

# Speaking Like a Book: Rhetorical Inflation, Mobility, and the Atrophy of Ethics in *Dom Juan*

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**Abstract:** “On doit discourir des choses et non pas des mots,” Molière warns in the “Préface de Tartuffe.” In *Dom Juan*, the play hastily composed by the comedian to replace the banned *Tartuffe*, Sganarelle says that his master, Dom Juan, speaks “tout comme un livre” (I, ii). These quotations reflect Molière’s preoccupation with the evaporation of ethics in the storm of semiotic hyperproduction increasingly characterizing early modernity.

**Keywords:** ethical – transaction – social capital – rhetoric – bookish

“On doit discourir des choses et non pas des mots,” Molière warns in the “Préface de Tartuffe.” In *Dom Juan*, the play hastily composed by the comedian to replace the banned *Tartuffe*, Sganarelle says that his master, Dom Juan, speaks “tout comme un livre” (I, ii). These quotations, along with many others, reflect Molière’s preoccupation, in what has been referred to as the age of abstraction and the age of representations (*Heterologies* 180), with the evaporation of ethics in the storm of semiotic hyperproduction increasingly characterizing early modernity. Robert N. Watson, among others, studies the early modern anxiety about the proliferation and the increasing power of representations. Ultimately, Dom Juan intends to live as a “free” signifier in the same world where Monsieur Jourdain becomes a “mamamouchi,” and Argan becomes a doctor. For all his superficial sophistication, and for all our ambivalence about him and our temptation to admire him, Dom Juan is another of Molière’s Faustian narcissists. In this essay, I will focus on what I see as Molière’s concern with the ethical implications of some of the changes characterizing his time, changes that enabled real people to entertain the kind of illusions exemplified by his comic solipsists.

Dom Juan stands for the coming collapse of the very society whose status hierarchy gives him his prestige and power. Social meaning and mutual obligation are dissolving in a widening circulation of increasingly detached and empty signs that refer to nothing more than their own ability to substitute for meaning and value. Dom Juan enacts the negative effects of a process that orthodox modernity has defined as entirely

positive: social ambition, social mobility, and the emancipation of individual desire. Norbert Elias argued that as the bonds of interdependence tighten within social groups, their susceptibility to feelings of repugnance and shame increases, and the rules that constrain and guide their behavior become more strict and specific. Dom Juan seems to represent a reversal of the process studied by Elias: he is working to loosen bonds of interdependence, and he knows no shame. Dom Juan's seductiveness derives principally from the fact that he embodies the projected ideal of social ambition released by the disintegration of class bonds and their ethical constraints. He is the phantasmal aristocrat who dwells at the heart of bourgeois fantasy. Moreover, his victims are, in most cases, made vulnerable by their own fantasies.

Molière composed all of his plays, in fact, in an era of convulsive cultural change. In her superb recent book, Mechele Leon elucidates the volatility of the comedian's own reputation, and of readings of his plays, during the early modern period. The plays' historical context is the period in which the materialistic worldview, emphasizing increasing individual affluence and pleasure as the principal ends of life, was replacing traditional constraints on individual desire. Dom Juan, himself, whom Camille Dumoulié calls the hero of desire, embodies modernity's "liberation" of ever widening and intensifying individualist desire. Dumoulié correctly connects Don Juan with the many Promethean and Faustian characters that modern culture has produced (32). From the *burlador* of Tirso de Molina's play, to the donjuanesque, Faustian, and Promethean heroes of recent cinema, by way of Cicognini, Molière, Mozart, Pushkin, Lenau, and Nietzsche, such figures abound. These characters embody hypertrophied desire, ungovernable individualism, and uncompromising rejection of constraint and authority. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, too, refers to modern man as Promethean and Faustian, as well as Protean (see especially 175-79). In fact, Nasr argues that Renaissance thinkers *consciously* resurrected the Prometheus myth as a model for their ideal man (175). Here, one thinks of Stephen Greenblatt's study of Renaissance self-fashioning. One way in which the idea of self-fashioning can be understood is as a realization of the Oedipal wish to father oneself: to be the source of one's own being and fate. This accords rather well with the early modern weakening of kinship ties and other ethical constraints, and with the ideological assertion that such constraints are archaic.

These considerations are important to my reading of Dom Juan, who energetically rejects any implication that he owes a debt to his forbears and who contemptuously dismisses his father, Dom Louis. The son is haughtily indifferent to his father's reminders that he, Dom Juan, is indebted to the past and to others, and to the father's *crédit* at Court (Act IV, scene iv). Also important here is social theorist Ernest Becker's assertion that "narcissistic self-inflation," which denies man's connection with other animals, also entails rejection of dependence on the female body. That body is equated with a lack of control over one's origins and fate (*Denial*, 119). There is no mother figure in *Dom Juan*, and the wastrel nobleman is certainly contemptuous of femaleness, in general. In fact, for him, there are no real women; there are only

instances of the abstraction, Woman. Dom Juan denies any form of attachment or indebtedness.

The modern proliferation, in literature, of Don Juan figures, and of the closely related Faustian ones, and our ambivalence about them, are symptomatic of modernity's simultaneous encouragement and fear of desire unconstrained by ethical commitments or obligations, and they exemplify the very ambivalence that has always characterized responses to Molière's play. In a number of ways, Dom Juan is an advance "scout," a pioneer, for the modern worldview and the modern economy. Our ambivalence about Molière's Dom Juan, and about the Don Juan figure in general – is he a hero of rebellion against empty conventions, or a cynical exploiter of privileges and prestige? – reflects his central position in a modernity whose pressures we both celebrate and decry. He operates at the extreme limit of the very individualism that we all cherish.

The fact that we are ambivalent about modernity, about the character of Dom Juan, and about the play, should open our interpretive awareness to a moliéresque theme and strategy that James F. Gaines explores brilliantly in his new book: paradox. There are many dimensions of paradox in *Dom Juan*. One rather delicious paradox is that, in real life, the machinations of those who banned *Tartuffe* provided the impetus that produced *Dom Juan*, which is perhaps Molière's most eloquent denunciation of manipulative eloquence. Moreover, the convergence of promiscuous seduction and religious hypocrisy in Act V of *Dom Juan* allows Molière to imply that religious discourse is just another prestige dialect designed to dupe the ignorant, and it enables Molière, in effect, to put *Tartuffe* on stage, after all. Dom Juan, the seducer-turned-false-*dévo*t, perfectly mirrors *Tartuffe*, the false *dévo*t who would be a seducer. Dom Juan's ethical *dérogance* perfectly mirrors *Tartuffe*'s nihilistic social ambition. The two characters resemble one another closely in their exploitation of what amounts to an *illusion* of value. *Tartuffe* converts the discourse of religious devoutness into mere rhetoric that serves his individual desire, and Dom Juan does the same with the accoutrements of nobility. Their nihilism lies in this individualistic profiteering, this use for egocentric purposes of language and gestures perceived as guarantors of value in relationships. Value *becomes* illusory in their hands.

The cultural changes I have alluded to include the increasing importance of market economics in early modern Western Europe. Donald Worster, among others, underlines the importance of the market in the atrophy of traditional ethical constraints (78). In a market economy, value is established only in transactions, and Dom Juan can be seen as a systematic multiplier and exploiter of transactions. Another important contextual factor for fully appreciating Molière's play is the conversion of social identity into a kind of socio-cultural capital, and of social relations into transactions among profit-seekers. As James F. Gaines has shown, Molière dramatizes the issue of integrity and explores critically the codes and standards of *ancien régime* France. La Rochefoucauld's *maxime supprimée* 603 is apposite here: "Les rois font des hommes comme des pièces de monnaie; ils les font valoir ce qu'ils veulent, et l'on est forcé de les

recevoir selon leur cours, et non pas selon leur véritable prix.” The interplay of social semiotics, power, and the increasingly pervasive market could hardly be more effectively evoked than in this maxim. Moreover, La Rochefoucauld alludes clearly to the conversion of social identities into cultural capital whose value is found and exploited in transactions. Identity is reduced to rhetoric, and one is, however fleetingly, the creature of one’s persuasiveness. Exploitation by individuals of this erosion of boundaries ultimately undermines commitment and trust and accelerates the disintegration of coherent groups into a loose, temporary associations of atomized social entrepreneurs.

Such semiotic identities are analogous to money, whose importance was also on the increase in the seventeenth century. It is hard for us to recognize, but some early moderns must have been able to see that the conceptual difference between paying debts with words and gestures, as Dom Juan does, and paying them with newly minted or printed money is not great. A currency is a system of representations of value whose usefulness is found in transactions. It purports to be exchangeable for substances of real value, but misreading the representation may lead to its substitution for, or its erasure of, what was formerly the real value. La Rochefoucauld’s perhaps nostalgic distinction between market price – *cours* – and true value – *véritable prix* – recognizes the similarity between printed money and a society of pretense and laments the reduction of identity to semiotics. Peggy Phelan speaks of such representation as entry into the system of exchanges and *mutual consumptions* (my emphasis; 11). This is also closely related to what Jonathan Crary means when he says that, in modernity, subjectivity is becoming a precarious condition of interface between rationalized systems for the exchange of information (2). Dom Juan makes constant use of his social status and its trappings to gain profit from social transactions. He and his dupes are seekers of advantage in a social marketplace. Dom Juan’s success in serving his own desire depends entirely on the desires of his “victims.” Phelan’s concept of mutual consumption is powerfully evocative here. The nobleman is both the subject and the object of consumptive desire. Dom Juan systematically exploits the market value of his social status and of his bookish language. *Dom Juan*, like several other Molière plays, most notably *Les Femmes savantes*, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, and *Tartuffe*, dramatizes a kind of connivance between pretense and credulity, with each participant in the transactions motivated by the expectation of social profit.

In *Dom Juan*, as in a number of his other plays, Molière analyzes the exploitation of a particular kind of cultural or social capital, in the form of what have been called prestige dialects, to gain social power and profit (Easthope 35). Having argued that the burgeoning products of the printing and book-selling industry were marketed as means to greater personal prestige and authority, Anthony Easthope emphasizes the importance of the narcissistic gratification received by readers through consuming symbols of intellectual superiority and personal dynamism. *Tartuffe* flatters Orgon by associating him with the rhetoric of *dévotion*, Trissotin mesmerizes the learned ladies with

hackneyed platonizing poetry, and Dom Juan dazzles his dupes with the trappings of his noble status and his bookish flattery.

In terms of Molière's works, the immediate context of *Dom Juan* is *Tartuffe*, in which Orgon's narcissistic social ambition is exploited by Tartuffe's use of the rhetoric of *dévotion* to make Orgon feel like an object of worship and to try to seduce Orgon's wife. In *Dom Juan*, as in *Tartuffe*, impressive language is an instrument of desire and a means of exploiting naïve ambition. In the former play, as we will see, language does not just serve as the instrument or medium of desire; it is so inextricably connected with desire that it becomes in effect both the object and the tool of desire. As Dom Juan's profligate distribution of words and gestures increases, relationships and persons are erased, ethical constraints evaporate, and language alone remains. The *grand seigneur méchant homme* exploits the trappings of nobility and the rhetoric of literary eloquence as cultural capital, or exchangeable property. He inflates the short-term value of words, gestures, and décor while exhausting the fund of trust on which the long-term value of communication depends. As in economics, inflation leads to the collapse of value.

As I have said, the play's larger, historical context is the early modern period, one of whose most significant aspects is that printed text was being used to consolidate centralized state power, create and regulate larger and more homogeneous markets, and administer larger and larger territories. Jeremy Rifkin has argued that the nation state itself was an artificial construct designed to level barriers to faster exchange and thus foster the growth of more extensive markets (167). The nation state benefited from this process in that more money-mediated transactions produced more tax revenue and more centralized power. Sociologist of modernity Zygmunt Bauman makes the complementary point that the nation state owed its success to the suppression of self-asserting communities (173). So, the dismantling of the groups described by Elias enhanced both the "freedom" of individuals and the power of the modernizing state. The break up of corporate entities and local communities in favor of the national market was thus, in part, a result of deliberate policy. Here, Roland Mousnier's argument that French absolutism strove to transcend class divisions in favor of the national interest is also apposite.

Printed text circulates freely; it is increasingly detached from limited, limiting places, times, and cultural contexts. Fred Inglis has pointed out that, in addition to being a key instrument of the developing market, print was an early proto-industrial product and a commodity within that market. Inglis has even argued that the printed book was "the first embodiment of the commodity form: an easily made, mass produced, reproducible, profit creating, obsolescent object" (16). The increasing prevalence and power of print served the new cognitive model that characterized the early modern epistemology epitomized by Descartes, but also exemplified by Adam Smith. The homogeneous space required by market economics resembles the "dead extension" that Descartes posited in order to found his epistemology of control. In Descartes's epistemology, the specificities of organic space are eliminated in the interests of

management and manipulation. A lucid critique of Descartes' mind/body dualism and of its epistemological consequences is Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Damasio argues persuasively that contemporary brain physiology falsifies both Descartes's dualism and the myth that rationality can be free of emotion and value. Dom Juan embodies this "value-free" cognition. Epistemology's emancipation from issues of value gives an air of legitimacy to the separation of economics from ethical constraints.

It can be argued that it is in just such limited contexts, with their concomitant defined relations and obligations, that ethics can be meaningful. These small, local, cultural, political, and economic entities are undermined by an expanding, increasingly homogeneous market. Ethical constraints are most effective, and ethical relationships most healthy, in concrete, local environments. Adam Smith himself assumed a small, essentially local market in which bad behavior would lead to consequences that would provide swift correction. He certainly imagined nothing like what we now call "the Market." Smith, after all, was a moral philosopher. Etymologically, *ethos* contains the concept of place (Casey xiv). This concept is progressively weakened by the modern obsession with mobility and by modernity's replacement of concrete places and bodies with representations. David Le Breton provides useful evidence of early modernity's denigration of the body and of the constitution of the modern subject through that denigration (29-62).

Paradoxically, as print supports more definitive-seeming, authoritative and authoritarian language, it also fosters in the individuals who are able to produce and consume it a sense of autonomy. It confers prestige on them, as it releases them from attachments to corporate entities smaller than the national state. It also makes them less sheltered objects of state power; paradoxically, as they are liberated from local constraints, individuals become more transparent to state power. Moreover, mechanically reproduced notational languages of all kinds, including mathematical language, is a key ingredient in the modern epistemology of power that was developing in the seventeenth century. Anthony Easthope has argued that the seventeenth century was a period of textual authoritarianism (33). Dom Juan's famous arithmetical "creed" – "je crois que deux et deux sont quatre, Sganarelle, et que quatre et quatre sont huit" (Act I, scene i) – makes him a trivializing exponent of the same epistemology that was emancipating natural science and economics from values, or ethical considerations. According to Michel de Certeau, modernity is writing, and the modern Utopia would be a perfect *text* constructed on a clear space (*Practice* 168, 135). Representations, existing in the cultural equivalent of Descartes's dead extension, tend to replace bodies and places. Dom Juan aspires to be as mobile and as authoritative as printed information.

*Dom Juan* was produced in a France where transactions of all kinds were multiplying and, in the process, social and economic ambitions were being released, even as the bases of social distinctions were fading. Dom Juan's bookish rhetoric confers on him an air of autonomy and impenetrability. As Sganarelle suggests, it makes

dialogue with Dom Juan impossible; Sganarelle says that he would have to submit his arguments in writing in order to respond effectively to his master's pseudo-philosophical statements (Act I, scene ii). Also, Dom Juan's rhetoric makes the women whom he addresses and describes in such language feel like precious, permanent, prestigious beings. It is the perfect medium of seductive flattery, since it moves its speaker to a higher plane while exploiting his hearer's ambition to join him there. For commoners, Dom Juan's combination of noble status and promiscuous distribution of flattering words and gestures is irresistible. He contrives to be a member of two aristocracies: the old one based on birth, and the new one based on mastery of text. For Dom Juan, women themselves are not ethically significant beings but mere signs of his successful multiplication of profitable transactions.

Dom Juan is a maniacal multiplier of transactions between his manipulateness and others' credulous ambition. For the nobleman, women are exchangeable commodities; they are mere signs of his success in the competition among males and in the widening system of exchanges. They are currency in an economy of desire in which Dom Juan, too, is a mere sign: he represents the social status the common women expect to attain by marrying him. Jean Baudrillard makes the useful point that there is no such thing as fashion in a society of stable castes and ranks: in such a society, signs are limited in number and in range of diffusion, and they stand for reciprocal relationships and obligations (11-12). Like Monsieur Jourdain, Dom Juan stands at the point at which the collapse of the traditional hierarchy begins to degrade the very social capital that he exploits. Social meaning and collective ethical responsibility are beginning to dissolve in a widening circulation of increasingly detached and empty signs. The signs have meaning and value only as pretenses in social transactions. They thus depend on ambition and gullibility. They signify nothing permanent or substantive. Dom Juan accelerates this process of degeneration.

The fact that the play's central themes are language, ethics, and the corrosive effects of compulsive transactions is clear from the beginning. The first scene is a conversation between Sganarelle and Gusman, who has come to plead the case of Dom Juan's recently abandoned wife, Done Elvire. Gusman cites Dom Juan's social rank and the fact that he has given his *word* as reasons to believe that the marriage commitment will be honored. Clearly, Gusman assumes that the traditional noble code is still operative for Dom Juan. Gusman believes in an ethically binding relationship among status, language, and obligation. Sganarelle's answer expresses the ambivalence about his master that has always characterized critical responses to the play: he is fascinated and horrified, impressed and frightened by his master's contempt for all constraints. Dom Juan works to establish an erotic free market, applying to love the ethical "neutrality" of the new allegedly value-neutral epistemology and economics. Dom Juan can best exploit his social status as capital in marriage transactions and he can maximize his profit only by multiplying such exchanges. In these transactions, the women whom Dom Juan manipulates serve as signs that he has masterfully exploited his social capital. In this

process, Dom Juan himself is reduced to a display of signs of the status which his dupes desire.

Sganarelle's first speech also includes the famous "praise of tobacco," in which the servant places the issue of exchange in the context of circulating commodities and mimics the reduction of social relations to an empty semiotics of mechanically, compulsively repeated gestures. Like Dom Juan himself, this ethically empty ritual exchange of gestures without substance or commitment reduces status to pure display. The proliferation of transactions reduces their significance; the narrowing margin of significance explains, in part, the compulsiveness of the repetition. Bauman argues that the other side, the dialectical accompaniment, of unencumbered freedom is the insignificance of choices (35). This complements Elias's point about the positive relation between class codes and ethical boundaries. However, in the world evoked by *Dom Juan*, social capital is accumulated only through exchanges, and it has value only in further exchanges. The fleeting social profit sought in each transaction can be further exploited only in further exchange. Meaning and value are progressively weakened.

Tobacco itself is an appropriate symbol of the cultural changes going on in France and Western Europe during the early modern period. It is a new commodity, introduced from the New World, and thus a sign of emancipation from tradition and from the old economy. It circulates in the vastly expanded space, literal and semiotic, of modernity. It is also addictive.

Sganarelle alludes to his master's exploitation of social ambition by saying that Dom Juan is an equal-opportunity *épouseur*: he will promise to marry any woman, of any social class. This false egalitarianism reflects the elimination of limits and borders that was blurring ethical boundaries in general and enshrining individual desire as the engine of economic progress. For Dom Juan, words have a function that makes the concept of commitment obsolete and irrelevant. He uses seductive language, including the rhetoric and décor of his own noble status, to establish what amounts to an erotic – or at least a matrimonial – free market in which the exchange of promises is unlimited. Of course, unlimited promises are, by definition, meaningless. Being committed to one woman would be like being trapped in one place, and Dom Juan is mobility – that modern fetish – incarnate. Like Dom Juan, modernity relativizes social status without eliminating it, thereby unleashing a huge desire to acquire the now seemingly transferable signs and benefits of high status.

So complete is Dom Juan's conversion of substance into rhetoric that he will say, in Act I, scene ii, that once his display has done its work and his promise has been believed, there is no more to say, and no more to desire. His desire has no object beyond the use of semiotic production to manipulate others. Dom Juan identifies language itself as the means and medium of his desire and pleasure. Language has become both means and end. There is nothing – and no one – else. Sganarelle has already described how his master deploys a wide range of rhetorical resources in his seductive projects: Dom Juan includes tears, sighs, and transports of emotion among

the rhetorical weaponry he exploits. This account of his copious semiotic production establishes Dom Juan as a master symbol-manipulator. His seductiveness is that of purely semiotic virtuosity. However, since his desire can be satisfied only fleetingly and only in transactions, he must compulsively seek new dupes. In the end, this desire has neither subject nor object; there is only the endless repetition of empty exchanges.

It is in this same scene that Sganarelle says that his master has the advantage in communicative exchanges because he speaks like a book. Dom Juan reduces emotion to the rhetorical display of signs that are supposed to express emotions, emptying the physiognomy of love of its significance and embodying the seventeenth-century version of what we have come to call the slipping signifier. Not only does he speak like a book, he *is* like a book: he is a device whose purpose is the reproduction and diffusion of language, and whose relation to the seeming referents of that language is distant or nonexistent. Like the language in a book, Dom Juan's discourse immobilizes and silences its receiver; he does not anticipate or invite a response. In his exchanges with the peasant women, Charlotte and Mathurine, these aspects of Dom Juan's use of language are clear. In Act II, scene iii, Dom Juan's quasi-literary flattery of Charlotte makes her an object, or a collection of rhetorically separated and analyzed objects. It also permits Molière to show us that the seducer's desire to deploy his bookish discourse obscures his own perception. As Dom Juan asserts his masterful subjectivity by eloquently dissecting and "appreciating" Charlotte's various supposed charms, he replaces her body with text-like discourse. The blindness to reality imposed by this substitution of representation for being is emphasized when Sganarelle points out, after his master has expressed admiration of Charlotte's hands and a desire to kiss them, that her hands are actually black with dirt. Dom Juan is reduced to comic proportions here by the fact that his invariable verbal performance has, in effect, disabled him. Not only is he incapable of an ethical relationship with a woman; he cannot even see her. He is a mere machine for the reproduction of bookish rhetoric, and he makes mere raw material for text-like productions of the women to whom he claims to be irresistibly attracted.

Moreover, the nobleman's instrumental exploitation of impressive language that, in his case, neither expresses inward experience nor seeks authentic connection, reminds us of the seventeenth-century preoccupation with the question of sincerity. Is sincerity a delusional obsession, as it is for *Alceste*, a dangerous vulnerability, as in *La Princesse de Clèves*, or a rhetorical stance without depth or ultimate referent, as in this play? Dom Juan's use of noble status as an apparently exchangeable commodity combines with his victims' desire for social mobility; like real trends of the times, it makes identities relative and raises the issue of the relation between expression and truth. The fourth scene of Act II further lampoons Dom Juan's aesthetic/erotic posing. With both Charlotte and her rival, Mathurine, on stage, he turns from one to the other, repeating the same empty flattery and promises to each, in turn. These verbal pirouettes are accompanied by their physical equivalent, as the would-be master of the universe spins like a top, spouting

hackneyed verbiage. His objectification of the women has made *him* an object. No ethical relation is possible between objects. Like a printing press, Dom Juan has become a mechanism for manufacturing and distributing copies. He does, indeed, speak like a book. Here, as elsewhere, Dom Juan exploits his membership in two aristocracies, that of class and that of textual mastery. The comic annihilation of his pretensions is reinforced by the fact that he is seducing two naïve peasant women.

Dom Juan does nothing more than what modern epistemology requires: he reduces beings and relationships to notational representation. The idea that this is adequate, and even superior to direct perception, depends on the prior assumption that phenomenal reality is merely the elaboration of a kind of inherent notation. This is precisely what Galileo asserted when he said that the universe is a text written in the language of mathematics. Appropriately, Dom Juan will say, a bit later in the play, that his only beliefs are mathematical. Like Dom Juan, modernism does not merely speak like a book; it defines knowledge as if everything were the equivalent of a printed text. Perhaps the best example of this is our endlessly, and mindlessly, repeated assertion that DNA, the basis of life, is “codified information” instructing cells in how to “construct” a human being – as if it were analogous to the printed instructions for assembling a mechanical artifact. The tropes of the printed text as the model of knowledge and the machine as the model of the cosmos are mutually confirming metaphors. It is fascinatingly symptomatic that these metaphors came to cultural dominance in the period during which text came to be the product of a machine—the printing press.

Among the other key passages in the play where the themes I am elucidating here can be found is the first scene of Act III. It is here that Dom Juan expounds his mathematical creed: “Je crois que deux et deux sont quatre, Sganarelle, et que quatre et quatre sont huit.” Dom Juan clearly regards his purported arithmetical rationalism, along with his text-like “speech,” as a means of asserting his superiority. The context of this claim is Sganarelle’s joking at the expense of doctors and his expression of fear of not believing in a number of popular superstitions. The implication is that there is nothing more to being a doctor than being taken for one, than wearing the costume and speaking the language associated with medicine. Dom Juan’s seeming certainty that believing only in mathematical “truth” places him above, and emancipates him from, the level on which common superstitions – including ethical ideas, no doubt – command respect. Quantification is, perhaps, the ultimate in replacing beings and places with representations. Dom Juan’s belief that words and numbers are more real than things and people permits his delusion that limits are to be transcended. The alleged ethical neutrality of mathematics both defines a new modern intellectual elite and emancipates that elite from ethical constraints. Molière here anticipated the eighteenth-century critique of abstract rationality, a critique exemplified by Edmund Burke and others. Burke argued that the regime of calculated, quantifiable self-interest would lead individuals to exploit one another mercilessly (Muller 133). Dom Juan could not more completely embody what Burke feared.

Act III, scene ii, the famous *scène du pauvre*, powerfully underlines the themes of calculation, exploitation, and the impossibility of ethically significant relationships in Dom Juan's world. The modern separation of economics from ethics and the erasure of ethical boundaries by money, are evoked by this scene. Significantly, when they encounter the poor hermit, Dom Juan and Sganarelle are, literally and figuratively, *lost*. As I mentioned earlier, the Greek *ethos* implies the concept of place; when Dom Juan offers the hermit a coin if he will blaspheme, refusing to give it in exchange for the hermit's telling him where they are, he emphasizes that he prefers to inhabit an ethical no man's land without concrete location. Dom Juan rejects the location in a specific, concrete place that the hermit's help signifies. Edward S. Casey asserts that ethically meaningful social interactions must involve sharing, and they must occur in specific places (xiv). This is another way of making Elias's point about the positive relation between boundaries, or limits, and ethical meaning.

Dom Juan would like to entice the hermit into the dead extension, the abstract, calculable "space," where the nobleman's dedication to self-interest and exploitation seems intelligent. As ethically important, mutually beneficial beings, Dom Juan and the hermit are made absent by Dom Juan's attempt to reduce the hermit's faith to the level of an exchange value. In fact, the potentially mutually beneficial exchange of what each one needs becomes a transaction in which money replaces relationship. If he accepted the coin, the hermit would be abetting Dom Juan's project: he would be reducing his religious faith to the level of promiscuous transaction. It would lose its status as a value imposing limits and guaranteeing value.

It seems clear that *Dom Juan*, at least as much as *Tartuffe*, expresses Molière's intense interest in demolishing the world of words, or of representations, into which the main characters try to seduce their victims. Perhaps it would be well to lose this essay, and to prepare the way for further study of the comedian's production, by pointing out that representations are always produced and consumed by motivated human beings, and that, therefore, interpretation is a vital human function. Of course, interpreters must account for their own motives, as well as for those of the producers of the messages they are interpreting. Molière's plays are filled with what I would call lessons in interpretation, and it would be productive, I believe, to look at them with that in mind. The hyper-production of signs of all kinds in early modernity made the issues of motive and interpretation more urgent than ever before.

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