

L'ESPRIT DE MOLIÈRE

An Examination of the Comedy of Molière etc.

by

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A MASTER'S REPORT

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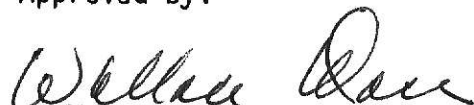
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L'ESPRIT DE MOLIÈRE

AN EXAMINATION OF THE COMEDY OF MOLIÈRE WITH
COMMENTARY BY GEORGE MEREDITH AND HENRI BERGSON

A MASTER'S REPORT

SPRING, 1975

PAMELA HILL

C'EST UNE ÉTRANGE ENTREPRISE
QUE CELLE DE FAIRE RIRE LES
HONNÊTE GENS.

MOLIERE

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, who later took the stage name 'Molière', was born in Paris in January, 1622, at his parents' house in the Rue St. Honoré. Little is known of the facts of his childhood and youth, but his attraction to the theatre is indisputable. At the time when Molière commenced his career, the stage was a dubious vocation at best, and comedy little more than an artificial genre. Molière triumphed by establishing the dignity and authority of the comic theatre in France, creating a highly developed and powerful form of artistic expression in plays that are a superbly balanced orchestration of low comedy and elevated wit.

Molière constructed his plays upon a foundation of laughter whose range and depth gave comedy a new dimension. These plays transform comedy into a profound instrument of moral judgment and their spirit and grace lies but a hair's breadth from the tragic.

Before consideration of Molière's work it is important to understand the state of mind of the French people at the time he was writing. The King's minority {Louis XIV} caused trouble and uncertainty. He was five years of age at the death of his father in 1643, and authority passed to his mother, Anne of Austria. With Mazarin continuing Richelieu's iron-handed policy the Regency maintained internal order for five years.

The Parisian theatre had begun to assume importance at this time, although Paris had only two recognized playhouses, the Hôtel du Marais, where Corneille presented Le Cid ten years earlier in 1633, and the more famous Hôtel de Bourgogne where Montfleury was the leading actor.¹

¹D. B. Lewis, Molière - The Comic Mask .

{London: Eyre & Spotteswoode, 1959}, p. 15.

The theatres presented other tragedies by Corneille, comedies by Rotrou, farces which included the Hôtel de Bourgogne's trio of stock comedians Gros-Guillaume, Gaultier Gargouille, and Turlupin, and pieces by Du Ryer, Mairet, and Alexander Hardy.

More noticeable influence on Molière came from Le Petit-Bourbon where the Italian Company of Giuseppe Bianchi had been playing since 1639 at the invitation of Louis XIII.² Their principal comedian was Tiberio Fiorillo, known as 'Scaramouche', and considered by many to have been a model for Molière, the actor.

While Molière was traveling the provinces with his acting troupe in 1649, Paris was in a turmoil. A sedition group, Les Fronde, under the guidance of the Prince of Condé, had driven Mazarin and the court to Rueil. Some discontent was aimed at Mazarin who was not a nobleman, not even a Frenchman. The ambitious nobles and the members of parliament used their resistance themes: the abuses of tax collectors, the impoverished state of the people, to provoke eager response from the people.

But when Mazarin was able to win Condé over to his side, and committed 15,000 men to his command, the parliamentary and bourgeois Fronde sued for peace. The treaty of Rueil was signed at the end of March, 1649.³

Now Condé demanded a large share in the government for his reward and when he was neglected, began to gather again the support of the nobles. When the Queen-Mother ordered Condé arrested along with Conti, his brother-in-law and soon to be patron of Molière and his company, actual civil war

²Lewis, p. 23.

³Percy Chapman, The Spirit of Moliere.

{New York: Russel & Russel, Inc.}, p. 180.

broke out, both in Paris and the provinces. The early release of the prisoners failed to arrest the rebellion and Conde withdrew to the south and Spain - an enemy country.

France was in a total state of confusion. Mazarin fled to Germany and Turenne, once a "Frondeur" himself, headed the troops loyal to the crown against the Spanish contingent. Mademoiselle, daughter of Monsieur, uncle of the King, shut the gates of Orleans against the royal forces and opened those of Paris to the rebellion depriving Turenne of an imminent victory in July, 1652.

This time the movement was definitely aristocratic in origin and the goals which they were pursuing, money and station, were quickly becoming evident to the bourgeois.

When Mazarin returned to Paris in February of 1653, the Fronde had completely collapsed. The King re-entered Paris in October, Condé was condemned to death and Conti saved himself by marrying Mazarin's niece.

Amazingly enough, the more serious people of the country felt that the answer lay, not in strengthening the Parliament which had proven as selfish as the aristocracy, but in the firm establishment of the King alone at the head of the government. A group of militia who waited upon the King at Saint-Germain to welcome him back had their spokesman say "We long only for the glory of serving you and I would be disavowed by all my fellow-citizens were I to speak otherwise".⁴

The French were the only nation in Europe who idolized their sovereign. In fact, nothing that happens in France from 1660 on can be understood

⁴Chapman, p. 183.