

When Feasting with the Statue Is Dueling with
le Ciel: Carnival Inversions in Molière's
Le Festin de pierre (Dom Juan)

Kathryn Willis Wolfe
Penn State Erie, The Behrend College

A significant contribution to Molière studies was made in 1999 when Droz published, as the 500th book in its collection of *Textes littéraires français*, Joan DeJean's critical edition of *Le Festin de pierre*, which for the first time used the uncensored 1683 Amsterdam version as the basis for a modern edition of the most scrutinized and perplexing of Molière's plays and thereby restored to the play the title under which the work was known during Molière's lifetime. The new Pléiade edition of Molière's complete works that appeared in 2010 followed suit, making a broader reading public aware of the change both in title and in principal source. The significance of the reversion to Molière's original title for our study of the play is made clear by Joan DeJean's recognition that when the French censors of 1682 imposed the *Dom Juan* title on a work that had never previously carried that designation (any more than had its Italian or French predecessors), they created a shift in emphasis that has influenced reaction to the play ever since (DeJean 29). *Dom Juan* emerged as the character whose attitudes and behavior are the principal subject of focus, demanding moral retribution on a serious level, while the importance of the Italian comic tradition was obscured, a tradition in which Arlequin (Sganarelle) took the leading role in a comic pair that jointly exposed the injustices of the powerful.

Redirecting scholarly attention toward the Italian *commedia dell'arte* tradition that so strongly influenced Molière may begin to give renewed direction to critical efforts that René Pommier – that most ardent opponent of the academic *langue de bois* – sees as having stalled toward the end of the twentieth century. He echoes Patrick Dandrey's comment that “la deuxième moitié du vingtième siècle aura plus compliqué qu'éclairé et peut-être même plus utilisé que servi, tout compte fait, le texte de Molière” (Dandrey 10). Such a redirection might even help to resolve a problem, which we hope to address here, that Pommier uncovers in his recent study of *Dom Juan* (2008).

Pommier not only uses his book to target the weak underbelly of contemporary Molière criticism, but he also offers insightful readings of several scenes that offer strong support for *Dom Juan*'s status as a rationalist when confronting both religion

and Sganarelle, including the *scène du pauvre* and the lead-up to Dom Juan's invitation to the Statue to dine. It is at the point of this invitation at the end of Act 3, however, that he encounters what he sees as incontrovertible proof that Molière was making use of a subject that was not an ideal vehicle for giving theatrical voice to his grievances with regard to religion in general or the fate of *Tartuffe* in particular, notable for its attack on religious hypocrisy. However Molière might go about making Dom Juan into a character capable of rendering a long series of scenes powerfully subversive, the necessity of his Dom Juan coming face to face with the moving and talking Statue undermines the whole enterprise, for, as Pommier says,

Molière a été amené à mettre son personnage dans une situation impossible dans laquelle il n'aurait jamais dû se trouver. Don [sic] Juan est un incrédule, mais c'est un incrédule qui se trouve devant ce devant quoi aucun incrédule, à ma connaissance, ne s'est jamais trouvé dans la réalité: il se trouve en face d'un véritable miracle. À partir de ce moment, il ne peut avoir, à moins de s'incliner devant le miracle et de se convertir, un comportement logique et crédible (93-94).

The result, in Pommier's view, is that the remainder of the play becomes "parfaitement invraisemblable" whenever the Statue and Dom Juan meet face to face. He claims that "Molière ne fait que suivre le canevas dont il a hérité, sans chercher le moins du monde à nous faire croire à l'histoire qu'il nous raconte" (94). He is not the first to raise this objection, although he states it better than most.¹

Yet would the play have impressed Molière's pious contemporaries as being so powerfully anti-religious that they would force him to water it down almost immediately after it opened and, after his death, set the censors to work at it in so merciless an attack as the 1682 French edition proved to be, if it had been clear to them, as it is to Pommier, that he had abandoned his anti-religious perspective halfway through his play, that he had allowed the obligatory talking Statue to function unambiguously as a supernatural manifestation of a just and all-powerful God, and that thereby he had allowed himself to undermine the rational coherence of his final two acts and, with it, the force of his stance on religion and its strength in shielding religious hypocrisy? It is significant, when trying to judge the probability of this conjecture, to note that the play's controversial status in France did not prevent its being received as a significant text abroad, where re-editions or translations of the Amsterdam text proliferated in the final years of the seventeenth century. As Joan DeJean notes,

¹ See, for example, Cairncross 2-7 on the *dénouement* as offering a "litmus test of the fundamental disunity of the play."

Au tournant du XVIII^e siècle le texte de l'Édition d'Amsterdam est facilement disponible, partout en Europe, mais non pas en France. Au seuil de l'âge des Lumières, l'Europe valorise comme un texte classique une pièce française que les Français de l'époque ne peuvent ni voir, ni lire, sauf dans une version gravement édulcorée. (32)

A play seen by contemporaries as being seriously weakened by flagrant inconsistencies in its characters or its plotline is not granted this degree of recognition.

The question becomes, then: why should we accept with Pommier that any attempt to find coherence in the play as a whole must founder on the rocks of illogic simply because Molière did not choose to provide the edifying ending Pommier proposes, in which the rationalist Dom Juan would recognize his error of judgment and admit that he has encountered a true miracle in the statue and that he finds himself, consequently, face to face with incontrovertible evidence of the existence and power of God? Might coherence still be an attainable goal if we reason from the premise that it is unlikely that a playwright of Molière's caliber and experience would have chosen to write a comedy whose denouement would so clearly *not* bear the test of coherence because it made use of a scenario that he could not prevent from undermining the force of his skeptical, rationalist approach to religion and its exercise of power in the society of his time? If we choose to assume that Molière and his contemporaries knew what he was doing better than we do at a distance of 350 years from the fact, then we must conclude that Pommier's basic assumption may in some way be faulty.

So what is the context in which Pommier understands the statue and his interactions with Dom Juan? His use of the phrase "un véritable miracle" when speaking of the statue suggests that we should consider his stance in the context of the position held by the Catholic Church on manifestations of God's power. According to Sarah Ferber, inanimate objects (such as the statue) are one of many material forms the early modern Catholic Church recognized as potentially able to mediate divine power. Miracles (such as a statue able to move and talk with humans) suppose that God will "to some extent, reward faith and devotion by *ad hoc* displays of His power" (9). In the case of Dom Juan, of course, it would appear to be more a matter of punishing a *lack* of faith and devotion by such a display, if this is indeed what is at stake. Ferber furthermore recognizes that over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Church was forced to deal within its ranks with a "problematic lack of consensus on where the limits lay to the credibility of claims of divine intervention," and much of her work is devoted to examining the complexity of the differing stands taken on this issue and on the appearance of fallibility such internal disagreement revealed (4). Meanwhile the Church was beset by attacks from without, from French Calvinists who saw in the central doctrinal miracle of transubstantiation "evidence of a misplaced reliance on an overweening Catholic priesthood as dispensers of papist magic" (5). If the notion of miracles, in an era that was seeing the flowering of scientific reasoning, was raising

issues of credibility and alleged magic within an increasingly divided religious community, as Catholics struggled to “reinforce the shaky foundations of their church’s authority in a time of religious upheaval” (Ferber 2), why should we be less skeptical than they and accept with any greater certainty than Molière’s contemporaries that the statue’s status as a miracle must be credible, “véritable,” simply because it begins to move and speak on stage? In short, why must the statue’s “miraculous” status be treated as a given, to be understood from a religious vantage point allowing no room for skepticism, when skepticism was part and parcel of the Church’s contemporary response to alleged cases of divine intervention? Should we not also evince skepticism about the nature of the statue’s role, particularly in light of his interaction with a pair of characters whose *raison d’être* appears to be to undermine anything related to the Catholic Church and its doctrines? Would not accepting Pommier’s assurance that Molière has forced his rationalist to confront a “miracle” be tantamount to accepting the authority of the highly superstitious Sganarelle, who declares the moving statue to be a *miracle* at the beginning of Act 4, but whose own stated beliefs so overshoot the limits of Catholic doctrine as to have proven problematic with religious purists from the outset?² Sganarelle is no more a spokesperson for the Catholic position on divine miracles than is Dom Juan, although he stands as a foil to Dom Juan’s disbelief.

Perhaps a way out of Pommier’s predicament exists if we shift to a different viewpoint from which to make sense of the walking and talking statue, one that is not so at odds with the general tenor of the play up to the point of his arrival on stage, but that takes the implications of the original title into account: the carnivalesque context in which the Italian *commedia dell’arte* functioned. In order to test this out, we will bring to bear the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who examined in his magisterial work on Rabelais the underlying workings of what he called the “carnival-grotesque” that operated in a wide variety of manifestations of early modern popular culture – from charivari and carnival to diableries, farces and the *commedia dell’arte*. While he left aside the corpus of Molière’s work as lying beyond his field of study, he does recognize that “[...] the contents of the carnival-grotesque element, its artistic, heuristic, and unifying forces were preserved in all essential manifestations during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: in the *commedia dell’arte* (which kept a close link with its carnival origin), in Molière’s comedies (related to the *commedia dell’arte*), [...]” (34).

This is a world that set itself in opposition to established authority (including the Catholic Church, which, nevertheless, usually tolerated it), a world of masquerades and disguises that made use of inversions, parallelisms, contrasts, symmetries, and doubles to assault authoritarianism. It is commonly referred to as the “world turned upside down,” and we propose here a preliminary analysis of what Pommier finds most

² See *Observations sur une comédie de Molière intitulée, “Le Festin de pierre”* in Forestier & Bourqui 1212-21.

problematic in the play, based on the idea of inversion, so as to suggest a way of approaching the play that would justify our sense that Molière was far from incapable of preventing the demands of the *Festin de pierre* scenario from undermining the coherence of his play in the eyes of his contemporaries.

To be sure, *Le Festin de pierre* does not plunge the spectator directly into the upside down world of carnival as did the *commedia dell'arte*. Like *Amphitryon*, in which Molière situated his action before the threshold of Amphitryon's house, creating a vertical line of demarcation separating the world of carnival justice within the house from the everyday world of social conflicts visible onstage, *Le Festin de pierre* also establishes a carnival/everyday world divide, placed horizontally at the level of the stage itself, such that the topsy-turvy world of carnival folly remains invisible to the spectator viewing the action onstage while the world of carnival energy bubbles up from below to influence the comportment of certain characters.³ From the start a structurally significant portion of the plot is linear and of this world, an everyday world beset by contemporary preoccupations regarding upper-class male honor and the central role that protecting female honor played in it in early modern France. Dom Juan is on the run with Sganarelle, pursued not only by the don's "maîtresse," Done Elvire, but by her brothers, who seek to avenge the insult to their family that Dom Juan's desertion of their sister represents. Only the statue's final appearance to lead Dom Juan into the flaming depths of hell below stage prevents them from avenging their outraged honor at last by engaging Dom Juan in a duel *en règle*.

Molière's everyday world is characterized, as John Cairncross has noted, by a "total absence of political or social authority throughout the play" (2). His choice to eliminate any possibility of substituting for the private justice sought through dueling, a public, state-enforced resolution to the issues of abandonment and religious hypocrisy that Dom Juan's behavior with regard to the brothers' claims raises (a resolution that would be comparable to that effected in *Tartuffe* by the royal officer) suggests that Molière was prepared to seek his resolution elsewhere, although not by espousing the position of the *dévots*, whether *vrais* or *faux*, that he had already rejected in *Tartuffe*.⁴ Rather, it suggests that he was prepared to exploit the private world of male honor and dueling, already significantly at play, in order to develop his resolution. We shall examine, therefore, how he did so, drawing forth from contemporary norms of male and female honor a series of carnival elements that will prepare a denouement that is neither of this world nor of the world of Catholic miracles, but of carnival.

³ See articles by Wolfe and Tonelli.

⁴ In *Tartuffe* Orgon finds Cléante's distinction between *vrais* and *faux dévots* utterly unconvincing, a mere attempt to show off his bother-in-law's rhetorical abilities, whereas Elmire offers up convincing proof – rational, experimental evidence, as it were – of Tartuffe's treachery in the scene in which she hides her husband under the table.

Before examining the timing and manner of the statue's entrance into the world of the play, we should note a significant divergence of approach distinguishing Molière's conception of the *Commandeur*, whom the statue was carved to represent, and that of the *commedia dell'arte* version used by the Italian players with whom Molière shared the stage of the Petit Bourbon in Paris, for the contrast proves instructive.⁵ For the Italian players, the commander was the lone character forming a link connecting the abandoned Donna Anna to Don Juan's eventual plunge into the flames of hell, for having been killed in a duel fought with Don Juan because he was the *brother* of the seduced lady, he then went on to bring about Don Juan's flaming demise as a form of personal and familial revenge. Molière chose a somewhat more complicated solution, exploiting a characteristic approach taken by many popular carnival forms when called upon to treat conceptual contrasts: that of doubling characters (creating two individuals sharing similar characteristics), thereby giving bodily form to abstract conflicts. He separated into two discrete camps those characters with a familial tie to Done Elvire on the one hand (the Italians' single brother now redoubled into two, Dom Carlos and Dom Alonso, who oppose each other over the timing of their duel with Dom Juan) and, on the other, the commander, whose very duel with Dom Juan is set both qualitatively and quantitatively in opposition to the duel looming between Done Elvire's brothers and Dom Juan. Not only are we given *no* details concerning the insult that provoked his duel with Dom Juan, but when Sganarelle worries that pursuing the latest "jeune beauté" into town might subject his master there to the "ressentiment des parents et des amis" of the "Commandeur que vous tuâtes il y a six mois," Dom Juan brushes aside his fears as a non-issue, saying, "Ah, n'allons point songer au mal qui nous peut arriver [...]" (*Festin* 1.2).⁶ This carefree attitude underscores a fact that will become increasingly evident over the course of the play: no one ever arrives to avenge the commander's death. The commander has been "bien tué," as Dom Juan observes, and the issue settled (Dom Juan, in fact, notes that he has been officially pardoned: "J'ai eu ma grâce de cette affaire"), unlike in the affair concerning Done Elvire. Presumably, Molière did not intend for his statue to be seen as working in parallel with the brothers due to the continued existence of some unresolved point of honor. Moreover, not only did Molière avoid implicating his statue directly in the issue of Done Elvire's honor as a blood relation, but he took care that he not even be drawn into the brothers' quarrel with Dom Juan as an outside observer, for the two camps never meet face to face on stage or engage in dialogue. Only Sganarelle and Dom Juan ever communicate with the statue. From the outset it would appear that Molière had another purpose in mind for his statue with regard to Dom Juan's treatment of Done Elvire than to attend to the demands of honor as they are perceived by Done Elvire's brothers, which, after all,

⁵ See Gendarme de Bévoite 335-53.

⁶ All quotations are taken from Joan DeJean's edition of the play.

formed part of the established order in 17th-century France every bit as much as did the authority of the Catholic Church and so were fair targets for carnival's "negation of the entire order of life (including the prevailing truth), a negation closely linked," as Bakhtin remarks, "to the affirmation of what is born anew" (307).

It was important, nevertheless, that Molière help his audience sense the carnivalesque connection he envisioned between his statue and the issue of Done Elvire's dishonor since this issue is the principal unifying theme running through the play's somewhat disparate plotline. In the course of two exchanges, both in Act I, Molière set about dealing with this matter, for it was an issue central to establishing his play's comic tone, as well as to setting up his attack on the power of religion's hold over society.

In the first exchange, Sganarelle, ever the one to choose their topic of discussion, has just been granted "la liberté de parler" by his master. Thereupon he admits to being scandalized by the life Dom Juan is leading, "par exemple je vous vois tous les mois vous marier comme vous faites" (1.2). After all, such behavior amounts to mocking the deity ("se railler du Ciel") by mocking one of his sacred sacraments ("se jouer ainsi d'un mystère sacré"). It is significant in the context of carnival that Bakhtin recognizes "mocking at the deity" as a subject of "festive laughter" characteristic of "the most ancient rituals" (1.2). Dom Juan's behavior may be part of a long comic tradition, but the reply he gives to Sganarelle focuses our attention on a contemporary context for interpreting his mockery of *le Ciel*, the code of 17th-century male honor well known to Molière's spectators: "Va, va, c'est une affaire entre le Ciel et moi, et nous la démêlerons bien ensemble, sans que tu t'en mettes en peine." Pieter Spierenburg observes in his historical study on violence that for men in early modern Europe, "Being insulted either verbally or physically equally amounted to an attack on a man's honor, which could be repaired only by counter-attack" (9). By mocking the deity through his never-ending series of promises of marriage, Dom Juan in effect insults *le Ciel* in such a way as would lead the spectator to anticipate their being pitted against each other, as two noblemen, in a formal duel, given the manner in which Dom Juan phrases the issue. This "body-related concept" of honor entails, in Spierenburg's words, a right to "respect, deference," and for noblemen an acknowledgment of "prestige, rank, or superiority" (none of which Dom Juan seems inclined to accord to *le Ciel*) that could only be acknowledged at the level of a man's peers and that could never, therefore, cross class boundaries, hence excluding Sganarelle from participation in his master's concerns regarding honor (9). Be that as it may, Dom Juan has been engaged in this generalized mocking behavior for some time now, but has yet to be challenged to a duel. Clearly, a more pointed jab is necessary in order for *le Ciel* to realize that he has been insulted – one that would preferably involve Done Elvire directly – because for the spectator *le Ciel* will be dishonored as long as he does not counter-attack.

At this point Done Elvire conveniently appears on the scene. Immediately perceiving that Dom Juan is not particularly pleased to see her, she goes straight to the

heart of the matter, pouring out her thoughts on the issue of her dishonor. In a longwinded speech, she details her own failures, her condemnation of his actions, and her judgment of him as being “criminel à mes yeux” (1.3). Her subsequent demand that he provide a justification of his actions only results in a comic exchange in which Sganarelle is forced to speak for Dom Juan while being unsure of what to say. This prompts Done Elvire to berate her former lover for his lack of knowledge of how to defend himself and to instruct him, at length and with the rhetorical skill of a Sorbonne professor, on how to do so, by using his skills as a courtier “accoutumé à ces sortes de choses” and telling anything but the truth. This second longwinded speech, which attacks Dom Juan’s honor as a verbal swordsman by vaunting her superior knowledge of defensive tactics, might expose her to a challenge to a duel, were she a man. As it is, her behavior stands as a total anomaly in the context of the norms regulating 17th-century female honor. As Spierenburg notes, “female honor was based, first, on chastity and, second, on passivity and silence. The passive role accorded to women meant that they had only limited possibilities for maintaining their honor themselves” (8). Clearly, since Done Elvire, whose dishonor is indeed attributable to a failure of chastity on her part, both massively eschews silence and pursues the matter of her dishonor herself, without regard to the role that her brothers expect to play in defending it, her role presents a carnival inversion of the operative code of female honor.

Dom Juan bears out this interpretation of her role when he comments on her apparel to Sganarelle upon first perceiving Done Elvire approaching them: “Est-elle folle de n’avoir pas changé d’habit, et de venir dans ce lieu-ci avec son équipage de Campagne” (1.2)? In an age in which dress carried with it far greater signification than it does in our own time, the inappropriateness of her country attire for the magnificence of the palace that Molière had chosen as the backdrop for Act I marks a contrast with the vestimentary norm so stark as to constitute yet another inversion, one whose significance cannot be overestimated in the context of carnival. Bakhtin not only speaks of clothing worn inside out or upside down as denoting the topographical inversion inherent in carnival practices, but also of dressing down as a means of carnival uncrowning, as when men “remove their royal robes and pompous academic gowns of the Sorbonne in which they masquerade as heralds of divine truths” (213). Interestingly, Done Elvire’s rejection of norms of female propriety in both attire and honorable behavior permits her to take on the very male roles Bakhtin associates with the royal robes (attending to the demands of justice) and the academic gown (teaching a lesson).

Since she presents herself as a carnival character every bit as much as do Sganarelle and Dom Juan, we can presume she is attending to the same carnival task as they are, that of giving form to the attack on established authority. Her role then becomes that of presenting her recriminations against Dom Juan in such a way that they can help him to formulate his insult to *le Ciel*.

This is precisely the function of her professorial lesson on how to use hypocrisy as a means of self-defense. Concluding her list of the models for lying her pupil must try

to imitate, she declares, “voilà comme il faut vous défendre, et non pas être interdit comme vous êtes” (1.3). Dom Juan emerges from his silence by claiming to be an unskilled student, though obedient; he immediately attempts to put her lesson into practice and begins his great lie: “Je vous avoue, Madame, que je n’ai point le talent de dissimuler, et que je porte un cœur sincère” (1.3). Molière then harnesses his hypocrisy to forge a link joining the issue of Done Elvire’s dishonor to the religious world of *le Ciel* so as to bring *le Ciel* within range of a truly devastating insult to the honor of any man in 17th-century France. Playing the religious hypocrite, Dom Juan invokes what he refers to as “un pur motif de conscience” so as to put forth a claim that he has developed scruples about their recent amorous entanglement that have led him to open “les yeux de l’âme sur ce que je faisais,” resulting in the belief that he cannot live with her “sans péché.” Thus shielded by the power of religion to silence critics, he clarifies the unfortunate role of his adversary *le Ciel* in the matter:

J’ai fait réflexion que pour vous épouser je vous ai dérobée à la clôture d’un couvent, que vous avez rompu des vœux qui vous engageaient autre part, et que le Ciel est fort jaloux de ces sortes de choses. Le repentir m’a pris, et j’ai craint le courroux céleste ; j’ai cru que notre mariage n’était qu’un adultère déguisé, qu’il nous attirerait quelque disgrâce d’en haut, et qu’enfin je devais tâcher de vous oublier, et vous donner moyen de retourner à vos premières chaînes. (1.3)

Spierenburg lists among the most frequent insults that provoked men to retaliatory action that of “cuckold,” and while Dom Juan has not pronounced the word itself, the message is the same (33). He is provoking *le Ciel* in a deliberate verbal attack that links *le Ciel* to Done Elvire’s dishonor.

In the context of 17th-century male honor, Dom Juan currently occupies the position of power; he knows it, and so do the spectators. He has managed to seduce Done Elvire away from the convent in which she was pledged to God and in so doing to turn *Le Ciel* into a *mari cocu*, that time-honored butt of laughter in the carnival world of farce, a world in which women make cuckolds of husbands who tyrannize them when they find a man more to their liking, thereby helping the procreative force to triumph for the betterment of humanity.⁷ In the everyday world, it is a laughing matter as well, but not for the cuckolded husband. As Spierenburg remarks, “[...] the seduction of a woman, married or single, enhanced rather than diminished a man’s reputation, while it was a blow to the honor of the man under whose authority she resorted. Ridicule befell the cheated husband in particular” (116). This was because a man’s inability to assure the faithfulness of his wife was considered dishonorable in a

⁷ See Bakhtin 241-43.

patriarchal system in which, “every attempt by a wife to alter the circumstances of her subjugation was understood as a challenge to the husband’s authority. It turned the world ‘upside down’ ” (138). Under the circumstances, *le Ciel* finds himself in an even worse position than are Done Elvire’s brothers, for not only must *her* honor be defended, but so must the honor associated with *his* ability to exercise authority over her. This is an insult that cannot be ignored. Even as it demands that *le Ciel* avenge the double dishonor to himself as a cuckold through a duel with Dom Juan, it questions God’s very ability to exercise His authority over humans via religion, that covenant between God and His church that is often likened to the bonds of marriage. It is a perfect example of Bakhtin’s description of grotesque realism that “degrades, brings down to earth [and] turns its subject into flesh” (20).

Done Elvire, we should note, does not conceive of her dishonor as it relates to the insult to her family sensed by her brothers, but rather as it relates to the one involving the cuckolded “husband” brought to light by Dom Juan. It is from *le Ciel* that she expects her defense to come when she tells Dom Juan, “sache que ton crime ne demeurera pas impuni, et que le même Ciel dont tu te joues, me saura venger de ta perfidie” (1.3). Her cuckolded husband will surely come to her rescue! Meanwhile, since Dom Juan’s hypocrisy gives the lie to his stated fear of celestial anger and eagerness to escape the effects of *le Ciel’s* husbandly jealousy, we can assume he will welcome the anticipated dueling encounter, which will surely not be long in coming.

Given the seriousness of the insult as well as the presumed power of *le Ciel* to effect celestial vengeance, Molière derives a certain comic effect from the length of the wait we observe (lasting till the end of Act III) before finally encountering the only character capable of carrying out such vengeance. *Le Ciel*, of course, does not exist in the play as a character with physically perceptible attributes any more than God exists as flesh and blood for the Catholic Church, save in the doctrinal miracle of transubstantiation. Therefore, since defending his honor in the context of 17th-century norms of behavior requires a bodily adversary who can challenge Dom Juan to a proper duel, *le Ciel* needs someone to stand in his place. He needs a body whose representational power before the spectator partakes of the familiar Catholic belief system that posits the possibility of Ferber’s “ad hoc displays of divine power” (hence the suitability of the statue) and of the equally familiar carnivalesque world harnessed by Molière’s comic theater. Now, according to the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, “le Ciel,” carries with it more than one meaning for our purposes. Besides serving as a designation for the Christian God, it is defined as having existed for both Greeks and Romans as “une divinité particulière,” to which the dictionary’s authors added a quotation from Varro: “les premiers dieux sont le Ciel et la Terre” (2.114). Thus in early modern France, a designation of *le Ciel* called to mind not only the Christian God, but one of the gods of the Roman pantheon deposed by Christianity. This is significant in that carnival processions “were interpreted as the march of the rejected pagan gods,” according to Bakhtin, and that German scholars in the 19th century attributed a Germanic origin to

the word *carnival* as meaning “the procession of the dead gods” (393). Molière’s *mari cocu* is thus a bi-valent entity, as much a Roman god (or devil, as the old gods were more often designated once Christianity had cast them downward into the hell from which carnival emerges) as he is a stand-in for the Christian God.

This dual identity of *le Ciel* is important for interpreting what happens when we finally meet the statue at the end of Act III. Overawed by the grandeur of the mausoleum in which he stands (“Ah! que cela est beau! Les belles statues! le beau marbre! les beaux pilliers! Ah! que cela est beau!”), Sganarelle points out the statue to his master (3.5). Dom Juan then reacts as he did upon seeing Done Elvire approaching in Act I. He draws attention to the statue’s attire, which, while perfectly suited this time to the grandeur of the architecture, is none the less carnivalesque in its exaggeration of the degree of importance the dead commander enjoyed while living; at the same time it makes an unmistakable reference to the era of the deposed Roman pantheon of which *le Ciel* is a member: “Parbleu! le voilà bon, avec son habit d’empereur romain!” As Steve Dock has observed, “The pseudo-Roman *costume à l’antique* was wholly as important as formal dress [at the court of Louis XIV] since it was the ultimate vestimentary image of greatness, associating wearers with the king and with emperors of the past” (20). Molière seems to have found in this Roman military costume – which permitted his highest-ranking male contemporaries to bolster their claims to prominence by appealing to a golden age of mythically-amplified fighting achievements when they posed for statues and paintings – a suitable form of hyperbole with which to mark the statue’s carnivalesque elevation to his new-found role as the dueling stand-in for the almighty *Ciel*. At the same time, Dom Juan’s jibe suggests that the commander’s exaggerated vestimentary claim to mythic fighting ability taints *le Ciel* as well.

Dom Juan’s mocking taunt about the costume follows up on his first insulting quip about the mausoleum itself, of which he observes, “Qu’on ne peut voir aller plus loin l’ambition d’un homme mort; et ce que je trouve admirable, c’est qu’un homme qui s’est passé, durant sa vie, d’une assez simple demeure, en veuille avoir une si magnifique pour quand il n’en a plus que faire” (3.5). One is reminded of a lower class ritual Spierenburg mentions, called “house-scorning:” “The initiator would challenge the other with insults to leave his house, or he would just slam the doors and windows or throw stones. The reasons varied, but they always had to do with honor” (69). While only amounting to verbal rocks thrown at the statue’s house, Dom Juan’s derision taken along with his mockery of the statue’s costume together constitute deliberate provocations to the dead commander that are hurled from the position of strength that Dom Juan occupies, as one both living and possessed of rational abilities that enable him to point out the comic misalignment between the simplicity of dress and dwelling of the living commander and the inflated image he projects once dead. The statue – played by a living actor whose role obliges him to adopt a stone-like immovability before the spectator in the interests of *vraisemblance* – bears out the validity of Dom

Juan's taunt by remaining stonily mute, comically unable to react with any immediacy to the insults.

Sganarelle, still in awe of the grandeur surrounding them, comes to the aid of his paralyzed carnival *confrère*. Progressively reinterpreting the wonderful artistry exemplified by the statue, he tells Dom Juan, "Ma foi Monsieur voilà qui est bien fait, il semble qu'il est en vie; et qu'il s'en va parler; il jette des regards sur nous qui me feraient peur si j'étais tout seul, et je pense qu'il ne prend pas plaisir à nous voir" (3.5). In effect, Sganarelle's praise performs a carnival inversion similar to that of a *commedia dell'arte* summersault, though on a verbal level: he flips us from the everyday world, in which no statue on a tomb – no matter how skillfully carved he is – can react to a visitor's comments as if alive, to the theatrical world-turned-upside-down in which we are willing to suspend our disbelief and accept that he can, if for no other reason than he is played by a human actor only masquerading as a statue. Nevertheless, since he is dressed in a costume that places him with one foot squarely in the camp of the anti-authoritarian forces, the statue continues to fail at defending *le Ciel's* male honor and remains motionless.

Dom Juan, however, sees in the presence of Sganarelle's carnival creation an opportunity to force the issue and to engage *le Ciel* in a duel. Concentrating on the implications of the statue's angry expression as a living reaction to his own recent insults, he doubles Sganarelle's carnival inversion with one of his own, transforming the context in which his visit to the statue is to be understood so as to invert the direction in which the insults are flowing. From the code of behavior that applies when a man's honor is taken from him through insults, he flips us to the code that applies when honor is, on the contrary, bestowed upon him (and thus *received* by him): the code of courtly manners to which Dom Juan has already alluded as they approached the mausoleum: "c'est une visite dont je lui veux faire civilité, et qu'il doit recevoir de bonne grâce, s'il est galant homme" (3.5). Since Dom Juan's insults recognize the improved social status of the commander, an improvement whose very existence was, after all, made possible by Dom Juan himself when he did him the honor of killing him (a fact to which Sganarelle has already alluded in Act I, scene 2), his entire visit, insults and all, emerge now as an honor being bestowed. The result is that the statue's displeasure at the way in which this visit is evolving – as proven by his angry facial expression – can now be interpreted by Dom Juan as a form of dishonor to himself: "Il aurait tort, et ce serait mal recevoir l'honneur que je lui fais." Better able to defend honor thus outraged than is the immobile statue, he responds immediately to the insult detected and instructs Sganarelle to challenge *le Ciel's* representative to a duel...a carnivally-inverted duel, one that does not invite the statue to leave his house to fight, but rather to dine: "demande-lui s'il veut venir souper avec moi" (3.5).

By creating this contextual inversion that will accentuate eating over fighting, life over death, Molière was using standard carnivalesque means to replace the old and dying form of what Spierenburg calls "external honor" with new life, in the form of an

emerging sense of honor as “inner virtue” (69). This involved the substitution of a sense of honor related to non-aggressive behavior for the code of honor being progressively discredited as the monarchy acted to outlaw upper-class dueling.⁸

Additionally, Molière used this inversion of context to set in motion a chronological inversion of the duel that will lead logically to the play’s requisite denouement. By dint of “feeding” the statue with ever more “honneurs de la maison” (from offering the invitation to dine in Act III to offering “une chaise et un couvert,” and “à boire. À la santé du Commandeur. Qu’on lui donne du vin” as the statue arrives in Act IV), the carnival duo of Sganarelle and Dom Juan effectively resuscitates the dead commander. Their verbal “food” reinvigorates him, enabling him initially to accept the challenge through his first perceptible movement in Act III. He then develops the capacity to speak, in response to the carnivaly-inverted “insults” that Dom Juan’s continued civility represents, so as to issue, at the end of Act IV, his own invitation/challenge to the ultimate feasting duel in Act V, by which – at last – he avenges *le Ciel’s* dishonor by roasting Dom Juan and feeding him to the jaws of hell, in an unmistakable inversion of their initial duel’s outcome.

Bakhtin, who speaks at length on the carnival importance of feasting, declares that “the banquet is even more important as the occasion for wise discourse, for the gay truth. There is an ancient tie between the feast and the spoken word” (283). Indeed, the dinners to which Dom Juan and the statue invite each other provide just enough frank speech to serve the play’s rationalist, anti-authoritarian purposes, even if it is somewhat limited by the statue’s developmental limitations.

The statue’s bi-valent role suggests that we be attentive to a possible double-voiced interpretation of his parting statement when he refuses the torch Dom Juan offers to see him out, after dinner at the end of Act IV. Indeed, we hear the Statue’s first and final word on religion when he declares, “On n’a pas besoin de lumière quand on est conduit par le Ciel” (*Festin* 4.8). That the statue appears to assert that he speaks for the all-powerful Christian God needs no explanation. At the same time, his declaration affirms that belief needs no light (like a statue, it is blind), while light implies *preuves* and *ouverture d’esprit* (both meanings given for *lumière* by Furetière’s *Dictionnaire*) of which one obviously has no need when one allows oneself to be *conduit par le Ciel* (and therefore *crédule*). Here we see to what extent Molière’s use of the statue constitutes anything but evidence of a mindless follow-through on the *Festin de pierre* scenario that would justify Pommier’s charge of incoherence.

When at last the statue offers his hand to Dom Juan to lead him home to the carnival banquet he has prepared below stage (an offer of *honneurs de la maison* that Dom Juan does not refuse, unlike the celestial offer of pardon), he is dealing with a Dom Juan

⁸ Henry IV, Louis XIII, and Louis XIV issued a number of edicts against dueling. Richelieu’s edict of 1626 was notoriously enforced: Bouteville and Chapelles were sentenced to decapitation and Louis XIII insisted the execution be public.

who remains an honorable dueler in the eyes of Molière's contemporaries. Spierenburg comments, "Preparedness to act, rather than success or failure, was the principal measure of assessing an aristocrat's reputation" (69). Dom Juan will not be a defeated man, whatever happens, for he has courageously refused to show fear before death in the face of the final duel by refusing any action – including repentance – that might be construed as an attempt to avoid the confrontation so as to save his skin: "il ne sera pas dit que quoi qu'il arrive je sois capable de me repentir" (*Festin* 5.5). The statue, invoking the weapon with which the mightiest pagan gods of Rome were armed (*la foudre*), makes a final declaration that uses Dom Juan's refusal of the Christian God's gift of pardon to formulate a sort of password, a means of opening up a pathway for them to the world of carnival devils below, the world from which egalitarian carnival justice flows, even as it attributes agency to *le Ciel*: "Dom Juan, l'endurcissement au péché traîne une mort funeste, et les grâces du Ciel que l'on renvoie ouvrent un chemin à la foudre" (5.6).

Their departure together constitutes a reconciliation of sorts, which parallels the reconciliation that Dom Carlos sought in vain in his last encounter with Dom Juan, shortly before the statue's arrival. As Spierenburg notes, "[...] revenge per se [...] was never an automatic response" (26), and cases were documented in which "instead of proceeding to fight, [the men] had reconciled their differences and drunk together" (85). Done Elvire has chosen to return to the convent, which is apparently a satisfactory outcome from the point of view of the somewhat weaker fighter that is Molière's *mari cotti*.

At the end Sganarelle, whom Dom Juan had designated as his carnival-inverted second in the duel for not belonging to Dom Juan's social class, stands as the only remaining character onstage. Since seconds, according to Spierenburg, "[in] theory [...] served as witnesses only," Sganarelle now bears witness to the *état présent* of justice (75). As Bakhtin notes, the feast always carries with it an "element of victory and triumph" (283) and indeed Sganarelle's cry of "mes gages, mes gages, mes gages!" is something of a crow of victory for the forces of carnival gathering below the stage (5.6). It drives home the fact that at least one person has come up short when *le Ciel* was meting out divine justice because he finds himself left behind, without having been paid the wages due him. Moreover, Sganarelle's complaint that "tout le monde est content; il n'y a que moi seul de malheureux," is comically contradicted by the reality of the situation: Done Elvire's brothers have not been allowed to settle their score on the field of honor any more than M. Dimanche can hope to be reimbursed, Dom Louis to be assured of his son's definitive conversion, or the peasant girls to be married to the man of their dreams. From the viewpoint of carnival, divine justice seems to have come off as singularly incapable of satisfying much of anyone, a defeat indeed for religion and authoritarianism at the hands of Dom Juan-the-rationalist and his sidekick Sganarelle, one that should satisfy even Pommier's demand for coherence if he will but grant the credibility of Molière's use of carnival inversions. Besides, should any of the other characters return after the play ends, hoping to find Dom Juan and hold him to his

promises, who would believe a superstitious valet who accounts for his master's handy disappearance with a cock-and-bull story about a statue that comes to life to cast Dom Juan into hell, but whose deed no one has witnessed, save himself?

WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984. Print.
- Cairncross, John. "A Structural Approach to Molière's *Dom Juan*." *Continuum: Problems in French Literature from the Late Renaissance to the Early Enlightenment* 4.2 (1992): 1-7. Print.
- Dandrey, Patrick. *Dom Juan ou la critique de la raison comique*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1993. Print.
- DeJean, Joan. Introduction. *Le Festin de pierre (Dom Juan)*. By Molière. Genève: Droz, 1999. 7-46. Print.
- Dictionnaire universel françois et latin, vulgairement appelé Dictionnaire de Trévoux*. 6 vols. Paris: chez la Veuve Delaune, rue S. Jacques, et al., 1743. Print.
- Dock, Stephen Varick. *Costume & Fashion in the Plays of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin Molière: A Seventeenth-Century Perspective*. Genève: Editions Slatkine, 1992. Print.
- Ferber, Sarah. *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Gendarme de Bévoite, G. *Le Festin de Pierre Avant Molière: Dorimon, De Villiers, Scénario des Italiens*. Paris: Société Nouvelle de Librairie et d'Édition, 1907. Print.
- Molière. *Le Festin de pierre (Dom Juan)*. Ed. Joan DeJean. Genève: Droz, 1999. Print.
- . *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Georges Forestier and Claude Bourqui. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 2010. Print. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.
- Pommier, René. *Études sur Dom Juan de Molière*. Paris: Eurédit, 2008. Print.
- Spiereburg, Pieter. *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008. Print.
- Tonelli, Franco. "Molière's *Don Juan* and the Space of the Commedia dell'arte." *Theater Journal* 37.4 (1985): 440-464. Print.
- Wolfe, Kathryn Willis. "The Carnival Logic of Molière's *Amphitryon*." *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature* 37.72 (2010): 93-115. Print.