

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Dom Juan

To the Editor:

A common fault in drama criticism is an over-emphasis on ideas at the expense of the theatrical basis of a play. Francis L. Lawrence's "Dom Juan and the Manifest God: Molière's Antitragic Hero" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 86–94) seems not to be wholly innocent of this fault.

Lawrence's premises are sound enough: Dom Juan is an antitragic hero who, in denying a manifest providential Deity, rejects anagnorisis. This argument is supported by a framework of tragic theory drawn from Racine, Barthes, and others. This procedure leads to a failure to recognize essential elements of tone in the play, and a consequent misapplication of emphasis. Both kinds of error arise from ignoring the theatrical dimension of the play.

Lawrence discusses, for example, Sganarelle's "scatological excuse" for his absence when Dom Juan is threatened by Dom Alonso (III.iv): "The servant's enslavement to crude physical urges is a low comic element of the master's bondage to passion" (p. 90). This interpretation is supported by Barthes rather than by necessary stage action. On stage the tone of the action would direct attention to its "low comic" possibilities rather than to the intellectual pattern. It is fear of the physical threat that causes Sganarelle to hide and his bowels to loosen, not his enslavement to physicality or his knowledge that "le monde existe." No stage directions are given, but it would be both senseless and highly inappropriate for him calmly to walk off in this scene because of alimentary necessity.

The role of Sganarelle as a foil to Dom Juan, however, is important. We seldom see one on stage without the other. To Dom Juan's ineffective vice—which Lawrence stresses (p. 88)—Sganarelle offers a timid and ineffective virtue, which his master rejects. Dom Juan treats Sganarelle's tentative but persistent admonitions with indifference or sarcasm. Lawrence recognizes their parallel roles but, in one instance, wrongly emphasizes the significance of the parallel by ignoring the stage business. He compares

Sganarelle's gluttony (IV.vii) to Dom Juan's "sexual appetite" (p. 91). Since Dom Juan has been calling for dinner since the beginning of the act, it would be a poor production that would not allow him to eat something. There is no reason for the audience to be thinking of him, at this point in the play, as having any appetite other than that which he is satisfying.

The stage action contrasts Sganarelle's gluttony with Dom Juan's selfish appetite and thus exemplifies one of the central issues in the play, the nature of Dom Juan's physicality. He is not merely a sensationist who believes in physical being rather than spiritual virtue. His physicality is wholly self-referential. People and objects are only of importance insofar as they relate to his own body. He is able to repudiate not only the rational arguments for virtue, honor, piety, and duty but also the physical demonstrations of divine providence in the miraculous animate statue and the ghost. He reacts to the ghost by attacking its physical being. He strikes at it and "le Spectre s'envole dans le temps que Dom Juan le veut frapper" (IV.v). This piece of stage business is as crucial as his becoming physically trapped when he finally accepts the palpable being of the statue by giving it his hand—"O Ciel! que sens-je? Un feu invisible me brule. . . ."

These points are important because Dom Juan's attitude toward physical being, especially his own, determines his reactions to other characters. "The central conflict of the play" is not so much "the struggle between Dom Juan and God" (p. 88) as it is the interaction between Dom Juan and the other characters. This interaction provides the essential dynamism of the stage action. I am suggesting, not that God is not manifest in the ghost and the statue, but rather that these manifestations take part in the stage action just as the other characters do. To stress God as an idea in *Dom Juan* rather than as a participant in the stage performance is to run the risk of misinterpreting the play.

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