invocation of a woman's right to sexuality to the demand for a free choice of husband. Unlike in poetry, the novel, and tragedy, in comedy woman is marked by corporeality and erotic desire, thus demystifying the codified image of female chastity. Woman has desire. Molière inherited this knowledge from old French folktales, farce, and satirical literature (Gutwirth 1966, 79). But whereas in the old farce female desire is charged with misogynistic prejudice and portrayed as lust, in Molière it becomes natural and legitimate. In his comedies, the women who point to their right to sexuality are neither ridiculous nor vulgar. Moreover, erotic desire is often the entry point for liberation from patriarchal violence.

Among Molière's female characters, witty servants stand out, often distinguished by their sharp sensibility and sound reasoning. Some of them occupy a prominent place in their respective plays; Dorine (*Tartuffe*) and Toinette (*Le Malade imaginaire*), for instance, also act as “directors” of scenes that “produce” comedy, functioning almost as the author's alter-ego.

Although women do occasionally produce comedy, few of them are comic (Dorine, for example, makes witty comments, but she is not ridiculous herself, and the same goes for Célimène). Still, a couple of comic figures can nevertheless be found among them, such as the devout Pernelle (*Tartuffe*) and the greedy Bélise (*Le Malade imaginaire*), as well as the ridiculous *précieuses* and the learned ladies. The most prominent female comic character in Molière's oeuvre is the *prude*. Virtuous women who preach morality and chastity are constant subjects of his ridicule, and over the years, he also portrays them as deceitful and hypocritical (Arsinoé in *Le Misanthrope*). In contrast to the wide range of male comic characters, there are very few female social types that Molière exposes to ridicule, notes [Waterson \(2003\)](#), adding that his oeuvre does not have the misogynistic bend prevalent at the time (197).

Given the vast literature on Molière and his work, it is surprising that the image and role of women in his oeuvre has so far been relatively little explored. Although discussions of individual female characters, including topics that relate more or less directly to the position of women in society, can be found in a number of treatises devoted to individual comedies or to Molière's oeuvre as a whole—and such discussions have indeed become noticeably more pronounced in recent decades (also on account of the prominence of feminist critiques)—they are far from being comprehensive and have no ambition to give a proper survey of the topic. There was to my knowledge only one monograph that seeks to analyze Molière's comediography from a distinctly feminist point of view, Roxane Decker Lalande's *Intruders in the Play World: The Dynamics of Gender in Molière's Comedies* (1996). Lalande, who views comedy primarily as an escape from reality, doesn't pay much attention to historical context and neglects references to contemporary women's culture and issues related to the woman question. She focuses on the magic circle of playful illusion created by ludic activity and, on this basis, finds that Molière draws a sharp line between men and women, who, as a rule, appear as intruders or outsiders. This somewhat strange starting point to which she subordinates her reading of Molière's comedies nevertheless draws attention to the fact that women have a special place in them, including the fact that they are rarely comic. However, it is precisely in the light of this special place that it is difficult to ignore their historical context. Just as I was finishing this book, a book appeared entitled *Women and Irony in Molière's Comedies of Marriage* by John D. Lyons (Oxford University Press 2023). It covers similar ground to mine, with the starting point that Molière's comedies consistently favor women's rights, and it deals with the same set of comedies as I do, albeit from a different perspective, focusing on the use of different kinds of irony. I admire the scholarship of the author and find myself largely in agreement with the general thrust of his argument, but

10 *Where are women in Molière's comedies?*

my approach has different emphases. Unfortunately, it appeared too late to allow me to take it into account.

A very different approach to Molière is taken by feminist critics who deal with seventeenth century women's culture and the woman question, which has been a major topic in French culture in the early modern period and beyond. As a rule, these critics are not interested in Molière's entire oeuvre. They rather problematize his attitude toward contemporary women's culture, as it is allegedly reflected in two of his comedies with female protagonists, *Les Précieuses ridicules* and *Les Femmes savantes*. The debate on Molière's attitude to the woman question has been underway for a long time (supposedly since his lifetime), involving many different points of view and occasionally going even so far as the accusation that the abovementioned comedies have shamed and pushed progressive women's culture and its emancipatory potential into oblivion for centuries.

Moliere was no enemy of women: he sharply attacked enforced marriage, demanding freedom of sentiment for the young girl and respect and independence for the wife.

(Beauvoir 1956, I. 129)

This is what Simone de Beauvoir, probably the most influential French feminist author, said in her famous 1949 book *Le Deuxième Sexe*. She did not deal much with Molière, mentioning him only when reporting on the salvos of laughter from the audience that greeted the two comedies. However, even if she discerned in this laughter a mockery of women conquering a new cultural field, she placed the author elsewhere. Despite her authority, for most feminists he remained there.

La querelle des femmes

The debate on the woman question known as *la querelle des femmes* is widely believed to have taken place in France with greater or lesser intensity from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. It covered a wide variety of views on women's nature and abilities, their right to schooling and literacy, access to public offices and positions, including positions within the government, civil and marital status, the right to own property, the right to sexual pleasure and divorce, etc. In short, it examined virtually all the topics that concern the unequal position of women vis-à-vis men in society. It began with the very institution of civil or state law, which, influenced by religious prejudice (claiming that sin came upon man through a woman, Eve) and Aristotle's notion that women lacked reason, denied women almost all rights, including those they had enjoyed in the Middle Ages. Christine de Pizan, the first French professional writer,