

# Classroom Connections

Before the performance...



## Translation and Adaptation

Ask students to define the words “adaptation” and “translation,” then discuss what they mean in terms of works of literature. What forms of adaptation do students most often see in popular culture? Molière’s *Don Juan* is a French play written in prose. Shortly after Molière’s death, his wife had another playwright adapt the piece into verse. The Shakespeare Theatre Company is producing Stephen Wadsworth’s prose adaptation of Molière’s play, which is a new translation from French to English. Ask students to discuss the role of the translator and adaptor. What is involved in translating and adapting stories? Working in small groups, have the class select a favorite myth or legend to adapt for a short performance. Bilingual students may choose to translate it into another language as well.



## Censorship

Censorship is a controversial issue. While the first amendment guarantees our right to free speech, media such as books, music, art, theatre, television and films can be censored even in our country today. Discuss with students their opinion of censorship. Do they feel that any material needs to be censored? What are the reasons works of art are censored or “toned down” for the public? Ask students to research a piece of art that has been censored and write an opinion piece about why it should or should not have been censored. What were the reasons this particular piece was censored? What social rules or conventions did it challenge? After students present their pieces to the class, discuss what social rules or conventions may have existed in Molière’s time to lead to the censorship of *Don Juan*.



## Questioning Social Mores

Social mores are the accepted traditional customs and morals of a particular social group. Molière, like Shakespeare, drew much of his inspiration from the world around him. His plays are social satires mocking commoners and nobility alike. What social mores does Molière mock in *Don Juan*? Discuss the customs and morality of our respective communities. Are they similar to Molière’s? Have they changed? How?



## Playing Around on Your Girlfriend/Boyfriend

Have two “couples” stand across the room with their backs facing each other. Play a CD of light “romantic” music. Narrate the following to the students; instruct them to embody each description: “You are waking up from a deep sleep. You slowly turn around, looking for your true love. Then your eyes lock with the person standing across the room. This is your true love. You move towards each other in slow motion.” One student from each couple is given a special direction before the activity starts—as the couples are about to join together, the members with the secret instructions turn to each other and join hands, spurning their intended. As they run off together (still in slow motion) see how the jilted lovers react. Do they chase their true loves, turn to each other for comfort, or do they sit down and sulk? Ask students to write a brief paragraph from either the point of view of the jilted lover or the lover who dumped their intended for another stronger attraction.



## Commedia in Molière’s Plays

*Commedia dell’arte* is a type of comedy developed in Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries and made popular in France through the work of playwrights such as Molière. It is a very theatrical art form characterized by the use of stock characters in traditional masks and costumes. The masks were often physical representations of each character’s personal traits and easily recognizable to an audience. For example, the surly and pompous Il Capitano’s mask features a furrowed brow and long, upturned nose. Have students create masks to represent the stock characters that we are familiar with, such as “Mean Girl” or “Jock” or “Nerd.” What features define these characters? Would an audience recognize the character?

# Classroom Connections

...After the performance



## Friends Don't Let Friends...

In the first performances of this play, Molière himself played the role of Don Juan's servant Sganarelle. Sganarelle attempts to convince Don Juan to repent and live a good life. At the end of the play, Don Juan is dragged down into hell, leaving Sganarelle to fend for himself. In his last speech, Sganarelle says, "Master! Oh, everyone will be satisfied by your death—the Heaven you offended, the laws you violated, the creditors you dodged, the girls you deceived, the families you dishonored, the parents you demeaned, the women you ruined, the husbands you drove to the brink. Everyone's happy except me, with nothing in my pocket and nowhere to go! Oh Master! My wages, my wages! My wages." Ask students to discuss this final moment in the play. What does Sganarelle really think of Don Juan? Ask students to imagine that they are Sganarelle, and they must write a letter home explaining what has happened to Don Juan. How might Sganarelle relate the events of the play from his perspective? What will he do next?



## Molière on *Don Juan*: Moral Judgement or Cheers?

Don Juan is a legendary character famous for his seduction of women. His name is often found as a synonym for "seducer." Some people see him as a cruel philanderer who uses women for his own personal gain, while others see him as a man who truly loves every woman he seduces. What do you think Molière thought of Don Juan? Divide the class into two teams—one team supporting Don Juan as the "cruel philanderer" and the other supporting him as the "true lover"—and have them create arguments in support of their belief. Next, have the teams debate one another. Can one team persuade the other that they are right? What is the class's verdict on Molière's opinion of Don Juan?



## Don Juan in the 21st Century

Discuss with students what kind of place Don Juan held in his society. Did he have power or wealth that he could have used for good? Ask students to brainstorm a list of people in recent history with the same circumstances as Don Juan. How did they use their wealth and power? What kinds of ends did they meet? Do we expect those like Don Juan to be punished, or do they get away with their evil deeds?



## Women in the Play

The character of Don Juan is a famous "ladies' man," seducing many women and behaving unethically towards them. How were the women in the play portrayed in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's production of *Don Juan*? How might a modern woman respond to Don Juan's behavior? Referring back to the article "Marriage and Family in 17th-Century France," ask students to make a list of reasons why Don Juan's behavior toward women did not comply with the social norms of courtship at the time. Then ask students to make a list of reasons why Don Juan's behavior toward women may or may not comply with the social norms of courtship in our time. Have students imagine that they are a spokesperson for women's rights in either Molière's time or ours, and ask them to write and present a speech supporting their opinion of Don Juan's behavior.



## Chivalry—Then and Now

Chivalry was a code of honor upheld by medieval knights, including such idealized qualities as defense of the church and its principles, love of country, bravery, honesty, courtesy and gallantry toward women. The qualities changed throughout history to adapt to changing societies but still maintained the essential ideals of truth and honor. Have the class create a chivalric code for today's society listing all of the ideals or qualities that one would aspire to. What ideals would you include? Why?



## The Moral of the Story

As children, many of us grew up reading or listening to parables from the Bible, Aesop's fables or Grimm's Fairy Tales. An important aspect to all of these stories is that they have a moral—a lesson that the author wanted us to learn. While these stories from our childhood often had very clearly stated morals, Molière's adaptation is more complex and uncertain. Ask students to discuss the lesson they felt was communicated to teenagers in 2006. Ask each student to write an epilogue of Don Juan speaking from Hell to relate the moral of the play.