

MOLIÈRE'S USE OF NAMES IN GEORGE DANDIN

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Will George Dandin, a rich peasant who has married above his station, live happily ever after with his beautiful young wife Angélique? Will he gain respect and acceptance from his wife's impoverished, but haughty parents, Monsieur and Madame de Sotenville? Not very likely. The subtitle of Molière's play George Dandin is "Le Mari confondu" ("The Husband Confounded").¹ In each of the play's three acts, Dandin learns of one of his wife's escapades. He calls her parents to judge the case, but is confounded by his wife's cleverness. No matter what the situation, Angélique makes her husband appear to be the guilty party.

Although the courtiers at Versailles, where the play was first presented in 1668, found George Dandin to be absolutely hilarious,² the play aroused protests, not only in the seventeenth century, but in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth as well. Preachers, writers, and critics objected to allowing a faithless wife to get the better of her jealous husband.³ Socially conscious writers saw in the play a treatise on democracy and sympathized with the poor peasant who was misunderstood and mistreated by decadent aristocrats.⁴

While the play has an underlying current of bitterness and social criticism, it is without question a comedy and not a tragedy or a serious drama. The play contains many elements of broad farce, such as a wife beating her husband and slapstick collisions in the dark, with resulting pratfalls. Its literary antecedents are comic. The ridiculous cuckold and the deceiving wife have a long literary tradition, from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages to the modern era. Among other sources, Molière may have drawn on amusing tales by Boccaccio and other Italian writers and even one of his own, earlier farces, La Jalousie du barbouillé, in which the faithless wife is also called Angélique.⁵

What of the names in George Dandin? What do they show about the author's intentions and the characters themselves? A study of the meanings, social connotations, and literary precedents of the names in George Dandin reveals that the names are an important comic element in the play. They point up amusing and ironic aspects of the characters' stupidity, social pretensions, and perversity.

Before studying the names in detail, let us look at the situation at the beginning of the play. Dandin complains about his wife Angélique and her parents, Monsieur and Madame de Sotenville. His wife treats him with contempt and is offended at bearing his name. The Sotenvilles use his money freely, but have as little to do with him as possible. Dandin had supposed that he was concluding a mutually beneficial alliance with the Sotenvilles. They needed money, and he wanted to marry into the aristocracy. His wife

Angélique belonged to a family in which nobility was transmitted through the female as well as the male line. Therefore, his children would be gentlemen, at least Angélique's children would be. Dandin soon has reason to wonder whether Angélique's children will be his own or whether he is not soon to become a cuckold. Lubin, an inept, talkative country bumpkin, who does not realize that Dandin is Angélique's husband, discloses to the one person from whom it should be kept secret that Angélique is involved in an amorous intrigue with a young courtier named Clitandre.⁶

The name Lubin is traditional for a man willing to engage in questionable enterprises for a fee.⁷ Sixteenth-century literary antecedents include Rabelais's Frère Lubin, a talkative provincial,⁸ and Marot's Frère Lubin, who could do anything immoral, but nothing good.⁹ Molière's Lubin follows these traditions. He is talkative, mercenary, and lacking in moral values. He thinks that jealous husbands deserve to be deceived. He is delighted to act as Clitandre's go-between in his affair with Angélique and is more than pleased with his reward of three gold coins. Molière's contemporaries found Lubin, with his repertoire of extravagant oaths, his talent for telling everything he knows at just the wrong moment, and his overvaluation of his own mental gifts, the most amusing character in the play.¹⁰

Dandin's reaction to his wife's impending infidelity is not what we might expect. He does not try to keep the affair secret, nor does he beat Angélique in a fit of jealousy or murder his wife and her

suitor. Instead, he is determined to make his dishonor as clear as possible in order to obtain a separation from his wife. While Dandin's actions may seem foolish or incomprehensible, he is simply living up to his name, which signifies "fool," "simpleton," "dolt," "nincompoop," and possibly also "deceived husband."¹¹ Although Angélique is frankly offended at bearing Dandin's name, his own attitude is ambivalent. On the one hand, he refers to his name as belonging to a race above reproach (II, 2), paralleling on a lower level the Sotenvilles' pride in their names and their ancestors. On the other, he considers the fact that he is now called "Monsieur de la Dandinière" instead of George Dandin the sole advantage of his marriage (I, IV),

The name Dandin is not original with Molière. Rabelais, in the sixteenth century, spoke of Perrin and Tenot Dandin, "apointeurs de procès."¹² Two major writers of the seventeenth century also have their Perrin Dandins. Racine's Perrin Dandin in Les Plaideurs is a judge who cannot be stopped from trying cases.¹³ La Fontaine's Perrin Dandin resolves a dispute between two pilgrims over an oyster by eating the oyster himself and giving each of the parties to the dispute half a shell.¹⁴

Molière's Dandin carries on the legal traditions of his last name. His vocabulary is full of legal terms. He takes on the role of a prosecuting attorney with his wife Angélique as the defendant and his parents-in-law, the Sotenvilles, as judges. He is convinced that he can rid himself of his wife if he can present a clear case,

of misconduct against her. Unfortunately for Dandin, Angélique is too clever for him, and he is never able to convince his chosen judges of her guilt. Molière has added an important touch in giving his Dandin the first name George. George means "farmer" or "plowman," an appropriate name for a peasant.¹⁵

While Dandin lives up to his name, Angélique does not. She has been described as "l'image même de la sensualité égoïste".¹⁶ Dandin calls her "trafresse," "scélérate," "pendarde de femme," "ma carogne de femme," "Madame la coquine," "crocodile," "une méchante carogne," and "une méchante femme." Angélique is not a docile, submissive wife, but a formidable adversary who refuses to accord Dandin the respect he feels is his due and who resists his attempts to impose legal and moral obligations on her. Angélique, à coquetté, chafes under the limitations of life in a small provincial town with a husband who takes literally descriptions of marriage as "chains" and "ties." She insists on the right to lead a life independent of a man she did not choose to wed. After having escaped from the repressive and impoverished home of her parents, she intends to enjoy herself. She advises Dandin to take any complaints he may have to her parents. In doing so, she sets him up for his final defeat, for she realizes that her parents will soon tire of his complaints, especially if she can discredit him sufficiently in their eyes.

Dandin's first efforts to bring his wife to justice are frustrated by the Sotenvilles' insistence on giving him a lesson in manners. The Sotenvilles are endowed with an overweening pride

in their names, their lineage, and their personal dignity. The lessons they try to impose on Dandin are evidence of their scorn for their peasant son-in-law. By throwing up a screen of etiquette, they seek to maintain the distance between themselves and Dandin as he tries to bring them down to his level.

Madame de Sotenville indignantly interrupts Dandin before he can present his case against Angélique. She rebukes him for not greeting her and her husband respectfully enough. Dandin attempts to continue, but Madame de Sotenville interrupts him again. He has had the effrontery to refer to her as "belle-mère" ("mother-in-law"), mentioning the unnamable, her alliance with a peasant. Her exclamation, "Encore!" shows that this is not the first time that she has tried to teach him the proper form of address for one in her position. Monsieur de Sotenville is less openly scornful of Dandin than his wife. He nonetheless objects immediately when Dandin refers to him as "Monsieur de Sotenville" instead of using the more respectful "Monsieur," even though his wife had called him "Monsieur de Sotenville" just four lines earlier. Sotenville, who is greatly enamored of his name, which means "Stupid in the City," does not want to have his family name pronounced by someone so far beneath him in rank. He further forbids Dandin to refer to their daughter as his wife, thereby revealing the basic impropriety and emptiness of an unmentionable relationship. Dandin defies the Sotenvilles by refusing to learn what they are trying to teach him; that is, that he is not their equal.

The Sotenvilles answer Dandin's accusations of their daughter with a lesson in genealogy. "De la maison de la Prudoterie il y a plus de trois cents ans qu'on n'a point remarqué qu'il y ait eu de femme, Dieu merci, qui ait fait parler d'elle," Madame de Sotenville claims (I, 4). Although no one may have spoken about the women of the house of Prudoterie for more than three hundred years, it is obvious that someone has noticed Angélique's marital problems, even if her mother has not. Angélique herself admits that she and her husband are a subject of local gossip (III, 6).

The Sotenvilles go on to brag about their ancestors, Jacqueline de la Prudoterie and Mathurine de Sotenville, apparently unaware of the fact that names such as Jacqueline and Mathurine were no longer used by the aristocracy. Feminine names ending in -ine were reserved for peasants in Molière's day. After these names stopped being used by peasants, they were once again used by city-dwellers, except for the names Martine and Mathurine, which were still boycotted by them.¹⁷ Thus, Jacqueline and Mathurine sounded like peasant names to the courtiers at Versailles and to the theater-going public in Paris, as did the name of Angélique's servant, Claudine. Masculine names ending in -in also were reserved for peasants, and we have three examples in this play, Dandin, Lubin, and Dandin's servant, Colin.¹⁷

The Sotenvilles' pride in their ancestors extends to the male side as well. Monsieur de Sotenville, for example, tries to impress Clitandre, Angélique's admirer, with stories of his family's exploits. While the irony of these stories would escape anyone but a specialist

today, in Molière's time it was clear that Monsieur de Sotenville was bragging about his family's participation in disastrous campaigns and ridiculous enterprises. In his youth, Sotenville took part in the arrière-ban, or the convocation of the réar vassals, at Nancy, a total disaster. His father, Jean-Gilles de Sotenville, was present at the siege of Montauban, one of the least glorious of French military exploits. Bertrand de Sotenville, one of his ancestors, had the privilege of selling everything he owned for the "voyage d'outre-mer" (the Crusades).¹⁸ By naming these inglorious exploits, Sotenville enlarges the sphere of his family's incompetence. The Sotenvilles are not only stupid in the city, but in military endeavors as well.

Though Monsieur de Sotenville's stories leave Clitandre unimpressed, they indicate to him that playing on Sotenville's pride in his name and desire for respect would be an effective way to frame his denials of any dishonorable intentions toward Angélique. "Moi, aimer une jeune et belle personne, qui a l'honneur d'être la fille de Monsieur le baron de Sotenville! Je vous révère trop pour cela, et suis trop votre serviteur. Quiconque vous l'a dit est un sot" (I, 5). Sotenville is too stupid to appreciate the implications of Clitandre's use of the word "sot," though it forms the first syllable of his name, or to note the irony under the aristocratic and courtly politeness of Clitandre's words. For all their delusions of grandeur, the Sotenvilles are only minor country aristocrats and were considered ridiculous by the high-born members of the court and the wealthy theater-goers of Paris.

While the Sotenvilles may seem incredibly blind, stupid, or perverse in believing Angélique and Clitandre rather than their son-in-law, Dandin's accusations are never supported by appearances. Appearances, however, depend to a large extent on what the viewer wishes to see. Dandin fails to realize that his chances of bringing the Sotenvilles around to his point of view are slim. They are predisposed to believe their daughter and Clitandre, rather than Dandin, because Dandin is not a member of the same social class. Besides, it is in their best interest to prevent a public scandal. Their great outpourings of tenderness and relief when Angélique makes Dandin's accusations appear to be false demonstrate their concern about protecting their family name (II, 8). For a moment, Angélique is their little girl again, not simply an object of barter. It is they who selected the name Angélique for her, and to them she will always be a little angel.

What of the name of Angélique's admirer, Clitandre? No one in the seventeenth century was actually named Clitandre. The name is not even French. It is a conventional name for a young lover in pastoral poetry. It comes from the Greek and means "famous as a man" or "famous for manliness."¹⁹ The name is so far removed from reality that Lubin has trouble remembering the name, let alone pronouncing it (I, 2). While it may seem that there is a Clitandre in each of Molière's plays, in fact, the name Clitandre appears elsewhere in Molière only as the name of a marquis in Le Misanthrope of 1665 and as the romantic lead in Les Femmes savantes of 1672.

Though Dandin, as the subtitle predicted, is confounded in the end, he is not the only character exposed to ridicule. Lubin carries out his venal tasks so incompetently that the audience cannot help laughing at his blundering and stupidity. And Lubin, who laughed at Dandin's predicament, may well suffer the same fate if he marries Angélique's servant Claudine, who has shown herself to be exceptionally talented at deception. Clitandre, who fancies himself an irresistible suitor, plays the role of the young lover for which his name has destined him. It seems obvious, however, that Angélique is using him, rather than the other way around. He spouts the conventional phrases leading to adulterous love, but fails in his attempt at seduction. The Sotenvilles come in for special treatment since they are ridiculous on both sides of their family, coming as they do from a long line of dolts and prudes. The meanings and social connotations of the names of the Sotenvilles and their ancestors expose the absurdity of their pride in their family and their names. They are not only stupid in the city, but blind in the country. They may consider their daughter an angel, but the audience knows, even if they do not, that Angélique, while not technically unfaithful, has strayed from the chaste and prudish example of her ancestors.

Throughout the play, Dandin, Lubin, Clitandre, and the Sotenvilles conform to the destinies inherent in their names. Only Angélique escapes the determinism of her name. Because she is cleverer than the others, she retains her aura of angelic purity

and virtue while enjoying the pleasures of an extramarital intrigue. Quick-witted and intelligent, she is able to confound her husband, deceive her parents, and take pleasure in the flattering words and admiration she feels are appropriate for one of her youth, beauty, and social class.

In George Dandin, Molière uses names as an integral part of the comedy. Whether the names are ironic as in the case of Angélique, obvious, as in the case of the Sotenvilles and the house of Prudoterie, or more subtle as in the use of peasant names and the invocation of disasters and defeats, the names intensify and highlight the comic defects, stupidity, and perversity of the characters in this play.

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NOTES

¹ In the canon of Molière's works, George Dandin comes between Amphitryon and L'Avare (The Miser). All three works were produced in 1668. George Dandin was first presented before the court at Versailles on July 18, 1668. Its first performance in Paris was at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal on November 9 of the same year. See Molière, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Robert Jouanny (Paris: Garnier, 1962), II, 183-187. All references to Molière's works in this paper are to this edition. References to acts and scenes will be given in parentheses in the body of the text. The act will be indicated by a Roman numeral, the scene by an Arabic numeral.

Molière himself played the role of Dandin and his wife Armande that of Angélique (R. Farquharson Sharp, "Note," The Birmingham Repertory Theater, program for Friday, March 19, 1920, p. 1).

² Robinet, a letter in verse of July 21, 1668, quoted in Henry Lyonnet, Les "Premières" de Molière (Paris: Delagrave, 1921), p. 195.

³ See, for example, Bourdaloue, "Sermon sur l'impureté," Oeuvres de Bourdaloue (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1840), I, 297, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lettre à D'Alembert sur les spectacles (Paris: Garnier, 1889).

⁴ See Léopold-Lacour, Molière acteur (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1928) and Histoire de la littérature française classique, 1660-1700 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1947), p. 262.

⁵ In addition to classical sources and the fâbliaux of the Middle Ages, Molière may have been inspired by two of the Decameron tales (VII, 4 and 8), La Rhodiana by Andrea Calmo, and Il Filosofo by Arétino. See Antoine Adam, Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^e siècle (Paris: Editions mondiales, 1962), III, 368-369. The most immediate source is probably La Jalousie du barbouillé, a farce attributed to Molière, which presents a number of points in common with George Dandin. See Molière, Oeuvres complètes, I, 1-3.

⁶ "The stupid Lubin has some justification in regarding Dandin as a bystander," says J. D. Hubert, "for the latter has become so estranged from his own household and from his marital rights that nobody would take him for Angélique's husband." Molière & The Comedy of Intellect (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p. 192.

⁷ The definition of Lubin in Randle Cotgrave's A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues, reproduced from the first edition, London, 1611 (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), is "A Base, or Sea-Wolfe; also a nickname for a Monke, or Frier; whence, Frere Lubin; the true name of a certainé Monke, who loved a neighbor's house better then his owne couent."

⁸ François Rabelais, Pantagruel, ch. 7, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jacques Boulenger and Lucien Scheler (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1955), p. 197.

⁹ Clément Marot, "D'un qu'on appelloit Frere Lubin," Oeuvres

diverses, ed. C. A. Mayer (London: The Athlone Press, 1966), pp. 142-143.

¹⁰ Lyonnet, p. 196.

¹¹ Walther von Wartburg, Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch (Leipzig-Berlin: Teubner, 1934). The definition of Dandin in Cotgrave is "A meacocke, noddie, ninnie; a hoydon, sot, lobcocke; one that knows not how to looke, and gapes at every thing he knowes not."

¹² Le Tiers livre, ch. 41, pp. 474-477.

¹³ Jean Racine, Les Plaideurs, Théâtre complet de Jean Racine, ed. Maurice Rat (Paris: Garnier, no date).

¹⁴ Jean de La Fontaine, Fables, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Garnier, 1962), pp. 255-256.

¹⁵ Albert Dauzat, Dictionnaire Etymologique des noms de famille et prénoms de France (Paris: Larousse, 1951).

¹⁶ Jean Meyer, Molière (Paris: Perrin, 1963), p. 230.

¹⁷ Albert Dauzat, Les Noms de personnes: Origine et évolution (Paris: Delagrave, no date), p. 66.

¹⁸ Molière, Oeuvres complètes, II, 892. The names Gilles and Bertrand may have had comic overtones in the seventeenth century, for La Fontaine in "Le Singe et le léopard," published in 1671, speaks of "Bertrand, Singe du Pape en son vivant," and of "Gille, Cousin et gendre de Bertrand," Fables, p. 248.

¹⁹ Lidell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, abridged version (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953). Kluto - renowned; andros - man.