

L'ESPRIT DE MOLIÈRE

An Examination of the Comedy of Molière etc.

by

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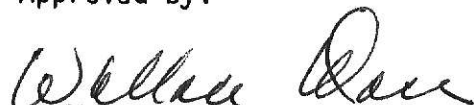
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L'ESPRIT DE MOLIÈRE

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.

unless the force can be felt of that "current of opinion which ... bore Louis XIV toward the ideal of the generations of his time"⁵

The early part of Louis XIV's reign curiously brought about a union of extreme enlightenment with this adoration of the sovereign. "Tout prospère dans une monarchie où l'on confond les intérêts de l'Etat avec ceux du prince," says La Bruyère. The experience of the Fronde, following the tyranny of Richelieu had proven the ideals of heroism led only to a waste of human lives. Disavowal of the pursuit of personal glory was the only solution for the nobility while this same disavowal brought for the commoner the satisfactions of peace and revived prosperity. The gentleman King, Racine says, "toujours tranquille, toujours maître de lui, sans inégalité, sans faiblesse, et enfin le plus sage et le plus parfait de tous les hommes" fulfills for a nation the ideal for a perfect life.

These thoughts may seem some distance from comedy and Molière. Yet this feeling the French had for their King caused many reactions of the people of the 1660's and the plays that were written for them. Not only were the feelings of admiration and enthusiasm concentrated upon the monarch at the expense of any individual, however noble he may be, but feelings were stirred that excessive pride in birth was absurd, both feelings highly evident in Molière's plays.

The comic in Molière sustained the morally emancipated, yet absolutist, codes of Louis XIV and his court. In the comic technique of Molière, the honnête homme for whom he wrote could find justification for his beliefs. "Comic art," says Ernest Cassirer, "possesses in the highest degree that faculty shared by all art, sympathetic vision."⁶

⁵Ibid.

⁶McCollum, p. 30.

The pages which follow will cover several theories of comedy and basic elements of Molière's comic style. When a relationship exists, I will attempt to explain the relevance of the relationship with examples of Molière's comic art. As McCollum says "The precise way in which a given example fulfills the definition is unique, but even in a great play, part of the artist's genius is in realizing the possibilities and implications of the form he adopts".⁷

Henri-Louis Bergson, a leading figure in Twentieth-Century philosophy, interprets the phenomenon of laughter as a corrective response to rigidity, to the human being who assumes the qualities of a machine, in his study of comedy, Le Rire, Essai sur la signification du comique (1900). Le Rire is convincing in many particulars: laughter is, by and large, an exclusively human reaction, and the effect of the mechanical imposed upon the living is unquestionably comic.

Several of Bergson's contentions, however, are not completely satisfactory, even when applied to Molière. For Bergson the comic appeal is to pure intelligence. Emotion is the enemy of laughter.⁸ "Laughter is above all a correction... its function is to intimidate by humiliating."⁹ Feeling, in Smith's opinion, not only accompanies laughter of any kind; but is closely akin to it's source.¹⁰ Bergson would reduce all laughter to the

⁷ McCollum, p. 8.

⁸ Henri Bergson, Laughter (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1956) p. 4-6.

⁹ Bergson, p. 200.

¹⁰ Willard Smith, The Nature of Comedy (Boston: Gorham Press, 1930), p. 53.

satiric, and would give it a moral or "social function".

Schopenhauer comes close to this philosophy of pure intelligences, and the story goes that he found himself laughing at the angle produced by a straight line tangent to a circle and actually offered such an angle as an example of the purely comic.¹¹ So much for the humorous German scholars.

To go on, the Bergsonian theory fits the comedy of Molière in that laughter combines with a sense of social values to criticize and correct social conduct. Hypocrisy, avarice, pedantry, and affectation are the vices with which Molière is concerned. Even voltaire says that the speeches of Cleante in Tartuffe were "the best sermons in our language".

The raisonneurs of Molière's plays said what needed to be said, although sometimes not so subtly. When Philinte says to Alceste, "In this world you need a manageable virtue,"¹² His demand for moral flexibility shows both common sense and a comic ambiguity. Philinte's sentence points out the admirable-ridiculous rigidity of Alceste and the slipshod elusiveness of social life.

The vices of Alceste and Tartuffe remind us of the numerous efforts of humanity to rise above their lowly life. Bergson might possibly have considered Rousseau's accusation that Molière held virtue up to ridicule; certainly such comedy might be unpalatable for those whose society is based solely on individual values.

In many of his ideas on comedy, Bergson is joined by George Meredith, the English novelist. Meredith's thoughts are contained in The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit. The relations between Bergson's

¹¹Smith, p. 53.

¹²McCollom, p. 30.

essay on comedy and Meredith's is not simply their illustration of Molière. Both were reacting against the "machinery" of the nineteenth century and both confine their idea of comedy within the range of comedy of manners. Comedy, says Bergson, is a game that imitates life. In the introduction to The Egoist, Meredith finds the game taking place in the drawing room "when we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes".¹³

The comic for them lay in manners rather than in man. Smith describes the Frenchman as more scornful than tolerant in this laughter, he considers himself superior and lacks sympathy. I agree here wholeheartedly. Thus, the Frenchman wishes comic character to be "all of a piece", with no contradictions to mitigate the ridiculousness.¹⁴ This unity is complied with in a comedy of manners, in which characters are comic by virtue of their physical traits and their social relations, rather than by their moral constitution or spiritual disposition.¹⁵ To Bergson the comic figure is one who is not a man but, instead, a clockwork apparatus leading the life of a puppet might have - "the malady of sameness", as Meredith called it.

Molière's theory of the comic is best illustrated in the three great verse comedies: l'Ecole des Femmes, Tartuffe, le Misanthrope; and the three great prose comedies: Don Juan, le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, and l'Avare.

¹³George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, {New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1956} p. 5.

¹⁴Smith, p. 120.

¹⁵Ibid.

The initial step for Molière is the comic in character. Bergson wrote pages on the subject. "Rigidity, automatism, absentmindedness and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and all serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in character."¹⁶ It is the rigidity of Alceste that makes us laugh. A flexible vice is not as easy to ridicule. We find absentmindedness in l'Avare when Harpagon, after meeting with son, forgets everything. The character of Alceste withdraws into himself, he is liable to ridicule because he is unsociable.

Meredith does not isolate Molière's characters from life and can understand a misanthrope like Alceste. He believes that laughter is a more complicated reaction, he regards man's failings more totally than Bergson does, as mere mechanical absurdities.

Molière's emphasis on character does imply a subordination of plot which neither Bergson nor Meredith discuss in any depth. Molière's plots are fragile and simple. The same theme: the attempt of a bullying father to force a daughter to marry against her will, appears in four plays: Tartuffe, le Malade Imaginaire, le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, and M. de Pourceaugnac. The mother is substituted for the father in les Femmes Savantes. In le Misanthrope there is hardly any action at all. Don Juan and l'Avare are borrowed plots which remain secondary to character. Without fail, in the plays of Molière, character dominates.

In the second place, Molière conceives of the comic in character for all types and conditions of men. Bergson believes that Molière's characters are merely types and are not individuals. He says:

¹⁶Bergson, p. 156.

Altogether different {from tragedy} is the object of comedy. Here it is in the work itself that the generality lies. Comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again. It takes notes of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes...The very titles of certain classical comedies are significant in themselves. Le Misanthrope, l'Avare, le Jouer, le Distrain, etc., are names of whole classes of people; and even when a character comedy has a proper noun in its title, this proper noun is speedily swept away, by the very weight of its contents, into the stream of common nouns. We say "a Tartuffe", but we should never say "a Phedre" or "a Polyeucte".¹⁷

Disagreement with Bergson prevails. Although Alceste's flaw dominates his character, he lacks the simplification of a type. His character is complex, not entirely comic, nor ridiculous. Meredith criticizes Rousseau for discussing the character of Alceste as though Molière had presented him for an absolute example of misanthropy. In his Lettre sur les spectacles, Rousseau says: "Vous ne souriez que nier deux choses: l'une qu' Alceste est un homme droit, sincère, estimable, un véritable homme de bien, l'autre, que l'auteur lui donne un personnage ridicule." Meredith finds Alceste as "a misanthrope of the circle he finds himself placed in - he has a touching faith in the virtue residing in the country, and a critical love of sweet simpleness. Nor is he the principal person of the comedy to which he gives a name. He is only passively comic".¹⁸ In many of his characters, Molière blends opposite elements to establish individuality. Molière's characters are typical of human nature, not of one social type; they are individual and at the same time universal.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 22.

A third characteristic of Molière's comedy is his treatment of the comic fault. He outlines the central figure against the norm of society. His desires are opposed by the members of his own family or a larger social unit; for example, Orgon's family (with the exception of his mother) opposing his generosity to Tartuffe. The conclusion is the triumph of common sense over the central figure and his aberration.

Molière contrasts reality with unreality in this opposition of characters. The central figures are not real in actuality. Meredith says, "He did not paint in raw-realism. He seized his characters firmly for the central purpose of the play, stamped them in the idea, and by slightly raising and softening the object of study, generalized upon it so as to make it perfectly human".¹⁹ We know people who possess these faults in part but in Molière the characters display openly the fully developed traits. If we were to accept them as actual abnormalities, it would not be an amusing experience but one filled with pity or disgust. This element of the unnatural with the natural produces what Bergson terms "absence of feeling". "I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity".²⁰

In this instance it is easy to see where Bergson's theory works but he carries this idea to the extreme by allowing that, by this "absence of feeling", the comic appeal is solely to pure intelligence. This is the

¹⁹Ibid., p. 10.

²⁰Ibid. p. 63.

area where Bergson attracts the most criticism.

The fourth characteristic of Molière's comic art is morality. If we define morality as Christianity does, self-denial, self-sacrifice, we will not find any in Molière. Lavissee believed that the moral of Molière is to follow nature:

On ne trouve pas dans tout son théâtre un devoir qui commande
un renoncement a soi, même un effort qui coûte
L'amour est une loi de la nature...Molière prend parti pour
elle contre les geneurs de l'amour, les pere, les tuteurs,
les maris...comme encore contre tous ceux, Tartuffes, femmes
savantes, cuistres des lettres, qui l'offensent par des
manieres, des grimaces, et des faussetes. La nature doit
être temperée par la raison.²¹

Smith believes that the morality of Molière is based on "enlightened common sense". Instead of resisting nature one should conform to nature. By resisting nature, one is resisting truth and exposing himself to failure and ridicule.

Molière wishes the individual to put a limitation upon both its inhibitions as well as his self-indulgence. The conformity exists so that society can exist. (Molière deals with morality on a social basis rather than an individual basis.) It is not conceived on a sublime level.

Meredith holds a more revered view of Molière's morality:

The comedy of Molière throws no infamous reflection upon life. It is deeply conceived in the first place, and therefore it cannot be impure. Meditate on that statement. Never did man wield so shrieking a scourge upon vice; but his consummate self-mastery is not shaken while administering it. Tartuffe and Harpagon, in fact, are made each to whip himself and his class-the false pietists, and the insanely covetous. Molière has only set them in motion. He strips Folly to the skin, displays the imposture of the creature, and is content to offer her better clothing, with the lesson Chrysale reads to Philaminte and Belise. He conceives purely, and he writes purely,

²¹Lavissee, Histoire de France, {Paris: Hachette, 1903}.

in the simplest language, the simplest of French verse. The source of his wit is clear reason; it is a fountain of that soil, and it springs to vindicate reason, common sense, rightness, and justice-for no vain purpose ever. The wit is of such pervading spirit that it inspires a pun with meaning and interest. His moral does not hang like a tail, or preach from one character incessantly cocking an eye at the audience, as in recent realistic French plays, but is in the heart of his work, throbbing with every pulsation of an organic structure. If life is likened to the comedy of Molière, there is no scandal in the comparison.²²

Bergson deals with morality in some area already covered in this paper previously. He contends that it is "rigidity" that makes a man unsociable and liable for ridicule. Bergson says, "there is essential difference between the social ideal and the moral". This is why, he goes on, that it is the faults of others that makes us laugh. This is the "unsociability" characteristic of the comic character previously mentioned.

Molière's characters show that the world is not perfect, but by observation and common sense and with a certain reliance on nature, it can be kept functioning.

The morality, thus discussed, is the morality implicit in Molière's social satire is obviously relative to the social conditions of France in the 1660's. Molière's morality is a city morality or as Meredith would have it, a "drawing-room" morality. The political situation described, the precious literature, everything that we know of the period shows the distinctions of social status. The kingdom was ready to go to war in 1661, over a question of precedence.

These social conditions received some share of comic treatment from Molière. In the case of the doctors, l'Amour Medicin and la Malade Imaginaire,

²²Bergson, p. 17-18.

he treats the maintenance of prestige in the eyes of the public. In the Malade Imaginaire, he parodied the solemn rites by which a novice was inducted into the medical profession. Some ridiculous aspects of the faculty of medicine were exposed also in this play. The dispute between the music and dancing masters of the Bourgeois Gentilhomme holds certain members of their respective professions up to the public eye. He treats class-consciousness with the reverse technique by afflicting Madame Jourdain and George Dandin with longing for a lower station. Station develops the plot of Amphitryon.

These plays dealing with station were written after Molière and the Troupe du Roi were established in Paris {1665} and when they were frequently called before the court. Chapman suggests that Molière felt that satire of station was more appropriate before a court audience than the general public. "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?"²³ Critics consider the satire of these plays, although good natured, as the least profound of Molière's work.

The other social vices he attacks are religious hypocrisy and parental tyranny. Molière felt marriage should be based on a series of similarities. The first, social status, is illustrated by his opposition of the marriage of George Dandin to Angelique. The second, age, he exemplifies by opposing the marriage of Arnolphe to Agnes. The third, affection, he shows Tartuffe as being hypocritical and Marianne ingenuous.

²³Chapman, p. 238.

It might be wise to remember that Moliere married a woman a good deal younger than himself, and was believed by some to have been unhappy in his marriage.

Molière was against parental authority in that the average parent in the sixteenth century dealt with his child's welfare on terms of his own. He was ahead of his time in his conception of family relations. His abhorrence of the "arranged marriage" is illustrated in Tartuffe when Orgon uses his daughter Marianne as a mere pawn in his own concern for Tartuffe.

Meredith finds in Molière a standard of morality: Molière has "the wit of wisdom", which throws light everywhere. Meredith seems to feel more cordial toward Molière than Bergson. To Meredith's way of thinking the talent for comedy is measured by "being able to detect the ridicule of those you love, without loving them less: and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes and accepting the correction their image of you proposes".

Yet comedy does pass moral judgments and in the preface to the printed edition {1669} of Tartuffe, Molière sounds as if he believed comedy was a form of social reform:

If it be the aim of comedy to correct man's vices, then I do not see for what reason there should be a privileged class. The stage possesses a great virtue as a corrective medium...nothing admonished the majority of people better than the portrayal of their faults. To expose vices to the ridicule of the world, is a severe blow to them...
people do not mind being wicked, but they object to being made ridiculous.

But along with Meredith, I see Molière as chastening us without rancor or sanctimony. Molière explains his purpose in la Critique de l'Ecole Les femmes {1663}: "... to broach ridicule in a fit manner and

to make the faults of all mankind seem pleasant on the stage... you must be merry; and it is a difficult undertaking to make gentle folk laugh...I should like to know whether the great rule of all rules is not to please?" And thus we see why Meredith emphasized that comedy is "the ultimate civilizer".

A fifth area of Molière's comedy is the element of farce. Smith classifies the comedies of Molière as farces, comedies of manner and comedies of character, the latter two already discussed in this paper. McCollom classifies comedies as one type in which change dominates, another in which intrigue dominates- his meaning here is the elaborated ruses of the characters- and the third type in which the plot gives way to some combination of story, character. Theme, and language as the commanding form instead of the plot.

The first type, McCollom's, the comedy of chance, is illustrated by Molière's early farce Sgnarelle or The Imaginary Cuckold in which the structure of chance takes the form of a series of misunderstandings caused by the dropping of a portrait.

Molière's Don Juan exemplifies the second type of comic structure. The chief character of intrigue is a clever rogue, a villain-type as in Don Juan, or a lover, hero-type.

The third type of structure in which plot loses prominence to one or another element is exemplified by Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme and Le Malade Imaginaire known as comedies of character.

Although plot plays an important role in the French comedy before Molière, Routrou, Mairret, Corneille, by the time Molière had written Les Precieuses Ridecules, Le Misanthrope, Tartuffe, or Le Malade Imaginaire,

plot had dwindled to a thread linking comic situations.

There are many scenes in Molière which are attached to the plot but do not compete with it. In L'Avare, the calculations of the miser who wants to give a dinner and the scene of the flocks that the money-lender wants to lend instead of money; in Le Misanthrope, the scene of the sonnet, the conversation of the coquette and the prude; in Don Juan, the scene of Don Juan getting rid of a creditor. While Molière increases the boundaries and adds types and their reactions, he continually seeks the comic in some relationship to a structural element of his play.

It is upon the basis of the farce element in Molière's comedies that Bergson extends his theory of automatism. Bergson believed that a comic impasse occurs whenever a human being ceases to behave like a human being - whenever he "resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once and for all and capable of working automatically". When this automatic figure appears before our eyes he looks ridiculous because he makes gestures but cannot act of his own will. When he arrives at a turn of events where his automatic response is inadequate, he becomes isolated, in all his mechanical idiocy.

But Molière's farcical elements are more numerous than those of Bergson's mechanical laughter theory. He does not employ wit for wit's sake and the language in which he wrote is natural. His characters use conversation to exploit Molière's ideas.

Finally, there is l'esprit de Molière. This is, by far, the most fascinating ingredient of Molière. Bergson does not influence my thinking here, he finds his comic hero in the hollow-man insulated in his empty

world. Comedy, Bergson says, is a "game" that imitates life; but only with the gestures of "types", not living beings.

Meredith reaches closer into l'esprit de Molière. "To love comedy", says Meredith, "you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good." He measured Molière's talent for comedy by "being able to detect the ridicule of those you love, without loving them less: and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in their eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes."

We all take ourselves and the world too seriously. We become over-absorbed in ourselves. Molière teaches us to step back, take a look, and then laugh at ourselves. Molière had confidence in the nature of man. He did not believe in solutions where there are none.

This humanist side of Molière is even more precious when we remember he was living in the shadow of the Sun King. However, men appear as equal in the eyes of the Comic Muse. And the French, under Louis XIV, were more satisfied than is usually thought. Molière's laughter consoled the great as well as the humble and for a while the balance of society was maintained.

Molière's influence extended greater boundaries than the society of his period. To him is credited the creation of the comedy of manners. Restoration comedy with Wycherley and Congreve followed directly in his footsteps. I remember reading somewhere that to appreciate Molière, Wilde and Shaw, one must be capable of great subtlety of an intelligent nature. Wilde himself was probably responsible for that remark. Other dramatic currents as well were eager for his leadership. The Neo-Classicists found in his theatre, the ideal classical comedy. To social

reformers, Molière was an apostle of oppressed humanity.

L'esprit de Molière is not totally definable. If I were to continue to search for a certain quality, one that would include the laughter, the cool judgement, the social sense, the equanimity, and the sympathy. I would say of him what George Sand said of Balzac:

"Son âme était d'une grande sérénité."

"Morbleu Molière! faut-il
que je vous aime!"

Jacques Copeau