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THE SPIRIT OF MOLIÈRE
AN INTERPRETATION

THE SPIRIT OF MOLIÈRE

AN INTERPRETATION

BY PERCY ADDISON CHAPMAN

EDITED BY JEAN-ALBERT BÉDÉ

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

CHRISTIAN GAUSS



1940

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IN MEMORIAM

FOREWORD BY THE EDITOR

WE ARE PRESENTING today Percy Addison Chapman's posthumous work on Molière as the most fitting monument that could be erected to his memory. The *we*, here, is not a rhetorical one. Although I must be regarded as the sole responsible editor, I considered myself, somehow, the delegate of Percy Chapman's friends and colleagues in Princeton and elsewhere. Many of them, in point of fact, have already indicated their deep interest in this undertaking. One in particular, without whose help and encouragement this tribute would never have been complete, assisted me with tireless and unbounded generosity: I am referring, of course, to Dean Christian Gauss, who thus remains, in his own right and to the very last, Percy Chapman's closest confidant and most trusted adviser. My thanks also are due the Princeton University Press for their splendid cooperation in honoring a former member of their board. But first and above all my gratitude will go to Mrs. Percy Chapman. It was she who entrusted to my care her husband's manuscript. Thanks to her, I shall have had the rare, though melancholy, privilege to translate into something tangible all that I felt and feel for my departed friend—for the one friend who introduced me to America, not only in the sense that he contributed to bringing me into this country, but because it is in him that I first learned to

admire the finest aspects of the American mind and heart.

This work as we offer it is necessarily and pathetically unfinished. No attempt was made to move the hands of the clock beyond the hour that Fate has struck. To all documentary purposes—but for one exception—the manuscript and the book alike end with the study of *Tartuffe*. The exception is that of *Le Misanthrope* which the author, disregarding chronology in this instance, chose to examine in connection with *Don Garcie de Navarre*. From a critical viewpoint, however, it will be found that such important plays as *Don Juan*, *L'Avare* or *Les Femmes Savantes*, while they have not been analyzed, were taken into consideration, time and again, in Percy Chapman's general appraisal of Molière. Most important of all, we are fortunate enough to possess, virtually complete, what would have been the concluding chapter of the entire work. This chapter states in such enlightening manner Chapman's final conception of the "Spirit of Molière" and of his times that it gives the reader an impression, and the book an appearance, of completeness.

Such being the case, it has seemed advisable to preserve this illusion of continuity whenever possible. To be sure, as I have just said, the development was allowed to drop after the discussion of *Tartuffe*. Up to *Tartuffe*, however, gaps that existed in the manuscript have been filled. These additions by the editor will be found to be printed between brackets. There is no telling, of course, that they would have proved satisfactory to the author. All that can be said is that each corresponds to a suggestion of his, however laconically expressed, sometimes pencilled in the margin for his own future consideration.

It thus happens that Chapter x ("The Quarrel of the *Ecole des Femmes*"), which reached us in the scantiest form—less than five typewritten pages in all—was deemed essential enough in the chain of reasoning to deserve full treatment. To a lesser extent and for the same reason, Chapter xi ("From Mazarin to Louis XIV") also has been supplemented.

Other tasks for the editor included the final delineation of chapters, the organization or reorganization of some of them into their component parts (Chapter xi and the beginning of Chapter xii were largely tentative in this respect), and, generally speaking, the revision of the text in order to avoid, as far as possible, any laxity in the style or the sequence of ideas. Whatever arbitrary there is in all this was inescapable; whatever shortcomings will, I hope, be forgiven. The undertaking was carried throughout with the greatest respect for the author's ways of thought or expression, and Percy Chapman's many friends may have here the assurance that, aside from the interpolations referred to above, the text that they are about to read is all his and nothing but his.

The manuscript was bequeathed to us without a title. Nobody was better qualified than Dean Gauss to explain, in words as moving as they are convincing, what Percy Chapman had set out to do and how the present title seems to come closest to reflecting his intentions. I would not dream of adding any further comments, except in confirmation of the fact that the philosophical character of this essay, even more than its sudden interruption, is responsible for the absence of any critical apparatus and the scarcity of footnotes. Extremely sound and up to date though it is, the author's scholarship was meant not to

appear on the surface, but to hide beneath it. His sole purpose was to present the general public with an interpretative picture—and a very personal one—of a man that he had come to live with, and of a century that he had come to live in, most intimately. One feels confident, regardless of friendly prejudice, that he has succeeded, even though death overtook him before he could quite reach his goal. To the American reader this picture should prove invaluable, coming as it does from one who had, so to speak, France at the tip of his fingers. To the French lover of Molière it will prove equally interesting as an enlightened, modern American reaction to the most typically French—perhaps—of French authors. To both it cannot but appeal for its human and humane qualities.

The greatest and most wistful satisfaction, however, will be reserved to those who have known Percy Chapman. Chapman the man is everywhere in these pages, with that mysterious mixture of sad concentration and young enthusiasm, with his critical acumen subdued by a delightful, poetical humor and an ever indulgent smile. He loved men in spite of all their faults, and life as the greatest gift of God, whatever its problems and miseries. He loved it so much that his *presence*, in this book, seems almost intolerable at times. Who, having bathed in the light of his friendship, could read without a pang in his heart what he has to say of Dorante the huntsman in the *Fâcheux*, "who makes you feel what delight there is in hunting and how good it is to be alive"?

J.-A. B.

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INTRODUCTION

I

IT IS NECESSARY to explain that in the few pages which follow, the reader must not look for what he has the right to expect in the introduction to an ordinary volume. To me *The Spirit of Molière* by Percy Addison Chapman is not merely a book, and the bonds between him and me were such that I could not pretend to assess its relation to other works in the field critically or dispassionately. To me *The Spirit of Molière* is the epilogue to a life and all that I can do is to say something about Percy Chapman and explain how this book came to be written and published in the seemingly unfinished form in which it is now offered to the reader.

If I were asked to give briefly to the reader who did not know Percy Addison Chapman some idea of him, I could do no better than to quote from two of his friends. One of them was the beloved and deeply religious poet and mystic, O. W. Milosz, who had known Chapman for nearly thirty years and whose death, under circumstances so strikingly like Chapman's, was to follow so shortly thereafter. In the last weeks of Chapman's life, Milosz in an earnest conversation with one of his close friends had raised and answered the following question which I give in his own words "Si Dieu me demandait: voyons, de tous les hommes que tu as rencontrés ici-bas,

quel est celui qui s'est le moins éloigné de la nature première, du *Paradise Lost*, je lui répondrais certainement: Percy Chapman. C'est de là que venait cet air d'éternel étonnement et de tristesse profonde répandu sur son visage. Le souvenir vivait en lui d'un monde autre que celui où nous assistons."

The other note is from the distinguished scholar, Paul Hazard of the Collège de France: "Aussi bien sont-ce toutes les études françaises qui font dans sa personne une perte irréparable. Nul n'avait plus de cœur que lui, mais nul aussi n'avait compris et aimé comme lui le génie de la France."

II

PERCY ADDISON CHAPMAN was born in Plainfield, N.J., on September 12, 1889. An only child, his early years were spent in a home dominated by the Puritan tradition, and in lonely isolation. That is why, although he craved comradeship, he was to make those friendships which were to mean so much to him, only in the freer years of his college and professional life. His qualities of mind were such that he had entered Princeton as the youngest member of the Class of 1909. He attracted the attention of his teachers by his unusually deep interest in the fundamental problems of literature. Although he possessed a fine sense for the rhythms of verse and prose and for the felicitous word or phrase, his deepest interest, from first to last, was not in the technical processes of literature. This last work of his will indicate how conscious he was of the significance of the relation of the poet to his public and his time. Yet his dominant interest was never to be in literary history and the succession of

schools. From first to last he sought in literature an answer, if answer there might be, to the problems of man and his destiny. In the presence of masterpieces of literature (and it was upon these that his interest centered), his question was always the same. What meaning does this poet find in life?

Before we can discuss the kind of answer he sought, we must return for a moment to another aspect of his formative years. To those who knew him it seemed almost a foregone conclusion that young Chapman would decide to prepare himself to teach the literature of France. Of all the Americans I have known, no one ever entered more fully into the spirit of its masterpieces. So true was this that it was only there that he felt safely at home.

It was to have been expected that before the United States entered the War he should have volunteered as a private for service in France, and that as a captain in the A E F. he should have been awarded the Croix de Guerre for his conduct at the front. Apart from these years in the service of his country, his life was spent as a teacher of French literature at his alma mater, where he was associate professor at the time of his death on September 19, 1937. His great success as a teacher is to be found in part in his qualities of heart and mind, his utter unselfishness, but also in the fact that to him there was not the slightest tinge of the exotic in the masterpieces of France. To him they conveyed their meaning directly. They were chapters in the Book of Life and he interpreted them to his students with keen penetration and deep sincerity. His emphasis was always upon what significance there was here for them and for him.

There was another aspect of Chapman's life and education in the broadest sense, which must be mentioned here. He never spoke of it, and would not have wished others to do so in any detail. But it is, however, not without its bearing upon the kind of answer to the riddle of life which he was seeking and in some measure explains his turning to Molière. The lives of two persons very close to him were to end in years, in one case many long years, of bed-ridden invalidism, and he was to see, day in and day out, far more seemingly gratuitous pain and suffering than falls to the lot of the average man. It must suffice to say that his life here presents a close parallel to Alfred de Vigny's and that like Vigny, he was to be deeply imbued with "the tragic sense of life." In spite of this, Chapman continued to believe that there were answers, there were at least possible adjustments, to the problems, to the dilemmas into which the circumstances of life seemed forever to be forcing us; but it will be evident that for him they could not be soft answers. It is plain that this is one reason why Molière was to mean so much to him. He says of Molière, that for him "as for Shakespeare, the world is a stage, but one on which strutting can arouse but laughter. The joy of the actor who glories in the world of his own illusions dissolves before the penetration and the clarity of insight. Knowledge and understanding are but a bitter consolation for belief, but if accompanied by laughter and human kindness—a trait which makes all the difference between Alceste and Philinte—they provide an atmosphere in which the play that is life can be gone through with."

Chapman expected, then, to find no easy solutions and one condition he always made. No solution could be

satisfactory to him unless it were open on the same terms to all. A particularistic, an individualistic, a "romantic" solution could have no validity for him. This is why the reader cannot fail to notice the deep emotion by which Chapman is stirred, in the passage in which he identifies the Spirit of Molière with the spirit of comedy "To all, the great lord as well as the humble, comedy teaches that life is more an adjustment of his own passions to those of others than the enjoyment of his privileges or the ability that they give him to impose his will on his inferiors. Men appear, in the eyes of the Comic Muse, as strangely equal."

III

LET us turn now to the volume before us. It was natural, as we have seen, that, from the first, the great masters of the French seventeenth century should have appealed to Chapman. They too believed in the universality of truth. Such rest as his earnest questioning spirit was to allow him, he found in those works where beauty seemed at least to be consonant with reason. There was a time when the stoic heroism of Corneille appealed to him more strongly than is evident in these pages. So too did Racine's deeper insight into the tragic possibilities for self-deception which passion offers. Furthermore, that unobtrusive perfection of Racine's prosody, with its discreet rhymes which had led Gautier to say of him, "even when the bird walks one is conscious that he has wings," was more closely in accord with Chapman's demands upon the artist. We have seen how deep was his consciousness of the tragic sense of life. How is it, then, that one who sees life in these terms, as so many

earnest men and women see it, should finally find his deepest satisfaction in the spirit of comedy? This is the paradox which, without personal reference and in general terms, he was trying to resolve in this his last work.

If the author had lived to write a preface, he would certainly have eliminated one possible misunderstanding. He would have made it plain that *The Spirit of Molière* was not intended as a contribution to original research in literary history. It adds no new facts to our information about the great comedian's life or the circumstances under which his comedies were played. He was familiar with the studies of earlier scholars and drew heavily upon the admirable work done by Michaut and Lancaster, to whom he would certainly have acknowledged his particular indebtedness. His aim was at first an attempt to throw light upon a fundamental problem of life and esthetics. What is the meaning of comedy, with particular reference to comedy as understood by Molière?

After much earnest study and reflection, about two years before his death, Percy Chapman had completed an essay upon this subject. He had hoped to bring it within rather brief compass, but the extent and ramifications of his problem made this impossible, and the manuscript ran to some eighty rather closely typed pages. He had undertaken his task in order to clarify his own ideas. Perfectionist that he was, he was not satisfied and was unwilling to publish it. In the desire to condense, he had been forced to omit nearly all illustrative material and any detailed treatment of particular problems in Molière. The few friends who had seen his manuscript were much impressed by the significance of his conclu-

sions and urged him to expand it. It is this revision that is here published.

Every reader will regret that he did not live to give final form to his work. Those who knew him can forecast some of the changes he would have made. The first seven chapters published virtually without change were written more rapidly than was his wont and he would certainly have revised sentences and wording. He would have added something to his discussion of *Tartuffe* and he had in mind an additional section which would have discussed *L'Avare* and the comedies of the last years.

But in one sense this work is Chapman's and virtually complete. That careful scholar and devoted friend, Jean-Albert Bédé, has edited the manuscript. Only those who realize what scrupulous care he has bestowed upon following Chapman's thought through rewritten pages and notes can understand how much we owe him. The text now, save for the omissions of unconscious repetitions and the correcting of *lapsus calami*, stands as Chapman left it with the exception of the few bracketed passages. These were added only because called for in Chapman's manuscript and they have been elaborated with sympathetic penetration along the line and often in the wording suggested by his notes. We deeply regret the absence of the chapter or chapters which would have preceded *The Spirit of Molière*. But in one sense they could have added but little to Chapman's general thesis and we can be certain they would not have altered his conclusions.

In a letter to a friend only a few weeks before his death, he had written, "The more I read and reread the comedies, the more I feel confirmed in the main ideas

that were in those eighty pages and that is comforting and encouraging." It is plain that in his own mind he had decided to present the problems discussed in his earlier essay in far more concrete form, centering them upon Molière whom he now treats as the great modern representative of the Spirit of Comedy.

The first section of this revised study was to discuss the genesis of comedy in the mind of one of its greatest representatives. By what processes, through what inner struggles, what adjustments between the individual and society, between an author and his public, does comedy come into being at all? This is the aim of the first eleven chapters. In them he has traced the development of the great representative of the comic muse to the period of the full flowering of his genius, through *Le Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*. He had incorporated into these chapters, in more concrete form, all that he found significant in his earlier work.

The second section of his revision was planned to discuss the meaning of comedy, and here again he was to center upon Molière whose spirit he identifies with the Spirit of Comedy. Fortunately this section had been completely rewritten in the moving and significant form in which without change it is here presented. Though he left us no detailed written treatment of the late plays, it is plain from his letter that he had considered their bearing and that they had been subsumed into this final assize. In the sense, then, that there is nothing in the conclusion to this volume which would have been altered by him who wrote it, had he been granted greater length of days, it is finished and we may accept it in gratitude as his legacy to us all.

INTRODUCTION

xxi

I have said that I cannot judge dispassionately the work of Percy Addison Chapman. I can only say that I have favored the publication of this manuscript in its present form because particularly in its final chapter it gives us upon this profound question of the nature of tragedy and comedy, "secrets from the wells of life," conclusions based upon thinking as earnest and feelings as deeply sincere as any I have ever encountered in literature or in life.

CHRISTIAN GAUSS

THE SPIRIT OF MOLIÈRE
AN INTERPRETATION



L'ILLUSTRE THÉÂTRE, OR THE
BÉJART CONTRACT

FROM the very beginning of his career as a writer, actor, and producer of comedy, Molière was hailed even by his enemies as "the Terence of our time." His practice in comedy is, with that of Terence, the basis of Boileau's rules for this form of art, in spite of the latter's disapproval of the indecorous sack of Tabarin. George Meredith finds the coincidence of Molière with his public one of those rare situations in which a great comic poet may develop.

Yet it is a curious commentary on the tortuous working-out of human destiny that the desire to write or act *comedy* does not seem to have been a part of Molière's original ambition. He wanted merely to be an actor. Little is known of the facts of his childhood and youth, still less of his early thoughts, but that he was attracted to the theater is indubitable. In 1643, his twenty-second year, the signature of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin appears with others at the bottom of a new contract defining the mutual obligations of a new theatrical company.

It was scarcely a promising group that gathered on June 30 of that year, at the house of Marie Hervé, veuve Béjart, in the little rue de la Perle, to add the solemnity of the law to their resolution to stick together. Its center was Marie Hervé's children, Madeleine, Joseph, and

Geneviève Béjart. Old Joseph Béjart had died some six months before, leaving debts for a heritage. He had been a "bourgeois de Paris," with an office in the "waters and forests" that involved some small dignity, but yielded very meager returns. It may have been that he also tried himself out at acting.¹ At any rate, his children one and all were caught by the lure of the theater, and their mother seems to have done her best to aid and abet them on their hazardous voyage toward the land of heart's desire. Their comrades, if "enfants de famille" is perhaps a somewhat high-sounding name for them,² were at least "enfants de bourgeois": there was a sort of down-at-heel tutor, a recalcitrant stepson, a minor girl. Two at most of the ten signers of the contract were professional actors, but they too, like the rest, probably came from families of master artisans, tradesmen, minor officials or lawyers. They gathered, then, before a notary and with a "noble homme" for a witness,³ to bind themselves by an agreement strong enough to carry them on their enterprise in the autumn.

Contemporaries of his later glorious days constantly affirmed that Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, then a young man of twenty-one, was swept into the contract in the skirts of Madeleine Béjart. Fifteen years later he is still referred to as a satellite of hers. She was four years his senior, and had already had a good bit of experience, for an "enfant de famille." When she was eighteen she had bought a house for herself in Paris, in the rue de Thorigny, a step

¹ A document remains in which he is styled "sieur de Belleville," an appellation that smacks singularly of the boards.

² They are so described in the Preface of the 1682 edition of Molière's plays.

³ A lawyer and a prominent dramatist, André Mareschal.

from her mother's. At twenty she had had a daughter whose father, the Chevalier de Modène, was an officer in the household of Monsieur, the King's brother. She had long mingled with theatrical people in Paris, had won the admiration of the dramatist Rotrou, and had acted in tragedy. She seems to have combined the temperament of an artist with a practical business sense and an unfailing fund of generous good humor. If there were any hope, in the phrase of the contract, for "the conservation of their troupe under the name of *L'Illustre Théâtre*," that hope seemed to lie under Madeleine's magnificent red hair. Yet time was to show that it was not so much in her that their future lay, but in the youngster who, whatever his feelings for her may have been, signed his name near hers at the foot of the contract.

Of all the signers, young Poquelin was the only one who seemed to be giving up far more than he stood to gain. The rest had no very assured means of livelihood. He on the contrary had a family who were well-to-do, well established, honored and respected, as they had been from father to son for three centuries. Jean-Baptiste was an eldest son, and eldest child. His grandfather Jean Poquelin had come to Paris from Beauvais, where his father was a city councillor, and had become a merchant upholsterer in the parish of Saint-Eustache, the very trade center of the city. He was certainly of an enterprising spirit, and perhaps of an impetuous temperament, for he married the daughter of a royal violinist. His son, however, Jean Poquelin the second, married the daughter of another upholsterer, consolidated and enlarged the business, had numerous children, grew in wealth and prosperity. In 1631 he purchased from his brother

Nicolas, another upholsterer, an office at court: he became *valet de chambre tapissier du roi*, a position that gave both honor and profit. The making of the royal bed, one of the duties of the *valet de chambre*, was far from being regarded as a disgrace. the charge carried with it the title of *écuyer* and paid a good return for three months a year attendance at court. That this "charge" might remain solidly in the family, Jean Poquelin obtained in 1637 "survival rights" to it in favor of his eldest son. Jean-Baptiste, aged fifteen, duly took the oath of office.

Nor were Jean Poquelin's efforts in regard to his son confined to seeing that he step into a business better and more honorably established than when he had taken it over from his own father. Jean-Baptiste had received an excellent education: he had gone to a very good school, the Collège de Clermont in the rue Saint-Jacques, where the Jesuits cultivated in the youth of the best families a knowledge of the humanities and a taste for elegant latinity. Whether or not this liberal education were finished off with a course in philosophy under the famous Gassendi is extremely doubtful, in spite of the familiarity manifested by the author of the *Femmes Savantes* with Gassendi as well as with Descartes and Aristotle, but that he studied law at the University of Orléans seems assured. A knowledge of the law would doubtless be no detriment to the head of an established business, and also, Jean Poquelin may have thought, could lead to his son's rising from the respectability of trade to the honor of the magistracy.

This prudent father, it will be seen, did all he could to assure for his son a position that guaranteed security and enable him to hold it with the dignity that springs from

a well filled and well tutored mind. No Monsieur Jourdain would he ever be, filling his maturity with the ledger and the yardstick and astounded, when age brought him leisure, to discover himself speaking in prose, but learned and of sound judgment, able to discourse with other men like himself of Homer and Horace, Montaigne and Grotius, as they sat over their burgundy of an evening, freed from the futile chatter of their women-folk. Critical of the government, critical of the clergy, conscious of their importance but awestruck before rank, entrenched in integrity more than in wealth, the stuff of which doctors and lawyers and magistrates are made, heads of families who could feel themselves the salt of the earth and the mainstay of the kingdom.

Yet just as he was reaching his twenty-first year, the young man resigned the survival rights of the royal office, begging his father to bestow it upon such other of his sons as he saw fit,⁴ and signed a receipt for 630 livres as his share of his mother's estate and a part of his own inheritance. He renounced the future his father had prepared for him, he abandoned all the advantages of wealth and education to throw in his lot with a group of players and to try to become an actor.

Even in our own day such a decision on the part of a first-born son would probably be regarded with alarm. The stage is doubtless still one of the more precarious professions, depending as it does on so many hazards, not the least important of which is the continuing coincidence of the actor's talent with the changes of public taste. But in the first half of the seventeenth century in

⁴ He assumed the title again when his brother died (April 5, 1660): cf Chap vi, below, p 85

France, to economic and moral uncertainty was added a certain degree of stigma. The actor's profession has indeed been regarded with suspicion in most civilized societies. Even in ancient Greece, where the drama long maintained the character of a religious ceremony, the main body of minor actors seem to have been recruited from among foreigners and barbarians. In Rome, actors were often slaves, were branded with infamy, and were sometimes sold in troupes, like pairs of mules or fours of horses. In the France of 1643, professional actors other than mountebanks and charlatans had been known only for about a hundred years. Until well along in the sixteenth century, the theater had been entirely in the hands of amateurs, and until the early seventeenth the putting on of plays continued to be a favorite and much appreciated diversion of courts, of colleges, and of lay and religious organizations. Gradually, however, professional troupes, Italian as well as French, began to develop and multiply.

Under the Christian dispensation, the infamy of Roman times had continued to be attached to actors, in both canon and civil law. To infamy, from the fourth century on, was added excommunication. Minor and not major excommunication, to be sure, which means that the actor, while forbidden the sacraments—baptism, marriage, extreme unction—was not excluded from the society of the faithful. This attitude of the Church, considered imperative by the early fathers so long as pagan drama and games continued to flourish, applied to less and less persons as the customs of the Empire disappeared and by the twelfth century the word *histriones* covered charlatans and mountebanks only, even *jongleurs* being

expressly excepted. Medieval drama, it will be remembered, began within the church, and after it had been removed to the market place or a hall, was played by pious laymen and continued to be regarded as the handmaid of religion. As time went on, plays even of religious theme like the mysteries began, it is true, to develop scandalous and vulgar passages. They were still, however, in the hands of amateurs, of men who were only occasionally players, known to the mayor and the parish priest. As was the case with the *Atellanae* in Rome, neither the Church nor the civil authorities held anything against the actor, who was merely a local butcher or baker or law-clerk on a holiday, however increasingly objectionable the spectacle he performed may have been found.

It is the professional actor appearing with the drama of the Renaissance who incurs the suspicion of society and revives the feelings of republican Rome towards the early Greek troupes. Throughout the sixteenth century the professional actor is a member of a troupe which wanders from place to place, playing now at a great house, now in a hired tennis court (*jeu de paume*). He is a stranger, an unknown vagabond, whose presence threatens the community with disorder, debauchery and drunkenness. The plays he presents have moreover for the most part not the slightest connection with God or the saints, and often, as distinguished from the morality or the farce, are even at variance with Christian ethics. Like the Greeks and slaves who replaced the Roman *Atellanae*, these professional actors were producing a foreign art, an art whose roots were in a cult vastly different from, and offensive to, the prevailing religion, even though it was not, as happened at Rome with the Greek

religion, destined to replace it. The French clergy seem to have been peculiarly conscious of a rivalry inherent between classical drama and Christianity, and in the ferocity with which the actor was often hounded it is hard not to detect a feeling that his performance threatened that of the priest. It is only in 1850 that the Church resigned itself officially to accepting the actor within its portals.

The Gallican Church was the most severe in maintaining the excommunication of actors. In Renaissance Italy, where from the Popes down, people were more successful than elsewhere in remaining Christian while including many things in their philosophy, the ban upon actors had been in practice lifted before the end of the sixteenth century. In France also, of course, the rule suffered many exceptions. A curious illustration of the acceptance of variety in Catholic practice is provided by the magnificent funeral accorded the Italian actress Isabella Andreini at Lyons in 1604, because she was an Italian and in Italy it was not the custom to deprive actors of the benefit of clergy. Nor did French actors show any great disposition to live without the law: they managed to get themselves christened and married like anyone else, and when death approached, they usually preferred to admit that all they had lived for was a sin rather than do without the last sacrament. For marriage, a priest could usually be found who did not know them, or who was human and conveniently forgot their profession. He could, moreover, justify his humanity on a principle even more consistently followed by the Church than hostility to the comedian, namely the encouragement of marriage and opposition to unions formed out

side of wedlock. The civil authorities seem to have been inclined to even greater leniency than the ecclesiastical. The latter's objection to actors had doubtless religious as well as moral grounds, whereas the former were opposed to them solely as fomentors of disorder, and were inclined more and more to favor them as providers of socially beneficial entertainment. The royal authority in particular came to regard the comedian with increasing approval as the drama became a diversion in favor with the court. It is said that an actor and actress of the royal troupe would renounce the stage in order to marry, and the next day receive a formal order from the first gentleman of the bedchamber to mount again upon the boards.

The status of professional actors had been indeed considerably modified in the half-century that preceded the formation of the *Illustre Théâtre*. Little is known of them before 1600, and the first French actor whose name has been preserved, Agnan Sarat, was the head of a troupe which played at Paris in 1578. There were undoubtedly several troupes at this time, Italian as well as French, and they were all errant, staying as a rule but a short time in any one place. Paris was no more important than the provinces through the reigns of Charles IX and Henri III, and it is only with the restoration of peace and the acceptance of the authority of the crown under Henri IV that the capital begins to be the artistic as well as the political and social center of the nation. Throughout the sixteenth century indeed professionally played drama had flourished more outside of Paris: there are many traces of French troupes at Rouen, Strasbourg, Lille, in Holland, in Flanders, and even at Basel and Frankfort. In 1592, during that troubled period in which there was much

uncertainty as to who the King of France was or would be, the troupe which had assumed the title of the King's Comedians (*Comédiens du Roi*) seems to have made a very long stay at Bordeaux. After 1600, however, its visits to Paris become more and more frequent, along with those of other troupes such as that of the Prince of Orange, and from 1629 on we find the *Comédiens du Roi* permanently established at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

Thus was the only theater in Paris known. It was the property of an association of men called the Brotherhood of the Passion (*Confrérie de la Passion*), made up of artisans and tradesmen whose main avocation had been the performance of mystery plays. They had acquired, just before the middle of the sixteenth century, the town house of the Dukes of Burgundy, and had made it over into a theater which continued for well over a century to go by its original name, the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The edict of 1548 forbidding the playing of mysteries on account of their indecency doubtless proved a severe handicap to the association's dramatic activity. It was probably less adept than professionals at the new tragic, historic and romantic plays that were being composed; and the *Confrères* gradually gave up trying to act themselves, renting their theater instead to professional troupes. From 1598 on, the Hôtel de Bourgogne seems to have been constantly rented, now to one troupe, now to another, French, Italian, and even English. The *Comédiens du Roi* took a three-year lease in 1629, and thus they seem to have renewed triennially so long as their landlords held the theater, or until 1677.

In 1630 a second troupe established itself in Paris, and after moving about from one tennis court to another,

finally settled down in 1634 at the *Jeu de paume du Marais*, which remained their home until they were disbanded in 1673. The experience of this Marais troupe had been far from easy. Not only had they to pay the Brotherhood of the *Passion* for the privilege of playing in Paris, but on one occasion a royal order had given four of their best actors to the rival troupe. In spite of this they had been extraordinarily successful, as we shall see, and the Marais is more responsible than the Hôtel de Bourgogne for the progress made in drama in the 'thirties. It may well have served as an encouragement to the Béjart group who, in 1643, aspired to found a third theater in Paris.

In spite of the establishment of these theaters in the capital, theatrical people seem to have kept themselves apart and to have constituted a society that, far more than was the case with other professions, lived in a world by itself—a world doubtless half-real, half-imaginary. Differing in that respect from English practice in the Renaissance, French and Italian troupes from the very beginning contained actresses as well as actors. The rule seems to have been that they intermarry, and troupes are almost entirely composed of couples. The first Parisian actress whose name is known, Marie Venier, was the wife of Charles Laporte, the first actor to have been also a playwright. Actors always chose a name by which they were known on the stage, either a creation of their fancy or a real or imaginary family title. Pierre Le Messier, known as Bellerose, Nicolas Lion, sieur de Beaupré, François Chastelet, known as Beauchasteau, and Claude Deschamps, sieur de Villiers, all married actresses, and la

Bellerose, la Beaupré, la Beauchasteau, and la Villiers were as greatly appreciated as their husbands.

Another characteristic of their lives in which they provide a startling contrast with the bourgeoisie is the absolute equality that existed between the men and women in a troupe. The ideal wife of a bourgeois was a modest creature, more soberly dressed than her husband, incessantly busy, looking after his children, directing his servants, seeing to his buttons, keeper of his keys and able to account, at any moment, for the smallest of his possessions. Whereas comedians, as Chappuzeau puts it, "veulent tous être égaux et se nomment camarades." Each member of a troupe, man or woman, had an equal voice in its direction, and an equal share in the profits. They worked together, they played together. As in 1639 the Hôtel de Bourgogne contained but a single dressing-room, they dressed and undressed together. The pictures which the early seventeenth century gives of their lives present, in contrast to the order which generally reigned in a bourgeois home under the authority of the father, scenes of quarrelling and bantering, of jealousy and generosity, of boasting and devotion, that, if not exactly "without care," as the actor Bruscombille would have it, are at least free from the inhibitions and distortions that constraint and decorum bring with them.

The development of the theater in Paris during the first half of the seventeenth century had none the less tended to break down the barriers that separated the professional actor from established society. The troupes of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Marais were no longer wandering, but constituted regular and well known members of the community. The theater, far from

being haunted solely by pillars of the cabaret and the tripot as it had been in its tennis-court days, was now the resort of the social and intellectual élite of the nation. By 1643, the drama had become for the French the most interesting of the arts, over the perfection of which the erudite sweated in his closet and the great lady opined in her drawing-room. Cardinal Richelieu himself, the last of the great Renaissance clergy who never allowed the cloth to interfere with their lay activities, was possessed by a veritable passion for the theater. Not only had he urged his recently formed Academy to formulate an opinion upon the value of the *Cid*, extremely successful in spite of its "irregularity," but he employed playwrights to compose plays according to his idea, is said actually to have had a hand in them himself, and had built, as a part of his great Parisian residence, the Palais-Cardinal, what was at the time the largest and most elaborate theater in the world. Great ladies and gentlemen, the Duchesse de Montmorency, the Comte de Belin, the Marquise de Rambouillet, had interested themselves actively in actors as well as in authors and in plays, and the King himself had authorized a decree in 1641 which, while it forbade indecency on the stage, made also the following declaration:

Nous voulons que leur exercice, qui peut innocemment divertir nos Peuples de diverses occupations mauvaises, ne puisse leur être imputé à blâme, ni préjudicier à leur réputation dans le commerce public .

This decree is far from establishing the actor as a respectable member of society, and Voltaire in the next century was to do vigorous battle in behalf of playerfolk. However, it does not only indicate the official attitude upon

the usefulness of the theater; it also plays upon the desire of the actors themselves to be no longer considered as pariahs. The extreme insistence of Chappuzeau, thirty years later, upon the regularity of their family and of their attendance at church, which according to him was identical to that of the bourgeoisie, is sufficient indication of their desire at least to be considered respectable.

Indeed one of the peculiarities of the Parisian actor, as distinguished for example from the Italian actors of the *commedia dell'arte*, is his manifest effort to remain a part of the society in which he lives. Plays were written for both Parisian theaters in which the actors defended themselves against accusations of loose living. Not infrequently actors would return after their stage days to the fold of recognized society. It is thus that Marie Laporte, the actress mentioned above, retired from the boards after her husband's death and finally married a lawyer. Guillot-Gorju, one of the more famous farce actors, was originally a physician, and returned in his later days to his original profession. Although Tallemant des Réaux, the son of a banker, shared the generally held middle class opinion as to the morality of actors and regarded them as vagabonds—they were, he says, “*épars ça et là, et n'avaient ni feu ni lieu*”—he notes that Turlupin had furnished himself a room with some elegance, which was his home. We have seen that Madeleine Béjart at the very beginning of her career had purchased a house. Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, most striking of all, gave up an established business and an honorable career for the theater.

Such a step on his part, while undoubtedly momentous, was not as revolutionary as it would have been a

hundred years before. Indeed there had been at least one actor in the recent past who, like Roscius in ancient Rome to whom contemporaries compared him, had won universal respect and admiration through the weight of his personality, the dignity of his life, and the power of his talent. The son of an Auvergnat judge, Guillaume des Gilberts had come up to Paris to study law but was attracted to the theater and, under the stage name of Montdory, became the actor-director of the Marais troupe. Quite exceptionally he married outside of the theatrical profession. He alone is responsible for the increasing success of the Marais against the more favored Hôtel de Bourgogne. When in 1634 a royal order took four of his best actors away from him, he did not lose heart, and within a short time—if we believe Tallemant des Réaux—"his troupe was again better than the other one, for he alone was better than all the rest." With the exception of Rotrou, all the best playwrights of the time brought their works to Montdory. Thus he created the Brutus of Scudéry's *Mort de César*, the Massinisse of Mairet's *Sophonisbe*, the Jason of Corneille's *Médée*, the Rodrigue of the *Cid*. In fact, it was on his account, most probably, that Corneille gave all of his plays to the Marais. Montdory's last rôle, however, was the Hérode of Tristan l'Hermite's *Marianne*, the most violently passionate of them all. While playing it, again in the words of Tallemant des Réaux, "there fell an apoplexy upon his tongue which prevented his playing afterward." Generously pensioned by Richelieu, he left Paris and lived on in retirement for fourteen years.⁵

⁵ cf. Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century*, I, II, pp. 747-50

Montdory enjoyed from the beginning the protection of the Comte de Belin and the Marquise de Rambouillet and seems to have been the Cardinal's favorite actor, perhaps in part responsible for the great churchman's interest in the theater. Rapin says of him that after his performance the spectator would go out "rêveur et pensif, faisant réflexion à ce qu'il venait de voir et pénétré en même temps d'un grand plaisir." He stands as the first supremely great actor of the French stage. The second was to be the young man who by renouncing upholstery had disrupted his father's most cherished plans. That he should have done so to enter, of all careers, that of the theater, must certainly have been a cause of dismay. Yet there never seems to have been any complete break between father and son, and they came to each other's assistance on occasion for the rest of the old man's life. Jean Poquelin may have been careful and prudent and even narrow-minded, but he was no father of comedy. That he could sympathize with Jean-Baptiste is doubtful. But he must have understood that in a nature as vigorous and a character as strong as his son's, there was no opposing an "invincible inclination"⁶ for the theater.

⁶ cf. *Preface* of 1682, *Œuvres*



DRAMA IN 1643

TOWARD what was the young man so invincibly inclined? What was there, in drama of the years preceding his majority, to lay hold upon the imagination and stir to the possibilities of life? It is tempting, of course, to seek in the plays then given a model of comedy as Molière was to write it. Certain of his enemies, later, represent him as having gone to school to the charlatans and mountebanks whom the idle could watch in the booths of the Foire Saint-Germain or the great Pont-Neuf; his enthusiastic but ill-informed biographer Grimarest would have it that his grandfather took him often, in his childhood, to the Hôtel de Bourgogne. It is moreover certain that in his own plays are to be found innumerable echoes of the plays of his youth—scenes, characters, lines, turns of phrase, which come, for the most part, from comedy.

This is all the more striking as, in spite of the general interest in the drama, the comic spirit was never less fruitful for art in France than in the year 1643, when the melancholy Louis XIII followed, within a few months, his great prime minister to the grave. The iron rule of the State had been lifted for a moment from society. The future was full of opportunity, and the Duc d'Enghien—"le grand Condé"—a youth but a few months Molière's senior, had just overwhelmed the redoubtable Spanish squares at Rocroi, in one of the most dashing and bril-

liant victories that ever have been won. France had been at war, of course, for years. But wars were not so terrible in those days. triumph had followed triumph, and the renown of French arms shone over the desolation of Germany, the discord of England, the lethargy of Spain, and the apathy of Italy. It was good to be French, in those days, and young. In the drawing-rooms of the capital was reflected the glory of the battlefield, and through the long winter season, when there was no fighting to be done, the shining eyes of beauty rewarded the labors of the hero. The handsome young officers, the best blood of France, hastened back to Paris, once the troops bestowed in winter quarters, and were as charming and witty and clever in the salon as they had been bold and conquering before the enemy. Life was good and bright, then, and the shade of dark destiny had been lifted from the world. Pride was the order of the day, in turning a perfect sonnet as in executing a perfect manoeuvre. Julie d'Angennes, the charming daughter of Mme de Rambouillet, was married in 1645. She had capitulated after a siege of thirteen years, and all the poets in Paris collaborated with the victorious Duc de Montausier to offer her the most magnificent garland of verses that ever were traced upon vellum and bound in resplendent morocco. How beautiful love could be, if pursued with patience, made exquisite with thoughtfulness and adorned with every embellishment that art and rank and wit could give it! Why remind a world like this that life may be absurd and brutal and painful and sad? For it, the stuff of tragedy as well as comedy would seem to have no meaning.

Yet it is during this period that modern drama begins. It is neither Shakespeare nor Lope da Vega who hit upon the technique that was most fruitful for ensuing generations in Europe, it is Pierre Corneille. His great plays of 1639-1643—*Horace*, *Cinna*, *Polyeucte*—mark the culmination of fifteen years of intensive dramatic production in Paris, during which the seriousness with which the author takes his task is fairly equalled by that with which the audience receives the play. If the best of life is to be found in action, after all, action in love, action in war, action performed in as perfect and graceful a fashion as possible, why should the drama not be the favorite form of art? The world itself is but a stage. The lover like the warrior, in 1643, could do very well with an audience. The great thing, as the technicians of the time would have it, was to make the *liaison des scènes*.

The stuff of drama in France at the beginning of the century had been very much the same as that which served the great Elizabethans across the channel, and Polonius in *Hamlet* has very well summed it up:

Tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene inevitable, or poem unlimited¹

For its serious drama, the Renaissance explored the past, both sacred and profane. It was looking for such characters and incidents as would arouse a sense of the gusto there was in living in the immense world of new time and space which had just been discovered. The plays of Shakespeare are a world in themselves, where the goodness and strength and sweetness and purity of the main

¹ Act II, scene 2

characters shine forth over a nature that is luscious and rich and violent and colorful beyond any that has been created before or since. King and princess, lover and mistress, lady and gentleman, philosopher and warrior, bumpkin and churl, all move across his stage, and by the very power of soul that is within them, breathe poetry into every word of his infinitely varied language. The best known French dramatist of Shakespeare's time, Alexandre Hardy, drew for his plays on much the same material as did Shakespeare sacred story and Greek legend, Roman and modern history, medieval and Italian romance. The result Hardy achieved is far inferior in quality to that of his great English contemporary, though vastly greater in quantity. He is said to have composed some seven hundred plays. Instead of being the director of a theater like Shakespeare, actor and manager and poet, he seems to have been the hired writer of the King's Comedians, treated doubtless without great respect by the troupe, and stalked by the necessity of providing it with plays. He was not unlearned, Hardy, and knew his ancients as well as his Renaissance novel and the learned tragedy and comedy essayed by his predecessors in the sixteenth century. But he also knew that his rough and boisterous public were equal neither to the grandeur of Sophocles nor the rhetoric of Seneca, but liked better a good love story, with surprise and variety and action and magic, with caverns and deserts and prisons and seas as well as palaces and public squares and bedchambers. With these the scenery at his disposal, particularly that of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, amply provided him, as Shakespeare's Globe did not. His female rôles, also, were played by women and not by boys.

Hardy's plays all fall into three of the four genres or kinds of play which were recognized in France. Shakespeare treated tragedy, comedy and history. The French had tragedy, tragi-comedy, pastoral, and comedy, in that order of seriousness. Tragedy ended in catastrophe. Tragi-comedy and the pastoral were both love stories, usually with a happy ending, the difference being that in the former knights and ladies figured, in the latter shepherds and shepherdesses. The gentleness of the knights is so like the nobility of the shepherds that it is often difficult to distinguish between them, and more than once is found the title "pastoral tragi-comedy." Though like Shakespeare Hardy interlarded his plays with comic scenes, he left to writers that were to follow him the "sustained comedy" of the Renaissance. One reason for this was doubtless the popularity in his time of the farce at which he was probably less adept than the actors themselves.

The farce was very welcome to the French after the devastating wars of religion, and it flourished under Henri IV and for long after his death. The farce is the one form of art, if art it can be called, that seems to have survived all revolutions of taste in France, over which waves of changing culture seem to have rolled without affecting it. The audiences who split their sides before Tabarin under Louis XIII seem to have been amused by the same antics and the same *gauloiserie* as the townsfolk of the time of the crusades. A clever wife, a stupid husband, a willing lover. No knights or high sentiment or great deeds or faraway lands for your farce audience, but men and women tricking each other, smacking each other, gross with the flesh and full of the devil, just as they

were all around you, as you bought and sold and ate and slept. When you were lucky, the farce broadly hinted, you did not sleep alone—a thought that is the bane of the moralist as it is the delight of the school-boy:

La la la la, ne riez pas tant,
Vous en feriez bien autant,

as a popular refrain has it. Something has to be done about this thought in life, of course, uncomfortably recurrent as it is. Your farceur would lead you to laugh at it without condemning it entirely

Throughout the early years of the century, the rule was to play a farce at the theater after the serious play was over. These were the Callot days, the mask and white face days, with Italian troupes in Paris as often as French. The great actors of the King's Comedians who took over the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1629, although they used pretty romantic names when they did the lover or the hero—La Fleur, Fléchelles, Belleville—have come down to us under the names they used in farce: Gros-Guillaume, Gaultier-Garguille, Turlupin. However, the extraordinary thing about the development of the theater in this period is that the custom of playing a farce to end the performance was gradually discontinued. This was probably the case by 1634. The generation of farce actors disappears, so that by 1643 there is but one left, Jodelet, and he, as we shall see, is used in full-length comedy for the last twenty years of his life. Most of the actors of his generation were known by their romantic names: Floridor, Montfleury.

What did for the farce was the rise of precious taste, if so limited and pejorative a term may be applied to the

cult of refinement and delicacy that accompanied the solidification of the monarchy under Richelieu and the beginnings of drawing-room life in city mansions. For the first time in the history of the country, the nobility found itself concentrated in Paris, under a king but little given to court life and with considerable leisure for the life of society. The lodestone which drew them to the capital had had the same effect upon the learned, the poets and the men of letters. The brilliance and charm of the Marquise de Rambouillet in particular, but of many other great ladies as well, drew them together in the drawing-room (Mme de Rambouillet was the first lady to receive her guests elsewhere than in her bedchamber), and encouraged intercourse among them on a footing of relative equality. Wit, if proper and extreme, and learning, if decent and amusing, were open sesames as well as birth to the blue room of the incomparable Arthénice. If the soldier could restrain his vigor, the poet his reverie, the scholar his pedantry, and the priest his piety, they were equally welcome about the alcove where the hostess reclined on her day-bed. Bishops writing madrigals, grammarians writing sonnets, governors of provinces playing at lover, merchants' sons turning compliments, and all agreed that life properly understood may be rendered charming and tender and gay and graceful while maintaining its dignity and decorum, such is the atmosphere in which modern French culture took on its definite form. This society differs from that of the previous century in that the most original minds are to be found among the bourgeoisie. But a bourgeois like Voiture cast his ideas in a form that was pleasing to the

warmer nature and more delicate sensibility of the gentle.

This society provided the audience that accounts in large measure for the dramatic activity of the 'thirties and for the direction in which drama developed. If the farce was eliminated, it was because ladies wanted to go to the theater, and they had no desire to have a blush brought to their cheek. Tallemant des Réaux says that the word "teigneux" (*scurvy*) caused an extremely unpleasant image to arise in Mme de Rambouillet's mind, If such is the case, a farce of Gaultier-Garguille, if she ever saw one, must have caused her violent mental discomfort. It is not out of the farce, but out of tragedy, tragi-comedy and pastoral that modern serious drama is to develop.

The most striking characteristic of this development is that it does not seem to have come about through the original creations of one or several men of superior genius, as was the case in Spain and England, but as it were through the gradual elevation of drama into a superior realm. Corneille is the supreme dramatist of the period, and a poet of great originality and creative power. Many other dramatists were men of varied imagination and temperament. Yet it is not this which accounts for the merit of the plays which are superior. Their action springs, as with Shakespeare, from the men and women represented in them, for the origin of events is no longer God, in the Renaissance world, but man. Yet from these French plays does not blaze the refulgence of a Hamlet or a Lear. They are great in so far as their characters move in the cold light of reason which for Descartes was the indication of the presence of truth. Clarity and dis-

tinctness are what make for greatness, in this drama, not variety and color and movement. It is not the warm, pulsing humanity of their action which counts, but its rightness, its opportuneness, its grace. These plays are close to a Poussin, as Shakespeare is to a Rubens. Light does not suffuse life with a rich glow, but allows the contour of circumstance to stand out so that a way may be found through the midst of it. In this light action is both possible and peremptory, and feeling is restricted to the passion that unleashes it. With Hamlet a monologue is in large part a reverie, a feeling-out of his soul against the world, with Rodrigue it is a review of his situation.

Curiously enough the cardinal principle that dramatists gradually discovered in this period was this: that the sure way to destroy the dramatic value of action was to show it on the stage. The sight of the action itself—sword-play or stabbing or suicide—was calculated to confuse and bewilder the spectator as to the most interesting aspect of it, which was the motive behind it and its effect after it had been performed. The audience preferred to understand these things, rather than to experience them through mere feeling. The problem was then, how to present a drama, an action, without showing the action itself? The action itself being banned, what were the scenes to be played?

Much ink has been spilt over the development of the "rules" in France. How did such purely mechanical and intellectual principles come to be applied with increasing rigor to a drama that was vital? If the first necessity of art is liberty, as the romantics would have it, did the "rules" not merely hamper French drama and prevent the soaring of genius? Might a Corneille not have been a

Shakespeare, if given a chance? The "rules" were said to be the principles of drama as laid down by Aristotle, modified by Horace, argued about by the Italian critics of the sixteenth century, and then imposed upon unwilling dramatists by the pedants of the French Academy supported and indeed directed by the supreme authority of the prime minister. The tyranny of the great Cardinal regulated tragedy as it regulated duelling or the status of the Protestants.

Such does not seem to have been exactly the case. The idea of applying the rules did indeed originate about 1629, at a time when the little group from which the French Academy was to grow began to meet at the house of Valentin Conrart. But the idea was not theirs. It seems to have emerged in conversations at the Château de Chantilly, the country residence at that time of the Duc de Montmorency, in which the most prominent participants were the Duchesse de Montmorency, who was a Roman, a member of the Orsini family, a French gentleman the Comte de Cramail, a noble churchman the Cardinal de la Vallette, and a young bourgeois from Besançon, Jean Mairet, who had been attracted to Paris like so many provincials of his time and other times, who had been a soldier, and who had begun to write plays. All great readers of Italian literature, as were most cultivated people in the first half of the century, they felt that much better plays could be made than those of Hardy if they could be given the "perfection" of Tasso's *Aminta*, Guarini's *Pastor Fido*, Bonarelli's *Filli di Sciro*. As Mairet says in his preface two years later, he was persuaded to compose a pastoral "with all the rigor which the Italians have been accustomed to practice in this

agreeable kind of writing, in which it must be admitted that three or four of them have divinely well succeeded." Thirteen years after the death of the author of *King Lear*, French drama finds the secret of renewed life in the daintiness of Italian decadence. These Italian pastorals are quite certainly not as great as Shakespearian drama, but they were undoubtedly composed with greater "rigor." Mairet finds that these Italian masters "had had no greater secret than to take their measures on those of the ancient Greeks and Latins, whose rules they observed more religiously than we have done up till now," and he writes his pastoral *Silvanre*, in which he also tries religiously to observe the rigor of the rules.

The mechanics of the rules may be briefly stated, with the reminder that they became perfectly clear in their essentials only years later. A complete play of any *genre* consists of five acts in alexandrine verse; four or five principal persons of elevated station and character are shown in a single place, preferably a palace, embroiled in a difficulty which is worked out in a time approximating that of the performance; no incident, violent or otherwise, can occur on the stage, the attention of the audience must be caught by one main action, and held fixed upon it from the beginning to the end of the play. As this action consists entirely of talk, the heroic quality of the characters springs from the quickness of wit and soundness of judgment that makes for brilliant repartee as it does from the "virtue" of which they boast and which is the result of greatness of soul. The magic sonority of the alexandrine couplet must lift the whole house into a superior region and hold it there. Banned was any "irregularity" that

risked letting the audience fall back into the world of reality.

The spirit of the rules may perhaps best be felt if the two most important are considered. These were the necessity of observing *la vraisemblance* and *les bienséances* respectively. *La vraisemblance* is the τὸ πιθανόν, or poetic truth of Aristotle, that is, truth to human nature as anyone from his own experience of life may recognize it. The audience must feel that the passions and decisions it is witnessing are profoundly and humanly true, such as they might experience themselves. *Les bienséances* are the τὸ ομαλόν, or consistency of Aristotle. For him, this seems to have meant the accord of every word and act of a person in a play with the idea of his essential character given the audience from the beginning. During the Renaissance this notion of character became confused with that of station, and for the French the observance of the *bienséances* came to be attention to the propriety and decorum suited to people of the upper classes even more than of consistency of a character with itself. The *Ventre-Saint-Gris* of Henri IV, for example, while it has come down through history as his most constant and characteristic utterance, would be very much out of place in a classical tragedy, for it can be fitted into none of the categories of character proper to a monarch. A king may be a conqueror, or a tyrant, or a lover; he cannot at the same time be a bubbling, impatient, sprightly person given to trivial outbursts of profanity.

By the time of Racine, if we may be permitted to look ahead for a moment, this observance of the *bienséances* had become the supreme problem, not only for the dramatist, but sometimes also for his characters. Titus,

in *Bérénice*, is confronted with the choice of being either an emperor or a lover: he cannot with propriety be both. It was no longer to his own self that a man must be true—the triumphant self of the Renaissance—for what became of the self when analyzed closely? He must endeavor to live up to the idea of himself at which he might arrive by examining on the one hand his desires, and on the other his inherited or properly assumed obligations.

It is impossible to go here at length into the controversy waged in the years following 1629 as to what the rules were and how they were to be applied, nor into the immense variety of plays in which Mairet, Scudéry, Rotrou, Du Ryer, and many other dramatists as well as Corneille either tried them out or consciously broke them. It is the quarrel which breaks out in 1637 over the *Cid*, ending in the famous *Sentiments de l'Académie*, which fairly definitely established them. La Ménardièrre's *Poétique* appears in 1639, and most of d'Aubignac's *Pratique du Théâtre*, although it was published only in 1657, was written about the year 1640. However, the essential thing to note is that as play followed play, it became increasingly apparent that the plays which came close to following the rules were more successful than those which did not.

The greatest *genre* in which to write was at first not at all realized. All *genres* were tried, not only tragedy, tragicomedy and pastoral, but also comedy. It is Corneille, who in the early 'thirties creates comedies worthy of the new refinement in the theater—*Mélite*, *La Galerie du Palais*, *La Place Royale*, *La Veuve*, *La Suivante*—comedies in which ladies and gentlemen of noble, if somewhat

superficial nature, become involved in imbroglios which permit them to exhibit to advantage their high-mindedness and wit. The scene of some of these, as the titles show, is a place in Paris well known to the audience, and frequent references are made to familiar aspects of Parisian manners. Yet the characters in them are about as far from life as those of a pastoral or tragi-comedy. They usually end with some of the characters discovering that they were not as much in love as they had thought with the person they had supposed, but might easily marry another for the greater convenience of all concerned. The appeal of these plays is that of a drawing-room love story spiced with mild adventure. Except that it does not occur to them often to question the existing social order, the characters might almost step into a comedy of Oscar Wilde. They are not comic, but on the contrary are attractive, superior, witty and charming. The comic quality of these plays appears only in their lightness of tone. They are very much paler than Shakespeare's comedies, but not altogether different in spirit. Progress in dramatic technique is not so evident in them as in the other *genres*.

Silvanire (1629), the first play to keep the rules, was a pastoral; Mairet's *Sophonisbe* (1634) was a tragedy; *Le Cid* (1637), the first of these plays to be extremely successful and also of superior merit, was a tragi-comedy; and finally *Horace* (1640), *Cinna* (late 1640 or early 1641), and *Polyeucte* (late 1641 or early 1642), which may be said to consecrate the rules, were tragedies. They were called tragedies because situations of greater moment appear in them than in the pastoral or tragi-comedy.

But they were not tragic as *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* are tragic. Humanity emerges from them triumphant:

Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers,

says Auguste in *Cinna*, and Polyeucte, dying for his faith, is more of an example of strength of will than he is of the grace of God. Love, heroism, grandeur, such is the gamut of tragedy as of the other *genres*. Rodrigue in the *Cid* is the lover and the hero, Polyeucte is a martyr and a great soul, and Corneille strove to portray in the Auguste of *Cinna* the perfect monarch, so far above ordinary humanity that in him are blended the forgiveness of the lover, the fortitude of the hero and the very height of grandeur.

Is it thus that the art of drama appeared to young Poquelin? Could he sense, as some of his contemporaries did, the weakness of many of these serious plays, how far they often were from life in their bursts of bombast and unfeeling cleverness? Did he think then, as he was to say twenty years later, that it was harder to observe men like a comic poet than to "se guinder sur de hauts sentiments" like a tragic poet? It is certain that later he drew largely upon comedies played between his fifteenth and twenty-first years, whereas very few traces of the serious drama of this period are found in his work. Several plays of 1637, his fifteenth year, were particularly useful to him: his *Amphitryon* is Rotrou's *Sosies*, the *chumère* of the *Bélise* of his *Femmes Savantes* is the same as that of *Hespérie* of Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin's *Visionnaires*; *Le Docteur Amoureux*, of Le Vert, may have been the model of his own lost farce of the same title, and at all events contains several passages, echoes of which are discernible in his

own plays. The André Mareschal who was the "noble homme" witness of the Béjart contract, was the author of several comedies from which he got ideas. Nor must it be forgotten that Corneille's *Menteur* was played in the spring of 1643, when the *Illustre Théâtre* was forming.

Yet the fact that these comedies were useful to him later, when he had turned entirely to the writing of comedy, does not prove that they struck him at the time more than the greater serious plays that were being performed. Is it possible to imagine a boy of fifteen more impressed by the *Sosies* than by the *Cid*? Moreover these comedies are far closer in spirit to contemporary tragedy, tragi-comedy and pastoral, than to comedy as he was later to write it. Molière's delicious Sosie will be far from the mock-heroics of Rotrou; it is not the older Molière who, like Mareschal, would boast that he had "purged" his play of offense, nor would he who claimed that "le bon sens n'a pas de place déterminée au théâtre" have trumpeted like Desmarets

Ce n'est pas pour toi que j'écris,
Indocte et stupide vulgaire
J'écris pour les nobles esprits,
Je serais marry de te plaire

The *Menteur*, at first glance, seems a comedy of character such as Molière is later to write. Everything in this play is subordinated to the presentation of the central figure, whose impulse to lie seems irresistible like the jealousy of Alceste or the avarice of Harpagon. But is not Dorante really a heroic figure, closer to a Horace or a Cinna? Cinna does some very successful lying himself, it will be remembered. In both cases, behind the lying, there is

not so much prick of passion as continuity of design. With Dorante, the audience's amusement at the enormity of his stories is blended with unavoidable admiration for the fertility of his invention and the singleness of his purpose. He is more of a hero than any character of the earlier comedies of Corneille. Six years of creating heroes had not been without effect on his feeling for character.

In short, nothing that we know of Molière invalidates the constant accusation of his enemies, that he thought himself born to play heroic parts, and everything that we know of the drama of his day tends to make it seem probable that such was the case. It was indeed stipulated in the contract of the *Illustre Théâtre* that Clérin, Poquelin and Joseph Bérart were to "choose alternately the heroes."



A WANDERING APPRENTICE

How much success young Jean-Baptiste had at "choosing heroes" we do not know for sure. It would appear, however, that the *Illustre Théâtre* endeavored to justify its title by the performance of heroic plays. While there is no record of their having played a single comedy, a very considerable list of tragedies and tragi-comedies was in their repertory. They were provided with plays first of all by Tristan l'Hermite, one of the best of the authors of tragedy, whose *Mort de Chrispe* and *Mort de Sénèque* they played. Tristan as well as his brother Jean-Baptiste l'Hermite had been for years a close friend of the Bégards, and is on more than one occasion to use his good offices in their behalf. They bought the *Scévole* of Du Ryer, and when the poet Magnon published his first tragedy *Artaxerce* he stated in the preface that it had been "représentée par l'*Illustre Théâtre*." They also may have introduced to Paris one of the last plays of André Mareschal *Le Jugement de Charles le Hardi, dernier duc de Bourgogne*, in which, against the growing taste of the day, this independent author attempts to base a serious play upon French history. A member of the troupe for a time during the early months was the actor-poet Nicolas Desfontaines, who after producing a number of tragi-comedies of exciting title such as *Eurimédon, ou l'Illustre Pirate* and *Orphise, ou la Beauté persécutée*, had been led by the success

of Corneille to turn to the writing of tragedy. The troupe not improbably gave his tragedy *Perside, ou la Suite d'Ibrahim Bassa*. Desfontaines was a great composer of "suites": he had already done a *Vraie Suite du Cid*, and *Perside* grew out of Scudéry's *Ibrahim, ou l'Illustre Bassa*, a dramatization of his sister Madeleine's novel. Two other tragedies by Desfontaines were certainly produced by the troupe: *Saint Alexis, ou l'Illustre Olympie*, and *L'Illustre Comédien, ou le Martyre de Saint-Genest*, a tragedy which preceded the *Véritable Saint-Genest* of Rotrou and was responsible for its title.

It is of course evident that most of these plays are second or third rate. Do they differ however in aim or in atmosphere from the tragedies of Corneille which represented the extreme of dramatic achievement in the 'forties? It would in a way be pleasing to find in the young Molière some spark of the rebel he was later to show himself in matters of taste in drama. If Du Ryer and Magnon are orthodox enough playwrights, Mareschal and Tristan had shown during the 'thirties a marked tendency to balk at the rising tide of precious and heroic idealism, Mareschal for the sake of imagination and humor, Tristan for the sake of truth. Many of Mareschal's earlier plays were written in flagrant and conscious defiance of the "rules," and Tristan's *Marianne*, which had proved the undoing of the actor Montdory, contained in the person of Herod the truest and most violent passion to be found in French drama before Racine. By 1643, however, both had learned their lesson. The play which Mareschal gave the *Illustre Théâtre* obeyed the letter of the rules even if their spirit escaped him, and those of Tristan, in contrast with his earlier delineation of mad

passion, bore the stamp of stoical heroism which reveals the influence of Corneille. In short there is nothing to contradict the impression made by their title, and by the favorite adjective of their author Desfontaines, that they were bent upon becoming illustrious by the presentation of illustrious persons upon their boards. Emperors and saints, kings and heroes, are the central characters of these plays. Was the making of a tragedy about the figure of Saint-Genest, actor-martyr, an effort to show the illustrious character of their profession? The play contains, in the mouth of the hero, a defense of actors, and of the theater, which, flat as it is, well summarizes an ideal both of play and audience:

Le Théâtre est sévère, et veut des qualités,
Qui puissent faire aux grands admirer ses beautés¹

Did fortune smile a little upon them, in the beginning? It is not impossible that it did. Having signed their June contract in 1643, they remain together through the dead summer season, and on September 9 they rent the *Jeu de paume des Métayers*, "sis sur le fossé et proche la porte de Nesle," on the confines of the old city, and about at the present junction of the rue Mazarine and the rue de Seine. In October they engage three "master players upon instruments" In November they are at Rouen, probably playing in that dramatic center, the home of the Corneille brothers. At the end of December they contract with Léonard Aubry, Ordinary Paver of the King's Buildings, to pave the approach to their theater, "so that the coaches might get to it easily," and on January 1, 1644, they give their first performance. On

¹ Act II, scene 1.

January 15 the Marais theater was destroyed by fire, a circumstance that cannot but have aided them, as the troupe of Floridor and Jodelet, to which Corneille was giving his plays, was at this time more popular than that of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and its closing must have made a considerable audience available. The *Illustre Théâtre* played at all events through the winter and spring seasons, were joined by Desfontaines, and in a contract of June 28 engage a dancer, Daniel Mallct, to serve them "tant en comédie qu'en ballets." It would appear that they were attracting attention and were emboldened to branch out. What share of their success was credited to Jean-Baptiste Poquelin? Probably very little, for although Madeleine's acting in tragedy attracted some attention, contemporaries are silent as to him. In this second June contract, however, drawn one year almost day for day after the original one, the name "Molière" is used for the first time, and appears first among the signatures. Whatever the public may have thought of him, the young man of twenty-two seems to have felt himself more and more completely pledged to the actor's profession, and to have been appreciated by his fellows, for he is now director of the troupe.

Their success may have been enough to give them courage, but it was emptying their pockets. In July they agree that general funds cannot be used to reimburse individual members of the troupe for sums expended on decorating the theater. In September, Tristan seems to have persuaded the younger brother of Louis XIII, the Duc d'Orléans, to whom he was gentleman ordinary, to allow them to claim that the *Illustre Théâtre* was "entretenu par Son Altesse Royale," a claim that was un-

doubtedly an "illustrious" fiction, for in the very contract in which this phrase appears they were borrowing 1100 livres. Good Marie Hervé, veuve Béjart, put up her own house as security. In December they decide to move across the river to the *Jeu de paume de la Croix-Noire*, in the paroisse Saint-Paul. In order to fit it up as a theater they practically mortgage their future to a certain François Pommier. Molière's signature alone at the foot of the cancellation of the lease of their old theater seems to indicate that he was more and more taking upon himself personally the troubles of the troupe.

In March 1645, he borrows 291 livres tournois from a "marchande publique," Jeanne Levé, on the strength of two ribbons with gold and silver embroidery, one of satin, the other of green cloth. In May, Pommier has the troupe up for unpaid interest, and they are only let off by the friendliness of the police lieutenant. By August, Molière is doing a few days in the Châtelet prison. unpaid interest, unpaid candles, unpaid linen. By August 13 the troupe is reduced to Molière, the three Béjarts, two actors and an actress. An act of this date is the last trace of the *Illustre Théâtre* in Paris. It was beaten. At some time between then and the end of the year 1645 Molière, Madeleine, Joseph and Geneviève Béjart seem to have left Paris, taking Marie Hervé with them. Much has been made of Molière's love for Madeleine, which is mere conjecture. Not enough attention has been paid to the fact that Molière and the Béjart family stood by each other. For twelve years they were to remain in the provinces. It was doubtless hard to have to admit defeat before a Paris audience—the only audience capable of really appreciating "illustrious" acting. But Madeleine, with her

vigorous nature, her practical sense, and her red hair, does not seem to have been the sort of person to have weakened under disappointment nor to have indulged in dramatic self-pity. She had probably played in the provinces before, she could do it again. Did she play the Dorine, then, as she was later to do to the despondent family in *Tartuffe*? Quite possibly.

After all, badly shaken as they were, Molière and the Béjarts did not encounter utter disaster. They joined the Comedians of the Duc d'Epéron, Lieutenant-General for the King in the province of Guyenne. Now, this was a troupe of long standing. The "sieur Dufresne, bourgeois d'Argentan," had led them and served the Ducs d'Epéron, father and son, for at least thirteen years. To be associated with him meant an assurance of illustrious patronage, for the governor of a province was still, in the middle of the seventeenth century, a very considerable personage, endowed with an authority and prestige that was close to that of an independent sovereign. The Duc d'Epéron was, in the midst of his provincial court, among the last of the great feudal barons in France, unsoothed by the gentleness of Mme de Rambouillet, combining haughtiness, brutality and self-indulgence with a curious vacillation and weakness before real administrative problems. Where his pleasures were concerned, he brooked no restraint, and his comedians were called upon to play before his mistress, a bourgeoisie of Agen, as well as before his duchess. Serving him as they did, he was good to them, however much he may have gotten himself detested by the citizens of Bordeaux.

For five years after he left Paris, Molière almost disappears. The Comedians of the Duc d'Epéron play not

only at the Governor's palace at Bordeaux, but also in various towns of the south: Agen, Toulouse, Albi, Carcassonne, Narbonne. One day in April 1648, "le sieur Morlierre" appears, hat in hand, at the office of the City Hall of Nantes to announce the approach of the troupe of the sieur Dufresne. He "very humbly begged" the city council to allow them to mount upon the boards and perform their comedies. The next year "le sieur Morlierre comédien" writes the mayor of Poitiers requesting permission for the troupe to come and play there for a couple of months, a request which is refused, "attendu la misère du temps et la cherté des blés." The records of Agen show that in February 1650, the city council had had a tennis court fitted up as a theater, "suivant l'ordre de Monseigneur notre gouverneur," with "une galerie pour mon dit Seigneur." "The same day, le sieur du Fraisne, comédien, came to the City Hall to pay his respects on behalf of his company and to tell us that he was in this city by order of Monseigneur notre gouverneur." Apparently the head of the troupe undertook these missions when no refusal was possible.

The next year the Duc d'Epemon gave up his governorship of Guyenne and his comedians at the same time. His old family henchman, Dufresne, although he remains a member of the troupe for eight years more, resigns his leadership, and it is Molière who takes his place. Molière was one year assuming the leadership of the *Illustre Théâtre*, it was five years before he became leader of this troupe. But their leader he is from now on. They were well known in the southland now, and begin to be engaged in the winter by the States General of Languedoc at Pézenas or at Carcassonne to play while

that body is in session They are made to feel, now and again, the disapproval of the pious. On one occasion the Consuls of Albi had had the idea of having the troupe play during the visit to their city of the Comte d'Albijoux, Governor of Languedoc. After his departure, a feeling of morality and piety perhaps combining, as happens with good merchants, with an opportunity to economize, they regret their liberality and refuse to pay what they had promised. The royal intendant, M de Breteuil, reminds them with some sharpness that 'cette troupe est remplie de fort honnêtes gens et de très bons artistes, qui méritent d'être récompensés de leurs peines.' Pierre de Boissat, one of the early members of the Academy, went to all their plays when the troupe came to Vienne, and invited Molière to his table as one "eminent in his art" "He did not depreciate him," says Boissat's biographer, "as some do, affecting a stupid and insolent severity"

The Duc d'Epemon, who became governor of Burgundy in 1651, seems this time to have felt no need of a troupe "destinée seulement aux plaisirs de sa grandeur." Perhaps the counsels of his daughter, whom the violence of his character is said to have driven into a convent and who repaid him at the end of his life by converting him, were beginning to prevail Molière succeeded however in 1654 in securing the patronage of M. le Prince de Conti, younger brother of the Prince de Condé, the second of the princes of the blood and one of the greatest lords in the realm. His almoner Daniel de Cosnac, Bishop of Valence and Die, later Archbishop of Aix, recounts the way of it in his memoirs. The Prince had taken up his residence in his château of La Grange, near Pézenas, with his suite and a lady who illumined his bachelorhood

with her special favor. Mme de Calvimont had no sooner arrived than she proposed to enliven the quiet of country life with a troupe of comedians. As the good Bishop had "l'argent des menus plaisirs de ce Prince," it was he whom Conti asked to satisfy the lady's desire:

I learned that the troupe of Molière and the Béjarts was in Languedoc. I sent word to them to come to La Grange. While the troupe was getting ready to come on my order, there arrived another one at Pézenas, that of Cormier. The natural impatience of M. le Prince de Conti, and the presents made by the troupe to Mme de Calvimont lead to their being engaged. When I tried to point out to M. le Prince de Conti that I had pledged my word to Molière on his orders, he answered that afterward he had pledged his word to Cormier, and that it was more right that I should break my word than he his. Meanwhile Molière arrived, and when he asked to be reimbursed at least for the expenses he had incurred in coming, I could not obtain it, much justice as there was in his request, but M. le Prince de Conti had thought it proper to persist in his decision over this trifle. Vexed by such ill-dealing, I resolved to get them on the stage at Pézenas and to give them a thousand crowns of my own money, rather than break my word to them. As they were about to play in town, M. le Prince de Conti, a little nettled by what I was doing and urged by his secretary Sarrasin, whom I had stirred up to help me, agreed that they should come and play once on the stage at La Grange. At its first performance the troupe did not do well, in the opinion of Mme de Calvimont and consequently also in the opinion of M. le Prince de Conti, although according to all the other spectators it far surpassed that of Cormier, both by the skill of the actors and the magnificence of the costumes. A few days later they played again, and Sarrasin, by dint of praising them, made the Prince de Conti admit that

Molière's troupe should be kept rather than Cormier's. He had helped them in the beginning for my sake, but having fallen in love with one of the actresses, the du Parc, he then thought of helping himself. He won over Mme de Calvimont, and not only did he get the Cormier troupe dismissed, but also got Molière's troupe given a pension.

Thus do they become "la troupe de M le Prince de Conti." This is the first of a long line of conquests recorded for the famous du Parc, among which are to be counted both Corneilles and Racine. Not long before this time she had been dancing in public squares on the platform of her charlatan father. What a light this episode sheds, not only on the lot of the actor, but also over the entire society which forms his public! An amorous prince, a high ecclesiastic providing amusement for his lady by a group of excommunicates, justice become a question of "more" or "less" in accordance with the rank of the person committing an action, and obtained through a gust of desire in a subaltern, finally, enlightening the whole account, a strong sense of common decency and a sense of moral values, such is the world which an actor must manipulate before the joys of his art can begin. A great name was a matter of first importance for a troupe, not so much for the pension that might or might not go with it, as for the advantage it gave in getting engagements before town publics who naively associated the greatness of the name with soundness of artistic judgment.

The high moment of the "service" of the troupe with the Prince de Conti was the dancing of the ballet *Les Incompatibles* the following winter at Montpellier. In this

the lords of the Prince's suite joined with actors of his troupe and of another in an elaborate spectacle. Two years later the great nobleman had been married, had been converted by the Jansenist Bishop of Aleth (a more serious clergyman than his Highness' almoner), and having renounced the evil ways of the world, expressly forbade his comedians to go on using his name. This they were obviously loath to do, for a month after his order they were still using it to obtain permission to play at Dijon. Is there any relation between the experience of Molière with the Prince de Conti and his later picture of a "dévot" and a "grand seigneur méchant homme" in *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan*? It is tempting to draw the parallel.

Another side of the troupe's life is shown by the *Aventures burlesques* of that jolly and penniless bohemian Dassoucy. In July 1655, he arrives, he says, in Lyons, which compared to Paris seemed to him merely a fine village. However, he soon begins to like it, and what charms him most is meeting up with Molière and "MM les Béjarres." For three months he stays in Lyons "parmi les jeux, la comédie et les festins," then with Molière he takes boat by the Rhône for Avignon, where he arrives with still forty pistoles in his pocket. The first thing he does is to go to the "Academy," the local gaming-house, where a big Jew named Melchisedec takes it all away from him. It is then that Molière and the Béjarts stand him in good stead: "for these generous persons were not satisfied to treat me like a friend, they treated me like a relative." Going shortly to Pézenas for the session of the States General of Languedoc, they take Dassoucy along "they say the best of brothers at the end of a month is tired of feeding his brother; but they, more generous than

all the brothers you could have, did not tire of seeing me at their table a whole winter long." Of course Dassoucy was a musician, and contributed undoubtedly to the "harmony" and "comedy" of their meals:

A cette table bien garnie,
Parmi les plus friands muscats,
C'est moi qui soufflais la rôtie
Et qui buvais plus d'hypocras

He himself values his services but little. "I never saw so much goodness," he says, "so much frankness and decency as with these people, well worthy of playing really in the world the parts of princes which they play every day on the stage." It will be remembered that the "generosity" of the princes of Corneille and authors of his generation had about it a turn of magnanimity and grandeur that allied it to Roman "virtue." When applied to actors, however, not only by Dassoucy but also by other writers, the word is used in a simpler sense. It seems to have been natural to actors to be generous without any undue affectation of virtue.

While Dassoucy is with them, in the autumn of 1655 at Lyons, the troupe produces Molière's first full-length play, *L'Etourdi*. He is in his thirty-fourth year. He has been, as we should say, in the theatrical business for over twelve years. The experience of him who would "play heroes" has been, as we have seen, in acquitting debts, encountering rebuffs and disappointments, undergoing the whims of the great and the chicanery of the bourgeois, seeking engagements and soliciting patronage, above all striving to please. A life in which, however, "pleasures and displeasures are mingled," as he is said to have averred later, and in which the pleasures undoubt-

edly increased with mounting prestige and success. For the troupe was extremely successful, and as one good actor was engaged after another—the de Bries, the du Parcs—their jolly table as pictured by Dassoucy rang with such laughter and song as to make their life appear in large measure, as Bruscambille would have it, “sans souci.”

Less is known of their repertory of serious plays than of that of the *Illustre Théâtre*. They doubtless chose among all the more successful plays of the last thirty years, for every play that had been printed, as most of them were a few months after the first performance, was available to them. Molière had probably been Rodrigue and Herod and Horace and Venceslas and Cosroès as Madeleine had been Chimène and Marianne and Emilie and Cléopâtre. To Dassoucy, it will be noted, they are still “every day princes.” Yet they had found in the provinces a public less completely inoculated with the heroic virus than was that of Paris, and which could still laugh whole-heartedly, like the public of the Hôtel de Bourgogne in the 'twenties, at a farce. It is thus that Molière, reverting to the practice of Gros-Guillaume and Gaultier-Garguille, seems to have begun composing little one-act farces in which he himself often played the principal and most ridiculous part. Like this older generation of actors, he wore a mask. Unlike them, however, his farces were not those of the old medieval repertory, but rather those of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*.

Molière had certainly known a good many Italian actors, and watched them play with the keenest interest. While of course it is absurd to affirm, as his enemies did later, that his master in acting had been Scaramouche, it

is none the less true that this famous actor, Tiberio Fiorelli, was the head of a troupe called to Paris by Mazarin and which played there in the Petit-Bourbon theater in 1644 and 1645, the years of the *Illustre Théâtre*. In 1658, when he returns to Paris, Molière is to share the Petit-Bourbon with these same Italians. During his years in the provinces, he falls in with Italian troupes on more than one occasion, particularly in the city of Lyons where he remains for longer and longer periods from 1652 on. Lyons had shown itself for decades, chiefly because of its position at the limit of navigation of the Rhone, the most receptive of all French cities to Italian culture, and it seemed to take an especial pleasure in the playing of these Italian companies.

There is a certain dash, a certain glamor, about these Italian professionals, ever wandering over the face of Europe, that the French actors, stay-at-homes as they are, tend to lose. So also are the Italian plays more fanciful, more frivolous, more purely imaginative, than those of the soberer French, who tend constantly toward moral grandeur on the one hand, or conscientious realism on the other. The Italian specialty is the light play, comedy or farce. Their more ambitious comedies were of course written out—the sustained comedy of the Renaissance—but their farces were improvised by the actors on the basis of a scenario or sketch tacked in the wings. Their plays all turned about certain characters that had become traditional: pairs of lovers with their valet and maid, the old father or guardian who would prevent the marriage, an unsuccessful lover in the person of a swaggering Spanish captain, a friend of the father who was a pedant, lawyer or doctor, and a considerable variety of zanies, or

clowns, some of whom were valets, some rogues, some ruffians, some stupid louts. The characters about whose fortunes the plot turns—the lover and the girl—were presented as naturally and attractively as possible to the audience. But all the rest, the comic characters—old men, doctors, captains, servants, clowns of every variety—wore masks. It is the mask and the improvisation that gives its peculiar quality to this comedy. The mask lends fixity to the character that wears it, and forces the actor to make up by the liveliness of his gestures for the immobility of his countenance. Gesture and speech must accord with the kind of character which the audience attaches to the unchanging mask. The improvisation stirred the vigorous imaginations of these warm-blooded southerners to a variety and unexpectedness of acting which combined with the rigidity of the mask to form the essence of their art.

It must have been by 1650 at the latest that Molière tried his hand at making up little one-act farces inspired by the performance of the Italians. They were perhaps partly written out, partly left to improvisation. Some of them he built about himself, playing the part of a pedant or a country lout. Others he made for the actor du Parc: *Gros-René Ecolier* or *Gros-René Jaloux*. Two of them have been preserved, or at least two one-act farces bearing titles used by Molière but which may be a reworking of his version *Le Médecin Volant* and *La Jalousie du Barbouillé*. The others he never published, although they were long played at his theater. When Molière did write a complete play, however, it was not a tragedy but a comedy similar to these farces. And like these farces the *Etourdi* was imitated from the Italian.



THE NEW COMEDY

IN 1655, the taste of Paris as well as that of the provinces called for comedy. During the twelve years that had elapsed since the founding of the *Illustre Théâtre*, the cult of heroism had suffered a great decline. The "Fronde" had done for the spirit of Rocroi and Nordlingen, and the tone of drama had changed.

Pierre Corneille, it will be remembered, had reached the high point of tragedy with *Horace*, *Cinna*, *Polyeucte*, and *Pompée* between 1640 and 1642. He had returned to comedy in 1643 and 1644 with the *Menteur* and its *Suite*, which were built however about a figure as heroic in his way as the patriots, saints and lovers of tragedy. He had produced from *Rodogune* (1645) to *Pertharite* (1651) seven heroic plays all but one of which were tragedies. *Pertharite* was such a complete failure that its author ceased writing for the theater for several years. Though he was conscious of no diminution in his talent, he felt that after twenty years of writing he had grown "too old to be in fashion."

Corneille, the most famous among the serious playwrights, had been alone in persisting even as long as this in the attempt to produce tragedy. The burlesque writer Paul Scarron had in his invalid's chair composed between 1645 and 1655 a series of comedies which in many respects were the best so far written in France. Even more

than Corneille he had felt the possibilities of the Spanish *comedia*, and it is interesting to see, in these years when war with Spain was constantly in progress, the Parisian public flocking to the Marais to enjoy an afternoon of Spanish art and Spanish manners. There is in these plays, of course, not the slightest allusion to the war, and indeed during the years of the "Fronde" a flight from actuality, even into the enemy's country, may well have seemed a relief. A country, too, not of perfect honor and perfect love, but of outrageous pleasantry and gross buffoonery. Most of these plays were written for the farce actor Jodelet (*Jodelet ou le Maître Valet*, *Jodelet Duelliste*), and all were played by him sooner or later. Their comic quality springs from the contrast between the sense of honor and delicate sentiment of the masters, on the one hand, and the poltroonery and gluttony of the *gracioso* on the other. What amuses Scarron is to place his valet in a situation calling for the most elevated idealism, and to show him impelled to skyrocketing effects of the imagination under the spur of physical timidity and violent appetite. The middle road of life is completely avoided, in this comedy. To romance is opposed a pusillanimity so extreme, a yielding to the senses so complete, that the character of Jodelet or of Dom Japhet assumes proportions as gigantic, in their way, as those of the great-souled heroes of Corneille.

All the other dramatists follow the lead of Scarron or cease writing. Thomas Corneille, the younger brother of Pierre, begins his career as a dramatist with eight comedies in quick succession between 1649 and 1656. The abbé Boisrobert, who had written tragi-comedies in the taste of his patron Richelieu in the 'thirties, resumes

dramatic composition in 1650, and in six years produces ten comedies as against one tragi-comedy. The beginning of the tender Quinault was also in comedy. he writes three between 1653 and 1655. Old Tristan l'Hermite, friend and benefactor of the Bézarts, who seemed even more pledged to tragedy than the great Corneille, ends his career by writing a comedy, *Le Parasite*, played in 1654. Like him La Fontaine, then unknown, tries his hand at a Latin comedy and adapts the *Eunuch* of Terence.

Molière's *Etourdi* is an adaptation of an Italian play by Niccolò Barbieri, *L'Inavvertito*, published in Venice in 1629. Barbieri was the leader of an Italian troupe which had been in and out of France for years, and was at Lyons at the same time as Molière in 1653. The plot of the *Etourdi* is the same as that of *L'Inavvertito*: a clever servant thinks up one scheme after another to secure a lady for his master, and each time the bemused lover blunders into the plan and ruins it. This plot, it will be noted, is close to that of Latin comedy—it may even be regarded as the classic plot of classical comedy—and bears little or no resemblance to life as it was lived either in Italy or in France. We are here in a world of pure "adventure," peopled with Latin procurers, Spanish gypsies, and piratical Turks, where shipwrecks, disguises and opportune recognitions are mere everyday matters:

C'est qu'en fait d'aventure il est très ordinaire
De voir gens pris sur mer par quelque Turc corsaire,
Pour être à leur famille à point nommé rendus
Après quinze ou vingt ans qu'on les a cru perdus

There is not the slightest indication in this play that it had ever occurred to the author to use in comedy references to places and events and manners familiar to the

audience, as had often been done by French dramatists for over twenty years. The "Messina" where the action takes place is in a world where human values and human life are completely distorted in the interest of laughter, a world in which young love is as comic as death or paternal affection, in which the avarice and cupidity of the old are as much matters of course as the ruse of the clever or the dreaminess of the young. The schemes concocted by the valet to get Célie away from Trufaldin are as fantastic as is the purchase of a slave girl from her master in seventeenth century Lyons. An old man will be made to drop his purse, he will be persuaded to pay for the funeral of his old friend said to have died, a band of masks will invade Trufaldin's house and carry off the girl with them. The level of farce is reached in the last act when the valet disguises himself as a Swiss landlord and talks with a German accent.

Molière carried the unreality and inhumanity of the situation even farther than Barbieri. As was the custom with plays of the *commedia dell'arte*, the latter had incorporated in his plot a minor rôle, that of an economical but gruff and kindly father, which was his in all his plays, and which he acted under his stage name of Beltrame. His chief prominence is in the prologue, where he bespeaks the favor of the audience for his play. Molière treats the subject differently although the general conduct of the plot is the same, he writes for himself the part of the valet, played of course with a mask. He calls himself, indeed, Mascarille, "little mask," and in so doing perfects a new type of zany. All the simplifications and additions which he has made in the Italian original serve to give scope to this character. The Scappino of the

Italian comedy is on the stage less than two-thirds of the time, and in many scenes plays a very secondary part. Mascarille is on the stage seven-eighths of the time, and although the cast includes ten characters, speaks himself over a thousand lines, or about one-half of the play. The whole action is swept along on the inexhaustible abundance of Mascarille's imagination. He alone makes the play, and the audience readily agrees with him when he says, in the heat of one of his cleverest creations:

Après ce rare exploit, je veux que l'on s'apprête
A me peindre en héros un laurier sur la tête,
Et qu'au bas du portrait on mette en lettres d'or
Vivat Mascarillus, fourbum imperator!

In the writing itself there is a freedom and a joy in the savor of language, in the familiar, often earthy tang of the phrases, in the flash and brilliance of the lines, that made Victor Hugo prefer the "luminous style" of this play to any of the later writing of Molière. He has not yet discovered the rule which makes a dramatic poet too careful to remain within the character that speaks the lines to give rein to his lyric inspiration. Molière triumphs in his main character. Like a Dorante, greatest of liars, or a Jodelet, prince of cowards, Mascarille is an "emperor of rascals." The fertility of his invention is infinite, and the quickness of his wit. As presented in the play, these are the supreme qualities that men can have. Mascarille can be more eloquent than a father himself on the necessity of prudence and obedience in a son, yet when threatened with a beating he can espouse with even greater warmth the fire and heedlessness of youth.

D'un censeur de plaisirs ai-je fort l'encolure?
Et Mascarille est-il ennemi de nature?

Moquez-vous des sermons d'un vieux barbon de père,
Poussez votre bidet, vous dis-je, et laissez faire.

Not that the audience is led particularly to have a greater sympathy for the "nature" of the son than for the "bile" of the father. Both are mere ten-pins in the hands of the dexterous Mascarille, who juggles with them to his own greater glory and the joy of the spectator. He is as completely skeptical of money and authority as he is of love that colors life with sweet illusion:

. . . Allons donc, et que les cieux prospères
Nous donnent des enfants dont nous soyons les pères!

are the lines with which the play ends. Life, whatever way you take it, is bound to be absurd, if you understand it. Molière has at last found the true source of his inspiration. It is not the tragic but the comic Muse. But though she plays over life, and around life, she does not touch it anywhere. Mascarille's real achievement is not in getting his master married, chance brings that about: it is in being very funny. Such contemporaries as the Cardinal de Retz would have done well to reflect that such could be the sole outcome of trying in real life to be as clever as Mascarille was on the stage. A completely comic view of the world is proper in a rascally valet of comedy but much less commendable in an archbishop.

The *Dépit Amoureux*, the second of the two plays which Molière composed for the provinces, and which was played at Béziers a year after the *Etourdi*, in December 1656, was also drawn from the Italian. It was adapted from the *Interesse* of Nicolò Secchi. It is not as good a play as the *Etourdi*, the spontaneity and gusto of which have largely disappeared. It must have cost Molière a

greater effort than did the previous play. Not only do the plot, principal characters and situations come from Secchi, but it is full of borrowings from Latin and French playwrights. Its plot turns about the disguise and mistaken identity that are the favorite devices of Italian comedy of intrigue. Old Albert, to keep his wealth, has a flower-woman's son substituted for his daughter. This boy dies: without the old man's knowing it, his real daughter is resubstituted for the false son, and is reared as a boy in his household. It is this quiproquo that provides the solution of the imbroglio. Eraste loves Lucile, another daughter of Albert, and she him. Their valet and maid respectively, Gros-René and Marinette, are also lovers. However, another young man, Valère, allows it to become noised about through his valet Mascarille that he and Lucile have been secretly married before a notary, the wedding being followed by "too sweet a night." This assertion of Valère's causes between Lucile and Eraste, Marinette and Gros-René, the double lover's quarrel that gives the play its title. Of course it turns out that the false Ascagne, who loves Valère and whose real name is Dorothée, took her sister's place on the night in question, and when this is discovered all ends happily, as it is easy for Valère, after the manner of the second lover of comedy, to accept the exchange of sisters.

The Mascarille of this play, undoubtedly played by Molière, has a relatively minor part, and is not as fully developed as was the Mascarille of the *Etourdi*. There is no question this time of triumphing, or of being an emperor. Some demon of loquacity spurs this Mascarille to talk when there seems no necessity for doing so, and to say the things which are the most disagreeable to his

hearers. He is thus constantly under the threat of a bastonnade, and cringing and pleading to escape it. He is a mixture of Spanish humor and Italian fantasy. His coward-glutton side is developed as was not the case with his predecessor.

Moi, chamailler! Bon Dieu! suis-je un Roland, mon maître,
Ou quelque Ferragu? C'est fort mal me connaître.
Quand je viens à songer, moi qui me suis si cher,
Qu'il ne faut que deux doigts d'un misérable fer
Dans le corps pour vous mettre un humain dans la bière,
Je suis scandalisé d'une étrange manière . . .
A table, comptez-moi, si vous voulez, pour quatre,
Mais comptez-moi pour rien s'il s'agit de se battre

Where he resembles most the first Mascarille is in his utter lack of morality and his impish delight in the ways of the flesh. Whereas at the end of the play the other valet, Gros-René, is to marry his Marinette, Mascarille is left unprovided for, and hinting that he will do his best to make horns sprout on his colleague's forehead.

Molière tried in the *Dépit* a play for the success of which the chief responsibility did not rest on his own shoulders. Du Parc's Gros-René, a part which the farces written for this actor probably enticed Molière to develop, is more important than Mascarille, and completely contrasted to him in character. In him is neither imagination, poltroonery, knavery nor cleverness. He is fat and jolly, as du Parc was in reality "un homme tout rond de toutes les manières." He is of a philosophical—or rather anti-philosophical—turn of mind, a combination of whimsical good-sense and robust optimism, of confidence in self and respect for others. His master

Eraste, anxious and jealous, does not dare believe Lucile, even when she tells him that she loves him, but Gros-René takes life more simply:

Je veux croire les gens, quand on me dit je t'aime.

The very shuffle of nouns and pronouns in this sentence gives the impression, somehow, that very sound principles of conduct are in no way dependent on a knowledge of grammar, and also that because a man and woman are in love with each other is no reason why they should abandon the elementary rules of mutual confidence which must govern any human relationship.

It is in the setting of the main love affair of Eraste and Lucile against this background of simple common sense instead of utter disillusion as in the *Etourdi* that the real originality of the play consists. The principal old man, Albert, completes in a way Gros-René. He differs from him in that the possession of wealth has deprived him of good humor and has made him gruff and unsociable, but he shows in an entirely unnecessary scene with a pedant that his sense is just as solid and his learning about as limited as is the case with the valet. These two characters come more from life than from the world of the theater, and alone in the play give the impression that the scene is rightly laid in Paris and not in Messina. In working out the characters of his impossible plot, Molière has been led to draw on his experience of the kind of people among whom he grew up. Gros-René came from Nantes; it would be interesting to know whether Molière had him play this part with a Parisian accent.

More important than any character in the play are the scenes of the lovers' quarrel: master and mistress, then valet and maid, meet with the firm conviction that each has been mortally offended by the other. Then love shows its strength and they end in complete accord:

Eraste

Mais si mon cœur encor revoulait sa prison?
Si, tout fâché qu'il est, il demandait pardon?

Lucile

Non, non, n'en faites rien ma faiblesse est trop grande,
J'aurais peur d'accorder trop tôt votre demande

In these two short scenes, so rapid, so charming, lies the germ of a new comedy. Neither will nor imagination leads the action here, but feeling love triumphs, "weakness" triumphs, and the audience is delighted. It happens to the masters, it happens to the valets—it happens to everybody.

On October 24, 1658, Molière and his troupe appeared before the young King, his brother the Duc d'Anjou and the court in the Guard Room of the old Louvre, on a stage erected at the King's command. It was a critical moment in the company's career. After twelve years in the provinces, they had determined to make a second attempt upon Paris, and in May had moved up from Grenoble to Rouen, so as to be nearer the capital. Molière, according to the Preface of 1682, made frequent trips to Paris to see what could be done. The fortunes of the Marais, its best actors gone, its situation in the rue Vieille-du-Temple more and more inaccessible, were now at a low ebb. In July, Madeleine Béjart signed a contract with the Marais troupe for the rent of their

theater, perhaps with the idea that the two troupes might be mingled. Although nothing ever came of this contract, it is concrete evidence of the uncertainty of Molière and his comrades as to their future, and of the effort they were making to establish themselves. They had not yet definitely settled upon a place in which to play when they appeared before the King, although to be sure Monsieur, the King's brother, had accorded them his protection. From the beginning the Béjarts and Molière had spared no pains to secure protection, a respect in which they are in marked contrast to the Marais company, who after Richelieu's death never found another protector. How that of Monsieur was obtained is difficult to say, but however it was, it must have been through pulling strings of one sort or another.

On that day in October, then, before the most awesome assemblage in the land, they played Corneille's *Nicomède*, and staked their future on their performance of tragedy. Why they should have chosen this particular play is not known. Perhaps out of tact, because the relations between Prusias, his second wife and his son Nicomède by a first marriage could no more be applied to the French royal family in 1658 than could the relations between Armenia and Rome to those of France and Spain; perhaps because, of all Corneille's tragedies, it is the most filled with grand and noble political sentiment. At all events, they must have felt that only a tragedy was worthy of being offered on such an occasion to such an audience, in spite of the universally recognized superiority in serious plays of the King's Comedians, now usually called the "great comedians," of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Some of the latter are even said to have been

present in the hall. To have offered the *Etourdi* or the *Dépit* as the main part of the entertainment was apparently out of the question.

Just how successful their tragedy was is doubtful. The audience was probably, as the Preface says, "very well satisfied with the charm and acting of the women" (Madeleine Béjart was no mean tragic actress, while the "imperial bearing" of the du Parc must have been magnificent in Laodice) When the tragedy was over, Molière as "orator" stepped out on the stage, and—

After having thanked His Majesty, in very modest terms, for his goodness in excusing his defects and those of all the troupe, which had appeared but tremblingly before so august an assembly, he said that the desire they had of having the honor of diverting the greatest king in the world had made them forget that His Majesty had in his service excellent originals of which they were only very poor copies, but yet, since His Majesty had been willing to bear with their country manners, he very humbly begged that he might be permitted to give one of those "petits divertissements," which had won for him some reputation, and with which he was in the habit of regaling the provinces

This compliment was so agreeably turned and so favorably received that the whole court applauded it, and still more the little comedy, which was that of the *Docteur Amoureux*. Little comedies had long been unheard-of, so that this one seemed to be a new invention, and diverted as well as surprised everyone. M. de Molière played the Doctor, and the manner in which he acquitted himself of this rôle won him such great esteem that His Majesty gave orders to establish his troupe in Paris

Thus does La Grange, faithful keeper of the Register, recount this first performance.

The playing of a farce after a tragedy had indeed been abandoned in Paris for at least twenty-five years. Scarron, who probably regretted it, remarks in his *Roman Comique* (1657) that "today the farce is practically abolished." Thus is apparent the boldness of the "invention" by which Molière assured the success of his company. It is his "little comedy," composed by himself and in which he plays the most farcically ridiculous part, which tips the scale of royal favor, leads to permission to use the Petit-Bourbon theater, and starts the troupe on the highroad to glory and popularity.

What was this "little comedy"? It was one of those farces composed or arranged by Molière in the provinces, to which we have already referred. Molière "thought it wiser to suppress them," according to the good La Grange, "when he had set up as object of all his plays to oblige men to correct their defects." Skits of the type of the *Docteur Amoureux*, inspired as they were by the success of the Italians in the same sort of thing, yet contain (to judge by traces of them remaining in the *Député*, the *Cocu Imaginaire* or *Georges Dandin*) the homely, earthy, everyday spirit of the French farces that a Gaultier-Garguille or a Guillot-Gorju were still playing in Molière's boyhood. They do not shine by observance of the *bien-séances*. Nor are they a product of a grandiloquent imagination, exciting itself in anarchic poltroonery much as it did in heroics. Their value lies in the extent to which human life is caught as it were in the act. It is Molière the observer—the Contemplator, as Boileau calls him—who appears in these modest improvisations, penetrating, impersonal, reflecting in a polarizing mirror the absurdity

of the interplay of human desires when men try to live together in the world.

The succeeding months were not to belie the royal judgment as to the real value of the company: it is in comedy that it shines. Upon a royal order, it was established in the Petit-Bourbon. Built over in the early part of the century, this theater had previously been used solely by Italian troupes, and at the end of 1658 the new *Troupe de Monsieur* found the famous Scaramouche installed there. The newcomers paid the Italians 1500 livres as part of the expenses they had incurred, and were allowed to play on the "extraordinary" or less popular days (Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday), whereas the Italians retained the "ordinary" days (Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday) Under these conditions the troupe played through the winter and spring, and took the ordinary days only when the Italians went off to Italy for a vacation in June. It may be said here that, whether Scaramouche was Molière's teacher or not, there is no record of any but the friendliest of relations between the two troupes during all the years of their association.

On arriving in Paris, our country comedians had counted the faithful four of the *Illustre Théâtre*, Molière, Joseph Béjart and his sisters Madeleine and Geneviève (known as Mlle Hervé on the stage), a younger Béjart brother Louis (L'Eguisé), who had joined them in the early 'fifties, old Dufresne, the du Parcs and the de Bries. During Lent of 1659, an idle time for the theater when changes occurred in troupes, old contracts expiring and new ones being made, Dufresne retires to his native Argentan and the du Parcs go to the Marais. As may be

imagined, it was not easy to satisfy equally the three main actresses of the troupe, Madeleine Béjart, Catherine de Brie and Marquise du Parc, and the latter's desertion with her husband probably was due to pique on her part: how could she, with her many admirers, share with others? The du Parcs were replaced by another provincial couple, du Croisy and his wife, and Dufresne by a young actor named La Grange, who is to be Molière's most ardent admirer and most faithful lieutenant. It is he who kept the "register" of performances, engagements, casting, and payments from which our knowledge from now on principally comes, and it is he who is responsible for the Preface of 1682. Two additional actors are also drawn from the Marais: Jodelet and his brother L'Espy. Jodelet is the hero of the farce, the "enfariné" (white-face), whom Molière evidently thought it would be advantageous to have opposite his own mask.

The troupe by no means abandoned the acting of serious plays. During 1659 it put on six tragedies of Corneille (not *Nicomède*, curiously enough), two of Du Ryer, two of Tristan, and one of Rotrou, all of which were in the repertory of the "great comedians" at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. From the beginning, troupes in Paris seem to have felt the necessity of playing against each other as much as for themselves. However, the main success of the Troupe de Monsieur was manifestly in comedy. When it went "en visite" to a great house or to the Louvre, "for the King," which happened with encouraging frequency, it is always a comedy that is called for. Desmarests' *Visionnaires*, for example, or Scarron's *Dom Japhet d'Arménie*, Jodelet's triumph of long standing. An

old play of 1635 on Sancho Panza,¹ by Guérin de Bouscal, meets with considerable success with Molière in the title rôle. The *Elourdi* and the *Dépit* are also in demand, as well as some of the "little comedies."

After these months of success, it is with a new "little comedy" that real triumph is achieved. On November 18, 1659, after a performance of *Cinna* in the Petit-Bourbon, the troupe played the *Précieuses Ridicules*.

¹ *Le Gouvernement de Sanche Pansa*



LES PRÉCIEUSES RIDICULES

THE SCENE is laid in Paris, "dans la maison de Gorgibus." It is no longer the "public square" of the *Déput*, that public square with the houses of the principal characters opening upon it, so convenient for intimate conversation, in the convention of comedy, and for the unexpected adventures and encounters that intrigue involves. We are here in the "salle basse" of a "maison bourgeoise," the sort of room that began to be built in the seventeenth century as the bourgeoisie housed itself more amply, not so much of low ceiling, as the name seems to imply, but on the ground floor. People do not ordinarily sit in it, yet, but it must be passed through when entering and leaving the house.

Into this room stride La Grange and du Croisy (they bear their stage names in the play), having obviously come from upstairs. They are a little sheepish, a little amused, more than a little annoyed.

A-t-on jamais vu, dites-moi, deux pecques provinciales
faire plus les renchéries que celles-là, et deux hommes
traités avec plus de mépris que nous?

La Grange has taken the thing to heart, and will get back at them. He knows what the trouble is with these two young ladies just arrived in town.

L'air précieux n'a pas seulement infecté Paris, il s'est aussi répandu dans les provinces, et nos donzelles ridicules en ont humé leur bonne part.

He will play a trick on them, teach them a lesson. He has a valet . . . "mais sortons d'ici auparavant." Old Gorgibus catches them as they leave.

Hé bien! vous avez vu ma nièce et ma fille? Les affaires iront-elles bien? Quel est le résultat de cette visite?

For an answer they refer him to the girls, and go out his "très humbles serviteurs." Gorgibus calls for the maid Marotte

Où sont vos maîtresses?—Dans leur cabinet —Que font-elles?—De la pommade pour les lèvres —C'est trop pommadé dites-leur qu'elles descendent

This is farce, of course, with its typical figures. lovers, mistresses, valets, father, guardian, maid, and the plot based on a trick; but it is also very close to life. French middle-class parents did not impose matches on their children very often, but they considered that they were responsible, when their daughters began to be marriageable, to take the initiative in finding them mates. As in their home-keeping world girls met but few men, they usually took kindly to this procedure. Not so, however, Madelon and Cathos.

Et quelle estime, mon père, [says Madelon, that is, Madeleine Béjart], voulez-vous que nous fassions du procédé irrégulier de ces gens-là? . . . La belle galanterie que la leur! Quoi! débiter d'abord par le mariage!

"Et par où veux-tu donc qu'ils débutent," cries the irascible old codger, "par le concubinage?" He is indeed "du dernier bourgeois," and his reading has been sadly

neglected. In the world of Mlle de Scudéry, in the *Grand Cyrus* or the *Clélie*, it is only at the end of the tenth volume that the hero marries the heroine. Here, as indeed in all the romantic novels and plays for thirty years past:

. . le mariage ne doit jamais arriver qu'après les autres aventures . . les rivaux qui se jettent à la traverse d'une inclination établie, les persécutions des pères, les jalousies conçues sur de fausses apparences, les plaintes, les désespoirs, les enlèvements, et ce qui s'ensuit

No one can make a serious plot out of any other stuff than this: should life be lived on a different model? "Le moyen de recevoir des gens qui sont tout à fait incongrus en galanterie!" says Cathos (Catherine de Brie)

Je m'en vais gager qu'ils n'ont jamais vu la carte du Tendre, et que Billets-Doux, Petits-Soins, Billets-Galants, et Jolis-Vers, sont des terres inconnues pour eux.

For those imbued with Mlle de Scudéry's so clever, so delicate psychology of gallantry, how breathe any other air? Can this old man really be her father, Madelon wonders, he who cannot understand that she should be called "Polixène," and her cousin "Aminte," as Mme de Rambouillet was "Arthénice" and Mlle de Scudéry "Sapho"? She must have had a "more illustrious birth"

Mon Dieu! ma chère [says Cathos] que ton père a la forme enfouie dans la matière! Que son intelligence est épaisse! et qu'il fait sombre dans son âme!

When the Marquis de Mascarille (Molière) arrives, steps from the sedan chair in which two struggling porters have borne him into the room, and consents to pay them only when threatened with one of the carrying-poles of the chair ("Il est raisonnable"), he is the pol-

troon valet of the *Dépit*; but when he delicately fluffs out his cascade of a wig, when he smoothes the enormous lace canons that hang from his knees, "where children might have played hide-and-seek," when he freshens up the flood of ribbons with which his shoes are covered, he is a new comic type, the "marquis" of this and future plays. The valet of pure fantasy melts into the fop, the young man about town.

The girls are filled with delight at the delicacy of Mascarille's compliments,—"*vous allez faire pic, repic et capot, tout ce qu'il y a de galant dans Paris*":

Nous n'avons garde, ma cousine et moi, de donner de notre sérieux dans le doux de votre flatterie

When armchairs are brought ("*les commodités de la conversation*"), Mascarille is fairly enthroned between them

Je vois ici des yeux qui ont la mine d'être de fort mauvais garçons, de faire insulte aux libertés, et de traiter une âme de Turc à More Comment, diable! d'abord qu'on les approche, ils se mettent sur leur garde meurtrière! Ah! par ma foi, je m'en défie!

"Ma chère," says Madelon, "c'est le caractère enjoué."
 "Je vois bien," answers Cathos, "que c'est un Amilcar."

Paris, they agree, is "le grand bureau des merveilles," and outside of Paris "il n'y a point de salut pour les honnêtes gens." Of course, the girls are not yet known in Paris, and they would be "obligées de la dernière obligation" to Mascarille if he could introduce them to some of the wits. One must be up on a hundred things in Paris: "*les petites nouvelles galantes, les jolis commerces de prose et de vers,*" for "*c'est renchérir sur le ridicule,*

qu'une personne se pique d'esprit, et ne sache pas jusqu'au moindre petit quatrain qui se fait chaque jour."

Mascarille is just their man, for he goes in for verses himself:

Vous verrez courir de ma façon, dans les belles ruelles de Paris, deux cents chansons, autant de sonnets, quatre cents épigrammes, et plus de mille madrigaux, sans compter les énigmes et les portraits.

He would like to show them, notably, an "impromptu" he made yesterday "chez une duchesse de mes amies que je fus visiter; car je suis diablement fort sur les impromptus":

Oh! oh! je n'y prenais pas garde
Tandis que, sans songer à mal, je vous regarde,
Votre œil en tapinois me dérobe mon cœur
Au voleur! au voleur! au voleur! au voleur!

Nothing pedantic about that, he says, and then explains to them its beauties:

Que vous semble de ce mot *tapinois*? n'est-il pas bien choisi? . . . *Tapinois*, en cachette, il semble que ce soit un chat qui vienne de prendre une souris, *tapinois* . . .
Au voleur! au voleur! au voleur! au voleur! Ne diriez-vous pas que c'est un homme qui crie et court après un voleur pour le faire arrêter? Au voleur! au voleur! au voleur! au voleur!

Not only has the gallant Mascarille written his impromptu, he has done an air for it

Vous avez appris la musique?—Moi? point du tout —
Et comment donc cela se peut-il?—Les gens de qualité savent tout sans avoir rien appris

Whereupon Madelon reproves her cousin for ever having been so simple as to have thought otherwise: "Assuré-

ment, ma chère . . ." Mascarille sings his air for them: "Il y a de la chromatique là-dedans," says Madelon, "tout est merveilleux, je vous assure; je suis enthousiasmée de l'air et des paroles."

Mascarille will take them to the theater, for he is a great patron of dramatists "quand j'ai promis à quelque poète, je crie toujours, Voilà qui est bien! devant que les chandelles soient allumées" He has even done a play himself. "Hé!" says Cathos, "à quels comédiens la donnerez-vous?"

Belle demande! Aux grands comédiens, il n'y a qu'eux qui soient capables de faire valoir les choses les autres sont des ignorants qui récitent comme l'on parle, ils ne savent pas faire ronfler les vers et s'arrêter au bel endroit .

That is the opening shot of a war with the Hôtel de Bourgogne that is to last for four years. . . .

The action hereafter moves rapidly toward horseplay. Mascarille's ribbons are well chosen (*furieusement bien*), he offers his gloves to be smelled (*terriblement bon*), he has his plumes admired (*effroyablement belles*), and finally cries out in fear that both the ladies are attacking his heart at the same time. Cathos attempts to reassure him: "Vous avez plus de peur que de mal, et votre cœur crie avant qu'on l'écorche," to which he replies "Comment diable! il est écorché depuis la tête jusqu'aux pieds!"

It is time now for a diversion, and the Vicomte de Jodelet is announced. The old farce actor, with twenty years of Parisian successes behind him, enters here in his minor rôle to pass on the comic crown, as it were, to his younger and greater successor. His well known befloured face comes in opposite the mask of Mascarille:

Ne vous étonnez pas [says the latter] de voir le vicomte de la sorte; il ne fait que sortir d'une maladie qui lui a rendu le visage pâle comme vous le voyez.

"Ce sont fruits des veilles de la cour et des fatigues de la guerre," answers Jodelet, and puts the final touch to the picture of the young man of quality. Whether sprightly like Mascarille or blasé like Jodelet, he is the hero of the camp as well as the drawing-room. Mascarille used to command "un régiment de cavalerie sur les galères de Malte." They had both been at the siege of Arras, and had helped in the winning of one of those redoubts called a "demi-lune": "Que veux-tu dire avec ta demi-lune?" says Jodelet, "c'était bien une lune toute entière."

The farce grows broader as they show the girls their wounds, and Mascarille has his hand on the button of his breeches when stopped by the delicacy of Madelon. They send for an orchestra, and two neighboring ladies, who arrive as Mascarille and Jodelet are telling of the dukes and countesses they have been to see. The dance, however, is rudely interrupted by the arrival of the masters, La Grange and du Croisy, who treat their valets to a beating, and have their finery taken off. The girls in horror order from their presence the despoiled impostors, who do not leave without a last philosophical reflection on the part of Mascarille.

Allons, camarade, allons chercher fortune autre part,
je vois bien qu'on n'aime ici que la vaine apparence, et
qu'on n'y considère point la vertu toute nue

Old Gorgibus having arrived, the orchestra beg him to pay them, but he drives them out with the stick of farce, and ends the play:

Et vous, qui êtes cause de leur folie, sottes billesvesées,
pernicieux amusement des esprits oisifs, romans, vers,
chansons, sonnets et sonnettes, puissiez-vous être à tous
les diables!

The success of the *Précieuses* was tremendous. Molière and his old friend Madeleine Béjart, taking the main burden of the play upon their shoulders, finally tasted, after sixteen years, the fruits of complete triumph. Not as a queen and a hero, be it remarked. It is a question as to which plays the more ridiculous part. The first performance brought in the highest gate yet received by the Troupe de Monsieur, and in the eleven months that elapsed before the Petit-Bourbon was ordered torn down the little comedy was played there forty-four times. "People came from twenty leagues around" to hear it, says one writer, and the jingle of Loret, author of the *Muze historique*, who had shown himself thus far cold to the new troupe, rises to heights of lyric enthusiasm:

Jamais l'*Oedipe* de Corneille,
Que l'on tient être une merveille,
La *Cassandre* de Boisrobert,
Le *Néron* de Monsieur Gilbert,
Alcibiade, *Amalazonte*,
Dont la cour a fait tant de compte,
Ni le *Fédéric* de Boyer,
Digne d'un immortel laurier,
N'eurent une vogue si grande,
Tant la pièce semblait friande
A plusieurs, tant sages que fous
Pour moi, j'y portai trente sous,
Mais oyant leurs fines paroles,
J'en ris pour plus de dix pistoles

In the wake of this triumph, a hack writer, Somaize, constitutes himself an authority upon preciousness and, in

January 1660, has a one-act farce called *Les Véritables Précieuses* printed, which either was played or was doubtless intended to be played, on the stage of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. It is as much an imitation of Molière's play as an attack upon it, and seems to have been a move in what had always been considered fair warfare between Parisian theaters. Up to this time, nothing of Molière's had been published, but he rushed the *Précieuses* into print, using the courts to prevent a rival publisher from getting out an unauthorized edition. His published play probably reached the public before that of Somaize, and was preceded by a preface written by himself which though not devoid of impertinence was instinct with the joy and confidence of victory. Here he makes his bow among "messieurs les auteurs, à présent mes confrères." At the same time one of Molière's publishers puts out a *Récit en prose et en vers de la farce des Précieuses*, by Mlle Desjardins, the future novelist Mme de Villedieu, which she claims to be the story of the play as told her by a friend, she herself not having seen it. Friend of Molière's as she was, her account is of course favorable to his play, and makes just as good advertising as the attacks upon it. In April, Somaize publishes a versified version of Molière's play (not of his own) and his first *Grand Dictionnaire des Précieuses*, which are to be followed by other works in the ensuing months. In May, the Petit-Bourbon puts on a play by Gilbert, *La Vraye et la Fausse Précieuse*, in an effort further to exploit the theme.¹

If there is one thing that may be said with great positiveness as to the *Précieuses Ridicules*, it is that nothing profoundly offensive was intended by it to any part of the

¹ cf Chap x, below, p 157

public. A contemporary later stated that Mme de Rambouillet and many of her friends were present at one of the early performances. It is of course clear that some of the practices represented in the play as being those of society—the writing of parlor verse, the patronizing of plays and writers, even the long courtship—were those that met with her favor in the 'thirties and 'forties. But let it not be forgotten that the word "précieux" was first used in the seventeenth century after Mme de Rambouillet had ceased receiving any large number of guests. Let it be remembered also that Molière and his comrades had from the beginning subordinated every other consideration to getting a public and making their enterprise go. Would they have put on a play intended to be so disagreeable to an important part of their audience that some of the best-paying seats would be emptied? It is absurd to think so. The very nature of his art requires a dramatist to essay a spectacle which, shocking or even irritating as it may be, is none the less profoundly agreeable to his audience. The attack in the play, if attack there be, is not against people but against literature, not against life, as anyone lived it, but against the ideal life represented in literary works "romans, vers, chansons, sonnets et sonnettes," as Gorgibus has it. If anyone is, as we should say, taken for a ride, it is good Madeleine de Scudéry, and she not in her person but in her novels. The *Grand Cyrus* and the *Clélie* are undoubtedly made to appear ridiculous. Yet be it remembered that the second of the two novels, the *Clélie*, had appeared five years before the play, and that Mlle de Scudéry had written no more in this vein. The "aventures" of the novels of Mme de Lafayette and Mme de Villedieu are less numerous

and more humanly probable than the interminable series of "enlèvements," lovers' conversations, and discussion of manners that characterize the grand romance

Moreover is it certain that Molière is not directing laughter in the *Précieuses* against what he himself had formerly gone in for? Years later the scholar Ménage boasted that on coming out from a performance of the little comedy he had said to Chapelain that like Clovis, the first Frankish king to be a Christian, they must now burn what they had adored. Was not Molière up to a certain point "burning what he had adored" as the *Précieuses* took form in his mind? "Illustre" and "précieux" are close together in the language of the time. What did the group of the *Illustre Théâtre* "adore" in 1644 when it started playing illustrious lovers and emperors and saints and actors? This was the very time when Madeleine de Scudéry was beginning the *Cyrus*, and when all the poets in Paris were composing the "sonnets et sonnettes" of the *Guirlande de Julie*. Would Molière have found "les plaintes, les désespoirs, les enlèvements" as funny then as he did sixteen years later? We shall see shortly that at the very time of the *Précieuses* he was trying his hand himself at a serious play, and that he could find nothing better for a plot than "les jalousies conçues sur de fausses apparences." No, the attack of the *Précieuses* is not against any persons, either in the public or among authors, but against a certain atmosphere of the spirit which seemed the only atmosphere compatible with high idealism, but which somehow was unspeakably absurd.

Molière's little comedy certainly heralds a revolution, or at least a very marked evolution, in taste. Yet it applies to comedy in a very large measure the identical dramatic

technique which had already shown itself the best for serious plays. This first comic play to be an overwhelming success is also that which comes nearest in many respects to obeying the "rules," as they had developed in the 'thirties and 'forties. The unities of time, place, and action are better observed here than had ever been the case before in comedy. The "salle basse" of the *Précieuses* is for comedy what the "palais à volonté" was for tragedy, a single place in which the entire action naturally occurs; and the action itself moves gleefully forward in exactly the time it takes to play it, without extraneous episodes and with steadily mounting effect. The multiplicity and fantasy, the ever-renewed schemes and increasing improbabilities that make of the *Etourdi* rather a series of farces than a single play, the interplay of impossible quiproquos of the *Dépit*, are totally absent here, and if the trick of the young men in the beginning and the bastonnade of the end be excepted, the main body of the play moves forward in as verisimilar a fashion as a tragedy of Racine.

Of course the plot of the *Précieuses*, slight though it be, is not altogether original with Molière. Valets playing the gentleman before ladies is said to have been found in a lost play written in Italian by the Abbé de Pure and performed by the Italian troupe three years before; a rejected lover's valet disguised and paying court to his lady is to be found in Scarron's *Héritier Ridicule*, given at the Petit-Bourbon in the preceding August. More than to either of these plays Molière probably owes to a comedy by Samuel Chappuzeau called the *Cercle des Femmes*, published at Lyons in 1656, and not impossibly performed by Molière's troupe while it was there (though

in point of fact no record of its ever having been performed has been found) The ideas for Chappuzeau's plays are drawn, as the author acknowledges in his preface, from the *Dialogues* of Erasmus. If its plot is briefly outlined, the awkwardness of its structure and development as well as the weakness of its comic quality will perhaps make more evident the triumph of simplicity, force and directness achieved by Molière.

Chappuzeau's comedy is divided into six "entrées," like a ballet. The scene is a public square in Lyons, with a curtain before one of the houses that can be drawn to reveal a room within. As the play begins two young men who have travelled contrast German inns with those of Lyons, much to the advantage of the latter.² Then there is a discussion of "conditions" from which the reader emerges with the impression that a class society is the only conceivable one (Note what an inconsiderable part Molière has given this theme in the *Précieuses*.) Then a scene between a pedant and a learned lady, and one between the pedant and the lady's father. more discussion of the nobility, and a treatment of feminism that may be a satiric echo of the *Clélie*. Here the plot begins. the father wants a noble son-in-law, and the pedant decides to provide him with one. With the collusion of the two young men already seen, Hortense the pedant brings forward Germain, a loutish "cadet de village," as the pretender. In the fifth "entry" the curtain is drawn, and Emilie and her friends appear seated in a room, discussing the status of women, deploring the mingling of "bourgeoises" with "femmes nobles," affirming the ne-

² Making foreign ways and foreign manners appear grotesque is to be used very sparingly by Molière in all his plays

cessity of maintaining "le culte extérieur" (that is, appearing by one's dress and manner what one is), and planning the constitution of a "cercle" or academy of women. It is a scene which reminds us as much of the *Caquets de l'Accouchée* as of the *Femmes Savantes*, and very much inferior to both. In the last short scene, four pages long, the false noble is brought on with his false suite, and has time only for five short speeches before the "sergents," not previously mentioned, come in to arrest him as one who has left his host at Grenoble "without having said good-bye."

The play is not without merit: the local setting, the local allusions, the discussion of aspects of contemporary manners, all these features which are the best characteristics of the comedy of manners as it is to develop in France, and which are to be found in many plays from 1630 on, are perhaps given a more thorough trial in the *Cercle des Femmes* than had ever been the case before. On the other hand, how clumsy the plot is, how many are the themes treated, and how incompatible with each other! What has the description of German inns to do with feminism, and what has the playing of a trick to do with the character of a pedant? Molière, while gleaning perhaps many scraps of ideas from this play, has made almost his entire action out of its last four pages. He has seen that out of five stumbling speeches of a lout he can make a vast picture of the life of high society as it was lived in his time, but as also in many respects it is lived in all times. By so doing he shows himself thoroughly impregnated with the spirit of French classical art as it is to develop in the following years, the contemporary of La Fontaine as well as of Boileau and Racine.

To one of the rules of this art, of course, it must be admitted that the *Précieuses* seem to conform quite imperfectly. That is the rule of the *bienséances*, or propriety. We have seen the importance of this rule in the development of serious drama, how indeed it tended to become the most important of all, not only in its sense of consistency of character, but also and more particularly in the avoidance of any word or gesture which might offend the most delicate sensibilities. We have seen that as the necessity of the observance of decorum and propriety became more generally felt in the 'thirties, the farce disappeared from the theater. The farce is indeed by its nature completely incompatible with delicacy of the sensibilities in so far as this involves the avoidance of the grosser images presented by the realities of life. French *gauloiserie* requires that lust and appetite and the flesh in all its ways be looked at, fairly and squarely, and then laughed at. Such, for the "esprit gaulois," is a healthy acceptance of life. Now Madelon and Cathos are mainly ridiculous because they would make love a matter of vanity and wit only, and because they would banish, or postpone as long as possible, that aspect of love between man and woman which, for the farceur, is the essential around which the rest is mere embroidery. Marriage is, for Cathos, "une chose tout à fait choquante". "Comment est-ce qu'on peut souffrir la pensée de coucher contre un homme vraiment nu?" Remarks of this sort, indelicate though they may be, are to crop up again and again throughout the comedy of Molière because they bring to such a sharp point the absurdity of a life dedicated entirely to affectation, or indeed to idealism *contra naturam*, and totally

opposed to the simplest of realities. It is not that Molière refuses to conform to the *bienséances*. His work is sparing in carnal imagery. But it is not in spirit opposed to it, as were the novels of Mlle de Scudéry, old maid that she was. It is Molière indeed who is responsible, in France, for a modification of the *bienséances* themselves, and talk in the salons of the eighteenth century, from Mme de Tencin to Mlle de Lespinasse, will be vastly freer than was that of the blue room of Mme de Rambouillet.

It may indeed be asked if the laughter excited by the *Précieuses* were not the expression of a certain liberation of the spirit. This "farce," as Mlle Desjardins insists upon calling it, had given more wings to laughter and brought more brightness to life than all the comedies of five acts in verse so far written. The cry of the old man in the pit: "Courage, Molière, voilà de la bonne comédie!" whether really uttered or not, expresses the verdict of contemporaries and of posterity. No heroics of buffoonery, this, but boasting made as ridiculous in the "lune toute entière" of Jodelet as were the "autres aventures" which Madelon would have preceded marriage. Comedy here does not spring, like the idealism of the serious plays of the time, from a feeling which would make of life an adventure impelled by a high sense of personal value and embellished by delicate fancy. Indeed, it represents as unspeakably absurd such conduct when it diverts into false channels the fruitful course of natural impulse, instead of directing it along the plain broad highway which common sense and tradition and universal human experience have laid down.

The drollery of the *Etourdi* came from a pure sense of the comic as seized upon by the intelligence, but implied

allegiance to nothing other than wit. In the *Dépit*, a belief in the possibility of a sound basis for human relationships begins to appear. The moral implication of the *Précieuses*, strong and assured and triumphant, is that the ordinary life is the good life. The best of love is to be found, not in languorous gesture nor in delicate thrill, but in comradeship and home and children. It is even discreetly hinted that war is not the winning of laurels, but service and effort. The old man in the pit, if such there were, must have laughed his deep-throated chuckle with all the greater satisfaction that he had never distinguished himself on the battlefield, and that drawing-room successes were for him a fling or two that had excited his youth for a moment, and provided a sweetly comic memory for his old age. In spite of the original mask, so soon and so rightly discarded, the Mascarille of this comedy is no longer an "emperor," nor indeed a poltroon, but a "portrait"—caricatured to be sure but very recognizable—of the young man about town to whom Molière has given his title of "marquis." His lines and his gestures are no longer appreciated as expressions of an imaginary character, built upon a human trait, but as revelations of a type known to all. It is not their cleverness so much that counts as it is their truth. The girls are no longer the half-charming, half-whimsical "donne" of Italian comedy, as was Lucile in the *Dépit*, but unmistakable reproductions of the kind of lady who would ape in her life the princesses of fiction with whose adventures she filled her imagination during long idle hours in bed.

Molière the poet has retired somewhere into the depths of the subconscious, Molière the painter has triumphed before the court as well as the town. The message of the

farce had now a meaning, let the *bienséances* suffer as they might. The farce as the French had always loved it, the farce that had nearly disappeared under the effort toward artistic and social refinement that had accompanied the solidification of the monarchy, the farce that was always close to the plain people who took life as a playable game made up of human adjustments over plain problems, the farce had come into its own as never before. Society, for some reason, was now ready to laugh at it.



THE PROGRESS OF COMEDY, 1660-1661

THE YEAR that followed the production of the *Précieuses* was one of increasing success for the Troupe de Monsieur. Molière resumes the title of *valet de chambre tapissier du roi* upon the death in April of his younger brother Jean, to whom the survival rights had been transferred seventeen years before when he had resigned them to go in for the theater. He could now resume, as an ornament, what his father had bestowed upon him on condition that he make of living up to it the guide of his life. From this time forward he seems to have exercised regularly the quarterly service involved in the charge, and to have "made the King's bed," as Chappuzeau says the year after his death. He was now, as a member of the troupe, "à Monsieur"; as *valet de chambre*, he was "au Roi": he "belonged" to the two figures of highest rank in the kingdom.

Certain changes are occurring in the company. Joseph Béjart had died in the spring of 1659, and old Jodelet dies on Good Friday, 1660. However the du Parcs return from the Marais and begin playing after Easter. Gros-René plays the Vicomte de Jodelet in the *Précieuses*, and, according to Loret,—sad confirmation of La Bruyère's reflection on "a world in which so many people are found to replace" a man—does it three times better than the old farce actor Madeleine Béjart makes over into one

play two twenty-year old comedies on Don Quixote, by Guérin de Bouscal, the same author whose *Gouvernement de Sanche Pansa* had shown itself so successful the previous summer. The noble master, however, proved to be less acceptable than his valet as a protagonist, and Madeleine's play was a failure.

On May 28, 1660, the Petit-Bourbon put on a new little comedy by Molière, *Sganarelle, ou le Cocu Imaginaire*. It contained like the *Précieuses* but one act, but this time it was in verse, which was a definite rise in dignity for a farce. The summer season, in spite of the exodus from Paris of the quality and the wealthy bourgeoisie, was not so dead, in these piping times of peace, as it had been during the long war with Spain, and Molière evidently felt that a new play of his own would do more than anything else to fill the house during July and August. In this he was not disappointed, for the new play was about as popular as the *Précieuses*, and caused nearly as much discussion. A parody upon it called *La Cocue Imaginaire*—silly enough, indeed, for Molière's men were replaced by women—was published in August, though it was probably not played. Before it appeared, a certain Sieur de Neufvillennaine, claiming to have Molière's play by heart after five hearings, obtains a privilege for its publication by the trouble-making Ribou. Molière, who had already secured a privilege of his own, complains to the lieutenant of police and has this edition prohibited, but not before a good many copies had been sold. As the commentaries of Neufvillennaine were highly complimentary to his play and made very good advertising, Molière evidently felt disinclined to remain on a war footing with the piratical author and publisher, and arrived at a compromise with

them. The Neufvillennaine version therefore remained the only text of this play to appear during Molière's lifetime. Not only was the *Cocu* played over thirty times before the end of the year at the Petit-Bourbon, which was a very good record, but it was called for again and again "en visite," and notably was played for the King or Cardinal Mazarin no less than six times at the Louvre or Vincennes. It remained indeed always a favorite with Louis XIV.

It is a curious fact that in this play and those which are to follow it for several years, Molière does not even attempt to develop fully the possibilities of the "salle basse" of the *Précieuses* as a setting for a complete play, nor those of a drawing-room conversation as an action. In the *Cocu* we are again in the conventional "public square" of the *Etourdi*, the *Dépit* and the farces, and the very involved plot is far closer to the farce than to life, in spite of the fact that the characters are presented as Parisian bourgeois. It is briefly as follows: Sganarelle, "bourgeois de Paris," believes his wife to be in love with Lélie, a conventional young lover of comedy; Lélie believes Sganarelle to be married to the girl whom he believed his betrothed, Célie, daughter of Gorgibus, "bourgeois de Paris"; Célie believes Lélie to be in love with the wife of Sganarelle, and the wife of Sganarelle believes her husband to be in love with Célie; all of which beliefs are groundless. This amazing series of misunderstandings was started when Célie, grieving because her father insists on her breaking with Lélie, whom she loves, in order to marry Valère, who is wealthier, fainted and dropped a portrait of Lélie, which is picked up by the wife of Sganarelle. The latter sees this portrait in her

hands, thinks it is an image of her lover, and thus precipitates the action. The dénouement is brought about when the "souvante" of Célie manages to grasp the situation and explain the misunderstandings, and when the father of the unseen Valère arrives to state that his son has been found to be secretly married. It is a combination of the husband-wife-lover theme of French farce with the father-daughter-lover theme of Italian farce, and above all it is a presentation of that ancient farce figure the cuckold.

It is perhaps safe to say that cuckoldry had always been the favorite subject of the French farce. It permitted a picture of men and women when they try to live together which was full of comic possibilities: the man, desiring above all things to feel secure at the head of his own household, obeyed, respected, and loved all at the same time by his wife, the woman, more sensitive, more imaginative, unfired by the heavy unattractiveness of her cocksure spouse, and on the contrary stirred by the youth and grace and submissive eagerness of some unattached bachelor lover, irked also by the inferior position given her by custom, and like all oppressed inferiors making up for it by trickiness and deceit, showing herself to male eyes, in short, the "animal" of Rabelais and Erasmus. The adventures of this pair had been an age-old subject of delight to the good townsfolk who made up of a holiday the public of the medieval *basochiens* as well as the idlers on the Pont-Neuf and at the Foire Saint-Germain.

The cuckold theme becomes evidently less comic as the wife is regarded less as the husband's chattel and more his equal, as the household appears less governed by the absolute authority of the male, and more dependent for

its proper functioning on the existence of harmony between them. Where this harmony exists, the mockery of the farceur has no hold, and it may be pointed out in passing that a belief in the possibility of harmony between man and woman is at the center of precious idealism and of the hope of love as presented in the plays of Corneille. It may also be remembered that a belief in the equal rights of husband and wife, whether accompanied by harmony or not, appears in the seventeenth century to have been held and acted upon by professional comedians in that vast majority of cases where husband and wife were members of the same troupe.¹ Under such circumstances, women, like men, seem to have been regarded as having a right to lead their own lives. According to Chappuzeau, they acknowledged masculine superiority in matters involving judgment, but this acknowledgment was entirely voluntary on their part and was not imposed by their contract. There are numerous examples, in the Parisian troupes of the time, in which husband and wife go on working together in spite of the latter's receptivity to advances by other males and at times in spite of notorious unfaithfulness. In Molière's own troupe, such was certainly the case of the du Parcs, and not improbably of the de Bries. The feelings of these husbands have not been recorded, but however they felt, they kept on playing, and there is no evidence that their marital misfortunes brought upon them undue mockery from their comrades. It may very well have been that in the eyes of actors male insistence

¹ cf Chap. I, above, p 14

upon the subservience and faithfulness of wives appeared as a very grotesque aspect of bourgeois manners.

Sganarelle is "le cocu," just as Mascarille had become "le marquis." His, then, is the second zany rôle created by Molière. As Molière must have begun to write this play before Easter, it is possible that he intended the part for Jodelet. It is close to the character created for this actor by Scarron, and in one scene particularly reminds us of *Jodelet Duelliste*. If this were so, what a commentary it would be on the effect of what an artist creates upon the direction that his future work will take! For Jodelet having died, Molière plays the part himself, and achieves in it a personal success far greater than that of the Mascarille of the *Précieuses*. The rhyming journalist Loret for the first time talks of the author "Molier," whose name he rhymes with "particulier." And out of this imaginary cuckold are to grow many of the great bourgeois rôles of the later comedies. If Jodelet had lived, how different might Molière's plays have been!

The bourgeois in this play, however, is not Sganarelle, the husband, but Gorgibus, the father. He is the Gorgibus of the *Précieuses*, but whereas in that play his common sense made him almost attractive as contrasted with the folly of his daughter and niece, here he is the eternal father of comedy, shut off from all sympathy with his children, ridiculous and dishonest in himself. It is true of course that his daughter's hand and his word are pledged to Lélite; but here is another possible spouse with "twenty thousand ducats": how hesitate? What is love, what is a promise, in the face of that? His daughter is "une sottie, une impertinente" to oppose "la raison paternelle" on this point. She, like the *précieuses*, reads too many novels:

Lisez-moi, comme il faut, au lieu de ces sornettes,
Les Quatrains de Pibrac, et les doctes Tablettes
Du conseiller Mathieu, l'ouvrage est de valeur,
Et plein de beaux dictons à réciter par cœur
Le Guide des pécheurs est encore un bon livre
C'est là qu'en peu de temps on apprend à bien vivre,
Et si vous n'aviez lu que ces moralités,
Vous sauriez un peu mieux suivre mes volontés

This is Molière's first try-out of the comic effect of references to the numerous moralizing books more or less religious in character which his time produced, and to which we shall have occasion to return in connection with a later play. How eloquent here is Gorgibus' "en peu de temps"! The less reading done in life the better, and the sole object of what reading one does do is to learn how to "bien vivre," which as he looks upon his daughter means sewing and cooking and keeping house in general and particularly obeying "ses volontés." So much for writing, and thinking, and art, and beauty! The two Gorgibus are the first sketches for what is to be that arch-philistine Chrysale of the *Femmes Savantes*.

Sganarelle, in whom the fear of the stick reveals the zany, is a more complex character. He is the poltroon valet of comedy, certainly that very type created by Jodelet, in whom love of life and fear for his skin are the dominant impulses. But he is also the brutal husband of farce, who calls his wife a "carogne"; above all he is the cuckold. He is not really so, of course, but only thinks he is, and thus the proprieties are after a fashion preserved. But his reaction to the idea of being a cuckold is what causes laughter in this play, just as Rodrigue's reaction to the idea of dishonor is what interests and uplifts in the

Cid. Molière, after Scarron, invites the comparison, and in a long monologue has Sganarelle debate with himself the duty of vengeance.

The duty of vengeance ideal had meant much to the Renaissance, more, indeed, in spite of what now appears its primitive and barbarous character, than to the Middle Ages. It may have been that it became less possible to resign oneself to the Biblical "vengeance is mine, saith the Lord" as the Lord became more remote and the importance of individual honor more pressing. At all events, vengeance is a frequent theme with Corneille; but with him it is not so much a matter of irresistible boiling wrath or the impossibility of bearing the self if unrevenged as it is the living up to a generally accepted code of honor consciously realized.

It is upon this theme that Molière embroiders. Sganarelle, excited by what he thinks to be Célie's unselfish indignation over his wife's infidelity to him (though in reality she is indignant over Lélié's supposed infidelity to her), works himself up to action:

Montrons notre courage à venger notre honte
 Vous apprendrez, marouffe, à rire à nos dépens,
 Et, sans aucun respect, faire cocus les gens

It is not jealousy that moves him, he has no more jealousy than he has love for his wife, it is the fear of ridicule. But—he takes a few steps—"doucement, s'il vous plaît," he reflects Lélié does not look like an adversary easily to be overcome:

Quand j'aurai fait le brave, et qu'un fer, pour ma peine,
 M'aura d'un vilain coup transpercé la bedaine,
 Que par la ville ira le bruit de mon trépas,
 Dites-moi, mon honneur, en serez-vous plus gras?

Such considerations as these lead Sganarelle to reasoning even more profound than that aroused in Rodrigue by nobility and virtue:

Peste soit qui premier trouva l'invention
De s'affliger l'esprit de cette vision,
Et d'attacher l'honneur de l'homme le plus sage
Aux choses que peut faire une femme volage!

What an abominable custom this duelling is, over a woman's infidelity! She commits the crime, and the husband is held responsible:

C'est un vilain abus, et les gens de police
Nous devraient bien régler une telle injustice

The voice of cowardice, growing more and more eloquent in his reflections, finally convinces him that life is dearer than honor

L'on m'appellera sot de ne me venger pas,
Mais je le serais fort de courir au trépas.

("Sot," it will be remembered, means both "stupid" and "cuckold" in French) In spite of his excellent reasoning, however, bile stirs within him. He cannot bear to be such a poltroon, he is resolved on vengeance and "virile action":

Déjà pour commencer, dans l'ardeur qui m'enflamme,
Je veux dire partout qu'il couche avec ma femme

The movement of this monologue, the debate with himself, the looking at the question now on this side, now on that, the whole suddenly precipitating itself in the resolution to act, is as similar to those of Hamlet as to those of Rodrigue. It is, of course, a part of Renaissance theatrical convention that a character alone on the stage should thus talk to himself, and it is indeed a convention

which the "rules" in France decried and were finally to eliminate. Yet as Molière uses it here, is it not a powerful picture of the interplay of fear and vanity in our poor nature? To rush off and recount the misfortune, the knowledge of which by others is the cause of all his troubles, under the impression that he is thus committing a "virile action"—what delicious, if not yet cruel, comedy! The rhyming "ardeur qui m'enflamme" with "il couche avec ma femme" is in the very language a comic contrast of the heroism of serious plays with the grossness of the farce

This scene was, according to Neufvillennaine, the most popular in the play, in spite of its being, in some respects, a mere doing-over of one of the stalest commonplaces of the farce in a manner reminiscent of the anti-heroism of Jodelet. Was it because it brought again upon the boards a popular old farce character, after the long years without farce in the better theaters? Was the King pleased to find in it a presentation of the duel calculated to aid the government in the effort it had been making for thirty years to suppress this life-wasting relic of feudal custom? It is certain that duelling would not flourish in the atmosphere of such comedy as this. Was the public pleased with this mocking of the heroic literature and the heroic attitude of the previous generation? Or were the gestures with which Molière accompanied the lines irresistibly comic?

At all events, the *Cocu* established firmly the reputation of the troupe, and the greatness of Molière, both as playwright and as actor, above all its other members. By the end of the summer the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Marais seem to have been doing their utmost to destroy the rival company by taking Molière's actors away from

him, and when on October 11 workmen sent by the Superintendent of the King's Buildings arrived without warning to tear down the Petit-Bourbon theater (it was in the way of the new façade of the Louvre which Claude Perrault was finally to erect), the future of the troupe must have hung for a moment in the balance. More than poetic genius is necessary to make a theatrical enterprise successful. However, if La Grange is to be believed.

Toute la troupe de Monsieur demeura stable tous les acteurs aimaient M de Molière, leur chef, qui joignait à un mérite et une capacité extraordinaire une honnêteté et une manière engageante, qui les obligea tous à lui protester qu'ils voulaient courir sa fortune et qu'ils ne le quitteraient jamais, quelque proposition qu'on leur fit, et quelque avantage qu'ils pussent trouver ailleurs

Royal favor saved them. The King was unwilling to interfere with the decision of his administration in regard to the tearing down of the Petit-Bourbon, although the work had been begun so prematurely that rumor explained M de Ratabon's order as the result of machinations by the rival comedians, but he granted the Troupe de Monsieur the use of the great theater built by Richelieu in his town palace. This the great Cardinal had left to the crown in his will, and it was now known as the Palais-Royal. By the twentieth of January, 1661, Molière's company began to play there. The Palais-Royal is to remain Molière's theater for the rest of his life.

It was a large, rectangular hall, said to have been capable of containing as many as 3,000 spectators, but in which a fair average audience seems to have been about a thousand. At one end of the rectangle was the big stage,

provided with a certain amount of machinery for spectacle plays, but upon which, at other plays, there were some fifty chairs for spectators. These were occupied by men only, and the stage was the favorite resort of the young man about town to whom Molière's Mascarille had given the title of "marquis." Around the house ran a gallery, in which were the boxes frequented by the quality, and under it, in the rear of the hall, was a graduated series of seats known as the "amphitheater." Forward of this, and directly in front of the stage, was the "pit," the "parterre," where some three hundred spectators stood up. The pit and the stage constituted perhaps the most interested, and at all events the most vociferous and obstreperous, part of the audience. The superb insolence of the marquis raised no less a problem for the company than the rowdiness of lackeys and retainers of all sorts who were constantly "crashing the gate" on grounds of their masters' rank and privilege or out of mere bluff. In May of this year the troupe paid the doorman 55 livres to indemnify him for injuries received while attempting to keep some of them out.

Except in the machine or spectacle plays, no curtain was used, at this time, to separate the stage from the house before and after the play and between the acts. The presence of spectators on either side of the stage, singularly limiting the possibilities of scenery and eliminating any effect obtainable by distance or lighting, is perhaps the most important single factor determining the character of French classical comedy and tragedy.

Two weeks after the opening of their new theater, on February 4, 1661, the troupe played *Don Garcie de Navarre*, a serious play by Molière. We shall return to this play in

a later chapter. It was a complete failure, a fact which seems to have had an unfortunate effect on the popularity of the troupe. For a time the Palais-Royal was uncomfortably close to being empty, at every performance. However, they were not discouraged. They gave up offering serious plays, for the moment at least, and Molière seems to have set himself immediately the task of composing a new comedy, which was played for the first time on June 24.

The *Ecole des Maris* is a more ambitious play than the *Cocu*, three acts in verse instead of one. The verse is, however, less good, as a clever contemporary observed, and the play as a whole bears fewer marks of inspiration than its predecessor. Is this because it was written under the sting of disappointment that followed the failure of *Don Garcie*, or because Molière, sensitive to criticism, was making a determined effort to write up to the exigencies of the "rules," and was restraining the farce vein which until now had been the main source of his inspiration? It is certain that once the improbable situation is accepted, the development and conduct of the plot is here the most consistent and the simplest of any verse play that Molière had yet written.

To the guardianship of two brothers, Ariste and Sganarelle, are confided respectively two orphan sisters, Léonor and Isabelle, whom they expect to make their wives. From a Spanish play, Mendoza's *El Marido hace mujer*, Molière seems to have drawn the idea of making Ariste a man in his early forties, smiling, sociable, and easygoing, who treats his ward with discretion and gentleness, giving her complete liberty, while Sganarelle, twenty years his brother's junior, is solitary, opinionated,

self-satisfied, and above all determined to keep his Isabelle under lock and key, "à recoudre mon linge aux heures de loisir," and far from the "damoiseaux" and "muguets" who might tempt her away from the undivided attention which she owes her husband. One of these dreaded young men, however, Valère, lives on the very "public square" in which the comedy takes place, and is already smitten with the charms of his guarded young neighbor Isabelle is not without having noticed the soft eyes he has made at her, and spurred by horror of her coming marriage with Sganarelle, she plays on the latter's vanity by proclaiming her indignation at what she declares to be Valère's active attempts to seduce her, and urges Sganarelle to tell the young man to keep away. Valère, thus informed by Sganarelle himself of the fact that Isabelle more than returns his interest in her, collaborates eagerly with her in making of her over-sure guardian the agent who brings them together. Deceived by Isabelle into thinking that she is her sister Léonor, Sganarelle in the end actually favors her marriage by a notary to Valère (the conventional marriage of comedy) under the impression that it is his brother's ward and not his own who is thus proving the hopelessness of the system which has been applied to her.

Molière has called this play a "school," and by so doing has implied that something is to be learned from seeing it. This title is not original with him, apparently, for it was used by the actor-playwright Dorimond for a one-act farce in prose called *L'Ecole des Cocus* published in the same year with a privilege preceding Molière's. Dorimond like Molière had drawn his plot largely from Scarron's story *La Précaution Inutile*, and an idea of

Molière's relative delicacy in treating a farce theme may be had by comparing the two *Ecoles*. in that of Dorimond, for example, a young lady protesting her chastity is suddenly seized with pain, retires to a corner of the stage and gives birth to a child. Much as Molière drew from the farce in characterization and in gesture, he neglects almost entirely its favorite forms of episode. These two plays, however, differently as they present it, both teach the same lesson: the closeness with which a girl is watched is no guarantee of her future fidelity to her husband. Perhaps stimulated by the *Adelphi* of Terence, Molière enlarged this idea into the whole question of liberty versus restraint in bringing up children. This he interweaves with the idea of life in healthy contact with society on the side of liberty, as against a life of solitary independence, and recalcitrance to usage, on the side of restraint. The very desire to curb another human being, in Molière's picture, is the result of some crotchet of character and springs from aloofness and an unhealthy spirit. The condition of liberty, on the other hand, is living in contact with others. Molière's whole first act, one-third of the play, consists mainly of a discussion between the characters in the course of which the situation is unfolded and the idea made perfectly clear. This technique by which a play is simultaneously the picture of a human episode and the development of an abstract moral idea is one of the most peculiar characteristics of classical comedy as Molière is to establish it.

Such was already the case, in a measure, with the *Précieuses*. How was Molière led to develop this aspect of his art? It may be pointed out, in the first place, that the *Ecole des Maris* is no problem play. The place which

liberty in education has assumed since Rousseau may easily cause the modern reader to exaggerate the importance which Molière or his audience attached to it. True enough, Molière has replaced the boys of Terence by girls, which gives the idea as he presents it a real air of novelty, for much as the education of boys had been discussed, from the time of Rabelais and Montaigne on, the first treatises on education for women were yet to be written. Let us not assume, however, that Molière is trying to raise, here, the question of freedom for children or education for women as a Brieux or a Bernard Shaw are advocates of this or that rearrangement of the social order. He is merely playing on a feeling in his audience which is a part of the common sense of the Occident, namely that a marriage based on mutual inclination is more likely to be a happy one than a marriage in which one or both of the parties are constrained, and that therefore the former is in general desirable. The maid, Lisette, speaks a line which, as is often the case with Molière, gives the impression that from the simplest people come the profoundest truths.

Sommes-nous chez les Turcs, pour renfermer les femmes?

The same father who in real life might try to force his daughter to marry against her will in order to satisfy some selfish or worldly-wise design of his own would, if ever he set foot within a theater, feel indignant to see such a procedure on the stage. Freedom being the condition of love, to go from the traditional happy ending of comedy to advocacy of liberty of choice on the part of the girl is a step which, as soon as the matter begins to be looked upon as a problem, is logically unavoidable.

What a moralizing comedy like Molière's does, in a way, is to stir the mind toward applying the lessons of romance to life. It is thus that from the beginning he represents his authoritarian fathers and guardians as suspicious of all literature. For literature keeps shining before men's eyes what they really want as distinguished from what, through some imperfect adjustment or other, they think they want. Absolute authority of parents over children, while it was supported by the law during the Renaissance as a way of assuring order, has never appeared a perfect social arrangement to the western world. One of the characteristics of the 1660's was, as we shall see, the joy with which the royal authority was accepted, because by accepting it all other authority could be dispensed with. [In accord with this principle, Molière's central idea is that, in good society, no one individual attempts to exercise authority over any other but each is left to work out his problems for himself, within the limits of the respect which he owes to the others. Being a father or a guardian does not release one from the obligation to respect the child.]

These considerations, however, while they may explain why Molière gave his play a certain moral slant, do not account for his having imbedded as it were his whole action in a moral discussion. He may have had two reasons for this. In the first place, he is visibly anxious, in these years, to show himself more than a writer of farces, and he may have been trying to elevate his comedy by giving it that air of "instruction" which the vast majority of the critics of the first half of the century agreed was a necessary part of art. Also—and this is perhaps even more important—the society of the seven-

teenth century drew a really extraordinary satisfaction from conversations which, as La Rochefoucauld puts it, "roulent sur la morale." The number of books of etiquette published, the ever-increasing proportion of maxims and general moral truths or "sentences" to be found in all literature, the entire history of the precious movement, bear eloquent testimony to the pleasure taken in the discussion of problems of conduct and deportment in society. For a modern audience, an extreme vivacity of acting is necessary to make the exposition of the *Ecole des Maris* anything but insipid;² its overwhelming popularity at the time proves, however, the extent to which contemporaries spontaneously enjoyed it

In the Sganarelle of this play, Molière added to the zany Sganarelle of the *Cocu*, the characteristics of his two bourgeois Gorgibus. As guardian of Isabelle, he is Gorgibus, and as her prospective husband, he is Sganarelle. All trace of valet poltroonery has disappeared, and paternal authority has been conferred upon him. Nor is this new Sganarelle primarily a cuckold. Indeed the very center of his character is an inordinate self-satisfaction and vanity, a vanity all the more towering that it leads him to go contrary to the trend of manners and to distinguish himself by his simple and old-fashioned dress, by repelling the advances of others, by desiring a life lived entirely within his own portals and in the bosom of his

² [Percy Chapman had not read but would no doubt have approved the following comment by Professor Horatio Smith which appeared some time after his death (*Masters of French Literature*, New York, Scribner's, 1937, pp 29-30) "One American critic who wants high seasoning referred to a New York presentation of *L'Ecole des Maris* in 1934 as 'dull theatrical fare' One understands why New York producers should trim it up and turn it into a 'song and dance show'"] —Editor's note.]

own family. In this respect he is the most complete bourgeois thus far created by Molière. The fear of cuckoldry is with him merely an adjunct of his vanity. Even when under the apparent evidence of Isabelle's devotion to him, he is moved to the most grotesque explosions of affection.

Oui, ma pauvre fanfan, pouponne de mon âme .

Hai' hai' mon petit nez, pauvre petit bouchon

this is no expression of real love, only sensuality and pride of possession. It may be that Sganarelle is completely comic but is he quite completely human?

Ariste, on the other hand, is Molière's first "raisonneur" and Léonor his first model girl. Here, they figure as foils of Sganarelle and his ward, and for this reason perhaps, they are less vital characters. Isabelle, in particular, is to live on and be recreated in plays that follow. The "précieuse," it will be remembered, was a woman who retreated before love, who was a fortress that must be besieged, who would have considered it a dishonor to express any positive feeling, who played with life and avoided living it. In Isabelle, it is hard to feel that Molière has not tried to embody an exactly opposite type of girl. It is she who makes advances to her lover, it is she who has all the ideas, it is she who precipitates the wedding! What forwardness, what immodesty, in spite of her urgent excuse! She is, however, too clever to be altogether true, and this over-cleverness as the motive power of the plot stamps the play as still enmeshed in the traditional, unreal comedy of intrigue.

The *Ecole des Maris* had been playing but a little over a month when Molière was requested by Fouquet, the

Superintendent of Finance, to prepare a spectacle for the entertainment which he was planning to give in August at his newly completed château of Vaux-le-Vicomte in honor of the King and the royal family. This housewarming was, as is well known, disastrous for him who had deserved well of his country for having piloted government finances through the difficult years of Mazarin's administration, but who had in so doing not failed to vastly increase his personal fortune. He was no more guilty than Mazarin in this respect, but Mazarin held over him the advantage of having died some months before. At any rate, the King was disagreeably impressed by the splendor of Vaux, and his host was shortly thereafter tried, convicted and sentenced to perpetual imprisonment. Friends of Fouquet, like Madame de Sévigné, and those whom he had protected like La Fontaine, grieved long over his disgrace. Molière, however, had had none but what we should call business relations with him, and his personal feelings toward him we do not know. The King himself, to whom he was valet-de-chambre, and the King's brother, Monsieur (Duc d'Orléans since his uncle's death), who was patron of the troupe, are the ones on whose approval Molière consistently stakes his fortunes.³

Thus it happened that *Les Fâcheux* was written, learned, rehearsed and ready in a fortnight. This was a really remarkable feat, for it is a three-act play in verse, just like the *Ecole des Maris*. Unlike the *Ecole des Maris*, however, it contains the merest thread of a plot. A lover,

³ The *Ecole des Maris*, when published, was dedicated to Monsieur, and the *Fâcheux*—the play represented at Vaux-le-Vicomte—not to Fouquet, but to the King.

Eraste, seeks to meet his mistress, Orphise, and is constantly prevented from doing so by one "bore" after another. They accost him and insist upon telling him a story or requesting him to call the King's attention to some scheme of theirs which in their opinion will be of advantage to the government, and incidentally to themselves. The telling of the stories and the explaining of the schemes form the greater part of the play, and are interesting because each reveals its author as belonging to one or another recognizable type of bore. To these little scenes of manners are "sewn," as Molière says in his preface, a number of *intermezzis* which make of this play the first "comédie-ballet."

A stage had been arranged outdoors in the magnificent Le Nôtre gardens of Vaux-le-Vicomte, the decorations had been designed and directed by Le Brun, and in general the whole performance was framed with a splendor equalled thereafter by Versailles alone. As the curtain was drawn (a curtain was used of course, in spectacle plays), Molière himself came to view in his ordinary clothes and apparently surprised to find himself revealed to the audience. He steps forward stammering excuses to the King for being thus alone and without actors to provide the entertainment expected, but in the course of his embarrassed explanations twenty fountains begin to play all around, the stage itself is seen to represent a garden ornamented with statues, and in the middle of it appears to rise what seems to be a great rock, but is soon discovered to be a shell, with a beauteous Naiad in its center. The Naiad, who is Madeleine Béjart in the flesh, recites a prologue written by the academician Pellisson, during which dryads, fauns and satyrs emerge

from the trees and dance. The dance over, the comedy begins. This takes place, not among trees and gushing fountains, but as always in comedy, in a public square "à Paris" Nymphs and fauns, shepherds and shepherdesses, are proper to a sylvan setting, but comedy requires a city.

The King was again delighted by this performance. The little trick with which Molière started his spectacle is a way of setting up a sympathetic contact between actor and public which is doubtless as old as the theater, or at least as the farce. That he should have played it, however, upon the "greatest King in the world," and so successfully too, indicates as nothing else can the particular atmosphere that surrounded these private performances at great houses or at court, and the friendly, half-bantering relations that began to exist between such social outcasts as actors were supposed to be, and the French nobility. Molière is said often to have been invited to dinner by "ces messieurs," and what seemed even more extraordinary, he invited them to dine with him. He was well housed at this time in the rue Saint-Thomas-du Louvre, a street which has since disappeared, but on which stood the Hôtel de Rambouillet. A sarcastic contemporary attributes these invitations of his to vanity, his "esprit" putting him on a footing of equality with people "far above him." A less harsh explanation, however, is that, if the "gulfs" which separated the people of different ranks are for a moment forgotten, he was obeying the simplest demands of courtesy.

According to the same contemporary (Donneau de Visé), it was the "portraits" to be found in Molière's plays which particularly interested the "gens de qualité."

"Je suis furieusement pour les portraits," Madelon had averred in the *Précieuses*. So were the courtiers. Amazingly stimulated by Molière's inventiveness, they would bring him examples of "their own defects and those of their friends" so that he might work them into his future plays—gestures, doubtless, turns of phrase, this trait or that trait, "bromides," as American slang had it some years ago. De Visé's picture was probably intended to be slighting but is not without its pleasant side: the marquis leaving their seats on the stage after the performance, rushing behind the scenes and catching Molière in his dressing-room, pressing upon him one side-splitting idea upon another which the play had aroused in their minds, he in the meanwhile, embarrassed and overwhelmed, searching in vain for his "tablettes" to make note of their stories—"tablettes" which he may well have carefully lost beforehand so as to build up the reasonable excuse that he could not possibly remember all the suggestions made to him.

Was the first episode of the *Fâcheux* due to such collaboration? Eraste tells of having been the other day at the comedy, in a stage scat. The play was well along, when "un homme à grands canons" came marching in, shouting "Hola! ho! un siège promptement," and then, chair in hand, strode out to the very middle of the stage and planted himself with his back to the audience, hiding the actors from three-quarters of the pit. A murmur arose, but he, "ferme et constant," paid no attention and would have remained there indefinitely if he had not—worse luck—espied Eraste.

Ah! marquis, m'a-t-il dit, prenant près de moi place,
Comment te portes-tu? Souffre que je t'embrasse!

At any rate the story has it that, during a performance of the *Fâcheux* at the Palais-Royal, this and similar anecdotes so excited the young men on the stage that they set to acting out themselves what the actor was reciting. Playwright, actors and public between them, in those years, seem to have succeeded in producing gales of inextinguishable laughter, and indeed this sort of intimacy between the Parisian public and their theater has continued in a large measure ever since.

Les Fâcheux is the first of Molière's plays to be written "by order," and sets the note of exuberant good humor that is to characterize all his plays so created. It is also the first play to be solely a picture of contemporary life built around a number of character types. After the sketch of "the marquis" referred to above, which affords a vision of the theater and of the life of the man about town, comes "the servant," the fussy and solicitous valet, insisting on getting his master's costume exactly right, and giving a glimpse of the dependence of the nobility on their domestics, then "the amateur musician," ready to sing the air he has composed, "the duellist" seeking a second; "the card-player" detailing at length his last misfortune; ladies discussing the perfect love; two government job-hunters, one a pedant offended by the abundance of bad spelling to be found in Paris shop signs and desirous of suggesting to the King that there be created for him a charge of "contrôleur, intendant, réviseur et restaurateur général desdites inscriptions"; the other an economist who, having noticed that more money is made in ports than elsewhere at the seaside, suggests that all the coasts of France be turned into ports.

The best portrait of all is perhaps that of the huntsman, which it is said the King himself suggested. It may have been modelled on the marquis de Soyecourt, the royal master of hounds. The terse vigor and variety of the language in this portrait, with its abundance of hunting and animal terms, makes the reader sigh for the savourous French of the sixteenth century, before Malherbe had reduced literature, under the yoke of reason, to describing the nature of man in the abstract:

Dorante

A trois longueurs de trait, tayaut! voilà d'abord
Le cerf donné aux chiens J'appuie, et sonne fort.
Mon cerf débuche, et passe une assez longue plaine,
Et mes chiens après lui, mais si bien en haleine,
Qu'on les aurait couverts tous d'un seul justaucorps.
Il vient à la forêt. Nous lui donnons alors
La vieille meute, et moi, je prends en diligence
Mon cheval alezan Tu l'as vu?

Eraste

Non, je pense.

Whereupon he describes the horse at length, which is, of course, irritating to Eraste who wants to get away. But we do not. One is tempted, in fact, to wish that more horses were described in the French seventeenth century. While it is impossible to detect today all the allusions to occurrences or personal peculiarities that this portrait may contain, a modern reader feels that in the place of the marquis de Soyecourt he would have been rather pleased by it than otherwise, for bore though he is to Eraste, he makes you feel what delight may be in hunting, and how good it is to be alive.

The play does not contain an offensive line. It is a model of graceful and easy pleasantry, it is the first example of a comedy hilariously amusing which also has assumed a courtly air. It is equally far from the earthy brutality of the farce and the sometimes painful profundity of the great comedies that are to follow. The valet himself is no longer the mouthpiece of animal appetite, but is a creature of delicacy, humor, and charm. La Fontaine, at this time installed at Vaux as Fouquet's pensioned poet, addresses to his friend Maucroix one of those epistles in verse which were passed about in manuscript form and finally published, in which he describes the play as follows

C'est un ouvrage de Molière
 Cet écrivain, par sa manière,
 Charme à présent toute la cour.
 De la façon dont son nom court,
 Il doit être par delà Rome
 J'en suis ravi, car c'est mon homme
 Te souvient-il bien qu'autrefois
 Nous avons conclu d'une voix
 Qu'il allait ramener en France
 Le bon goût et l'air de Térence?
 Plaute n'est plus qu'un plat bouffon
 Et jamais il ne fit si bon
 Se trouver à la comédie,
 Car ne pense pas qu'on y rie
 De maint trait jadis admiré,
 Et bon *in illo tempore*
 Nous avons changé de méthode
 Jodelet n'est plus à la mode,
 Et maintenant il ne faut pas
 Quitter la nature d'un pas

"La nature," here, is in perfect harmony with "les bienséances," even possibly with the atmosphere of

“précieux” refinement which characterized the society of Vaux. Taste had succeeded at last in shaking off affectation, and nature spoke without the slightest hint of vulgarity. In a sense literature had for forty years been striving to attain this nice equilibrium in the *Fâcheux* it was achieved. The tone of French classicism was found. Yet the play is, of course, relatively superficial, and when compared with Molière’s comedies of later years, may well cause wonder as to whether the absolute rule of accepted taste is conducive to the greatest literature. Molière composed easily and rapidly within the bounds of taste, yet in the plays on which he works the most, he is constantly on the verge of overstepping them.

The end of 1661 marks a high point, if not in Molière’s career, at least in the joy with which that career was pursued. Fortune smiled upon him from all sides, and upon his troupe. The King favored him, Monsieur protected him. In January of the following year, the Italians return to Paris and are granted leave to play at the Palais-Royal. But this time it is they who pay Molière a part of the expenses he had incurred in repairing the theater, and it is they who get the “extraordinary days.” Molière’s last play seems to have been such that, in spite of its success, it provoked no invective from his enemies. He cannot but have derived profound satisfaction from his growing power, his increasing ability to create characters, to paint manners, to spin a plot. It is during this year that his friendship begins with Boileau and La Fontaine, his staunchest defenders and the writers with whom he had most in common. Last but not least, he was on the point of being married.



LOVE INTERLUDE

THE PROBLEM of Molière's marriage may be briefly stated. On February 20, 1662, when he was forty years of age, he married Armande Grésinde Béjart, who was, according to the marriage contract, "twenty years of age or thereabouts." She was overwhelmingly believed by contemporaries to have been the daughter of Madeleine. As she was born about 1642, it is as probable as not that Molière had known Madeleine before her birth. On two occasions during Molière's lifetime and on two occasions after his death, it was more than insinuated that he had married his own daughter. In 1663, Montfleury, the most prominent actor of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, whose acting had been parodied by Molière in the *Impromptu de Versailles*, is said to have made the accusation in a request addressed to the King. In 1670, a certain Le Boulanger de Chalussay repeats it in a satiric comedy entitled *Elomire Hypocondre* ("Elomire" being an anagram of "Molière," used frequently by his enemies). In 1676, an "intendant" of the Duc d'Orléans, Guichard, during a suit with the musician Lulli in which Molière's widow was called as a witness, protests against her capacity to testify on the grounds that her marriage was incestuous. Finally, in 1688, an anonymous author publishes, under the title *La Fameuse Comédienne*, a satire upon Armande, then a famous actress and remarried to an actor named

Guérin, in which he alleges that "she has been thought to be Molière's daughter . . . however, the truth about this is not well known "

These allegations do not seem to convey an impartial idea of the general belief. Although contemporary opinion did consider Armande as the daughter of Madeleine, it did not believe her to be the daughter of Molière but rather of one of the numerous lovers with whom the public credited Madeleine as well as all other actresses. The King, as an eloquent answer to Montfleury's request, was godfather to the first child born to Molière and Armande. *Elomire Hypocondre* was suppressed by the courts as libellous, on Molière's own plea. Guichard lost his suit, and the *Fameuse Comédienne* seems to have harmed in no way the reputation of "la Guérin " It is furthermore remarkable that, so far as we have been able to ascertain, such an accusation was never made by any of those who attacked Molière on the ground that his comedies were offensive to religion, in spite of the fact that this extraordinary charge, if there had been any truth in it, would have served them as well as M. François Mauriac, who in our own day has brought the old accusation up as a proof of the hopelessness of a life without grace In general, the feeling of the seventeenth century as to Molière's marriage has been fairly stated by Brossette, the Lyons correspondent of Boileau, who makes the critic, then well advanced in years, say out of his memories "that Molière had been first in love with the actress Béjart, whose daughter he had married, then with Mlle de Brie, also an actress " Of course the old bachelor that was Boileau had a very contemptuous opinion of the importance of women in any man's life, it also is possible

that Brossette has not quoted him correctly; yet the acceptance of Molière's relations with Madeleine (and with other women), accompanied with an absolute disbelief in his being the father of Madeleine's daughter, seems to have constituted, for contemporaries, a perfectly satisfactory picture of his private life endorsed, moreover, by Voltaire and the entire eighteenth century.

The story is not, however, quite as simple as that. Nineteenth century scholars have discovered that in every official document where Armande is mentioned during her lifetime, she is expressly stated to be the daughter not of Madeleine, but of Madeleine's mother, Marie Hervé Béjart. She was thus before the law Madeleine's sister. In an act of March 10, 1643, three months before the contract of the *Illustre Théâtre*, by which Marie Hervé renounces for her minor children the inheritance of their father, there is mentioned among them "une petite non baptisée" who can be identified only as Armande. It is true that Madeleine herself had had a daughter four years before, but this child died in infancy. At all events, in Armande's marriage contract and marriage certificate with Molière, in the marriage contract of her sister Geneviève and in her own marriage contract with her second husband Guérin, as in many other official documents, she figures as "Armande Grésinde Béjart" or "Armande Grésinde Elisabeth Claire Béjart," "fille de feu Joseph Béjart et de Marie Hervé." It was this that she was given out to be before men and before God, by her own family, by Molière's family, by all the other persons with whom she was called upon to sign acts and contracts. Although neither had any interest in publish-

ing the fact, both the Church and the State, with their seals, had signified that she was so accepted by society.

It is on the basis of this factual evidence that any reader of Molière must come to his own conclusion. The mystery remains intact, and all of the many arguments advanced by scholars resolve themselves, in the last analysis, into their own personal feeling, as to Molière, or actors, or morality, or poetry, or religion. Knowledge of the history of Molière, the Bégarts, the troupe and the time leads to just as undemonstrable a conclusion as does a so-called "knowledge of life" or a profound feeling for the hidden secret of genius.

Why, it may be asked, if Armande were really the daughter of Marie Hervé and the sister of Madeleine, Joseph, Geneviève, Louis and other Béjart children; and if this fact were believed by all those who signed Molière's marriage contract and certificate, and those who were present at the signing of these documents, including Molière's own father and brother-in-law as well as the Bégarts and probably other members of the troupe; if all these persons, respected bourgeois or actors and actresses, were cognizant of the real facts in regard to Armande's birth, why did not some of them attempt to make these facts known and thus destroy the odious implication involved in the belief that Armande was Madeleine's daughter? One answer to this question is that of Molière himself. when his art was attacked, he would strike back if he saw fit, but when "certain matters" were touched upon, he would say nothing.¹ It may be that his family and friends felt as he did on this point, or were persuaded by him to respect his own silence. Another answer is that

¹ cf Chap x, below, p 168

any vigorous, serious and honest attempt to proclaim Armande the daughter of the *veuve* Béjart might have met with incredulous smiles. According to Marie Hervé's burial certificate of 1670 drawn up over the signature of her son Louis and her son-in-law Léonard de Loménie, she was eighty when she died and therefore fifty-two at Armande's birth, according to her tombstone, erected by Madeleine, she was seventy-five when she died and therefore forty-seven at Armande's birth. Even the latter age is an unusual one at which to have a child. So unusual indeed that, in the presence of incredulity, it becomes almost ridiculous to affirm it. The airing of the question would have made very bad advertising for the theater. Nor were there, in those days, journalists eager to pounce upon stories of this sort in order to spread over their pages the slightest circumstances connected with them, supported by documents in proof. Indeed, as we have seen, the question of the private life of a comedian was of very little interest to anybody during the Old Régime. It is the increased importance of the personal experience of the artist, as well as the increased importance of the figure of Molière as one of the great men of France, which lead nineteenth century scholars to diligent research around this question. The skeptical wisdom of the previous age was apt to leave a man's private life to himself, to admit that there were many things under the sun, and to judge the fruit apart from the tree.

Whoever she was, the child Armande Béjart was greatly beloved by the older people among whom she grew up. Although nothing positive is known about her childhood and youth, they must have been spent with

her only relatives, who were all with the *Illustre Théâtre*, the Comedians of the Duc d'Epéron, the Comedians of the Prince de Conti, the Troupe de Monsieur. She was certainly what the French call "une enfant de la balle," brought up in inn courtyards and the wings of the theater, listening from infancy to the careless, exuberant, exaggerated, emotional talk of player-folk, present at violent quarrels and at reconciliations equally extreme, knowing all the "facts of life" as soon as she knew anything at all, yet keeping them well in their place beneath the world of the candles which suffused all life with a glorious glow. From what we know of the Célimène of the *Misanthrope* and the Lucile of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, she may not have been a very pretty child, but lively, vivacious, charming, ready with those clever answers which, from a child's lips, fill grown-ups with delight. Whether she was the girl Benjamin of the Bégarts or the only daughter of Madeleine, she must have been cordially spoiled by the whole family and the whole troupe.

The marriage contract bears eloquent testimony of the desire of Molière himself and of the Bégarts to "avancer" the bride. The witnesses were "Jean Poquelin et André Bourdet, père et beau-frère du futur époux, Madeleine et Louis Bégart, sœur et frère de la future épouse." The marriage was under the régime of property held in common (*la communauté*) but accompanied with stipulations allowing the wife to withdraw from it at any time and relieving her from responsibility for debts contracted by her husband. Her mother, Marie Hervé, accorded her a dowry of 10,000 livres tournois—her own money? or Molière's? or Madeleine's?—to which Molière

added a "domaine préfixe" of 4,000 livres tournois. No groom could have made a greater effort to oppose on every point the procedure of the guardian of comedy. Besides, under the "gothic" language of the law, can be felt the tender solicitude of all those about Armande. They did their best to give this child as firm an establishment in the world as money and property could afford, and with it as complete a liberty from the "puissance de mari" as the law would allow. It is remarkable that not only Armande's family, but also Molière's, concurred in this arrangement. Molière's father and sister might quite conceivably have opposed his generosity to his bride, for the clauses of the contract left wide openings for money to go out of the Poquelin family. Yet the signature of old Jean Poquelin and of André Bourdet would seem to indicate that they raised no objections to it. In this connection it will be remembered also that, when Madeleine died ten years later, she left all of her property to Armande with the full agreement of her surviving relatives. Indeed a perusal of these dry documents, contracts and wills, can lead to but one conclusion. "la Molière" was one of the best beloved children that ever a family surrounded.

Of Molière's own relations to her before their marriage nothing at all is known. Efforts to prove him her "guardian" spring from the desire to see in the living Molière the Ariste or the Sganarelle of the *Ecole des Maris* or the Arnolphe of the *Ecole des Femmes*. In fact, the child Armande must have been looked after by Marie Hervé and Madeleine, and Molière's responsibility for her was no greater than for other members of the company. In his capacity of leader of the troupe he seems to have inspired in all feelings of esteem, admiration, gratitude and

affection. He was also, it would appear, a silent man off the boards, but little given to those outbursts of light-hearted gaiety or self-revelation and self-justification which bring a man down to the level of others. He cannot but have inspired his comrades with the profundity of his nature and the superiority of his genius, as well as with his wisdom, his goodness, his understanding and charm. Is it not probable that the child was drawn to him, eagerly responsive to his notice and listening seriously to his words? May it not have been that in the responsiveness of the child, not unmixed with a certain amount of coquetry as it undoubtedly was, Molière felt the possibility of a union more perfect than had been his with any woman? or perhaps a consolation for the turn of his age, growing out of the presence of a companion whom he could adore and also protect, whom he could surround with his wealth, and at whose feet he would lay his triumphs? Did her deep eyes not seem to say, when she was quiet for a moment, that she understood as no one else did what he was trying to do, what he strove to say, the rich and generous feeling for life that he wanted to shine forth from his comedies over the world of petty envy and petty self-sufficiency in which he lived? If he ever dreamed of such a relationship between himself and his wife, his comedies would not tell, would not give even the slightest hint of it. It was the business of serious plays, not of comedy, to do so. The *Don Garcie* might have been the place for this feeling, and is a proof that Molière was unable to express it. With him it was probably too deeply true for anything like complete expression. But it is none the less only such a hope that can explain this extraordinary marriage.

Legend has it, as legend would, that Molière was at one time or another "involved," as we say, with the du Parc and the de Brie as well as with Madeleine and Armande. Nothing is known for certain about this. Nor is it recorded that his relations with any of his actresses had any repercussion on the activity of the troupe or the fate of their theater. There were certainly difficulties and jealousies when the du Parcs left the Petit-Bourbon for the Marais, yet they are easily explicable otherwise than through the personal relations between Molière and any of his actors or actresses. His marriage with Armande had an effect, as we shall see, upon his plays and probably upon his health, but only thus indirectly upon his theater. Indeed, if a guess may be ventured, it is that Molière could never command from women the devotion that seemed to be at the beck and call of the merest little marquis. He was not, like them, "*si bien fait*." He also knew too much, he felt the human lot too deeply, to arrive at what he could take for a thoroughly intimate acquaintance with any other mortal. His was the ultimate solitude of great souls. The women whom he knew, and whom he tried to admit through the portals of his spirit, must have recoiled with a shiver of fear from the bleak truths that lurked within. His could be neither companionship nor possession. He must live, at his profoundest, alone. The comfort of "charity," of the love of the great Consoler, for which Pascal longed, was probably denied him by the forms of his belief. He was left with his "*divertissements*"—Pascal's word—his little comedies, the making and acting and directing of which at least kept his mind from the abyss.

Had he realized always that such was man's fate? Does his tardy marriage represent a time when illusions nourished for a moment his desires, and released the fountains of joy within him? The comedies which we have just reviewed, from the *Précieuses* to the *Fâcheux*, seem filled with a spirit of irrepressible gaiety that may have come, in part, from the smile with which Fortune had been gratifying the man Molière as well as the director of the troupe. At all events, marriage must have given this smile a strangely sardonic twist, for in the play that follows it, comedy penetrates further than ever before into the painful maladjustment that is life. At the end of an interval of fifteen months, the longest in his career after the *Précieuses*, Molière produces on December 26, 1662, the *Ecole des Femmes*, five acts in verse.



L'ECOLE DES FEMMES

BASED again on the *Précaution Inutile* of Scarron, the *Ecole des Femmes* is a further exploitation of the theme of the *Ecole des Maris*. True enough, Arnolphe is a wealthy Parisian bourgeois with houses in town and estates in the country—the fullest portrait that Molière has yet attempted of a contemporary figure. The plot turns on the fact that one of these estates carries with it a title, and at the beginning of the play Arnolphe is shown as desirous of assuming it and of being called Monsieur de la Souche. Yet this respectable bourgeois, who was far from abnormally susceptible to noble ambitions, is still Sganarelle. In him, even much more than in his predecessor of the *Ecole des Maris*, cuckoldry has become a fixed idea. He sees it everywhere. Gleeefully he seeks for evidence of it amongst his friends and acquaintances. Nothing rejoices him so much as a tale of marital infidelity, and for him the inevitable result of marriage, as marriages are ordinarily made, is horns. All the observation of his forty-two bachelor years (he is pointedly shown to be forty-two) has led him to this conclusion. In his own case, we discover as he talks with his friend Chrysalde in the opening scene of the play, he has found a way to avoid them. He has adopted a little girl whom he had taken from the hands of a country nurse at the age of four, he has had her brought up in a convent in utter ignorance

of the "facts of life," so that—perhaps from looking in her convent at pictures of the Annunciation—she thinks that children are "born by the ear"; he has recently shut her up in one of his town houses under the guard of a simple-minded peasant couple, and tomorrow he will marry her. She will be entirely his. All she knows in life he will have taught her. He has found a means of satisfying completely what La Rochefoucauld calls "the secret desire of possessing what one loves"

No better theatrical convention could be found, it would seem, to stress the inhuman absurdity of such a design, in a world where men live together in society, than to bring it out from the recesses of the house where it was conceived and to air it in a public square where people come and go about their affairs. It may be shown as colossally heroic and gloriously monstrous when an Italian prince of the Renaissance shuts up his beloved in a dark mysterious castle hidden among mist-covered marshes, as in the story told by Stendhal. Solitude and power are necessary if such a scheme is to be taken for a moment seriously. "Secret desires" of that sort are of the kind that men ordinarily situated must keep to themselves. If they become known, they will lead—not to disaster, there are no disasters in public squares—but to ridicule.

Something of the sort must have been the idea of this comedy as Molière conceived it. But the public square of comedy, good "stylization" as it was, proved an inadequate setting for the presentation of a probable human episode such as the "rules" required. The whole play is a tissue of improbabilities. It is improbable that people should come out of their houses to discuss their most

private affairs in the street, and yet Molière's plot requires that almost the entire action be composed of the discussion of private affairs.

The story is briefly as follows. To Arnolphe comes young Horace, the son of an old friend who has been away for years. Horace announces his father's speedy return to Paris, but confides to Arnolphe that in the meanwhile he needs money. Arnolphe without hesitation presents him with his purse, and then learns what Horace is to do with it. He is in love—Arnolphe chuckles: "voici de nouveau quelque conte gaillard." But the person in question is precisely the young Agnes whom Arnolphe is guarding and intending to marry. Horace knows her as the ward of a certain "de la Zousse, ou Source," whom he does not connect with Arnolphe.

On this misunderstanding the whole plot turns. Arnolphe, instead of enlightening his young friend as to the identity of the object of his affections, encourages him to pursue his design, and then makes every effort to see to it that the design is frustrated. This line of conduct in itself smacks more of the farce than of life. However, young Agnes, whom love draws to Horace at first sight, discovers within herself a brain and will of her own. Every obstacle that Arnolphe puts in the path of the young lovers is thus turned as it were by the power of love itself, and Agnes finally walks out of the house and joins her lover. This is, of course, no good ending for a comedy, and Horace immediately turns the ward of Monsieur de la Souche over to his friend Arnolphe for safe-keeping until he shall have seen his father and gained his consent to marry her. The father shortly arrives with a friend who has been for years in America (favorite haven of the *deus*

ex machina of Renaissance comedy), but whose daughter, left in France, they arranged long ago for Horace to marry. It then appears that this daughter is the very Agnes, ward of Arnolphe, about whom the play has revolved, and the end comes with the latter's discomfiture and the satisfaction of all the rest

None of the events of the comedy is shown to the audience. The stage represents the front of the house in which Agnes is kept under the guard of Alain and Georgette, and her acquaintance with Horace begins as she is sitting on her balcony, and he bows to her from the square below. Yet the audience learns of this meeting, first when Horace tells Arnolphe of it, and later, in delicious detail, when Agnes in all innocence recounts it herself to her suffering guardian. Then, Arnolphe having instructed the servants to refuse the young man admittance, and Agnes to repel his advances, and having posted himself to see that his orders are carried out, Horace again walks beneath the balcony, and is received by a "grès," that is, a stone which Agnes throws in his direction. Of this episode, however, which, like the first, could have taken place on the stage itself, the audience learns only when Horace recounts it to his "friend" Arnolphe as a good joke on Monsieur de la Souche for to the stone was attached a note, read aloud by Horace, in which Agnes avows her love for him and her ignorance of proper conduct under the circumstances with an innocence, a sweetness and a frankness which are at the same time exquisite and unspeakably comic. So the play goes. Whether the events take place in Agnes' room, in the garden at the rear of the house, or in the public square itself, the audience is appraised of these through

conversations which are held in the most unlikely place imaginable for them.

The meetings of the characters, their entrances and exits, their accounting for their presence outside the house, are all managed with an obvious, though not unskillful, awkwardness. At the very center of the play, for example, is a scene in which Arnolphe, seated, to Agnes, standing, preaches a veritable sermon upon the relations between husband and wife.

Du côté de la barbe est la toute puissance . . .

and then has Agnes read aloud a series of stanzas called "Les Maximes du mariage, ou les Devoirs de la femme mariée." If ever there was a scene for the closet, it would seem to be that one. Yet Arnolphe, by calling to his servants for "un siège au frais ici," as if to profit by the cool of the evening, makes in a way acceptable the picture of the enthronement of the husband and the humility of the wife in that very public square which amplifies the absurdity of any such conception of marital relationship.

In other words, there is here a sort of conflict between the traditional stylization of comedy and the equally traditional plot of the comedy of intrigue based on events, and, on the other hand, the real interest of classical comedy as it was developing, which, like that of all classical drama, lay in qualities of character and in psychological reactions as revealed through conversations. The plot is a romantic love story, yet the play lies in the characters of Arnolphe and Agnes opposed to each other. Horace is a mere conventional young lover who is presented to the audience as of no interest, however inter-

esting he may be to the heroine. The events merely seem to add one trait after another to the two main characters. The action is the effect of love, love unrequited in Arnolphe, love encouraged in Agnes. Manners are not forgotten, that is, pictures of contemporary Parisian life; but they are brought in incidentally as illustrating the characters' preoccupations, mainly in the discussions between Arnolphe and Chrysalde upon the generality of marital woes. It is a question whether this aspect of the *Ecole des Femmes* is important enough to justify its being looked upon as the first French comedy of manners. It does not indeed turn as much upon manners as did the *Fâcheux*. Making a plot was one thing, painting manners another.

Agnes in this play frees herself from her guardian and joins her lover as does the Isabelle of the *Ecole des Maris*. But whereas the latter is represented as being thoroughly mature and sophisticated, an adept at dissimulation and of an extraordinary inventiveness, in Agnes her utter innocence and truthfulness are only matched by her ignorance. She talks of her feelings at the approach of Horace with the same candor that she shows in telling of the fleas that bother her at night (oh, heroines of romance, what would you say of this?) Whereas Isabelle knows that Sganarelle is repulsive and Valère attractive, Agnes has never heard of love and is all obedience and sweetness toward Arnolphe at the same time that a new and unsuspected feeling is drawing her toward Horace. Far from realizing that she must trick her guardian in order to escape from him, she is easily led to believe that Arnolphe will respect her inclination for Horace and

favor her union to him, and she is only undeceived when he himself has made his opposition too brutally evident.

For her, vice has no more meaning than virtue:

Je m'entends point de mal dans tout ce que j'ai fait. . . .

Le moyen de chasser ce qui fait du plaisir?

Some critics have been inclined to see back of this line all its philosophical consequences, and to make of Molière, not only a thorough "libertine" and epicurean, but also a precursor of the hedonistic philosophers of the eighteenth century. It would perhaps be safer merely to see in Agnes a figure of innocence, purity, naturalness, of young love—the first "ingénue" in fact, but lacking the aura with which much romantic writing would have surrounded her. She is presented with a sort of cruel completeness and with no attempt to veil the physical and social implications of love. No sacredness is here attached to innocence and purity, and Agnes is represented as welcoming the caresses of her lover with as much candor as his impassioned declarations. The most shocking scene in the play to many contemporaries was that in which she tells Arnolphe of the visit made her in his absence by Horace.

Arnolphe

Mais que faisait-il étant seul avec vous?

Agnès

Il jurait qu'il m'aimait d'une amour sans seconde,
Et me disait des mots les plus gentils du monde,
Des choses que jamais rien ne peut égaler,
Et dont toutes les fois que je l'entends parler,
La douceur me chatouille, et là dedans remue
Certain je ne sais quoi dont je suis tout émue.

Arnolphe

O fâcheux examen d'un mystère fatal,
Où l'examineur souffre seul tout le mal !
Outre tous ces discours, toutes ces gentilleses,
Ne vous faisait-il point aussi quelques caresses ?

Agnès

Oh tant ! Il me prenait et les mains et les bras,
Et de me les baiser il n'était jamais las

Arnolphe

Ne vous a-t-il point pris, Agnès, quelque autre chose ?
Ouf !

Agnès

Hé ! il m'a . . .

Arnolphe

Quoi !

Agnès

Pris . .

Arnolphe

Euh !

Agnès

Le

Arnolphe

Plaît-il ?

Agnès

Je n'ose,

Et vous vous fâcherez peut-être contre moi

It turns out, after suspense has been still more prolonged, that what Horace "took" was a ribbon that Arnolphe had given her. But in the meanwhile, whatever images

arise in the spectator's mind are of a sort to present together the sweetness of innocence and the gestures of lust. It is, of course, the spirit of the farce, which looks life in the face. But your farceur is usually careful never really to arouse in his audience the feeling of what innocence and purity are—there were no women in the farces of Molière's childhood. That he should dare to do so in this play is evidence of the depths to which comedy was penetrating. We are far, here, from the delicacy of the *Fâcheux*. Indeed it confirms our previous remark that, the more Molière worked upon a comedy, the less able he was to remain within the bounds of taste as it existed in his time.

What is true of the figure of Agnes is even more so of that of Arnolphe. After *Mascarille*, this is the longest part that Molière wrote for himself, and, in contrast to the "emperor of rascals," is perhaps the most grotesquely ridiculous. No more "playing heroes" for Molière. This was an awkward part, full of asides and lengthy monologues, which, however, had shown themselves effective with the public, even if disapproved by the critics of drama. It was a complex one, too. Arnolphe is not only the Sganarelle of the *Cocu* and the *Ecole des Maris*, but in him to vanity is added a real love for his ward. Love, that is, if such a name can be given to the desire to possess entirely. It is such love as could exist in a world where self-love alone would be observed as a reality. As a matter of fact, Arnolphe, from the beginning, is presented as the sort of man for whom society is, to put it mildly, suspicious. [This happens because he himself is suspicious of society. To see in every married couple of one's acquaintance "un cocu et une coquine" is not the best way to

make friends and be considered a friend.] That Chrysalde, Arnolphe's "good friend," should be a cuckold would cause in him only satisfaction and a sense of superiority. For *he* is not one and will not be one

Contre cet accident j'ai pris mes sûretés

In him the sin of presumption and of "suffisance" fairly cries out for a fall. Such a design as he has upon Agnes is mad, such a design is odious, such a design is contrary to the essential requirements of life in society—it is unspeakably absurd. So does the exposition present this figure, unsympathetic, condemned in advance, deserving of punishment.

The trouble is, however, that mad, odious, anti-social, absurd as Arnolphe's desire may be made to appear, it is none the less only too human. Alain, the simple-minded peasant servant, explains it to his simple-minded wife Georgette as follows

Je m'en vais te bailler une comparaison,
Afin de concevoir la chose davantage
Dis-moi, n'est-il pas vrai, quand tu tiens ton potage,
Que, si quelque affamé venait pour en manger,
Tu serais en colère et voudrais le charger?

.
La femme est en effet le potage de l'homme

The longing for complete possession, "cette amitié goulue qui n'en veut que pour soi," to quote Alain once more, whether it be of the eater for his soup, of the owner for his wealth, the parent for his child, the artist for his work or the husband for his wife, is, alas! too close to the human heart and to the secret of success in living not to excite sympathy after all. The spectator at this play—especially perhaps the modern spectator—is constantly

on the point of exclaiming: "Poor Arnolphe!" A recent reviewer calls Agnes a "cruel child." Molière, going even deeper into the character of his cuckold, has endowed him not only with the desire to possess, but also and at the same time the desire to be loved. Whenever his fixed idea is not involved, he is represented as a man capable of disinterested friendship and of arousing friendship. He is no mere grotesque, as is Sganarelle. He is a man, with much good to him but with a weakness. Such is, it will be remembered, Aristotle's requirement for the hero of tragedy.

On returning from the country, Arnolphe expects the household to be overjoyed at seeing him, but his two country bumpkin servants are so simple-minded that, far from showing him any affection, they are too innocent even to show respect. Looking for devotion and met with neglect, Arnolphe changes from the benevolent master to the violent tyrant, and the hilarious farce scene thus provoked sets the tone for the ensuing changes in his feelings for Agnes. In two scenes of the play, as they talk together of marriage, a misunderstanding arises between them. Agnes is thinking of the marriage to Horace, Arnolphe of the marriage to himself. In the first of these, at the end of the second act, when he discovers his mistake he orders Agnes to receive her lover, the next time he presents himself, by throwing a stone at him:

Arnolphe

M'entendez-vous, Agnès? Moi, caché dans un coin,
De votre procédé je serai le témoin

Agnès

Las! il est si bien fait! C'est . . .

Arnolphe

Ah ! que de langage !

Agnès

Je n'aurai pas le cœur . . .

Arnolphe

Point de bruit davantage

Montez là-haut.

Agnès

Mais quoi ! voulez-vous

Arnolphe

C'est assez

Je suis maître, je parle, allez, obéissez

This last line, in point of fact, is one put by Corneille in the mouth of no less a personage than Pompey in *Sertorius*¹ It thus points the contrast between what tragedy and comedy do with authority.

The other scene is near the end of the play. As he sees his ward slipping from him, Arnolphe has come to realize more and more what the possession of Agnes means to him, and is reduced to plead with her in a way which, grotesque though it is, is none the less the expression of real suffering.

Enfin à mon amour rien ne peut s'égalér

Quelle preuve veux-tu que je t'en donne, ingrate ?

Me veux-tu voir pleurer ? Veux-tu que je me batte ?

Veux-tu que je m'arrache un côté des cheveux ?

Veux-tu que je me tue ? Oui, dis si tu le veux,

Je suis tout prêt, cruelle, à te prouver ma flamme

¹ Act V, scene 6

But when she answers:

Tenez, tous vos discours ne me touchent point l'âme,
Horace avec deux mots en ferait plus que vous,

he is thrown into the extreme of violence:

Ah! c'est trop me braver, trop pousser mon courroux!
Je suivrai mon dessein, bête trop indocile,
Et vous dénicherez à l'instant de la ville
Vous rebutez mes vœux et me mettez à bout,
Mais un cul de couvent me vengera de tout.

The convent was of course the traditional alternative to marriage for the recalcitrant girl. Molière's "cul de couvent," by analogy to "cul de basse-fosse," meaning the deepest of dungeons, is one of those twists of language by which he drives home the absurdity of desire when ill-directed. It brings out in a flash the contrast between the ferocity of authority and the gentleness of love, assimilating as it does a convent, which should be a refuge and a reward, to a prison, place of punishment and restraint.

What is to be said as to the relation between the theme of jealousy and cuckoldry to be found in the *Ecole des Femmes* and the plays preceding it, and Molière's own personal experience? For moderns eagerly looking in an artist's work for revelations of his own life and circumstances, it is easy to leap upon the parallel between Arnolphe, aged forty-two, Agnes in her teens, and Molière, aged forty, Armande half as old, just as in the *Ecole des Maris*, the older and successful guardian, Ariste, is similar to Molière, whereas the younger guardian, Sganarelle, is not.

It is certain that Molière's marriage to Armande was not that bond of respectful and affectionate comradeship

which his plays now and again hold out as a human possibility. Whether Armande was unfaithful or not, she was certainly approachable, and this, in an imagination unable to banish jealous thoughts, may be even worse. Are, therefore, the series of Molière's plays on jealousy and cuckoldry really a sort of living confession, in which a progress may be noted from wishful thinking to ultimate disillusion? Or was he playing up his own attitude in a sort of humorous way, to make it more tolerable? Did he transform the deep wound in his heart into the injured vanity of the cuckold in order to make himself and his own feelings appear comic in his own eyes? These are secrets that remain his. However, it would be unwise to push the analogy too far. Quite evidently this series of comedies is even more the result of observation of life than it is a reflection of emotional experiences. More than that, Sganarelle and even Arnolphe are types of farce far more than they are individuals. They are as old as French art. The problem of Arnolphe is that of Panurge, on which Rabelais spends an entire book, and the differences in Molière's treatment from Rabelais' are far more explicable through an examination of their two worlds than of their personalities. For Rabelais, the main problem was knowledge, for Molière, it is society. Rabelais' cure for cuckoldry—as for everything else—was “trink,” Molière's is renunciation by the male of the hope which he derives from the authority granted him by custom. Such is the lesson that the two “schools” teach. In the first, the older lover wins by kindness, the younger loses by selfishness. In the second, it is the older lover who is the grotesque, and it is youth which wins or rather nature. The idea of the first play, borrowed from Men-

doza, shows the generous spirit triumphing, in spite of the handicap of age, the ungenerous spirit losing in spite of advantages. This is the atmosphere of the serious play of Molière's youth, but not that of comedy. High moral qualities excite less enthusiasm, in 1662, than in the days of Rodrigue and Auguste, because they inspire less confidence. People flocked to the Palais-Royal, to roar at Arnolphe, as a score of years before they had flocked to the Marais to be stirred and uplifted by the heroes of tragedy. The *Ecole des Femmes* marks a deepening, it is true, in Molière's work, and for this it would be hazardous to allege that his experience was in no way responsible. But still more it marks a further progress in comedy.



HEROIC AND COMIC TECHNIQUE *DON GARCIE AND LE MISANTHROPE*

THE succeeding years were to prove that Molière's talent for farce was to develop into a genius for high comedy, carried ever higher on a wave of popular taste. But before entering upon a consideration of the definite triumph of his work and his troupe, let us examine for a moment his one attempt at heroic writing and what resulted from it in the development of his comic technique. For Molière did write one wholly serious play, a "heroic comedy" of five acts in verse, *Don Garcie de Navarre, ou le Prince Jaloux*, the initial performance of which, on February 4, 1661, occurred only a few days after the opening of the Palais-Royal theater

This fact is one of several that indicate the considerable importance which Molière attached to this work. It had been completely written for quite a while, as a reading of it is mentioned in the *Véritables Précieuses* of Somaize, printed early in January 1660. A five-act tragi-comedy, or heroic comedy, in verse, its composition must have required some time. The latest that it could have been written was during the troupe's first year in Paris, and it may have been done while Molière was still in the provinces, before the *Précieuses* and not long after the *Etourdi* and the *Dépit Amoureux*. Contrary to his subsequent custom, Molière had secured a privilege for the

publication of *Don Garcie* on January 7, 1660, many months before it was played.

This privilege, however, was not used, and the play was not published during Molière's lifetime. The reason was that it was a failure, the only undisputed failure of Molière's career. It was given only seven times at the Palais-Royal in February and March 1661, and the last time brought in only 70 livres. It was played again for the King in September 1662, and this time was not altogether displeasing, as is witnessed by the fact that the performance was repeated in the autumn of the following year at Chantilly and Versailles. In November of that year, 1663, Molière tries it twice more before his town audience in the Palais-Royal (perhaps to illustrate the kind of acting which he advocated in the *Impromptu de Versailles*,¹ played at this time with it), and that is the end of *Don Garcie*. It has never been offered since.

The scene is laid in a city of the Kingdom of Leon in Spain, and the play offers that combination of important political interests, of persons of exalted rank and of embroiled plot which were associated with "heroic comedy" and made it so very similar to tragedy as conceived by Pierre and even more by Thomas Corneille. Though tradition demands that Done Elvire, a Princess of Leon, love Don Sylve, a Prince of Castille, "ces chaînes du ciel qui tombent sur nos âmes" have bound her to Don Garcie, who is Prince of Navarre. Don Garcie has also, by a brilliant victory, saved Done Elvire from an unworthy marriage into which she was being forced by Mauregat, the usurper of the Kingdom of Leon. He has,

¹ cf Chap x, below, pp 166-7, n

however, a fault, an "eternal weakness," and Done Elvire wistfully remarks to her confidante, Done Elise, that he cannot pretend to her hand

S'il ne purge ses feux de leurs transports jaloux

All this the audience learns in an opening scene between Done Elvire and Done Elise.

In the first act, the jealousy of Don Garcie is aroused by a letter which a page delivers to Done Elvire in his presence; in the second he finds in Done Elvire's hand the torn half of a letter which seems to indicate that she loves his rival Don Sylve, in the third, he discovers her talking to the Prince of Castille himself, in the fourth, he sees through an open door a man on his knees before her. Each time his suspicions prove groundless the letter of the first act is from a woman; when the second half of the torn letter is added to the first, it turns out to be favorable to Don Garcie over Don Sylve, the kneeling man of the fourth act is a woman in disguise; and Don Sylve, who was talking to Done Elvire in the third act and who, having defeated Mauregat and won back the Kingdom of Leon, is again in the fifth discovered by Don Garcie with his mistress, turns out to be not a Prince of Castille at all, but Don Alphonse, Prince of Leon and Done Elvire's brother. When Don Alphonse discovers that Done Elvire is his sister, he returns to his former love, Done Ignès, who was the "gentleman" found kneeling to Done Elvire. All is well that ends well, though everything that has occurred in the play tends to confirm in the audience Done Elvire's own foreboding, as expressed by her in the first act, that her marriage to Don Garcie is of a sort

Qui deviendrait sans doute un enfer pour tous deux

It will readily be seen that, as in most serious plays of the 1650's and '60's, the only persons vital to the action in *Don Garcie de Navarre* are the lovers, and that the action itself consists entirely in the variations of their feeling for each other. Don Garcie has two confidants, one of whom, Don Alvar, is loyal and does his best to preserve harmony between his master and the princess, while the other, Don Lope, is perfidious and seizes every occasion to kindle Don Garcie's jealousy. Both of these are in love with Done Elvire's confidante, Done Elise. As for Don Alphonse and Done Ignès, they serve but to keep alive the atmosphere of battle and romance which Molière has endeavored to create about his purely psychological situations. His small success at this combination is shown by the fact that it is not the jealous prince, but a secondary character who wins the battle between the fourth and fifth acts. Imagine the *Cid* if Don Sanche and not Rodrigue had defeated the Moors!

The judgment of the town was final and accurate: the play was a failure. Yet, as a "tableau des passions galamment touché," when compared with other similar plays of the period that were outstandingly successful—the famous *Timocrate* played five years before it, for example—it is not such a bad play. Precious as it is (certain passages are indeed astonishing from the satirist of the "grand Cyre") it is far from the insipidity which Boileau holds so strongly against Thomas Corneille or Quinault. In spite of an excess of "pointes" and a luxuriance of the "langage ampoulé" of which Molière was the first to appreciate the affectation, there is a ring of sincerity, the sense of a real human situation in certain tirades of Done

Elvire² which bear the marks of a profounder sense of passion than that of the great Corneille. The very public, however, who four years later filled the Hôtel de Bourgogne for thirty-six successive performances of Quinault's *Astrate*, would have none of *Don Garcie*.

Various explanations have been given for this failure. the audience who had seen Molière as Mascarille and Sganarelle could not take him seriously with a long sword at his side; the natural manner of recitation on which he insisted so strongly with his troupe was not adapted to heroic plays, the conventional nature of which was thought to be better expressed in the spouting practised by the "great comedians"; tragi-comedy was a genre the popularity of which was waning, the play is "cold," it does not grip. "the audience neither suffered with the characters nor laughed at them"³ All these explanations have no doubt some validity, though one further remark may certainly be made. when *Don Garcie* is compared, no longer with the work of other playwrights, but with other plays of Molière, its inferiority becomes all too evident.

Molière was here attempting to create for himself a heroic rôle. Don Garcie is valorous on the battlefield, submissive before his mistress, endowed with those qualities of high-minded generosity which Corneille and his successors had led audiences to look for in a hero. Yet when Molière tries to get this figure into the plot which he has chosen, what does happen? It is somewhat as if, in an Italian comedy, a mask were put upon the figure of the lover. A "character" is drawn, with a single, dominant, invincible trait, which is jealousy. [It is not,

² See especially II 1350-89

³ Lancaster, *op cit*, III, II, p 539

obviously enough, the fact that this trait is jealousy rather than preciosity, or avarice, which accounts for Molière's failure.] He is to do "le jaloux" in a series of plays the composition of which follows that of *Don Garcie*. His audience had already seen him in the *Cocu Imaginaire*, and will shortly witness the *Ecole des Maris*, the *Ecole des Femmes*, and the *Misanthrope*. These were all well received. The *Ecole des Femmes* was a veritable triumph, and the *Misanthrope*, although relatively less successful (perhaps because it was played in June, which was the off-season), has often been regarded as one of the greatest creations in literature, and is at all events Molière's final and technically most perfect presentation of the jealousy theme. But "le jaloux" of these plays is not a hero. He does not excite admiration, he excites laughter. Of course Alceste is a fundamentally sympathetic and even admirable character: yet good as his qualities are, they are manifested under circumstances that cannot but draw a smile. Tragic as his situation has often appeared to those who have drawn the deepest satisfaction from the play, his predicament is invariably presented in a comic light.

Furthermore, what is Molière's plot in *Don Garcie*? In this five-act play, the action develops because five times, once in each act, the jealousy of Don Garcie is aroused, and each time, having been proved groundless, it is appeased. Is not this the very rhythm of comedy, as Molière was to write it? Is it not by such a successive reappearance of a fundamental trait that the infatuation of Orgon, the avarice of Harpagon, the hypochondria of Argan, become more and more comically apparent? It is the periodical jack-in-the-box movement so subtly described

by Bergson,⁴ the effect of which is irresistibly funny. This technique is admirably adapted to the presentation in a comic light of a "character" as Molière conceived it, that is, a personality whose reactions are conditioned by some obscure primary impulse that has hardened into an inveterate habit.

A comparison with *Othello* will perhaps make this aspect of *Don Garcie* clearer. The Shakespearian hero is a man of a violently passionate nature, but he is not a "character": jealousy is not his dominant trait. He is a man of action and imagination rather than of introspection and insight, and he is of a different "complexion" from his wife the diabolic perspicacity of Iago, who is himself moved in part by jealousy, as well as by envy and spite, plays upon the strings of this noble heart with such deftness as to concentrate the entire emotional nature of his victim around the single passion of jealousy and thus to precipitate the monstrous act which terminates the play. It must be admitted, of course, that the fixation of a passion about an object like a handkerchief, which a critic like Bradley considers melodramatic rather than tragic even in Shakespeare, is inconceivable in a serious play of 1661 in France. It was still so to many Frenchmen one hundred and seventy-odd years later, and the "mou-choir" was near to causing a riot in the Paris of 1829. The "cassette" of Harpagon is to be sure a somewhat similar, though much more logical, invention, but the *Avare* as Molière presented it was a hilarious comedy, not a serious play. Boileau holds up Quinault's *Astrate* to ridicule by a reference to the ring that plays a part in the plot. And a

⁴ *Le Rire*, pp. 70ff.

ring, certainly, is far more decorous as a symbol than a handkerchief. It will not be forgotten either—and in this respect he is similar to *Don Garcie*—that Othello as a great military leader, is felt to be a heroic figure because he is a bulwark of the State. In 1661 in France, such heroes are felt to be neither a bulwark of society nor even a menace to it. The best that contemporary writers can do with them is to endow them with exquisite sensibilities and make of them perfect lovers.

When Molière had finally made up his mind not to publish *Don Garcie*, he freely used lines, characters and situations from it in his later plays. The *Misanthrope*, especially, is so close to it as to appear in plot development merely the same subject done over. We are no longer in Spain, but in the drawing-room of Célimène, a lady of high rank in Paris, “une veuve de vingt ans,” whose beauty and cleverness attract a host of admirers. Célimène has with her, as is natural in her widowhood, her cousin Eliante, whose modesty and reserve contrast with her own brilliance. A frequent visitor is Alceste, a lord who has, “pour ses péchés,” fallen in love with her, but who, even though Célimène assures him that his love is returned, sees with increasing irritation the light of her smile shine as brightly upon other admirers. Oronte, for instance, the amateur poet or the foppish marquises Acaste and Clitandre. The play depicts a crisis in the jealousy of Alceste, which sharpens within him disgust with the insincerity of society and the air of universal flattery and pretended friendship that prevails among the best people. A long opening scene is devoted to a discussion of this very question of sincerity versus society between Alceste and his friend Philinte, who have come

to call upon Célimène, and it has been thoroughly debated before she herself is even mentioned. We shall see, however, as the play develops, that Célimène, not Alceste, is the central figure in it.

The remainder of the first act is taken up with a more amusing scene in which Oronte, a gentleman given to light verse, approaches Alceste as a person whose friendship he would value highly, and asks permission to read him a sonnet which he has just composed. He does so in spite of Alceste's protests, and then, pressing Alceste for an opinion, is finally told that his poetry is good for the waste-basket, is full of falsity and affectation, and compares ill with the "pure passion" of an old song which Alceste recites. A duel is in prospect as a result of Alceste's bluntness.

The second act opens with a scene between Alceste and Célimène, in which the former protests that he cannot endure the number of lovers which she has constantly about her, and announces from the beginning that she and he must "break." She lightly turns aside his thrusts, and when they are interrupted by the arrival of other visitors, Alceste, instead of going as he had threatened, persists in staying. For the benefit of the assembled company, Célimène does little satiric "portraits" of many of their common acquaintances, until finally Alceste, enraged that the woman he loves should thus revel in "médisance," bursts out in protest, accusing the guests, particularly the marquises Acaste and Clitandre, of fostering her tendency to satire by laughing at her wit and encouraging her in malice. He is called away by guards of the "maréchaussée," who have had wind of his quarrel with Oronte and are intervening to prevent a duel.

In the third act, Alceste and Célimène are not together at all. First the two marquises, Acaste and Clitandre, each of whom thinks himself the preferred of Célimène, agree that if one of them can produce positive proof that he is first in her esteem, then the other will retire. Afterwards, Célimène receives the visit of a lady somewhat older than herself, Arsinoé the prude, who charitably advises her hostess of the bad opinion people have of her because of the number of "lovers" she has, an attack to which the young widow finds an all too devastating rejoinder. Finally Arsinoé, disdainfully left alone with Alceste by Célimène, having failed to excite his interest in herself, undertakes to furnish him with proof that Célimène is unfaithful to him.

In the opening scene of the fourth act, Philinte recounts to Eliante the amusing settlement, before the "maréchaussée," of the quarrel between Alceste and Oronte: Alceste forced himself to say that, for love of Oronte, he would like to have thought well of his sonnet. Eliante replies by avowing her great esteem for Alceste, saying that if by chance his love for Célimène were not successful, she might accept his suit herself. Whereupon Philinte hopes that if hymen does join Alceste to Célimène, Eliante might allow the "faveur éclatante" which the goodness of her soul presents to Alceste to fall back upon him. At this point Alceste bursts in, furious, claiming that Célimène is unfaithful to him, and calling upon Eliante to help him take vengeance by "accepting his heart." Eliante and Philinte both try to persuade him that perhaps he allowed his belief to be too hastily formed, and finally leave him with Célimène. He then upbraids her bitterly for her treason, her perfidy. She receives his

outburst with the utmost coolness. Suppose the letter which he thinks is for Oronte was addressed to a woman? Taken aback a little, Alceste challenges Célimène to prove it, but she retorts diffidently.

. . . Il ne me plaît pas, moi
Je vous trouve plaisant d'user d'un tel empire,
Et de me dire au nez ce que vous m'osez dire.

His righteous wrath thus turned, Alceste remains in a state of raging uncertainty. Is she sincere in causing him to think that he is preferred above her other lovers, or is she playing him as she does the rest? He finally wishes

Que vous n'eussiez ni rang, ni naissance, ni bien,
Afin que de mon cœur l'éclatant sacrifice
Vous pût, d'un pareil sort, réparer l'injustice,
Et que j'eusse la joie et la gloire en ce jour
De vous voir tenir tout des mains de mon amour

To which Célimène smilingly replies

C'est me vouloir du bien d'une étrange manière! .

They are interrupted by Alceste's valet, Dubois, come to tell him that he has been called for at home by a man who wrote a note for him. After searching through all his pockets, Dubois remembers that he left the note at the house. A tense scene ends thus in an atmosphere reminiscent of farce.

Dubois' blundering intrusion is explained, at the beginning of the last act, in a conversation between Alceste and Philinte. Alceste was called away by a lawsuit of which the audience has already had a hint. Alceste, although in the right, has lost it, because he was content to rely on justice to win it for him, whereas his opponent had had recourse to intrigue and solicitation of the

judges. Alceste's misanthropy is pushed to the point of anti-social delight by this outcome:

Ce sont vingt mille francs qu'il m'en pourra coûter;
Mais pour vingt mille francs j'aurai droit de pester
Contre l'iniquité de la nature humaine,
Et de nourrir pour elle une immortelle haine

Then follows the least "happy," but perhaps the most logical of all Molière's endings. Oronte and Alceste besiege Célimène in an attempt to force her to accept one or the other of them. They are joined by the two marquises, Acaste and Clitandre, each of whom reads out before the entire company a letter written to the other, from which it appears only too clearly that in writing to her admirers she endeavors to make each feel that he is preferred over the others. Oronte, the marquises and Arsinoé depart to spread the news of Célimène's duplicity throughout society, while she, left alone with Eliante, Philinte and Alceste, employs with the latter, woman's final weapon—surrender. She admits she has wronged him, and pronounces herself willing to accept him for a husband. He, however, is not to be conquered so easily: he will marry her only if she will leave Paris and join him in his "désert," that is, his country estate. This she refuses to do.

La solitude effraie une âme de vingt ans.

Alceste then proclaims that he will depart alone from Paris, and regrets that he must withdraw the offer of his heart made to Eliante. She is not embarrassed to accept the hand of Philinte, and the contented pair, abandoning Célimène to her fate, follow Alceste out, Philinte saying:

Allons, Madame, allons employer toute chose
Pour rompre le dessein que son cœur se propose

[Many of the striking similarities which this acknowledged masterpiece of French classical comedy entertains with *Don Garcie de Navarre*, Molière's one outstanding failure, will have been made apparent by this mere summary]. There is, in fact, an almost exact correspondence between the main figures of both plays: Don Garcie is Alceste, Done Elvire Célimène, Done Elise Eliante, Don Alphonse Oronte, Done Ignès Arsinoé, Don Alvar and Don Lope together Philinte. Acaste and Clitandre, the marquises, are the only important figures added in the later play. Phrases, lines, whole passages of the first play also reappear in the second.

The main difference is, of course, that *Don Garcie* is a romantic tragi-comedy pitched in heroic key, whereas the *Misanthrope* is a picture of manners pitched in comic key. The former takes place in an ideal Spain of noble deeds and high adventure, the latter in a frivolous Paris drawing-room frequented by people of the court. The plot of *Don Garcie* involves the winning of battles and the crowning of kings, while in the plot of the *Misanthrope* important political or military events are conspicuously absent. Indeed it approaches action only in a ridiculous lawsuit and an equally absurd duel. [In this connection, it will also be remembered that the tragi-comedy affords a happy, if not too logical, ending; the comedy does not. The claim of the *Misanthrope* to completeness is based, not upon a conventional "dénouement," but upon the richness of its substance.] At one and the same time it exposes an idea, it develops a human situation, it unrolls a picture of society. Both the problem contained in the idea, and the human situation, are left unsolved, but the three elements which constitute the essence of classical art: the

intellectual, the human, and the artistic, are united and blended throughout. This is why the slightest comparison of *Don Garcie de Navarre* and the *Misanthrope* reveals in the second the firmness of a masterpiece, beside which the first appears as weak, ineffectual, and awkward. There is no better way of appreciating the profound truth of character found in the *Misanthrope*, as well as its dramatic power, than to examine the two plays together.

Many scenes could be compared. Done Elise talks, now with Don Lope, now with Don Alvar, of Don Garcie, as do Eliante and Philinte of Alceste; letters are used in a not dissimilar fashion in both plays; the Jealous Prince falls into a rage, as does the Man with the Green Ribbons; and the scene of the *Misanthrope* in which Célimène, with amazing effrontery, baffles and confuses her lover when he appears before her bearing the proof of her infidelity is a second version of a similar scene in *Don Garcie*.

The fundamental traits of Alceste's character are already to be found in his Spanish counterpart both are sincere, both are jealous. But Don Garcie is sincere in a world of the imagination where sincerity is the natural possession of every generous spirit; Alceste, on the contrary, lives in a society which regards sincerity as uncouth and frankness as ridiculous. Don Garcie is jealous of a fine and scrupulous princess who really loves him and is entirely innocent of the acts from a belief in which his jealousy springs, while Alceste loves a coquette who is even more guilty than he at first believes, and whose love for him is problematical, not only to him and to the audience, but even to herself.

When corresponding scenes are placed side by side, how pale those of *Don Garcie* appear! Done Elise possesses, to be sure, some of that smiling and sensible poise which is to be the charm of Eliante; but she is merely a confidante of the heroine, and her relations with her two lovers are but slightly related to the plot. What a contrast to the *Misanthrope*, where Célimène gathers all the lovers to herself—except Philinte, who is impervious to her beauty and brilliance, and whose modest and unswerving devotion to her cousin Eliante serves at the same time to carry on the action of the play at critical moments, to sharpen the satire of Célimène and her group, and to give the good public a sense of what there may be that is lasting and solid in a relationship between men and women. Where Done Elvire is as loyal as she is charming, with Célimène charm is inextricably intermingled with coquetry. It is this new characteristic that brings about the final scene of the fifth act, in which the letter device, not original with Molière in the first place, achieves the full measure of its dramatic possibilities. How monotonous also is the constantly recurring jealousy of Don Garcie! The quality and temperature of his outbursts vary but slightly from one act to another, whereas in the *Misanthrope*, what intensity of dramatic interest has been gained by interweaving jealousy and misanthropy, and by allowing this passion of Alceste to manifest itself in a variety of circumstances which keeps astir within the audience not merely, nor perhaps even mainly, sympathy for the characters and interest in their fate, but a thought about life and about society!

Of the many phrases and lines of *Don Garcie* used again in the *Misanthrope*, let us look for a moment at a relatively inconspicuous one, "le bonheur d'être aimé," which occurs in the sixty-sixth line of the earlier play. In the first scene of the first act of *Don Garcie*, Done Elise suggests to Done Elvire that her lover might be cured of his jealousy if he should learn of his "glory" from her own lips. Done Elvire answers:

Non, non, de cette sombre et lâche jalousie
Rien ne peut excuser l'étrange frénésie;
Et par mes actions je l'ai trop informé
Qu'il peut bien se flatter du bonheur d'être aimé

Follows a disquisition on the value in love of sighs, looks, blushes, and especially of the "mute interpreters," which would put to shame the abbé Cotin, but which, at that moment of the play, must have served mainly to dispel any uneasiness that the audience might have felt as to the possibility that they were on the point of witnessing something unusual.

In the *Misanthrope*, we are in the first scene of the second act. We are thoroughly informed as to the character of Alceste and the general situation. We have, at the opening of the second act, beheld Alceste escorting his mistress, as to whom our curiosity has already been excited, on the stage. Alceste is reproaching her for her way of living, of which he disapproves highly, and particularly for the "trop d'amants qu'on voit vous obséder".

Célimène

Mais de tout l'univers vous devenez jaloux

Alceste

C'est que tout l'univers est bien reçu de vous

Célimène

C'est ce qui doit rasseoir votre âme effarouchée,
Puisque ma complaisance est sur tous épanchée;
Et vous auriez plus lieu de vous en offenser,
Si vous me la voyiez sur un seul ramasser.

Alceste

Mais moi, que vous blâmez de trop de jalousie,
Qu'ai-je de plus qu'eux tous, Madame, je vous prie?

Célimène

Le bonheur de savoir que vous êtes aimé

After a similar admission by Chimène in the *Cid*, Don Rodrigue cries out in the exuberance of his joy:

Est-il quelque ennemi qu'à présent je ne dompte?
Paraissez, Navarrais, Maures et Castellans!

But Alceste:

Et quel lieu de le croire a mon cœur enflammé?
or.

. Qui m'assurera que, dans le même instant,
Vous n'en disiez, peut-être, aux autres tout autant?

Whatever may be thought of the possibility of discovering a relationship between Molière's life and his work, it is difficult not to remember at this point that the actress who played Célimène was Molière's wife and that Molière played Alceste. When *Don Garcie* was being written, Armande Béjart was seventeen, a very beloved child no doubt, but just a child—in all probability the "Mlle Menou" alluded to in one of Chapelle's letters. At the time of the *Misanthrope*, she was twenty-three. She had been the wife of Molière for some time. She had

lived with the troupe in Paris, she had been to Versailles and in a position to talk freely with bearers of great names. However Molière may have felt, whatever the effect upon his personal life of the development of this sprightly young woman his mate, can the conclusion be avoided that he had learned from her much about life, about the heart of woman, and the hopes of man? Be this as it may, what vigor of character, what firmness and completeness of diction, what dramatic intensity Molière obtained when he listened to the Comic Muse, as against the weaker, less effective, less human results inspired by her heroic sister! Indeed when a comparison is made of these two efforts of Molière to present an identical situation in a heroic and then in a comic light, a statement like that of Lytton Strachey's to the effect that "the most infamous achievement" of the classical tradition was that it prevented Molière from being a great tragedian, seems an oversimple explanation of the concentration of his effort upon comedy. It would appear, as we have seen, that his desire was to be a tragedian, or at least a writer of serious plays, and that something "prevented" him from becoming one. But this something does not appear to have been solely the classical tradition—the feeling for the necessity of verisimilitude within a certain frame of decorum based on contemporary custom and vaguely connected in the general mind with the practice of the ancients. The height of classical tragedy is reached but shortly after his time, and *Andromaque* is produced the year after the *Misanthrope*. But Racine was well-nigh a score of years younger than Molière, and his tragic figures are of a different quality from any of Molière's creations. They suffer, they do not triumph. To Molière,

as to Corneille, lives in which some side of the self triumphed, or at least persisted, were the only ones of interest to the artist. With Racine also character persists. But with him, the self understands so completely its own motives, its own essence, and the bearing upon this essence of the circumstances with which it is confronted, that the very completeness and clarity of this knowledge makes it appear touching and beautiful, endowed at the same time with the vision of angels and the weakness of men. So placed, it comports itself with a dignity, an elegance, a restraint that excite a pity not unmingled with admiration. This graceful acceptance of defeat, in the manner of a Mithridate, a Phèdre, or an Athalie, is utterly foreign to anything the two older dramatists ever conceived. For Corneille in his great days, the wreck of a high design made for tragedy, for Molière, the persistence of a petty passion made for comedy. In the 'forties, Corneille could make such figures, if not tragic, at least of great poetic import. In the 'sixties, at the hands of Molière, they seem able to provoke only laughter.



THE QUARREL OF THE *ECOLE*
DES FEMMES

THE height of perfection reached in the *Misanthrope* as contrasted with *Don Garcie* must be ascribed, of course, in large measure to the technical progress Molière had made in the period which elapsed between their composition, during which he had written nothing but comedy. From the *Précieuses* to *Tartuffe* his hand grows constantly surer of itself, the light of the comic spirit penetrates human situations ever more profound, ever more complex. Between 1659 and 1665 the definite form of French classical comedy is established. the mask of the Italians disappears with the *Ecole des Maris*, characters and situations approach ever closer those of contemporary Paris, and plot development through interaction of desires rather than through will and planning in the conduct of an intrigue becomes with the *Ecole des Femmes* the essential of comic structure.

This triumph of comedy, marked by the success of the *Ecole des Femmes* in 1662, was not accomplished without opposition. A part of this opposition arose from the success of Molière's troupe, and came primarily from the "great comedians," who saw their hitherto undisputed superiority threatened by their new rivals. They who had been playing serious plays and serious plays only, were forced to introduce comedies on their own boards: "on

vit tout à coup ces comédiens graves devenir bouffons," says Guéret, "et leurs poètes héroïques se jeter dans le goguenard."¹ It is said that their intrigues may have been partly responsible for the ousting of the Troupe de Monsieur from the Petit-Bourbon, months before the actual modifications of the Louvre required it,² and they were eagerly to welcome skits written by rival and jealous playwrights against the new author. [Indeed it may safely be assumed that they were not the only ones to consider themselves offended by Molière's comedies. Established writers must have shared their anger and their fears for the future. Pierre Corneille, the giant of the day, no doubt was mortified at being driven from the stage "par des pygmées," and resented having a line of his *Sertorius* parodied in the *Ecole des Femmes*. As for his brother Thomas, who liked to call himself "Corneille de l'Isle," he could not fail to see a rather personal and pointed allusion in Chrysalde's words chiding his friend Arnolphe for becoming all of a sudden 'Monsieur de la Souche'".

Je sais un paysan qu'on appelait Gros-Pierre,
 Qui, n'ayant pour tout bien qu'un seul quartier de terre,
 Y fit tout à l'entour faire un fossé bourbeux,
 Et de monsieur de l'Isle en prit le nom pompeux]

Moreover, the precious and the devout constantly did their best to belittle Molière's reputation and oppose his comedy. He did all he could to assuage their susceptibilities. in the spring of 1660, for example, he had accepted and put on a play rather favorable to preciousity (*La Vraie et la Fausse Prêteuse*, by Gilbert, which netted

¹ *Promenades de Saint-Cloud*, Nouv. Coll. Mol., Vol. XVI, p. 60

² cf. Chap. vi, above, p. 95

his company 3,000 livres), but this proved of no avail. It is thus that throughout the attacks made against him there was more than professional jealousy seeking by any and every means to depreciate the work of a rival.

[The campaign at first was a verbal, not a written one. It was drowned under the applause which greeted the first performances of the *Ecole des Femmes*, and Molière could well afford to ignore it, thus following the advice of Boileau, then an enthusiastic youth of twenty-six years of age, who strengthened his acquaintance with the dramatist by sending him his "Stances à M. Molière, Sur sa comédie de l'*Ecole des Femmes* que plusieurs gens frondaient":

Laisse gronder tes envieux
Ils ont beau crier en tous lieux
Qu'en vain tu charmes le vulgaire,
Que tes vers n'ont rien de plaisant
Si tu savais un peu moins plaire,
Tu ne leur déplairais pas tant

Molière's plan, in fact, seems to have been to rely exclusively on "les rieurs," who were overwhelmingly in his camp, headed by the King himself and his family. Royal favor was, in his opinion, more than enough to silence malignant tongues. By dedicating the *Ecole des Femmes* to Madame, when the play was published on March 17, 1663, he practically asked for a reassurance of the King's support. He was soon to obtain it in the form of a pension for 1,000 livres granted the "sieur Molière, excellent poete comique." There followed a "Remerciement au Roi," penned in Molière's lightest and most triumphant vein, in which we see his Muse hurrying to the Louvre, disguised as a marquis: "chapeau chargé de

trente plumes, perruque de prix, rabat du plus grand volume, pourpoint minuscule, mais surtout le manteau retroussé par un ruban sur le dos"; and, in such attire, she would express her thanks to the smiling monarch and promise to devote "à la gloire et aux plaisirs de son bienfaiteur tout son art et toutes ses veilles." Never since Marot had any poet been bold enough to address the sovereign with such graceful ease and trusting familiarity.

By that time, however, the grievances of Molière's adversaries had ceased to be mere gossip and had been set down in print. True enough, this was as yet restricted to a single instance; the work was anonymous, printed under an old privilege which dated back to at least a year before, and it took great pains both to extol and blame Molière's play. If we consider the times and the heavy censorship then in force, such signs of caution will not necessarily suggest cowardice. In fact, they may prove better than anything that our critic knew full well what he was about in attacking thus, in black on white, an obvious protégé of the King. It took a gambler to do this, and a gambler Donneau de Visé really was. For it was he, whom we have encountered already,³ who added hastily to the third volume of his *Nouvelles nouvelles* a few extraneous, ironical pages devoted to Molière and more especially to the *Ecole des Femmes*. De Visé was somewhat of an opportunist, ambitious and eager to "get a start." At other times in his career—earlier and later—he found it convenient to support Molière. Just then, aware as he was that the veil of his anonymity was rather thin, it seemed that he stood a good chance to create a reputa-

³ cf Chap vi, above, p 106

tion for himself by doing the opposite and trying to wreck Molière's budding fortunes.

One may surmise that Molière, frustrated in his hopes that critics could go unanswered, was annoyed at first and uncertain what to do. This period of hesitancy did not last long, however, and, as early as March 1663, his preface to the first edition of the *Ecole des Femmes* showed that he was ready to take up the challenge. He even expressed his relief that he was able at last to force his opponents into giving more consistency to objections which so far had been mainly oral, and he hinted that he had begun composing a "dissertation en dialogue" which would embody, in rather sensational fashion, his reply to his detractors. Thus it will be seen that the change, which was about to take place, from tongue-wagging to regular polemics on the stage and through the printing press, was to no small extent encouraged and engineered by Molière himself, obviously confident that in an open war, with blows frankly and freely exchanged, he would have two assets instead of one—the benevolence of his King again and always, but also and perhaps above all the sharpness of his wits.

The *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*, first performed on June 1, 1663, as an afterpiece to the *Ecole des Femmes*, illustrates vividly the age-old military precept that to defend oneself it is best to take the offensive. This one-act comedy in prose is much less an attempt to answer objections specifically than a broadside fired by Molière, however good-humoredly, at all and every one of his opponents—envious actors and authors, overdignified men and overprudish women, "précieuses" and "tur-lupins." Whatever earnestness there is in the play—and

there is plenty of it—, whatever self-justification or indication of a positive creed, must be extracted from the broad, general statements and is invariably bound up with humor and satire. There is no denying, of course, that the *Critique* is by far the nearest approach to a manifesto that Molière ever wrote. Indeed the passing years have, if anything, enhanced its value as such, and to it we must constantly turn in order to find the truest, simplest and yet most comprehensive definition of all that Molière's comedy intended to be. But it is criticism in comedy form—a genre destined to much use and abuse thereafter, and bound to be dull whenever the element of criticism is allowed to overshadow that of comedy. With Molière, comedy may be expected to remain paramount. Although there runs through the *Critique* the barest thread of a plot, characters are finely drawn and the dramatization is excellent. The play can be thoroughly enjoyed without any previous knowledge of the *Ecole des Femmes*.

The action, or should we say the conversation, takes place in a Parisian drawing-room and lies in a rapid exchange of opinions on the subject of what modern Americans would call the latest theatrical "hit" of the season. The discontented clique of authors, actors and sticklers for the rules and proprieties of the stage speak their mind through the words of the jealous poet Lysidas:

. . . On m'avouera que ces sortes de comédies ne sont pas proprement des comédies, et qu'il y a une grande différence de toutes ces bagatelles, à la beauté des pièces sérieuses. Cependant tout le monde donne là dedans aujourd'hui, on ne court plus qu'à cela, et l'on voit une solitude effroyable aux grands ouvrages, lorsque des

sottises ont tout Paris Je vous avoue que le cœur m'en saigne quelquefois, et cela est honteux pour la France

To this patriotic outburst Dorante—Molière's mouth-piece—replies with a defense of the new comedy which is, in fact, an attack upon "serious plays":

. . . Je trouve qu'il est bien plus aisé de se guinder sur de grands sentiments, de braver en vers la fortune, accuser les destins, et dire des injures aux dieux, que d'entrer comme il faut dans le ridicule des hommes, et de rendre agréablement sur le théâtre les défauts de tout le monde Lorsque vous peignez des héros, vous faites ce que vous voulez Ce sont des portraits à plaisir, où l'on ne cherche point de ressemblance, et vous n'avez qu'à suivre les traits d'une imagination qui se donne l'essor et qui souvent laisse le vrai pour attraper le merveilleux. Mais lorsque vous peignez les hommes, il faut peindre d'après nature On veut que ces portraits ressemblent, et vous n'avez rien fait, si vous n'y faites reconnaître les gens de votre siècle. En un mot, dans les pièces sérieuses, il suffit, pour n'être point blâmé, de dire des choses qui soient de bon sens et bien écrites, mais ce n'est pas assez dans les autres, il y faut plaisanter, et c'est une étrange entreprise que de faire rire les honnêtes gens.

We shall have occasion, in a later chapter,⁴ to go back to some of the variations developed by Dorante on this theme Suffice it to say for the moment that the discussion warms up and is brought to some sort of a climax toward the end, when there is a quasi-argument, shortly interrupted as a servant comes in and announces that supper is served:

Ah! [says Dorante] voilà justement ce qu'il faut pour le dénouement que nous cherchions, et l'on ne peut rien trouver de plus naturel On disputera fort et ferme de

⁴ cf Chap. xi.

part et d'autre, comme nous avons fait, sans que personne se rende; un petit laquais viendra dire qu'on a servi, on se lèvera, et chacun ira souper.

Things were not going to be so simple in fact, and the dispute had just begun. Molière's rivals could not without anger and disappointment see his *Critique* run thirty-two times in succession, a very unusual success for a mere one-act play, and bring in its wake a successful revival of the *Ecole des Femmes*. Even before Molière was able to publish his preface to his new play, addressed this time to the Queen-Mother, there came the first retort in kind, a one-act comedy entitled *Zélinde, ou la Véritable Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes et Critique de la Critique*. De Visé again was the author, apparently embittered at the failure of his first attempt and determined to throw caution to the winds. The air of impartiality which he had formerly assumed has disappeared: the attack is thoroughgoing to the point of virulence. Any pretense to fight the battle single-handed has also disappeared. De Visé was now looking for allies and aspired visibly to unite all of Molière's enemies under his leadership. This new product of his pen was a play, and a play demands actors. What could be more natural than to take it to those of the Hôtel de Bourgogne? More probably than not, de Visé treated them to a reading, but their resentment against Molière was not such, after all, as to induce them to put on a poor play. And *Zélinde*, from a dramatic viewpoint, is a poor play just as certainly as the *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* is a sprightly little comedy. So it happened that it was printed (August 1663) but never, so far as we know, had any public performance.

The analysis of human motives is, we all know, a very delicate operation. There can be no doubt that a note of personal, ugly jealousy crept into all these attacks made against Molière. So in the last scene of *Zélinde*, with no pretense to moderation, the heroine is out to find all possible means of pillorying Elomire [Molière]—one suggestion being that the *Critique* be re-written the other way round, to the effect that “ceux qui défendent *L'Ecole des Femmes* la combattent, et ceux qui la combattent, la défendent”; another, that the last scene of the *Précieuses Ridicules* be reproduced, Molière divested of all that he stole from authors and actors alike, and left naked on the stage, and a third, that he be merely tossed in a blanket, four marquis doing the job. There can be no doubt, either, as will be seen shortly, that Molière was to be thoroughly aroused by this procedure. But it is equally certain that a good many, if not all, of Molière's objectors found, or thought they found, a valuable excuse for this pettiness in that, to their minds, the original responsibility rested with him and him alone. It was he, not they, so they said, who had lowered comedy to the level of individual satire. It was they, not he, who were defending the loftier purposes of dramatic literature. They were using only his own weapons, and whatever paradox there was in fighting disloyally a battle which involved at bottom the question of morality and self-respect on the stage, he, not they, must take the blame.

This may explain why a hitherto respected author, Boursault, was the next to throw the gauntlet to Molière. There had been more than one hint that Lysidas, the jealous and tedious author depicted in the *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*, was none other but Boursault himself.

So it is that, toward the beginning of October, he took to the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne a new comedy entitled: *Le Portrait du Peintre, ou la Contre-Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*. Boursault was a regular purveyor to this theater, and his play somewhat better, if not more original, than *Zélinde*. It was accepted and performed. Molière, so the story goes, went to hear it one day and took a seat on the stage where he could be plainly seen, ready, it seemed, to be a "good sport" and to enjoy a laugh at himself if the occasion warranted it. But it turned out that the *Portrait du Peintre*—needless to say, the "peintre" was Molière—provided little new in the way of effective raillery or serious argument. Boursault had merely taken up one of de Visé's suggestions at the end of *Zélinde*, and done the *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* over, reversing the parts and attaching ridicule to Molière's defenders. The play was in verse, but this hardly sufficed to endow it with originality.

Molière's stinging reply followed within a few days. There had been some haggling over the propriety of the title *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* on the grounds that the play was much less a "critique" than an "apologie." No such question could be raised about the *Impromptu de Versailles*—as neat and suggestive a title as ever was found. An "impromptu" it certainly was, having been written in even less time than the *Fâcheux*. As for the name "Versailles," it advertised in boldest fashion the strong link that existed between Molière and the court. Here was an "impromptu" not only rehearsed and played in Versailles (the performance, by the way, must have been on October 18 or 19), but requested by Versailles, sponsored by Versailles, applauded by Versailles,

all "Versailles" in its atmosphere and spirit. Three times in his play Molière states unequivocally that the King himself "ordered" him to write this comedy. However strange it may seem to us that the greatest and busiest monarch in the world should have bothered to take an active and personal part in a "comic war," is it conceivable that Molière would have ventured such a boast had not the "order" actually been given?

In fiction as in fact the scene of the *Impromptu* is the stage of the theater in the palace at Versailles. We are supposed to attend the informal rehearsal of a play shortly to be acted before the King. Of this imaginary play we hear fragments which make it appear a sort of *Critique de la Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*, intended as a reply to Boursault's *Le Portrait du Peintre*. Over one-half of the *Impromptu*, however, is taken up by side remarks from Molière or members of his troupe, who are shown under their own names and without make-up. But for the fact that the fiction here is that of a rehearsal, not of an actual performance, Molière's technique would, of course, be strongly reminiscent of the scene of the comedians in *Hamlet*. There is not, and there cannot be, any suggestion of Shakespearian influence on him, but it is worth remembering that in the next century the Venetian author Goldoni, equally cognizant of his French and English predecessors, will borrow from both of them, in his own *Teatro Comico*, the idea of writing a "comedy inside a comedy" and the essence of the strikingly similar advice given by both Shakespeare and Molière to the comedians.⁵

⁵ *Hamlet*: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For any-

The following passage, spoken by Brécourt, probably strikes the dominant note of the *Impromptu*

Comme l'affaire de la comédie est de représenter en général tous les défauts des hommes, et principalement des hommes de notre siècle, il est impossible à Molière de faire aucun caractère qui ne rencontre quelqu'un dans le monde, et, s'il faut qu'on l'accuse d'avoir songé toutes les personnes où l'on peut trouver les défauts qu'il peint, il faut, sans doute, qu'il ne fasse plus de comédies

This raises clearly the issue of personal satire as opposed to general satire. Molière rejects the former but upholds the latter as being the very object of comedy. Perfectly conscious, on the other hand, that an absolute ban on personal satire might mean the death knell of legitimate criticism such as, for instance, his friend Boileau was shortly to practise it, he was willing to accept it whenever thing so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 't were, the mirror up to nature" (Act III, scene 2)

Molière "Le comédien [*that is, one according to Molière's heart*] aurait récité, par exemple, quelques vers du roi, de Nicomède

Te le dirai-je, Araspe? il m'a trop bien servi,
Augmentant mon pouvoir .

le plus naturellement qu'il lui aurait été possible. Et le poète. Comment! vous appelez cela réciter? C'est se railler, il faut dire les choses avec emphase. Ecoutez-moi

(*Il contrefait Montfleury, comédien de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne*)

Te le dirai-je, Araspe? etc

Voyez-vous cette posture? Remarquez bien cela. Là, appuyez comme il faut le dernier vers. Voilà ce qui attire l'approbation, et fait faire le brouhaha. Mais, monsieur, aurait répondu le comédien, il me semble qu'on roi qui s'entretient tout seul avec son capitaine des gardes parle un peu plus humainement, et ne prend guère ce ton de démoniaque — Vous ne savez ce que c'est. Allez-vous-en réciter comme vous faites, vous verrez si vous ferez faire aucun ah!" (*Impromptu*, scene 2)

it remained ethical and restricted itself to prodding public conduct or investigating professional matters:

Je leur [*to the critics*] abandonne de bon cœur mes ouvrages, ma figure, mes gestes, mes paroles, mon ton de voix, et ma façon de réciter, pour en faire et dire tout ce qu'il leur plaira, s'ils en peuvent tirer quelque avantage. Je ne m'oppose point à toutes ces choses, et je serais ravi que cela puisse réjouir le monde; mais, en leur abandonnant tout cela, ils doivent me faire la grâce de me laisser le reste, et de ne point toucher à des matières de la nature de celles sur lesquelles on m'a dit qu'ils m'attaquaient dans leur comédies. C'est de quoi je prie-
rai civilement cet honnête monsieur [*Boursault*] qui se mêle d'écrire pour eux, et voilà toute la réponse qu'ils auront de moi

Now this was excellent ground on which to stand before the King, who could not but approve of such standards and grant his sympathy to an author offended in his honor and unspared even in his innermost feelings or private life. Here, however, there is little doubt that good diplomacy walked hand in hand with sincerity. A tone of genuine anger runs throughout the *Impromptu*, in sharp contrast with the easygoing, benign equanimity which still pervaded most of the *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*. Too much had occurred between the two plays to allow Molière to preserve all of his calm. The *Portrait du Peintre* especially had proved unpalatable, not so much as the work of an obscure individual called "Br—Brou—Bros-saut," than as the symbol and by-product of a cabal inspired by the Hôtel de Bourgogne and joined by every author, "depuis le cèdre," meaning possibly Corneille, "jusqu'à l'hysope," who resented whatever good fortune Molière might have had.

Thus the quarrel was reaching the dangerous stage of all quarrels when mutual suspicion and rancor are permitted to dominate impersonal, doctrinal issues. Molière himself was on the verge of forgetting about "bien-séances," and although the *Impromptu* as a whole fights fairly, one could detect here and there a few blows delivered slightly below the belt. As for his opponents, it goes without saying that they had long since lost their self-control, and they were soon to resort to that sheer mud-slinging which Molière had so strongly condemned in his latest play. The original question of who had *first* introduced personal satire on the stage was becoming more and more confused and even meaningless through a maze of denials and self-contradictions. The still deeper question of whether satire, personal or not, was the legitimate essence of comedy, had been lost sight of on both sides. Or rather Molière, lucid as always, realized pretty keenly that such was the real object of the debate: but to him, as the passage quoted above plainly shows, the equation between general satire and comedy was in the nature of a fundamental truth, that is, self-evident and above discussion. So it happened that he who saw the problem was not willing to argue about it, and they who should logically have argued about it were not seeing it any longer.

At any rate Molière was wise enough to stop at that point. He did not even take the trouble of printing the *Impromptu* as he had the *Critique* and rested on his Versailles triumph, which the Parisian public was soon to confirm. To him the quarrel was practically at an end. We may safely adopt the same view. After October 1663, it is not a quarrel any more, it is a one-sided, slowly de-

generating guerrilla warfare, waged by people who knew in their hearts that they were hopelessly defeated but were bent on venting their rage and disappointment at all costs. The Hôtel de Bourgogne remained their headquarters. Let us say for the record that de Visé produced there his *Réponse à l'Impromptu de Versailles, ou la Vengeance des marquis*. This play was published in December and accompanied with a *Lettre sur les affaires du théâtre* which de Visé included among his *Diversités galantes*. A few days before, a certain Robinet had issued a pamphlet ironically entitled *Panégérique de l'Ecole des Femmes, ou Conversation comique sur les œuvres de M. de Molière*. Early in 1664, the Hôtel de Bourgogne put on another play, this time by the son of the actor Montfleury, named *Impromptu de l'Hôtel de Condé* and first performed, in all probability, at the house of that Prince. Boursault had thought of adding his voice to the chorus, then renounced, for unexplained reasons. Finally, Montfleury himself, whose acting Molière had ridiculed, sent a request to the King, accusing the dramatist, for the first time publicly, of having married the daughter of his own mistress. On this neat piece of slandering, which the King answered, the reader will remember, by standing as godfather to Molière's first-born child,⁶ the case was allowed to rest. It is only fair to add that Molière was not without supporters in this long-drawn out battle, although he never endorsed their efforts on his behalf and they do not necessarily reflect his views. In February 1664, an actor of the Marais, Chevalier, printed a play, called *Les Amours de Calotin*, which summed up, in terms quite favorable to Molière, the whole story of the quarrel

⁶ On February 28, 1664 cf Chap VII, above, p 113

On March 17 of the same year, a newcomer, Philippe de la Croix, attempted to vindicate Molière in a dialogue in prose and verse entitled *La Guerre Comique, ou Défense de l'Ecole des Femmes*

Let us now forget—at last—the personal implications of the quarrel and revert to the fundamental issue. As early as the winter of 1660, Somaize objected to the *Précieuses* on the ground that it was a “satire”] Three years later, this is the burden of the attack upon the *Ecole des Femmes*.

La réussite qu'eurent les *Précieuses* [says de Visé in his *Nouvelles nouvelles* of February 1663] fit connaître à Molière que l'on aimait la satire et la bagatelle Il connut par là les goûts du siècle, il vit bien qu'il était malade, et que les bonnes choses ne lui plaisaient plus

Boursault was to echo the same feeling a little later in the *Portrait du Peintre*

A ce que veut le peuple, il se rend complaisant

Satiric, trivial, vulgar, low, under these heads the criticisms tend to fall It may be noted here in passing that the same de Visé, who considered the taste for satire a sign that “the age was sick” in 1663, wrote three years later an analysis of the *Misanthrope* as a “satiric portrait” in which he accepts such a design as perfectly natural and highly laudable. [But then, as we already pointed out, de Visé's outstanding quality was not consistency.]

When these early criticisms are considered, it is hard to avoid the feeling that they represent what is left of a very fine side of Renaissance idealism, from Ronsard and du Bellay to Malherbe and Corneille. Art should please, to be sure, but it should also instruct and more par-

ticularly elevate. The coq à l'âne detested of the Pléiade in the 1540's pleased, indubitably, as did also the vulgarity of the mystery plays as the Confrérie de la Passion would have liked to play them at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, if they had not been prevented by the royal edict of 1548.⁷ What was to come of the century-old effort of poets and artists to elevate, to purify, to stir generous and noble sentiments, if a Molière were to cater to a taste for scurrility as practised by the mountebanks, if writers able enough to win the favor of the court and town were to forget the duty of the poet to uplift and ennoble, and were to curry favor with the populace by appealing to meanness and envy rather than to sympathy and emulation? Art for so long now had been addressed solely to an aristocratic élite who by their very gentle nature should be pleased only by what was distinguished and refined, generous and virtuous. The comic had but a limited scope, with this public. Satire for them was inseparable from baseness, and vulgarity. It was left to the clowns and buffoons of the public squares.

What must have been offensive to the delicate in these early comedies of Molière was that his characters are at the same time so natural, so spontaneous, so profoundly human, so unconscious—and yet so ridiculous. A “précieuse” in the playlet of equivocal title called the *Panégérique de l'Ecole des Femmes* who objects very strongly to all of Molière's plays, gives a description of the “belle comédie” which she likes:

. . . les pièces qui sont des tableaux galamment touchés, où l'on remarque de beaux sentiments, où l'on voit des moralités judicieusement répandues, où paraissent ces

⁷ cf. Chap. I, p. 12

brillants d'esprit qui charment, où enfin l'on trouve de quoi s'instruire et se divertir agréablement.

This description would apply to almost any of the ambitious plays for the ten years preceding, whether they were called tragedy, tragi-comedy, heroic comedy, or even simply comedy. In 1660 the great Corneille had stated in his *Discours sur le poème dramatique* that the only distinctive characteristic of tragedy was that it treated—or should treat—events of great political moment. Of such there had been a strange dearth since *Nicomède*. All other plays, even where kings and princes appear, may be classified as “comedies.” It is clear also that by “comedy” Corneille means “la belle comédie.” The difference between tragedy and comedy, says he,

ne consiste qu'en la dignité des personnages et des actions qu'ils imitent, et non pas en la façon de les imiter, ni aux choses qui servent à cette imitation.

The reader is certainly given the impression that for the author a “little comedy” was inconceivable as a form of drama that could be considered as a work of art. Such was undoubtedly the general feeling among poets, the very feeling voiced by Lysidas of the *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*, when he deplored the unhealthy appeal of “bagatelles” and “sottises” for the Parisian public.

It is curious to observe that during the same year in which the quarrel of the *Ecole des Femmes* occurred an attack of some violence was made by the abbé d'Aubignac on two of Corneille's tragedies, *Sophonisbe* and *Sertorius*, in which the taste for tragedy of this distinguished critic appears in some particulars in harmony with that which drew the public to Molière. The weakness of these late

tragedies of Corneille, says d'Aubignac, lies in the fact that he has forgotten how to "conduire jusqu'au bout . . . les fortes passions," and that "il a ajouté au mobile historique . . . un mobile romanesque." Now Molière's Sganarelles and Arnolphes show a depth and simplicity of passion and his plots a lack of romantic elements that place his comedy beside the tragedy of Racine (who is to realize d'Aubignac's ideal) as the supreme examples of classical art, whereas Corneille, unable seemingly to carry through with merely the great hates or ambitions of his heroes, must needs adorn them with a love that makes them appear unconvincing and superficial "la tragédie cornélienne traîne toujours avec elle l'ornement glacé d'une intrigue d'amour."⁸ Corneille's plots were as complex as his characters. Although he himself, in his greatest tragedies, had done more than any other author to reduce his presentation of the subject to that simplicity which was to be demanded by classic taste, he nevertheless was unable to put away his fondness for a complicated plot, in which his characters display their ability to triumph over obstacles, and he himself his own cleverness in causing them to do so in a probable fashion. Molière does not seem, in the beginning, to have been far from Corneille in his feeling for human nature or in his dramatic inspiration. He remained perhaps closer to his elder contemporary, in these respects, than to the younger Racine. But he had gone to school to the Comic Muse, and she had taught him to create plays which were, like those of Racine, masterpieces of their time and of all times.

⁸ René Bray, *La Tragédie cornélienne devant la critique classique* (Paris, 1927), p. 34



MOLIÈRE AND HIS PUBLIC

I FROM MAZARIN TO LOUIS XIV

LET us now turn from Molière to a consideration of his public. In his case more than in that of any other writer, the quality of his work was determined by the reaction of the public across the footlights. It must be remembered that he was always a practical dramatist, for on the sustained and continued success of his plays depended, not merely his personal livelihood and his personal satisfaction, but also the welfare of his company and the fate of the enterprise for which he had deserted, years before, the life of honor and relative ease which his birth and position offered him. A measure of agreement between himself and his public was of the very nature of his art as actor and as writer.

[This is quite a simple fact, to be sure, but one from which extreme inferences have been drawn. Those who sat at Molière's comedies are sometimes represented as tyrants, the narrow limits of whose taste cramped and confined the impulse of his genius.] A chapter on Molière in a recent work, for example, was entitled, "Le Génie captif." For the author, Molière's plays are "a continual compromise between his personal inspiration and the comic frames, types or effects imposed by the

tastes, habits or prejudices of his public."¹ To what extent may we subscribe to this statement?

It has of course always been recognized that an artist must subject himself to some discipline, must be captive to something, "In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister," says Goethe. The restrictions which he and the great writers of his time imposed upon themselves were of course determined by an ideal of art which was largely of their own making and for their own use. Poets, in his day, felt themselves to be members of a small group who were privileged to inhabit the kingdom of the spirit, and whose relations with their public were rather those of seer or prophet than of entertainer.

For writers of the seventeenth century, the cult of the ancients provided in quite concrete form that disciplinary training in the arts, which they craved. Corneille in his best work is striving to attain a high ideal of tragedy. Boileau seems to have prided himself upon having taught Racine how to "faire difficilement des vers faciles." But the peculiarity of this period in France as distinguished from other epochs is the extent to which the discipline of artistic idealism coincided with that of public taste. Or rather, perhaps, the extent to which the greatest artists submitted to the exigencies of the taste of their time and did their best to satisfy at the same time this taste and their own ideal. Rebels like Théophile de Viau, Cyrano de Bergerac, Saint-Evremond, superior as they are in many respects, do not turn out to have been the supreme literary artists of the period. La Fontaine does better work in his *Fables*, where he has submitted to the yoke of decency, than in his *Contes*, where he gives free rein to the

¹ Félix Gaiffe, *Le Rire et la Scène française* (Paris, 1931), p. 103.

erotic side of his whimsical fancy. Corneille seems always to have been diminished by the taste of his public, but he was impotent to rise above it. It would seem on the other hand that the artistic perfection attained by Racine was rewarded by the esteem of his contemporaries, and it is not for long that Pradon was looked upon as his equal.

[Now, whatever the extent to which Molière formed his public or his public formed Molière, it is obvious that both Molière's temperament and that of his public were of a sort to turn him aside, if not from formal tragedy, which he never attempted, at least from heroic writing, and to encourage and reward his talent for comedy. The success of his *Ecole des Femmes* and the manner in which he emerged from the subsequent quarrel were no mere strokes of fortune] There is no doubt that a period was opening in which the spirit of satire was to be very general. Whether this results from the fact that "the times were sick," or whether on the contrary it springs from a feeling that the times were cured, is a question that might be raised. At all events, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that all great classical writing, at least profane writing, is tinged with satire. The work of Boileau is almost exclusively satirical, and Racine, when he turns from serious writing to satire, was so cruelly successful at it that Boileau himself, on one occasion, felt it necessary to reprove him. As for La Fontaine, it is the satiric quality of his fables that often render them unpalatable to children, and it is this same La Fontaine who is the first to herald the satire of Molière as having brought back "good taste" to France.

The state of mind of the Frenchman of 1660 is best understood by a consideration of the troubled and un-

certain years of the King's minority. He was but five years of age at the death of his father, in 1643, and when authority thus passed to his mother, Anne of Austria, the smouldering embers of discontent in men's hearts at the iron-handed rule of Richelieu began to burn more hotly. Richelieu had been, after all, a French nobleman, and as the King's minister could be felt by the others as merely *primus inter pares*. But the successor whom he designated to his high function, Mazarin, was not a French nobleman, not even a Frenchman at all, he was an Italian. To him fell the task of continuing Richelieu's policy, of restraining the ambitions of the great nobles, and of pursuing the war against Austria and Spain. For five years the Regency maintained internal order. Then, in 1648, Austria accepted defeat, and Spain being left alone in the field, with less to distract men's minds from internal causes for dissatisfaction, revolt broke out in Paris. While the emissaries of the French crown, under the wily guidance of Mazarin, were negotiating a profitable and even triumphant peace in Westphalia, the boy on whose head that crown had descended, was found to have fled the Louvre in the middle of the night because of the rioting of the Parisian populace. [The "Fronde" had begun, which was going to prove a cruel and dangerous game, though nothing but a game after all] Voltaire, much later, found it a most amazing example of French light-mindedness² as compared to the melancholy restlessness with which the English went about the decapitation of their monarch and the modification of their institutions in the direction of democracy. [The word *fronde*, it will be remembered, designates that *sling* with

² *Siecle de Louis XIV*, Chap. iv.

which children throw stones at birds and birds' nests, and such a name applied to a political or social uprising is the best commentary on the period by the period itself]

The trouble did not have its origin with the nobles, at least not the "nobles d'épée." It started among members of the Parliament of Paris, that High Court of Justice the stamp of whose approval was necessary before a royal edict became law. They held noble rank by virtue of their office, and the heredity of that office gave them a feeling of independence which grew only haughtier under a weak government. In refusing further to sanction the royal demand for increased advances of funds, they, above all, defended their prerogatives and posed as helpers, rather than subordinates, of the monarch, as the guardians of national tradition, the superiors of the Estates General and the equals of ministers. But the themes upon which they based their resistance the abuses of tax collectors, the impoverished state of the people, were bound to provoke an eager response from the "man in the street." It is thus that, when the government, in order to strengthen his position, carried off as a hostage the oldest and most respected of the magistrates, Broussel, there followed one of these *journées* of which Paris possesses the secret (August 26).

[True enough some persons of high rank joined the sedition, conspicuous amongst whom were the Coadjutor Bishop of Paris, Paul de Gondî, later Cardinal de Retz, and the Duc de Longueville. Their purpose, however, was much more to precipitate the overthrow of Mazarin than to foster the cause of Parliament or defend the welfare of the people. Moreover, they were far from united, and the most famous of them all, the Prince of Condé,

hero of Rocroi and fresh from a new victory at Lens, appeared, to say the least, in no particular hurry to join the movement. In fact, Mazarin, who had withdrawn to Rueil with the court—"pour prendre l'air" as he chose to put it—was able after protracted negotiations to win Condé over to his side and entrusted him with fifteen thousand men. Condé took Charenton on February 9, 1649, whereupon Mazarin boasted that Paris would be brought to reason within a month. He was right. The parliamentary and bourgeois Fronde, their enthusiasm having cooled down to a considerable degree, sued for peace. They obtained very lenient terms at the treaty of Rueil, which was signed at the end of March. The progress of Archduke Leopold's troops in the northeast and the renewed pressure of foreign danger played an obvious part in forcing Mazarin's hand.

At this point, thanks to Condé, the Fronde took a new and not totally unexpected turn. He had saved the situation, and he knew it. It had never been his intention to be Mazarin's policeman and nothing else. He asked for his reward in the form of a share, and a sufficiently large one, in the business of government. When he saw himself neglected, he gathered other malcontents, and a new struggle loomed, concerned no longer with the pretense of aiming at so-called political or social liberties, but with the distribution of power alone. It started mildly enough as a duel of wits between Condé and the court for the support of the nobles and princes. However, when the Queen-Mother, at the end of her patience, ordered Condé arrested together with Conti, his brother-in-law, and the Duc de Longueville, actual civil war broke out, both in Paris and the provinces. Even the early release

of the prisoners failed to stem the tide of rebellion: Condé withdrew to the south and was soon in direct relations with Spain—an enemy country.

An extremely confused state of affairs follows. No one knew on which side his neighbor was or what the next day would bring forth. Mazarin was frightened and fled to Germany in February 1651, but he was back the following December. Turenne, once a "Frondeur" himself, now was heading the troops loyal to the crown. Nemours and Beaufort advanced with a Spanish contingent from the North in the interests of Condé, who joined them in April 1652. Monsieur, uncle of the King, refused to move, but his more enterprising daughter, Mademoiselle, the Amazon of the rebels, shut the gates of Orléans against the royal forces. She was to open those of Paris to the "Frondeurs" at the crisis of a battle that Turenne waged against them outside the Porte Saint-Antoine, thus depriving him of an imminent victory (July 1652).

Nothing illustrates better the individualistic, not to say anarchistic, character of this new Fronde. No one believed in the permanence of any coalition, it was truly every man—or woman—for himself. This time the movement was undoubtedly aristocratic in its origin, even though the nobles here and there managed to drag the Parliament or the people after them.] But the gap between the idealism of the aristocracy and the actual aims which they were pursuing was becoming rapidly and increasingly evident. Their tradition led them to live for honor, loyalty, friendship; what they were now striving for was money and station, some to preserve what they already had, others to acquire a share in the spoils. The

bourgeois was quick to realize it. He had been shocked for a long time by the enormity of the graft which existed throughout governmental machinery. The banker, who loaned money to the government or who gained enormous fortunes out of farming the taxes, was a figure profoundly repugnant to the ordinary man of the middle class, whose ideal was not great wealth but a moderate fortune and a position of dignity. To him the unlimited wealth of a Mazarin, of a Fouquet, as well as the sordid aims of the "Frondeurs," soon became another unbearable scandal. "Larrons," Guy Patin calls them.

[Such being the case, it matters little which side finally won. In fact, throughout the whole struggle, many "Frondeurs" had been secretly or even openly negotiating with the Cardinal. Mazarin staged another flight away from Court in order to allow the last embers of resentment to die down. When he returned, in February 1653, the Fronde had completely collapsed. As early as October, the King had triumphantly reentered Paris. Thus five years of misery had been without political results. The Parliament had even lost in the process its right to take cognizance of the financial administration. Condé was deprived of his status as prince of the blood and condemned—by default—to suffer death at the King's pleasure. Conti saved himself by marrying Mazarin's niece. The peace, in fact, was made with as much levity as the war which it concluded.]

Frivolous the leaders of the Fronde were, undoubtedly. But one of its most amazing aspects was that as time went on, the more serious people of the country felt increasingly that the cure for their ills lay, not in the strengthening of such institutions as the Parliament, which had proved

itself as selfish as any other part of the nation, but in the firm establishment of the King and the King alone at the head of the government. The birth of Louis-Dieudonné after his parents had been married for twenty-three years was generally reported as partaking of the miraculous. Around the golden head of this handsome youngster as he rode through the streets of Paris appeared in the eyes of his subjects a halo that marked him as divinely sent to save them from the results of their own folly. A deputation of militia waited upon the King at Saint-Germain in the autumn of 1652 to invite him back to his good city of Paris. "We long only for the glory of serving you," said their spokesman, "and I would be disavowed by all my fellow-citizens were I to speak otherwise." John Evelyn, writing in this same year 1652, and feeling perhaps that his own country had given up the monarchy forever, notes that "the French are the only nation in Europe who idolize their sovereign." Indeed nothing that happens in France from 1660 on can be understood unless the force can be felt of that "current of opinion which . . . bore Louis XIV toward all-powerful monarchy as toward the ideal of the generations of his time."³ For lack of appreciating it, Michelet fell into reflecting with romantic bitterness on the humiliating domesticity of the great writers of the period, and especially of "Sosie-Molière," who was "avant tout valet de chambre du roi, faisant le lit du roi," and who wore himself out by his effort to combine this bed-making with his theatrical activity.

The flattery of the King in which his subjects indulged seems, of course, sometimes incredible, and when a Jean

³ Lacour-Gayet, *Education politique de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1898), Chap. viii.

Racine pronounces in 1678 before the assembled Academy "that all the words of the language, all its syllables, appear to us precious because we regard them as so many instruments which must serve the glory of our august protector," we are inclined to remember that certain of his contemporaries considered Racine in his later years as more of a courtier than an "honest man." As grudging a courtier as La Bruyère, however, so sensitive to the evils into which he felt his country to be falling, even though he believed with Montaigne in the human and relative, rather than divine, origin of governments, paints an admiring portrait of Louis XIV which is too convincingly true to be wholly insincere.⁴ For long after Molière's death, Louis XIV was able to maintain in the eyes of his people the miraculous halo with which his infant head was surrounded "L'Etat" of Richelieu becomes "Le Roi" under him "Tout prospère dans une monarchie où l'on confond les intérêts de l'Etat avec ceux du prince," says La Bruyère. The union of extreme enlightenment as to human nature in general with this adoration of the sovereign is one of the most curious aspects of the early part of Louis XIV's reign. It may have satisfied at the same time a general desire for a strong central government and for the glory of personal heroism which the people could now enjoy vicariously in the glory of their monarch. The experience of the Fronde, following the tyranny of Richelieu, had shown that the ideal of heroism led at best to a wanton waste of human lives, and at worst to the misery which marauding bands spread over the countryside. Duels decrease under Louis XIV, not because of police measures, but because

⁴ *Du Souverain ou de la République*

there are fewer challengers. It was no longer possible, after the years of Richelieu's rule, to recapture the feelings of the time of Henri IV, when it had been possible, as La Fare puts it in his *Mémoires*, "d'avoir le cœur haut et de le sentir." Renunciation of the pursuit of personal glory was the only relief possible for the nobility from the sense of futility which the Fronde had brought about, while the same renunciation entailed for the commoner all the satisfactions of peace and revived prosperity. Don Quixote is no more, Sancho Panza triumphs, while the gentleman King "toujours tranquille, toujours maître de lui, sans inégalité, sans faiblesse, et enfin le plus sage et le plus parfait de tous les hommes"⁵ fulfills for a nation the ideal of the perfect life.

Such considerations as these may seem a far cry from comedy and Molière. Yet this feeling of the French for their King has in more ways than one a repercussion upon the public of the 1660's and the plays that were made for it. Not only does it concentrate feelings of admiration and enthusiasm upon the monarch at the expense of any "particulier," be he ever so illustrious by birth or deed, but it stirs the feeling that excessive pride in birth or overeagerness to shine were more than a little absurd. For La Bruyère, the greatness of Louis XIV lies in this, that being called upon by his birth to reign, he possessed the amazing number of qualities that are necessary to reign well. This coincidence between disposition and duty in the monarch turns out, in writers as diverse as Bossuet and La Fontaine, to appear as the situation most to be desired for everyone. It accounts for the singing of the Savetier as well as for the greatness of Hen-

⁵ Racine, *Oeuvres*, I, 105 (1685).

riette d'Angleterre, in whom, in the lofty words of Bossuet, "tout ce que peuvent faire non seulement la naissance et la fortune, mais encore les grandes qualités de l'esprit pour l'élévation d'une princesse, se trouve rassemblé"

Living up to the responsibilities that life presents seems to have constituted a sufficient ideal for a majority of the nation, and when these responsibilities were a matter of birth and inheritance, the fulfilling of them is felt to be more decorous, more harmoniously perfect, than when they are responsibilities that have been voluntarily undertaken. The oft-agitated question as to whether a man should pride himself on being a gentleman or on being a poet is an illustration of the period's hesitation in this particular the best opinion—Pascal, Boileau—was in favor of being a gentleman, although La Bruyère begins to doubt whether society is right in this. The point to be observed in Molière's public is the extent to which it was composed of individuals who, on the one basis or the other, had reason to feel that their feet were on firm ground. A preacher like Bourdaloue certainly touched a responsive chord in the faithful when he enumerated the duties

qui nous concernent spécialement et en particulier, selon les divers engagements et les obligations propres que nous imposent notre vocation, notre profession, notre condition, la place que nous occupons, le rang que nous tenons, le caractère dont nous sommes revêtus

The great? The increasing difficulty of reasonably justifying inherited privilege begins to be evident to others, but not to themselves: many a young marquis, satisfied with "de vieux parchemins qu'ont épargné les

vers . . . s'endort dans une lâche et molle oisiveté,"⁶ or is only too pleased to have "les dents belles surtout, et la taille fort fine."⁷ To them, of course, few careers are open: a "charge" at court, a "bénéfice" or a commission in the army are the sole possibilities, and these are to be obtained only by cash or intrigue. The King himself, the father of his nobles, wants no great names on the civil list, much as he is to insist on the presence of their possessors at Versailles.

The bourgeois? They have a choice of many honorable careers: not only the Church and the army, to which wealth is giving them an easier access, but also the magistracy, a great variety of government offices, and trade. The bourgeois can, by "the loyal and regular virtues," arrive at that "calm and solid dignity of life" which, for Fortin de la Hoguette some years before, had seemed a condition ardently to be desired.⁸ The ministers of Louis XIV throughout the reign, especially perhaps Colbert, Louvois, Chamillart, are perfect examples of what La Bruyère meant by saying that "des citoyens . . . s'élèvent, deviennent puissants, soulagent le prince d'une partie des soins publics."⁹

The valet class? Thanks also to the growing power of money and especially the system of farming taxes, the "gens de rien," as backward-looking contemporaries disdainfully refer to them, are more and more able, by energy and initiative, to attain wealth and position.

⁶ Boileau, *Satire V*.

⁷ *Misanthrope*, Act III, scene 1.

⁸ *Testament*. Quoted by Maurice Magendie, *La Politesse mondaine et les Théories de l'honnêteté en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1925), p. 823.

⁹ *Des Grands*.

The occupation or the attainment of a position that commanded respect was not, therefore, in the Paris of this period, inordinately difficult, in the various ranks of society. As for the philosophers who, like La Bruyère or Boileau, would put merit above position, they were rare. The seeking out and rewarding of merit was the least of the preoccupations of government and society:

De quoi voulez-vous là que la cour s'embarrasse?

Elle aurait fort à faire, et ses soins seraient grands

D'avoir à déterrer le mérite des gens ¹⁰

Rank had replaced function, very decidedly, not only in the nobility, but throughout society, and between those who held their positions by inheritance and those who had attained and preserved them by effort, there never was a public like the public of Molière in which so large a proportion was solid and respectable. The time was, for once, not out of joint. Never was gnawing anxiety more nearly tamed. By giving to each and all a feeling of assurance in themselves and in the social structure, the absolute authority of Louis XIV had created a sort of liberty, a liberty to enjoy the world. Not with the voracious gusto of the time of Francis I, of course, with a burning, tingling sense of the richness and fullness that was in living, nor with the feverish, oversensitive precipitation that characterizes our own day, but rather as a spectacle, tasted and appreciated with a profound satisfaction that was tinged either with sweet emotion or, and more frequently, with deep-seated glee. Accepting the institutions of society and confident that this maintenance, which nothing seemed to threaten, was sufficient to make the basis of life secure,

¹⁰ *Misanthrope*, Act II, scene 8

they were ready to laugh at life *per se*, when it had led to conduct or gesture out of harmony with the functioning of the age-old machine that was French society, now that it had been gotten into a shape that seemed perfectly adapted to the needs of all. Comedy as Molière had come to write it, in which the comic spirit rises no longer on the wings of the imagination, as with Corneille and Scarron, but is limited and conditioned by an observation of men, produced a greater satisfaction in the 1660's than any other form of art. The value of conformity to custom so strongly felt by Montaigne as he grew older, was now evident to everybody, and within this firm and unshakable frame the "marvelously diverse and mobile creature" that was man appeared completely comic.

II. THE COURT—FESTIVAL PLAYS

[MOLIÈRE's public, uniformly disposed as it was to natural and unaffected laughter by the political and social situation in which it found itself, was nevertheless double] the court and the town. Now for the first of these, the renunciation of personal glory necessitated by the conclusion of the Fronde was more difficult than for the second. The court was composed of the best blood of France, which had flowed in the veins of those who, in the not too distant past, had been regarded as defenders and bulwarks of the realm, and of those who, in times more remote, to be sure, but still remembered, had been rulers over duchies and counties, possessing the prestige and commanding the obedience given to independent sovereigns. The gentle-folk of the court were endowed with the feelings of a ruling class, with the generosity of spirit and more particularly with the sense of honor to

which nobility obliges. They were penetrated by the conviction that their ancestry and their estates were of providential establishment, of divine decree. They felt traditionally above certain cares and a certain effort which to the bourgeois, whose position depended solely on his ability to preserve and augment his inherited wealth, were matters of daily concern. Harmony between husband and wife, solicitude for the up-bringing of children, were not for them of the utmost importance. It was more necessary that the children be "established" than educated. So long as they could "maintain their rank," they had lived up to what divine arrangement required of them. Giving freedom of rein to their own nature was the rule with them, and made for a more charming, varied, piquant life in society than was the case with the bourgeois. With them the code of gentlemen, the "aiguillon d'honneur," was traditionally sufficient to assure a good life, or at least a life nobly lived. Courage, friendship, fidelity, were in their very blood.

Yet the old spirit had gone, with the old responsibilities. Less and less was it possible to feel the sheer joy of being a noble, equal of the best, a fighter, a protector, a dispenser of happiness to dependents. The maintenance of rank was less a matter of gentlemanly conduct and of high deeds than of finding the wherewithal to keep up an establishment and a retinue. For this, two things were necessary: economy and the royal favor. The experience of La Rochefoucauld is enlightening in this regard: having striven in vain during the early part of his life for the position which he thought due his title and his merit, he must at last content himself with the fortune

which his lowborn steward was ingenious enough to assure him. By strict economy and with the aid of the abbé de Coulanges—"le bien bon"—Mme de Sévigné brings it about that her daughter is able to contribute her full share to the pomp required of her husband, the governor of a province. The good lady could not but smile at the impetuosity of a Maréchal de Bellefonds, who disobeyed the King when his honor commanded it, and preferred disgrace to humiliation. He was not given time, said Mme de Sévigné, to think it over. It had become more important to be a courtier than to be a noble. During the Fronde the Prince of Condé had made a treaty of alliance with the King of Spain, as if the principality which existed but on parchment after his name put him on a par with the ruler of the most far-flung kingdom in the world. Six years a rebel and a fugitive from his suzerain's justice, this nobleman had finally capitulated with good grace, and been pardoned, at the treaty of the Pyrénées in 1659. One of his most glorious moments, in his old age, was when he entertained the King and the court at his country place. And the descendants of the victor of Rocroi, who had served as a model for Mlle de Scudéry's Artamène, show themselves outstandingly successful in matters of canny investment.

For this audience more than half of Molière's plays were originally composed. His footing in Paris had first of all depended on securing its approval, and royal favor was directed toward his company, as has been seen, by the playing of a farce. [Though some of the opposition which Molière's comedy met in the beginning, on the grounds that it was satiric and base, may have come from courtiers, yet the court at large could but follow the King's

lead in this as in other matters, and this is indeed a good enough reason why the author of the *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* should pay them a glowing tribute. Listen to this admonition by Dorante:

Sachez, s'il vous plaît, monsieur Lysidas, que les courtisans ont d'aussi bons yeux que d'autres, qu'on peut être habile avec un point de Venise et des plumes, aussi bien qu'avec une perruque courte et un petit rabat uni; que la grande épreuve de toutes vos comédies, c'est le jugement de la cour, que c'est son goût qu'il faut étudier pour trouver l'art de réussir, qu'il n'y a point de lieu où les décisions soient plus justes, et, sans mettre en ligne de compte tous les gens savants qui y sont, que, du simple bon sens naturel et du commerce de tout le beau monde, on s'y fait une manière d'esprit qui, sans comparaison, juge plus finement des choses que tout le savoir enrouillé des pédants

The emphasis here is visibly and not at all surprisingly on "le simple bon sens naturel" as opposed to pedantic or prudish casuistry. It is the same Dorante who claimed, a little earlier, that "le bon sens n'a pas de place déterminée à la comédie," thus bringing together, in a bold and truly Cartesian *rapprochement*, the court and the pit. The court, needless to say, rises far above the pit in that it adds to their common share of good sense its own qualities of refinement and grace. The "simple bon sens naturel," however, both among those who pay "un demi-louis d'or" or a mere "quinze sols," remains at bottom an attitude of complete open-mindedness, devoid of any preconceived inner check, whether rational, moral or esthetic.] It is not the mind, indeed, that it indicates as the seat of laughter, but a far less elevated part of the anatomy. Pure laughter, the best laughter, the most

pleasant laughter, is aroused, it would appear, when the mind and the judgment are, as it were, off duty. The *Ecole des Femmes* achieved its end because it pleased, and it pleased because it aroused just this kind of laughter. Those who are offended by it carry with them to the theater certain moral or esthetic prejudices, while those who enjoy the play, always in the words of Dorante,

. . . en jugent par la bonne façon d'en juger, qui est de se laisser prendre aux choses, et de n'avoir ni prévention aveugle, ni complaisance affectée, ni délicatesse ridicule . . . Laissons-nous aller de bonne foi aux choses qui nous prennent par les entrailles, et ne cherchons point de raisonnements pour nous empêcher d'avoir du plaisir

Never more than in his court comedies did Molière remain faithful to his critical pronouncement of June 1663, to the effect that the sole end of comedy is to transcend the intellectual and the rational and stir a sense of the universal comicality of the human lot. It is the completeness of the feeling of laughter that satisfies in these plays, and not the surciness of its justification in the light of reasoned experience. Now, except for the *Tâcheur*, all of Molière's plays up to that time had been made for the town. The series of court plays, in which he was to remain close to the spirit and often the form of the farce, begin with the *Impromptu de Versailles* in October 1663. From then on and throughout the 'sixties, a play by Molière was among the most agreeable of the diversions provided at great royal entertainment. To be sure, almost all of these court comedies were enjoyed at the Palais-Royal as well as at Versailles or Chambord, and plays like the *Misanthrope*, made for the town, were also

presented before the court. The taste of the two publics coincided in many particulars. It is nevertheless in the court plays that the most hilariously funny of Molière's characters and situations are to be found, provoking a mirth that is as spontaneous and thoughtless as that aroused by the farces of the Pont-Neuf or those of the Italians. Molière, when he worked rapidly and in the spirit of the farce, achieved results that were more purely comic than when he strove harder to attain perfection. "Il est le premier des farceurs," Lanson says of him,¹ "et c'est pour cela qu'il est le premier des comiques."

These court plays were in general and of necessity very hastily composed. You could not point out to the King that the requirements of art would entail the postponement of his festival. The pastry-cook, from whom mountains of sweetmeats were ordered, played a part identical in the eyes of the royal host and his guests to that of the dramatist who provided the spectacle. The *Amour Médecin*, *George Dandin*, the *Amants Magnifiques*, must be ready to take their place in the succession of pleasures planned for the occasion with the same implacable necessity that brought the fish to the table before the roast. There was never a question of not meeting the royal demands in these matters, and the playful way in which the *Impromptu de Versailles* calls attention to the poet's predicament is generally regarded as evidence that Molière was feeling increasingly sure of the King's approval, and was more and more emboldened to a liberty of expression close to that employed by Marot to the less awesome Francis I.

¹ Gustave Lanson, "Molière et la Farce," *Revue de Paris*, May 1, 1901, p. 153

As little as five days was available for putting together some of these *divertissements*. On none of them was as much time spent as on the full five-act comedies like the *Misanthrope* or the *Femmes Savantes* made for the Palais-Royal. In the case of some, time was lacking to finish them: the *Princesse d'Elide* is versified in the first two acts only of the five, and *Mélicerte* is not finished at all. In other words, these are works in which the author could not submit himself consciously to the discipline either of art or of the taste of his public, and must put more complete trust in his inspiration. With the possible exception of *Amphitryon*, in which of these plays can evidences of haste and negligence not be found? On what principle of artistic unity can a play like the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* be justified, in which a relatively realistic comedy of manners is combined with a spectacle of the most fantastic buffoonery? On none, certainly, which could be included within the ideal of verisimilitude and decorum as a Boileau or a Voltaire conceived it. Molière was here letting himself go to his spontaneous impulse, confident that it would find a response in his audience. There is of course, an increasing perfection observable, from the *Fâcheux* to the *Malade Imaginaire*, in the blending of satiric realism with fantasy. It is doubtful, however, whether Molière, even if he had lived, would have attempted to give to this sort of play as complete a unity as to his more decorous comedies, so far was fantasy from the taste of his age.

Another characteristic common in general to these festival plays is that they are not exactly immoral, in the sense in which the indecency of the contemporary Italians was immoral. Yet the situations of *Amphitryon* or *George Dandin* are hardly of a sort to be approved by one

who attaches extreme importance to the need of solidity in the marriage tie, to say nothing of its sacredness. Nor does the ending of *George Dandin* satisfy that requirement of an audience noted by Aristotle and still accepted, albeit with some regret, by Corneille, to see vice punished and virtue rewarded. The unhappy and horn-bedecked husband is carried off finally in an uproar of gaiety to drown his sorrows in the flowing bowl, a way out of marital difficulties scarcely to be recommended under any code of morality. Yet it was felt by the court to be a highly satisfactory ending to one of the most lavish and delicious of long entertainments ever provided in the gardens of Versailles.

Obviously the ballets and *intermezzis*, the most important part of many of these court plays, are completely outside the domaine of morality. The Egyptians of the *Marriage Forcé*, the Moors of the *Sicilien*, the Turks of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, even the doctors of the *Malade Imaginaire*, are designed to provoke a maximum of gaiety and a minimum of thought. Baudelaire, finding in them an outstanding example of the "absolute comic," so superior in his opinion to the "significant comic" characteristic of the French tradition, regrets that this part of Molière's work is not more frequently performed. The atmosphere of these *intermezzis* is found also within the plays which are often but a vehicle to carry them, and many of the most exquisitely comic lines and situations have no relation to morality. such is the naive astonishment of M. Jourdain at having been using prose all his life without realizing it. The very torture of merriment which seizes Nicole at the sight of her master in his new clothes is but slimly connected with satire of his preten-

sions to gentility, and is much more an instinctive reaction to the grotesque. Is not Thomas Diafoirus a pure grotesque? And do not Argan, M. Jourdain, M. de Pourceaugnac, stir a gale of laughter in which the moral condemnation of these figures as unadapted to society is certainly absent from the mind of the laughter? M. Jourdain transcends the mere parvenu: he is a man enmeshed like all men in the dilemma that comes from our being at the same time creatures of instinct and possessors of reason, and when we laugh at him we are also laughing at ourselves.

In January 1664, the comédie-ballet of the *Marriage Forcé* was played in the Louvre, in the apartments of the Queen-Mother, the pious Anne of Austria. Her royal son took the part of a gypsy in one of the entries. The spectacle turns on a one-act farce, a "little comedy," in which an elderly Sganarelle, having decided to sweeten the bitter decline of his years by the presence of a young and lovely wife who would "rub him when he was tired," proceeds to ask the advice of a friend, and then of two philosophers, as to whether he is right in so doing. It is the query of Panurge, and it receives the same reply: "Mariez-vous donc." However, Dorimène herself, who looks forward in marriage to liberty, to entertainment and fine clothes, proves more clearly to Sganarelle than common sense or philosophy the folly of the step he is taking, and in the end he is "forced" to go through with his undertaking by the inevitable "bâton" of his lady's brother. The play is of course pure farce: "on y remarque plus de bouffonnerie que d'art et d'agrément," Voltaire says of it, and this pronounces its condemnation in the eyes of the author of the *Temple du Goût*. In so far as it has

any correspondence with the reality of contemporary life, it offers a contrast between the narrowness of middle-class selfishness and economy, as represented in Sganarelle, and the amusing if unscrupulous devices by which the members of the society of the gambling-hall and cabaret attempted to refill their empty pockets. It is unfair, of course, to consider the farce apart from the ballet, which formed the major part of the entertainment. But it does give to the whole the tone of a somewhat chastened Rabelaisian gaiety.

In May of that same year 1664, the King arranged for his court a week-long festival at Versailles which was called "Les Plaisirs de l'Ile enchantée." Given in honor of the Queen-Mother and the Queen, it marked also the establishment of French social supremacy in Europe and the preparedness of Versailles to accommodate a considerable number of guests. They were provided with a continuous round of amusements, *courses de bague*, collations in the gardens, fireworks, ballets, music, comprising an assemblage of "fêtes galantes et magnifiques" such as royal profusion had never offered before. It is said that a certain piquancy was added to the occasion because the marked attentions with which the King was honoring Mlle de La Vallière were already a matter of general notice. The first day, May 7, was filled with spectacles of an unprecedented magnificence, in which ladies and gentlemen of the court mingled with the actors and actresses of Molière's company in representing gods and goddesses, shepherds and shepherdesses, heroes and heroines of medieval romance, in a gala succession of bedazzlements. As a part of the second day's entertain-

ment, Molière contributed the *Princesse d'Elide*, "comédie galante mêlée de musique et d'entrées de ballet." Pressed by time, as we have seen, Molière had put into verse but the first two acts of the five. As the play continues, it becomes for that matter less and less dialogue, more and more ballet. The plot, which turns on a princess too proud to marry, won by a lover clever enough to pretend disdain, is taken from a Spanish play by Moreto with the scene transplanted to ancient Greece. Molière played the *gracioso* part of the poltroon valet. The tone of the play is well fixed by the last stanza of a song in the fifth act.

Songez de bonne heure à suivre
Le plaisir de s'enflammer
Un cœur ne commence à vivre
Que du jour qu'il sait aimer
Quelque fort qu'on s'en défende,
Il y faut venir un jour
Il n'est rien qui ne se rende
Aux doux charmes de l'Amour

These lines are certainly not supreme examples of Molière's art as a poet. They are, however, very complete proof of his ability to adapt himself to the atmosphere of an occasion which required lightness and grace with just a note of laughing sweetness. Three days later, as another part of the same entertainment, Molière's company presented a play in three acts called *Tartuffe*, which even then—that is, prior to any subsequent alterations—must have provided as complete a contrast to the *Princesse d'Elide* as could be dreamed of within the work of a dramatist.

III. *TARTUFFE* — THE TOWN

PUBLIC performance of this play was immediately forbidden. The guests at Versailles, according to the official account of the festival, had "found it very amusing." The King "n'y trouvait rien à dire." But it was forbidden, as the *Gazette* puts the case, it was judged "injurious to religion." For five years no free performance in a public theater was to be allowed.

At this point we are about to witness a most important departure from the critical principles that Molière established in 1663 and applied in his court comedies. Throughout these years during which he is doing his best to have the ban on *Tartuffe* lifted, his constant plea is that the play is moral. In the *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*, it was sufficient to defend comedy because it pleased by causing laughter. Five months later, the *Impromptu de Versailles* maintains that "l'affaire de la comédie est de représenter en général tous les défauts des hommes." But *Tartuffe* having been forbidden, Molière begins his first *placet* to the King by stating that "le devoir de la comédie [est] de corriger les hommes en les divertissant." In his second *placet*, after the performance of August 1667, he alleges that "les plus scrupuleux en ont trouvé la représentation profitable." In the Preface of 1669, after the play had been freely performed, he assumes as generally admitted that "l'emploi de la comédie est de corriger les vices des hommes."

It will not be forgotten, of course, that the vast majority of classical critics maintained that morality was a necessary part of literary art. This is true of the eighteenth century, when the useful is constantly united with the

beautiful. Such had been also the opinion of defenders of "the rules" in the early part of the seventeenth century—notably Balzac and Chapelain—and on this point Bouleau will agree with them. Corneille, who in his critical writings claims, after Aristotle, that the sole end of art is to please, nevertheless in his works has given examples of a drama the effect of which is more moral than esthetic. The victories of his heroes are moral victories, their very heroism lies in living up to a moral code. His was to be sure a positive morality, inciting to vigorous virtue through emulation. His tragedy strives to uplift and exalt and strengthen, encouraging to fortitude and giving confidence to the will. This very loftiness of purpose is what accounts for the fact that the comic, during the period of Corneille, was largely eliminated. The only way found of making a comedy which was also a work of art was to reduce very considerably the laughter which it excited. Comedy played in the theaters tended to approach in dignity and refinement the higher genres, or else through exaggerated buffoonery to be a sort of anti-heroic play. Morality here is inseparable from elevation and decorum. The purely comic is in the hands of the "saltimbanques" and "farceurs" whose sole object, as Georges de Scudéry says with infinite contempt, is to "amuser le peuple." We have seen that during the early quarrels Molière was accused of being one of them. Those who disapprove of his comedy damn him with faint praise by calling him a "farceur." He seems to admit the accusation and to glory in it, at first. Yet in the end he comes to claim a moral goal for his work. Indeed he develops the farce into a form of comedy which is perhaps the most moral of all the forms of art of the end

of the century. The negative morality of comedy, the making ridiculous, is of course vastly different from the positive morality of Corneille. It is a morality all the same—the new morality of a new age—as was sensed by Alfred de Vigny when, returning from a performance of *Tartuffe*, he noted in his *Journal*: “Ce qui domine dans Molière, c’est le moraliste”

In this and other respects, there is a certain amount of incidental information to be gleaned from the history of the comedy *Tartuffe*, of the changes made by Molière in its composition, and of its vicissitudes before it could be presented to his town public. It was first offered, then, in three acts, on May 12, 1664, before the Versailles audience which for five days had been giving itself up to the pleasures of the enchanted island. Through the influence of a secret religious organization known as the *Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement*, its public performance was prohibited. On September 25, the same three acts were again presented, before Monsieur, or better perhaps Madame, at Villers-Cotterets “Perfect, entire and finished” in five acts, it was performed for Monseigneur le Prince at the Château de Raincy on November 29 following. On August 5, 1667, Molière produced it under the title of the *Imposteur*, Tartuffe being called Panulphe, at the Palais-Royal, during the King’s absence at the siege of Lille, whereupon it was immediately stopped and further showings were forbidden by the First President of the Parliament of Paris. It was first freely performed, the ban having been lifted, in the form in which we have it today, in the Palais-Royal theater, on February 9, 1669. It probably was, over all this period, the talk of the court and the town, and many performances and read-

ings of it were given at country estates and private houses. No host could offer a greater enticement to his guests than to include it in his program and announce that

Molière avec Tartuffe y doit jouer son rôle ¹

Readers will recall the plot of the five-act *Tartuffe*. It centers about a Parisian bourgeois, Orgon, a man of some property, with a house in town and a place in the country, and of a lineage distinguished for its piety and loyalty to the King. By his first wife Orgon has had two children, Damis and Marianne. The scene of the play is the "salle basse" of the Paris house where he lives with them and his second wife Elmire, their stepmother, who is younger than her husband and not averse to a life of reasonable pleasure and social intercourse.

Orgon has noticed in church a certain Tartuffe, remarkable for the fervor of his praying and the extreme humility of his demeanor, and has been so smitten with admiration for this saintly personage that he has taken him into his house where he cherishes him as the dearest of friends and the most consoling of spiritual advisers. In this he is highly approved by his mother, Madame Pernelle, an old lady of great piety, severe morality, and ready irritability. All the rest of his family, however, including the bubbling maid, Dorine, and the even-tempered brother of Elmire, Cléante, see clearly in Tartuffe an impostor and a hypocrite. Orgon's infatuation reaches the point of desiring to have him marry his daughter Marianne, and of disinheriting his son Damis in order to make of Tartuffe his heir. The latter,

¹ Boileau, *Satire III*.

in the meantime, has been nursing a secret lust for Elmire, which he finally declares. Orgon, informed of this by his son Damis, is easily persuaded by Tartuffe that it is not true, and that the family are in league to evict him. The father drives his son from him, makes over to Tartuffe all his worldly goods, and even entrusts him with a "cassette" containing papers compromising to a friend of Orgon's who has had to flee Paris because of seditious activities during the Fronde. Elmire finally persuades her husband to hide under the table during an interview between herself and the impostor. The latter's real nature being thus revealed Orgon goes into a rage against him as violent as had been his previous infatuation. Tartuffe now holds in his hands, however, the means of dispossessing Orgon and his family of all their wealth, and would have done so, had not the Monarch, whose all-seeing eye had discerned the rights and the wrongs of the situation and discovered in Tartuffe a scoundrel unpunished for previous crimes, ended the play by having him led off to prison.

How different the play in its present form is from the three acts first shown at Versailles has given rise to much speculation on the part of scholars. Unfortunately for the curious, it is impossible to arrive at definite conclusions on this question. Were the original three acts more purely comic, as was usual with plays written for the court, less realistic and less moral, than the final version? Although probable, it is impossible to say this definitely. Does not the play as we have it still retain in every single detail the spirit of comedy? The admirable exposition, with the crusty grandmother leaving in a huff, and touching off to perfection, in her irritation, the character of every person

in the household, the "pauvre homme" scene, the lovers' quarrel renewed from the *Dépit*, the extraordinary courting of Tartuffe overheard by Elmire's fuming stepson in the closet, the reversal in which Orgon falls on his knees before Tartuffe in an ecstasy of enthusiasm over the latter's humility, the clash of common sense with passion in the scenes between Cléante and Orgon, Cléante and Tartuffe, the rage of Orgon when his mother shows herself as obstinate in her good opinion of the hypocrite as he was before his eyes were opened—who can think of any of these without a smile?

Yes indeed, the characters are conceived in the comic mold which is that of Molière: a dominant passion or idea which distorts the normal and reasonable aspect of every human situation. The overdevotion of Madame Pernelle and Orgon, the overimpetuosity of Damis, the oversensitiveness of Marianne, mark them all as belonging to a family in which emotional unbalance is the rule. The responses of Tartuffe himself to the varying pull of religion, lust for woman and lust for power, make of him one of the most intricately constructed comic figures in all drama. The mingling in his love-making of religious and amorous imagery is of the very essence of comedy. Even the sensible and urbane Cléante, by his naïve assumption that men will respond to reason, is occasionally amusing. As for Dorine, though not ridiculous herself, she is contagious gaiety incarnate, inciting the audience to a comic view of events and persons.

The sources also on which Molière drew for details of his story, of which a considerable number are known, are all comic in tone. It may be permissible to quote one of them here, not because it was necessarily the most im-

portant, but because it provides a complete episode out of which, it seems, a comedy could have been made. It is told by Tallemant des Réaux of a certain Charpy de Sainte-Croix, and runs as follows:

Or, un jour qu'il était dans l'église des Quinze-vingts, madame Hansse, veuve de l'apothicaire de la Reine, y vint; elle loge dans les Quinze-vingts mêmes Il l'accosta et lui parla de dévotion avec tant d'empressement, qu'il charma cette femme, qui est dévote Elle le loge chez elle Lui, qui est si charitable qu'il aime son prochain comme lui-même, s'est mis à aimer la petite madame Patrocle, la fille de madame Hansse elle est femme de chambre de la Reine, et son mari est aussi à elle Charpy se met si bien dans l'esprit du mari et s'impatronise tellement de lui et de sa femme, qu'il en a chassé tout le monde, et elle ne va en aucun lieu qu'il n'y soit, ou bien le mari Madame Hansse, qui a enfin ouvert les yeux, en a averti son gendre, il a répondu que c'étaient des railleries, et prend Charpy pour le meilleur ami qu'il ait au monde Souvent les maris font leurs héros de ceux qui les font cocus . Madame Hansse, enfin, n'a plus voulu qu'ils logeassent avec elle Charpy n'est plus en même logis que la dame, mais il la voit toujours de même Quand il prie Dieu, il dit. "Seigneur, je me résigne à ta volonté . . ."²

There are several similarities between this story and the play. The use of the striking expression "s'impatronise"³ is evidence that Molière must have been familiar with it. The church scene and the taking of the hypocrite into the home are also important aspects of Molière's play found in this story alone. The differences are, however, no less apparent "la petite Madame

² *Histoires*, ed Monmerqué et P Paris, X, pp 161-2

³ *Tartuffe*, Act I, scene 1

Patrocle" is as yielding to the seducer as Elmire is adamant against him, and whereas Orgon's indignation is finally aroused, when his eyes have been opened to the hypocrite's duplicity, the most profoundly comic aspect of the Tallemant story lies in the husband's complete refusal to admit that anything is wrong. The serious fashion in which he goes about satisfying equally his needs for piety, respectability and carnal satisfaction make of him a figure of distinct comic possibilities. Molière has nowhere put a François Patrocle in his plays, but he was not without realizing the opportunity that Paris offered for studying cuckoldry.

. Est-il au monde une autre ville aussi
Où l'on ait des maris si patients qu'ici ?

says Arnolphe of the *Ecole des Femmes*. Madame Patrocle has also some counterparts in Molière's theater: Arnolphe's Agnès might conceivably have been not unlike her, grown a little older, and the Angélique of *George Dandin*, though more positive and domineering, could well have been her sister. But the particular comedy that might be made from the Tallemant story remains to be written. It is not *Tartuffe*.

For the outstanding characteristic of *Tartuffe* as we have it today is this: in spite of the comic elements of which it is composed, its total effect is serious. It offers an amazing contrast to the atmosphere in which it was first performed. Brunetière calls it a "drama." Stendhal noted that there was very little laughter at a performance of it which he witnessed. Another observer remarked that the first laugh occurred at the unmasking of the hypocrite, and was a laugh of satisfied hatred rather than

of joy. A distinguished scholar who has discussed it recently describes it as follows. "No earlier play by Molière had shown so many interesting characters, nor had he previously brought out so clearly the devastating effect of vice upon a family. We see its peace destroyed, the father's affections alienated, the daughter's future threatened, the son driven out, the wife's honor imperiled, the house handed over to an outsider, and finally the head of the family arrested."⁴ Peace destroyed—affections alienated—future threatened—honor imperiled—head of the family arrested—this sounds but little like comedy. How did it happen that a play which in its conception and in its first public seemed dedicated to gaiety, should turn out to be so somber?

At some period or other of its composition, before or after its prohibition, undoubtedly before its first performance in five acts, Molière hit upon the idea of causing its action to revolve about a family group, whose welfare is menaced by the machinations of a schemer and the folly of a father. The unifying of his plot about people who are more appealing than comic is properly what is original with Molière. And these appealing people seem headed for disaster. In the Tallemant story, no disaster is threatened. its comic quality lies largely in the fact that relationships which according to ordinary morality would wreck a family, are in this one innocuous because treated with an almost sublime disregard. But in the center of the Molière play is a woman young, charming, sensible, self-possessed, dignified, whose coolness and courage are responsible, if not for the saving of the situation, at least for the clearing of the air. The children also,

⁴ Lancaster, *op cit*, III, II, p 629

while their innocence and impulsiveness often draw a smile, are by far the most attractive yet created by Molière. The heart warms to these people, so simple, so generous, so open and honest, and we wish that they might be happy.

Now we have seen that Molière struck the line that he was to develop into great classical comedy when he gave up the creation of buffoon heroes similar to those of Corneille and Scarron, and when he began writing scenes the comic quality of which seemed to spring neither from the wits of the author nor from those of his characters, but from life itself. It is in giving the audience the impression that it is witnessing life and that it is laughing at living characters that his comic talent really developed. Observation, not imagination, was the task of the comic poet. "il faut peindre d'après nature . . . et vous n'avez rien fait, si vous n'y faites reconnaître les gens de votre siècle." The "peintre" is now inseparable from the "farceur." To the sense of the comic is added the sense of life, and the sense of life, constantly threatening to become dominant, tends to merge the comic with the serious. The audience is no longer below the characters, as in tragedy, nor above them, as in comedy, but nearer to their level. Sympathy and even admiration, the appeal of all plays for Corneille, with *Tartuffe* begin to be aroused by comedy.

The serious side of Molière's plays, it is true, is especially noticeable to a modern reader or spectator. For Goethe, the *Avare* was a tragedy. Throughout the nineteenth century, indeed, the figure of Molière tends, for many of those who appreciate most deeply the profound implications of his work, to take on a somber hue. The

"mâle génie" of Musset, who was of all the romantic poets the one most given to laughter, is an unexpected epithet for a merely comic writer. To cite a very recent and perhaps extreme example, a reviewer of Juvet's production of the *Ecole des Femmes* praises this remarkable interpreter of Molière for not having "dissimulé ni atténué l'amertume d'un ouvrage qui confine presque au drame"⁵ As the play is here described, Arnolphe seems to have become a tragic figure, Agnes a "cruelle enfant." The intention of the actor—Juvet himself played the part of Arnolphe—seems to have been to arouse sympathy in the audience for this isolated, maladjusted and silly man much as sympathy goes to Oedipus and Hamlet. Such an interpretation of this rôle is vastly different from that of its creator "lorsqu'il explique à Agnès la violence de son amour avec ces roulements d'yeux extravagants, ces soupirs ridicules, et ces larmes maies qui font rire tout le monde"

It is, of course, often hard to determine the exact borderline between a situation that deserves comic treatment and one that deserves tragic treatment, and Molière was accused even by contemporaries of having created in Arnolphe a too furiously passionate figure for comedy. A recent writer has noted that an outstanding characteristic of Molière was his "inability to remain on the surface,"⁶ and his work undoubtedly turns the light of comedy on profound aspects of the human lot. Those whom Molière affects deeply and seriously are not deceiving themselves as to what is to be found in his work. One of the curious traits of French classical art is that the

⁵ Pierre Lièvre, in *Nouvelle Revue Française*, June 1936, pp 993-5.

⁶ Félix Gaiffe, *op cit*, p 105

more it tends to be a picture of life, the more is gravity compatible with comedy, and the easier is it to turn a comic light on the situations of tragedy. Scenes in Racine are near to comedy, and scenes in Molière near to tragedy. But let us not forget that for contemporaries, the distinction of genres was a primary necessity of art. Whether or not "le socque est inférieur au cothurne," as Fénelon would have it, it is the "sock" that Molière wears. It must be said also that whatever tragedy is hidden behind the comic actions of some of his individuals, the appeal of his frankly sympathetic characters is very discreet. Sentiment is almost entirely lacking in his work. Elmire in *Tartuffe* is a stepmother, be it observed. There is not a word of real tenderness, as it exists between parents and children, or between brothers and sisters, in all his plays. The tenderness of his lovers is always close to laughter. It was not only in art that the classic period believed in restraint, but also in life, and if Molière's comedy has remained among the French the most beloved of all their works, it is certainly in part because combined with its gaiety is this extreme reserve in the expression of the profounder feelings.

Such are, perhaps, a few of the reasons why the shift, so perceptible in *Tartuffe*, from comic toward serious realism, to which a modern reader is so sensitive, was not generally felt by contemporaries. To be sure, Boileau confided in Brossette that he did not like the ending of *Tartuffe*, because it "laisse le spectateur dans le tragique." But the same Boileau split his sides at a performance of the *Avare*, although Racine did not. When accused by Racine of being the only one to have laughed at it, the critic replied that he thought too much of his colleague

not to believe that he, too, had laughed, at least internally. To him as to the times in general, that definite category of art called "la comédie de caractères" was designed to give less a *sense* of life than *ideas* about life. When Boileau exalts Molière's ability to portray "un jeune homme, un vieillard véritable," he means "truly young" or "truly old," not "truly a man." As a matter of fact, if Molière really did endeavor to paint Orgon's family as more sympathetically appealing, he has not admitted it, and it may well have come about as an indirect result of his efforts to make his "faux dévot," who threatens their welfare, an indubitable hypocrite and villain.

J'ai mis tout l'art et tous les soins qu'il m'a été possible pour bien distinguer le personnage de l'Hypocrite d'avec celui du vrai Dévot J'ai employé pour cela deux actes entiers à préparer la venue de mon scélérat Il ne tient pas un seul moment l'auditeur en balance; on le connaît d'abord aux marques que je lui donne, et d'un bout à l'autre il ne dit pas un mot, il ne fait pas une action qui ne peigne aux spectateurs le caractère d'un méchant homme, et ne fasse éclater celui du véritable homme de bien que je lui oppose

It would appear from this that the moral opposition between hypocrisy and true virtue—Tartuffe and Cléante—was of more importance than the dramatic opposition between guilt and innocence—Tartuffe and the family. The play becomes as much of a Morality as a Comedy. Just as in the "salle basse" of *Tartuffe* Molière returns to the realistic setting of the *Précieuses* after the "public square" of *Sganarelle* and the *Ecoles*, so the traditional plot comes here closer to a really possible situation in a French family, as was the case in the first "little comedy."

Both "school" plays also turned upon a moral question, but whereas in them it bears merely upon the question of freedom for girls, in *Tartuffe* it is enlarged into a complete philosophy of conduct

Whether *Tartuffe* was originally made for the court or not remains in doubt, though the fact that the Palais-Royal had been for some time without a new play by Molière, would indicate that it was planned for the town. As for the modifications introduced in it between 1664 and 1669, however, they were indubitably made with the Palais-Royal audience in mind. All through this period Molière could and did give many private performances at great houses. It was his town audience he could not reach. Were not then these modifications made for the purpose of appealing to the very definite moral convictions of the Parisian bourgeoisie, and must responsibility for the final state of the play not be laid largely at their door? Was not Molière endeavoring to make this public feel that his hypocrite, close as he obviously was in act, thought and feeling to a truly devout person, was nevertheless, in the light of the firmly rationalistic morality accepted at the time in Paris—"la morale des honnêtes gens," as Sainte-Beuve calls it—a really anti-social figure around whom it was legitimate to center a comedy? It was on the opinion of this public who liked his comedy that he counted to overcome the barriers set up by the pious. There was no appealing to these, of course. Not only did they not go to the theater, but in the eyes of many of them the more highly moral a play appeared, the more subtly immoral it was. Such was the opinion of Nicole and the Prince de Conti, and such will be the opinion of Bossuet.

Of what sort of people was the town public composed? What was the Parisian bourgeois of 1660? He was a man of property, first of all, and property that he had inherited. If he did not himself possess "pignon sur rue," he aspired to one, or had ancestors or relatives so distinguished. His was the "droit de bourgeoisie," which marked him as a taxpayer and responsible citizen, less important now than when cities were independent of the crown, but still giving him superiority over the artisan. He was not, like the noble, assured of the divine origin of his status, nor like the poor dependent for his future upon divine mercy. It was by hard work, by long patience, by prudence, foresight, and sound judgment, that his fortune had been accumulated, and these virtues must be persisted in if it is to be preserved. He was very watchful of his money, which was hard to make, and easy to lose, and he was inordinately attached to his every possession. He tended to be physically timid and often was petty. He felt within him the surge of no forces that hard work and fulfilment of duty could not direct, and was but little tempted by ideals of honor or chivalry, exaggerated devotion to woman, loyalty to name, or any self-sacrificing exaltation of the spirit. His main virtue was scrupulous honesty, in business, toward his fellows and toward himself. He was hard-headed, conservative politically and economically. He preferred security to great wealth, peace and tranquillity to adventure and novelty.

The unit which commanded his deepest loyalty was his family. Toward all of its members, he acknowledged an unbounded responsibility. It was only by maintenance of family unity that hard-won wealth could be

preserved and acquired position consolidated. He would have his son as well or better off than himself, and for this purpose would bring him up in the knowledge that life is more a renunciation of what youth finds desirable than it is a striving for what the heart longs for. The innate for him was composed of abstract principles by which experience could be judged, not of gleaming goals barely glimpsed on the distant horizon.

With his fellow-bourgeois he would never sufficiently agree so that as a class the bourgeoisie could undertake the governing of society, as the pitiful end of the Parliamentary Fronde had proved conclusively. And just as his individual and family consciousness alienated him from his fellow-bourgeois, so his envy of the noble, who possessed naturally that ideal in feeling and deportment for which he secretly strove, and his inattention to the humble, prevented his taking the initiative in any whole-hearted cooperation between all parts of the nation in directing its economic and political life. On the other hand, his love of security and prestige had made him a fair customer for the royal offices that were offered in increasing numbers to the highest bidder, and he would be glad to see his son give up a good business for a "charge." Indeed it is this willingness to desert trade for a position connected with the regulation of society under the control of the crown—the magistracy, the law, the administration of finance—which is the outstanding characteristic of the French bourgeois as distinguished from the English or Dutch. It accounts in large part for the strength of the monarchy, and also for the intellectual interests of the bourgeoisie. They brought to the handling of abstractions a mentality developed through the han-

ding of material things. It is thus that their fate was more and more involved with that of the King, and that they were coming to be as much dependent on royal favor as were the nobles. It is a question as to whether the assumption of authority by Louis XIV did not constitute for the bourgeois a triumph comparable to that of the Revolution at least it gave him a more immediate sense of relief and assurance.

The bourgeois must not be thought of, however, as contenting himself with assuring the bases of his existence. These once established, he was free to concern himself with things about which he was really curious. He was invariably well educated, often learned, of an intellectual turn of mind, desirous of surrounding himself with beautiful things adapted to his taste and station. It is in the seventeenth century that creation in art and letters begins to be mainly bourgeois. The bourgeoisie has assumed tasks that in the Middle Ages were those of the cleric or the artisan, and has acquired interests that are also more and more those of the noble.

This bourgeoisie loved the theater enough to stand through the performance, but not enough to pay more than 15 sols for admission. The bourgeois chose the pit, and left the boxes to the quality. A good audience at the Palais-Royal seems to have been about a thousand, and of these about six hundred were in the pit, standing, restless, ready to hiss or applaud, interesting themselves in the play as no modern audience even in France ever does. Molière's appeal had been from the beginning to this audience rather than to the boxes or the stage. The contrary was the case at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and when farces began to be given there after a longer play,

it is said that boxes and stage were often emptied before the farce began. But the pit was favorable to the comic. How many entered the theater free—officers in great households or at court, royal guardsmen, minions of the law, even lackeys? The relative importance of this group it is impossible to estimate exactly, as our knowledge of their existence comes solely from efforts of the comedians to have them excluded. Doubtless they were the noisiest part of the audience, but they probably were not the most appreciative, and the company, far from attempting to cater to their taste, was doing its best to have them forbidden entrance to the theater. The town public that counted was composed of solid folk, serious and respectable. Not the very upper crust of the bourgeoisie—neither magistrates, lawyers, nor doctors went to the theater, and Guy Patin, when he talks of plays, does so by hearsay. Some of the “bonne bourgeoisie” there undoubtedly were, especially of the younger generation, but most of the pit was composed of the “bourgeoisie moyenne,” like Molière’s own family, merchants, minor functionaries, holders of small “charges,” shopkeepers, butchers, bakers, armorers, saddlers, well-to-do members of corporations, even perhaps artisans. Positive and practical-minded, these, but given as they were to observing people and reflecting about life, they were above all passionately interested in the theater. For the court, attendance at a play was part of an entertainment, a way of spending the “après-dînée,” a diversion like another, provided for them at Versailles or at a great house. The town public left their homes and came to the theater especially to see a play. They were ardent theatergoers, fans, as we should say. Less impressed, perhaps, than the quality by the

prestige attached to the name of the author, they became expert in judging the work, and would applaud a well executed tirade as a modern crowd at a match applauds the making of a goal. In them, as Molière points out, was found that just proportion of unprejudiced feeling and technical knowledge which made of their approval the highest commendation. It seems to be for this public rather than for that of the court that Molière made the plays that cost him most effort.

We have seen how Molière's early satire of preciosity and then of false devotion, offensive as it was to the delicate, drew crowds to his theater and aroused the enthusiasm of the pit. It is this coincidence between the growing comic genius of Molière and an attitude found in his public that marks his initial success. In his attack on preciosity, this agreement certainly exists. Is this also true of his attack on religion? [It led to the most serious struggle of his career, and one upon which, as a purely practical dramatist, it would not be supposed that he would embark. But the challenge—if it is a challenge—was not only made but repeated, the year after *Tartuffe*, in *Don Juan*. This play, in which religion is even more directly involved, was one of several "Don Juans" performed at the time, and the only one on this theme which drew serious objections. Thomas Corneille, a practical dramatist if there ever was one, made this same play of Molière over so that it was at the same time innocuous and relatively successful. What demon was urging Molière to display such unnecessary aggressiveness?]

This question has proved of great interest to many scholars, and a considerable number of answers have been advanced. All of them have an air of plausibility.

Molière was a libertine, it is said, a pupil of Gassendi, a reader of Lucretius, an apostle of "nature" and an enemy of Christianity. Such are the explanations based on hypotheses as to his personal convictions. To each a counter-argument may be advanced. he was not a libertine, in the sense of believing entirely in natural impulse as against reason, the value of which he obviously also acknowledged, he was probably not a pupil of Gassendi; whatever he may have thought of Lucretius, he has drawn from him only moral platitudes or even perhaps comic effects; and his work, as he himself constantly alleged and as is evident enough if compared with that of Voltaire, is not a direct satire of the Christian religion. Those on the contrary who would see in Molière solely the dramatist and comedian, striving to please and to be successful, have maintained that *Tartuffe* was written "by order of Louis XIV," who was impatient of devout disapprobation of his youthful and vigorous pursuit of pleasure; or that, encouraged by the success of the "Maximes du Mariage" in the *Ecole des Femmes*, he was following up in *Tartuffe* a vein that was proving rich. Others would hint that having contracted a marriage in defiance of all laws divine and human, he had become at heart a rebel against the universe. None of these arguments is susceptible of definite proof, and belief in one or the other is more a matter of personal temperament than of historical evidence.

Renaissance taste, as it developed in France and as it reached its final analysis in Boileau, tended to keep art in a separate category from religion. Religion was never more than in this period understood to be founded on a belief in the miraculous. No better proof of this can be

found than in the work of a Pascal, for whom the anti-natural, the "absurd" in Christian belief is the surest mark of its divine origin. The faith of Pascal's hypothetical libertine in reason must be undermined and broken down before it is possible even to bring up the subject of religion. Art, on the contrary, was regarded as an imitation of nature, and could appeal only in so far as it coincided with observable human truth. Not only the miraculous, but the "marvellous" and even the unusual, tended to be banned as being improper subjects for artistic treatment. A La Fontaine, a Boileau, reject with surprising indignation any belief that "good sense" cannot justify, and they have nothing but scorn for the spyglass of the astrologer or the users of divining rods. It is not in this period that a poet could be formed who, like Hugo, would draw satisfaction from the feeling that he was in direct communication with the spiritual world. In other words, a work could only appeal if it remained within the truths of life as they were confirmed by rational experience. Even in the religious plays of the time which were of artistic merit, truth to accepted and natural conceptions of human psychology was the rule. Racine's *Athalie*, the culmination of French classical tragedy as well as of religious drama and the work of an artist of extreme piety, constitutes a sort of demonstration that God acts in verisimilar ways his wonders to perform. Artistically perfect as it is, this play so close to Voltaire's heart is not moving, and the reader is tempted to question whether its earnest author has not succeeded in showing that tragedy as a form of art and Christianity as a subject for art were less and less adapted for great masterpieces.

The sole appeal of classical art, then, was to rationalized experience, and such art was regarded as outside the realm of religion entirely. The vast majority of superior people, from Montaigne to La Bruyère, and many after them, like Buffon, seemed to find no difficulty whatever in conciliating religious belief with artistic, philosophic and scientific skepticism as to the supernatural. Boileau shows the same peevish irritability at the idea of a breach of natural law on the part of God that he might manifest if apprised of a breach of etiquette on the part of the King. Neither was tolerable in his philosophy. Ordinary living, in which was included artistic pleasure, was carried on in accordance with reason and observation, but the profoundest roots of man's nature were imbedded in mystery. Religion, however necessary, could not be talked about. It was too intimate and personal a matter anything that might be said about it was a self-revelation forbidden by decorum. In art as in conversation, it was better taste to leave religion out. Religious discussion was in general banned from society, and indeed showed signs of being banned from the pulpit itself. Molière's Cléante, who would have religion taught by example and not by precept, is the echo of a very general tendency of manners. For just as esthetics tended more and more to be consolidated on a basis of reason, so also did morality. When really violent attacks on religion begin to be made, those of a Fontenelle, a Bayle, a Voltaire, they are directed against all belief in the miraculous, which is to be qualified as "superstition." Behind these attacks seems to lie a confidence that a morality and an esthetics founded on reason and observation suffice for living, and that "mys-

tery" can be left completely out of life. The beginnings and endings of moral law or "le beau idéal" need not be gone into. All that is necessary is to conform to their mandates.

The works of contemporary writers, even of Pascal, are just as completely pledged to the verisimilar, to human and natural truth as it may be rationally observed, as are the plays of Molière. As much as he they present the problem of living as being purely a matter of morals. What, then, impels our author to write in such a way as to be offensive to the religious, where they are not? Can it be that his was a nature too profound to maintain that convenient separation of the practical from the spiritual life which was possible for them? In the *Ecole des Femmes* moral questions only are involved in the relations between Arnolphe and Agnès what is the proper way of bringing up children, what is the proper way to go about choosing a wife? Why, when he talks of these things, must his discourse "sentir le libertinage"? Why does he illustrate the ignorance in which children are kept as to sex by the "enfants par l'oreille," which brings out in such vivid and comic fashion the contrast between what we know of nature and one of the fundamental beliefs of the church? The "Maximes du Mariage" contain a doctrine as to relations between husband and wife that has nothing to do with religion why does Molière bring it forward in such a light as to make it appear that Christianity is on the side of the tyranny of the male? This is in point of fact contrary to what actually occurred in French manners during the Renaissance: it was the civil, not the religious authorities who insisted on the power of the "chef de famille." Why, in *Don Juan*, must

Sganarelle cry out "Mes gages!"⁷ in such a way that belief in the supernatural and in eternal punishment seem to be presented as not natural to man? This quip is not even original with Molière, and had never caused scandal before. Thomas Corneille, in his version, preserves a certain measure of the comic without offending religion by having the valet declare that he will go and be a hermit. Why, in the *Tartuffe*, must Molière present the keeping oneself from even the most normal earthly affections in order to consecrate one's life entirely to God, an attitude prescribed by Jesus to his disciples and common to the saintly in all religions, why must this be presented in such a way as to point a complete contrast between the ordinary life and the consecrated life, and to raise a smile at the expense of the latter? Is it the tyranny of the comic Muse? Is it an instinct for dramatic contrast? Does it correspond to the feelings of his public in regard to the higher regions of the spiritual life? And these feelings, what are they? Are they antagonistic to devotion? Or is the smile merely the consolation of the ordinary man for being thus ordinary? Is this another instance of the satire of heroics, which we have seen to be at the beginnings of Molière's comedy? No society was ever composed mainly of saints, of heroes, or of leaders. May Tom, Dick, and Harry not be pardoned for feeling that there is something to be said for their way of going about life? They know the value of wealth, of daily bread, of independence, of family relationships, of common sense

⁷ cf. Act V, final scene (*after Don Juan has been struck by lightning and swallowed by the earth*) "Ah! mes gages! mes gages! Voilà, par sa mort, un chacun satisfait. Ciel! offensé, lois violées, filles séduites, femmes mises à mal, maris poussés à bout, tout le monde est content, il n'y a que moi seul de malheureux. Mes gages, mes gages, mes gages!"

applied to natural inclination. They and their ancestors before them have kept going on this basis. They have never shone extraordinarily perhaps, but they have kept their heads up, they have done their job, they have continued the race, they have augmented their property, their dignity and their prestige. They have a place in society that society has guaranteed to them, they have achieved a position of security. Can they not afford to laugh at those who think they are born to be too much, to do too much?

Moreover, if we examine the character of Tartuffe himself, what do we find? A rascal, of course, a schemer, a man bent on bettering himself at the expense of his neighbor but without sacrificing the pleasures of the flesh as he does it. As such he is a part of the play his purpose causes the action, his weakness brings about the dénouement. Yet in his speeches he reveals depths in his character that are unnecessary as far as the plot is concerned. His way of comparing the earthly beauty of Elmire to celestial delights cannot but give rise to the impression that Molière, as he enters into the character of his hypocrite, is led to portray in him that inextricable confusion of spiritual and carnal love which often exists in the mystic. This mental confusion in Tartuffe no doubt contributes to his appearing so much more odious, in his courting of Elmire, than is Panurge when he goes to visit the ladies of Paris. Clearmindedness as to one's own motives certainly appears here, in the reaction of the audience to the psychology of Tartuffe, as being the prime essential, not only for a moral and decent life in society, but even of a tolerable life with oneself. The ability to divide and subdivide, and to classify, which for

Descartes was the essential in thought, is no less so for morality, and an application of reason to the origin of one's impulses is a prime necessity for the good life. In more than one particular, the distaste of the audience for *Tartuffe* is close to the distrust of Bossuet for the pietistic Mme Guyon.

Molière shocked the pious by encircling religious beliefs and religious images too closely with laughter. Yet he manages to arouse, as did no other writer of his time, feelings as to the bases of life which were at the same time those of the artist, those of the commoner, and even those of the majority of the sincerely religious. Nature observed by reason, conduct governed by moderation, life on the basis of the known, such convictions as these are made more solid by his comedy. Does not his attack on religion, in which he went beyond most of his contemporaries, show that he was penetrating to the profounder levels of feeling in his public than were they? *Tartuffe* has turned out to be the most popular play in France.



THE SPIRIT OF MOLIERE

SOME thirty-five years ago the French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote a book on laughter which was based almost entirely upon illustrations drawn from French writers of comedy. *Le Rire* carries conviction in many particulars: laughter is, by and large, an exclusively human reaction, and the effect of the mechanical imposed upon the living is irremediably comic. Molière's own method of creating comic characters has in a large measure served as an example for the Bergsonian theory.

Two of Bergson's contentions, while interesting and stimulating, do not, however, seem wholly satisfactory, even when applied to Molière. For Bergson the appeal of the comic is to pure intelligence. Emotion is the enemy of laughter.¹ Furthermore, "laughter is above all a correction . . . its function is to intimidate by humiliating." Through laughter, "society takes vengeance . . . it would not attain its end if it bore the marks of sympathy or goodness." He compares laughter to the foam thrown up by the sea and gathered by a child on the shore. It is "froth with a basis of salt": "the philosopher who picks it up to taste it will find in it . . . a certain dose of bitterness."² This would reduce all laughter to the satiric, and would give it a distinctly

¹ *Le Rire* (1900), pp. 4-6

² *ibid.*, pp. 200-4

moral—or, as Bergson insists with his modern terminology,—a social function.

There is no question that the Bergsonian analysis fits the comedy of Molière in so far as it is a social corrective in which laughter combines with a sense of merely social values to chastise vagaries of conduct. Pedantry, affectation, hypocrisy, avarice, are all “vices” against which Molière directs the laughter of the audience. Spontaneous as the laugh may be, its social rightness is confirmed by the intelligence, or, as Molière would prefer to say, by common sense. It applies particularly to the great comedies, those made for the town. It is in *Tartuffe* and the *Misanthrope* especially that the satire becomes “bitter” in the sense that it seems directed against human aspirations and motives—the love of woman, the love of truth, the love of God—which have meant so much to men. The “vices” of *Alceste* and *Tartuffe* remind us uncomfortably of the most deeply moving efforts of humanity to rise, in this lowly life, above the level of the material. Rousseau, whose distrust of laughter Bergson seems to share, is understandable when he accuses Molière of holding virtue up to ridicule, and for him who would found society entirely on individual values the laughter of such comedy may well be considered as “anarchic.”

Throughout the eighteenth century indeed, the sense of the comic has in general furnished the leaven of social relationships. The entire work of a Voltaire is either pitched in a comic key or, at its most serious, is impervious to the attack of ridicule. Though the evils of wit are well perceived by such philosophers as Helvétius, it is in comic rather than tearful drama that a Beaumarchais reaches his greatest triumphs, and the rise of sensibility fails to drive

laughter from the drawing-room, however many novel-reading devotees it may claim in the closet. *Paul et Virginie*, when it was first read aloud in a salon, was greeted with such ill-disguised smiles that it was three years before its author dared publish it. The sense of the ridiculous may indeed be regarded as one of the prejudices of established civilized society with which the new philosophy had to cope as well as with superstition and custom. If this is more the case in France than in neighboring countries during this period, may it not be because comic expression had reached a higher degree of perfection there than elsewhere? May it not be the great classics of the end of the seventeenth century, whose practice in writing determined so completely the form in which new thoughts were to be cloaked, who are largely responsible for this bending of the French mind to a comic view?

It is true, of course, as a recent writer has said,³ that compared with the exuberance of the sixteenth century, "classicism was grave." Yet with the exception of Racine and Bossuet, the greatest classical writing tends always to the comic. Mme de Maintenon, whom Professor Hazard cites to make his point, cannot indeed be accused of an excessive propensity to gaiety. But the period in which her influence predominated began after the best of classical writing had been done. Does not a smiling if bitter understanding of motive arise from the maxims of La Rochefoucauld, and a gleeful enjoyment of the absurdities of living from the fables of La Fontaine? The downrightness of Boileau is never far from the comic

³ Paul Hazard, "Farces et Farceurs au temps de la Renaissance," *Revue des Deux-Mondes*, October 15, 1934, p. 946

thrust of satire, and the legislator of Parnassus, in his lighter moments, can be even impishly amusing. It is Boileau, it will be remembered, for whom Molière was the greatest writer that the age had produced. Molière who never wrote a good line that was not instinct with the spirit of comedy. The great classics gave to the comic spirit a weight, they clothed it in a language so perfect, that it assumed for them and for coming generations in France an importance which elsewhere it did not have.

A complete examination of this aspect of French culture would be a vast undertaking. The limits of the present study are confined to a review of the work of Molière, and our immediate purpose is to show that the Bergsonian theory of the comic—not to speak of the Gidian contention that Molière is “un écrivain grave”—does not account for the kind of laughter aroused by certain of his plays. Let us assume, for instance, that we are sitting at a children’s matinée of *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*. One will be inclined to wonder whether, when applied to this theaterful of convulsed youngsters, beside themselves with glee at the sight of the great syringes with which the apothecaries are pursuing their vicum, the “hostile gesture” theory of laughter was a complete explanation of what was taking place. The audience knows from unpleasant experience what an enema is, but they also know that the experience is only relatively unpleasant, and as for a syringe the size of those being brandished about on the stage, while it might be encountered in a dream, there is no such thing in reality. The outburst of unbridled merriment with which the children greet this spectacle partakes certainly more of the nature of pure pleasure than of satire. These children

act as Molière would have his audience do: "ils se laissent prendre aux entrailles." Just what "vices" of theirs would be corrected by the sight of the benighted nobleman it is difficult to see.

Certain writers more recent than Bergson have elaborated a conception of laughter which explains perhaps more completely than does his, at the same time the laughter of the child at the syringes and of the sophisticated adult at Alceste made ridiculous in Célimène's drawing-room. These writers examine less the ludicrous quality of what causes laughter than the state of mind of him who experiences it. By so doing, they perceive that laughter is not a matter of pure intelligence, but of feeling, not of bitterness, but of joy. Laughter may be tinged with bitterness, but not necessarily so. There are also other expressions of joy than laughter, and the keenest and profoundest of delights—those of creation, of discovery, of anticipation, of reciprocated affection—doubtless are not usually so expressed. According to one writer, "laughter is restricted in its expression of joy to pleasures that contain relief"⁴. The peculiar joy of laughter lies not in the possibilities of new and delightful experience, but in a sense of comfort that things remain as they are, and that some unpleasant experience presented to the imagination has immediately been exorcised. Laughter expresses gladness that the bases of assurance have been left unimpaired; each laugh salutes a new aspect of their solidity. The laughter excited by Monsieur de Pourceaugnac and the smile which greets Alceste show that the insincerity of society is no more disturbing to our social security than are syringes to our

⁴ J. C. Gregory, *Nature of Laughter* (1924), pp. 59-60

health. Man's heart is no more a perfect organ than his bowels, yet he can manage in general to make out with both. Both, by and large, can be kept functioning, by observation and common sense, by a certain reliance on nature combined with a certain distrust of impulse. Arnolphe and Harpagon are tragic figures to him who feels himself and all men to be the inevitable victims of passion because in passion lie the seeds of their hope as well as of their despair. But they are comic to him who is assured that, however he may feel, he has sense enough to conform to the physical and social realities with which he is surrounded.

There are of course other bases for laughter than this. The pure of heart, like the socially solid, are freed for joy, and the laughter of little children fills the kingdom of heaven. But theirs is not the laughter of this world, in which oversolicitude as to the state of the heart or the state of grace can but lead to trembling and anxiety. The age of Molière felt very keenly the gap between this world and the other, but rarely has an age been more resigned to this one and disposed to put up with it. The Jesuits understood the value of purity of heart, and invented most ingenious ways for the faithful to convince themselves that they still possessed it. But for Molière as for Pascal their casuistry was far more a matter of keeping up a social front than of real attachment to the divine. Molière, however, would not disagree with the Jesuits as to the necessity for the individual of maintaining his honor in society. He differs from Pascal in that his laughter gives assurance that it is possible for you to do so while remaining reasonably true to yourself, in all frankness and honesty, without affecting constantly to be

what you are not. The world is not perfect, far from it, nor is the human heart. But they can work out a solution together—with laughter. Nowhere is the power of laughter for individual and social balance more deeply sensible than in the comedy of Molière.

The morality of Molière, although it bears an obvious relation to the social "set-up" in which the Frenchman of 1660 found himself, nevertheless goes much deeper than that and is quite general in its scope. Its broadest principle is the necessity of accepting society. "Social" in this sense, and "moral," tend thus to be identical terms. An attempt to satisfy the innermost and profoundest needs of man can lead but to solitude, or madness, and the former is no more possible, conceivable, nor indeed desirable than the latter. Molière's is a city morality, where life is more a matter of perpetual contact with others than with nature or things. The drawing-room tends more and more to be a sufficient setting for any comedy. The worker in the Gobelins manufactory is excluded from his picture, and also the peasant as a tiller of the soil. The work of man upon things was simply not included in life as he lived it, or as he portrayed it. Nor was, for that matter, the work of man upon the world of dreams or pure speculation. The precious, or indeed the overdevout, represents a life devoted to dreaming, pedants and doctors a life devoted to speculation. Both are represented, at bottom, as efforts of the personality to make a false impression on society. Whether he will or not, man is always an actor, with an audience in mind. For Molière as for Shakespeare, the world is a stage, but one on which strutting can arouse but laughter. The joy of the actor who glories in the world of his own illusion

dissolves before the penetration and the clarity of his insight. Knowledge and understanding are but a bitter consolation for belief, but if accompanied by laughter and human kindness—a trait which makes all the difference between *Alceste* and *Philinte*—they provide an atmosphere in which the play that is life can be gone through with.

Is, however, saying that the comedy of Molière is useful for life equivalent to saying that it is a low form of art? Is it an art of compromise, in which the distinction between the ideal and the actual is lost? Or rather has the Frenchman and the French artist of the seventeenth century become so persuaded of the enormity of the gap between what is and what might be, that he prefers to lose sight of the latter altogether? Such a feeling as this has undoubtedly been entertained in regard to Molière as well as the other writers of his time, particularly during the romantic period. For the poets of the nineteenth century, the "significant comic" is a low form of art. To lead everyone and anyone to suppose that he is qualified to pass judgment by his laughter upon the human lot is for them, contemptuous of the philistine as they were, close to what the seventeenth century reproached the mountebanks and clowns for doing in the fairs. The "sudden glory" theory of Hobbes as to laughter has colored most modern pronouncements on the subject, and as the artist and philosopher are felt more and more to be divinely mad, so the merely sane tend to appear presumptuous, gross and vulgar. As poets and prophets have urged more and more that the effort of the world be directed toward assuring the well-being of everybody, and as society has more and more accepted this task, the

mass for whom all tends to be done, is coming increasingly to be regarded as inert in itself, and capable of life only in so far as its leaders concentrate its attention on magic and life-giving images and formulae. We are far, in Molière, from such a view as this.

The most important social phenomenon of the Renaissance in Western Europe is the ever more inflexible division of society in accordance with rank or station rather than function, and the instinctive attribution of higher qualities to those whose position in society was more elevated. This actual situation had its repercussion upon theories of art, as is seen in the discussion of Aristotle's doctrine as to the sort of man worthy to be a hero of tragedy. Must he possess certain qualities of character, or was it enough that he be a king? As Renaissance tragedy was written, he was always a king, or at least among the great of the world. A Balzac may choose a vermicelli merchant as an example of the tragedy of paternal love, but not so a Shakespeare. The actions of a Rodrigue or a Nicomède are inconceivable in a commoner, because their rank alone was the reason of their being called upon to perform them. As the importance of station increases in men's minds, so does it become more and more difficult, in serious writing, to distinguish qualities of character in an individual from those inherent in the station which he occupies, and thus cause it to be felt—as was the ideal for tragedy—that he is a representative of universal humanity. In particular, the commoner experiences more and more difficulty in imagining himself in the place of a noble, and indeed as his own place in society becomes more fixed and recognized, he feels less and less inclined to do so.

It is a fact that the whole tendency of the idealistic literature of the early part of the century is to turn men's minds toward the noble and elevated. What is true of the tragedies of Corneille is even more striking in the grand romance. The only society worthy to be contemplated is one composed exclusively of princes and princesses, the ardor and delicacy of whose feelings for one another are merely set off and "illustrated," made illustrious, by the death of thousands upon the battlefield in their service. Wars that devastate entire kingdoms serve merely, for Mlle de Scudéry, to render more exquisite the moment when Artamène meets Mandane. As precious literature continues to be written, plays as well as novels, the artificiality of the ideal world which they present becomes more and more unbearably absurd, and even the *Bérénice* of Racine, in which the republican aspiration of the Roman people is not worthy to be opposed, in dramatic conflict, to a sigh from a lovely queen, has appeared to many as more of a madrigal than a tragedy.

The realistic novel of the period, in which a picture is given of the life of the bourgeoisie, is no less eloquent of the importance attached to station than are the more heroic genres. In the *Caquets de l'Accouchée*, the ladies take up their places in the chamber of the happy mother in accordance with their relative rank. Even serving-maids are found in the assembly, though they remain near the door. The characters of Furetière's *Roman Bourgeois*, which appeared in the same year as the *Misanthrope*, are almost oppressively class-conscious, and the contrast between the quality and the bourgeoisie, and the desire of the latter to ape the former, are brought out on every page.

Everything that we know moreover of the period tends to show the attention paid to distinctions of social status from the top to the bottom of the social scale. A duke and peer was a duke and peer, under Louis XIV, a marquis was a marquis, and a street-porter a street-porter. Before the law and before opinion, the social status of the individual was the first thing to be considered in his relations with other members of society. For Pascal, it was the number of his valets that decided, and rightly, which of two men should go through a door first. The original founding of the academy of Painting and Sculpture grew out of discontent felt by artists that no distinction was made among painters and sculptors, between those who did portraits or statues and those who painted houses or carved lintels. In that society, a baron was higher than a knight, and a physician, member of the Faculty, was far above a surgeon, who was but little better than a barber—a “laquais botté,” as Guy Patin calls him. A vast distance separated the Duc de Saint-Simon, a mere peer, from his comrade the Duc de Chartres, who was “enfant de France.” The kingdom was ready to go to war, in 1661, over a question of precedence. All the notables of a parish were convoked, on one occasion, and went into a long debate as to whether a young doctor should march in front of two councillors in a religious procession. Hot indignation was aroused, in such a satirist as La Bruyère, that the mere possession of money should give a former domestic servant a town house and an entry among the best people.

Now it might be supposed that Molière, like his friend Furetière, as he bent more and more effort to painting a picture of his age, would have made great use of questions

of station and of precedence. It is true indeed that "conditions" come in for a share of comic treatment. The maintenance of prestige in the eyes of the public is made a matter of hilarious comedy in the case of doctors, from the *Amour Médecin* (1665) to the *Malade Imaginaire* (1673). In the latter, the solemn rites by which a neophyte was inducted into the profession were parodied down to minute details, and the hocus-pocus of the Faculty of Medicine was as broadly if not as pitilessly exposed as had been the disputes of the Sorbonne fifteen years before by Pascal. From the provincial pretentiousness of the country noble, too, in Monsieur and Madame de Sotenville, Monsieur de Pourceaugnac and the Comtesse d'Escarbagnas, Molière draws some of his most outrageous buffoonery, and the dispute between the music and dancing masters of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* as to the value of their respective professions makes one of the most frankly comic scenes in all his plays. The overdose of class-consciousness with which Madame Jourdain and George Dandin are afflicted is, in its way, as comic in the longing for modesty of station as is the thirst for distinction in the others. The plot of *Amphitryon* turns very largely on station. If the opening scene of this play be compared with the Alain-Georgette scenes of the *Ecole des Femmes*, it is apparent that whereas in the earlier play we are merely in the presence of two country louts, the delicious comedy of the dialogue between Mercury and the Night springs entirely from the flavor of elegant domesticity with which their every observation is impregnated. These two immortals talk exactly like the butler and housekeeper in a great family. Sosie, also, is

perhaps the nearest to a real servant as distinguished from a valet of comedy in all Molière's plays

It will be noted that all the plays in which laughter thus springs from station were composed after the troupe, with the title of *Troupe du Roi*, acquired in August 1665, was finally established in Paris, and during the period in which it was called most frequently before the court Molière in them has the court audience in mind, and it is interesting that he should have felt satire of station more appropriate before this audience than before the town. Was it perhaps because the courtier, feeling that his birth made his position unshakeable, could afford better to laugh at those who paid undue attention to theirs? Whatever this may be, let us not forget that all of these court comedies, with the exception of the *Amphitryon*, were hastily composed, and that the satire which they contain is the least profound and the best-natured in Molière's work. It does happen, however, that the comic ray penetrates them to the mainspring of action, and in such case, it is qualities of character that stand revealed rather than aspects of station. Monsieur Jourdain is of course comic because his desires lead him to rise above his station in life and thus to disrupt that fixity of social status which was regarded as the normal, but it is because of the desire that he is comic, not because he is a bourgeois. Doctors are pedants even more than physicians; the gentlefolk of Limoges or Basse-Normandie are even more stupid creatures than they are "hobereaux."

This trait will become increasingly striking if we pass from court comedies to town plays. As early as the *Précieuses*, his first picture of manners, Molière's satire is directed neither against valets nor against marquises, but

against a kind of man who might be either a valet or a marquis. In the great comedies, with which he took the most pains, a picture of manners unrolls in which the condition of the characters tends to be lost from sight. In the *Misanthrope*, the greatest of them all, a certain familiarity with the period and the language is required in reading the play, to realize that these persons are great ladies and gentlemen, adorned by the prestige that opinion attaches to great names, and separated by a gulf from the "bonne bourgeoisie" of the *Tartuffe* or the *Femmes Savantes*. Many critics have attempted to show the gentlemanly delicacy with which Molière has endowed Alceste, but it must be confessed that it takes a discerning eye to detect the difference in this particular between him and the Ariste, for example, of the *Ecole des Maris*. One must be a veritable Moliériste to be able to say, off-hand, whether the line

Plus on aime quelqu'un, moins il faut qu'on le flatte,
or the line

De tous vos façonniers on n'est point les esclaves,
occur in the *Misanthrope* or the *Tartuffe*. Is it Eliante, of the *Misanthrope*, or Elmire, of the *Tartuffe*, who says

Non on est aisément dupé par ce qu'on aime,
Et l'amour-propre engage à se tromper soi-même?

Do not scenes like that of mutual criticism between Céliamène and Arsinoé give the impression that the difference between these great ladies and a pair of fishwives is more a matter of manners than of fineness of feeling? No such impression could come from a reading of Mlle de Scudéry, to say nothing of Chrétien de Troyes. The

characters of the *Misanthrope* are not primarily the dukes, marquises, viscountesses, which their counterparts in reality would have been, but are compromisers, coquettes, prudes, fops, asses, and misanthropists. Of course their idleness marks these people as members of that society in which, as the Chevalier de Méré would have it, good manners could be developed to their highest perfection because no one had anything else to do. Yet one of the traits by which Molière has marked the most profoundly this aspect of their lives—the “grand flandrin de vicomte,” who was seen, for three-quarters of an hour together, spitting into a well “pour faire des ronds”—is one even more fitting to a lackey than to a great lord. The portrait gallery of Célimène contains perhaps figures especially appropriate to her circle, yet it must be admitted that “un extravagant,” “un homme tout mystère,” “un ennuyeux conteur,” “un pauvre esprit de femme,” “un égoïste,” “un homme qui se travaille à dire de bons mots,” are not to be found exclusively among the best people.

In other words, Molière gives a picture of society in which character is shown as more important than station in the relations of men with each other. Society appears more comic when people are regarded as varieties of the *genus homo* than when they are considered as occupants of this or that position or bearers of this or that title. His comedy is more a comedy of character than a comedy of manners, more a picture of universal humanity than a picture of contemporary society. Or rather, his audience, contemplating the vision of themselves with which he presented them, felt that life as they were living it conformed to the inevitable necessity which the very nature

of mankind imposed upon life everywhere. Their laughter sprang, not from being reassured as to a disturbance of conventional social values, but from being reassured as to a disturbance of universal human values. The conventions of society were felt, at this moment, to be easily adaptable to the essential needs of human nature. Men gathered from Molière the impression that they were seeing themselves, but yet also and at the same time man as he must everywhere exist. They were made to see the essential characteristics of humanity so clearly, that in the light of them the peculiar aspect of institutions here or there, now or formerly, tended to appear as of relatively minor importance. The comic spirit gives confidence to him who possesses it in the islands of the Pacific as at the court of the Great Mogul, as more than one traveller and explorer was to prove in the new age of discovery that was beginning even under the Sun King. So long as man is man, life can be lived. The essential in life being human relationships in society, the game of life becomes playable in so far as its elements are known. The feeling of knowing human nature better, of being more perfectly conscious of the springs of its action and the limits of its possibilities for good or evil is a part of the pleasure experienced by him who laughs with Molière. It is not bitterness, it is not hostility, but the confidence that this world, absurd though it may be, is not only a possible but also an enjoyable sojourn for him in whose mind the comic gleam is ever ready to shine.

In its light, man stands revealed as man, and not as the possessor of more or less authority or prestige. Fathers have no more dignity in the eyes of Molière's sons than have masters in the eyes of his valets. The poetic feeling

with which a Rousseau or a Greuze will endeavor to surround the family relationship is conspicuously absent from his comedies. As such relationship was felt to be more solid, so was there less necessity for painting an ideal picture of it. It is idle to look for certain conduct from Don Juan because of his "quality" "Eh oui, sa qualité!" says Sganarelle, "la raison en est belle, et c'est par là qu'il s'empêcherait des choses" Don Juan is more of a "méchant homme" than he is a "grand seigneur," and if he is a menace to society, it is more because he, a lover, regards himself as a conqueror, than because his name and his manners cheat M. Dimanche out of the payment of his bill.

To all, the great lord as well as the humble, comedy teaches that life is more an adjustment of his own passions to those of others than the enjoyment of his privileges or the ability that they give him to impose his will on his inferiors. Men appear, in the eyes of the Comic Muse, as strangely equal.

This picture of the time of Louis XIV turns out to have been more profoundly satisfactory to the French than that to be found in the works of Bossuet, where a primary importance is attached to position because of the responsibilities devolving upon the individual from the fact of his birth. It is very clear to us now—as it began to be only too plain to a petulant Saint-Simon—that the French people were no longer stratified from the highest to the lowest in accordance with the importance of the function which each was called upon to fulfill in the nation's life. The policy of Louis XIV was tending to make each about as important as the other. In his court, it was an impertinence for a cabinet minister, essential

to the state as his function might be, to assume the dignity that birth only could bring. Such impertinence was tolerated, however, and Louvois made even princes of the blood address him as "Monseigneur." Equality under the State as an ideal is not so far off in France, however may have appeared the galloping coach of a fine gentleman sweeping the rabble before it. It is satisfaction with this situation which is expressed by the laughter of Molière. By laughter the lesser citizen could console himself for his relative obscurity, by laughter the higher citizen consoled himself for his relative nullity, and for a time at least the balance of society was maintained.

Thus it is that this mere comic poet came soon to be regarded as a genius, the greatest that his people had produced. The sense of equality which his comedy sets up is not different from that of the medieval fabliau or farce, but it is significant that under the Sun King a descendant of those humble and anonymous entertainers of the thirteenth century should turn out to be the greatest figure of all. May it not be that this sense of equality on earth, which no one took seriously in the age of Saint Thomas Aquinas—death, the great leveller, brought equality then, through divine justice—may it not be that this feeling was on the point of becoming an aim of great moment for mankind? It would have been madness to suggest it, when Molière was writing. Yet somehow, as it is sensed to contain the basic truth of humanity, it appears as desirable. The laughter that greeted the comedy of Molière was certainly based on the feeling that underlies all laughter, namely that all is well with the world, that whatever appears to threaten essential welfare really does not, or at least need not do so. Beneath it is to be

found a conviction as to ultimate reality, and ultimate reasons for assurance and contentment. The laughter of Molière implies a confidence in the nature of man, of all men. The solidarity and universality of the human, that is the anchor. Let us not push this point to the absurd, making of Molière a precursor of democracy and universal suffrage, for the only references to political questions in his comedy are by way of praise of the King. But let us not forget, at the same time, that Bossuet felt it necessary to warn the Dauphin, in recounting the history of Greece, that when all the members of a society become too pleased with their situation, having been brought to this happy state—as Bossuet would have it—by an authoritarian government based on the immutability of custom, they may be soon tempted to throw off their shackles and think themselves capable of governing themselves.

It is the comic spirit as well as the comic technique of Molière which prevails in comic plays and indeed in all comic writing throughout the eighteenth century. Yet there is a change, beginning subtly with Regnard, Dancourt and Lesage, and a new butt of wit appears, grows, and reaches its final figure in Beaumarchais. Condition, more and more, is the subject of eighteenth century comedy, and character less and less. From *Alceste* to the Count of the *Mariage de Figaro*, your noble is less and less a lover, more and more an aristocrat. The shaft of satire, now, is directed not so much at human frailty than at the privileged classes of society whose existence makes a mockery of that equality of all mankind which is the truth of human nature and of life. As aristocrats provoke satire ever keener, so those "conditions" on which the welfare

of society is felt to depend, merchants and fathers of families, appear as ever more touching and admirable. A comic Monsieur Jourdain is inconceivable, after Molière, and when Lesage does him over, in Turcaret, he has neither children nor a legitimate business. By 1765, in Sedaine's Vanderk, he begins to take on proportions almost heroic in the feeling he stirs as to the desirability and usefulness of such men as he in society. It is true that Vanderk has no successors, and remains alone of his species. The French would have no Roland made of a trader and moneychanger. Sedaine gives up, after this, the serious, realistic play, and bends his efforts to the stirring of sweet emotion through the more fanciful and less lifelike opera.

The case of Beaumarchais is even more interesting from this angle, for he, like Sedaine, tried his hand at the homely, sentimental play, and then, when unsuccessful, fell back on comedy. The gaiety of Figaro, however, was less assured than that of Mascarille and Scapin: he hastened to laugh at everything, it will be remembered, for fear of having to weep at it. Mortals are no more and no less equal, for Beaumarchais, than for Molière, in so far as they are human. But for Beaumarchais, their inequality in society is a crying shame.

Molière began his career playing heroes, he ended it playing Pantaloons. In the last and perhaps the most hilarious of his comedies, he used the very struggle of his poor body with death to sway the more completely his audience with inextinguishable laughter. "It is a point of honor with me," he had said to Bouleau, "not to give up." Life counts, not death. If the shade of his old master Lucretius really were in the gloom of Orcus—*tenebras*

Orci—and news of the world reached down there, it must have chuckled with approval over that performance of the *Malade Imaginaire*, when for a moment the vital motions could prevail,

Et quasi iam leti dominantem in corpore motum
Discutere. .

Profound as was his understanding of the weakness of mortal nature, his spirit triumphs over it to the end. Not enough attention indeed has been paid to the extraordinary contrast between the way his life was lived and the possibilities of life which appear in his comedies. Boileau, when he presents himself to his public, does so humorously, but truly. And so La Fontaine. But nothing could be further from all we know of Molière than the leisurely, ironical urbanity of the "raisonneurs" of his plays, who are often referred to as his spokesmen. If ever there was a life in which no heed was given to traditional bases of assurance—family, honorable profession, reputation as well as common prudence—it was Molière's. He began his mature life by throwing all this over. What did he find to put in its place? Effort, constant striving, invention, ingenuity, responsibility, maintenance of good humor, of balance, in the midst of the disillusion, the discouragement, the ever-recurring new and unexpected difficulties that his chosen career reserved for him. In all his work there is no hint that such a life as that might after all be a solution for many. There is no hint that life lived on the traditional basis is not the good one. His comedy presents no new picture of the world. There is no evidence that this incessantly active man felt on this account any superiority over the complacently moderate,

not a sign that he felt a glory in his own energy, activity and steadfastness of purpose: it is not Molière who would affirm that "ceux qui vivent, ce sont ceux qui luttent." No suggestion in him that the constant following of a single but ill-defined aim may be a greater achievement than the maintaining with obstinacy, like a Cornelian hero, a well defined and generally understood ideal.

Having voluntarily become an outcast from the society into which he was born in order to devote himself to that art, of all arts, which demands the most immediate and constantly renewed response from those for whom it is made, the development of his comedy is at the same time that of the needs of his compatriots and that of his own spirit. To consider Molière as a "captive genius," while possible, would not appear to be the most illuminating angle from which to regard his work. His nature, his ideal, his aptitude, his effort, his experience, all collaborate incessantly with the nature and ideal of his public, its particular situation and its profoundest requirements, to make of his comedies no more the product of an individual imagination than the expression of an attitude toward life that would be that of his people and of his age. His case is perhaps the best example of how French culture, concentrated in Paris, develops from the people rather than from the successive achievements of a few great spirits. In France perhaps more than elsewhere, it has been impossible to separate the artist from society. If the comic bent of the French mind was as assured as is noted by Mme de Staël, is it not largely because it was crystallized in the masterpieces of Molière, who, as Lanson says, best represents his contemporaries? What makes the laughter of Molière at once so free, so

profound, and withal so subtle? What gives it both the heartiness of a Rabelaisian guffaw and the acuity of a Voltairean smile? Is it not that to the waning value of the triumphant personality as felt by Rabelais and the rising value of the understanding reason as felt by Voltaire is added a measure of satisfaction with the institutions of society as they existed? That situation, which was approximated in French feeling during the years of Molière's greatest activity more closely perhaps than at any other time in French history, cannot but be the ideal situation for any society, and one toward which all societies must constantly strive. A society pledged wholly to opportunity for the individual, or wholly to order under the State, is bound to be a less civilized and indeed less perfect society than one in which some sort of compromise is hit upon between vigor of personality, stability of custom and enlightened acceptance of authority. Such the French had, or thought they had, under Louis XIV. They regard him who painted it as the greatest of their poets.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

As was explained in the Editor's Foreword, we did not think it necessary to supplement Percy Chapman's study with a full-length critical apparatus. Here is, however, a short book-list which may facilitate further study, either in French or in English, of Molière's life and works

I

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