

SOCIAL CRITERIA
IN THE DRAMA OF MOLIÈRE

Thesis

Submitted in Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

of Rhodes University

by

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December, 1974

This thesis has been written in English with the approval of the Senate of Rhodes University, because it is felt that in the event of its publication, the work will be more accessible to those interested in the field explored if it is in a language which is used by the majority of readers in this country.

I should like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor J.-L. Cattaneo, of the French Department, Rhodes University, for his assistance and encouragement in the writing of this thesis. I should also like to thank Dr. W.G. Moore, sometime Reader in French at St. John's College, Oxford, and Romance Editor of "The Modern Language Review", for his advice regarding contemporary scholarship on Molière, and Monsieur S. Flèche-Salgues, Chief Librarian of the Bibliothèque de l'Université de Paris, (Sorbonne) for his co-operation.

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" Il y a en poésie, en littérature, une classe
d'hommes hors de ligne, ... dont le caractère
est l'universalité, l'humanité éternelle intimement
mêlée à la peinture des moeurs ou des passions
d'une époque. "

Sainte-Beuve

("Molière")

INTRODUCTION

It is by no means an easy task to analyse and interpret the work of a dramatist such as Molière, for an interval of three hundred years inevitably blurs our perspective of the man and his intentions. We find ourselves unconsciously reading more into his lines than he possibly meant us to. We are tempted to attach significance to certain words and disregard others, in an arbitrary fashion. We try to reconstruct Molière's attitude towards his contemporaries and their's to him, from evidence that is often flimsy and seldom reliable.

Molière's very identity has been questioned, to the extent that the authorship of his plays has been variously attributed to such different personalities as Louis XIV and the great Corneille. (1)

To these problems is added a further complication when one embarks upon a thesis dealing with the picture of society as it emerges from Molière's plays. Not only are we confronted with the difficulty of interpretation already mentioned, but also with the vastly different way in which pre-enlightenment man regarded social and political institutions. We of the twentieth century tend to take for granted the notions of liberty, fraternity, and equality. Had anyone formulated such ideas in the seventeenth century, it is doubtful whether

(1) M. Garçon: Sous le masque de Molière: Molière est Louis XIV. 1953.
H. Poulaille: Corneille sous le masque de Molière Grasset, 1957.

they would have been accepted, since they contradict the very concept upon which society was based in the age of Louis XIV. This concept, broadly speaking, is that of a strict hierarchy in which everyone has his own appointed place. Obviously the notion of a hierarchy pre-supposes the inferiority of some and the superiority of others in the social structure of the day; and post-enlightenment thinking does not readily accept that some men should be privileged, and others regarded as belonging naturally to the lower orders.

Prejudiced as we are by the conviction that all men are born equal, we detect irony in what Molière was possibly saying in all sincerity. When, therefore, Mascarille solemnly affirms that

"Les gens de qualité savent tout sans avoir jamais rien appris" (1)

the twentieth-century mind all too easily interprets this as a barbed comment on the intellectual pretensions that people of high birth made at the expense of truly cultivated persons not fortunate enough to be born into the best circumstances.

Apart from the obviously comic effect of such a remark coming from a person in Mascarille's position, the "deeper implications" (if one is determined to seek them in witty

(1) Les Précieuses Ridicules sc. IX

dialogue) do not necessarily constitute a criticism of the social élite. One could just as well suppose Molière is alluding to the commonly-held belief that, for the upper strata of society, experience and "background" replace mere book-learning; the sort of belief that reminds us of Montaigne's definition of culture as what remains when one has forgotten everything one has ever learnt. I do not, of course, maintain that this is the way in which one must interpret the line in question. I would merely suggest that more than one interpretation is possible, and that, given the ambiance in which Molière lived and wrote, it seems more likely that he would respect rather than berate the nobility of his times, however conscious he may have been of the latter's shortcomings.

For, good, bad or indifferent, nobles were nobles while common folk were common folk, and to the seventeenth-century mind it was right that they should remain so. The issue of birth and station was not at that time clouded by the more sentimental, individualistic approach of post-Voltairian and Rousseauesque thought. We, for example, conceive of society as divided into classes, whereas the society of Molière's day was divided into "orders". It is tempting to equate or at least confuse the two, but an examination of the terms shows that they in fact refer to greatly differing concepts. Social grouping based on class makes use of materialist,

financial and economic criteria: people identify according to the source and level of their income. In a society of orders, however, the stratification is determined by factors such as the honour, dignity and prestige attaching to the functions of those within the group, the greatest honour in the society of seventeenth-century France being that associated with protection of the State. (1) This division is more archaic and closer to the old feudal system than the class-division with which we are familiar. It is essential to be aware of this radically different view of society and social structure when considering these under the reign of Louis XIV.

It is equally important to bear in mind that posterity is always eager to attribute certain characteristics to certain periods of history, which means that a further difficulty to contend with in setting Molière's plays in the context of his times, is the myth that has grown up about the "grand siècle". The seventeenth century is generally regarded as representing, for France, the triumph of absolute monarchy flanked on the one hand by the turbulent, disorderly sixteenth century, and by the negative, dissolute eighteenth on the other. But to think of the society Molière knew as a serene, stable, well-ordered whole, is to take an incomplete view of a

(1) This differentiation is admirably set out by R. Mousnier, in Etat et Société sous François Ier et pendant le gouvernement personnel de Louis XIV C.D.U.Paris, 1966 pp.47-49.

time marked by conflicting trends of thought and sensibility. It was a time in which Jansenists, Cartesians, Molinists and "libertins" all had differing convictions and did not hesitate to voice them. Moreover, the classical ideal of moderation and harmony inclines one to consider the seventeenth century as a kindly age, when in fact, as M. Méthivier points out, (1), it was a callous, insensitive century in which atrocities seemed part of the natural order of things. The truth of this judgement may be seen in, for example, the reaction of so gentle and cultivated a lady as the Marquise de Sévigné, to a brutal child-murder. In a letter dated 1675, she calmly mentions the fact that a child was "mis à la broche par des soldats dans la Bretagne".(2). The tone of the letter would not suggest that this was particularly shocking, nor even remarkable. Louis XIV's constant wars reduced death and danger to the level of everyday occurrences.

Where is one to turn for reasonably reliable information concerning the criteria that determined social grouping in seventeenth-century France? Much of our knowledge in this regard is derived from the writing of Charles Loyseau (3), the great theorist and commentator of

(1) H.Méthivier, L'Ancien Régime, Presses univ. de France, Paris 1968 p.63.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Author of Traité des Seigneuries, Discours sur l'abus des Justices de Village, Traité des Ordres et Simples Dignitez.

society in the early sixteen hundreds. His fundamental distinction between the orders makes for two main social groups: those who command and those who do not. To the former category belong the King, his soldiers and his magistrates; to the latter, that amorphous and ill-defined mass collectively known as the "people".

The overall picture of society that emerges from Loyseau's Traité des Ordres et Simples Dignitez is one of a severely hierarchical world, and the key-word is "ordre". At the beginning of the work just mentioned is a painstaking definition of that term, concluding as follows: "...et quant à sa définition: l'ordre peut estre definy, 'dignité avec aptitude à la puissance publique'". (1). Within the basic divisions of governors and governed exist various sub-divisions, so that, "par le moyen de ces divisions et sub-divisions multipliées, il se fait de plusieurs ordres un ordre général, de sorte qu'enfin, par l'ordre, un nombre innombrable aboutit à l'unité". (2).

In this we recognise the typically classical taste for synthesis, the need to envisage things in their entirety rather than in terms of their component parts. But the student of seventeenth-century society must beware of concluding that this tendency mirrors reality. There

(1) Ch. Loyseau, Les Oeuvres de Maistre Ch. Loyseau, Claude Joly, Paris, 1666, Auboyne, avec privilege du Roy.
 (2) Ibid.

is always the element of human nature, "varium et mutabile", to be taken into account; and human nature rebels against coercion into a set, pre-arranged system. Emphasis upon conformity, a sense of the overriding order of things, does not preclude the odd individual eccentricity, nor does it mean that prevailing obedience leaves no room for unconventionality. If we confine ourselves to documentary literature of the Traité des Ordres et simples dignitez variety, it is a relatively easy task to establish some picture of society in seventeenth-century France. This is because such a work, concentrating as it does upon standard practices and orthodoxy in an abstract, impersonal way, does not complicate matters with the heterogeneity of human beings. As soon as one seeks to reconstruct society from the writings of a literary or dramatic artist, however, this last-mentioned factor has to be considered as well, for psychological truth forms an integral part of the material contained in great works of literature.

In analysing Molière's plays, therefore, one must remain aware of the extent to which individual characters' idiosyncrasies (sometimes magnified to monstrous proportions for comic effect) influence the accuracy of the author's portrayal of his times. Often one finds that the author creates his own universe in which may be detected a fusing together of, on the one hand, the

reality that surrounds him, and on the other, his own, unique vision and interpretation of this reality. Molière is no exception.

For this reason it would be a sadly misplaced enterprise to attempt to reproduce the society of seventeenth-century France from a study of Molière's dramatic works, and it is not my intention to do so. I propose rather to examine the way in which Molière incorporates the social attitudes and values of his day into the plays he created, and the implications of his treatment of these "criteria", particularly inasmuch as they reflect the dramatist's judgement of his fellow-men.

In order to achieve this, one must establish, if possible, under what conditions the plays were written and produced, and to what extent Molière's comments, implicit as well as explicit, can be regarded as expressing his personal opinion. Other factors like possible changes of attitude have to be borne in mind as well, for a man of creative genius rarely has a static reaction to experience. Seldom, if ever, are his views at the end of his career the same as those he held at the beginning; maturity and disillusionment are bound to modify the artist's vision and judgement. Obviously his family background and prejudices, his milieu, colleagues and position in the social hierarchy have a direct bearing upon his

moral and intellectual development, so that some attention must be given to these influences in Molière's life. Once the various spheres of the world in which he lived (Paris, Versailles, the provinces) have been explored, and his place in that world tentatively fixed, some of the ambiguities in his drama that arise from the demands of audience-satisfaction have to be resolved, as well as the degree of his involvement with the themes he treated. A knowledge of any contradictions between his life and his works, and of contemporary reaction to the latter, surely helps to explain the evolution of the ideas on which his plays repose.

This, then, is the background necessary before a detailed study of social criteria in Molière's theatre can be undertaken. The next step is to determine the actual importance of social attitudes and values in his comedies. Satirizing society was not the best of recommendations for a man whose living depended on so precarious a source as Royal Patronage, so the question inevitably arises of whether Molière solved the problem by subordinating social preoccupations to themes of specifically psychological interest: for example, love, jealousy, vanity or obstinacy. For when one thinks of a play like the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, - a work which, by its very title, would seem to invite social comment - one is less conscious of the significance of M. Jourdain's attempt to fraternize with his superiors, than of the

monumental stupidity and snobbishness of the parvenu. In other words, we are more aware of the individual than of the circumstances in which he is placed, social or otherwise. Similarly, the vitality and magnificence of such "monstres sacrés" as Harpagon or Arnolphe are what impress us most, so that social considerations have little or nothing to do with our understanding of L'Avare or L'Ecole des Femmes.

But these are among Molière's greatest masterpieces, and are not by any means the sum total of what he produced during the span of his career as actor and playwright, - a period of some twenty years. Of the thirty-three works that are attributed to him, more than half are little-known; and from these less outstanding plays, some interesting observations concerning social criteria of the times may be made. This is particularly true of the "pièces d'occasion", those dramatic compositions hastily written for great occasions or at the special request of the King. (Louis' eagerness to participate in the costumed dancing that often accompanied such spectacles counted, no doubt, as one of the Sun King's less "glorious weaknesses".) For this reason, the examination of society as presented in Molière's theatre will be based on all that he wrote, from the first farce (La jalousie du Barbouillé) to the Malade Imaginaire, the last play he staged, and the one in which he was acting up to the night of his death.

Finally, it is not the purpose of the present thesis to show that Molière was a social reformer. His famous reference to the moralizing force of comedy (1), often quoted from the first placet concerning Tartuffe, is not necessarily a statement of his own attitude to his art. The circumstances surrounding the comment would lead one in any case to doubt its sincerity, and even if it could be taken literally, it has nothing to do with society, only with morality in general. Molière was primarily a comedian, whose main business was to "faire rire les honnêtes gens". Any convictions relative to social criteria that emerge from his plays have to be deduced either from the action, or the dialogue, or both. They are not obvious, and it is doubtful whether Molière ever intended them to be, or whether, in fact, he was himself fully conscious of what they were, since they are not clearly defined. The point in trying to define them is to gain a better insight into the way in which men and women act and react towards one another in the special universe Molière created; for human interaction is surely the whole essence of the dramatist's art.

Beverley Brooks,
Grahamstown, 1973.

(1) The first of three placets addressed to Louis XIV on the matter of permission for the play to be staged contains this remark: "Le devoir de la comédie étant de corriger les hommes en les divertissant..."

PART ONE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PLAYS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PLAYS.

Chapter One.

The Society in which Molière lived:
its composition and values.

The first point to bear in mind when discussing the society in which Molière lived, is that this "society" was not a homogeneous agglomeration of people sharing the same habits, values and attitudes. Molière came into contact with three distinctly different sections of what we loosely term "society", namely, Paris, the Court and the French provinces. For this reason, the discussion that follows will deal with these three sections separately, in an attempt to establish the ambiance surrounding a person living in France between 1620 and 1675, which is the period roughly coinciding with Molière's lifespan. (1622 - 1673).

Paris.

Since the court of Louis XIV and the aristocratic circles connected with it will be discussed in the following section of this chapter, the social milieu with which we are now concerned is the one associated with Molière himself: the bourgeoisie of Paris.

The term "bourgeoisie" is etymologically linked with town rather than country (a "bourg" is a market-town); and it applies in any case to town-dwellers, since members of this class chiefly made a living from the non-agrarian crafts of industry and commerce.(1)

The greatest concentration of bourgeois in Molière's day was to be found, naturally enough, in Paris. But at that time the bourgeoisie was a recent phenomenon in French society, and it is of interest to explore its origins briefly.

When the medieval social system known as feudalism disappeared, the division of society into the basic hierarchy of king, nobles, clergy and peasants should have disappeared with it; but the opposite occurred. From the 16th century onward, castes tended to become more definitely fixed, and society was still pervaded by the spirit of the feudal system, although this régime had long ceased to function effectively.

This would not have mattered so much had not a new

(1) D. Maland, in Culture & Society in Seventeenth-Century France, Batsford, London, 1970, pg.158, has made similar observations on this subject.

class intruded into the old, traditional division of society. This new class was the bourgeoisie, and its appearance in French history may be dated as far back as the time of Francis the First. (Early 16th century.) From the early Renaissance to the days of Colbert, the administrative reorganization of France had made great progress, which was due in part to the way in which the financial resources and ability of the bourgeoisie were used.(1) By the mid-17th century, "bourgeois" were solidly ensconced in various administrative posts, such as those of provosts, judges, and revenue officers. These posts could be purchased from the Crown, and certainly people who had amassed sufficient wealth from their activities in trade and commerce did not hesitate to avail themselves of an opportunity to assume a social position that afforded them greater prestige.

Administratively and economically, therefore, the bourgeoisie was an essential part of 17th-century French society, and was completely integrated into it; but this does not mean that the bourgeoisie enjoyed a degree of respect commensurate with its importance in that society. On the contrary, there was a tendency to regard it with contempt, and this accounts, no doubt, for the lack of self-confidence

(1) C.f. Robert Mandrou, Classes et Luttes de classes en France au début du XVIIe siècle, D'Anna, Florence, 1965, pp. 20-22.

exhibited by its members. Their lack of assurance is reflected, for example, in their eagerness to imitate the nobility, and in their readiness to retire from the world of commerce as soon as possible, to occupy positions in what we today would call the civil service. In Molière's day, the transition of "bourgeois" from trade to government posts was already a well-established, not to say commonplace, phenomenon. The classical preoccupation with hierarchy, as soon as we take it into account when analysing the structure of mid-17th century society, leads us to the question of where exactly this newly-emerged bureaucracy of France, recruited from the bourgeoisie, stood in relation to society at large.

In the first place, there existed within the bureaucracy itself an inner hierarchy. At the bottom of the scale were officers who were little more than clerks and bailiffs. In the middle were notaries and procurators, and the topmost ranks included the coveted posts in the "parlement" of Paris. Also at the top of this hierarchy were the "financiers", the agents of tax collection. Men occupying this position, if successful, could expect to acquire wealth, influence and social standing, as the case of Nicolas Fouquet confirms: his grandfather was a merchant of Nantes, his father had a post in the "Parlement de Paris", and he himself

was a "financier", rising even to the rank of chief minister of Louis XIV, until he committed the indiscretion of living more opulently than the King.

From this, it can be seen that the bureaucracy integrated into society at different levels, according to the status accompanying the particular post that a "bourgeois" had managed to secure. At one end of the scale, the prestige-value of the post did not elevate the holder much above the status he had enjoyed while still a merchant or trader; at the other extreme, there were posts that conferred dignities and precedence placing the holder among the ranks of the greatest nobles.

Ennoblement is the next aspect of bourgeois life in 17th century France that will be considered. Social mobility is hardly what one would expect to find in a rigidly-structured society; yet in the 17th century this movement of the upper middle classes into the ranks of the nobility was a definite trend. Basically, there were three ways in which a "bourgeois" could achieve noble status. The least esteemed of the three was the "noblesse de cloche", and was a collective ennoblement. It was conferred on the mayor and citizens of certain towns that had distinguished themselves in times of national crisis, and was considered a stage rather than

a state of nobility, enabling those who received it to enjoy certain rights and privileges, usually in the form of tax-exemption.(1)

This brand of nobility was usually reinforced with acquired nobility of another kind: the nobility conferred by letters. This was nobility "in perpetuum", and instead of buying an office from the Crown, the holder received, from the king, letters giving him certain rights and dignities reserved for those of noble rank. The "lettres de noblesse", like the posts already mentioned, were only awarded in exchange for sizeable sums of money. (The latter were a valuable source of income for the royal coffers, which were chronically in need of replenishment.)

Whether a "bourgeois" achieved noble rank by "noblesse de cloche", by "lettres de noblesse", or by becoming an office-bearer of the king, it remained true that his newly-acquired status was only a fact in purely legal terms. He was not regarded as a gentleman by the old, traditional nobility, but often referred to contemptuously as a "gentilhomme de plume et d'encre" (2); in other words, his origins go back no further than a legal document, for he is not noble by extraction.

(1) Pontoise, Sens, and Villeneuve-le-Roi are examples of such towns.

(2) See H. Méthivier, L'Ancien régime, P.U.F.Paris,1968.

The bourgeois reaction to this attitude was by no means aggressive. The desire to learn to live like the nobility far outweighed any feelings of resentment at exclusion, albeit implicit, from the aristocratic milieu. The effect of this imitation of the nobility was to narrow the gap between the "bourgeois" traditionally busy way of life and the noble's traditionally idle way of life. Judges, for example, had about half of their time taken up with work, and the rest was their's in which to do what they would. Men who had acquired nobility from office (who will henceforth be referred to as "robins", i.e. people of the robe of office) - men like Pascal's father, - could devote themselves to the study of mathematics once their official duties were completed for the day. Cultural and social prestige tend to overlap, and it must be admitted that the participation of the nobility in the prodigious intellectual efforts of the 16th and 17th centuries was, to say the least, modest. Apart from patronage, the nobility remained on the whole outside the field of cultural endeavour. From 1600 to 1640, it is rather the bourgeoisie that made France participate in scientific progress. Descartes, Mersenne, Fermat, Pascal... none of these men were sprung from the nobility. It would be inaccurate to claim that the "bourgeois" cultural superiority over their aristocratic contemporaries placed the former on an equal footing with the nobility; but it did tend to lessen the disparity between the two classes.

Material comfort was another factor that contributed to the growing affinity between the bourgeois and the noble way of living. Despite their natural instincts that dictated a frugal mode of existence, "bourgeois" felt the desirability of a new and more elaborate style of living, especially when they rose to the higher grades of their profession. All the apparatus of upper-class elegance and luxury was therefore in demand by the bourgeoisie: carriages, ornaments, fine porcelain, silverware and glassware. (This accounts for the increased production of luxury goods in the 17th century.) Middle-class households acquired more servants, gave receptions, and in general endeavoured to live up to the ambition of "vivre noblement". Not only did their expenditure rise spectacularly, but their visible means of support was disguised as far as possible. Noblemen of consequence did not work for a living, so it was understandable that those wishing to emulate them should feel the need to achieve, or appear to have achieved, a state of financial independence. Accordingly, there was a tendency to invest in government bonds, the "rentes" on the Hôtel de Ville, for this was a less conspicuous source of income.

It has already been stated above that the nobility of this period contented themselves with patronage of the arts as their contribution to cultural life. "Bourgeois" who had risen swiftly in their administrative careers

were not long in discovering the social value of doing likewise. The collection of works of art not only represented to them a means of acquiring extra prestige; it also satisfied the tradition of investment and avarice inherent in the "bourgeois" original set of values. From 1640 onwards, private collectors began to vie with each other, like the bankers Crozat and Jaibach and Pointel (the latter was a friend of the painter Poussin). Those who could not afford originals resorted to collecting prints, and it seems that by 1673, the year of Molière's death, there were at least 85 sizeable collections of prints in Paris. (1) In the sphere of art, it was architecture that appealed most to the middle-classes. From 1630 to 1660, in other words the thirty years preceding Louis XIV's ascension to the throne, every commission of importance came from the bourgeoisie. The nobles, of course, had town-houses, but their accommodation was only rented; actual building of houses in fashionable areas of Paris, like the Place Royale, was undertaken by men from the ranks of the upper middle classes: bankers, financiers, wealthy "robins". Favourite sites for their elaborate mansions included the right bank of the Seine and the Ile Saint-Louis, and, later on, the Marais.

From the above remarks it can be seen that, provided a

(1) See D. Maland (op. cit.) pp.161-162.

"bourgeois" had sufficient wealth, he could approximate satisfactorily to the nobleman's way of life as far as material matters went. His wealth could even buy him the right to the titles and privileges that accompanied noble status; but this was not enough to dispel the built-in prejudice against non-nobles.

We have seen, then, the place of the "bourgeois" in the context of 17th century Parisian society. Neither of the people (in the French sense of the word) nor of the nobility, it was closer to the latter by reason of its aspirations; but it tended to remain a class apart. Reference has already been made (1) to its economic and administrative importance to the State, and indeed Louis XIV was conscious of this importance. Like his father, he recruited his ministers from this frugal, thrifty, hard-working and obstinate social milieu. Such a minister was Colbert, whose policy of "mercantilisme" was merely the codification of a system that the bourgeoisie of France had been practising for some years, to the greater prosperity of France. The system consisted of importing raw materials and exporting them as finished articles in such a way that the balance of payments was in France's favour, and the gold reserve in France increased annually. This helps to explain why the monarchy (in the persons

(1) See pg. 15.

of Louis XIII and, later, his son) gave encouragement to the bourgeoisie and accorded it honours and privileges it had not previously enjoyed. That Louis XIV was fully sensible of the growing importance of the middle-classes in the mid- and -late 17th century is apparent in a somewhat startling remark recorded in his "Mémoires" for 1666 (1): that "ceux qui suivent le métier des armes ne sont ni plus obligés ni plus utiles au service des souverains, que le reste de ses sujets." Those who followed the "métier des armes", the military service, were exclusively recruited from the aristocracy; and it is notable that such a statement should come from a king ruling a society in which the nobility traditionally held the dominant rôle and commanded the greatest respect.

Before passing on to consider the part played by the aristocracy in 17th century France, it remains to be seen how the "bourgeois" themselves regarded their place in the society of their time. We have seen that they were never fully accepted as equals by the nobility, despite their assimilation of "noble" values and their imitation of the "noble" way of life. The normal reaction to this treatment is, surely, that of frustration and resentment. Yet, as R. Mandrou points out, the "bourgeois" attitude to the severely limiting

(1) R. Mousnier, Cours de Sorbonne cit., C.D.U.Paris 1966 pg. 87.

order of things that excluded non-nobles from the higher échelons of society and deprived them of the respect they no doubt deserved, was curiously passive; it was an attitude of resignation.(1) This is due in a large measure to the complexity of the bourgeoisie. In the middle ages, a "bourgeois" was simply a town-dweller; by the end of the 16th century, a bourgeois could be a merchant, a magistrate, the master of a trade-union, a doctor, or a lawyer. The term had come to cover a wide spectrum of society. In other words, the bourgeoisie was a very heterogeneous class, and where there is heterogeneity, there is seldom unity of purpose or orientation. The incoherence of middle-class social and political reactions in 17th century France neutralized any endeavours to change, or protest against, the status quo, however unfavourable it might be to "bourgeois" interests. To this lack of specific goal may be added the essential conservatism associated with the middle classes, heterogeneous or not. Maintenance of law and order, and loyalty to the monarchy, were the forms that this biding conservatism took among the urban bourgeoisie. That is why, despite the occasional gesture of impatience, for example when taxation seemed excessive, - it is not accurate to speak of any "feelings of revolt" or deep indignation among the Parisian middle classes of Molière's day. As far as the urban proletariat was concerned, it was totally wanting in

(1) Op. cit. pp. 49 - 50.

political awareness, being uncritical of the King and of the Church. Like the bourgeoisie, its slogan might well have been: "Vive le Roi sans la gabelle." If there was any conflict in the hierarchical structure of 17th century French society, it was the passive, latent one between the nobles of long standing and the newly-created nobles; in other words, between the "noblesse d'épée" and the "noblesse de robe". This brings us, naturally, to consider the place, aspirations and values of the nobility in the France of Louis XIV.

The Court.

The word "court" is synonymous with notions of rank and precedence, so it is not surprising that these should be major preoccupations in any discussion of the elegant, well-disciplined society that gravitated about the omnipotent person of Louis XIV. Just as the bourgeoisie, and in particular the commercial bourgeoisie of Paris, was divided into its own internal hierarchy of corporations (drapers being the most respected, goldsmiths, the least); just as the clergy was systematically grouped in ascending order from monk to cardinal; so, too, the nobility was arranged according to the degree of prestige attaching to the family and function of the aristocrat in question. At the top of the scale were princes of the blood; then came minor branches of their great families, followed by the "high" nobility, from dukes down to barons. Finally came the "gentilshommes"

exercising the profession of arms. These were the various sections of the old, traditional nobility, the "noblesse d'épée", that derived its name from its time-honoured rôle as protector of King and country.

The 17th century brought with it, as we have seen, the creation of a secondary nobility; and the "noblesse d'épée" felt, not unnaturally, insecure and threatened by the presence of this second "zone" of nobility, so it reacted accordingly. As early as 1604, the "noblesse de robe" obtained the right of heredity, and the implications of this could not fail to be felt by the older nobility. The latter was still the leading class, but its supremacy was less assured than formerly as a result of the social mobility that was a feature of the times. Not only was the existence of the "new" nobles a challenge to the power and importance of the old; there was also the growing consciousness among the "noblesse d'épée" of a diminution of superiority on the social, economic and cultural level. Added to this was the physical fact of numerical losses resulting from the wars of religion of the previous century (1560 - 1598). Although there are no statistics to confirm this, it was chiefly the nobles who participated in that lengthy conflict between Protestants and Catholics, and there can be little doubt that during those forty-odd years, a heavy toll was taken of their numbers.

Let us examine for a moment the three elements that, together, constitute a yardstick for the supremacy of a given class in a given society. Socially, a class is dominant if its way of living is such that it is reckoned superior to that of other classes in the same society. There are certain activities reserved for the élite. In the twelfth century, for example, hunting and jousting would come under this head. In the seventeenth century, the noble way of life was characterized, paradoxically, by lack of activity. The rest of the nation worked to leave the men-at-arms free to defend the common-weal, if need be: hence the tradition of the leisured nobility. Economically, class-supremacy depends on security of material possessions superior to that of other classes in the same society. Traditionally, the bulk of the nobility from the middle ages to the 17th century were unrivalled in wealth and resources. Culturally speaking, it is usually the dominant class that receives and transmits the great cultural heritage associated with the society of which it forms a part. The noble ideal of "courtoisie" was formulated and practised by the aristocratic milieu of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, to mention but one example.

If a section or group of a society manages to achieve a significant degree of superiority in one or more of the above-mentioned spheres, a comfortable feeling of

collective prestige in the face of the rest of the community results. One could safely assume that knights in the thirteenth century, for instance, felt that they alone were capable of administering a feudal society.

What was the feeling of the "noblesse d'épée" in the social context of the 17th century? No doubt its members were aware of the lack of lustre in their cultural activities from the French Renaissance onwards; but their main source of concern was conceivably the loss of social and economic prestige they suffered in the first half of the 17th century. Apart from capricious royal grants, the nobles' income was from the land, accruing not only from sale of produce, but also from the overlord's right to tithes exacted from the peasants and labourers working his lands. The 16th century was a period of tremendous development and expansion in western Europe. As frequently happens in such times, prices rose, and with the increase in the price of cereals and wine, the nobles' income increased correspondingly. But their costs increased as well. With the recession of the 17th century, prices of land-produce dropped, but the nobles' expenditure did not. The peasants, feeling the weight of less prosperous times, gave as little as possible to lord, tithe-collector and King. The economic movements of French commerce in the early 17th century,

coupled with the wars of religion of the late 16th century, made inroads in the wealth of the landed nobility. Some nobles were ruined to the extent that they applied to Henry IV for places in religious institutions (1), an action which gives some idea of the extremities to which they were reduced.

As for social prestige, the growing importance of the bourgeoisie and its acquisition of nobility by the means discussed in the first section of this chapter, represented a threat to the place that the old nobility had occupied for centuries in the national hierarchy. It was not so much that persons of non-noble birth had acquired respect as well as nobility; it was rather that nobles of long standing felt their rights and privileges cheapened through availability to those of less distinguished birth. Accordingly, when the States-General were convened in 1614, a request was put forward by the "noblesse d'épée", that heredity be abolished in the "noblesse de robe"; that the King exercise discretion in conferring letters of nobility on non-nobles; and that if a non-noble purchased an estate that carried the privileges and status of nobility (which automatically passed on to the new owner), the rights accompanying possession of such an estate be denied to the purchaser, - unless, of course, he was

(1) See R. Mandrou, *op. cit.*, pg. 38.

a true noble. These requests leave one in no doubt as to the anxiety felt by the "noblesse d'épée" regarding its position in relation to the secondary nobility, immediately prior to the period 1620-1675. From the above it can be seen that to speak of "the nobility" or "the aristocracy" in 17th century France is both vague and misleading, for this group was by no means a simple entity. In it one must distinguish the two types of nobility, which, far from fusing together to form a whole, tended on the contrary to remain separate and hostile. It is all too easy to confuse the recently-created nobility and the long-established nobility, since there were superficial points of resemblance between the two: they both enjoyed a measure of economic stability (despite the decline in prosperity of the older nobility) superior to that of other groups in their society. Both, moreover, owned land on a considerable scale, the newer nobility to an ever-increasing extent. As P. Goubert (1) remarks, the newly ennobled "bourgeois" were landowners just as much as the old nobility, the only differences being that they owned less land quantitatively, and managed their estates better than their more illustrious contemporaries.

The place of the privileged classes (a more accurate designation than the "nobility") in 17th century France was undeniably at the top of the social pyramid, and

(1) Pierre Goubert, Louis XIV et vingt millions de Français, Fayard, Paris, 1966, pg. 35.

the tensions and pressures that arose amongst them were not sufficient to dislodge them from their dominant position. The "noblesse d'épée", it is true, was subject to anxieties and frustrations from which its members had previously been exempt by virtue of deep-rooted tradition; the "noblesse de robe" was engaged in a perpetual struggle to assert itself in the face of prejudice against its bourgeois origins. But in relation to the rest of society, both the old and the new nobility occupied a privileged position, the former commanding the greater respect.

What of the aspirations of this complex section of the society that was ruled by Louis XIV? The court immediately associated with the Sun-King is, of course, Versailles. In fact it was only in 1682 that Louis XIV moved the French Court definitively to Versailles, leaving a capital that he had never liked. By that time, Molière had been dead for nearly a decade. In the early years of his reign, Louis had no fixed venue for his court. All the royal residences in turn served his purpose: the Louvre, Saint-Germain, the Tuileries, Fontainebleau, Saint-Cloud, Chambord...and with the King went the courtiers, the cream of the nobility, caught up in the daily round of duties and pleasures seasoned with intrigues both political and sentimental. Even at that early stage of his reign, the young King managed to impose his will on his entourage. As

Primi Visconti (1) remarked, "tout doit marcher suivant... la volonté du Roi". Leaving aside for the moment the nobles who did not follow the court, we are confronted with the question of the hopes, ambitions and intentions of those who did. The central figure at court was, of course, the King, so it was only natural that the attention of the courtiers was focussed on the Royal Person, and on their individual rapport with His Majesty. Although the feudal system had receded far into the past by the mid-17th century, the fundamental concept upon which it rested was not so easily relinquished and forgotten. It is with good reason that P. Varet (2) observes how slowly social and political institutions evolve, and how they are not supplanted without difficulty. The aspect of feudalism that survived into the century of Louis XIV was that of patronage, the chain of dependence that engaged the loyalty of one man to another, binding lord to king, and vassal to lord, - the system of reciprocally-given promises and commitments.

By Molière's day, much of this had become a mere matter of form: the term "fief" signified nothing more than an asset conferring a degree of nobility on the possessor (either an estate or some office of the King). But the more influential members of the old, military nobility had their dependants and protégés who swore loyalty to their lord and followed him, served him, and even

(1) See Georges Mongrédien, La Vie Quotidienne sous Louis XIV, Hachette, Paris, 1948, pg.14.
 (2) P. Varet, Les destinées de l'individu, Sirey, Paris, 1938, pg. 156.

fought with him in rebellions of the "Fronde" variety. Similarly, the nobles at court were there to pay homage to their King, please him, entertain him, and gratify his whims, tastes and vanity. It would be naïve to suppose that loyalty to the King was the sole motivation for their participating in what must have been a costly, tiring and often frustrating mode of existence. However pleasant a life of dissipation may be at the outset, there invariably comes a time when disenchantment overtakes the most inveterate enthusiast of self-indulgence. The Marquis de Saint-Maurice remarks, with a certain wryness, upon the expenses he incurred on the occasion of a dazzling fête given by Louis for Mme. de Montespan in July, 1668:

"Les dames et les hommes de qualité ont fait dans leur particulier des dépenses excessives... pour moi, ma femme, ma fille et mes enfants, il m'en coûte près de quatre mille livres et, à mon gré, je n'ai jamais fait une dépense si mal à propos; je m'en console parce qu'avec les fous il faut être fol." (1)

Well might La Rochefoucauld have pointed out, in his "Maximes" of 1665, that the man who lives without folly is less prudent than he supposes; folly, in the sense of extravagance and whimsy, was the order of the day in

(1) Quoted in G. Mongrédien's Vie quotidienne sous Louis XIV, op. cit. pg. 17.

the "young" court of Louis XIV. The letters of the Prince de Condé and the Duc d'Enghien, as well as those of ambassadors visiting the French court, are full of accounts of lavish royal entertainments. The comment of the Marquis de Saint-Maurice in a letter dated 16th January, 1671, sums up the situation in which the court-nobles found themselves during the first ten years of Louis XIV's reign (the years that concern this study of a period contemporaneous with the life of Molière):

"On ne parle ici que de Divertissements et
chacun se ruine pour y paraître". (1)

If it was not out of feudal sentiment alone that persons of high rank faithfully followed their King in the endless and expensive round of pleasures, - fêtes, ballets, balls, concerts and hunting - the logical conclusion is, that they did so from a desire for advancement. The royal favour was a useful adjunct to prestige; the fact of being admitted to Court and having influence in that exclusive milieu was a goal in itself in an age when ambitions were directed mainly towards the acquisition of rank and respect. Not even the King was indifferent to the latter: by reason of his position, he was obviously less concerned with winning glory than with maintaining it, and it has been remarked (2) how frequently the four words

(1) Mongrédien, op. ci. t, pg. 18.

(2) P. Goubert, op. cit., pg. 45.

"dignité", "gloire", "grandeur", and "réputation" recur in Louis XIV's writings from the very first year of his reign. We have seen in the preceding section of this chapter that, money-and-investment-conscious though the urban bourgeoisie might have been, their main purpose in acquiring and amassing wealth was to achieve a more prestigious way of living - one which resembled the aristocratic mode of existence. It was not material comfort per se that was desired, but rather the respect that enjoyment of such comfort brought with it.

Similarly, the "chasse aux charges rémunératrices" in which the members of the nobility attached to the court were engaged, was inspired by an appetite for honours and dignities; the material gain incidental to receipt of royal grants was of less importance. It was only in the latter part of Louis' long reign that royal munificence became essential to the court-followers for the maintenance of their persons and positions at Versailles, for by that stage expenses incurred for clothes, gambling-debts and rich living in general had ruined most of the nobles living in and around the French Court. They were little more than elegant, bored parasites dependent on pensions and grants from the King's purse; but even at that stage, money was a means rather than an end.

Avid as they were for marks of royal favour and preservation of their position at court, there can be little room for discussion of the aspirations of nobles who courted the King, whether at Chambord, the Louvre or Fontainebleau. Those related to the royal family, and members of the high nobility of long standing, formed the greater part of the courtiers; but that does not mean that nobles of more recent date were absent from the court; their desire for privileges and rank was, if anything, greater than that of the older nobility.

In the early years of Louis' reign, the court was relatively small, as a letter from the Duc d'Enghien to the Queen of Poland (June, 1664) shows:

"Il n'y a presque point de femmes ici et fort peu d'hommes. Jamais la Cour n'a été si petite et on ne sait quasi à quoi s'occuper."

This is a very different picture of the French court from that of Versailles towards the end of the century, when some 10,000 people were attached to the person of the King. Initially, therefore, it was a very small percentage of the nobility, be it of the sword or of the robe, that came into direct contact with the monarch. This brings us to another division of the privileged classes: that separating the "nobles de cour" and the "nobles de campagne."

Birth sets up barriers between individuals, conferring

on some and withdrawing from others what man wants most: social prestige. Just as the "noblesse de robe" was socially inferior to the "noblesse d'épée", so the rural nobility was in a less enviable position than the court-nobility. The libretto of a "mascarade" of 1665 gives some idea of the lamentable estates on which country noblemen resided:

"La scène représente une de ces maisons de campagne qu'on nomme noblessees ou gentilhommières, composées d'un corps de logis découvert, d'une petite tour ruinée, d'une grange en mauvais ordre et d'une cour où paraissent quelques petites dindes, des lévriers maigres et des bassets." (1)

As far as assets were concerned, the greatest that the rural nobles could boast were their centuries-old name and the various petty privileges that their rank, if not their fortune, still afforded them. Whereas the nobles at court were financially ruined by their extravagant way of living, those in the country were often in straitened circumstances through costly lawsuits. There, too, the tension between nobles whose family-tree went as far back as the middle ages, and nobles whose claim to aristocracy was based on a "lettre de noblesse" or a post in the King's service, was a source of ill-feeling when the ennobled "bourgeois"

(1) Mongrédien, op. cit. pg. 203.

purchased property that was traditionally the preserve of the old nobility. For the military nobles were jealous of their privileges, deeply attached to ceremony, and resentful of any encroachment by persons of lesser birth on what they regarded as their rights. Dramatists of the mid-seventeenth century were not slow to perceive the comic potential of country nobles, and often made them the butt of their satire. Poisson's "Baron de la Crasse", Montfleury's "Gentilhomme de Beauce", and de la Tessonnerie's "Campagnard" give ample evidence of the prevailing attitude of city-dwellers, particularly Parisians, towards the provincial nobility. The latter's main preoccupation was with past glory and the necessity of maintaining a sort of shabby gentility despite waning fortunes. Occasionally impoverished nobles went as far as permitting persons of inferior social condition to marry into their families for their impecuniousness made them regard money as an adequate compensation for lack of title. (George Dandin's unenviable situation was not altogether a figment of Molière's imagination).

The causes of their penury were complex: quite apart from negligence in administering their estates, and costs of law-suits already mentioned, it was true that agricultural techniques of the time were not advanced enough to avoid or counteract poor harvests. This meant that the income from lands as left over from the

feudal system was inadequate, and with the price-fluctuation and devaluation of the seventeenth century, the profits a noble stood to make from his estate were indeed meagre.(1) Not even the supplementary income he received as lord of the manor from road-tolls, hunting and fishing permits and land-tax, was enough to ensure him a comfortable standard of living. Allowing for a measure of exaggeration, it was perhaps with some justification that the indignant author of a contemporary pamphlet (2) exclaimed,

"Toute l'ancienne noblesse de France est réduite à la mendicité. Il y a des provinces où l'on ne trouverait pas entre la noblesse cent pistoles..."

Such financial awareness might lead one to suppose that the country-based nobility of seventeenth century France was concerned mainly with money. But in fact, as with the Parisian bourgeoisie and the court-nobles, money, for the provincial nobles, was not an end in itself; it was merely that its acquisition was essential for the preservation of rank and self-respect.

So far, only the privileged group of the rural population of France in Molière's day has been considered. To make the picture complete, it is now necessary to give some attention to the rest of the French people living in the provinces at that time.

(1) For further remarks on this subject, see H.Méthivier, *op. cit.* pp. 66-69.

(2) The "Soupirs de la France esclave".

The French Provinces.

Of the population of France in the times of Louis XIV, we have so far discussed only the upper strata: the nobles and the more prestigious members of the bourgeoisie. (The clergy have been excluded deliberately, since they were something of a group apart, and did not in any case come much within the ambit of Molière's experience.) This means that the greater part of the nation, numerically speaking, - the tens of thousands of urban workers and the enormous peasantry - have been omitted from the present analysis of seventeenth century French society. The urban proletariat, though an interesting subject for study, is somewhat out of our field, (1) but the peasantry (i.e. the non-privileged country-dwellers making a living off the land) cannot be ignored, since the years spent in the provinces by Molière and his troupe inevitably brought the actors into contact with persons other than the provincial townsfolk and members of the provincial nobility.

Like the economy of the day, society rested on the most numerous, productive, and dependent mass of society: the peasantry. As with the other sections already examined, the peasantry was a complex group rather than a class as such; however, it derived a certain unity from the fact that its members had many things in common: a degree of dependence, the same occupation,

(1) Apart from domestics attached to noble or bourgeois households, Molière does not include this social group in his comedies.

and the same environment. Moreover, they collectively made it possible for the three "states" of the nation (nobility, clergy, third estate) to prosper. Rural society had evolved a great deal since the middle ages, and the old feudal system had given way to a more flexible organisation. Feudal prejudice persisted, however, and although a peasant in the France of Louis XIV had the right to sell, let, give, exchange, or bequeath his land, he could only do so with the consent of his "seigneur", lord of the manor. He was also liable to heavy duties and taxes, payable to the overlord, in the event of his land changing hands.

It is a widely-accepted contention that such taxes as the peasant paid to the lord had become negligible, since they had been instituted in the distant past and money had subsequently lost some of its value. But as P. Goubert (1) points out, that was only true of one type of tax (that associated with the recognition of "seigneurie"); for all the others, the amount payable had risen correspondingly with the changing value of money. Not many studies have been carried out of the conditions under which peasants lived in the mid-seventeenth century, but those that have been made of specific provinces, notably Picardy and the Ile-de-France, lead to conclusions that are no doubt valid to a greater or lesser degree for other provinces. It would seem

(1) P. Goubert, *op. cit.*, pg. 29.

that few peasants were wholly landless; about one-tenth of the peasantry possessed the number of hectares (varying from one district to another) that could provide adequately for the needs of themselves and their dependants; the vast majority had only a few barren tracts, and had to find supplementary sources of income; and some were the chosen few, who enjoyed a measure of wealth and influence, and often had connections with the overlord. A village of some hundred families numbered one or two of the latter-mentioned fortunates; a dozen or so labourers who were financially independent; an equal number of less favoured peasants who owned a wretched cottage, a garden, and perhaps a sheep; and the rest were obliged to seek employment as hired hands on larger properties, or else earn extra money as woodcutters, weavers, vine-trimmers, or brewsters. The minute piece of land that was their's to cultivate, could never bring in enough to keep them clothed and fed, much less ensure a reasonable standard of living.

As long as the harvest was good, the average peasant could exist satisfactorily under this system. But the harvest was frequently poor, and famine was a common occurrence. Demographically speaking, the rural population of seventeenth century France was very vulnerable to fluctuations in prices, seasons, and misfortunes. Famine usually brought epidemics in its wake: small-pox,

typhoid and cholera. The mortality rate was high, and life-expectancy was short. (In 1661, it was barely 25 years.) Apart from disease and starvation, there was another factor that made the peasant's lot a hard one: taxation. The four tax-claimants that made demands on the peasant's work and revenue were the rural community itself, (i.e. the parish); the Church; the overlord; and the King. Tolerance of taxation, direct ("taille" and "gabelle") and indirect (e.g. duty on drinks) varied from province to province. An occasional show of resentment was inevitable, but it is interesting to note that the ill-feeling was more directed against fiscal levies than against the King, or even against the overlord. The most obvious scape-goats were the "gabelleurs", the tax-collectors themselves, agents of the King. The basic cause of peasant revolts was the hypertension of people who were undernourished, on the brink of starvation, and faced with dispossession of their meagre goods if unable to pay their taxes and creditors (for they frequently borrowed in order to meet financial commitments). Between 1624 and 1631, protest against tax-increases manifested itself in the towns, - in Dijon, Aix and Lyons. Between 1630 and 1632, the "Croquants" in Périgord, and the "Nu-pieds" in Normandy, were up in arms against unreasonable tax-demands. However, sporadic crises of discontent do not mean co-ordinated revolt. Peasants had concern mainly for the short-term, the here-and-now, the daily struggle for existence.

This explains why their revolts were of short duration. Calamities, epidemics, droughts and famine apart, what was life like for the seventeenth century peasant in normal times? The well-known comment of La Bruyère (1) leaves one in little doubt as to the suffering of the peasantry under Louis XIV, but some allowance must be made for sentiment and for the moralist's intention. Besides, the picture he gives of peasant-life - assuming it is wholly objective and true - dates from the 1680's, which puts it in a period some ten years beyond that which interests us. Furthermore, no distinction is made between the farm labourer and the smallholder; the persons described by La Bruyère are simply characterized as "attachés à la terre".

A more reliable source of information is that offered by inventories and contemporary deeds of sale. From these, it can be deduced that the average smallholder of the times lived very simply, his cottage being adequately, but modestly, furnished. On the decease of the head of the family, when an inventory of his goods was made, the estate could realise as much as 2,000 "livres" in the case of the wealthier farmers, and, at the other end of the scale, as little as 10 "livres" in the case of a labourer. As for the "manoeuvriers", who offered their services to anyone who had employment for them, their income was just

(1) Les Caractères, 1689.

sufficient to keep them from dying of starvation. The accounts and balance-sheets of bailiffs who administered estates in the absence of the lord of the manor (1) give some idea of salaries paid to those working on the estate. In the late '60s, an unskilled labourer could expect about 8 sous as daily wage, and a skilled labourer, 25 sous. Contemporary documents show that these wages (pittances would describe them more accurately) were often paid well in arrears. As G. Mongrédien remarks, "s'il n'y avait plus de serfs, il y avait encore des vilains."(2)

In the average village of seventeenth-century France, apart from the people whose livelihood came from the soil or from their services to wealthier members of the community, there were a few persons in a better financial position: the surgeon, for example, and the village priest. They were inferior only to the notary and officials of the Crown resident in the country.

Superficial though this survey of life as lived by the rural non-privileged in Molière's day might be, it is sufficient to enable us to draw a few conclusions relative to the values that dominated their lives.

Unlike the court-nobles, provincial nobles, upper and

(1) e.g. the bailiff managing "Rochers", Mme. de Sévigné's estate.

(2) op. cit. pg. 223.

middle bourgeoisie, the peasants were not primarily concerned with maintaining their place in society, or, if possible, bettering it. There may have been exceptions, for it is not possible to generalize to the extent of claiming that a whole section of a nation's population was totally unambitious; but certainly such exceptions were rare. At the meanest level, the peasant's main aspiration was to keep body and soul together, and for those in a slightly better position, it was to attain a standard of living where some measure of material comfort could be enjoyed. Status and rank only interest people once their daily bread and the roof over their heads have been ensured; in other words, once the basic requirements of human existence have been satisfied.

The conditions prevailing in seventeenth-century France, then, obliged the peasantry to devote most of their time and energy to eking out a living as best they could; and if social status was of less moment for them, the same was true of cultural achievement. Any leisure-time that was left over after a hard day's work was given to relaxation rather than to perusal of books. Literacy, in any case, was far from being a universal attribute: three-quarters of the male population of France, and nearly nine-tenths of the female, were altogether illiterate (as is evidenced by the small number of spouses who could sign their marriage-contract).

Financial considerations, and preoccupation with things of a material nature, characterize the peasant's way of life in the France of Louis XIV. Thrifty and prudent by nature, and not tempted from the path of frugality like his bourgeois bretheren in the big cities, the peasant usually had some small reserves tucked away for the bad years of drought, poor harvest and famine. These he was reluctant to display to the tax-collector for fear of seeming more opulent than was good for him. Above all, he was acutely conscious of the value of money and the toil necessary to earn it. The main features of his existence were: simplicity, hard work, suffering, and uncertainty for the future; for, much more than today, those living close to the land were prey to adverse climatic and agricultural conditions.

Conclusions.

Apart from the urban proletariat, the various milieux of French society at the time of Molière have been individually considered, and before we explore the world of the theatre in the seventeenth century, it is as well to sum up the social situation then prevailing.

In the first place, the social structure of seventeenth-century France consisted of a graduated series of "orders", reminiscent of medieval society by virtue of the various honours, duties, and privileges attaching

to each order. (1). Within the three traditional orders of clergy, nobility and people, were subdivisions. For example, in the order of the people, or "tiers état", was the following hierarchy: at the top, doctors and graduates from the faculties of theology, jurisprudence, medicine and arts; then advocates; then civil servants handling finances; then businessmen of the long robe; then businessmen of the short; then merchants; then those practising manual trades; then labourers, artisans, and peasants; then carters; and finally, beggars.

Despite the apparent stability of this ordered, hierarchical society, there were elements of unrest, tension and mobility that run counter to the traditional concept of the nation that was governed by Louis XIV. Unrest took the form of active revolt by the peasants in the provinces, but as it was unco-ordinated and sporadic, this manifestation of popular discontent was never lasting; nor did it express any disloyalty to the king or protest against the status quo. Tension and mobility were confined to the upper orders of society, in particular those of the old military nobility and the newly emerged nobility that was still bourgeois by origin. The former struggled to maintain its proud position; the latter, to be accepted as an important

(1) In the seventeenth century, the term "order" meant, as Charles Loyseau - op.cit. pg.6. - states, "une classe et condition certaine de personnes".

order in contemporary society. The "nobles of the robe" did not aspire to the replacement of their rivals, for the old nobles' way of life, though elegant and idle, was onerous, expensive, and, for those at court, uncomfortable. They merely sought to have their appointed place in society raised to join that of the centuries'-old nobility.

The greatest temptation, for the twentieth-century student of seventeenth-century French society, is to interpret the ambitions of the "robins" as motivation for trying to change the society of orders into a society of classes. That enterprise was only attempted in the eighteenth century; one hundred years earlier, the mentality of the nation was not yet ready for such an innovation, and a society without a King was inconceivable to the French people under Louis XIV. All that the "robins" wanted, in the mid-seventeenth century, was to have the magistracy recognized as the first order of the state, either instead of, or with, that of the nobility.

In the country, where old values and traditions die hard and conservatism is dominant, traces of feudalism were more apparent than elsewhere, although there were no longer any medieval "demesnes" in a closed economy founded on the work of serfs. Instead there was an economically-dominated peasantry, members of which were free in terms of jurisprudence, and who were permitted to own

land. The power of the lord of the manor was still considerable, but it was less absolute than several centuries before.

As far as the values of this society were concerned, they varied from order to order. Among the privileged orders, they consisted mainly of prestige, rank, honour, status within the social framework. They formed the basis of the criteria that "bourgeois" used in judging nobles, and vice versa; they caused the numerous petty wrangles between members of the old and new nobilities over precedence. The upper middle-classes, often economically superior to the nobility, remained of lesser status because their order was inferior; proof enough of the attitudes to rank and money held among the bulk of the dominant social groups of the time.

For the dependent and non-privileged classes, or orders, values rested on money far more than on prestige, for life was reduced, for peasants, to a struggle for existence in the most fundamental sense of the word.

The most important fact emerging from the above survey of society contemporary with Molière is the complexity of its composition and values. All too often there is a tendency to over-simplify, and treat the age of Louis XIV as a period of tranquil discipline in which all aspects of life derived their pattern from the Court of Versailles, and life itself unfolded with the

regularity and predictability of a garden of Le Nôtre. What we have is an age of hidden turbulence with occasional eruptions of violence, hastily suppressed; an age in which immense loyalty to the Monarch counterbalanced growing discontent with a fiscal system and a social structure that were more appropriate to the medieval state than to a nation that was already "modern" in more ways than one.



Chapter Two.Playwright, Theatre and Audience
in Molière's Time.

The picture of seventeenth-century society contained in Chapter One of the present thesis is merely a general sketch; too general, in fact, to suffice as background for a discussion of criteria in Molière's plays. It is essential to see where and how an actor and playwright fitted into the context of such a society. It is equally important to gain some insight into the attitudes and expectations of contemporary theatre audiences, since these inevitably affect the content and presentation of dramatic literature. This we shall now attempt to do.

Actors and Playwrights.

The social position of those connected with the stage in the seventeenth century can best be judged by the attitude of society at large to actors and playwrights, comic and tragic alike. This attitude changed with the evolution of theatre: at the beginning of the century, thespian art was more or less equated with the buffoonery of the fair, while in the 1690's, men of the stature of Corneille, Molière and Racine had already established the great tradition of French classical theatre, so that theatrical folk were accord-

ingly more respected.

Compared with the English or Italian theatre, French theatre was in a dismal state at the time of Henri IV, mainly in consequence of the monopoly exercised by the "Confrères de la Passion" (1) since 1402 - a monopoly that only ceased officially in 1677. The "Confrères" were based in the only permanent theatre in Paris: the Hôtel de Bourgogne. This was a shabby, dark, narrow room designed for mystery-plays initially, but when visiting troupes of Italian players came to entertain Parisian audiences at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the "Confrères" hired out their theatre to the newcomers. This was a wise move, since the Italians' performance was vastly superior to that of the indigenous players. But whether they permitted others to use the Hôtel de Bourgogne, or whether they staged their own productions there, the "Confrères" had the authority to interfere actively with performances of rival troupes, and even prevent them from taking place, on occasion.

During the first decade of the seventeenth century, the only area of theatrical activity in Paris not associated with the Hôtel de Bourgogne was that of impromptu comic entertainment at the big commercial fairs like

(1) Originally a medieval band of players who interpreted religious dramatic works, i.e. mystery plays.

the Foire Sant Germain and the Foire Saint Laurent.

At this early stage of its development, the French theatre was essentially non-literary - it merely offered amusement. The status of persons practising theatre-craft or acting on the stage was of the lowest. Even the director of the troupe did not enjoy a prestigious reputation, as is suggested by the fact that it was he himself who took money at the door and argued with those reluctant to pay. The public opinion of actresses and actors' wives was extremely unfavourable. In his Historiettes of 1657, Tallemant des Réaux passes harsh judgement on the morality of females associated with the theatre, remarking that one change-room was common to both sexes, and that, at a time when the "métier théâtral" was less disreputable than formerly.

At first, royal patronage of troupes was not a common practice. Henri IV gave no gratuities or pensions to actors, and it little availed Valleron Lecomte (director of a troupe) to append to his company's name the title, "Comédiens du Roy". Despite appeals to Parliament, he still had to pay the "Confrères" rent for their theatre.

In the year that Molière was born (1622) a rift developed between the "Comédiens du Roy" and their landlords, and they left the Hôtel de Bourgogne, trying their luck

outside Paris. For over a year, the Parisians had no one to entertain them. It was only in 1625 that a new troupe, the "Comédiens du Prince d'Orange", directed by Lenoir and Mondory, played at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Their star performer was Jodelet, who, with his distinctive nasal diction and type-cast rôles as an idiotic valet, became very popular. The next few years were characterized, in the theatrical world of Paris, by the intense rivalry of Mondory's troupe with that of the "Comédiens du Roy", who returned to the capital and played once more at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Mondory's players, after an outstanding success in 1629 with a new Corneille play (Mélite) established themselves in the Salle du Jeu de Paume du Marais, which meant that Paris boasted two permanent theatres by 1634, the year in which the King (Louis XIII) gave financial assistance to the company of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. At that stage, the principal actor of the "Comédiens du Roy" was Bellerose, a handsome, elegant, but somewhat effeminate person adored by some, and detested by others. (One lady remarked that she did not care for La Rochefoucauld "because he looked like Bellerose", and Tallemant des Réaux nastily remarked on the care with which Bellerose examined the feathers on his hat in the midst of an impassioned speech; an act which rendered his sincerity suspect.)

Already, in the mid-1630s, patronage of actors was

becoming an important feature of the theatre-world. The two main rival troupes of Paris each had their respective patrons; Richelieu gave his support to Mondory's company, and Louis XIII, who liked to assert his power over the Cardinal in trivial matters, encouraged the players of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, ordering six of Mondory's best actors to be transferred to the rival troupe. This did not daunt Richelieu's protégés, who simply recruited new performers and, with the excellent material that Corneille produced for them (The Illusion Comique was a brilliant success in 1636) outshone the Royal Company until a stroke forced Mondory to retire. Thereafter, the troupe at the Hôtel de Bourgogne became the dominant company, for the best actors at the Marais deserted to the more successful side, and Corneille, too, gave his plays to the King's players. The Hôtel de Bourgogne now specialised in tragedy. Whatever some spectators thought of Bellerose, he must take the credit for the great improvement in acting techniques at the Hôtel de Bourgogne; for there was an appreciable difference between the half-rehearsed productions first staged there, and the polished performances of the 1630s. Also responsible in part for this higher standard of acting were the fruity-voiced provincial, Montfleury, and the lisping Beauchâteau.

Impressive though its tragedies might have been, the

Hôtel de Bourgogne was no match for the Marais when it came to comedy. Jodelet still performed at the rival theatre, and was extremely popular. Scarron and Thomas Corneille wrote plays for him, and, as Tallemant des Réaux remarked, (1) farce only existed at the Marais, in the person of Jodelet.

What emerges from the above history of early French theatre is, that in a span of some forty years, great progress had been made in the standard of entertainment offered to the public of Paris. From being a casual, disreputable affair, theatre had become something worthy of the royal notice; and those participating in it, from unknown clowns in fairground farce, or anonymous members of a company with a limited repertoire dating back to the fifteenth century, had become personalities that basked in public favour, and were noted for their talent in interpreting great rôles in works by master playwrights like Corneille.

With the improvement in the performance itself came improvements and refinements in the theatre. Seating accommodation was adapted to the needs of the fashionable society that now began to frequent the theatre, and the admission fee went up correspondingly. Instead of the director of the troupe, officers were

(1) Quoted in Karl Mantzius' Molière: les théâtres, le public, et les comédiens de son temps. Colin, Paris, 1908. pg. 35.

paid to take money at the door. The rougher elements in the audience, however, still made this a hazardous and ungrateful task. By 1641, the status and importance of theatre was such that State subvention to the Hôtel de Bourgogne was fixed at 12,000 francs annually. As for the Italian performers, they had become such favourites at Court that, far from having to pay the "Confrères" rent for a theatre, they were given a room in a wing of the Louvre, and a grant of 15,000 francs annually. The theatre known as the "Marais" received no financial aid from the King, but the players there were given permission to use the title, "Comédiens entretenus par sa Majesté" - an inaccurate claim and a doubtful privilege; but their consolation lay in the personal interest shown in their work by Richelieu. It is perhaps significant that the Cardinal did not feel it beneath his dignity to indulge in play-writing himself, and decorated a room in the Hôtel de Richelieu for the début of a play that he had written in part (Mirame). The audience of this distinguished piece were specially invited, and their polite applause failed to convince the Cardinal that he had the makings of a great dramatist. The following year Richelieu died, leaving Louis XIII his palace, theatre, and all within it. So, by the early 1640s, (when Molière was in his late adolescence,) dramatic composition was an occupation that tempted men of the great Richelieu's importance, and actors themselves could,

if talented enough, attract the attention and sympathy of royalty. This was a far cry from the place assigned to playwrights and players some thirty years earlier.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the position of comedians (and, in fact, of anyone associated with the stage) was somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, it was true that actors exercised a certain attraction for the public, partly because of the glamour of their profession and partly because of their skill in interpreting challenging rôles. On the other, they came up against the moral prejudice instituted and maintained by the Church, which extended its condemnation to all who were contaminated by contact with the theatrical world. Excommunication was the penalty suffered even by musicians and backstage assistants. What is more, death itself did not mitigate the severity of the Church in this regard, as is confirmed by the difficulty experienced in obtaining a Christian burial for Molière as late as 1673. By the end of the century, matters had improved, for when La Grange, one of the leading members of Molière's troupe, died in 1692, permission was given for him to be decently buried at Saint Sulpice.

The effect of this ambiguity surrounding actors and theatrical personalities was to create a vague aura of scandal about all who followed their profession; and this, in turn, aroused great curiosity among the public

of the time. The private life of actors and actresses was a subject fraught with interest. An amusing passage from Tralage's Recueil of 1695 (1) gives a sort of catalogue of "honnêtes", clean-living artists as opposed to the more disreputable exponents of dramatic art. Of the different spheres of entertainment, that of the opera was regarded as producing the most morally reprehensible women; the amorality of female performers at the opera was notorious. Although contemporary gossip was mainly concerned with the private life of stage celebrities, the professional aspect was not without interest for the public, as is shown by the readiness of gazetteers and social commentators of the time, to remark upon changes in a troupe, the début of a new actor, the retirement or come-back of a veteran. (2)

Towards the end of the century, there was a falling-off of interest in the theatre, and dramatic activity declined. This was due to several factors: the absence of brilliant dramatists (Molière and Corneille were dead, and Racine had renounced playwriting); Louis XIV's rejection of frivolity and entertainment at court, with the onset of old age, illness and penitence; and the revival of Church-influence with the reign of Mme. de Maintenon at Versailles. The waning

(1) Quoted in Pierre Mèlèse's Théâtre et le Public à Paris sous Louis XIV, 1659-1715. Droz, Paris, 1934. Pg.172.

(2) e.g. Donneau de Visé's Nouvelles nouvelles, or Tallemant des Réaux's Historiettes.

of popularity of the theatre was also due, to a certain extent, to the fact that fewer patrons were willing to subsidize companies of actors; for without financial aid, it was far from easy for a troupe to survive. Patronage was essential, and more will be said about it later in this study.

The theatre in seventeenth-century France had a varied fortune, and if graphically represented, it would be seen to follow a curve reaching its peak in the middle, after an unpromising start, and ending in a decline. The careers of actors and playwrights were closely bound up with the fortunes of the theatre, and its history is their's.

Little has been said so far of the financial aspect of life for people whose income depended on the theatre. Admission-fees were, of course, the most obvious source of income. Both in Paris and in the provinces, the tendency was for the charges to increase with the age of the century, partly due to the depreciation of money, and partly due to the growing demand for entertainment. However, the entrance fee by no means sufficed to pay for the hire of the theatre; costumes; stage-props; music; and, if necessary, hire of children for minor rôles and singers to amuse the audience between acts. Moreover, troupes were sometimes obliged to engage in litigation (a source of further expense)

and were out of pocket when theatres were closed for about a fortnight at Easter, and on other religious festivals as well as on days of royal mourning.

Revenue for a troupe was supplemented by performances in the homes of nobles and wealthy "bourgeois". Occasionally during the off-season in Paris, provincial tours might be undertaken, and, depending on the calibre of the troupe, there was the possibility of performing at Court, in which case expenses would be defrayed by the government. The most desirable position in which a company could find itself was that of benefitting from a royal grant, or from the protection of a great patron. Louis XIV, and his father and Richelieu before him, were the main patrons of the theatre in the seventeenth century, and several nobles like the Prince de Conti were also willing to play the rôle of Maecenas where actors were concerned.

Such patronage brought troupes substantial revenues, and was of assistance when they were attacked, (which was frequently, for rivalry between troupes was strong.) However, as H.C. Lancaster points out, (1) protection, especially royal protection, may have seemed a blessing, but it was not unmixed; for there were times when King

(1) Henry C. Lancaster, History of French Dramatic Literature in the 17th Century, Part V. Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1942. pg.5.

and authorities took upon themselves decisions that might better have been left to actors. Despite occasional interference in the production of plays or in the organization of a troupe, protection was desirable rather than not. This does not mean that dramatists of the time wrote, and players acted, only for an élite in the hopes of obtaining patronage. As we have seen already, (1) early theatre was largely frequented by the unrefined; but the coarser members of the audience did not stop going to the theatre when, later in the century, more respectable persons began attending performances.

Fulsome though the praises of patrons might appear to modern readers as found in dedicatory prefaces to plays of the 1660s, this was simply a polite convention, and did not express any slavish subservience on the part of the dramatist regarding the patron. Dramatists wrote for a wide and very mixed audience, the size and composition of which we shall consider shortly. Before passing on to that subject, however, it is as well to examine briefly the sort of life led by a typical dramatist of the 1650s, to gain an insight into the existence and circumstances of such a person. The dramatist in question is Paul Scarron.(2)

Scarron's ancestors came from Italy and settled in Lyon -

(1) See pp. 52 - 54.

(2) For a full biography, see the work by Emile Magne, Scarron et son milieu, Emile Paul, Paris, 1924.

they were of magisterial stock, and had become well-to-do through a series of judicious alliances. Paul, born into this upper middle-class milieu in 1610, was the only surviving male child of the first marriage of his father (an austere and fanatical person known as "the Apostle" because of his mania for the writings of St. Paul.) When the Apostle's first wife died, Paul's father remarried, and was much chastened by the shrewish, domineering female who became his second wife. The child was somewhat in the way, and was sent off to college until it became apparent that he was not of the stuff of which magistrates are made; whereupon it was decided he should enter the Church.

He went to Paris at the age of 19, with the status of an abbé and a highly irresponsible attitude to life. In the Capital, where theatre was beginning to come into its own, Scarron was not long in discovering the theatrical world, and imbibed fully its exciting atmosphere while awaiting an ecclesiastical position. This went on until his parents managed to secure him a place with the Bishop of Mans. At twenty-three, with memories of many a glorious debauch behind him and the prospect of quiet and dutiful days before him, the young abbé left Paris for the provinces. Life at Le Mans was not as objectionable as he might have expected, however, for the Bishop, Charles II of Beaumanoir, was rich, liberal, and quick to appreciate Scarron's happy dis-

position. Moreover, Scarron's observant eye soon found ample opportunity for amusement in studying provincial dress and manners, and this exercise was to furnish him later with the material for his Roman Comique, a novel about an itinerant group of actors touring the provinces. A visit to Rome in 1635, a gay round of social activities, excellent food (the capons of Maine having a particularly good reputation) and the occasional opportunity to consort with visiting troupes of actors, all helped to while away the time until 1638, when Scarron's luck turned and he left Le Mans for Paris.

His kindly Bishop had died, most of his friends had left the provincial town, and he himself had contracted rheumatic fever after an exceptionally violent bout of pleasure at a Carnival. On his return to Paris, he found his father in disgrace and exiled to Amboise as a result of imprudent criticism of Richelieu's rule. The next few years passed wretchedly in journeys between Paris and thermal baths at Bourbon-l'Archambault; in attempts to obtain a pardon for his erring father; and, on the death of the latter, in lengthy and unsatisfactory litigation concerning the legacy of Scarron the elder, whose wife fiercely disputed the inheritance with her step-children.

At last, in 1644, with nothing but a small annuity

from a patron (1), Scarron moved in with his two sisters and tried his hand at writing plays to augment his pitifully small income. Jodelet, ou le maître-valet, made him a celebrity. Jodelet souffleté followed, and a great popular success was the Boutades du capitain Matamore. Writing for the theatre was not as profitable as he had hoped, despite his popularity, and Scarron gave up theatre for a while, visiting Maine and endeavouring repeatedly to find a patron to ensure him a reasonable income. Finally, Mlle. de Montpensier, the daughter of Gaston d'Orléans, gave him some satisfaction in that regard. His poetry was becoming more and more appreciated, and he was continually adding to it, increasing the reputation he had already acquired as a dramatist in the fields of comedy and burlesque. The "Fronde" was gathering momentum by this time, and Scarron, dauntless as his father, was not slow in penning the Mazarinade, a scathing attack on the Cardinal Mazarin.

In 1652, Scarron rescued a young girl of seventeen from a hated step-mother and the threat of a convent, by marrying her; she was to look after him for the rest of his life - some eight years. For a while he retired to the provinces with his wife, but the lure of Paris was too strong to resist for long. On his return to the Capital, he was immediately badgered by directors

(1) The Commander of Souvré.

of troupes for new plays, but he was no longer interested in playwriting. In 1651, the first part of his Roman comique had been published, and the second followed in 1657. In this remarkable work he was breaking new ground, trying to acclimatise in France the type of novel which offered a life-like picture of contemporary manners as well as an abundance of incident. Such a novel was the antithesis of the idealistic works of Honoré d'Urfé and Mlle. de Scudéry, emphasising as it did the comic elements of low life and presenting a satirical view of society.

The last years of his life saw Scarron settle down definitively in Paris; accounts of the disastrous attempt to found a colony in the "New World" deterred him from any plans he once entertained of emigrating, and with his own reputation for witty conversation and his wife's for beauty, there was no danger of loneliness in Paris. Many interesting people, some of them celebrities, came to visit the Scarrons, among them the comedian Boisrobert and the sceptic La Mothe le Vayer.

Love of food and wine, and extravagance in general, were responsible for Scarron's being wretched, penniless and heavily in debt at the end of his life. His interest in literature waned and his hopes fastened instead upon the post of historiographer to the King,

but in 1660 he died before these ambitions could be realised. His widow was later to become Mme. de Maintenon, second wife of no less a person than Louis XIV.

It might be argued that Scarron's biography is of questionable value in showing how a playwright lived at the time when Molière was first feeling his way into drama, both as an actor and as a writer. There seems, after all, to be little that is typical in such a turbulent, exceptional sort of existence, an account of which reads like an incident-fraught comedy.

Yet there are aspects of it which are typical: it is characterized by great mobility; by a perpetual need for money and protection; by an impressive variety of experience and contact with widely differing social milieux. Above all, it suggests the curiously ambivalent attitude of mid-seventeenth century society towards men (and women) involved with the theatrical world; a mixture of reserve and respect, the latter inspired by the talent and personality of such people; the former, by the slightly disreputable, precarious nature of their existence.

The actor and playwright have now been placed in the society with which we are concerned. Let us now cross over the footlights and see what sort of people were to be found among the audiences that filled the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the Marais, and the recreation rooms of

stately homes and royal palaces in the mid-seventeenth century.

Audiences.

It is a difficult task to establish with any degree of certainty the composition of a Paris audience in an age when records and reliable sources of information are rare; but a significant indication of the breadth of cross-section in such an audience is the range in the price of theatre-tickets as given by H.C. Lancaster:(1)

"When the Malade Imaginaire was given... the 'doubled' charges were: parterre, 30 sous, boxes of the third tier, 2 francs, boxes of the second tier, 3 francs, amphitheatre, stage and lower boxes, half a louis."

(It was customary to double prices for new plays and "machine" plays, i.e. ones involving elaborate mechanical devices and visual effects.) There is a considerable difference between 30 sous and half a louis, and such a difference in purse and, presumably, rank, presupposes a very mixed audience.

As for numbers, we are on slightly firmer ground in supposing what these might have been. The Hôtel de Bourgogne appears to have housed between five and six hundred people. At the Palais Royal, there were two halls, one holding six hundred spectators, the other,

(1) H.C. Lancaster, op. cit. V. pg. 18.

considerably larger, accommodating between three and four thousand. (The latter was the one that Molière used, but his audience-capacity was reduced by alterations.) (1) From this it can be seen that theatre-attendance in seventeenth-century Paris was reasonably good, and that theatre was frequented by more than one class of persons. It remains to determine which classes did patronize the theatre, and in what proportions.

A remark of Corneille in 1676 in a poem to Louis XIV on the revival of one of his plays at Versailles contains the remark:

"Le peuple, je l'avoue, et la cour les dégradent" (2) The word "peuple" in the time of Molière had a distressing tendency to be confused with the word "bourgeois". It included several strata of the middle classes as well as the plebs, and in fact embraced a considerable section of the population, - all those, perhaps, who had no connections with the court, as Corneille's line would suggest. Interpretations of the term "peuple" vary considerably from author to author. Boileau, for example, uses it in a highly pejorative sense, while D'Aubignac (3) regards the "peuple" as a group whose natural taste should be respected. As far as

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- (1) See H.C. Lancaster, *op. cit.*, pp. 17 et seq.
 (2) Quoted by John Lough, Paris Theatre Audiences in the 17th and 18th Centuries, Oxford University Press, London, 1957. pg. 62.
 (3) author of Pratique du Théâtre.

their place in seventeenth-century theatre audiences is concerned, the main difficulty lies in clarifying the sub-divisions within the large, amorphous group to which they belonged.

At the extreme bottom of the social scale can be placed those who had neither rank nor breeding; those whom Georges de Scudéry terms "ignorants du parterre" in his Apologie du Théâtre of 1639. Scudéry chastises these persons severely for their conduct during performances, and terminates with the blunt suggestion that they should have "une pierre au bec qui les oblige au silence." (1) Their conduct was no doubt reminiscent of that of very early audiences at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in the days of Henri IV, when people went to drink, gamble and brawl in the theatre before the play started and sometimes continued these exhilarating activities during the performance, since their only interest in the play itself was for its value as spectacle. Both audience and theatre had changed considerably by the late 1630s, however, and Scudéry makes it clear that he regarded certain elements in the parterre as being of the most humble extraction and the dimmest intelligence.

Although the audiences with which we are at present concerned were more mixed than one might at first imagine

(1) Pg. 98.

the influence of the lower orders on the general level of taste in drama in seventeenth-century Paris would not seem to have counted for much. When contemporary critics or playwrights mention their presence, it is with impatience and contempt. It would be incorrect to suppose that because the most inferior members of the audience were to be found in the pit (seeing that it was the most inexpensive part of the auditorium), the parterre accommodated only plebeian groundlings. Solid bourgeois, and even a few noblemen, also viewed the play from the pit. When, for example, disorders broke out in the "Théâtre Italien" towards the end of the century, the Lieutenant of Police, D'Argenson, speaks of the greater number of spectators in the parterre as being "gens de collège, de palais, ou de commerce." (1) Hardly a description of the popular rabble which is often, and incorrectly, associated with the pit. In fact there was nothing degrading about frequenting that part of the theatre, as is shown by the letters of highly respectable foreign visitors to Paris in the 1660s. Such people as Philip Skippon (a Cambridge graduate, soon to become an M.P. and a knight) and Edward Browne (the son of Sir Thomas Browne, author of Religio Medici) felt no embarrassment about paying their 15 sous and standing in the pit.(2)

In the parterre, then, was a mixture of the "menu peuple".

(1) See J. Lough, op. cit. pg. 87.

(2) Ibid. pg. 93.

students, civil servants, merchants, professional men and noblemen. The nobles were admittedly in the minority, but when they were not accompanied by ladies, it was quite common for them to prefer the pit to the more elegant parts of the theatre. Their presence in the parterre is attested by the trouble they caused at performances of Molière's Psyché and also the Comtesse d'Escarbagnas and l'Amour Médecin. The younger "gens d'épée" were a truculent breed, and many a disorder in the pit could be laid at their door. As P. Mélése remarks, (1) an audience in the seventeenth century was easier to arouse than an audience today; the public tended to be less inhibited about expressing approval or disapproval of the performance before it. The disapproving whistle ("sifflet") was particularly common, and since not everyone was inclined to have recourse to it at the same time, the protest at the "sifflet" was often more disrupting for the performance than the original "sifflet" itself.

Apart from conflicting reactions to the play, trouble in the theatre also arose from the reluctance of patrons, especially members of the King's troops (usually found in the parterre) to pay the entrance fee. Even edicts from the royal hand did not succeed in quelling these delinquent members of the royal household. Although

(1) Théâtre et public à Paris sous Louis XIV, 1659-1715.
pg. 216.

we cannot be certain of their rank and birth, it is a fact that a high proportion of the King's palace troops were recruited from the nobility.

We have now seen what elements of the public composed the parterre: in it could be found people from all walks of life, from lackeys to noblemen. The only feature they had in common was that they were all of the male sex, for women never entered the pit. Numerically, the spectators in the parterre were the most important section of the audience; that is, when a play was being presented under ordinary conditions. At premières, prices were doubled, and the population of the pit fell by 40% on such occasions. (1)

Before we consider the more distinguished social groups that attended theatre in seventeenth-century Paris, it remains to determine what attitude playwrights and actors had towards the pit-spectators. It is interesting to note that, as the century advanced, a change was discernible in the attitude to that part of the audience which was of more modest social origins. We have already observed (2) that the parterre was mentioned with contempt by critics like Scudéry. Before the 1660s, there are no flattering remarks whatever to be found concerning the parterre; the first favourable

(1) c.f. P. Mélése, *op. cit.* pp. 209.

(2) See pg. 71

comment on the taste of the latter comes in 1683, in Molière's Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes, and even so, as J. Lough points out, (1) Molière was an actor-manager

"who knew on which side his bread was buttered, and was very conscious of the fact that the spectators who bought tickets for the parterre generally represented more than half his audience."

But as years went by, more respect for the taste of the lower orders, and more reliance on their judgment, became apparent. It was a long time, however, before anyone would have suggested that the pit should be the final judge of actors and plays. What, then, of the other sections of a Parisian audience in the 1600s?

Given the social structure of seventeenth-century France, wherein a barrier continued to separate the noble from the non-noble despite possible acquisition of a title through office, it was inevitable that the outlook and ideals of the privileged orders should exercise an appreciable influence on the drama of the age. It would be wrong to suppose that aristocratic persons of great standing only saw plays at the Louvre or at Versailles. (The noble element in the

(1) Op. cit. pg. 103.

parterre of Parisian theatres being of less illustrious status than the dukes, counts, marquis and barons who gravitated about the King at court.) On the contrary, the higher échelons of the nobility were strongly represented in the different theatres of Paris in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The numerical preponderance of the band of male spectators in the parterre did not match their contribution to the box-office receipts. The representatives of the nobility who sat in the first row of boxes had, for the performers, an importance from the financial point of view which far outweighed their relatively small numbers. As if this were not cogent enough reason for actors and playwrights of the time to bestow respect upon their aristocratic patrons, the prevailing social outlook demanded such respect as the birth-right of the upper classes. It is not surprising, therefore, that the best seats in the theatre were reserved for the socially superior sections of the population.

The most stylish members of society took their place in the first "loges"; the second were occupied by a slightly more mixed public including priests, young, elegant adventurers and showy social beauties who were more interested in attracting admiring glances than in obtaining a good view of the performance. An extra-

vagant custom of the French theatre in the seventeenth century was to permit nobles to sit upon the stage itself; and this constituted an intrusion upon, and interference with, the performance that could only annoy those in the parterre. The stage was cluttered with wicker chairs along each side, and this seating was very popular with the more extrovertial members of the fashionable élite. The boxes were expensive, and the pit was beneath their dignity, so for half a louis they had an excellent view of the stage, an excellent opportunity to show off their fine attire, and the chance to create what Tallemant des Réaux describes as "une incommodité épouvantable". (1)

Not even the Opéra, despite its elaborate sets, was immune from this invasion. Lulli doubled the price of stage-seats from half a louis to one louis d'or, but this did not deter male spectators from going on-stage to be admired in their elaborate clothes and to have a close view of the female participants. The stage was an excellent place for making assignations, and while there were certainly some aristocratic spectators who took a genuine, intelligent interest in the performance, the majority relied on ready-made opinions for their judgement of the drama, since they seldom paid enough attention to the play to have ideas of their own about it. Donneau de Visé (2) tells the amusing

(1) *Historiettes*, 1657

(2) *Nouvelles nouvelles*, III, pg. 185.

anecdote of a young fop who was next to him on the stage at a comedy by some lesser-known dramatist. The fop said that the play was devoid of wit and merit; de Visé replied that it was strange he should find it so, as the piece was by Corneille; whereupon the young man went red and admitted parts of it were good, and could only have come from Corneille. De Visé then acknowledged that in fact Corneille had had no part in it, and his interlocutor, unabashed, attributed the "good" parts to superlative acting. Even if we make allowances for embellishment by the raconteur, the above story illustrates very well the lack of critical judgment in some members of the theatre-going élite in Molière's time.

In fact, although the opinion of the lower orders in the parterre was not regarded as the touchstone by which drama should be judged, the attitude of the more prestigious elements in the audience was not much respected either, as two lines from Boileau's Épître à M. Racine, in 1677, show:

"L'ignorance et l'erreur, à ses naissantes pièces,
En habit de marquis, en robe de comtesse..."

Contemporary descriptions of Molière's audiences in Paris do not give an altogether flattering account of the aristocratic section of it. As Donneau de Visé's tale would suggest, the taste of the élite was guided by others, and the modishness of being seen at the

spectacle was more important to them than any intellectual stimulus they might derive from the performance itself.

So much for the nobles to be found in Paris theatres in Molière's day. The audiences at court presentations of plays only differed from those at, for example, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, in the matter of their composition, for the mixed parterre was absent from such audiences. It seems, as J. Lough observes, (1) that the general level of taste in court-circles was much the same as that of the more mixed theatre-audiences of the time. It is tempting to take at their face-value the eulogies lavished upon the taste of "la cour" as the "centre du bon goût". Certain representatives of aristocratic circles in the mid-seventeenth century - people like Mme. de Sévigné, La Rochefoucauld, Mme. de Lafayette, and Bussy-Rabutin - assuredly had a great measure of general culture and intelligence, and were in a position to appreciate drama. But these people were in the minority, and there were many court-nobles whose taste and intellectual development left much to be desired; it was not for nothing that Georges de Scudéry mentioned the "ignorants des galeries" as well as the "ignorants du parterre." (2)

Attempts by contemporary writers to exalt the judgement

(1) op. cit. pg. 130.

(2) Op. cit. pg. 30.

of the court and deprecate that of the "peuple" are not always convincing. To show that there existed some lucid observers who were not under any illusions about the so-called gulf between the taste of the Court and that of the people, let us consider for a moment one of La Bruyère's pronouncements concerning "les Grands" (1):

"Qui dit le peuple dit plus d'une chose; c'est une vaste expression, et l'on s'étonnerait de voir ce qu'elle embrasse, et jusques où elle s'étend. Il y a le peuple qui est opposé aux grands: c'est la populace et la multitude; il y a le peuple qui est opposé aux sages, aux habiles et aux vertueux; ce sont les grands comme les petits."

Although the Caractères were published well after Molière's death, and any evidence of seventeenth-century social attitudes they contain might be rejected as belonging to an age not strictly contemporary with the dramatist's lifetime, La Bruyère was already a young man in his twenties when Molière's dramatic career was at its height. Besides which, social prejudice and social attitudes do not change as rapidly as fashions, so what was true in the 1680s was also true, to a greater or lesser degree, in the 1660s. La Bruyère's comment certainly indicates that, in

(1) Les Caractères, "Des Grands", ch. ix, no. 53.

matters of taste, wisdom and intelligence, the "grands" were no different from the "petits".

It is worth pointing out that Molière's first success at the Court of Louis was as an actor and writer of farce. In October, 1658, Molière's troupe performed Nicomède, a serious piece, before the King (1), and afterwards gave a rendering of a farce that had had great popular appeal in the provinces: Le Docteur amoureux. The latter entertainment was the one that drew Louis' benevolent attention to the actors under Molière's direction, and if farce were regarded as the genre associated exclusively with the plebs of the fairground, such popularity of the little play at court would indeed be hard to explain and justify. In fact, despite the delicate vapourings of precious young women like Climène in the Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes (2) and cries of alarm from people like the Boulanger de Chalussay (2) ("Aux farces pour jamais le théâtre est réduit"), - the Court was no less attracted to farce than were more pedestrian social milieux in Paris and the provinces. As E. Lintilhac (3) remarks,

"...à la cour comme à la ville, on voulait rire,

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- (1) See Grimarest's Vie de Molière of 1705, in the Edition du Seuil, Paris, 1962, pg. 15.
 (2) Critique, sc. iii; Boulanger de Chalussay, author of Elomire Hypochondre.
 (3) Eugene Lintilhac, Histoire générale du théâtre en France, iii Flammarion, s.d. pg. 218.

à la bonne franquette, suivant la tradition gauloise toujours vivace..."

The emphasis on order, discipline and sobriety that accompanies most accounts of seventeenth-century life in France, tends to eclipse the fact that the average Frenchman of the time was, after all, a human being with the human need for laughter and a fair capacity for entertainment that was not always of the most elevated kind. The point is, that farce was not merely intended to amuse the lower orders; the upper classes of French society also enjoyed the antics of "farceurs", whatever their pretensions to superior taste might have been.

A reliable index of what plays appealed most to court-audiences is the number of times certain pieces were performed at court, since this suggests the measure of demand for them. It must be confessed that the resulting reflection of court-tastes is not of the most flattering. The Princesse d'Elide had nine showings, the Fâcheux, ten; the Misanthrope and the Malade Imaginaire were not even staged there. The greatest demand was for works like the Fâcheux and the Cocu Imaginaire, which would confirm that the criterion for a play at court was entertainment-value rather than intellectual content.

What, then, did a playwright of Molière's time seek to

gratify in his public? Many plays were performed both at Court and in a Paris theatre, which made for complexity of audience-expectation. Granted, the taste of the Court did not differ materially from the taste of the general public, but the tone of a play had to avoid giving offence to the squeamish, while amusing the less cultivated elements in any given audience. Often a play would open in one of the town-theatres, and then be performed later before the Court; it was rare for a première to take place at Court. Scudéry, we have seen, alludes to the "ignorants des galeries" as well as to the "ignorants du parterre"; but he also speaks of the "savants". Could a dramatist satisfy the more enlightened spectators attending his plays without boring the people who had gone to the theatre merely to be entertained? In the very nature of things, playwrights are more interested in drawing large audiences than in stimulating a small, intellectual élite. Dramatists of Molière's day were no exception to the rule. However much they paid tribute to the small handful of "savants" in their audiences, the real qualities dear to them in their spectators were good sense and a reasonable degree of discernment. Members of polite society in Paris, like court nobles, were seldom "savants". As far as book-learning was concerned, they were not much better equipped than their bretheren in the pit. Clitandre's attack on

"le savoir obscur de la pédanterie" in the Femmes Savantes (1) gives a fair idea of the attitude of seventeenth-century society to erudition, and it would have been labour lost for a dramatist to aim at pleasing the minority that the "savants" constituted in an audience.

So far, we have considered audience/dramatist relationships without specifying the genre practised by the playwright. As it is with comedy that we are particularly concerned, let us now see whether, to please their audiences, comedians of the seventeenth century (in the French sense of the word) conformed to the traditional rule of choosing non-noble subject-matter for their plays.

H.C. Lancaster is perhaps over-simplifying the situation when he claims that "French tragedy is eminently aristocratic...Comedy, on the other hand, is usually a middle-class affair." (2) He bases these remarks upon the contention that the stratification of seventeenth-century society affected French drama to the extent of separating the genres according to the class of society about which each was written. This rigidity of genre-division was only true in theory: in practice, comedians did not limit their plays to non-noble subjects.

(1) act I, sc. iii.
 (2) Op. cit. pg. 4

Already, in Dom Japhet d'Arménie (1653) Scarron had pilloried the precious, hyper-refined language and manners of the aristocracy. As P. Voltz says, (1)

"Don Japhet a beau être espagnol, il ressemble à certains petits marquis de chez nous."

In the Impromptu de Versailles, Molière declares that

"Le marquis d'aujourd'hui est le plaisant de la comédie" (2).

Certainly he and his contemporaries took the broader view of society, - in Molière's plays alone, one finds a wide range of social types, from the peasants in Dom Juan and le Médecin malgré lui to the elegant aristocrats in Célimène's salon. (Le Misanthrope) What, then, are the conclusions to be drawn from the preceding examination of the theatre-going public of the mid-seventeenth-century?

Conclusions: In the time of Molière, theatre-audiences were severely restricted numerically speaking, given the size of Paris and the size of the Court (the two main centres of audience). The short runs of most plays, even very successful ones, are proof of this. Socially, the Parisian audiences were more mixed than is generally supposed from the distance of the twentieth century. The middle classes were well represented in an average audience of the time, with elements of the

(1) P. Voltz, La Comédie, Armand Colin, Paris, 1964. Pg.53.

(2) Sc. i.

plebs also present. Aristocrats were in the minority in Paris theatres, but their influence, and financial contribution to the box-office takings, compensated for their numerical inferiority. At Court, of course, the audience was exclusively noble.

Playwrights of the seventeenth century paid lip-service to the intelligence of the "savants", but the prevailing horror of pedantry, as well as the desire to attract large audiences, deterred dramatists from pandering too much to the taste of a cultivated élite.

What audiences - both mixed and court - really expected of a play, was that it should be diverting, and this accounts for the popularity of comedies in which were present traces of the farce-tradition that had delighted rougher spectators at the fairground in the days of Henri IV. (E.g. the burlesque comedies of Scarron in the 'fifties, and some of the farcical comedies of Molière in the 'sixties.)

Such documentation as we have from contemporary sources seems to indicate that the atmosphere in a Paris theatre of the seventeenth century was more turbulent than that of a present-day theatre. Disorders were common in the parterre, and on the stage itself were a number of spectators whose befeathered, beribboned, chattering presence could only have detracted from the performance,

hiding the players from the audience in the pit and interfering with the actors themselves. The only plays from which these noisy, ostentatious viewers were of necessity excluded were plays involving elaborate décor and machinery; but on the whole, not even increased prices kept them from seats among the actors on the stage.

Life for the dramatist in the mid-seventeenth century was not easy. It was essential to secure some form of patronage, as revenue from performances was not normally sufficient to cover expenses incurred. Moreover, as rivalry was great and competition fierce between troupes, an influential person kindly-disposed to the director of a theatrical company could often prove useful in the matter of permission for a controversial play to be staged, or of premises for a particular performance, financial considerations apart.

Socially, actors and playwrights were of dubious status, for whatever their origins, the fact of taking up the theatre was damning enough to incur the censure of the Church, added to which was the precarious and sometimes questionable means by which they earned their living. On the other hand, by the 1640s drama had developed so much from the limited, primitive affair it had been in the first decade of the century, that the dignity of an individual was not compromised if he turned his attention

to playwriting, so long as it was not his livelihood.
(Such was the case of Richelieu.)

These, then, are the answers to some of the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. Given the general social context and the specific theatrical context, it is now possible to discuss the situation of Molière in the society of his day.

Chapter Three.Molière's Place
in Seventeenth-century French Society.

The purpose of this chapter is to define Molière's place in the social hierarchy of his time, and to determine to what extent his way of life conformed to that of most of the dramatists who were his contemporaries. Inevitably, such an undertaking involves some discussion of his private life - a most unsatisfactory exercise, partly because of the countless biographies that have already been penned about him, with varying degrees of accuracy, from Grimarest (1) to the present day; partly because so much that has been written of Molière is coloured by myth, legend and imaginative reconstruction of the truth. Reliable documentation concerning his life is lamentably scarce.

The present work places less emphasis on biography per se, since it is only the social aspects of the history of Molière's life which interest us. In discussing the dramatist's parentage and family, for example, it is merely to establish the sort of milieu into which he was born; not to resolve any of the questions that have perplexed "Moliéristes" since the eighteenth century.

(1) Jean-Léonor Le Gallois, Sieur de Grimarest, author of Vie de M. de Molière, 1705.

We have to accept at the outset that much of Molière's life is, and no doubt will remain, in the realm of conjecture. This does not mean, fortunately, that the broad outlines of his existence are altogether uncertain, and some basis of fact is provided by the excellent work of M. Jurgens and E. Maxfield-Miller, Cent Ans de Recherches sur Molière.(1)

First, it is widely accepted that Molière's name was not Molière. He was christened Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, the son of Jean Poquelin, upholsterer, and Marie Cressé. Ambiguity clouds the origins of the Poquelins, but it is more than possible that their's was a family of very long standing. There was a rich family of upholsterers of that name in Beauvais, whose genealogical tree goes back to the mid-sixteenth century; several members of this branch of Poquelins came to Paris in the days of Louis XIII, and the fact that their name and trade were identical with those of Molière's father seems to be more than mere coincidence. As for the Cressé family, their ancestors may be traced as far back as 1528, at which stage of their existence they were goldsmiths. (The least respected of the trades included in the six corporations of Paris.) By the time Jean married Marie, however, both the Poquelins and the Cressés were practising the same

(1) Published by the Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1963.

trade, namely upholstery. Their union was almost certainly regarded by contemporaries as an event of some importance in the world of Parisian commerce, since it represented the merger of two thriving business-houses.

at the time of their marriage, Molière's future parents enjoyed a privilege which, in the seventeenth century, was normally the preserve of the great: their respective families had been resident in the same premises for over twenty years. Such stability of address was unusual for people other than those owning fixed property, and as we have seen (1) in the early 1600s, property-owners were either nobles or very wealthy bourgeois. Molière's forbears were not in either category. Such documents as exist suggest that their residential stability was achieved through thrift and a responsible attitude towards obligations rather than through wealth or social status. Whatever the explanation, it is an established fact that for the span of a whole generation, the Poquelins had plied their trade in the Rue de la Lingerie, and the Cressés, in the Marché aux Poirées.

Why so much ado about an address? one might well ask. The point is that the families from which Molière was sprung appear to have been highly respect-

(1) See Chapter One of the present work.

able; so much so, that they could enjoy a privilege that was relatively rare for persons of their class.

The next question to resolve is, what was their class? A brief study of the rigid social hierarchy of the time shows that people engaged in manufacture and sale of textiles (upholstery and leather-goods come under this heading) were placed in the top ranks of the commercial bourgeoisie, a position that sets a master-upholsterer somewhere between the lower class of "marchands" and the upper class of tradesmen. As R. Mousnier remarks, (1) merchants were the last members of society to qualify for the titles of "honorable", and "honnête". After them came the trades: draper, apothecary, goldsmith... then peasants and labourers... and finally, beggars and those living at the expense of others. These last named were the despised of society, and even tradesmen did not have a particularly good reputation.

Molière's family, then, may be considered as belonging fairly and squarely to the ranks of the middle bourgeoisie. To lend further substance to this contention, it may be noted that all the guests who attended a wedding that took place in 1661 between Anne Notin and Claude Bourbier (both children of upholsterers) are qualified by the title, "Bourgeois de

(1) Op. cit. pg. 51.

Paris". (1) Among those guests were the bride's uncles, Louis Cressé and Jean Poquelin.

There can be little room for doubt that when discussing Molière's circumstances, we are dealing with a milieu that is definitely bourgeois. Like so many of this class, the dramatist's maternal ancestors were not above indulging in the little vanity of their own coat-of-arms. (The bourgeois tendency to ape the nobility has been abundantly demonstrated.) From 1570 onwards, the Cressés boasted heraldry that is described as being "d'azur, à trois massacres (2) de boeufs d'or". Molière's maternal grandfather normally signed himself Louis de Cressé, which suggests, again, a certain penchant for social climbing, or at any rate some dissatisfaction with bourgeois origins. But in that we see nothing unusual, given the social mobility of the times. The Poquelins, too, had their own armorial blazonry, which was "d'argent à cinq arbres de sinople, dont trois de haut tige et deux plus petits". (3)

That the Poquelin family had a proud tradition of workmanship to commend it, may be deduced from the fact that it had secured the title of "tapissier ordinaire

(1) See Appendix I, in the work by M. Jurgens & E. Maxfield-Miller, pg. 620.

(2) skulls.

(3) Quoted in G. Bordonove's Molière Génial et Familier, Laffont, Paris, 1967. pg. 23.

du roi" for the head of the concern. When Jean-Baptiste was nine years old, his father bought this title from his elder brother, Nicolas, who in turn had received it from their father. With the honour went an annual income of some 337 livres. The following year, Molière's mother died (the life-expectation in those times was barely 25 years) and after waiting a decent interval, Jean Poquelin re-married. His second choice was one Catherine Fleurette who was the daughter of an iron-monger; like the first Mme. Poquelin, she was of solid bourgeois origins, although perhaps a little inferior to her predecessor by reason of the trade her father practised. Ambitious or not, Molière's father certainly did not marry out of the commercial bourgeoisie to which he belonged.

Dubious though the authenticity of the Grimarest biography of Molière may be (Boileau severely remarked that it is "fait par un homme qui ne savait rien de la vie de Molière et qui se trompe dans tout") there is little reason to quarrel with the statement by Grimarest that

"les parents de Molière l'élevèrent pour être tapissier". (1)

It was common enough practice to prepare the son and heir to take over management of a flourishing business

(1) Vie de M. de Molière, éd. du Seuil, 1963, pg. 13.

with a view to the day when the head of the family would retire. After all, Jean-Baptiste was the first-born of Jean Poquelin. Whether the future Molière submitted gracefully to the plans that had already been made for him, and at what stage the fascination he felt for the theatre made him refractory with regard to his father's wishes, does not concern us here. What is relevant to a discussion of criteria is an analysis of the sort of dilemma in which the son of a well-to-do, respectable, middle-class family in the seventeenth century found himself when his own ambitions clashed with those of his father.

On the one hand was the promise of financial security, a predictable existence, harmonious family relationships and a measure of social prestige. The latter was not perhaps of the greatest, but it was adequate for the class of person to whom it attached. On the other hand was the excitement and uncertainty of a profession that was only just becoming respectable, and offered - apart from the sheer romance of adventure - little financial security, prestige of a questionable variety, a hand-to-mouth existence, and inevitable ill-feeling in the Poquelin family. Before any choice between these alternatives could be made, however, there was the matter of whether or not the individual within the family group was free to choose.

Paternal authority in the time of Molière varied from province to province, but on the whole one can say that the seventeenth-century family resembled the family of classical antiquity inasmuch as it was a patriarchal group. It was not for nothing that Edme Rétif said,

"J'obéis à mon Dieu visible, à mon père."

As late as the eighteenth century, paternal authority was absolute over a son, even if he were married and had children of his own. P. Varet exaggerates a little, perhaps, in claiming that French society up to 1789 was a sort of "community of families rather than of individuals" and that, as Bodin put it, the division of the state "se fait par lignées et non par têtes." (1)

At any rate, Molière's situation in the early 1640s was certainly complicated by the social conservatism that dictated total obedience to paternal authority. Already, in mid-December of 1637, Jean-Baptiste had pledged himself to assume the office of upholsterer to the King after his father should relinquish it; but given that he was then only a lad of 15, it is hardly reasonable to speak of a "choice". The issue only becomes clearer in 1642, when the young Molière, well-educated, trained and conditioned to the station

(1) Les Destinées de l'Individu, Sirey, Paris, 1938, pg.159.

in life that his father intended him to occupy, was sent from Paris to furnish the needs of Louis XIII on a journey to Narbonne. The 20-year-old upholsterer came into contact, during this absence from the Capital, with Madeleine Béjart, actress and protégée of the Duke of Modena. Hers was the decisive influence in winning Jean-Baptiste from the regularity of a quiet, industrious, well-ordered bourgeois existence to the glamour of theatrical life.

What sort of person was Madeleine? Socially her position was somewhat delicate, since she was "protected" by a duke, and given her age (in 1642 she was twenty-four) and sex, there is little doubt what sort of relationship existed between herself and her patron. Her parents were constantly moving house, but despite their instability, they appear to have been conscientious regarding their children's upbringing.(1) Joseph, one of Madeleine's brothers, was studying theology at University in 1634, and the verses attributed to Madeleine herself in 1636 (on Rotrou's tragedy, Hercule Mourant, and published with the tragedy as a fore-word) suggest an extraordinarily good education for a woman of that time. That she was intelligent, that she was resourceful and energetic, that she was courageous, is amply

(1) See M. Jurgens and E. Maxfield-Miller, op. cit. pg. 79 on this subject.

demonstrated by the initiative she took in organizing a troupe of actors - a task that was normally undertaken only by men - and in managing it with all the success that could be expected under the circumstances.

It is a fruitless enterprise to try and reconstruct the relationship that existed between her and Molière. If we limit ourselves to the facts as they stand, we find that after the visit to the south of France, and the encounter with Madeleine Béjart, the heir to Jean Poquelin's upholstery business took the bold step of surrendering his place in the family concern to his younger brother, Jean, on January 6th, 1643. He did so in order to seek his fortune as an actor in the new company then being formed by "la Béjart", as she was called. A document signed in June of 1643 attests the inclusion of Molière among the other persons in Madeleine's troupe, the "Illustre-Théâtre". October that same year saw the company performing at Rouen, at a fair, while a theatre was being prepared for them in Paris (the "Jeu de Paume des Métayers.") This was fairly common among acting troupes of the time; a tour of the provinces or an engagement outside Paris frequently tided companies over until premises were available for their performances in the Capital, or until a new season opened to guarantee them large enough audiences. The first six months of 1644 were disastrous for the new troupe, and in

June, Molière took over its direction from Madeleine Béjart; but the change of leadership did not coincide with a change of fortune. By 1645, the actors of the "Illustre-Théâtre" followed the example of so many unsuccessful players, and left the City for the provinces. Behind them were bitter memories of debts, sojourns in prison, and betrayal by fellow-actors who had left them, favouring more prosperous troupes like that of the Marais. Their early experiences of theatrical life had brought nothing but humiliation, both prestige-wise and finance-wise.

What of the thirteen years of provincial touring? There is a very understandable tendency to consider the period 1645 - 1658 as one in which Molière and his friends led the kind of existence described in Scarron's Roman Comique (1657). In fact, it was suggested that the "Illustre Théâtre" formed the model for the company described by Scarron, and that Molière himself was the original of Le Destin, director of the troupe in the Roman Comique.(1) It is often dangerous to try and identify specific characters with persons in real life, and in fact there is little to suggest that Scarron's intention was to write a novel about the Béjart company in particular, especially as there were so many similar troupes in exactly the same situation at the time. Besides,

(1) Theory of the 19th century scholar Paul Lacroix.

Scarron had a rich fund of personal experience upon which to draw, from his own sojourn in the French provinces, notably Maine.

The existence led by Molière and his friends was conceivably far from easy, particularly in the beginning. As L. Thoorens observes, (1) it is more than likely that the "sieur Morlière" mentioned in the Register of Municipal Administration of Nantes (23rd April, 1648) who most humbly begged "messieurs de permettre à ses comédiens de monter sur le théâtre pour représenter leurs comédies", was a poor, shabby wretch. A whole picture of stereotyped poverty is easily conjured up: difficulties incidental to travelling, hitches in accommodation, lack of facilities, supperless nights... in some respects, the provinces were not much better than the Capital. Village magistrates and clergy took a dim view of itinerant players who had come from the city to extract money from the local populace. Accordingly, they often made conditions as difficult as possible for the theatrical companies who came their way. When a fair was held at a village, an interdict would frequently be served on the actors attracted to the pleasure-ground, forbidding them to perform until the local authorities had decided whether it was in order for them to do so. If they obtained the necessary permission before the fair was over,

(1) Léon Thoorens, Le Dossier Molière, Gérard et cie, Verviers, 1964 pp. 66-67.

they were just as likely to be ordered to give the first (and largest) takings to a convent or charitable institution. Occasionally, too, there was no room suitable for use as a theatre other than the town hall and local "jeu de paume". When these were not available, troupes had to resort to barns.

Apart from the above-mentioned difficulties, which were of a purely administrative and practical nature, there was fierce competition among theatrical companies, even in the provinces. Molière was not the only one to have had the happy idea of trying his luck there. Poets, students, and young noblemen bored with the routine of their existence, followed troupes in the country. (K. Mantzius suggests that it was the presence of such noblemen that tempted actors to add "de" to their name; a temptation Molière himself did not resist.) (1) It was difficult to tell the genuine nobility from the usurped nobility in such circumstances.

It is not likely that Molière and his friends suffered indefinitely from financial insecurity, however. Not only did success with provincial audiences (comedy-farces being very well-received) cause the troupe's standard of living to improve, but their circumstances took a turn for the better after the Prince de Conti

(1) Molière: les théâtres, le public, et les comédiens de son temps. Colin, Paris, 1908, pp. 65 et seq.

bestowed his patronage upon them. Before he did so they had been without a mentor since the Duc d'Esparmur had abandoned them in the early 'fifties. (1650-51). From 1655 onwards, when they again had financial support and were steadily gaining popularity, it was more a matter of tours than of "vagabondages"; it is not strictly accurate to regard the Molière-Béjart company as a band of wandering performers drifting aimlessly from town to town with no intention other than that of "singing for their supper".

Some idea of the way they lived in the latter years of their provincial touring is gained from the Mémoires of Charles Coypeau d'Assoney (1605-75).

The last-named was an old friend of Molière and the Béjarts, fallen on bad times. He joined up with the troupe in Lyons and travelled with them for a time. His remarks on the sort of life they led belong to a period dating from 1657.

"Jamais gueux ne fut plus gras", he says of himself after he had joined his fortunes to theirs! He mentions rich repasts and expensive wines ("muscat" and "hypocras"). Allowing for the pleasant blur of reminiscence slightly distorting reality, it seems that Molière and the troupe had attained a very comfortable standard of living by the time they were ready to direct their way towards Paris once more.

Materially they were well off. Socially, the prejudice against their profession prevented them from being altogether acceptable to polite society. For it remained true that, however well-educated theatrical folk might have been (and certainly Molière and the Béjarts were far from deficient in this respect), and however much wealth they might have amassed, the Church's condemnation of their means of support, and the vexed question of actors' morals, caused conventional middle-class and upper-middle-class families to be scandalised at the thought of their sons taking to the stage. It seems that Molière's own family had become reconciled to the idea of his being an actor, for on his return to Paris in 1658, relations between the Poquelins and Jean-Baptiste were completely normal. The Béjarts and other comedians as well, applied to Jean Poquelin (Molière's younger brother and head of the concern) for the furnishing of their homes. Jean Poquelin asked Jean-Baptiste to be godfather to his child born in the spring of 1659. The following year Jean died, and his aged father took over the business again until 1669, when Molière became "tapissier du roi" on his father's death. Despite his acting career, then, Molière appears to have re-integrated quite easily into the bourgeois milieu whence he was sprung.

Before considering Molière in the context of Parisian

and court society from the 'sixties onwards, it is as well to say a few words about the provincial society in which he found himself for more than a decade of his life, and a formative decade at that. The picture of provincial society that emerges from Scarron's Roman Comique is by no means flattering. The view we are invited to take of the provinces is one that a patronising Parisian of the mid-seventeenth century would certainly have adopted. Scarron was not unique in presenting provincials as "la plus incommode nation du monde". (1) Furetière's Dictionnaire of 1690 defines the word "provincial" as a strictly pejorative term, implying a total lack of finesse and polish. This inferiority of the provinces as compared with town and court was a natural consequence of the centralisation of intellectual life from the time of Richelieu onwards. As W.D. Howarth points out, (2)

"in Louis XIV's reign, ... the nobility were irresistibly attracted by the powerful magnet of Versailles, while writers and artists saw possibilities of patronage in Paris, at Versailles, or at other princely courts in the Ile-de-France".

The provincials with whom Molière and his fellow-actors came into contact must have exhibited all the

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- (1) Le Roman Comique, ed. E. Magne, Garnier, Paris, n.d., p. 24.
 (2) W.D. Howarth, Life & Letters in France, 17th Century, Nelson, London, 1967, pp. 56-57.

signs of their race that made them such an obvious target for the satirist and the comic dramatist: boorishness, tastelessness, obstinacy, hyper-sensitivity to criticism, and ineradicable attachment to ideas and customs long since outmoded. Socially they were regarded with contempt, mainly because their manners and habits were so far out of step with those of the court. It was not that they were morally or financially inferior, or, indeed, that their place in the social hierarchy of the seventeenth century was a lowly one. Censure of them was mainly on aesthetic grounds.

When Molière returned to Paris with his players in 1658 after the Prince de Conti had withdrawn his patronage from the troupe in May the previous year, three different social milieux had left their imprint upon him: the commercial bourgeoisie of Paris in which he had grown up; the theatrical circles in which he had moved for fifteen years; and provincial society, which he had observed and entertained for over a decade. To these diverse influences was soon to be added that of the court.

As we have seen, his status was higher on his return from the provinces than it had been in the mid-1640s, when bad debts and two spells of imprisonment had reduced him to the level of a "gueux". Still, it was

vital to secure patronage, and it was not until October, 1658, that Monsieur, the King's brother, gave the troupe his protection. The account of how Molière and his players entertained Louis XIV and his brother on the 24th October, 1658, in the guard-room of the Louvre, and the royal reaction to the programme, is well-known. The happy result of that particular performance was, that it was no longer necessary for the "Troupe de Monsieur", as it was now called, to hire a theatre or stage their productions in a converted "jeu de paume". They were given permission to share the "salle du Petit-Bourbon" with the Italian company under the direction of Scaramouche, who had long been a favourite at court. Despite the privilege thus conferred upon his troupe, Molière was still less favoured than his Italian rival, for Scaramouche's company performed on the popular days of the week (i.e. Sunday, Tuesday and Friday) while Molière's could only do so on off-days. Qualified though the mark of royal favour was, it did afford a foothold for the players newly returned from the provinces, and such a foothold was precious in a city where competition ran high among theatrical companies.

In July the following year, the Italians returned to their own country, leaving Molière in sole possession and enjoyment of the Petit-Bourbon theatre; an enviable position whence his rivals soon contrived to oust him. When the Petit-Bourbon was demolished unexpectedly in

October, 1660, to make way for alterations to the Louvre, the best facilities Molière could manage to obtain from the King for his productions were such as the Palais-Royal afforded, and they left much to be desired.

Good, bad or indifferent, the conditions under which Molière and his actors had to perform are of less interest for the present study, than the new social environment in which the dramatist was beginning to make his reputation.

We have already seen, in a very general way, what life was like for nobles at court (1); we have also seen the sort of audiences that filled the court-theatre. (2) Now comes the matter of Molière's place in the sphere of royal entertainment, which was quite different from entertainment of provincials.

The first point to bear in mind is that, for the generation that succeeded Richelieu's rule, amusement was extremely important. Those attached to the Court in the early 1660s were determined to enjoy themselves to the full; much of the emphasis on pleasures was reaction against the enforced austerity of earlier days, when, during the first Fronde, Paris was blockaded and the Queen Mother was stranded at

(1) See Chapter One, part two.

(2) See Chapter Two.

St. Germain throughout the winter. The extravagantly sumptuous repasts of the early 'sixties more than made up for the days when "love-making was accompanied by bread instead of sonnets" (1), so scarce was food. Molière's arrival on the court-scene coincided with a period when there was always some great person playing host to ever-willing guests, for gastronomic pleasures were certainly not accounted inferior delights. (2). Masquerades were fashionable, too, and ballets in which the young King did not disdain to participate, although the high-minded despised this form of entertainment most heartily, deeming it frivolous. Physical exercise was popular at court, and ladies were even allowed to watch, to maintain good tone and lend some refinement to the proceedings. During Lent, balls and ballets were forbidden, but sport was not, and hunting went on throughout the year: in winter, the Queen herself, and her ladies, would sometimes accompany the men in pursuit of the stag.

Such an ambiance was extremely propitious for a dramatist, and especially a comedian. There was a constant demand for concerts, ballets and plays, and as audiences were relatively small, the number of new plays required to divert them was correspondingly

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- (1) M. Magendie, La Politesse Mondaine, (1600-1660), P.U.F. Paris, 1925, pg. 543.
 (2) E.g. a venison-banquet for 1,664 persons, costing 5,000 livres, and Mme. de Chaune's Moorish banquet for Anne of Austria, with statues and orange-trees specially imported.

larger. This explains why court-productions had such a short run. Apart from the plays staged in rooms of palaces in Paris (the Italian farceurs, for example, used the Petit-Bourbon, and Molière's troupe, the Palais-Royal at a later date), it was common for players to be summoned to entertain the court wherever it was assembled, - not necessarily in the Capital. On such occasions, the theatrical company was said to pay a "visite", the length of which varied according to the importance of the event being celebrated; it could last for anything up to three weeks. In the case of a supper-with-entertainment, the "visite" would be of short duration - a few hours. Not only were "visites" desirable from the financial point of view, but they also enhanced the prestige of the troupe considerably. Nor were "visites" confined to court-audiences. It was equally common for an eminent figure of the aristocracy to call on the services of a troupe, even if the patron of the troupe were the King or, as in the case of Molière's company, Monsieur. La Grange's Register mentions almost a hundred performances "en visite", over and above those that took place before the King and court. Among the illustrious names that appear in the list are those of the Great Condé; Mazarin, Fouquet and Colbert; the Dukes of Guise and Beaufort, and Mme. de Rambouillet. But Molière gave more performances for the King than for all the nobles

put together: he played at Vincennes, Fontainebleau, Saint-Germain, Versailles, and Chambord, not to mention the Louvre and Tuileries Palaces.

What of the sort of existence Molière led during the most productive, demanding and interesting period of his career?

Obviously as his reputation grew, so did the demand for his comedies, which meant that in addition to the administrative burden of troupe-director, he had to find the time to compose plays of a sufficiently high standard to maintain his popularity and that of his players. Not all his great plays belonging to the period 1658-1673 were written hastily and under pressure, but René Bray is right in observing that

"il reste plus de vingt pièces qui furent composées à Paris par un comédien surmené, obligé de compter avec les mois, les semaines, et même les jours..." (1)

The fact of having Monsieur as his patron did not exempt Molière from anxiety regarding rival troupes in Paris, nor did he have the monopoly of court-entertainment. The players of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the Italian farceurs, and the actors from the Marais theatre were also invited to exhibit their talents

(1) R. Bray, Molière, Homme de théâtre, Mercure de France, 1968 Paris. Pg. 175.

before the court. But certainly up to 1670, Molière's performers were the favourites of the King, once the Italians had departed in 1660. The fact that in the summer of 1662, the Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe, jealous of the privileges accorded to that of the Palais-Royal, took the step of seeking the Queen Mother's intercession for entertaining the court, would suggest the measure of Molière's success with His Majesty. Such was his standing at court, that when Fouquet was disgraced and arrested a matter of weeks after commissioning a play from Molière (Les Fâcheux, 1651), instead of being involved in the minister's disgrace, the playwright was received, with his work, at Court. How reliable the tradition that Louis suggested amendments to Les Fâcheux might be, is uncertain. But it is significant, and no doubt an indication of the true state of affairs, that the play in question was dedicated to the King when it was published early in 1662. Three months after this triumph, the Palais-Royal troupe was summoned to Saint-Germain for a fairly protracted "visite" at Court, performing before the King for a week, and again a little later in the year, for an even longer spell, - nearly three weeks. It seems clear that by this time, Molière was becoming firmly established as the favourite entertainer at court. In 1663, His Majesty confirmed this by conferring on the comedian the title of "bel esprit", and granting him a pension of 1,000 livres. There

is reason to believe that Molière was admitted to the King's "lever" (1) in 1663, and from the end of that same year, he assumed the office that his father had once held, - "valet de chambre du Roi".

But the highest proof of royal esteem was yet to come. In February, 1664, Louis XIV was god-father to Molière's son, Louis, first-born child of his union with Armande Béjart, (a young woman some twenty years the dramatist's junior, and related to Madeleine.) In itself, the gesture was not specially remarkable. Other "valets de chambre" had been similarly honoured, and later the court-entertainer Lulli was to receive the same mark of favour. The King's action was only significant inasmuch as it came at a time when Molière was under heavy attack as a result of the controversy aroused by the Ecole des Femmes. Such a public manifestation of the Monarch's sympathy with Molière's cause could hardly pass without comment. There was little in the play itself to give legitimate offence (unless one accepts the humour of the "tarte à la crème" variety as being too earthy and gaulois for sensitive souls); it was the outstanding success of the piece that awakened the hostility of rivals jealous of their own reputation, and sparked off the storm of criticism that dominated conversation in the salons at that time. Not even the "Tartuffe" crisis

(1) If we can go by the famous letter written by Racine in November, 1663.

of 1664, - which was much more serious as it affected the "parti dévot" at the court and obliged Louis to ban further performances of Molière's new play, - diminished the privileged position that the comedian enjoyed at court. On the contrary, in 1665, after many performances before His Majesty (Fontainebleau, Versailles, and Saint-Germain), the Palais-Royal troupe was transferred from the service of Monsieur to that of the King himself, to be known thenceforward as the "Troupe du Roi au Palais-Royal". Not only did this mean a greater measure of dignity and prestige (criteria of the utmost importance in seventeenth-century French society), but also an increase in financial assistance. (A pension of 6.000 livres accompanied the troupe's new status.)

The libertine aspects of a new play written and staged that year by Molière (Dom Juan) did little to appease his fanatically religious enemies, however, and the interdict on Tartuffe remained in force. The rest of 1665 and the whole of 1666 saw Molière continue to fulfil his obligations as chief court-entertainer: at Versailles he presented L'Amour Médecin, and at Saint-Germain he spent nearly three months towards the end of 1666, helping to organise the great Ballet des Muses, to which his own contribution was in the form of three comedies (Mélicerte, Pastorale Comique and Le Sicilien.) Apart from these activities, Molière

was also endeavouring to have the ban on Tartuffe lifted, but such was the influence of his enemies that it was not until February, 1669, after repeated pleas and appeals to the King, that royal permission was finally given for the controversial play to be performed publicly.

Between 1668 and 1670, Molière did not spare himself to maintain a steady supply of new works for King and public. In 1668, after a lull in creative activity (explained partly by ill health, partly by preoccupation with the "Tartuffe" crisis) Molière staged his Amphitryon in the Palais-Royal theatre, and a little later at court. That year, the Grand Divertissement at Royal took place at Versailles, in the summer, and it included Molière's comedy, George Dandin. In 1669, at Chambord, it was M. de Pourceaugnac; at Saint-Germain, Les Amants Magnifiques, as part of another Divertissement Royal, for which the King had an insatiable appetite. This time it was Molière alone who was responsible for arranging the proceedings; before he had merely seen to the comic entertainment, while the master of ceremonies was Benserade. The year 1670 was saddened by the untimely death of Monsieur's vivacious, 26-year-old wife, Henriette d'Angleterre, and for four months there were no routs, revels or entertainments at court. But in October that year, the interest in the Middle East awakened

by the visit of one Arviou to the French Court, and the desire for vengeance after a slight to the national dignity when a Turkish gardener was sent to Paris as the First Ambassador of Turkey, caused a "turquerie" (play about Turks) to be commissioned. Accordingly, Molière staged the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, with the collaboration of Lulli (music) and Beauchamp (choreography). Collaboration characterised the next production as well - Psyché - which was performed before King and court in the Tuileries Palace in January, 1671. It was a most extravagant and costly piece of entertainment, lasting some five hours and involving the use of elaborate machines and stage-effects. Pressure of work obliged Molière to enlist the aid of Corneille, then aged sixty-five, in the composition of the play. Molière himself wrote the prologue, Act I and the first scenes of Acts II and III. The rest is executed by the author of Le Cid, - about eleven hundred lines.

The other play that Molière put on for the Court in 1671 was La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas (at Saint-Germain, on December 2nd.) This was the last performance of the Troupe du Roi before their royal patron. Already Lulli's growing popularity at court was estranging the King and his once-favoured comedian: the monarch's pleasure was increasingly gratified by the talents of the Florentine musician, as is shown by the privi-

leges conferred on the latter from the early 1670s. These included the monopoly, at court, of entertainment involving music and dancing. Molière had hoped to present his last play, the Malade Imaginaire, before the King, but shortly before Christmas, 1672, he realized the futility of this ambition, and the comedy was staged instead at the Palais-Royal theatre, where, after four performances, the famous comedian appeared for the last time. He died on the evening of February 17th, 1673.

The delicate social position of those connected with the theatre, and the attitude of the Church towards actors, caused inevitable difficulties when the matter of the dramatist's sepulture arose. As it was, while he was still on his death-bed, two priests in the vicinity of his house had refused to come and administer the final sacraments.(1) The formal appeal addressed to the Archbishop of Paris by Molière's widow in February, 1673, confirms the uncompromising stand taken by the priest of the parish:

"...comme ledict sieur Molière est décédé sans avoir reçu le sacrement de confession dans un temps où il venait de représenter la comédie, monsieur le curé de Saint-Eustache lui refuse la sépulture..."(2)

(1) Messieurs Lenfant and Lechat.

(2) C.f. Edition du Seuil, Paris, 1964, pg. 31.

The reasons for the Archbishop's indulgence remain obscure: there may or may not have been kingly intervention; but whether it was through fear of a public scandal, or whether it was because of the position Molière had held at Court, records show that Mme. Molière's supplication met with a favourable response. In a document dated 20th February, 1673, the Archbishop replied:

"...nous avons permis au sieur curé de Saint-Eustache de donner la sépulture ecclésiastique au corps du défunct Molière dans le cimetière de la paroisse, à condition néanmoins que ce sera sans aucune pompe, et avecq deux prestres seulement, et hors des heures du jour..."

He was careful to add that

"nostre présente permission sera sans préjudice aux règles du rituel de nostre église." (1)

Altogether a rather grudging and qualified statement of permission granted, which suggests the intensity of prejudice that existed regarding thespians of the time. On the other hand, it also implies the exceptional nature of Molière's case, and as such invites speculation on the latter's place in society at the time of his death.

Apart from the fact that he was a controversial celebrity in his own right as the result of the many

(1) Ibid.

successful plays he had staged for Parisian audiences at the Palais-Royal theatre, his position at Louis' court had lent him considerable prestige. From Les Fâcheux in 1661 to La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas in 1671, - a period of ten years - Molière and his troupe had established themselves as royal entertainers of the first degree. As René Bray points out, (1) if one adds together all the periods spent "en visite" by the Troupe du Roi, one finds that they amount quantitatively to a whole year, - a year in direct service to the King! This was a privilege that did not come to many, especially taking into account the capriciousness of royal taste and the fickleness of royal favour. Although he embraced a theatrical career, Molière did not, apparently, break completely with the bourgeois tradition that shaped his early days: we have seen that on his return to Paris from the provinces, his reconciliation with his family was swift and complete. When he married Armande Béjart, it was by religious ceremony, in the church of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, and his conduct in his private life (the little of it that can be gleaned from reliable sources) seems to have been entirely conventional. Such anomalies as have come down to posterity concerning Molière's life - for example, the suggestion that Armande Béjart was the illegitimate daughter of Madeleine, sired by Molière himself when he first met the interesting comédienne - are of

(1) Op. cit. pg. 138.

suspect origin, most of them insinuated by the dramatist's enemies at court or by his rivals at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Had Molière indulged in outrageous practices or overtly flouted the "bienséances" (code of seemly behaviour), it is highly doubtful whether Louis XIV would have protected him as he did. The Sun-King may have been autocratic, but not even he could afford to cross the powerful "parti dévot" at his court, as his policy concerning Tartuffe indicates. The remarks of such persons as Donneau de Visé and the Boulanger de Chalussay, author of the venomous Elomire Hypocondre, should be treated with the caution they deserve in view of their source.

What of the attitude to Molière among society at large in his day? To the nobles and the King, he was a supremely talented entertainer upon whom they could rely to provide hilarity at special functions of a commemorative nature, or simply a troupe-director whose ability to amuse was valuable in an existence so dependent on divertissement to make it liveable. To the actors at the Hôtel de Bourgogne he was a dangerous rival whose brilliance and reputation were a threat to their security, to their place in the theatrical life of Paris. To the very mixed audiences that filled the theatre of the Palais-Royal he was a comedian whose plays admirably answered to the classi-

cal ideal of "plaire et instruire", inasmuch as they provoked mirth and thought at the same time. Occasionally there were objections when the subject treated in a play offended the taste of the "précieux", or when the relevance of one of the lessons he pointed was felt to be uncomfortably obvious.(1) Religious dévots of the period hated Molière, partly because he was regarded as something of a libertine (in the sense of "a man of independent convictions"), and partly because their fanaticism and hypocrisy were attacked in Tartuffe. In general, the ultimate test of public opinion about Molière is the popularity he enjoyed as an exponent of comic art. His social position, like that of most dramatists of his time, was dubious, more because of the sort of milieu he frequented than because of any oddities in his personal life or any idiosyncrasies characterizing his behaviour in general.

For a dramatist and actor, he enjoyed, if anything, higher status than was customary for one of his station. For example, it was unusual for plays to have their première at Court; under normal circumstances Parisian audiences served as the guinea-pig for new works, and only if these were well-received by the Town did a troupe risk performing them before more august gatherings. A study of Molière's premières

(1) Like the gentleman who protested that Molière was mocking him as a cuckold in L'Ecole des Maris; whereupon someone retorted that he should be grateful it was only in fiction, not in fact !

shows, however, that no fewer than sixteen took place at court, if the Malade Imaginaire is also taken into account. Although the latter play had a town-première, the author had intended it to have its first performance at Court. Such familiarity with the court suggests the calibre of Molière's work and presentation, and the respect that was accorded him during his lifetime. For the rest, his career differs little from the careers of dramatists and actors more or less contemporary with him. One has only to bear in mind the hand-to-mouth existence of the early days; the provincial wanderings; the fortune-seeking and the quest for patronage and popularity.....

Reference to the content of Molière's plays has been carefully avoided in this chapter. To reconstruct the famous comedian's life from his works is tempting, and has been done with considerable skill by more than one scholar of note.(1) However, in a study such as the present one, it is not appropriate to adopt the subjective approach. We are only concerned with facts at this stage, and social interpretation of the plays belongs to a later section of this work.

(1) E.g. Pierre Brisson, Molière, sa vie dans ses œuvres, Gallimard, Paris, 1942.
Ramon Fernandez, Molière, The Man Seen Through the Plays.
 tr. Wilson Follett, Hill & Wang, New York, 1966.

Chapter Four.

Social Criteria
and the
Seventeenth-Century Dramatist.

The values of Molière's society have been reviewed; the place in that society of the dramatist in general and of Molière in particular, has been established. It remains now to discuss the importance of social values in the work of such a man, endeavouring to entertain such a society.

For a person whose livelihood depends, as Molière's did, upon pleasing his audience, the key-word is surely "entertain." Few people are amused by spectacles in which sermonizing about the criteria dear to them, is emphasized at the expense of humour or aesthetic satisfaction. Besides, obvious moralizing was considered unsubtle and offensive to good taste in the classical age. We have only to read a fable or two of La Fontaine (1) - the sort of literature that presupposes moralizing - to see the lightness of touch where moral lessons are concerned. Even the mordant La Rochefoucauld (2) and the disillusioned La Bruyère (3) never for a moment permitted themselves

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- (1) Jean de La Fontaine, moralist, author of Fables (1621-1695)
 (2) Le duc de La Rochefoucauld, author of Maximes, (1613-1680)
 (3) Jean de La Bruyère, author of Les Caractères, (1645-1696)

to become dogmatic or impolite.

How much less, then, would a playwright of the period allow his views on the conduct of his contemporaries to obtrude into his work, to the extent of making him forget his duty as an entertainer! Such lessons as exist in seventeenth-century French drama are implicit, and it is up to the spectator or reader, as the case may be, to detect and assess them. They are not the less real for being veiled; it is simply that we are dealing with the sort of literature which, if it intended to criticise the status quo, did so discreetly, and with caution. Moreover, it seldom criticised to change the order of things, but rather to preserve it, for seventeenth-century literature is not the literature of revolt and revolution.

Another point to be borne in mind when discussing dramatic literature of this age is that the dramatist was not a social pariah in the sense that he felt frustrated and excluded by the society into which he was born. Post-Romantic literature - dramatic and otherwise - has seen a strange paradox, in that while the attitude of society itself has changed towards the writer (e.g. the Church ceased to condemn playwrights and actors), the writer's attitude towards society became one of resentment and hostility. For

from feeling thwarted and misunderstood by his public, the seventeenth-century writer felt himself in tune with the society of his day, and experienced none of the anguish of non-communication that has beset more modern authors and "angry young men."

Molière's age was an age in which men were more conscious of the collective well-being, the common weal, than of the rights of the individual within that collectivity. Proof of this is the fact that even Descartes, who stood for the universality of human intelligence and therefore the intellectual equality of men, does not advocate human autonomy as forcibly as he might, nor does he insist upon the inalienable rights of the individual. (1)

Bearing this in mind, it is easier for us to understand why the works of the classical age of French literature are so much in harmony with their social background. Molière's plays were no exception.

So much for the author's attitude towards the tone of his work. What was expected of the comic genre, content-wise, other than that it should amuse? One of the surest authorities on this subject is Jean Chapelain, whose Opuscules Critiques of the 1630s

(1) For further remarks in this regard, see Bernard Lavergne, Individualisme contre autoritarisme, P.U.F., Paris, 1959, pp.36-39.

contain many of the basic tenets of seventeenth-century literary theory. Of comedy he says,

"... le poète y imite les actions des personnes de petite condition, ou tout au plus de médiocre, dont les fins sont heureuses." (1)

From this it is clear that comedy was by its very nature non-noble as opposed to tragedy, which is, as Chapelain states, an affair "des grands".(1) As for the utility of drama (including comedy), Chapelain waxes eloquent on the wholesomeness and moralizing quality of what he calls "la poésie représentative" in his famous letter to Antoine Godeau, dated 29th November, 1630. He says,

"... le but principal de toute représentation scénique est d'émouvoir l'âme du spectateur... et de la purger par ce moyen des mauvaises habitudes qui la pourraient faire tomber..."(3)

How seriously are we to take such a view of dramatic art, particularly in so far as it can be applied to Molière's plays? However authoritative his pronouncements might be, Chapelain passed his critical judgments a full thirty years before Molière's career reached its height. Some allowance must be made for inevitable changes of opinion in the course of those thirty years, be they ever so slight. What is more, Chapelain's statement displays a certain tendency to

(1) Alfred Hunter edition, Droz, Paris, 1936, pg.130.
 (2) Ibid. pg. 119.

generalize, and Molière's attitude to his play-content need not necessarily conform to that laid down by Chapelain. The latter, in a miscellany entitled Quelques gens de lettres français, remarks of Molière:

"Il a connu le caractère du comique et l'exécute naturellement. L'invention de ses meilleures pièces est imitée, mais judicieusement. Sa morale est bonne et il n'a qu'à se garder de la scurrilité." (1)

He applauds Molière's technique, finds his choice of sources acceptable, but feels some scruples about giving his unqualified approval to the "morale" of the dramatist's comedies. Still, he describes the moral content as "bonne", meaning, no doubt, that he found it essentially conservative and reasonable. But if the public of seventeenth-century Paris had thirsted for moral teaching alone, there was plenty to be had from the pulpit and religious literature. They sought something else from their visits to the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the Marais and, later, the Palais-Royal, just as the King and nobles did not require the bourgeois comedian whom they patronized so frequently to show them the straight and narrow path of virtue.

We return to the initial point raised in this chapter.

(1) Opuscules Critiques cit., pg. 344.

that the element of pure, laughter-provoking comedy was vital to the continued popularity of a playwright and actor like Molière. The entertainment-value of his productions guaranteed the demand for them, and it was this demand that earned him a living. This does not mean that the moralizing element is absent, but it is less important than Chapelain's statement would lead us to expect. In fact, correction and divertissement are fused together in Molière's conception of what his plays should contain, and this idea is stated in his often-quoted comment in the first placet to Louis XIV in August, 1664, concerning the ban on Tartuffe:

"Le devoir de la comédie étant de corriger les hommes en les divertissant..." (1)

The other well-known observation made by the dramatist himself on the genre he perfected is in scene vi of the Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes in June, 1663, and, like the other, it implies the double function of comedy: to castigate and to give pleasure. ("...rendre agréablement sur le théâtre les défauts de tout le monde.") (2)

It may be objected that in the case of the first quotation, Molière would naturally draw attention to the fact that his attack on "dévots" was neither gratuitous nor ill-intentioned, since he was pleading his cause

(1) Given in the Couton edition of Molière's works, Vol. I, pg. 889 (Pléiade, Paris, 1971)

(2) Ibid. p.p. 660-661.

with the King. The circumstances of the remark would tend to make it less valid as an indication of how Molière envisaged his work. It seems unlikely, however, that a dramatist in his position would claim to be both moralist and entertainer if this were not really the case; the evidence to refute such a claim would be too tangible, as the plays were there for all to see.

As for the second quotation, it is true that it is not spoken directly by Molière, but put into the mouth of a young marquis, one of the protagonists of the play. (1) It is always dangerous to attribute the ideas of any one character to the playwright himself, since the greatest playwrights seldom, if ever, identify themselves with a given character. Their views and attitudes emerge from the dramatic situation they present rather than from the speech of a "persona". In the present case, however, Molière was consciously presenting, not a dramatic situation as such, but a justification of the controversial Ecole des Femmes. This being so, one is surely not jumping to conclusions in supposing that statements regarding the rôle and purpose of comedy, placed in the mouth of sympathetic characters, reflect the opinion of the author himself.

It is safe to assume, then, that for Molière, - as

(1) The marquis Dorante.

For most playwrights of the mid-seventeenth century, drama was both exemplary and amusing, highlighting aspects of the human condition and delighting audiences while it did so. Being a comedian, despite the early attraction he felt for tragedy and "nobler" genres, Molière was naturally more concerned with the latter quality of drama, that is, its capacity for amusing and delighting.

And the subject-matter? From Chapelain's definition of comedy already given, (1), it is clear that the traditional concept of this genre regarded it as dealing essentially with "personnes de petite condition, ou de médiocre", in other words, servants, peasants, petty bourgeois and, at best, middle-class folk. It was intended for the counts, dukes, kings and emperors to be reserved for tragedy. This theoretical class-differentiation is interesting, suggesting as it does the application to drama of the social hierarchy of seventeenth-century France, the categorization of genre according to whether it was "noble" or "non-noble".

Unfortunately for the theorists, this was a matter in which theory did not correspond closely with practice. Inevitably members of the nobility tended to stray upon the comic stage from time to time, and

(1) See page 125.

rigorous separation of the classes according to whether a tragedy or a comedy was being presented, was neither practicable nor convincing. "Vraisemblance", or the credibility of a play, was a quality highly esteemed by those who, like Chapelain, propounded the doctrine of classical drama; and the exclusion of nobles from comedy runs counter to an attempt to create the illusion of reality on the stage. As Molière himself put it, "... il faut peindre d'après nature." (1)

In real life, of course, there is constant interchange between members of the different classes: a bourgeois shop-keeper sells articles to a marquise, a count, while dressing, banter with his valet, a châtelain gives instructions to his bailiff... Comedy deals with the very stuff of which daily life is made, where tragedy concentrates ideally on the rare, the exalted, the heroic. This possibly explains why nobles obtruded into comedy more readily than bourgeois and servants found their way into tragedy (other than as confidantes and mere tools of dramatic expediency.)

We have seen in Chapter One to what extent social mobility was a feature of life in the France of Louis XIV. Such a phenomenon offers the comic dramatist ample opportunity for exploring human affectation, particularly in the rivalry of merchants and gentry. Long

(1) Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes, sc. vi.

before Molière, this had been a favourite subject for comedy (one is reminded of the prototype of the parvenu as depicted by Petronius: Trimalchio.) Comedy in any case, as John Loftis observes in his study on the relationship between comedy and society (1), "takes man in his social relationships as its prime subject."

This is all very well; the comic potential of such a theme is quite obvious. The question is, how desirable was it for a person born into a hierarchical society and earning his living from pleasing different sections of that society, to make friction between the social orders the subject of his plays?

However far the age of Louis XIV might have been from living up to the reputation for order, discipline and harmony that posterity is pleased to attribute to it, the last-mentioned qualities were collectively the ideal towards which men strove. Our survey of the social structure of the time has shown that, despite rivalry and resentment, poverty and hardship, there was no actual conflict between classes in Molière's day; only differences between privileged and non-privileged orders, that were accepted as inevitable. Social mobility is one thing; social disunity another. In a society torn apart by inter-class struggles,

(1) J. Loftis, Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding, Stanford University Press, California, 1959, pg. 133.

and in which there is acute class-consciousness, plays focussing attention on, for example, the gaucherie of a newly-ennobled bourgeois, or the dishonesty and arrogance of an impecunious count, could conceivably be censured for inflaming passions best left alone. But the society in which Molière lived, and for which he wrote, was free from class-consciousness in the modern sense. Far from disintegrating under the pressure of inner strife, it was unified by the concept upon which it reposed, namely that of an harmonious whole whose parts were interdependent. This concept was reinforced by the attitude of Louis XIV to the nation he ruled. When he came to the throne in 1661, he never sought to change the existing social structure of the State, but rather wanted to maintain the various orders and services of which it consisted. Above all, he tried to preserve a certain equality of effort among the orders. (This accounts for his insistence that the ecclesiastical order should pay taxes, since the nobles gave their blood and the people, their labour, for the State.) (1)

It would seem, therefore, that the social stability characterizing his environment gave Molière a certain freedom in choice of subject-matter. On the other hand, it also imposed a limitation on his work in the sense that any attack on the social values of a given

(1) For further comment on this subject, see R. Mousnier, *op. cit.* pg. 87.

group, privileged or not, would have been construed as "speaking the impertinence in such a social context. As for a play depicting inter-class discord, its relevance to real-life would be considered questionable, and understandably so.

Then the complexity of audience-expectation with which he had to contend (1) inevitably placed restrictions on his artistic liberty. To pillory the values of the bourgeoisie in the Palais-Royal theatre, where such a large proportion of the audience were of bourgeois origin, would be an indiscretion inviting criticism, however much the noble elements in the stalls and boxes might enjoy the play. It would likewise be little short of folly to ridicule the aristocracy in a comedy staged at court before the very persons whose attitudes and way of life were under attack. Life was difficult enough for a comedian in seventeenth-century Paris, without his complicating it further by making controversial remarks in his dramatic works.

What has been said so far concerning choice of subject-matter for a playwright in Molière's position applies only to a generalized abstraction, for it fails to take into account the personality of the individual. There is, alas, little historically reliable evidence

(1) See Chapter Two of the present work.

of something so intangible as personality: it can only be deduced from such facts as are verifiable, -- for example, the conduct of the individual in question under certain circumstances. It is known that, despite unpromising beginnings and opposition from his family, Molière persisted in his ambition to become an actor/dramatist. In the lengthy wrangle over Tartuffe, contemporary comments and several placets to the King bespeak Molière's determination to have his play performed freely in public. A more passive, or more prudent, person would have surrendered to circumstances and abandoned projects causing difficulty and ill-feeling. Molière did not. His behaviour would suggest obstinacy and courage, leading one to believe that he was not the sort of man who wrote plays with a view to flattering his audience unduly, or sparing their sensibility for fear of losing their good-will. This is not to say that he deliberately flouted the classical precept of good taste and courtesy known as obedience to the "bienséances"; it merely points out that he was no sycophant slavishly pandering to the expectations of those who came to watch his plays. Moral independence does not preclude politeness and tolerance.

No clear-cut pattern emerges from a study of the content of Molière's plays in relation to the audiences for whom they were created. The Impromptu de Versailles,

which contains some very unflattering characterizations of aristocrats (1) and, inter alia, the observation that "le marquis d'aujourd'hui est le plaisant de la comédie", was written and performed for the King at court. But so was the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, which highlights the snobbishness and stupidity of the noble-aping parvenu. The Femmes Savantes, on the other hand, had its première in the City; and it shows up the ridiculous pretensions to intellectual superiority of certain bourgeois females. The Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes derives much of its piquancy from two portraits of the "cultivated" habitués of aristocratic salons, that could hardly have given much satisfaction to nobles (2); that play was not created specially for the court, but was first performed for the mixed Parisian audience of the Palais-Royal theatre.

Such an erratic pattern of subject/audience relationship would suggest indifference on the part of the playwright to the reaction of his spectators. Yet Molière was scarcely in a position to please himself, surrounded as he was by rivals and enemies, and dependent on patronage to no lesser extent than any other troupe-director and dramatist of his time. It is only partly true that the King was the person whose

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- (1) Some of the nobles listed among the Dramatis Personae of this play are described as follows: "marquis ridicule"; "marquis fâcheux"; "marquise façonnrière".
- (2) The Marquis and Lysidas.

approval ultimately counted. The King did not fill the coffers of the box-office at the Palais-Royal, nor was he solely responsible for special commissions of the Fouquet variety. To attribute Molière's lack of concern regarding audience-reaction to social aspects of his comedies, to lack of class-awareness among his spectators, is to negate the sharply defined social hierarchy that was one of the realities of life in seventeenth-century France. There is surely some other explanation.

A dramatist of genius could strive to please his public without compromising his artistic integrity through flattering their social sensibility. Molière was far more interested in exploring the possibilities of comic situations that would delight his audiences, than in ensuring their approval by such facile means as avoiding delicate subjects or loading panegyric on whatever class of society was predominant in the audience before whom he was performing. The main ingredient of great comedy is that "vis comica" - comic force - perceived either in a character or in a set of circumstances, that provokes mirth irresistibly in the spectator. This comic force has little to do with social satire, or studies in manners. It consists mainly of conflict, - as W.G. Moore so rightly remarks (1) not "disastrous, tragic conflict, but

(1) W.G. Moore, The Classical Drama of France, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971. pg. 99.

basic, temperamental conflict, in which we are on both sides." It involves a certain vision of humanity in the universal sense; in that, it is very typical of the seventeenth century and the classical pre-occupation with the study of man. But however great the universal dimension of Molière's comedies might be (and very few serious critics would deny its importance in his work), the success of any comedy rests partly on its relevance to contemporary life and events. In minor comedies, the universal element is entirely lacking, and such works depend wholly upon their capacity to reflect topical themes for their glory.

Although subordinate to his special vision of the human condition and its absurdity, the element of topicality is not altogether absent from Molière's plays. It mainly takes the form of choice of subjects in vogue in the 1660s, - like Dom Juan, the theme of which was immensely popular following the treatment it had received from the Italian players Cicognini and Giliberto in the mid-sixties. It was unfortunate that Molière's handling of the theme should have been interpreted at the time as an attack on the values upon which French society reposed in the seventeenth century. Molière's Ecole des Femmes (1662) had already been accused of irreverence on the grounds

that it made God seem ridiculous in the "Maxims of Marriage" (1) sermon, in which Arnolphe gravely threatens Agnès with "les enfers à toute éternité" if she dares listen to compliments from "aucun jeune blondin". Tartuffe, two years later, gave Molière's enemies even more grist for their mill, and Dom Juan (1665) confirmed, for some, the dangerously unorthodox view of religion taken by the King's favourite comedian. Rochemont called Molière a "farceur qui fait plaisanterie de la religion" in his "Observations sur une comédie de Molière intitulée le Festin de Pierre" (1665); and at that time it was a serious accusation. Religion was not then a matter of the free conscience of the individual. It was the source from which all authority, especially that of the Sovereign, derived its supreme power, and as such it was not a suitable target for the comedian's wit.

Again, the independence of Molière's attitude in choosing to treat a hoary theme like that of Dom Juan as he did, indicates that his main concern did not lie in placating enemies, currying favour with critics, and subordinating comic art to safety and success. We can assume, therefore, that such a man would not hesitate to feature social criteria in his works, if these appealed to his fine sense of the ridiculous.

(1) See Maurice Descotes, Molière et sa fortune littéraire, Ducros, Bordeaux, 1970, pp. 22-24.

One might wonder why such a theme is less obvious than its comic potential would justify in the plays of an entertainer in Molière's position. Certainly it would seem the reason is not to be sought in the dramatist's reluctance to appear unorthodox; nor is the absence of explicit reference to social criteria in his plays due to any exclusive preoccupation with the universal at the expense of the topical. There is perhaps a two-fold explanation for this omission in Molière's work. In the first place, the "vis comica" already mentioned (1) as being central to the classical conception of comedy, draws its strength from contrasts and incongruity, from basic oppositions in temperament. Social criteria are external to human nature, and as such offer only limited possibilities in this direction.

Secondly, people in Molière's time were not as fully aware of social criteria as we are today. Obviously there were rivalries and tensions between the various orders of seventeenth-century society, as the present study has tried to show; but these were a far cry from the sharply-defined class struggles of a later date. Social consciousness was not yet complete in the mid-1600s. While it would be somewhat excessive to claim that social criteria did not figure in the drama and literature of that age because they did not exist, it is not overstating the case to say that

(1) See pg. 136.

their relevance to daily life was then diminished by the fact that they had not yet fully crystallized out.

Small wonder, then, that they are not featured significantly in Molière's comedies, even when these treat of everyday life as people of that period knew it. Naturally, in plays with a mythological theme (like Psyché) or of pastoral inspiration (Mélicerte) one would hardly expect seventeenth-century social criteria to have a "raison d'être". This does not mean, however, that the latter count for nothing in plays of Molière and his contemporaries. However imperfectly formulated the criteria of society may have been, they inevitably affect the vision and judgement of a dramatist, whose work involves presentation of characters. It is not necessary to write a play having social criteria as its central theme for the reader or audience to discern therein the influence of social values prevailing at the time the work was created. More often than not, this influence is indirect, and the author himself is quite possibly unaware of it as he unconsciously applies the standards to which he is accustomed in everyday life, to the fictional world shaped by his creative genius.

Such, no doubt, was the case of Molière. We have no reason to suppose that a man whose primary inten-

tion regarding his profession was the delight and, to a lesser degree, the edification of his public, ever set out to present a thesis supporting or attacking the social hierarchy and criteria of his time. His plays, written during a span of well over a decade, are open to an infinite number of interpretations, as the vast body of critical work on Molière has shown. Different plays were composed under different circumstances and for different purposes; some, on analysis, seem to favour the traditional seventeenth-century concept of a society in which each has his appointed place; others appear rather to incline to the modern (i.e. post-Revolution) ideal of personal merit as the ultimate yardstick in assessing the worth of a person. Some of the comedies confirm, apparently, the popular conjecture that Molière is the advocate of good, plain common sense; others, again, would seem to run counter to this idea.

Whatever scholars seek to find in the great dramatist's work, one thing is certain: in discussing his views and beliefs, the only valid material with which to deal is, finally, that contained in the plays themselves. Contradictory or coherent, they are Molière's legacy to posterity; and while it is of little use

to equate his works with his private life (1), there can be no other basis for suppositions concerning the convictions of the "comédien du roi". This brings us to analysis of the text of Molière's comedies.

(1) Of the vanity of such an endeavour, Pierre Gaxotte remarks: "... l'âge classique n'est pas celui des personnalités littéraires étalées, envahissantes: aucun écrivain n'aurait eu alors l'idée de transformer une pièce de théâtre en une confession, même voilée. C'eût été tenu pour une indécence." Molière, fameux comédien. Hachette, Paris, 1971.