Dramatic Point of View.

*L’École des femmes* and *Le Misanthrope*

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Le grand procédé de variation, le grand parti-pris artistique, c’est alors et avant tout ce choix de la meilleure perspective dramatique.

Etienne Souriau, *Les Deux Cent Mille Situations dramatiques*¹

The architecture of seventeenth-century French plays has always been a source of personal fascination. In this essay I propose to consider one aspect of that complex organization, specifically how the author may inscribe a point of view in the play. What I will argue is that certain plays are grounded or centered in one character to such a degree that the audience perceives the dramatic universe from the perspective of that character. One will immediately object that a play does not have a POV² because it does not have a narrator, because it is mimetic. Indeed, except for rare cases (e.g., Corneille’s *Illusion comique*³), there is no narrator and only indirect signs of an implied author (in a preface or the stage directions). Every character who speaks may be understood to voice his or her own point of view. Yet certain plays, through their very construction as well as by other means, favor one character and his or her perspective over the others. Consider two extreme cases that also happen to be two of the most important plays of the period: *Phèdre* and *Tartuffe*. The former is the quintessential POV play: Racine ensures that we experience the world on stage

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¹ Souriau 184.
² I will use this abbreviation for point of view throughout.
³ The magician Alcandre in Corneille’s *L’Illusion comique* at times recounts and at times conjures up Clindor’s adventures before the eyes of the latter’s father Pridamant and the audience.
through Phèdre. In the case of Tartuffe, the opposite is true: we do not have access to any interiority that would lead us to see the world through his eyes.

Obviously I am speaking metaphorically when I refer to POV in theater, but then so are the fields of narratology and cinema studies when they use similar terminology. Indeed a stable, singular POV is quite rare in both narrative and cinema. The classic example in cinema is *The Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1946) which scrupulously adopts the perspective of the main character throughout. The only time the POV character could be seen on screen was in a mirror. It was a complete failure (Wilson 86) and is remembered only as a cautionary experiment. Monologue novels or experimental novels such as Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (1957) do employ a single perspective, but they are the exception. In most narratives, a single POV or focalization is generally not maintained throughout. Genette points out that even in *À la recherche du temps perdu* there is considerable varying of focalization, even beyond that of Marcel at different points in his life. Subjectivity is quite clearly a feature of theater (see Richardson 204) and thus there is no reason not to extend the metaphor of POV to theater as well.

The term point of view is problematic. The field of narratology rejected it because of its ambiguity, although terms chosen to replace it (e.g., focalization, filter/slant) also have their critics. In the context of theater, it seems the best choice, although a few qualifications are in order. POV is not a question of visual perception, neither the character’s nor the spectator’s (more on the latter shortly). And POV is not a mental standpoint or opinion. Here the term will refer to a character—itself a construction, of course—who is not the author, the implied author, or the narrator, but who is not merely the protagonist of the play. The POV character is also, albeit figuratively, the dominant filter through which the spectator/reader per-

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4 The term “point of view” is rarely used at present in narratological studies; since Genette’s landmark 1972 “Discours du récit,” the norm has been to distinguish between the narrator (who speaks?) and the focalizer (who sees?), although discussion of these issues is ongoing. The distinction is not particularly pertinent to the stage, however. We will use the term “focalization” below, but to refer to gaining access to a character’s thoughts and feelings, a use employed by Genette as well (206–07).

5 The famous scene where Marcel spies on Mlle de Vinteuil and her friend is focalized through Marcel and what he is able to see (a great deal) and hear (nothing); however the focalization shifts to Mlle de Vinteuil when it comes to her thoughts and feelings, thereby giving the reader access to what Marcel could not possibly know (Genette 222).
ceives the world of the play. I am by no means the first to consider the issue of POV in theater. Souriau’s *Les Deux Cent Mille Situations dramatiques* introduced the notion in conjunction with his shorthand descriptions of dramatic plot and Barko and Burgess wrote a short book exploring POV and its application to four plays. I hope to build on their work both in terms of theoretical understanding of the concept and close analysis.

In this article I will limit myself to two of Molière’s most well-known plays—*Le Misanthrope* and *L’École des femmes*—and attempt to raise and discuss the myriad issues that POV characters entail through the prism of these two works. The choice of Molière is hardly an arbitrary one; he explores the notion from different angles in a number of his comedies. One might explain the unusually high presence of POV characters in his theater by arguing that he sought to create privileged roles for himself as actor (see Scherer 27), but I prefer to imagine that the playwright was more interested in exploring dramatic possibilities. Hopefully, the plays will illuminate the concept of POV in theater and the concept will illuminate the plays as well.

My primary interest is the inscription of a POV within the play by the author, but one cannot ignore two issues that complicate the terrain considerably. The first involves the spectator and his or her relation to the POV character. The spectator’s response to a character—whether emotional, ideological, or based on a set of values—may contribute to the construction of a POV character or, even more importantly, may deny that status to a character. Employing the notion of an archi-spectator, Barko and Burgess devote a considerable amount of attention to the *distance* between character and spectator. While it is certainly true that the author relies on the existence and engagement of such a spectator and that in some respects (for instance, sympathy) it is not possible to avoid the issue, I will do my best to minimize my reliance on such a construct. As we shall see when considering the history of these two Molière plays, on stage and off, the spectator’s

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6 Chatman opposes the notions of *slant* and *filter*: “I propose *slant* to name the narrator’s attitudes and other mental nuances appropriate to the report function of discourse, and *filter* to name the much wider range of mental activity experienced by characters in the story world—perceptions, cognitions, attitudes, emotions, memories, fantasies, and the like” (143). While Ubersfeld does not espouse the notion of a POV character, her formulation “une conscience centralisatrice” is perhaps pertinent (337).

7 To give a concrete example, I have on occasion encountered an undergraduate student who is so put off by Phèdre’s sexual desire that he or she refuses to adopt her POV. In such cases, the play is experienced by that student as a failure, because Phèdre’s perspective is central to the audience’s engagement with the play.
reactions have hardly been unvarying. Indeed, there are many plays that are no longer staged because the audience’s values have changed over time. The enduring success of *Le Misanthrope* and *L’École des femmes* may have many explanations, but I don’t believe that a stable audience, thus an archi-spectator, is among them.

The second issue involves the object of study: is it the text or its performance? Because of the openness of dramatic texts in general (and these two are no exception), the director or actor has the room to modify, undermine, or accentuate what the author has provided to create a POV character. Unfortunately we do not know enough about Molière’s staging of and performance in his own plays. In any event, each production of a play is significantly different from the next and available, in the vast majority of cases, only through second-hand reports. Performance, therefore, does not offer a stable object of study. Furthermore, actors and directors are under the obvious obligation to be original, an obligation that may have distorting consequences. We may not, however, ignore the implications of performance and the ever-varying openness of the dramatic text to differing interpretations. Thus I will consider the plays in light of their potential *mises-en-scène*. A text’s inherent openness and its performance history have a legitimate place in this discussion. I will henceforth use the term “audience” to refer to readers and spectators alike.

Several other basic choices remain in order to clarify our object of study. Barko and Burgess note that the question of POV in theater may be approached through character or plot (the sequence of events). I have opted for the first, clearly, but it is a choice that merits explanation. First, POV implies subjectivity, and subjectivity in theater inheres in the speaking subjects that are characters. For our purposes, characters are understood to be constructs, animated by language and, when staged, by a human actor. I will thus attempt to steer clear of any notion of character psychology. In contrast to character, plot lends itself far less readily to subjectivity. Barko and Burgess choose to focus on character rather than plot as well, saying

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8 In the four plays Barko and Bennett examined (*Le Misanthrope*, Beaumarchais’s *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Musset’s *Lorenzaccio* and Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*), they encountered numerous points where it was impossible to determine which of two or more possible reactions the archi-spectator might have. They used the term *bifurcation* to describe such instances, but could go no farther than to identify them (91–92).

9 Souriau notes: “On voit que la mise en scène peut ici beaucoup—pour renforcer, préciser ce qu’implique le texte. Et je croirais assez que c’est pour cette raison que les grands effets de point de vue figurent surtout dans les œuvres des auteurs-acteurs” (131).
that the former option proved to be “plus maniable et plus rentable” (87),
but they express some regret at not focusing on the story (13). Yet their
discussion of Beaumarchais’s *Le Mariage de Figaro*, the most plot-driven of
the plays they examine, is unable to move beyond an inventory of shifts in
POV character from scene to scene depending on the shifts in the plot.
Implicit in the choice of focus on POV characters is the selection of plays
that have a dominant character. In *Le Mariage de Figaro* the complex plot
may be more important than any single character in the play, leaving no
character with a commanding role. I am led to conclude that a reading of a
play through POV is not likely to be particularly fruitful if the plot is
complex and there is no preeminent character. While both contain domi-
nant characters, the two Molière plays that we will consider differ from one
another with respect to the intricacy of plot. It is rather elaborate in *L’École
des femmes*, a classic combination of rivalry and young love confronting a
blocking character; in contrast, as others have observed, *Le Misanthrope*
has a considerably more pared-down plot (see Descotes 90, Brabant 260).10

The next issue, not surprisingly given the discussion above, involves the
potential shift of POV from one character to another. Such shifts are quite
common in theater, but the larger the number of shifts, and especially the
larger the number of characters who do a turn as the POV character, the
less central the notion of POV is to the play. But before we may consider
shifts in POV, we need to examine the process of *mise en place* and the
functioning of the single POV character. Actantial analyses, whether focused
on narrative or on theater, implicitly acknowledge a dominant POV through
their use of categories such as *subject*, *object*, or *rival*. Obviously, it is the
subject and not the rival who carries the POV, at least initially (see Souriau
72). We will return to the question of shifting and therefore multiple POVs
later in order to consider the potential claims that other characters in our
two plays make on the dominant position. Leaving aside some of these
issues for the moment, we will turn to how a POV is constructed in theater,
using the specific examples of *L’École des femmes* and *Le Misanthrope*.

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The first components in the construction of a POV character are the most
obvious, the most mechanical, and yet absolutely necessary: speech and
presence. The character must have a substantial onstage role. *Le Misan-
 thrope*’s Alceste and *L’École des femmes*’s Arnolphe have exceptionally large
roles in their respective plays. Arnolphe speaks 49% of the lines of his play

10 Norman notes that 200 lines pass before Célimène, ostensibly the object of desire
driving the plot, is even mentioned (163).
(871) and Alceste 41% (735). They dominate their plays through their onstage presence: Arnolphe only leaves the stage for a single scene out of 32 and Alceste is present for 17 out of 22 scenes and is the only character in the play to be onstage in all five acts.11 Such exceedingly large numbers are not necessary for a POV character—Phèdre, for example, speaks only 476 lines and is onstage for less than half of the play—but significant numbers definitely are crucial. I am not prepared to offer a lower limit, because the POV character is built on considerably more than speech and presence, but without those two elements, it cannot be constructed. No doubt the same is true in the novel and in cinema, although techniques are quite different. There is simply no way to experience the dramatic universe through the perspective of a given character unless we hear and see him or her, unless the POV character takes part in the onstage action, unless he or she reflects on that action. It is reasonable to assume that a large number of characters in a given play will reduce the likelihood that there may be a POV character, or conversely, that a character with a predominant speaking role or onstage presence is more likely to have a privileged POV.

Speech and presence may vary considerably in relation to one another. Silent presence may contribute significantly to POV. While outside the domain of the text proper, it is worth considering that the actor listening to other speakers may act and/or emote as well, thus continuing and developing his or her POV through potentially eloquent presence alone.12 While Alceste speaks only at the beginning and end of the long portrait scene in Le Misanthrope (II,4), it is easy to imagine a staging in which Alceste is physically separate from the others on stage and moves or gestures in such a way as to frequently call attention to himself.13

11 Measuring in lines rather than scenes, Arnolphe is present for 98% of the lines spoken, and Alceste for 81%.
12 Descotes notes that actors “jouent presque aussi bien quand ils écoutent que quand ils parlent” (119). Could a character who was onstage almost throughout the play but spoke relatively little be the POV? Is presence sufficient? The question, while outside of the scope of this essay, is an interesting one. It would be difficult for the author to construct; he or she would have to rely on stage directions. For the reader those stage directions would have to carry the full weight of the POV, because mere presence, to say nothing of an attentive and reactive presence, is relatively difficult to communicate through words. Stage directions may become cumbersome and in any event are used sparingly in the seventeenth-century French theater. In the case of a staged performance, the POV status of the character would depend on the skill and interpretation of the actor and/or director involved. All of which to say that the possibility is intriguing, but unlikely.
13 “Tartuffe, Arnolphe, and Alceste are all characters that hold the interest of the audience in a tight grip. On stage, even when they are silent, they remain within
The relationship between onstage presence and plot may also influence
POV. In *L’École des femmes* we do not see the young lovers together on stage
until V,3, and even then Arnolphe is a silent but acknowledged witness to
their conversation. The fundamental love scene between them is never
shown on stage. In contrast, Arnolphe and Agnès are alone together onstage
three times in the first half of the play and they have a long discussion
concerning love in V,4. Arnolphe’s repeated onstage presence with the only
desirable woman in the play is a subtle sign that his is the POV that matters.
To understand fully the crucial relationship between presence and POV,
consider Souriau’s brilliant example of a possible staging of *Britannicus*, Act
II, scene 6, in which Néron, hidden, observes Junie and Britannicus. If
Néron were placed on stage, he suggests, in silhouette in the foreground and
silent, the audience would be inclined to watch the scene through his eyes,
through his POV (236–37). If Néron is completely hidden, as is usually the
case, our perspective for this scene shifts to Junie because we share with her
the superior knowledge of Néron’s command to break off with Britannicus.

The incipit is the privileged place in which to create a POV character. If
an author wants to accentuate a particular POV then it is imperative to
establish it early. Discussing the post-Fronde vogue for abundantly present
characters, Scherer asserts that the public wanted to see them immediately
in the first scene of the play. While it was also quite common during the
same period to delay the entrance of an important character until the first
scene of the second act, such a substantial delay all but precludes that
character taking the role of the POV. While I do not want to be categorical
in asserting the need for the POV character to appear in the first scene of
the play (after all, Phèdre doesn’t appear until scene 3), any delay makes it
more difficult to construct such a POV. In the case of our two plays, Molière
takes the same sledge-hammer approach to the incipit that he does to
speech and presence: both Arnolphe and Alceste have the predominant role
in an overly long opening scene in which they share the stage (and argue)
with a friend. In both cases the focus is strongly on these two and signifi-

14 Souriau describes the POV as “la porte d’entrée par où le spectateur voit en
perspective l’intérieur de la situation” (124) and goes on to say, “C’est souvent
l’art de l’« exposition », dans les premières scènes du drame, de nous faire entrer
dans l’univers de l’œuvre sous l’angle voulu” (134).

15 Arnolphe has 120 of the 198 lines in the first scene (61%) and Alceste has 136 of
249 lines (55%).
cantly less on their sparring partner. Consider the opening two lines of *L’École des femmes*:

Chrysalde: “Vous venez, dites vous, pour lui donner la main?”
Arnolphe: “Oui, je veux terminer la chose dans demain.”\(^{16}\)

The assignment of pronouns (Arnolphe’s “je” and Chrysalde’s “vous”) combined with volition (“veux”) make it very clear whose perspective is likely to be central. Similarly, in *Le Misanthrope*’s opening scene, Alceste makes 82 references to himself while Philinte’s makes only 29. Philinte’s opening barrage of questions also ensures that Alceste is the focus of interest. Furthermore, both Alceste and Arnolphe appear in the first scene of the second act, that other privileged site in the composition of a play (see above). An interesting corroboration of the force of the POV established in the incipit is the confrontation between Oronte’s sonnet and Alceste’s *chanson*. Critics and audiences alike have long been willing to perceive the sonnet as worse than mediocre, that is to say, through Alceste’s eyes. Positive assessments of Oronte’s poem are fairly rare, even in contrast to the unabashedly simple song that Alceste offers as superior. Because Alceste has been established as the POV character in the first scene, the audience almost automatically takes his side in the second. Considering only speech, presence, and the opening scene, we must admit that Molière could be writing a recipe (or a parody...) of how to set up a POV character.

As a general rule, if a POV character has been established in the incipit, there will be considerable carry-over of that POV, even in the absence of the character on stage. Once the POV character has been put into place, other techniques, such as having the POV character be the subject of conversation, serve to reinforce his or her status. While Molière has created several virtually omnipresent characters (e.g., Sganarelle, Dom Juan, and Argan), a certain period of absence is normal even in plays with a POV character. Alceste has been so strongly established as a POV character in Act I that he can be absent for all of Act III but the last scene without threatening his POV position. Alceste is only mentioned twice during that extended absence, both times by Célimène, and both times in relation to Arsinoé’s affection for him. The fact that he is depicted as desirable works to counterbalance any danger of erasure through absence. Alceste’s return on stage in III,5 is followed by yet another absence as he follows Arsinoé to her home. During this second absence, Philinte recounts the offstage scene where Alceste is forced to make peace with Oronte (IV,1), a *récit* that Hope interprets as a means of keeping the play’s focus on Alceste and demon-

\(^{16}\) All quotes will be taken from the 2010 Pléiade edition of Molière’s *Œuvres complètes.*
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strating the latter’s domination of the action, even in his absence (524). In
the sole scene in L’École des femmes during which Arnolphe is not present on
stage a similar process occurs: he is talked about, but here by his two
ignorant servants, resulting in a burlesque version of what we see in Le
Misanthrope IV,1.17 In both plays Molière has the POV character leave the
stage before the last lines of the play, suggesting the possibility of an eclipse
of their POV (Arnolphe sixteen lines and Alceste only two lines before the
end). In the case of Arnolphe, he is also reduced to speechlessness: once he
learns Agnès’s identity (l.1739) he utters only “Quoi?...” (l.1739) and the
famous “Oh!/Ouf!” (l.1764) during the play’s last forty lines. Overall, the
end seems to matter far less than the beginning: once a POV character has
been established early in the play, there is a strong tendency to maintain
that position.

The play’s title is another feature of the incipit. The heading L’École des
femmes gives us no indication that one character might be more important
than another or that one character’s perspective will predominate. Indeed
the plural femmes is strikingly unhelpful in a play with a single female
character of any importance. Le Misanthrope, on the other hand, is related to
POV. While we might wonder as the play opens to whom the title—and
subtitle, L’Atrabilaire amoureux—refers, we do not long remain in doubt, as
the positions that Alceste voices in the first scene make him the obvious
referent. But the title is hardly neutral, presenting a jumble of traits that do
not seem to readily cohere, an issue we will return to shortly.

One further structural feature pertaining to the POV involves space. The
fact that Arnolphe appears in his own space and has authority over that
space (his house, or houses) abets his establishment as the POV character.
The spatial element provides a physical and thus visual means of indexing
his centrality. Alceste, on the other hand, is not at all in his own space, but
rather in Célimène’s salon. His status as POV is modestly undermined
through the consequent reduction in authority (see Hammond 58) and
through the contrast between the norms of that space and Alceste’s values
(e.g. sincerity) and characteristics (e.g. critical, angry, stubborn). When one
examines these two plays from this particular perspective it is striking the
degree to which Molière appears to be varying the structural elements and
experimenting with the possibilities.

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17 Racine takes a different approach in Phèdre where the power of the queen’s desire
and suffering voiced at length in I,3 and II,5 dwarfs those of Hippolyte and
Thésée, thereby filling the gaps of her absences from the stage.
Speech and presence are also vitally important because they constitute an enabling condition for the establishment and development of spectator engagement with the character. Such engagement is associated with two terms, *sympathy* and *identification*, both of which we will consider now. The OED begins its definition of *sympathy* with “A (real or supposed) affinity between certain things,” here between spectator and character. The spectator’s feelings—antipathy, respect, affinity, even simple liking—cannot form the basis of the establishment of a POV character, but they cannot simply be dismissed either. The spectator must be drawn in to view the dramatic universe from the perspective of the POV character. On the one hand, it is impossible to gauge spectator reaction to a given character, as will become abundantly clear shortly when we look at the issue as it concerns Alceste and Arnolphe. Along the same lines, directors and, through them, actors have enormous leeway in constructing a character more or less likely to elicit spectator sympathy. On the other hand, the notion of spectator sympathy is vital to the concept of POV, because why would any spectator take the POV of a character, whatever strategies the author employed, if that character had no claim to our sympathy? There is endless opportunity for debate in deciding what qualities, if any, elicit universal sympathy. I hope to simplify the problem as much as possible by singling out only a very few features as worthy of universal approbation or disapprobation, while conceding that all the others are open to legitimate debate. For the time being, I will assert only that suffering makes a universal claim to sympathy in almost all cases.

Identification suggests a deeper engagement than sympathy, requiring more of a commitment to a character’s POV than sympathy. The connotations are less emotional than those attached to sympathy and identity is more stable and enduring. Sympathy may be fleeting, and thus attach and detach itself quite readily from a given character, while identification does not. Is identification necessary in order to have a POV character? Perhaps partial or provisional identification will do for our purposes. Total identification may be a step too far. Consider the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his famous comments on *Le Misanthrope*: he identified so completely with Alceste that he was outraged by the fact that Molière made him appear ridiculous as though it were Rousseau himself who was the injured party.18

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18 The following quote conveys the general tenor of Rousseau’s comments on Alceste and conveys his own identification with the fictional character: “Qu’est-ce donc que le Misanthrope de Molière? Un homme de bien qui déteste les mœurs de son Siécle et la méchanceté de ces [sic] contemporains; qui, précisément parce qu’il aime ses semblables, hait en eux les maux qu’ils se font réciproquement et les vices dont ces maux sont l’ouvrage. S’il étoit moins touché des erreurs de l’huma-
The question remains whether the spectator is apt to adopt the POV of a character he or she finds unlikable. Eustis points to the centrality of this issue in terms of Molière's theater: "One of our biggest difficulties in properly interpreting Molière comedies has been the obstinacy with which many generations have insisted upon categorizing his characters as sympathetic or repulsive, reasonable or unreasonable in order to identify with the ones and, by our laughter, reject the others" (181). It is in this domain—the creation of characters that will elicit and/or repulse sympathy—that Molière departs most radically and most playfully from the norms for a POV character. Arnolphe and Alceste, despite their considerable similarity when it comes to speech, presence, and early introduction in their respective plays, differ markedly from one another when it comes to eliciting spectator sympathy and thus must be dealt with separately.

In the case of Arnolphe, Molière creates an essentially unsympathetic character and lodges him structurally in the position of POV. While I am loathe to decree what is and what isn't a sympathetic trait, it does seem abundantly clear that Molière offers little in the first scene of the play to incite a spectator to sympathize with Arnolphe. One might plausibly argue that his fear of being cuckolded may resonate on an unconscious level with the male members of the audience, but he is also self-satisfied, stubborn, scornful, arrogant, and seeks an unnatural level of control over the woman-child he has elected to marry, including the intention to keep her ignorant. If the above were a complete description of Arnolphe, the audience would be unlikely to adopt his POV and could consider his central position in the play as merely a function of Molière's structural tour de force in which all significant action takes place off stage. But Molière complicates the situation by having Arnolphe develop and reveal feelings of love for Agnès and also suffering that his love is not returned. And it is precisely genuine suffering that is a universal magnet for spectator sympathy. Aside from a reference to Agnès as a small child ("[Elle] m'inspira de l'amour pour elle nité, moins indigné des iniquités qu'il voit, seroit-il plus humain lui-même? Autant vaudroit soutenir qu'un tendre Pére aime mieux les enfants d'autrui que les siens, parce qu'il s'irrite des fautes de ceux-ci, et ne dit jamais rien aux autres" (34).

19 "Ce qui est sûr, c'est que le spectateur a devant les yeux, en la personne d'Arnolphe, un homme qui souffre authentiquement" (Picard 772; see also Hubert 67 and Apostolidès 147).

20 If we have any doubt concerning the efficacy of suffering to arouse sympathy, Molière has taken pains to embed it within the play itself. The old woman recounts Horace's affliction which she attributes to Agnès's eyes ("C'est un homme à porter en terre dans deux jours," I.526), thereby engendering sympathy in Agnès and inducing her to ignore Arnolphe's explicit instructions to admit no one.
dès quatre ans,” l.130), a comment that we will read as innocent in order to not unduly complicate matters, Arnolphe shows no sign of affection for Agnès, much less of genuine love, for the first half of the play. He lectures her, instructs her, tells her she should feel enormous gratitude towards him, interrogates her, and repeatedly sends her off inside the house.\textsuperscript{21} Whether in the opening scene with Chrysalde or alone in his numerous monologues, Arnolphe focuses primarily on unveiling or protecting his complex plan for obtaining a wife who will not cuckold him. It is only in Act III scene 5 that Arnolphe suddenly starts using the terms “amour” and “aimer” to describe his feelings for Agnès. The note of suffering that accompanies these terms is genuine: “Mais il est bien fâcheux de perdre ce qu’on aime” (l.993); “Elle trahit mes soins, mes bontés, ma tendresse, / Et cependant je l’aime, après ce lâche tour / Jusqu’à ne me pouvoir passer de cet amour” (ll.997-99). In the final two acts of the play, Arnolphe repeatedly expresses his love for Agnès and the suffering it has brought him. His anger is converted to love (“Et ces bouillants transports dont s’enflammait mon cœur, / Y semblaient redoubler mon amoureuse ardeur,” ll.1018-19); unaware of the notary’s presence he returns to the subject (“Je l’aime, et cet amour est mon grand embarras” l.1054); he even uses his pain to elicit the sympathy and aid of Alain and Georgette (IV,4). Arnolphe’s love and suffering reach their apex in his confrontation with Agnès in Act V, scene 4: he cajoles, he rails, he reprimands, he promises physical pleasure, all to no avail. The depth of his feeling is perhaps best confirmed by the concessions he is willing to make:

\begin{quote}
Tout comme tu voudras tu pourras te conduire,
Je ne m’explique point, et cela c’est tout dire.
Jusqu’où la passion peut-elle faire aller!
Enfin à mon amour rien ne peut s’égaler” (ll.1596-99).
\end{quote}

Through these two universal emotions, love and suffering, and despite everything else Arnolphe says and does, the spectator is led to sympathize with him, at least partially, during the almost two acts spanning from III,5 to V,4.

The objection has been raised that Arnolphe is a comic character and that the spectator laughs at him, even when he suffers. Indeed, Molière mixes grotesque notes with the pitiful: “Écoute seulement ce soupir amoureux, / Vois ce regard mourant, contemple ma personne” (ll.1587-88), Arnolphe says to Agnès in his futile attempt to win her love. The problem of a comic Arnolphe as opposed to a sympathetic Arnolphe is however a false one. As Picard (778 and passim) and Clarke (126) understood very well, the

\textsuperscript{21} The three meetings between these two characters in the first three acts all end with Arnolphe telling Agnès “Montez là-haut” (ll. 241, 641) or “Rentrez” (l.806).
two reactions of laughter and sympathy can coexist despite their seeming incompatibility. It may well be considerably more difficult for an actor, as opposed to a reader, to elicit the two reactions simultaneously, but to do otherwise and deliberately opt for either Arnolphe the buffoon or Arnolphe the tragic lover is to distort the play. Furthermore, as Picard notes, Molière complicates matters by giving Arnolphe two positive traits unrelated to cuckoldry, love, or suffering: he is a friend to both Chrysante and Oronte, and he is generous with his money when his friend’s son Horace appears (785). What is truly original here is that Molière impels us, through all the means we have described, to take the POV of someone who is largely antipathetic and then, relatively late in the play, he makes us feel sympathy for him.\textsuperscript{22}

In the case of Alceste, as we might conclude from the title and subtitle combined, Molière has created a jumble of a character. The variety of interpretations that he has received, both on the stage and in literary criticism is truly mind-boggling. Alceste’s contradictory characteristics have given interpreters great latitude and they have taken even more.\textsuperscript{23} While direct reports of Molière’s acting in the role are lacking, several convincing arguments have been made supporting the idea that his Alceste was simultaneously appealing and ridiculous.\textsuperscript{24} There exists little information about the role of

\textsuperscript{22} That sympathy may or may not be retracted in the last scenes of the play. Certainly, Arnolphe acts cruelly toward Horace and Agnès when Oronte appears, yet Arnolphe’s uncharacteristically laconic “ouf” leaves a great deal of room for the reader or the director/actor to elicit sympathy or not.

\textsuperscript{23} Readers of the play have attached all manner of identities to Alceste. Descotes reports the following: “Le personnage a été conçu comme un véritable homme de bien (Rousseau), comme un janséniste (G. du Boulan), comme un socialiste (G. Renard), comme un jacobin et Philinte naturellement devient royaliste (G. Desmoulins), comme le premier et le plus radical des républicains» (Sarcey) comme si par avance Alceste avait éprouvé une haine violente pour le Second Empire” (91). In the nineteenth century Alceste was glorified on moral grounds (L. Veuillot) (Albanese 91); more recently there has been an odd current of resistance to Alceste’s “charms” in the literary criticism of Guicharnaud, Hubert, Gossman, and Brody (Gutwirth 79). Indeed Gossman asserts that “no identification is encouraged” with any of the characters in the play (339).

\textsuperscript{24} First, the Duc de Montausier was delighted that everyone thought he was the model for Alceste, an unlikely reaction had Alceste been portrayed as merely laughable (Maber 130). Another contemporary, Donneau de Visé, suggests strongly in his Lettre écrite sur la comédie du Misanthrope that Molière avoided extremes: «le Héros en est le Plaisant, sans être trop Ridicule » (643). Herzel supports this reading of Molière’s interpretation by situating him and thus Alceste in terms of the actors playing Oronte and Philinte (355).
Alceste between Molière’s death in 1673 and the performances of the role by Baron (1720-29) (Sullivan "Actor's Alceste" 77). Baron played Alceste as a man of refined manners and went to great lengths to avoid appearing ridiculous, including delivering inconvenient lines as asides (Sullivan “Actor’s Alceste” 81). Grandval (1710-84) continued Baron’s tradition of a thoroughly non-ridiculous Alceste, as did Molé (1734-1802) (Sullivan "Actor's Alceste" 494). The nineteenth century went even further in the same direction, depicting him as “a starkly tragic figure” (Sullivan, "Molé" 496; see also Albanese 98 and Descotes 109). Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Alceste was almost universally perceived to be largely sympathetic and not at all ridiculous.

The contrast with Arnolphe may be illuminating. While both combine elements of the ridiculous and the tragic, Alceste does so throughout the play and he is a far more complex character than Arnolphe. From the first, Alceste is endowed with an unusually large number of character traits and ideological or moral positions. We could trace them through the play and label each as positive, negative, or questionable, but that would be to enter into the labyrinthine endeavor of laying claim to the “real” Alceste, and would do little to explain the construction of his POV in the play. For the sake of simplicity and to avoid debate, I want to severely limit discussion of Alceste’s character traits as the source of his POV, but to insist that he does have a claim to spectator sympathy through the specific trait of sincerity, a trait that has been and is held in universal high esteem. In Alceste, Molière created a complex, multi-dimensional character who is virtually impossible to dislike, in part because he champions this universally respected value.

25 Curiously, Baron played Alceste immediately after Molière’s death (1673) in at least two performances and then reprised the role almost 50 years later in 1720! He continued as Alceste up until his death in 1729 at the age of 76.

26 While Arnolphe has on occasion been interpreted on stage as a tragic figure (see Descotes 32), the range of interpretations is far narrower than those Alceste has received.

27 In the first scene alone one can find evidence of the following traits: he is angry, stubborn, opposed to social hypocrisy, in favor of sincerity, possessed with sharp critical judgment, excessive, invested in moral values, happy to correct others, opposed to corrupt practices, inconsistent, self-confident, and possessive.

28 Indeed one could do a reading of the play as the triumph of sincerity: Eliante the good and pure is its champion: “la sincérité dont son [Alceste’s] âme se pique / A quelque chose, en soi, de noble et d’héroïque” (ll.1165-66). When declaring his love to Éliante, even Philinte supports sincerity: “je vous parle du meilleur de mon âme” (l.1214). Oronte too demands sincerity, however insincerely (I,2, of Alceste) or sincerely (V,2, of Célimène). And finally, Célimène is punished in the end for her insincerity towards her suitors.
Furthermore, the playwright takes pains to underscore Alceste’s appeal within the play by having all three female characters, as different from one another as three women could possibly be, express romantic attraction to him. The appeal extends to males as well: Philinte is his devoted friend and even Oronte, although a complete hypocrite, makes amicable advances toward him. And just as in the case of Arnolphe, the fact that we may well find Alceste ridiculous does not impede our sympathy for him. The consequences of interpreting Alceste as one or the other—ridiculous or sympathetic—are even greater than in the case of Arnolphe. Descriptions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stagings make it clear that the play is distorted when Alceste is taken too seriously; a similar problem occurs if we only laugh at him. His charm, appeal, and the sympathy he arouses in others are central to the play. Worse yet, if we are prepared to dismiss him as merely ridiculous, as Gutwirth noted, we ally ourselves with Acaste and Clitandre “dont le rire perlé est d’un redoutable voisinage” (78). As in the case of Arnolphe, paradox may be the most fruitful course. As Molière himself said, “II n’est pas incompatible qu’une personne soit ridicule en de certaines choses et honnête homme en d’autres” (La Critique de L’École des femmes, scene 6). In both plays then, the POV is lodged in a character who combines sympathetic and ridiculous traits, thereby offering some degree of resistance to the spectator’s adherence.

It is clear that both Alceste and Arnolphe, albeit in very different ways, combine the tragic and the comic in their characters. Molière takes pains to integrate tragic traits, particularly tragic language, in his depiction of Arnolphe, mixing them freely with the comic plot of cuckoldry. Throughout, Arnolphe seems to be the victim of what he sees as tragic fate, combined with what the audience sees as the comic, but equally sad, fate of almost any rival to a far younger man. Whereas Molière juxtaposes comic and tragic in L’École des femmes, in Le Misanthrope he avoids the issue entirely by creating a character and a play that belong comfortably to neither category. The more general question remains whether a protagonist must have at least some serious, if not tragic, characteristics in order to be a POV character. Barko and Burgess find that “une distance . . . infranchissable nous sépare de tout personnage comique” (48). I think that they are correct in those cases where the comic character offers so few human traits that the audience can feel no sympathy for him or her, but I believe they go too far when they present characters in Le Misanthrope and Le Mariage de Figaro in those terms (38 and 48). I think it is safe to conclude that one is more likely

29 Goodkin calls Alceste “an object of universal desire” (560).
to encounter a POV character in a tragedy than in a comedy, but that the seriousness of subject matter is by no means determinant.

A curious variant of sympathy for the POV character is what Picard calls *biographisme* (775), a critical stance popular from the nineteenth to almost the mid-twentieth century. In such a reading, characters stand in for the author. The most frequent focus of such biographical interpretations is Molière’s marriage to the much younger Armande Béjart. Molière is identified with both Arnolphe and Alceste and the two plays are read as explorations of the playwright’s marital difficulties (see Herzel 363). Picard does an excellent job of demonstrating the ill-founded nature of such biographical associations (774–75). The fact that audiences saw Molière and his real-world concerns in the characters of Alceste and Arnolphe suggests, however, the dominance of their POVs in their respective plays.

*We have set out first a series of structural features associated with the establishment of a POV character and second we have examined the vital role of audience sympathy. We move now to the third consideration: the character as a construct and specifically how its interiority and vitality are developed to create a locus of POV. Audience reaction is implicated once again insofar as this category of features concerns access to the human traits of the character. The audience’s role, however, is far more passive and thus considerably less problematic than was the case for audience sympathy. In order to adopt the POV of a character, it is imperative that the audience has evidence of interiority suggesting a reasonably complex individual. That complexity can be constructed in several fashions, the simplest of which involves knowledge about the character. Is the audience provided with information about him or her beyond what we see on stage? Philinte’s account of Alceste’s visit to the maréchaux (IV, 1), discussed above, provides us with a glimpse of his conduct outside of the context of Célimène’s salon. We also learn that he has a propensity to become embroiled in lawsuits. Far more interesting is what Molière does with Arnolphe. First, he employs a récit, as in *Le Misanthrope*, but here it is homodiegetic and involves pre-dramatic and not offstage, action. Arnolphe recounts at some length in the first scene how he acquired Agnès (ll.129-48). The audience may well be put off by his conduct and attitude, but we get know him better; he takes on greater depth because we know something of his past. A homodiegetic récit will work more effectively to abet POV formation than a heterodiegetic one because the speaker is quite literally providing his or her perspective on events that have occurred off stage or in the past. Furthermore, Molière embeds the subject of knowledge in the play itself, as Arnolphe both seeks
to keep Agnès from knowledge (writing, men, etc.) and also strives to know much more than those around him (“J’en veux... apprendre / Jusqu’où l’intelligence entre eux [Horace and Agnès] a pu s’étendre,” ll.379-80).

The question of superior knowledge is thorny and has a bearing, however inconclusive, on POV. It happens fairly often in theater that the audience knows more than a given character, even more than a POV character: thus we have dramatic irony in its basic form. Does such superior knowledge undermine the POV character’s status as such? According to Harris, d’Aubignac found that “any superior knowledge on the spectators’ part actually risks hindering their [the spectators’] emotional interest and engagement” (Harris 147–48). Indeed, it would seem that such superior knowledge on the part of the audience is a distancing factor, making it difficult to see the play’s action through the POV character. Yet the classic example of dramatic irony, Oedipus Rex, is explicitly mentioned by Souriau and Barko as containing in Oedipus a dominant POV character. Souriau ties the detective plot of the play to the notion of POV and is categorical about Oedipus’s role: “L’action est solidaire de son point de vue et l’impose” (129). Yet who has ever seen or read the play unaware of what Oedipus will discover? The same holds true for numerous seventeenth-century tragedies based on widely known classical sources. Despite the audience’s superior knowledge then, Oedipus remains the POV character for whom the audience feels sympathy and through whose eyes we experience the dramatic action. Le Misanthrope contains no examples of dramatic irony and thus the issue of superior knowledge is not raised, but L’École des femmes displays dramatic irony on two distinct levels. First, superior knowledge and dramatic irony indisputably abet the construction of Arnolphe as the POV character in III,4, IV,6 and V,2, scenes in which Horace recounts what Arnolphe already knows because the young man is unaware that the older one is in fact Monsieur de la Souche. The audience shares Arnolphe’s superior knowledge. Arnolphe makes Horace a victim of his irony when he makes comments to the young man such as, in relation to taking charge of Agnès on Horace’s behalf in V,2, “Et je n’ai jamais rien fait avec si grande joie” (l.1441). Horace hears a friend’s generosity while the audience understands that Arnolphe is using his words’ polyvalence to express his diabolical glee. In III,4, as Horace laments the problems he encounters in his courtship of Agnès, Arnolphe, seeming to revel in his superior knowledge and accentuating the dramatic irony, asks the young man, “D’où, diantre, a-t-il [M. de la Souche] sitôt appris cette aventure?” (l.863). When the audience shares knowledge with an onstage character at the expense of another character, as is so often the case in this play, a certain complicity is created between the knowledgeable character and the audience (see Barko
and Burgess 19–20). Second, we find what I call authorial dramatic irony, wherein the author establishes complicity with the audience through words spoken by a character, words whose full significance the speaking character is unaware of (see Ekstein 19–24). Here Arnolphe is Molière’s victim and the audience’s knowledge is superior to the protagonist’s. On several occasions, Arnolphe makes a comment that he doesn’t mean but that later proves to be true. For example, he reassures Horace that everything will work out, saying “la fille [Agnès], après tout / Vous aime. ...Vous en viendrez à bout” (ll.890-91). Does this situation undermine Arnolphe as the POV character? One could argue that it does because the superior knowledge is shared by the playwright and the audience. Conversely, one might say that Arnolphe’s centrality is heightened by his seemingly supernatural power to influence events, despite the fact that he is unaware of it. Thus superior knowledge may be read to enhance or to undermine character POV.

We arrive finally at what is probably the most crucial feature of a POV character: internal focalization. Unless we have reliable evidence of what the character is “thinking” and “feeling,” it is impossible to perceive the dramatic universe through his or her eyes. Barko and Burgess put it well when they say: “Plus on nous laisse pénétrer profondément dans la vie intérieure d’un personnage, plus nous aurons tendance à adopter sa perspective” (20). The term internal focalization is a narratological one, coined by Gérard Genette, and has a different meaning in narrative, in cinema, and in theater. Because we are relying on the playwright’s text rather than any performance, internal focalization in theater must be expressed strictly

30 A variant of this peculiar type of dramatic irony involves the allusions to mythological figures that come out of Arnolphe’s mouth but are likely attributable to Molière instead: Arnolphe seems to allude to Oedipus as he plans to discover from Agnès and his servants what transpired during his absence, “Et l’on cherche souvent plus qu’on ne veut trouver” (l.370); he sounds like Odysseus when he reflects on the folly of having left Agnès alone: “Éloignement fatal! voyage malheureux!” (l.385); we hear an echo of Pygmalion when Arnolphe talks about molding Agnès like a “morceau de cire” (l.810). Once again Arnolphe would appear to be Molière’s comic victim, yet he is simultaneously placed in exalted company.

31 According to Gerald Prince’s Dictionary of Narratology, internal focalization is “a type of focalization whereby information is conveyed in terms of a character’s (conceptual or perceptual) point of view” (45). In narrative internal focalization means that we are dealing with a single character’s perspective. In cinema, “the most common type of internal of focalization in film is the: point-of-view” shot, which shows the perceiver and the object, person, or event perceived in successive shots” (Hedges 290–91).
through speech. It stands to reason that abundant speech might be positively correlated with internal focalization. But not just any speech will suffice; there must be evidence of both intimacy and reliability. There are two different types of internal focalization in these plays, one a matter of content and the other of structure. The content is generally emotional: expressions of strong feeling are central to the establishment of interiority for the character. The more complex and nuanced such emotions are, the more convincingly vital is the character.\(^{32}\) The contrast between Alceste and Célimène is instructive. Alceste’s sincerity along with his impassioned tirades and his anger work to create substantial internal focalization.\(^{33}\) I alluded earlier to the enormous range of interpretation and disagreement that the character of Alceste has occasioned, and I do not want to rely on my personal interpretation of Alceste in order to prove my point. Rather we will add to Alceste’s agreed-upon characteristics—sincerity and abundant speech—the telling contrast of Célimène’s absence of internal focalization. Almost everyone would concur that she never reveals her inner thoughts and feelings. Her cousin Éliante, when faced with the most obvious question about Célimène—whether she loves Alceste or not—cannot answer for certain: “C’est un point qu’il n’est pas fort aisé de savoir” (l.1180). Célimène carefully hides behind social discourse, flattery, flirtation, and irony so that all internal focalization is blocked. I do not mean to suggest that Célimène is not a vital character; merely that she does not provide enough information about her thoughts and feelings that we might see the world through her eyes.\(^{34}\) Furthermore, reliability is as serious an issue for her (accused of

\(^{32}\) Molière furnishes several examples of characters who have a dominant role in terms of speech and presence but who do not, through their lack of internal development, rise to the level of a POV character: Mascarille in \textit{L’Étourdi}, Harpagon in \textit{L’Avare}, or Eraste in \textit{Les Fâcheux}. \textit{L’Avare}’s Harpagon, for example, expresses considerable emotion, but it is neither complex nor nuanced, and it is all directed toward money and thus away from his humanity. The mechanical rigidity of his emotional reactions also suggests an absence of thought and human feeling (see Bergson 8 and passim).

\(^{33}\) Sullivan notes the success of Molière’s creation in this regard: “Alceste is a complex character, and it is precisely this complexity which makes him seem so real and so human that he has come to be considered as an actual person who has an existence entirely independent of the play of his creator” ("Actor’s Alceste" 75).

\(^{34}\) While certainly not the POV character, Agnès in Act II, scene 5 provides considerably more internal focalization when she describes her reaction to Horace’s wooing: “Et dont... / La douceur me chatouille et là-dedans remue / Certain je ne sais quoi dont je suis toute émue” (ll.562-64). There are quite a few such examples in that scene. The contrast with Célimène is striking.
being a coquette) as it is for Tartuffe, the hypocrite. And without reliability there can be no credible internal focalization.

The structural features of internal focalization are less open to debate and interpretation than the content-based. It may be presumed that a character alone onstage (or even in the presence of a confidant) is sincere. Whatever other functions a monologue may have, surely one of the most important is reliability. Nothing precludes a monologue from being the expression of a character’s delusions, but it will present sincere, internally focalized delusions. The presence of monologues in L’École des femmes is exceptionally large. Magné counts fourteen for a total of 204 lines (127), all belonging to Arnolphe. One of the primary organizing principles of L’École des femmes, monologues are a copious source of internal focalization for Arnolphe. Through them the audience learns of his plans, his precautions, his preening, his hubristic pleasure at manipulating Horace, and his pain when his plans go awry. These monologues function as a structural counterpoint to the numerous récits in the play. The latter carry the action of the play which in large measure occurs off stage, while the monologues work to make Arnolphe’s POV dominant, despite the fairly complex comic plot. Arnolphe’s internal focalization involves a strong intermingling of content and structure: in his monologues he often expresses his inner thoughts and feelings. The internal focalization is thereby strengthened. In the case of Alceste, Molière relies on content as there are no monologues at all in the play. The abundance of character traits attributed to Alceste as well as his highly emotive nature compensate for their absence.

A second structural feature that works to enable internal focalization much in the same way as the monologue is the aside. One character speaks, and by convention, no one else on stage may hear what he or she says, while the audience can. While asides may have a variety of functions, Fournier notes that, “Nécessaire, l’aparté l’est aussi à la représentation des passions, parce qu’il est avec le monologue le moyen privilégié de pénétrer dans l’âme du personnage” (56, see also Larthomas 381). As in the case of monologues, Arnolphe employs them while Alceste does not. In his first scene with Horace, Arnolphe reacts to learning what has transpired during his absence with the aside, “Ah! je crève” (l.327), while in his long scene with Agnès in the second act, he expresses his anguish in side comments such as “Ô fâcheux examen d’un mystère fatal, / Où l’examineur souffre seul tout le mal!” (ll.565-66). The abundantly self-directed voice of

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35 There is a dialogic variant of the aside, in which the aside may be audible to one other character on stage as well as the audience, but it is not pertinent to our discussion.
Arnolphe is a reflection of the dominance of his point of view. Arnolphe illustrates an oblivious verbalization of internal focalization in his scene with the notaire (IV,2) where he is so preoccupied with his own thoughts and feelings that he is unaware that someone else is conducting a conversation with him. Thus Molière creates internal focalization for the two characters through largely different means: Alceste through the abundance of character traits including, crucially, sincerity along with numerous expressions of emotion, and Arnolphe through the structural features of monologue and asides as well as his own emotional language.

The issue of internal focalization is tied to who may or may not be considered for the role of POV. While I hope I have left no doubt as to Alceste’s and Arnolphe’s claims to that position, it may be enlightening to consider why certain other characters in the two plays are precluded from taking that role. Characters do not exist in a vacuum but in a network of relations. In L’École des femmes the only other possibility is Horace. With 343 lines, his role is a substantial one; furthermore he speaks a higher percentage of the time he is on stage than does Arnolphe (60.4% versus 50%). He is the young lover and thus his eventual triumph is generically assured. However, there is little internal focalization: it is only in the final act that we learn that he truly loves Agnès (V,1) and that he suffers at the prospect of being separated from her (V,6). Perhaps most important is Horace’s lack of intelligence: he is incapable of recognizing the increasingly obvious fact that Arnolphe is the source of the all of the obstacles he encounters. It is possible that unintelligent characters do not play the role of POV because of the limitations such a perspective would necessarily entail. Furthermore, the audience would be reluctant to identify with an unintelligent character. The situation in Le Misanthrope is somewhat more complicated, in part because the play does not rely on a standard plot. Philinte shares the incipit position with Alceste, speaking almost as much as the latter in the first scene (45% of the lines versus 55%). Souriau is not alone in feeling that “Philinte... devrait nous plaire, et nous amener à juger Alceste de son point de vue” (133; see also Melzer 141). While he speaks little overall—almost half of his lines are spoken in this first scene—he is on stage for 60% of the play and thus could serve the rational judgmental role advocated by Souriau and Melzer. He even provides at least some degree of internal focalization, sharing his social philosophy and his feelings for Éliante. However, Molière undermines Philinte’s claims to the POV position

36 Another such example would be Britannicus. Racine may have given him the privilege of the title of the play, but his grasp of the political situation—in tellingly marked contrast to Junie—is almost non-existent.
by making him thoroughly uninteresting (“tiède” according to Barko and Burgess 36–37). As in the case of Horace and Arnolphe, Philinte functions in contrast to Alceste, and set side by side, Philinte has the advantage only when it comes to self-control. Otherwise, he pales in comparison to his friend and stands on morally questionable grounds when he supports social hypocrisy. The second option for POV character in _Le Misanthrope_ is Célimène. Her role is a more sizable one than Philinte’s (341 lines) and certainly a more central one to the plot insofar as she is the object of desire. She too has had her advocates, ready to brush Alceste aside in her favor as the central character in the play (Melzer 140 and to some extent Brody 572–73). Indeed, the famous portrait scene (II,4) constitutes a significant threat to Alceste’s POV and offers a real, albeit temporary, alternative. First, the space is Célimène’s and, as Gaines points out, in the portrait scene she physically occupies “the central ocular and hierarchical location from which all the details of society assume their highest meaning” (73). Second, through her critique of her peers she explicitly imposes her POV and it is accepted by most of the characters in attendance. Alceste, as we noted earlier, is silent for much of the scene. However, the delay in Célimène’s appearance on stage—she arrives at the beginning of the second act—makes it hard for us to adopt her POV. Even more important is the complete absence of internal focalization: as we described above, the audience has no access to Célimène’s true thoughts and feelings. Thus Molière arranges matters so that there both is a POV character in each of these two plays and little doubt about who it might be.

That Molière was conscious of playing with the notion of POV is clear in _L’École des femmes_. One has only to contrast this play with the earlier _L’École des maris_ (1661). The latter offers a similar plot in which an older man (Sganarelle) seeks to marry his much younger ward but she succeeds in marrying the young man who has caught her fancy despite the numerous efforts of the older man to prevail. In _L’École des maris_, however, we do not perceive the situation through Sganarelle’s eyes. He is merely the blocking character and while he is accorded a substantial role (he speaks over 42% of the lines and is on stage for 87% of the play), it is one that neither elicits

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37 Others have noted this lack of internal focalization: Célimène “supprime […] toute intériorité au profit d’un échange de formules creuses” (Apostolidès 153); “Par un singulier paradoxe, cette coquette [Célimène] se trouve la personne la plus en vue, en même temps que celle qu’on connaît le moins” (Collinet 95); Célimène, derrière l’écran des mots, est strictement inaccessible” (Vernet 176).
the audience’s sympathy nor provides nuanced internal focalization. Molière further undermines any possibility of Sganarelle being the POV character by giving him an older brother who is more wise, generous, and understanding, and with whom he must share the opening scene.

In *L’École des femmes*, not only does Molière make Arnolphe the POV character for the audience, but he also develops a metaphorical extension of the notion of POV within the play itself. In a curious parallel to Molière imposing Arnolphe’s POV on the audience, Arnolphe attempts to impose his POV in turn on those around him who are less powerful than he. While his pedagogical efforts may be viewed as merely efforts at persuasion—which is not what we mean by POV—it is still noteworthy that Molière has embedded the notion of perspective in Arnolphe’s dealings with others. Specifically, Arnolphe instructs Agnès, literally putting his own words in her mouth through the maxims he makes her read aloud (III,2); later he attempts to make Alain and Georgette share his fear of public embarrassment: “On veut à mon honneur jouer d’un mauvais tour; / Et quel affront pour vous, mes enfants, pourrait-ce être, / Si l’on avait ôté l’honneur à votre maître!” (ll.1095-97). In *Le Misanthrope* Molière moves from his earlier largely playful stance in *L’École des femmes* into a more serious examination of the possibilities entailed by a dominant character perspective. And we might speculate that it is precisely the complexity of the construction of Alceste as POV character that has led to the endless debate about Alceste’s character (comic, tragic, laughable, admirable, etc.; see Yarrow 314 and passim). The play’s originality is grounded at least partially in the issues tied to the POV character.

The notion of the single, dominant POV has provided an initial path into a consideration of what it might mean for a POV to exist in theater. While obviously unable to examine the subject exhaustively here, I have set down what I believe to be the three basic requirements for a POV character: 1) speech and presence, 2) sympathy and perhaps some degree of identification, and 3) interiority and vitality. It is important to recognize at this point that plays with a dominant POV character are rare and that their scarcity is hardly an accident. Theater adopts the strength of its very form when it favors multiplicity: multiple speakers onstage, multiple characters with a claim to audience sympathy, internal focalization for multiple characters as well. *The play as a whole*, however, loses its POV through such multiplicity. Which is not to say that this study is a waste of time. Analyzing POV in theater opens a special perspective on how a play is constructed and how it approaches its audience. By considering the extreme case, we are made more aware of how characters are brought to the fore through any one or a combination of the features we have identified and examined.
On more than one occasion, for example, Corneille opens his plays with female characters, alone or with their confidant, who draw the audience in powerfully to their POV with tirades that provide abundant internal focalization and elicit audience sympathy through their expression of emotional distress (e.g., Émilie in *Cinna* and Sabine in *Horace*). Elsewhere, there are numerous characters who satisfy conditions 1) and 3) but not 2); that is, they are abundantly present, speak a great deal and provide plentiful signs of inner life, but do not engender our sympathy. One thinks of Cléopâtre (*Rodogune*), Attila, or Racine’s Mithridate. Certain characters cannot claim the incipit, which is tied to the first requirement of speech and presence, because they come on stage after another character has made a bid for audience sympathy (e.g., Auguste in *Cinna* or Sertorius). Understanding POV in theater as composed of these three elements allows us to better understand reduced variations and the purposes they may serve dramatically. We may also consider POV on a micro rather than a macro level: one character’s POV may strongly dominate an act, for example, only to cede to another or to multiple POVs elsewhere in the play. Act II of *Britannicus* is dominated by Néron, although audience sympathy for him is doubtful; Mithridate commands the third act of his play, and Agamemnon the first of *Iphigénie*, yet none of the three dominate their respective plays. The notions of alliance and conflict offer further possibilities in conjunction with POV. In Corneille’s *Nicomède*, the strong unity between the eponymous hero and Laodice work to create a joint POV. In *Le Cid* Rodrigo’s status as the dominant POV is contested by Chimène, as Alceste’s was, at least initially, by Philinte. In a different vein, Hippolyte, rather than opposing Phèdre directly or allying himself with her, acts as her double through their common experience of suffering and desire (or suffering desire). The resulting contrast between them, however, only serves to draw attention to Phèdre and away from Hippolyte. He pales beside her.

Molière seemingly played with the possibilities of POV throughout his career as a playwright. Most of Molière’s plays, however, involve variations that undermine the possibility of a dominant POV. Argan (*Le Malade imaginaire*), like Harpagon (*L’Avare*) mentioned above, is too limited in his range of human emotion. He also shows signs of limited intelligence (reminiscent of the problem we noted about Horace) insofar as he allows himself to be manipulated by his wife, his doctors, his daughter, and her beau, thereby jeopardizing the possibility of audience identification. Dom Juan overwhelms us with his presence and words, but he arouses little sympathy and provides no indication of what his emotions might be.

While few playwrights have chosen to go this far, particularly in seventeenth-century France, the possibility of a single character POV
dominating an entire play exists, as I hope I have convincingly demonstrated. Seeing the dramatic universe through the perspective of Arnolphe or Alceste imposes an exceptional angle on the play’s action. In both L’École des femmes and Le Misanthrope the dominant POV imposes an unfamiliar perspective on the audience: Arnolphe because the traditional comic plot typically places the POV with the naturally sympathetic young lovers, and Alceste because he is such a singular, immoderate character. Dramatic conflict is by no means sacrificed on account of a dominant POV, but the audience’s freedom to choose sides—freedom that may be limited or controlled in many other ways as well—is foreclosed. But it is precisely the imposition of that specific angle on the entire play that makes such plays stand apart, makes them take on an additional layer that overlies the entire play and colors everything through the remarkable degree of intimacy with the POV character’s perspective. While a dominant POV is by no mean a guarantor of a great play, the enduring stature of L’École des femmes, Le Misanthrope, and Phèdre is at least in part a function of their use of a dominant POV.

Works Cited


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Seventeenth-Century Literature, 41(81), 315-341. Publication Information. Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature. This
document is currently not available here. Find in your library. DOWNLOADS. In this regard, Molière’s L’École des femmes is our most
celebrated example. It was first performed on 26 December 1662 at the Palais-Royal. We cannot dismiss Zeitgeist, but it is important
to study Molière using other criteria such as the dramatic structure of his plays, its types and other organizing principles.
According to Northrop Frye, one should study a work of literature using a conceptual framework. Moreover, there was a time
when Molière’s plays were not read as plays but as texts. Genre is the starting-point. Act I. Arnolphe adopted Agnès when she
was four years old. (My prose Tartuffe has a 4th production coming up, my Femmes Savantes is still waiting for its first, and my
Misanthrope is nearing completion.) Other articles where La Critique de L’École des femmes is discussed: Molière: Scandals and
successes: La Critique de L’École des femmes in June 1663 and L’Impromptu de Versailles in October were both single-act
discussion plays. In La Critique Molière allowed himself to express some principles of his new style of comedy, and in the other play he
made theatre history. He is the author of enduring plays such as Tartuffe and Le Misanthrope. Many of his plays contained
scandalous material. They were met with public outcry and were suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church. The women’s
fatuities, which they consider the height of wit, suggest their warped view of culture in which material things are of no account.