Molière and the Domestication of French Comedy: Public and Private Space in *L'Ecole des femmes*

by
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In preparation for the prenuptial morality lesson he plans to give his young ward and prospective bride, Arnolphe, the protagonist of Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes* (1662), calls for an armchair to be brought out from inside his house: "Un siège au frais ici" (III, 1, 665). What is curious and striking about the resulting scene is its incongruous blending of domestic, private elements with a public setting: for according to Molière's stage directions, the play is set in a *place de ville*. Thus as Arnolphe instructs Agnès in the "Maximes du mariage" —a very intimate subject, involving a lesson filled with references to the bed they will share— he is seated outdoors, in the a public square. Twentieth-century directors have remarked the strangeness of this image, and have dealt with it creatively: Louis Jouvet's production featured moving garden walls which could conceal and reveal Agnès's garden, thereby creating separate public and private spaces.[1] Jouvet also cites a colleague's mise en scène which transforms Arnolphe's order, "Un siège au frais ici," into his expression of surprise at discovering an already-present chair outdoors (Jouvet and Pignarre 379). Jouvet explains that the scene in question —this armchair in the public square— belongs to a seventeenth-century esthetic involving a conception of theatrical setting and décor unfamiliar to the twentieth-century spectator: "A l'époque de Molière cela ne dérangeait personne" (379). However, repeated references to this scene in satirical works by Molière's contemporaries prove Jouvet wrong: Molière's detractors ridiculed this scene for what they perceived as an absurd juxtaposition of private affairs and public space.[2] Its reproduction in the frontispiece of the play's first editions suggests as well that the scene was a striking one for contemporary audiences.

Philippe Ariès theorizes that it was precisely during the seventeenth century in Europe that the distinction between public and private life arose. Ariès summarizes the history of private life as "le remplacement d'une sociabilité anonyme, celle de la rue, de la cour du château, de la place, de la communauté, par une sociabilité restreinte qui se confond avec la famille, ou, encore, avec l'individu lui-même" (*Histoire* 16). With this gradual shift of the center of social life, personal and family privacy emerged as new values. The historians Jean-Louis Flandrin and Fernand Braudel

cite architectural evidence from the early eighteenth century to document the advent of a new "goût de l'intimité" in France: an increasing compartmentalization of the home enhanced privacy by creating more intimate domestic spaces (Flandrin 92-94; Braudel 269).[3] What forces lay behind this evolution of social space? Ariès's collaborator Roger Chartier cites as partial reasons the growth of literacy and the emergence of new forms of piety, which led to an increase in private reading and meditation and eventually to a new notion of the individual (Ariès and Duby, *Histoire* 618-19). Jean-Marie Apostolidès echoes Ariès's view that values popularized by an increasingly powerful bourgeoisie were at the origin of the new emphasis on family privacy (Apostolidès 135; Ariès, *L'Enfant* 314-15); like Jürgen Habermas (51), they identify the reinforcement of boundaries between public and private spheres as a bourgeois phenomenon. The historian Robert Mandrou likewise points to domestic enclosure as a defining element of bourgeois existence (151).[4]

These changes in the configuration of social space are played out on the French seventeenth-century comic stage, where we find a shift of the predominant setting from the public square to the domestic interior. The comedy of Molière marks a turning point in this "domestication" of theater. While the scene of most of his early plays is the public square, after about 1664 there is an increasing tendency for his comedies to be set inside the home. Our armchair scene from *L'Ecole des femmes*, with its juxtaposition of indoor and outdoor elements, is emblematic of this gradual transformation of dramatic settings: comedy lingers on the threshold between public and private space before moving completely within the home. Arnolphe's out-of-place armchair is a symbol of the new importance of the interior, domestic, and private in French seventeenth-century theater, a sign of the increasing movement of domestic concerns to center stage. Roger Herzel writes that "the weight of tradition kept *L'Ecole des femmes* situated in the public street, but that was clearly an environment that Molière had outgrown" (934-35); like Jean-Marie Apostolidès (135), he sees the domestic interior setting as an evolutionary endpoint in Molière's career. But while this phenomenon of domestication begins with Molière, it is not confined to his theater: it becomes widespread among his contemporaries and the next generation of comic dramatists (Donneau de Visé, Thomas Corneille, Baron, Dufresny, Dancourt).[5] The progressive enclosure of the comic space is also linked to a change in tone, a development towards the sentimental and moral in comedy. It may be considered to culminate, in the

eighteenth century, in the *comédie larmoyante* and the *drame bourgeois*, both solidly anchored in the family home.

French 17th-century comedy had inherited the public square setting from Latin sources, principally Plautus and Terence, and from Italian Renaissance comedy based on classical works. The public square is the conventional setting of comedy because comedy was at its origin a public, outdoor spectacle, in which the stage was designed to be continuous with its surroundings. As a dramatic device, the public square serves as a convenient way to assemble numerous characters, to provide variety and assure continuous action: it is a gathering-place, a place for chance meetings and scenes of recognition. With the "shift inward" of the comic scene came the new notion that sufficient dramatic action and contact could take place within the closed space of the home, and with a limited cast of characters: the family.

Domestic affairs are of course a conventional theme for comedy. But what is new in *L'Ecole des femmes* —something one does not find in Latin comedy or medieval farce, both important sources for Molière— is the depiction of the anxiety associated with this unfamiliar enterprise of separating the private from the public. It appears at first that Arnolphe has been successful in this undertaking. He maintains two residences, one for his public dealings, the other where he attends to his private concerns. The first is a busy social center which "[à] cent sortes de monde est ouverte à toute heure." The second is a quiet retreat where "nul ne [l]e vient voir" —an ideal place to keep Agnès out of sight and, Arnolphe hopes, to set up housekeeping soon with his innocent bride (I, 1, 144-46). Arnolphe has a new name ready for his new life: he has taken the title "Monsieur de la Souche."

Arnolphe seems to have done well in the public realm. His house is full of callers (I, 1, 143-44); he is, in his own appraisal, "assez riche" (125). A bachelor of forty-two, he now turns his attention to the private sphere, to the formation of a *ménage*. Ariès and his collaborators assert that the increasing distinction of public from private affairs was accompanied by a new concept of the home as refuge, and by a growing concern for escaping the scrutiny of outsiders (*Histoire* 15). This image of the home as a privileged, intimate, private space finds expression in Arnolphe's fantasy of enclosure, his dream of a tranquil domestic idyll: he has carefully chosen and painstakingly sequestered his future bride in order to ensure domestic faithfulness and felicity. Ideally, Arnolphe would be able to maintain parallel public and private lives

which were separate yet complementary. But he proves incapable of achieving this balance. One realm encroaches upon the other: Arnolphe's public behavior, and his obsession with public opinion, contradict and eventually invalidate his private endeavors. First, while he jealously guards his own domestic secrets, he displays a lack of respect for the privacy of others: his favorite activity is publicizing the marital woes of those around him. Chrysalde describes this perverse pastime: "Vos plus grands plaisirs sont, partout où vous êtes / De faire cent éclats des intrigues secrèts" (I, 1, 19-20). Indeed, the only reputation Arnolphe cares about is his own. He has chosen the ignorant Agnès as his bride precisely in order to avoid the same mockery he has inflicted on so many others: he is confident that her simplicity will keep her from seeking extramarital diversions. But Arnolphe's obsession with his public image undermines his pursuit of conjugal fulfillment: he is so concerned for his honor that he forgets to woo his intended bride. Nowhere is this clearer than in the "Maximes du mariage" scene, where Arnolphe terrorizes Agnès with images of cauldrons in Hell which await those women who besmirch their husbands' honor. With his emphasis on the "austères devoirs" of a wife, he drives her into Horace's arms, as she will later explain: "Chez vous le mariage est fâcheux et pénible, / Et vos discours en font une image terrible; / Mais, las! il le fait, lui, si rempli de plaisirs, / Que de se marier il donne des désirs" (V, 4, 1516-19).

It is this young lover who proves the most formidable obstacle to Arnolphe's enjoyment of a balance between public and private worlds. Horace jeopardizes Arnolphe's private projects by invading his home in his absence and winning the affection of Agnès. Once Horace has entered Arnolphe's private space, Arnolphe never fully regains control. Arnolphe's failure to gain admission to his house in I, 2—the slapstick scene with Alain and Georgette — has symbolic value: this scene demonstrates that Horace has in essence already dispossessed the master of the house and turned him into an outsider.

This dispossession progresses after Arnolphe learns of the intrusion. He vows to restore order, to "mettre un ordre et dedans et dehors / Qui du godelureau rompe tous les efforts" (IV, 1, 1010-11): he wishes to reestablish equilibrium by keeping Agnès inside the houseand Horace out. His strategy involves feigning solidarity with the enemy, the better to foil his projects. If, however, Arnolphe is to prevent Horace from discovering that he is in fact Monsieur de la Souche, Agnès's jealous guardian, he must keep a distance from this second homeand suppress part of his identity. In

fact, Horace appears to keep Arnolphe from enjoying either of his homes: the young man's tireless efforts to win Agnès compel Arnolphe to keep watch in the public square. In *L'Ecole des femmes*, the ability to be at home seems to signify a morally valorized capacity *to be at home with oneself*. The public square thus becomes a symbolic space, signifying moral as well as physical exclusion.

"J'ai peine, je l'avoue, à demeurer en place" (IV, 1, 1008), Arnolphe remarks: displacement is one of the keys to his character. Literally and figuratively a busybody, he is almost always in motion. Ironically, however, he almost never goes anywhere: he is onstage for all but one of the play's 32 scenes. In his agitation he is constantly ducking in and out of his house, shifting from visceral to visual experience, shuttling between the tranquil spectacle of Agnès and his inner chaos and turmoil —to which he always gives vent "outside," in the public square, in his monologues. Concealing part of his identity proves an exhausting enterprise which requires enormous self-control. What Arnolphe most fears is "éclat," a loss of equilibrium, an explosion caused by his inner frustration. Thus he is relieved to have successfully avoided Horace at one particularly vulnerable moment: ". . . de mon cœur le trouble impérieux / N'eût pu se renfermer tout entier à ses yeux: / Il eût fait éclater l'ennui qui me dévore, / Et je ne voudrais pas qu'il sût ce qu'il ignore" (II, 1, 373-76). He explains his fear: "J'ai peur, si je vais faire éclater quelque chose, / Que de cet incident par la ville on ne cause" (IV, 2, 1048-49). Here psychological displacement comes into play. Obliged to remain civil towards Horace, and to pretend to second him in his romance with Agnès, Arnolphe displaces his jealous rage onto those who surround him: the notary, the servants, and his dog (IV, 6, 1158).

Forced to lead a double life, Arnolphe develops a split personality. On the one hand, he is a generous *honnête homme*, the kind who gives financial assistance to a friend's son without asking questions (I, 4, 285). But when Arnolphe's obsession with avoiding cuckoldry gains the upper hand, he becomes a ridiculous figure. Similarly, Arnolphe is alternately generous and gentle, and harsh and furious with his servants. He beckons to them, "Approchez-vous: vous êtes mes fidèles, / Mes bons, mes vrais amis. . ." (IV, 4, 1092-93), and in the same scene, he lets them keep the money he has used to demonstrate to them how to refuse bribes. But he can also be a fearsome, angry presence; in Georgette's words, "Mon Dieu! Qu'il est terrible! / Ses regards m'ont fait peur, mais une peur horrible" (II, 3, 415-16). Such fluctuations are

part of Molière's conception of this character: they dramatize Arnolphe's inability to maintain consistency and balance between public and private life.

Only Agnès and Chrysalde seem to know the truth about Arnolphe: his vulnerability, his lack of equilibrium, his "unbalanced" nature. Towards the end of the play, Arnolphe feels he must avoid Agnès's "piercing gaze," her "yeux perçants" (IV, 1, 1022) —eyes which dangerously cross the barrier set up by his efforts of self-control, and which might cause him to "éclater." Chrysalde senses his friend's inability to maintain this barrier, and he condemns the kind of noisy, jealous husband Arnolphe would surely become:

> Je ne suis pas. . . pour ces gens turbulents
> Dont l'imprudent chagrin, qui tempête et qui [gronde,
> Attire au bruit qu'il fait les yeux de tout le [monde,
> Et qui, par cet éclat, semblent ne pas vouloir
> Qu'aucun puisse ignorer ce qu'ils peuvent avoir.
>
> (IV, 8, 1262-67)

Chrysalde's remark stresses the importance, the prudence of setting up boundaries between the private and the public. Unlike Arnolphe, he respects these boundaries: he knows not only what it is proper to conceal, but how successfully to maintain the equilibrium between the public and private domains. In fact, his very first words in the play are about privacy and the proper place for the exchange of secrets. The first thing he does is to evaluate his surroundings for their appropriateness for a confidential conversation: "Nous sommes ici seuls; et l'on peut, ce me semble, / Sans craindre d'être ouïs, y discourir ensemble" (I, 1, 3). Chrysalde's guiding principle is to avoid gossip: "Car enfin il faut craindre un revers de satire, / . . . / Comme sur les maris accusés de souffrance / De tout temps votre langue a daubé d'importance / . . . Gare qu'aux carrefours on ne vous tympanise. . ." (I, 1, 56, 67-68, 72).

Arnolphe is a poor manager of his private life, and that is essentially why the dinner he proposes to Chrysalde at the beginning of the play never takes place. Early in Act I, Arnolphe invites Chrysalde to dine that evening at his home, so that he can see Agnès's marvelous innocence for himself (". . . en ami fidèle / Ce soir je vous invite à souper avec elle; / Je veux que vous puissiez

un peu l'examiner, / Et voir si de mon choix on me doit condamner," I, 1, 151-54). But as the crisis worsens, and Arnolphe loses control over his intended bride, the dinner is postponed indefinitely ("Hé bien! Souperons-nous avant la promenade?" "Non," responds Arnolphe, "je jeûne ce soir," IV, 8, 1216-17). This dinner could not but fail to materialize: a comic relative of Dom Juan's "festin de pierre," it involves an impossible proposition. Like Dom Juan, Arnolphe is, in a sense, damned. We have seen that he is doomed not to enter his house as master. He will furthermore never achieve the "paradise" of the intimate family dinner, symbol of his fantasy of domestic felicity, perhaps because by attempting to turn his unwilling young ward into his wife he has transgressed the laws of the family.

He is excluded from a second family dinner at the end of the play.[6] Once hidden identities have been revealed, and Arnolphe has stormed off, Enrique goes to embrace his daughter ("Ah! ma fille, je cède à des transports si doux") and Chrysalde declares, "J'en ferais de bon cœur, mon frère, autant que vous, / Mais ces lieux et cela ne s'accommodent guère. / Allons dans la maison débrouiller ces mystères. . ." (V, 9, 1776-77). The festive meal is a conventional ending for comedy, but Chrysalde's commentary on the proper place for family reunions and tenderness, his notion of the importance of privacy, sets this comedy apart. Chrysalde knows the proper place of things; Arnolphe, with his gossip and his prying, his morality lesson in the public square, does not.

This final *festin* is a joyous gathering, but it does not lack a certain solemnity. Chrysalde uses the word "mystères": Chrysalde, Oronte, Enrique, Horace and Agnès are the initiated, and the home is a temple that Arnolphe has profaned. Arnolphe, as we have said, is doomed to remain outside, in the *place publique*. "J'ai peine, je l'avoue, à demeurer en place," complains Arnolphe; he would like to join the movement inside, but cannot. Seated in his armchair in the public square, he uneasily, almost pathetically straddles the public and private realms. Chrysalde's legislation of space is linked to his "modern" appreciation of family intimacy: he successfully separates the private from the public. When he declares, "Allons dans la maison," he predicts the direction French comedy will take, the gradual shift of the French comic scene from public square to domestic interior.

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NOTES

[1]For descriptions of this and other twentieth-century approaches to staging *L'Ecole des femmes*, see Carmody's *Rereading Molière*, as well as Laplace's overview.

[2]See especially Donneau de Visé's playlet *Zélinde*, reproduced in Mongrédien 1-82.

[3]An ambitious study of the *inventaires après décès* of thousands of Parisian households between 1600 and 1790 provides statistical evidence of these modifications and concludes that they reflect a growing demand, especially after 1720, for a "répartition des pièces...mieux adaptée à des besoins croissants d'intimité" (Pardailhé-Galabrun 255).

[4]Laurence Stone documents a related phenomenon in England, the birth in the late seventeenth century of what he terms "affective individualism": the walling-off of the nuclear family from either support or interference from kin, accompanied by the development of warmer affective relations between husband and wife and between parents and children (221).

[5]Perry Gethner is one of the few critics to emphasize that this shift in setting is not confined to Molière's works, but rather the beginning of a "distinctively French tradition" (398).

[6]As Ronald Tobin cleverly remarks, "Arnolphe's effort to `nourrir' Agnès, that is, to feed her physically and to (de)form her intellectually, has not been crowned with success because it is she who will participate in the banquet, while he, the representative of the ancien `régime,' will go to bed alone and without his supper" (30).

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