HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MOLIERE

(1622-1673)

Major works (dramatic)

The Affected Young Ladies. 1659
Sganarelle, or the Imaginary Cuckold. 1660
The School for Husbands. l661
The School for Wives. 1662
Critique of the School for Wives. 1663
The Versailles Impromptu. 1663
Tartuffe, or the impostor. 1664
Love is the Doctor. 1665
The Misanthrope. 1666
The Doctor in spite of himself. 1666
Amphitryon. 1668
George Dandin, or the abashed husband. 1668
The Miser. 1668
The Bourgeois Gentleman. 1670
The Impostures of Scapin. 1671
The Learned Ladies. 1672
The Imaginary Invalid. 1673

Biography

Moliere was born in Paris. His father was at the time the official upholsterer (furnisher) to the King, a position he had acquired by contract purchase, and through which he was able to provide the family a certain social status. Moliere himself, meanwhile, had from early life been attracted to the theater; in l640 he struck up a meaningful friendship with an Italian actor who was performing in Paris. Meanwhile Moliere was completing his education—a strict classical foundation included—at the Jesuit Collège de Clermont. He added a period of study of law, and was admitted to the bar in 1641.

Moliere was expected to follow in his father's career footsteps, but instead decided to go into the theater, a controversial decision, because the stage and acting were not considered respectable elements of society. (Actors could not be buried in the hallowed ground of a cemetery. The young man, who was at that stage simply Jean Baptiste Poquelin, changed his name to Moliere, his new stage name, to spare his family embarrassment. Thus was a new career launched, with the collaboration of the actress, Madeleine Béjart, with whom Moliere would be connected until l672.

Moliere and Madeleine Béjart joined a theater troupe—and served two prison terms thanks to the troupe's unpaid debts—before moving on to a new troupe, with which together they traveled and acted throughout France, during the following thirteen years. (A little less than a century earlier, Shakespeare had been forming his own acting company in London, and before long acting within it in his own plays.) In 1658 Moliere's play *The Doctor In Love* was performed for King Louis XIV, and caught the monarch's fancy. The King's brother became a patron of the troupe, and Moliere returned to Paris to live and work.

Much of Moliere's mature creation and acting revolved around the pleasure, and support, of the court. In l662 he presented, before the King, *The School for Wives*, a play concerning a controversial topic which drew protests, and fascinating critical explanations from Moliere himself. (The play involves he effort of a calculating gentleman, to prepare for himself a wife who will never betray him; he raises her, to this end, from the age of four, leaving her in a nunnery until she is seventeen and can join him.) Moliere is from

that time on part of the theatrical buzz of the city, and widely recognized for his boldness. The critical discussions Moliere mounted, in the course of defending *The School for Wives*, did a lot to enhance the dignity of comedy in French culture—to our day.

In l664 Moliere was invited to perform his play *Tartuffe, or the Impostor* before the King at Versailles. As a religious hypocrite, Tartuffe himself, the main character of the play, aroused the fury of an influential religious group, the Society of the Holy Sacrament. In l669, once more, the power of the Society weakened, and the play was allowed to be performed, with great success. Once more Moliere succeeded in his presentation of controversial material, and broadened the tolerance parameters of the French stage

Moliere was looking ahead, at this point, to a period of theatrical ups and downs. The King continued to support him, but when he wrote at his most sophisticated level, as In *The Misanthrope* (1666), he dealt with themes too subtle for his audience—philosophical skepticism—and the box office did little business. In *The Miser,*two years later, he failed to catch public attention. Financial problems were accumulating, and furthermore Moliere was slipping into bad health. In a performance of his last work, *The imaginary Invalid* (1673), a nagging long term cough turned into seizures. Moliere died that night, attended only by two nuns—his right to see a priest, for the last rites, having been denied.

Achievements

Critique Moliere was a master critic of society, in an age when nothing like a close up attack on the ills of social life existed in France. (Rabelais and Montaigne, in the sixteenth century, were deeply suspicious of social pretense, but did not make a scalding view of such pretense their central theme.) Moliere does not criticize the society of his time from a 'sociological' perspective, as Marx will do two centuries later, but rather rips apart the universal pretensions of major player-types within the society.

Poetics Moliere's management of the classical French verse couplet, the alexandrine, is unsurpassed. He is able to make these rhyming couplets appear natural—in fact the only possible form that the character in question could possibly have used. To serious French users of their language, today, Moliere's French appears the central achievement of language-making; as for a long time Shakespeare's English has been taken to represent the highest possibilities of written English.

Contemporary Moliere eschewed the use of classical Greek and Roman characters, in the creation of his comedy. (His equally brilliant dramatic contemporaries, Racine and Corneille, wrote classical, or sometimes Biblical, characters into their comedic imaginations.) The result, in Moliere, is not 'popular literature,' for the characters in Moliere are aristocrats, but literature concerning figure-types drawn from Moliere's own time.

Humor Moliere is a master of situational humor—not wordplay, not sarcasm—the kind that juxtaposes religious fakes, like Tartuffe, with normal bourgeois believers, or M. Jourdain, 'the bourgeois gentleman,' who discovers to his surprise that he has been speaking 'prose' all along, with the straight men and women whose mere existence is a mockery of him.

Themes

Characters Moliere creates his finest work around the personality of *someone trapped in a single conspicuous failing: jealousy, envy, avarice, excessive ambition.* It is as though Tartuffe is defined by hypocrisy, Alceste by misanthropy, or the Miser by his greed. This identification of a character by a single (or slightly more) trait has its roots in classical thinking, especially in the *Characters* of Theophrastus, 3rdcent. B.C.E., which is an original in the western science of character.

Norms There is a normative position, implicit in Moliere's writing, which is part of the classical comic tradition. It goes like this. If I am to pillory foibles I must have in me a sense of the right, proper, or normative. That will be my angle from which to judge; it will be common sense, or the common right knowledge of one's time. Theme number two: the *perasiveness of the normative.*

Irony Alceste, the misanthrope, acts out a characteristic theme of Moliere. He is too honest, in his insistence on 'always telling the truth,' and on 'no small talk or courtly chit chat.' His inner drive seems to be, to tell it as it is at all times. Unfortunately for him, though, he falls in love, and under the influence of romance becomes as venal and human as the rest of his society. The theme is this: *in the end we are all fallible*.

Society *Society is where the action of life is*. Moliere is one hundred percent the dramatist of society. Social norms define the actions and reactions, the anxieties and exaltations of Moliere's characters. One might contrast Shakespeare, in this regard. Of course his high drama, even Lear or Macbeth, is about the interactions of figures of society, and yet the ultimate proof of the character is not his or her relation to others, but his relation to himself (and the inner 'gods' he—or she, in the case of Lady Macbeth-- is struggling with.)

Characters

Molière creates characters about whom we feel, from the start, that we 'know what kind of person they are.' They spring from his and our sense of familiar character types: *the nouveau riche*, always with us, always goofing up socially; *the misanthrope,*always declaiming against human folly, and looking for a place to hide, from the absurdities of social life; the *hypocrite*, proclaiming his too too perfect purity of soul, while in fact having his eyes on Madame's bodice and Monsieur's pocket book; the s*calliwag,*who is always on the *qui vive*to make a buck, who knows how to roll with any punches, and who can turn any situation to his own advantage; t*he purveyor of wise saws,* who can always come up with a right-on passage from the ancient moralists, and who, as for himself, is beyond any kind of reproach.

Molière's proclivity, for creating in terms of such staple characters—we have just given short descriptions of major Moliere persons, **Monsieur Jourdain, Alceste, Tartuffe, Sganarelle, Cleante**—is the trademark of his crisp humor, and clearly enough springs from the way he saw life, in terms of repeating character patterns. It might seem, therefore, that Moliere is coming from a place entirely critical of mankind, out to ridicule our kind. A closer look, though, will show that Molière shades his portraits subtly. For all his ridiculous naivete, in thinking that he can be brought to represent upper class life style, M. Jourdain is far from hateful. He is trying, and in doing so makes himself an ass but a human one, by no means hateful. Alceste is a critic of mankind, no friend even of the fake cliché's—*how are you, my friend, I'm fine*—we exchange with one another, in order to maintain the stupid social order. And yet he has a human weakness that shows through all his gruffness: he is in love, and is bent out of shape to prove himself loveable—at least to his beloved. Tartuffe, the Hypocrite, is a pretentious jerk, yet he is so buffoonish at times, say when he is trying to make out with Mme. Orgon, that we laugh as him almost as an old friend. As for Sganarelle, Moliere here creates the scalliwag we all find amusing, until he runs off with our own credit card; or appears as a fake doctor who will be responsible for removing *our*appendix. Clèante may be a purveyor of truisms, but like all such folks he hits the target now and then. That is just what he does in his game-changing insights into Tartuffe, who has fooled many members of the family.