

## Up Close and Personal: Audience Pleasure and Unpleasure in the *Querelle de L'Ecole des femmes*

It is commonplace to observe that the *Querelle de L'Ecole des femmes* was hugely entertaining for the Parisian theatre audience owing to the opportunity it offered to play one theatre troupe off against another in a quarrel that was, essentially, performed as live theatre.<sup>1</sup> It has often--and quite rightly--been observed that the metatheatrical dimension to the quarrel contributed to its piquancy and thereby to the pleasure it provoked in the audience. In my examination of audience pleasure (and its counterpart, unpleasure) during the quarrel, I shall draw a distinction between the effects of various specifically metatheatrical elements (notably the presentation of a troupe rehearsing, and the discussion of acting techniques and of the nature of the theatre audience) and those, often similar, effects that stem from what I shall call 'metareference' or 'metareferentiality'. Where metatheatre draws the audience's attention to the vast and vexed question of the theatrical illusion by breaking it (with all the implications this may have for the illusion or not of life off-stage), and often resulting in an alienating effect that can be both pleasurable and disruptive,<sup>2</sup> metareference may refer to all manner of theatrical *and* extratheatrical elements known to the audience, and is typically a source of considerable pleasure. In both instances, a shift in perception occurs in the audience as what is usually foregrounded (the theatrical fiction) is de-emphasized in favour of what is usually secondary (references to a known and shared reality).<sup>3</sup> Where the simple term 'reference' may be applied in the *Querelle de L'Ecole des femmes* to the citations from Corneille's plays (specifically from *Nicomède*, *Horace*, *Le Cid*,

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<sup>1</sup> As Georges Mongrédien puts it, 'le public se passionnait pour cette lutte, où les uns se moquaient des autres, pour leur plus grand profit à tous, car les théâtres de Paris n'avaient jamais été si pleins'. See *La Querelle de L'Ecole des Femmes*, 2 vols (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1971), I, p. xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Whereas I am suggesting that metatheatre involves acknowledging to and with the audience the nature and existence of the theatrical illusion, Hornby emphasizes the disruptive nature of metatheatre, even suggesting that its effect is fundamentally alienating. See Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1986), passim. Hornby does consider the pleasurable dimension to metatheatre towards the end of his study.

<sup>3</sup> See Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, pp. 115-16.

*Sertorius* and *Œdipe*) that feature in *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, the moment is also, I am suggesting, metareferential because it is multifaceted and highly self-conscious. It is multi-layered, and produces the powerful effects of what Marvin Carlson has termed 'ghosting' and what we might, in common parlance, term 'baggage'.<sup>4</sup> A metareference, then, is a reference that acknowledges (implicitly or explicitly) its own baggage. The audience here is expected and invited to pick up not only on a quotation from a known text, but also to a known (and recent) performance of that text by a particular actor who is now absent and who, it is generally understood, is being mocked by another actor who is present.<sup>5</sup> The audience thus shares not only in the pleasure of recognizing and identifying a quotation and a recent performance thereof, but also, crucially, in the pleasure of a new and, in this instance, mocking complicity created between the audience and the actors now onstage.

Often, in the quarrel that concerns us, metareference takes the form of parody, when a specific actor is parodied in a specific role taken from a specific play; sometimes it may refer to a real-life situation such as the time Molière attended a performance of Boursault's *Le Portrait du Peintre* in which he is mocked. But by far the most interesting type of metareference found in the quarrel was only as far as we know experienced on a single evening, that of 11 December 1663, when the four principal plays of the quarrel were performed in succession. This unique theatrical event gave rise to an additional and highly-charged type of metareferentiality built, notably, on the known presence (and quite possibly on the visibility) of the individuals being referred to. In order to probe the peculiar pleasures and possible instances of unpleasure brought about by metareference in our quarrel, I shall first explore how key references and types of reference functioned in the more familiar and less vexed context of the Parisian theatres of the Palais-Royal and the Hôtel de Bourgogne and their shared theatre audience

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<sup>4</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), passim. Hereafter referred to as *Haunted Stage*. Carlson writes in particular of the 'thrill of superior knowledge that discrepant awareness offers to audiences' (pp. 31-32).

<sup>5</sup> In *Metareference across Media: Theory and Case Studies* (Amsterdam, NY: Rodopi, 2009), Werner Wolf gives one example from Molière: the moment in *Le Malade imaginaire* III.4 when Béralde advises Argan (who was of course played by Molière) to calm himself by watching a Molière play, and Argan responds by cursing Molière and his impertinence (p. 29).

in the course of the 1663 theatre season. This will form a basis from which to examine the more complex dynamics at work on 11 December 1663.

The context that led to the writing of Molière's *La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes* is well-known and need not be rehearsed again here.<sup>6</sup> What is of particular interest for us is, in the first instance, the metareferential context in which the play was most frequently seen, namely on a double-bill with *L'Ecole des femmes* at the Palais-Royal theatre.<sup>7</sup> Both plays were of course performed to what was essentially a sympathetic audience and one of the primary effects of this double bill was to establish a deep complicity with that audience. The principal way in which this is achieved is by means of the fact that the theatre audience, just like Climène and then the Marquis, have just seen a performance of *L'Ecole des femmes*; the other main characters in *La Critique*, meanwhile, have seen *L'Ecole des Femmes* very recently.<sup>8</sup> Just as the audience is bound together by its experience of *L'Ecole des femmes*, so also is it bound together with the new characters that it is now watching. Of course, a sympathetic audience at the Palais-Royal will not have shared the obviously flawed opinions of Climène or the Marquis (or, later on, of Lysidas); rather, they will, like Elise, have enjoyed the sport of the debate over a play that could not have been fresher in their minds. In particular, they would surely have joined Elise in mocking Climène in scene 6.

To witness a debate over a play written by and starring Molière in a second play in which Molière's fiercest critic is played by none other than Molière himself must have particularly piquant for the Palais-Royal audience. Herzel notes the

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<sup>6</sup> Useful accounts of the quarrel may be found, among other places, in the Introduction to Mongrédien's two-volume *La Querelle de l'Ecole des femmes* and in the 2010 Pléiade edition of Molière's *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Forestier, Claude Bourqui et al (Paris: Gallimard, 2010). All quotations from *La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes* and *L'Impromptu de Versailles* are taken from the latter (referred to as Pléiade), while all quotations from *Le Portrait du Peintre* and *L'Impromptu de l'Hôtel de Condé* are taken from the former (referred to as Mongrédien).

<sup>7</sup> As Roger Herzel notes, ticket sales for the double bill far exceeded those for the very successful run of *La Critique* on its own. See 'Natural Acting in *La Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* and *L'Impromptu de Versailles*', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 28 (2006), 183-92 (p. 185n3). Hereafter referred to as 'Natural Acting'.

<sup>8</sup> Herzel notes too that the social status of the characters played by Molière's actors in *La Critique* is that of the more privileged members of Molière's audience, which also helps create a close affinity between the two. See 'Natural Acting', pp. 186-87.

delicious moment in *La Critique* (scene 6) when as a Marquis, Molière is standing beside Lysidas who is criticizing the way that Molière performed the role of Arnolphe in *L'Ecole des femmes*. Lysidas deploras 'ces roulements d'yeux extravagants, ces soupirs ridicules, et ces larmes niaises qui font rire tout le monde', to which the Marquis, played by Molière, replies 'Morbleu, merveille!'. In the double bill, Molière had as Arnolphe only just performed the very *roulements* that Lysidas is now mocking. Herzel suggests that Molière as the Marquis would probably then have repeated the performance, in Lysidas's wake.<sup>9</sup> In the double bill, the audience would thus have seen this moment no fewer than three times: once as originally performed by Molière as Arnolphe, once by Du Croisy playing Lysidas (imitating Molière as Arnolphe), and once by Molière as the Marquis imitating Molière as Arnolphe (or perhaps imitating Du Croisy's Lysidas imitating Molière as Arnolphe).

The next play in the sequence, Boursault's *Portrait du peintre* was performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne on a double bill not with the play on which it depended for its existence and *raison d'être*, but rather with Corneille's tragedy, *Nicomède* (see *Pléiade* II, p. 1615n14). Its effect in performance, then, must have been very different. Whereas Molière's double-bill could not have been more tight-knit--one might even say incestuous--in terms of its presentation (featuring many of the same actors as in the reference play) and drivers (almost complete dependence of the second play on the first), *Le Portrait du peintre*, while attempting to draw on the success of its reference play, this time by genuinely criticizing it, remained rather more distant from it. Although we may assume an almost complete overlap between the theatre audience at the Palais-Royal and at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and although the audience's enjoyment of Molière's double bill no doubt encouraged them to go to the rival theatre where the work of their playwright was criticized, the metareferential element and ensuing pleasure is necessarily lighter and looser here. While the *Ecole des femmes--Critique* double bill could be offered safe in the knowledge that the reference play was known to the audience, the temporal and spatial difference separating

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<sup>9</sup> For the audience, 'the pleasure of being Molière's accomplice in this little piece of self-mockery (or perhaps self-congratulation) sweeps away all other considerations.' 'Natural Acting', p. 191.

the reference play from its critique play at the Hôtel de Bourgogne necessarily changed the relationship between the two.

It seems perfectly plausible to assume that most members of the Parisian theatre audience were fickle enough to be pro-Molière one evening and anti-Molière two days later, for such is the power of the collective response rooted in pleasure (it is expected that a trip to the theatre will be at some fundamental level pleasurable). Or, to put it another way, they may genuinely have enjoyed being anti-Montfleury one evening and anti-Molière the next, uniting against a common enemy for the relatively short duration of each performance -- this too can be pleasurable. They no doubt enjoyed in particular scene 2 of *Le Portrait du peintre* in which the Comte mentions Molière-Arnolphe's 'grimaces' then comments that, having read the play 'Je n'y puis trouver ces plaisantes postures, / Eh, parlez, depeschez, viste, promptement, tost' (presumably parodying the 'plaisantes postures' in question) (lines 150-51).<sup>10</sup>

The most evident source of metareferential pleasure for the audience of the next play in the sequence, *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, lies of course with its extensive use of parody.<sup>11</sup> First performed for the king and court, Molière's *Impromptu* was then taken to the Palais-Royal where it was performed a number of times with various plays, including *Le menteur* by Corneille, Molière's *Sganarelle ou Le Cocu imaginaire*, and Tristan's *Mariane*. Carlson highlights the importance of audience recognition of the reference, as well as the collective nature of the experience in parody:

Parody in the theatre has in all periods functioned as a device to further reinforce the collective and ongoing nature of the theatregoing community. In order to enjoy a theatrical parody the audience must be essentially composed of a community that shares a common theatrical history of

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<sup>10</sup> He also makes much of Arnolphe's notorious 'ouf', which was not in the original text of the play, but which featured (or came to feature) in early performances of it.

<sup>11</sup> Herzel reminds us that Molière had already criticized the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and praised his own troupe through the counter-criticism of Mascarille in *Les Précieuses ridicules*. 'Natural Acting', pp. 183-84.

attending the work being parodied. A great deal of the pleasure derives from the shared recognition of the parody's references, in their exaggerated or distorted form, and also of the fact that the recognition *is* shared. The laughter, as is normally the case in the theatre, is reinforced by its collectivity. (*Haunted Stage*, p. 39)

In Molière's big parody scene (scene 1), the audience would have thus enjoyed identifying each of the individual actors from the Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe that Molière was parodying, as well as the role in which they were being parodied. As Herzel points out, while the names of the actors Molière mimics in *L'Impromptu* are conveniently written in the text (published only after Molière's death), they were not spoken out loud, and so it is likely that Molière was able to convey the mannerisms of each individual actor with such accuracy (albeit exaggerated accuracy) that they were quickly recognizable (see 'Natural Acting', p. 184). The success of the reference depends of course on audience recognition, which in turn depends on their familiarity with the material (actors and plays) being parodied.

Audience pleasure in recognizing actor, role and play is spelled out by Mlle de Brie, who says 'je trouve cette idée assez plaisante, et j'en ai reconnu là dès le premier Vers, continuez je vous prie' (scene 1). One particularly piquant reference is to the actor and troupe manager, Zacharie Jacob Montfleury, playing Prusias in Corneille's *Nicomède* (which, we remember, was given with *Le Portrait du peintre* and which Molière's own troupe had performed on five occasions between 1660 and 1661). Molière adds another dimension to the experience by showing first how to perform these excerpts and then how not to do them, thereby inviting not just recognition but also active comparison, and presumably, thereby, some sort of judgement or evaluation. The reference, then, is not just to the acting style of various members of the Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe, but also to that promoted by Molière himself.

Another notable metareferential example comes in scene 3 when Molière plays a Marquis who imitates the (anti-Molière) Marquis of *La Critique de L'Ecole des*

*femmes* saying ‘*Détestable, morbleu, détestable, tarte à la crème*’. This is pleasingly multi-layered form of metareference as the audience is invited to recall three of Molière’s plays simultaneously (*L’Ecole des femmes*, *La Critique de L’Ecole des femmes* and the *Impromptu* being performed) at the same time that they are to enjoy both the actor’s self-parody and to participate in the collective and pleasingly ludic and knowing pretence that the real Molière is not present. These vertiginous metareferences help establish a particularly tight complicity between Molière and his audience.<sup>12</sup>

Given that Molière had devoted some time and energy to producing parodies of recognizable actors from the Hôtel de Bourgogne in recognizable roles, it is hardly surprising that his enemies in turn seized the opportunity to parody Molière’s acting, including his tragic acting, which by all accounts does seem genuinely to have been less than successful. In the final performed play of our sequence, *L’Impromptu de l’Hôtel de Condé*, Alcidon mocks, among other things, Molière’s recent performance of the role of Caesar in Corneille’s tragedy *La Mort de Pompée*. He first describes and then imitates Molière’s performance, complete with quotations from III.2 of the play in question:

... il vient le nez au vent,  
 Les pieds en parentaise, et l’espaule en avant,  
 Sa perruque qui suit le costé qu’il avance,  
 Plus pleine de lauriers qu’un jambon de Mayance,  
 Les mains sur les costez d’un air peu negligé,  
 La teste sur le dos comme un mulet chargé,  
 Les yeux fort égarez, puis debitant ses rooles,  
 D’un hocquet eternal separe ses paroles,  
 Et lors qu’on luy dit, *et commandez icy*,  
 Il respons,  
*Connaissez-vous Cesar de luy parler ainsi;*  
*Que m’offriroit de pis la Fortune ennemie,*

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<sup>12</sup> Just as the audience enjoyed participating in the pretence that Molière was not present, so also had the original audience at Versailles enjoyed participating in the pretence that the king had yet to arrive (from the first scene, we are told that ‘le Roi ne doit venir de deux heures’).

*A moy qui tiens le sceptre égal à l'infamie?* (Scene 3)

As before, this second play performed by the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne did not, for obvious reasons, feature alongside its reference play or, rather now, plays. Instead, it was performed with another play by Antoine Jacob Montfleury (son of Zacharie), a five-act tragi-comedy in verse called *Thrasibule*.<sup>13</sup> Given this inevitable distance between the play and its main inspiration, and a form of success that depended on audience memory and wavering allegiance, what may have been more successful in public performance of the *Impromptu de l'Hôtel de Condé* was when the actors picked up on references to Molière imitating *them* (see especially scene 3 where the Marquis imitates Molière imitating several of the actors from the Bourgogne troupe).

Alongside these pleasurable references, I would like to suggest that there may also have sat instances of unpleasure, when certain references went too far by becoming too personal. In adopting the term 'unpleasure', I wish to distinguish between straightforward displeasure or non-pleasure and the experience of having felt a sense of pleasure that subsequently wanes or disappears. Whereas Molière's satire of his critics in *La Critique de L'Ecole des femmes* remained general in the sense that no individuals were explicitly targeted (even if some saw themselves and others in his portraits) and were well within the bounds of what was acceptable in comedy, his eminently recognizable parodies in *L'Impromptu* were significantly more provocative. Meanwhile, *Le Portrait du Peintre* had ventured into new and potentially unpleasant (or un-pleasing) territory. As the editors of the Pléiade note:

c'était la première fois qu'on prétendait faire en plein théâtre la satire directe d'un contemporain, désigné si ce n'est sous le nom, du moins par un surnom connu de tout le monde ('le peintre'); la première fois que les comédiens d'un théâtre montaient une pièce qui dénigrait publiquement le directeur d'un théâtre concurrent; et pour couronner le tout, on cherchait à

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<sup>13</sup> See Mongrédien II, p. 315. Incidentally, Mongrédien describes Montfleury as 'un des meilleurs auteurs comiques contemporains de Molière' (II, p. 316).



le rendre suspect d'impiété. (Pléiade II, p. 1606)

We know too that at some point during the performance run of *Le Portrait du peintre*, the 'Chanson de la Coquille', which contains crude sexual imagery and which refers to Madeleine Béjart's performance in the prologue to Molière's 1661 *comédie-ballet*, *Les Fâcheux* was added (see Pléiade II, pp. 1605-06). Mongrédien has also suggested that the performed version of the play was harsher than the published version that has made its way down to us (see Mongrédien I, pp. 93-94).<sup>14</sup>

On the question of the limits of what is acceptable (and of where a line might therefore be drawn between elements that produce pleasure and those that are likely to produce unpleasure), Molière offers a very clear viewpoint in his oft-quoted speech in *L'Impromptu de Versailles*:

Je serai bien aise de contribuer à les [rival playwrights] faire subsister, pourvu qu'ils se contentent de ce que je puis leur accorder avec bienséance. La courtoisie doit avoir des bornes, et il y a des choses qui ne font rire, ni les spectateurs, ni celui dont on parle. Je leur abandonne de bon cœur mes ouvrages, ma figure, mes gestes, mes paroles, mon ton de voix, et ma façon de réciter, pour en faire, et dire tout ce qu'il leur plaira, s'ils en peuvent tirer quelque avantage. Je ne m'oppose point à toutes ces choses, et je serai ravi que cela puisse réjouir le monde; mais en leur abandonnant tout cela, ils me doivent faire la grâce de me laisser le reste, et de ne point toucher à des matières de la nature de celles, sur lesquelles on m'a dit qu'ils m'attaquaient dans leurs Comédies. (scene 5)

Molière accepts professional attacks as a potential source of theatrical pleasure, but draws the line at personal ones, which are not *bienséant(es)*. The limits of audience pleasure are thus those of *bienséance*.

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<sup>14</sup> In Donneau de Visé's *Réponse à L'Impromptu de Versailles* (scene 3), it is strongly suggested that Molière is a cuckold.

Overall, what this brief examination of the four plays in question demonstrates is that, generally speaking, the closer the links between the metareferences, the performers and the audience, the greater their impact on the audience. Molière's double bill of the main reference play of the quarrel, *L'Ecole des femmes* and its mock critique play, *La Critique de L'Ecole des femmes*, was thus, as its box office receipts demonstrate, particularly pleasing to the Parisian theatre audience. This tightness was further reinforced by the fact that Molière the actor played the fiercest critic of Molière the actor-playwright only minutes after he had appeared in the play under discussion. The pleasure of parody reached dizzying proportions in *L'Impromptu de Versailles* owing to Molière's extraordinary skill and to the audience pleasure to be derived from active participation as decoders of the series of metareferences which are both textual (citations from known plays) and performative (parodies of individual known acting styles). Meanwhile, at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the metareferential effect, while undeniable, was diminished owing both to the distance between the plays performed and their reference plays and to that between the reference plays and their critics. I have suggested that the most successful metareferential moments in the performances at the Hôtel de Bourgogne were those that were at least partially self-referential (i.e. when referring not to Molière's poor acting in *Pompée* but rather to his imitations of the actors now on stage).

At no point in the history of the quarrel did the level of proximity of reference and performance in all four of our plays reach higher (and perhaps excruciating) levels than when they were performed together on 11 December 1663 at the marriage of the Duc D'Enghien (Condé's son) and Princess Anne de Bavière (daughter of the Palatine princess and niece of the Queen of Poland). My contention is that the potential for audience pleasure, outlined above, was greatly increased in the performance context of the Condé wedding. At the same time, I shall suggest that the potential for unpleasure, hinted at above, also increased, owing to the new performance context and to a recent real-life accusation made by Zacharie Montfleury against Molière. It is a case, then, of heightened pleasure and heightened unpleasure, alongside some formerly pleasurable elements that might now be experienced as unpleasurable.

In his edition of the plays of the *querelle* (i.e. those written by playwrights other than Molière), Mongrédien draws on the evidence offered by the *Gazette*,<sup>15</sup> the *Muze Historique*,<sup>16</sup> and La Grange's *Registre*,<sup>17</sup> and surmises that *La Critique de L'Ecole des femmes* as well as *L'Impromptu de Versailles* and *L'Impromptu de l'Hôtel de Condé* were performed as part of the wedding celebrations at the Hôtel de Condé on the evening of 11 December 1663 (II, 316-18). Huguette Gilbert seems to have been the first person to draw on another, more informative source for further information in the form of an allegorical account by Charles Robinet, entitled 'Les Nopces ducales'.<sup>18</sup> In this 'relation travestie', we read:

Le soir [du 11], la Compagnie se réunit au Palais de Lysandre [M. le Prince]: où tout étoit préparé pour des alairesses dignes de la Solennité.

On y fut diverti dans une Sale superbement ornée, par les Comédiens de la Troupe du grand Lisis [le Roi], & par ceux de la Troupe de l'illustre Philemon [Monsieur], qui se jouèrent elles mesmes, en jouant la Critique & Contrecritique de l'Ecole des Femmes, avec quelques *Inpromptu* servans de Replique pour les deux Partis: ce qui ne pouvoit être que fort plaisant.<sup>19</sup>

From this, we understand, as Gilbert does, that the four performed plays of the quarrel featured in succession: *La Critique de L'Ecole des femmes* (Molière), *Le Portrait du Peintre ou la Contrecritique de L'Ecole des femmes* (Boursault), *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (Molière) and *L'Impromptu de L'Hôtel de Condé* (Montfleury). Molière's troupe and his arch-rivals at the Hôtel de Bourgogne thus collaborated in an extraordinary one-off staging of their quarrel.

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<sup>15</sup> The *Gazette* notes briefly that 'la Compagnie eut le divertissement de la Comédie Française' (15 December 1663).

<sup>16</sup> *La Muze historique* notes that 'Deux Troupes de Comediens, / Des cinq qui sont en cette Ville, / L'une et l'autre étant fort habile, / Divertirent ce mesme jour, / Admirablement bien la Cour' (15 December 1663, vv64-68).

<sup>17</sup> La Grange notes that 'la troupe fust mandée et joua a l'hostel de Condé au Mariage de SAS Mgr Le Duc La Critique de l'Escolle des femmes et l'Impromptu de Versailles' (11 December 1663).

<sup>18</sup> See Huguette Gilbert, 'Les Nopces ducales et la Querelle de L'Ecole des femmes', *Dix-Septième Siècle* 150 (1986), 73-74.

<sup>19</sup> *Les Nopces ducales* (Paris: Loyson, 1664), pp. 18-19.

It was undoubtedly the metareferential dimension to the quarrel and particularly to this unique staging of it that was thought liable to be so uniquely pleasing to Condé's guests. Mongrédien comments that 'si vraiment M. le Prince offrit ce soir-là à ses invités le spectacle de Molière parodiant Montfleury père, puis de Montfleury fils parodiant Molière,<sup>20</sup> il faut convenir qu'ils eurent là un exercice comique de haut goût, une réjouissance de qualité exceptionnelle, unique dans les annales théâtrales' (II, 321). Mongrédien rightly highlights the uniqueness of the event, but he overlooks its nuances, as well as the double-edged nature of the pleasure to be derived from it and which is my subject here.

We have seen that in earlier individual performances of the four plays, the memory of the source play, *L'Ecole des femmes*, featured as an important, ghostly presence in the minds of the spectators, and that the metareferential pleasure to be derived from this was inevitably greatest in the case of *La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes* when it was performed in a double bill straight after its source play. Here, by contrast, the four plays are reframed in order to create a whole new entertainment in and of itself. The event is no longer played out in reference to a comedy that, it is assumed, everybody had seen (indeed, some of the foreign dignitaries present at the wedding may not have done so); rather it becomes, for a single evening, a four-part comedy that refers to a play that some audience members would have known and others not. The entertainment was thus no longer about *L'Ecole des femmes*, but about the *Querelle de L'Ecole des femmes*. In particular, it was about the rivalry between two theatrical troupes who were present and performing that very rivalry.<sup>21</sup>

Just as the entertainment was reframed, so also was the relationship between the actors and the audience necessarily different. It was suggested above that the Parisian theatre audience would have had little difficulty siding at least for the duration of the performance first with Molière at the Palais-Royal and then, a

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<sup>20</sup> This is perhaps slightly misleading, as it was the actor who delivered the parody via the playwright's script.

<sup>21</sup> It may also have contained hints of another rivalry, that for patronage of the theatre and of the arts more generally between the former *frondeur*, Condé, and the young Louis XIV. There is also the question of the groom, Condé's son, to whom *Le Portrait du peintre* had already been dedicated, and that of Louis XIV's brother, Monsieur, to whom Molière's troupe still belonged.

few days later and in another location, with the members of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, in the interests of their own entertainment and pleasure. Here at the Hôtel de Condé, the audience's emotional elasticity underwent a more exacting test as its members were invited to switch allegiance several times in the space of a single evening.<sup>22</sup> The challenges are all the greater when one considers that audience allegiance was such a live issue in the quarrel. In *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, for instance, Molière famously satirizes the audience at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, arguing that to attack Molière's play is tantamount to attacking its supportive audience, including the king himself (scene 5).

In the first instance, then, this new framework and performance context will have simply bestowed a greater piquancy on the many topical references that feature in the plays, such as the reference in *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (scene 5) to the upcoming anti-Molière play (i.e. *Le Portrait du peintre*) to be performed by the 'grands comédiens'.<sup>23</sup> A similarly heightened piquancy will have been felt in the various references to Boursault and Molière that are dotted throughout the play. More crucially still, in this new context, the audience was required to respond to the various metacritiques put forward in the very presence (seen or unseen, but certainly known) of the troupe or troupe members that they were supposed to be complicit in mocking. In the case of some of the parodies, it will have been heightened pleasure, in particular, the pleasure of being able to compare in quick succession the *copie* with the *original*.<sup>24</sup>

One play more than any other will have gained in metareferential potency on 11 December 1663: Montfleury's *L'Impromptu de l'Hôtel de Condé*. In public performance, as we have seen, the play was performed as a sideline to a five-act

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<sup>22</sup> Gilbert claims that 'la représentation du 11 permet alors aux deux partis de se sentir également traités, également écoutés et, par la médiation d'un auditoire auguste, mais bienveillant, attentif à l'un comme à l'autre, de vider leur querelle, à défaut de se réconcilier' (p. 74). But this is surely an oversimplification.

<sup>23</sup> Even at the first performance of the play, this strategy was operative, for *Le Portrait du peintre* had already been performed.

<sup>24</sup> On 10 December 1663 the wedding party celebrated the couple's engagement at the Louvre. The Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe performed Montfleury's *Thrasibule*, and a short play, *Le Jaloux endormi*, nicknamed *Les Cadenats* (itself derivative of *L'Ecole des Maris*) by Boursault was also performed. In *Pléiade*, we read that *Les Cadenats* was performed by the Hôtel du Marais (II, 1612n3). These are of course the two playwrights whose plays would be performed the following day alongside Molière's.

tragi-comedy by the same author, and its references to the details of the quarrel will have had only limited impact. In the first instance, the play was, as its title indicates, claiming a privileged status vis-à-vis the hosts and its location.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, it now featured alongside and just after its inspiration piece, Molière's *Impromptu de Versailles*. For although Montfleury's *Impromptu* features references to *L'Ecole des femmes*, it is primarily a response to the series of parodies that feature in Molière's *Impromptu de Versailles* (with which it was otherwise never performed).<sup>26</sup> The metareferential benefits of this juxtaposition will have been felt by the audience from the very first scene onwards: scene 1 features two of the actors whom Molière had just (perhaps only half an hour earlier) mocked in his *Impromptu*: the actors known as De Villiers and Beauchâteau. The reference to how Molière 'a bien contrefait vos postures / Bien imité vos tons, vôtre port, vos figures' invited the audience to recall Molière's dazzling sequence of parodies at the same time that it invited them to verify the accuracy of those parodies, though in this instance with the actors playing different roles. Likewise the moment in scene 3 where the Marquis character fondly recalls and then imitates Molière's parody of Montfleury could hardly have failed to please an audience that has just shared in the pleasure of that imitation, and now enjoys the extra level added by the imitation of an imitation.

However, it is one thing to join in laughing (however kindly or gently) at somebody in their absence, as was the case in the original performances of these plays, and quite another to laugh at them in their presence, as is the case here. This new framework raises a number of pressing questions regarding audience response to the more personal remarks or observations that are made, for instance, to Montfleury's great girth (see *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, scene 1). It is possible that these instances took on a more malicious or even sadistic

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<sup>25</sup> Mongrédien speculates that the Duc d'Enghien, to whom, as we have seen, *Le Portrait du peintre* had already been dedicated, may have commissioned the *Impromptu de l'Hotel de Condé* (II, 316).

<sup>26</sup> Molière's *Impromptu* did not of course depend on Montfleury's in the same way, for it was written first. The relationship between them is an unequal one.

dimension, which in turn might hint at masochistic dimension to the knowing participation of some of the individuals concerned.<sup>27</sup>

It seems likely that the audience response will have been guided at least in part by the visible or official response of the individual targeted at any given time. While these are not recorded, some useful clues may be gleaned from various accounts of Molière going to see a performance of *Le Portrait du Peintre* at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.<sup>28</sup> According to Donneau de Visé's *Réponse à L'Impromptu de Versailles*, Molière did not sit discreetly at the back of the auditorium, but 'sur le Theatre' (scene 3) (i.e. on stage) during this performance, thereby offering the audience at the Hôtel de Bourgogne the unique (until it was surpassed by the performance currently under scrutiny) experience of seeing him respond live to a series of parodies of his acting style.<sup>29</sup> As we have seen, his 'grimaces', his 'plaisantes postures', his textual delivery and of course his 'ouf' are openly mocked in Boursault's play. According to the account given in another play written during the quarrel, *Les Amours de Calotin* by Chevalier, 'ce fut un charme sans égal / De voir et la copie et son original' (I.3) (see Mongrédien I, p. 96). This suggests a form of audience pleasure that is in most respects similar to that noted above with respect to *La Critique de L'Ecole des femmes*, namely the pleasure of the juxtaposition of the reference (Arnolphe's 'ouf' or Molière's acting more generally) and the referent (Molière). The difference, of course, is that Molière's own alleged critique of himself is a mock critique, whereas that of the Hôtel de Bourgogne is an attempt at a genuine critique. The tone at the Palais-Royal was perhaps self-deprecating, but it was fundamentally friendly; the tone at the Hôtel de Bourgogne had, as we have seen, a more malicious bent. The first form of pleasure is unmitigated; the second is not entirely unmitigated. But it was a form of pleasure nonetheless, and we know from *Les Noces ducales* that it

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<sup>27</sup> Herzl has noted that, in instances when an actor copies somebody who is also seen by the audience, the audience 'can recognise a certain malicious accuracy' ('Natural Acting', p. 188) – something that in turn suggests a degree of pleasure taken in malice.

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, 'Molière' openly expresses his intention to go and see *Le Portrait du peintre* in his *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (scene 5).

<sup>29</sup> This is reminiscent of an anecdote that tells of Socrates who, when seeing himself lampooned in Aristophanes's *The Clouds*, stood up so that the audience could compare him with his on stage portrayal. As Hornby suggests, his aim might have been to contest Aristophanes's depiction or simply to participate 'in a good-natured spirit of fun' (Hornby, p. 100).

was precisely the experience of seeing the two troupes playing out their differences ('qui se jouèrent elles mesmes') that was the essence of the pleasure of the experience ('ce qui ne pouvoit être que fort plaisant').

Meanwhile, de Visé's Alcipe tries to evaluate Molière's response to his portrayal, noting that the playwright struggled to laugh at it and was visibly uncomfortable (see *La Réponse à L'Impromptu de Versailles, Vengeance des Marquis*, scene 3). This is not unlike Arnolphe's experience in *L'Ecole des femmes*, when Horace unwittingly invites him to laugh at his own misfortune, just as he has laughed at that of so many others before him. But, unlike Arnolphe, Molière opted to be present at his comic portrayal and did so from a position of considerable knowledge. If it is true that Molière's laughter was mitigated, then this is a useful reminder that recognition and complicity can also be mitigated, particularly when dealing with individuals rather than with types. The debate over laughter as evidence of recognition or as evidence of its opposite, which had been ignited in 1659 during the controversy over *Les Précieuses ridicules*, thus rumbled on in a more sophisticated form in this latest controversy.

It is probable that the line between pleasure and unpleasure, and between *bienséance* and the breakdown thereof, had been crossed with the 'chanson de la coquille', which one hopes (and imagines) cannot have featured here. But another line had also been crossed which would have been known to some people present on 11 December, for Montfleury père had recently written to Louis XIV (who was of course present at Enghien's wedding) to accuse Molière of incest, specifically, according to a letter written by Racine in late November 1663, 'd'avoir épousé la fille [Armande Béjart], et d'avoir autrefois couché avec la mère [the aforementioned Madeleine Béjart]' (see Mongrédien II, p. 313). Alongside the pleasure to be derived from the incestuous relationship between the plays being performed sat the distinct unpleasure, for those who knew of Montfleury's letter, of an allegation of actual incest.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that Molière was not accused outright of having married his own daughter, but rather of having married the daughter of his former lover.



What, ultimately, are we to make of this extraordinary event? There is no doubt that it must have been highly entertaining and a source of considerable and heightened pleasure for the audience, for the reasons that I have outlined. I have suggested too that this pleasure may at times have verged on the excruciating for a sensitive audience; that it was at times uncomfortable for the actors when they were mentioned individually seems to be in little doubt. Mongrédien, meanwhile, has suggested that Condé may have had a conciliatory purpose in mind when summoning the rival troupes for this event (II, p. 318). Given Condé's penchant for controversy, however, this seems somewhat unlikely. Gilbert, meanwhile, suggests that 'à défaut de se réconcilier', this may have offered the two parties the opportunity to 'vider leur querelle' (74) before a well-meaning and objective audience. She goes on to suggest that, with the king's consent, this performance sought to 'apaiser la Querelle au moment où elle redoublait d'intensité et perdait précisément toute mesure' (74). If that is the case, then the alleged cathartic effect was not immediate, for, as Gilbert herself acknowledges, public performances of Molière's *Impromptu* continued – admittedly not for long – until 28 December,<sup>31</sup> while the last public performance of *La Critique* was on 1 January 1664. Boursault's play had already been published in November 1663, but Montfleury's *Impromptu* was published on 19 January 1664 (while, as we all know, Molière's *Impromptu* was only published posthumously).

It seems clear that the primary purpose of this extraordinary event was to offer the best possible form of theatrical entertainment available in a never to be repeated one-off spectacular. By succeeding in bringing together the two rival troupes of the Palais-Royal and the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and by offering the quite extraordinary spectacle of layer upon layer of metareference to the collective delight, if sometimes perhaps a uneasy delight, of the wedding guests, Condé demonstrated his extraordinary influence in the realm of the arts (and, one might say, of the human) at the same time that he played out his personal interest in theatrical (and other) controversy. It was of course inevitable that the *Querelle de L'Ecole des femmes* would come to an end sooner or later, and we

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<sup>31</sup> There was one further public performance of *L'Impromptu* on 16 March 1664.

shall never know the exact reasons why or indeed exactly when it may be thought to have ended. But one effect, probably an unintended one, of this performance on its players may have been to experience first-hand and in a unique way the very power of the theatrical tools that they had put into the service of their quarrel. If confirmation of the power to please an audience was no doubt extremely welcome, the power of the personal metareference was revealed to be something of a theatrical H-bomb. Neither party pursued this particular method again; not because it was ineffective, but rather because its effect, even under controlled conditions, had proven to be *too* effective. In other words, such heightened forms of metareference had turned out on 11 December 1663 to be too hot to handle.

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