

L'ECOLE DES MARIS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University

May 1968

MASTER OF ARTS (1967)
(Romance Languages)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: L'Ecole des maris: A Critical Analysis

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NUMBER OF PAGES: x, 126

SCOPE AND CONTENTS: A critical analysis of various aspects of L'Ecole des maris (sources, plot-structure, characterization, the comic element, style, moral and philosophical import) leads to the conclusion that the play heralds a revolution in French comedy, and pre-figures closely Molière's subsequent masterpieces.

INTRODUCTION

By the middle of the seventeenth century the writing of French literary comedy had generally received but perfunctory treatment. The technique whereby the comic action arises principally from the moral or psychological flaw of a carefully delineated protagonist was unknown. Voltaire's complaint that characters were not conceived according to human nature was an accurate criticism of contemporary comedy: "Le théâtre n'était point comme il le doit être la représentation de la vie humaine."¹ The early comedies of Corneille are characterized by complicated imbroglios and superficiality in the portrayal of human nature. Despite Corneille's efforts to depict contemporary society, these gay and amusing comedies of love fail to create the impression of real life. The lines from La Galerie du Palais:

O pauvre comédie, objet de tant de veines,
Si tu n'es qu'un portrait des actions humaines,
On te tire souvent sur un original
A qui, pour dire vrai, tu ressembles fort mal!
(vv. 173-6)

may be considered a just criticism of this kind of artificial, fantastic comedy. Les Visionnaires of Desmarets de Saint-

¹Voltaire, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1879), XXIII, 297.

Sorlin, the most successful French comedy before Corneille's Le menteur,² is not a true character comedy, but merely, in the view of Daniel Mornet, "une galerie de portraits - caricatures juxtaposés".³ In Le menteur, generally considered the best comedy up to the time of Molière, the representation of a mere "humour" replaces an accurately delineated character.⁴ The plot, though vivacious, is extremely complicated, and the atmosphere is that of the unreal, imaginary world of Corneille's early comedies. "Nulle part", writes Mornet regarding Molière's predecessors, "il n'y a vraiment de comédies de caractères; il n'y a que des silhouettes qui ne sont dessinées que pour être comiques, qui réussissent à l'être parfois, mais qui ne sont jamais l'expression de la vie."⁵ It was left for Molière to indicate with his Ecole des maris the particular type of comedy that was to prevail in France for approximately fifty years - the comédie de caractère in which the comic action develops from an inveterate weakness in the comic hero.

²See H. C. Lancaster, A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century, Part II (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1936), 279.

³D. Mornet, Molière (Paris: Boivin, 1943), p. 24.

⁴Infra, p. 47.

⁵D. Mornet, Histoire de la littérature française classique (Paris: Armand Colin, 1947), p. 252.

None of Molière's plays preceding L'Ecole des maris is commensurate with the intrinsic merit of this first character comedy. During his long Odyssey through the provinces as a vagabond actor, Molière probably wrote his two extant Italian-style farces, La Jalousie du barbouillé and Le Médecin volant (their authenticity is not certain), and composed his first two five-act comedies, L'Etourdi, and Le Dépit amoureux. The farces contain no study of character; the two full-length comedies, both of which are thoroughly Italian in nature and hence divorced from reality, are superficial in character portrayal. Nor are they structurally admirable: L'Etourdi, consisting wholly of variations on the same theme, has no real plot; conversely, the imbroglio in Le Dépit amoureux is so improbable and complicated that it is not easy to follow. After the re-establishment of his troupe in Paris, Molière wrote Les Précieuses ridicules (1659), a short farce in which he satirizes the ignorant imitators of salon society. The salient feature of the play is the exaggerated portrayal of contemporary manners rather than the creation of human beings. The four main characters, though constantly amusing, fail to create the illusion of real life. The following year Molière produced his short farce, Sganarelle ou le Cocu imaginaire. Like Les Précieuses ridicules, this work is more a scene than a complete play, but unlike the Précieuses, its plot is again very involved.

The chief interest lies in the character of the jealous Sganarelle who is, however, a conventional comic type seen against an unreal background of fantasy and farce. Perhaps encouraged by the success of this play, Molière unfortunately decided to treat the theme of jealousy in a comédie héroïque, Dom Garcie de Navarre ou le Prince jaloux. Its jealous hero, endowed with the Cornélian ideals of generosity and honour, is not presented in a comic light. First performed in February 1661, Dom Garcie de Navarre was a tragic fiasco. Molière wisely abandoned the elevated realm of tragicomedy and, with his Ecole des maris, reverted to more congenial territory.

L'Ecole des maris, first performed in Molière's new theatre in the Palais Royal on June 24, 1661, possesses a comic and intellectual fibre that is lacking in the playwright's preceding dramas. The play should be considered Molière's first significant literary comedy, and its protagonist his first comic hero. Themes and techniques, already enunciated in this early work, are repeated, often with deft elaboration, throughout Molière's subsequent comedies, and the basic features of its comic hero are re-treated and developed with greater intricacy in Sganarelle's subsequent avatars. Though not a masterpiece, L'Ecole des maris is deserving of our attention: it is a distinct innovation in comedy, containing the germs that were developed as Molière's craftsmanship

evolved.⁶

⁶All the quotations from Molière's plays that appear in the text have been taken from Oeuvres de Molière, edited by E. Despois and P. Mesnard, Nouvelle Edition, 13 vols., (Paris: Hachette, 1893-1927).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to offer my grateful thanks to Dr. Marie Stock who first stirred my interest in Molière and whose valuable criticism and suggestions were most helpful in the preparation of this dissertation. Mrs. Margaret Belec did me the kindness of typing the text.

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"The specific remedy for vanity
is laughter, and the one failing
that is essentially laughable is
vanity."

Bergson, Laughter

CHAPTER I

THE GENESIS OF L'ECOLE DES MARIS

Literary Sources

In an epistle in verse addressed to his friend Maucroix on August 22, 1661, La Fontaine suggested that Molière had restored to France the refinement and grace of Terence:

Nous avons conclu d'une voix
Qu'il allait ramener en France
Le bon goût et l'air de Térence.

When he saw Molière's Ecole des maris performed, La Fontaine was undoubtedly reminded by the style, and especially by the content of the Adelphoe of the sententious Terence; for the precise centre of the dramatic conflict in each comedy lies in the clash between two opposed educational doctrines: the theory of severity and that of indulgence. Although in the Latin work the educational systems are exemplified by young men who are the pupils of their father and uncle, and in the French play by young women, the wards of their guardians and prospective husbands, the basic subject matter of both comedies is similar.

Terence's Demea, a man of austere principles, lives frugally on a farm where he rules his son Ctesipho by severity, repression and fear; his brother Micio, an easy-going town-dweller, believes in treating his nephew Aeschinus with kindness and indulgence: "pudore et liberalitate . . ."

liberos/retinere satius esse credo quam metu" (vv. 57-8). Each of the "fathers", thoroughly convinced of the supreme validity of his own method, levels criticism and reproach at his brother's.

The development of the action in the Latin comedy is, however, considerably different from that of Molière's play. While Ariste's method is successful over Sganarelle's, Terence makes it clear that both of his educational systems fail, and carefully explains that each youth has been corrupted, though in a different way. Both Aeschinus and Ctesipho become involved in love affairs: unknown to his uncle, Aeschinus commits a wrong against an Athenian citizen, Pamphila, whom he promised to marry, and, for the benefit of his timid brother Ctesipho, abducts the music-girl Bacchis from the slave-dealer Sannio. Disillusioned when he discovers that Ctesipho is no paragon of virtue, Demea is momentarily confounded. At this point in the French comedy Molière ended his play with the triumph of Ariste's theory. But Terence makes Demea unexpectedly and deliberately assume a change of demeanour: he will imitate Micio's policy to the point of exaggeration simply in order to expose the inefficacy of his system and the utter baselessness of his popularity. Thus Demea becomes indiscriminately generous at his brother's expense: he prevails upon Micio to marry Sostrata, the elderly mother of Aeschinus' bride, provide a farm for her poor friend Hegio, and free his slave Syrus together with

the latter's wife. When Micio's discomfiture is complete, Demea explains to him that his policy has been in excess of true liberality and therefore erroneous, his repute has been the result not of prudent understanding but of an indiscriminate compliance with his nephew's every whim and fancy. The abiding solution to the moral problem of the play arises from a compromise between the two systems, from their interaction. Demea will no longer treat Ctesipho with severity, but, on the other hand, he will not resort to total indulgence; he will, as he implies in his concluding words of advice, blend the two extremes into one policy of tolerant understanding:

sed si id voltis potius, quae vos propter adulescentiam minus videtis, magis impense cupitis, consulitis parum, haec reprehendere et corrigere et obsecundare in loco: ecce me, qui id faciam vobis. (vv. 992-5)

The influence of the Adelphoe upon L'Ecole des maris has been variously assessed by the critics. Ernest Martinenche believed Molière derived nothing from Terence's play, and pointed out the striking resemblance between L'Ecole des maris and Hurtado de Mendoza's El Marido hace mujer.¹ Eugène Despois held that the original idea of the two opposed educational

¹"Les Sources de 'L'Ecole des maris'", Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France, V (1898), 110-6.

systems was inspired by Terence's Adelphoe, but that the resemblance between the two plays ends here.² "Les obligations de Molière à l'égard de Térence", he writes, "se réduisent à bien peu de chose; et l'on pourrait même douter qu'il lui eût emprunté l'idée de ce contraste, au lieu que l'aller chercher dans l'observation du monde réel, si quelques imitations de détail, fort rares d'ailleurs, ne prouvaient que Molière, en composant sa pièce, s'est souvenu du poète latin."³

Perhaps it would be wise to examine one of these "imitations de détail" indicated by Despois in the Grands Ecrivains edition of Molière's works. For despite divergences between the two comedies, certain specific details in Molière's text indicate convincingly that he was occasionally indebted to Terence. Despois points out a marked similarity between lines 253-8 of L'Ecole des maris and lines 757-62 of the Adelphoe.⁴ In the former comedy Ariste has just illustrated his precept that liberal understanding and gentle tolerance will win a woman's love. Sganarelle, totally confounded, castigates his brother's policy of indulgence in the

² See Oeuvres de Molière. Nouvelle Edition (Paris: Hachette, 1923), II, 339.

³ Ibid., pp. 339-40.

⁴ Ibid., p. 375, n. 3.

following speech:

Quelle belle famille! Un vieillard insensé
 Qui fait le dameret dans un corps tout cassé;
 Une fille maîtresse et coquette suprême;
 Des valets impudents: non, la Sagesse même
 N'en viendrait pas à bout, perdrait sens et raison
 A vouloir corriger une telle maison.

These lines reveal a striking parallel to lines 720-3 of the Adelphoe, in which Demea confronts Micio with further news of Aeschinus' depravity. Unperturbed, Micio urges his brother to participate in Aeschinus' wedding celebration. Demea is inexorable, and, in a concluding soliloquy, expresses his wrathful indignation:

. . . o Iuppiter,
 hacine vitam! hoscin mores! hanc dementiam!
 uxor sine dote veniet; intus psaltriat;
 domus sumptuosa; adulescens luxu perditus;
 senex delirans. ipsa si cupiat Salus,
 servare prorsus non potest hanc familiam.

The similarity in tone and content between the corresponding passages is not without interest.⁵

It is almost certain that Molière had read Terence, for the classical education he had received from the Jesuits included a study of the Roman comic authors Terence and Plautus. According to the Préface of the 1682 edition of the complete

⁵ Another almost certain trace of the influence of Terence can be detected in a comparison of lines 940-7 of L'Ecole des maris with lines 720-3 of the Adelphoe. See Despois p. 423, n. 1. In addition to these obvious similarities between the French and Latin comedies, Despois has pointed out resemblances in three other sets of corresponding minor details, which, however, are not sufficiently precise to indicate borrowing: p. 370, n. 2; p. 372, n. 1; p. 394, n. 3.

works of Molière, the playwright had chosen Terence "comme le plus excellent modèle qu'il eût à se proposer."⁶ However, it is almost irrefutable that the points of difference between L'Ecole des maris and the Adelphoe exceed the points of contact. Lancaster recognizes the fundamental differences in his refutation of Miss K. E. Wheatley's attempt to re-establish Terence as the principal source of Molière's inspiration: "Miss Wheatley minimizes the importance of the differences between Molière and Terence that are due to the fact that Molière is dealing primarily with relations between two brothers and two women they expect to marry. . . while the other is concerned with relations between two brothers and the sons of one of them."⁷ Terence's conception of the two brothers is different, for he does not oppose a wise man like Ariste to a fool like Sganarelle.⁸ L'Ecole des maris ends with the emphatic triumph of one of the irreconcilable educational theories, while the denouement of Terence's comedy consists of a mutual concession. Moreover the indulgence enjoyed by Léonor is immensely less than that

⁶G. Michaut, Les Débuts de Molière à Paris (Paris: Hachette, 1923), p. 118.

⁷H. C. Lancaster, A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century, Part III (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1936), p. 235, n. 16.

⁸See Despois, p. 339.

permitted to Aeschinus -- a factor contributing greatly to the collapse of Micio's system. In spite of the similarity between a few details, it is likely that Molière found the idea of opposing two brothers, two pupils and two systems of education not in Terence's Adelphoe, but in the Spanish play of Hurtado de Mendoza, El Marido hace mujer.

The possibility that Mendoza's play is a source of L'Ecole des maris is indicated and analysed in detail by Martinenche.⁹ He shows there is a resemblance between the two plays in the basic dramatic situation: Mendoza presents two brothers, don Juan and don Sancho, not dissimilar in character to Ariste and Sganarelle, and married to two sisters, doña Leonor and doña Juana, as well as a third man, don Diego. Moreover the brothers' antithetical views on the subject of female liberty produce the same results as in L'Ecole des maris. Though doña Leonor is still attracted by don Diego after marrying don Juan against her will, she has been considerably influenced by the gentle tolerance of her husband. When don Juan receives by mistake a letter don Diego addressed to his wife, he tries to win her love by granting her complete freedom and trusting her implicitly. The result is that doña Leonor not only loses all desire to betray her husband, but develops a genuine love for him.

⁹RHL, V (1898), 110-6.

The younger brother, don Sancho, is, on the contrary, a crude enemy of sophisticated society, a jealous man obsessed with one idea -- fear of cuckoldry. He shares with his counterpart in the French play an intense hatred of modernity which accounts for his adoption of a tyrannical policy towards his wife. On discovering a secret meeting between his wife and don Diego, Don Sancho mistakes Juana for his sister-in-law, and bitterly derides his brother (in words reminiscent of Sganarelle's) for what he assumes to be the downfall of his system. Exasperated by her husband's brutal rudeness and incessant suspicions, Juana finally abandons him in favour of don Diego whom her sister has rejected in favour of don Juan.

There is, therefore, ample evidence to support Martinenche's contention that "Mendoza n'a pas seulement suggéré à Molière la meilleure partie de son intrigue. Il lui a fourni plus d'un trait pour la peinture de ses deux frères."¹⁰ The critic has, moreover, indicated a number of close similarities in situation between the Spanish and French plays.¹¹ The full title of Mendoza's play: "C'est le mari qui fait la femme, ou les mœurs changent avec les traitements" is similar to a line spoken by Molière's comic

¹⁰ Martinenche, p. 114.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 114-5.

hero: "Ma foi, les filles sont ce que l'on les fait être" (v. 511). Don Sancho's obstinacy and crudeness are sometimes expressed in phrases similar to Sganarelle's. When the former scoffs at don Juan: "Muy de lo hermano major os portais", we can almost hear Sganarelle exclaiming to Ariste: "Monsieur mon frère aîné, car, Dieu merci, vous l'êtes" (v. 20). Too close supervision of a woman will, in the opinion of don Juan, encourage her to be unfaithful: "Que es decir a una mujer / todo loque no ha de hacer / decirla que pueda hacerlo". And Lisette echoes these words: "C'est nous inspirer presque un désir de pécher / Que montrer tant de soins à nous en empêcher" (vv. 157-8).

Martinenche's evidence supporting the influence of Mendoza is, undoubtedly, convincing. It is most probable that Molière derived from El Marido hace mujer the substance of his first act and part of the third, the traits of his main characters, and, as Martinenche has indicated, ideas directly influencing certain lines in the dialogue. The fact that one of the heroines in Mendoza's play is called Léonor may be a further sign of Molière's indebtedness to the Spanish work; and Mendoza's division of his material into three acts is akin to the structure of L'Ecole des maris. Martinenche held that Molière was indebted to El Marido hace mujer more than to any other source: "Pour qu'il y ait une école des maris, il faut qu'il y ait une opposition entre

deux conceptions du mariage. Pour que cette opposition soit plaisante, il faut qu'un des deux maris soit victime de son système. Ni Boccacce, ni Lope, ni Boisrobert, ni Dorimond ne donnaient à Molière cette indication, la plus précieuse de toutes. L'honneur en revient tout entier à don Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza."¹² Despite Molière's knowledge of Terence's Adelphoe and his borrowing of a few specific details from the Latin play, it is legitimate to conclude that the immediate source of his inspiration for the basic dramatic situation of L'Ecole des maris is El Marido hace mujer.

Molière's Isabelle manages to communicate with Valère by transforming her guardian into an unwitting messenger. The original source of this comic core of the intrigue is undoubtedly the third tale of the third day in Boccaccio's Decameron. In this piquant tale the Italian author relates the story of a young Florentine wife who falls in love with a gallant she has frequently seen passing her house. Since the young man is not aware of the love he inspires and the good fortune awaiting him, the crafty heroine decides to attract his attention by complaining to her confessor that his friend has been importuning her. She implores the friar to intervene on her behalf so that the man's unwelcome advances

¹²Martinenche, p. 113.

will immediately cease. Ingenuously and unwittingly the friar agrees to become the messenger between the two lovers. The heroine then insists that a girdle and purse she claims the young man has sent her must be returned. After the friar has faithfully complied with her wish and renewed his remonstrations with the gallant, the latter, quick to detect the hidden message, recognizes in the disguised gift the assurance of his future happiness. Finally, during the absence of her husband, the heroine instructs her lover how to enter her room, through her mock complaint to the friar that the insolent young man has already attempted this very act by means of a tree in her garden.

From this summary of the subject matter it is evident that Boccaccio's eccentric, vain friar finds a direct counterpart in Molière's comic hero. Both the friar and the young heroine are as vividly depicted and artfully contrasted as the creations of the French dramatist. The comic principle upon which the tale is based is reproduced in the second act of L'Ecole des maris, but with slight alterations, since a member of the clergy could not be ridiculed in French comedy in the seventeenth century. Accordingly Molière transferred the fool's rôle from the friar to the prospective husband. Despois, Gustave Michaut and Antoine Adam¹³ believe that Molière imitated Boccaccio despite Lope de Vega's exploitation

¹³Despois, pp. 340-1; Michaut, Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, p. 119; Adam, Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^e siècle (Paris: Domat, 1952), III, 273-4.

of the Italian tale in La Discreta enamorada and Dorimond's in La Femme industrielleuse. Martinenche,¹⁴ on the other hand, is convinced that Molière was influenced by the more recent versions of the tale. That the original Decameron material was re-treated and elaborated in two intermediary plays does not necessarily decrease its influence upon L'Ecole des maris.

In his comedy La Discreta enamorada Lope de Vega freely modified Boccaccio's tale in order to adapt it to the dictates of his own genius: he transferred the fool's rôle from the friar to an old man in love with his son's fiancée, and developed with wit the actual intrigue of the Italian original. Fenisa, engaged to Captain Bernardo, father of Lucindo, succeeds in informing the son, through the father, of her love for him. She tells Bernardo of the approaches she claims his son has been making to her; Bernardo then remonstrates with his son and conducts him into the presence of his future step-mother. When Lucindo falls on his knees before her, Fenisa, pretending to pardon him, gives her lover her hand to kiss. The young lady proceeds to utter words that have one meaning for Lucindo, another for the old man: "Que Dieu te donne la femme qu'il te faut et que je te souhaite. Qu'il t'inspire tant d'affection pour moi que je

¹⁴Martinenche, p. 111.

ne paraisse plus ta belle-mère et que je puisse te croire mon ami."¹⁵

Isabelle's using Sganarelle as an unwitting messenger between herself and Valère may, indeed, have been suggested by this episode in Lope's comedy, for in neither the original Boccaccian tale nor in Dorimond's adaptation does the husband participate in the advancement of the intrigue. Martinenche was sure that Fenisa's equivocal words inspired Sganarelle's remarks that have one meaning for the comic hero, another for Valère;¹⁶ but Lancaster notes that this device also occurs in Dorimond's play and in Scarron's Jodelet ou le maître valet.¹⁷

Lope's comic heroine does not limit her strategy to verbal equivocation: she pretends to fall so that Lucindo can kiss her while helping her to her feet. There is considerable probability that the excellent scene between Isabelle, Sganarelle and Valère in L'Ecole des maris (II, 9) was inspired by the corresponding episode in La Discreta enamorada (II, 15). Despois avers that, in this respect, the Spanish play may possibly have influenced Molière;¹⁸ and

¹⁵ See Martinenche, p. 113.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lancaster, III, 235.

¹⁸ Despois, p. 341.

Martinenche states explicitly that the extremely clever scene of Molière's second act is to be attributed to La Discreta enamorada.¹⁹

The original Decameron material was utilized by the actor-playwright Dorimond in his one-act farce, La Femme industrielle (1661). During the absence of her husband, the Capitan, Isabelle asks the Docteur, the private tutor to young Léandre, to reprimand the latter for the unwelcome attention he has been paying her. When the Docteur delivers this message and indicates the house the youth is to avoid, Léandre is not slow to perceive the esoteric meaning in his words. Moreover, the young pupil thanks the Capitan's servant, Trapolin, so ardently for saving his life that Isabelle is convinced that his remarks are intended for her. She accordingly complains that money contained in a purse has been pushed through a crack in her door. Upon receiving this purse from the Docteur, Léandre, quick to learn from his fiancée's instructions, slips a love-letter through the crack in her door. The final stage in the intrigue is Isabelle's mock complaint that Léandre has climbed her garden wall, slidden down a tree trunk, and entered her bedroom window. In her indignation, the virtuous young maid claims

¹⁹Martinenche, p. 112.

to have beaten the intruder and driven him away. Following the Docteur's equivocal remonstrations, the young lover joins Isabelle with little difficulty. When surprised in the house by the husband's unexpected return, Léandre assures the Capitan that he is the spirit of one of Isabelle's relatives who has been guarding her virtue in his absence, and departs. Delighted with his guarantee of her chastity, the Capitan decides to guard Isabelle no more.

Dorimond has accepted the traditional framework of Boccaccio's tale, and has evolved from it an interesting and individual play, transferring the rôle of the jealous husband to a braggart soldier, making the friar an obtuse and pedantic tutor, and introducing the heroine's mock complaint that the young man importuning her has pushed a love-note through a crack in her door. It is very possible that this new means of communication between the lovers may have inspired the letter device in Molière's second act. Three additional factors lend support to the supposition that La Femme industrielle influenced L'Ecole des maris. First, the coincidence of names for the heroine is interesting. Secondly, the ending of both plays is similar: Lisette's apostrophe to the audience concludes L'Ecole des maris; the valet Trapolin terminates La Femme industrielle by warning the audience that if they are jealous they will find ghosts in their house. Thirdly, Despois²⁰ draws a parallel between

²⁰Despois, p. 385, n. 2.

line 369 in L'Ecole des maris and a line from the ninth scene of Dorimond's one-act farce. When Sganarelle, almost hypnotized by his obsessive thoughts and fears, jumps at the sound of Valère's door-knocker and cries: "Qui va là?", one is perhaps reminded of Dorimond's line: "Qui va là, qui va là, qui va là? qui, qui, qui?" This similarity of phrase between the two comedies is possibly more the result of coincidence than of deliberate imitation.

No critic can doubt that Molière utilized either Lope de Vega's La Discreta enamorada or Dorimond's La Femme industrielle, or the original Decameron material. It is possible, though somewhat improbable, that the great dramatist went directly to the Decameron, since Dorimond, as an intermediary, had already dramatized the Italian tale and secularized the friar. Moreover, there is little doubt that Molière was familiar with this play. According to the privilège, dated March 25, 1661, La Femme industrielle was acted by the troupe protected by Mademoiselle when this company was in Paris between December 1660 and February 1661. The achevé d'imprimer of the first edition of the play is dated April 22, 1661. Its appearance in print may have been chiefly responsible for Molière's use and adaptation of Boccaccio's tale in L'Ecole des maris.

In the Grands Ecrivains edition of Molière's works, Despois dismissed Dorimond's play as a triviality: "C'est faire trop d'honneur à Dorimond que de supposer que

Molière ait pu lui emprunter quelque chose."²¹ Martinenche, on the other hand, held that La Femme industrielle was one of Molière's chief sources: "Molière a profité de cette lecture. Il lui a emprunté peut-être le nom de son héroïne, et certainement la donnée de son second acte."²² And Lancaster who has offered what is, in my opinion, irrefutable proof that Molière derived his title from Dorimond's L'Ecole des cocus, states: "It seems strange that Molière should derive the title of his comedy from one play by Dorimond and neglect another that so closely resembles it in plot."²³

The problem of the origin of the title of L'Ecole des maris has led to conflicting opinions. Eugène Rigal believed that it was probably Molière who first used the term "école" in the title of a play.²⁴ Despois also argued for Molière's priority on the grounds that Dorimond's comedy, L'Ecole des cocus, ou la Précaution inutile was initially called only La Précaution inutile, and that the use of the term "école"

²¹Despois, p. 344.

²²Martinenche, p. 212.

²³Lancaster, III, 212.

²⁴See Lancaster, Part, III, p. 208, n. 12.

was added to the original title after the first performance of Molière's comedy, attesting to the brilliant success of the latter play: "L'intérêt seul qu'il [Dorimond] avait à piquer la curiosité du public en parodiant le titre d'une pièce en vogue, a pu l'engager à cette petite supercherie, si même c'en est une que l'addition d'un nouveau titre au privilège imprimé."²⁵ To support this view Despois indicates that the writer of the minutes of the booksellers' association for August 10, 1661, listed Dorimond's play with the single title, La Précaution inutile. However Lancaster²⁶ convincingly discredits Despois's ingenious hypothesis by drawing our attention to the significant fact that two other plays by Dorimond, published with double titles, also appeared in this same document with single titles. Moreover, the double title, L'Ecole des cocus, ou la Précaution inutile was used in the printed privilège itself, dated April 12, 1661. Lancaster therefore concludes that Molière imitated the word "école" with its moral implications when L'Ecole des

²⁵Despois, p. 345

²⁶Lancaster, III, 207-8.

maris was first performed on June 24, 1661, and Dorimond's three double titles were reduced to single titles by the author of the booksellers' register. Adam is equally emphatic in asserting that Dorimond's play supplied the formula for Molière's title.²⁷

The theme of Dorimond's one-act farce is that force does not keep a woman virtuous; and the plot relates why precautions are useless. Lucinde has no sooner assured the Capitan of her love and chastity than she gives birth to a child. The Capitan then marries the ignorant Cloris and dresses her in armour to keep her inviolate during his absence. However with the appearance of young Léandre, the Capitan becomes a cuckold. Although Molière was undoubtedly indebted to Dorimond for the title of his play, I believe he owed little else to him.

Pierre Larivey's best and best-known comedy, Les Esprits, depicts a contrast between two brothers to whom severity proves to be a less successful educational policy than indulgence. Although the comedy was accessible to Molière, there is no convincing evidence to prove that he utilized the work. Only Despois implies that Molière was perhaps influenced by Larivey's Esprits.²⁸

²⁷ Adam, III, 274.

²⁸ Despois, p. 340.

Boisrobert's comedy La Folle gageure (1653) evinces the same moral truth underlying L'Ecole des maris: a woman can not be guarded by force when she is in love. When Télame asserts that the most nearly impossible thing in the world is to procure a virtuous woman by presenting her with gifts, Lidamant, encouraged by the countess, determines to win Diane, Télame's carefully guarded sister. The progress of the play from this point follows the course of Lidamant's success as he outwits his fiancée's brother. In vain Télame keeps his sister under the closest supervision. By means of his disguised valet, Lidamant manages to get his portrait and love-letter into the guarded and locked house, and finally has himself brought into the house in a chest. The main proposition in the play is expressed by Lidamant in the second verse of the first act:

Je lui soutiens, madame, et veux gager de plus
 Qu'une femme qu'on garde, eût-elle cent Argus,
 Si son coeur y consent, peut avoir des nouvelles
 De l'amant qui la sert malgré ses sentinelles;
 Qu'amour en ses desseins tout seul la peut aider,
 Et qu'il est impossible enfin de la garder.²⁹

This is the basic theme pervading L'Ecole des maris.

La Folle gageure is a close imitation of Lope de Vega's El Mayor Imposible. Here the queen of Naples holds that the "mayor imposible" is to guard a woman who is in love. To Roberto's bold assertion that he is able to

²⁹ Quoted in Martinenche, p. 111.

guard his sister from any attacks upon her honour, the queen reacts by supporting one of her courtiers in his efforts to win Roberto's sister. The sister is won; and the queen's initial theory is vindicated: human nature can not be forcibly constrained, for any attempt to coerce it will result in determination and independence. Or, as Lope defines it:

. . .el imposible mayor
para las cosas humanas
es guardar una mujer,
si ella misma no se guarda. (1, 7)³⁰

Molière was certainly familiar with La Folle gageure, for his troupe had performed this play prior to the first performance of L'Ecole des maris. Although there are no precise indications in either La Folle gageure or El Mayor imposible of influence upon L'Ecole des maris, the moral import of both plays is identical to the theory expounded by Molière's Ariste. Martinenche held that the Spanish comedy and in particular Boisrobert's work contributed to the conception of the French play of 1661: "Comme elle [La Folle gageure] dégage la même moralité que L'Ecole des maris, il est naturel de supposer que Molière, en la lisant, a senti s'éveiller en son imagination l'idée de sa première grande comédie."³¹

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Martinenche, p. 112.

Beside the inspiration afforded by the preceding authors, two other possible minor influences are traceable. There is a marked similarity between a couplet spoken by Ariste (vv.191-2) and two lines found in Boisrobert's one-act farce L'Amant ridicule: "Le Monde est un beau livre, où je m'instruirai mieux / Que dans tous les Auteurs." This text, published in 1655, was accessible to Molière. And Louis Moland indicates a similarity between Act II, scene 5, of L'Ecole des maris, and Act 1, scenes 6 to 10, of the commedia dell'arte scenario, Il Ritralto -- a sketch in which a jealous husband is the unwitting messenger between his lover and his rival.³²

Critics often fail to take sufficiently into account what Molière could have derived from his own repertoire. Isabelle's feigned speech addressed to her absent sister in the full knowledge that Sganarelle is listening outside in the street (III, 2) is a repetition of a similar situation depicted in Molière's early farce, Le Médecin volant: here the valet Sganarelle, disguised as a doctor, pretends to be reprimanding his twin brother (sc. 15). Moreover, certain aspects of Sganarelle's character are evident in some of Molière's previous creations: in his two bourgeois Gorgibus,

³² Molière et la comédie italienne (Paris: Didier, 1867), p. 84.

in Sganarelle's two preceding namesakes.³³

Thus L'Ecole des maris was probably drawn from an extensive range of sources. Until better evidence is offered, the most reasonable conclusion is that Molière's principal source was Mendoza's El Marido hace mujer from which he utilized material for his first and third acts, that his second act was derived from Dorimond's La Femme industrielle, a work serving as an intermediary between Boccaccio and Molière. By combining these major contributions, Molière created the main outline of his plot. He probably borrowed the name Léonor from Mendoza, from Dorimond the name Isabelle. Several other sources have been proposed, the most notable of which is Lope's La Discreta enamorada, a play which presumably inspired the great scene of his second act. In the composition of L'Ecole des maris Molière has been thoroughly eclectic, ready and willing to utilize whatever could be most valuable to his purpose.

Despite the number and variety of the works which influenced L'Ecole des maris, Molière has assimilated his source material with skill and artistry. We detect no sutures within the fabric of the play, no discontinuity in theme,

³³For the influence of Renaissance Humanism upon Molière, see below pages 115-6.

no unevenness of style. Moreover, he freely adapted his models to French requirements and tastes. Thus the action takes place before the girls' marriage, for, according to the French classical bienséances, it was indecent to portray an adulterous relationship on the stage. Molière has carried the idea and transformed the atmosphere of Mendoza's play into a different world of thought and sentiment. He has invested his characters with life, and, as Martinenche implies, has succeeded in extricating comedy from the shackles of Italian and Spanish influence: "Tandis que d'autres n'avaient écrit que d'ingénieuses comédies, il [Molière] est le seul à avoir conçu une véritable école, l'école des maris."³⁴

Autobiographical Sources

The dominant question of L'Ecole des maris is whether a tolerant or a repressive educational system will produce the better wife; and the answer is the success of the older lover who wins the affections of his ward by kindness and tolerance, and the failure of the younger who loses because of his selfishness and severity. Although these ideas were commonplace at a time when the feministic ideals of the précieuses were in vogue, certain specific details in the dramatic

³⁴ Martinenche, p. 116.

situation of L'Ecole des maris suggest that the subject of the play was partially Molière's own story.

Two salient details in Molière's comedy for which the known literary sources do not account are the strangely combined rôles of parent, schoolmaster, and fiancé performed by the brothers, and the jarring discrepancy in age between them and the girls. Moreover it is precisely these two details which coincide with Molière's personal situation in 1661.

Upon his death, the father of Léonor and Isabelle had entrusted the two brothers, Ariste and Sganarelle, with the combined moral authority of legal master and fiancé -- a situation somewhat analogous to that of Molière and Armande. Officially the latter was the daughter of Marie Hervé and Joseph Béjart who died in 1643, the supposed year of his daughter's birth. It is generally believed that Armande and her mother lived with the actors, accompanying them on their provincial tours.³⁵ And it is not unreasonable to suppose that in his capacity of director of the troupe Molière probably fell into a paternal way of treating the child

³⁵ See Lancaster, III, 25; also, G. Michaut, La Jeunesse de Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1922), p. 148.

Armande. Before long it was otherwise than as a father that he wanted to love her. The first indication that the actor was contemplating marriage was about Easter 1661 when Molière asked his associates to grant him a double share of the profits if he should marry -- a fact confirmed in La Grange's Registre.³⁶ On February 20, 1662, at the age of forty, Molière married Armande Béjart who was, according to the marriage contract, approximately twenty years of age.

The second interesting factual parallel between the author's life and the comedy itself is evident in the precise care with which Molière tells us the ages of his male characters: Sganarelle is nearly forty -- twenty years younger than Ariste who is "presque sexagénaire" (V., 240). And Léonor and Isabelle are probably barely twenty. Moreover the ages of the comic hero and heroine correspond closely with Molière's own situation; for he was thirty-nine when he wrote L'Ecole des maris and Armande Béjart was eighteen.

One perplexing question emerges from these facts. Why did Molière make Ariste an old man of sixty, and not, for example, forty, his own age, with a Sganarelle of about thirty? To have lowered their ages would have by no means been injurious to the effect of the play. This problem of

³⁶Le Registre de la Grange (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1947), I, 33.

age is an enigma which has often confounded the critics:

"Il est regrettable," writes Emile Faguet, "que Molière ait compromis sa thèse par la pousser trop loin. . .et qu'il ait fait épouser sa jeune fille charmante par un homme très sensé, très judicieux et très libéral, mais 'sexagénaire', ce qui est le mettre en danger et le punir de sa sagesse."³⁷

Faguet goes on to propose a judicious improvement over Molière's treatment of the situation: "Il eût été beaucoup plus raisonnable et beaucoup plus sain de présenter la jeune fille comme 'se croyant' amoureuse du sexagénaire parce qu'elle a pour lui de la sympathie et le vieillard comme l'avertissant de son erreur et de son imprudence, l'éclairant et finalement la mariant avec un sien neveu de vingt-cinq ans."³⁸ This alternative would obviate the possibility of her repeating the unfortunate love experience of the Princesse de Clèves.

It is not strange that Molière's mind should have dwelt upon the idea of gross disparity in the ages of a couple just at the moment when he himself, a man of forty, was about to marry a young girl of eighteen. One's reason can hardly refuse to consider some motive behind this behaviour. That Molière was attempting to explore the

³⁷ En lisant Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1914), pp. 26-7.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

prospects of his forthcoming marriage with Armande may be an answer. Perhaps L'Ecole des maris was intended to influence and instruct Armande Béjart (who played the rôle of Léonor), while also serving as a self-defence for the poet. From the title of the comedy to the final apostrophe of Lisette, emphasis falls on the "école" element, on education for marriage. Moreover it is rather astute of Molière to have the younger brother convey the impression of age, both outwardly by putting him into garments of the style of Henry of Navarre's subjects, and inwardly, by making these old-fashioned clothes a consequence of his innate propensities. Conversely, the truth of Ariste's real old age is extenuated while his youthful spirit and reasonable disposition are accentuated. Thus the triumph of a generous and reasonable old man in spite of the handicap of age, and the failure of an ungenerous and unreasonable younger man despite the advantage of age may well be, on the part of the playwright, an indirect means of self-defence. If Ariste can win the love of Léonor, surely Molière, disburdened of twenty years, can capture the love of Armande Béjart. In fact, several critics regard L'Ecole des maris as the attempt of a middle-aged man, who marries a young girl, to solve a personal problem: "Peut-être, et même il est probable," writes Faguët, "que Molière était à cette date (1661) sous l'influence de son amour pour Armande Béjart, plus jeune que lui de vingt-deux ans, et cédait-il au désir

de convaincre Armande qu'un mariage disproportionné pour ce qui est des âges est très raisonnable quand le mari l'est lui-même."³⁹ In the opinion of Abel Lefranc, "Le sens caché de la pièce doit concorder avec la passion très vive qu'il éprouvait à ce moment pour Armande, et d'autre part avec l'hésitation qui accompagnait ses projets de mariage."⁴⁰

The portrayal of the ideal Ariste - Léonor relationship undoubtedly reflects, to some extent, Molière's passion and hope with regard to Armande Béjart. But the insoluble problem is -- to what extent? Whether the personal element in L'Ecole des maris was intentional or unconscious (or intermediary) must remain a matter of conjecture until more precise evidence has been procured.

That the problem of age weighed upon Molière's mind is most evident when we consider his change in attitude between 1661 and 1673 with regard to the relative ages of a married couple. In 1661 when he was meditating on his impending marriage, the great disparity of age between Ariste and Léonor was not considered inexpedient.⁴¹ Again in L'Ecole des femmes, produced just after his marriage, it

³⁹ En lisant Molière, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Michaut, Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, p. 129.

⁴¹ See vv. 199-205.

is not age, but character that is the source of insurmountable difficulties: Agnès reproaches Arnolphe only for having never made any effort to win her affections. The two "school" plays were, to some extent, the result of observation of life; but if their sources completely excluded the author's own emotional experiences, how do we account for one jarring element in both comedies -- disparity of age? This is contrary to nature, not true to life, and we wonder with Michaut: "Mais si c'était de Léonor que Valère eût été amoureux? Mais si Léonor, tout en restant reconnaissante à son tuteur de ses bontés, avait eu une répugnance bien naturelle à épouser un vieillard?"⁴² Apparently influenced by his own matrimonial misfortunes, Molière reversed his opinion in his later plays, indicating that equality of age between husband and wife is essential to a happy and successful marriage. Youth invariably marries youth: Cléonte marries Lucile (Le Bourgeois gentilhomme); Clitandre, Henriette (Les Femmes savantes); Cléante, Angélique (Le Malade imaginaire). Thus the playwright's views concerning the relative ages of a married couple seem to have been predisposed first by his hopes, then by his own experience and ultimate

⁴²Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, p. 128.

disillusion. His vindication of disparity in the ages of Aristè and Léonor is, therefore, hardly fortuitous.

The recurrence of the theme of jealousy and cuckoldry in Molière's literary production during the years immediately preceding and following his marriage⁴³ is additional evidence of personal disclosure on the part of the dramatist. Armande's conduct was not irreproachable, and Molière, who we know was impulsive and innately jealous,⁴⁴ soon met with extreme disappointment in his conjugal experience.⁴⁵ The relation between the recurrent theme of jealousy and cuckoldry and the dramatist's own personal experience may well be a kind of living confession, first of a fearful anticipation, then of a constant disillusionment that must have possessed him with acute discomfort.

Moreover Molière continually evoked and developed the different follies that could be perpetrated by men in circumstances similar to his own. At a time when he was being incommoded by the church, Molière wrote a play on religious hypocrisy and struggled for nearly five years to

⁴³ Sganarelle, Dom Garcie de Navarre, L'Ecole des maris, L'Ecole des femmes.

⁴⁴ See R. Fernandez, La Vie de Molière (Paris: Gallimard, 1929). Trans. W. Follett: Molière, the man seen through the plays (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), pp. 86; 149.

⁴⁵ See. J. Grimarest, La Vie de M. de Molière, Ed. critique par Georges Mongrédien (Paris: M. Brient, 1955), p. 59.

be able to produce Tartuffe. Le Misanthrope was written during a period in Molière's life when he had many reasons for reflecting on misanthropy: the violent attacks on L'Ecole des femmes, Tartuffe, and Dom Juan, his increasingly strained relations with Armande, the death of his first-born child, his quarrel with Racine, and his ill-health. And as his health continued to deteriorate and the assistance of the doctors proved of no avail, he produced five comedies consisting wholly or partially of attacks on medicine and the medical profession. The theatre of Molière is, in short, coextensive with its author's life.

It is unfair to suppress all biographical and contingent elements and insist that Molière's inspiration at the time of the composition of L'Ecole des maris was wholly impersonal and objective. We have a right to seek and find the playwright in this comedy. L'Ecole des maris marks a further stage of refinement in Molière's comic technique, and an unquestionable intensity in the moral import of his theatre; and, because of this, it would be injudicious to allege that his personal experience was in no way responsible. There is, to be sure, a definite connection between the life of the creator and the created work of art.

CHAPTER II
PLOT - STRUCTURE

The most fundamental part of a playwright's task is plot-structure. Though the interest in L'Ecole des maris lies less in the plot than in the characters and social problem, this tightly - constructed three-act¹ comedy offers, nonetheless, evidence of careful workmanship and a keen dramatic sense.

Two salient dramatic phenomena soon become apparent. First, the development of the plot is in perfect accordance with the moral and philosophical idea of the play, and its conclusion is the natural result of the brothers' antithetical educational doctrines. Léonor marries the indulgent and reasonable Ariste, and Isabelle escapes from the tyrannical and unreasonable Sganarelle. The dramatic structure and the main idea are so closely fused that the search for and discovery of a central theme serves to reveal the dramatic apparatus supporting it.

Second, the unfolding of the plot and the character study progress simultaneously and are inextricably bound together: the relationship between Sganarelle on the one hand, and Isabelle and Valère on the other, corresponds to the ever-increasing self-confidence and cecity of the comic hero. In this fusion of character and intrigue Molière is an innovator, for French comedy before him most often consisted

¹The classical preference was five acts - a preference which influenced de Villiers considerably in his critical evaluation of L'Ecole des maris: "Si cette pièce avait eu cinq actes, elle pourrait tenir rang dans la postérité après Le Menteur et Les Visionnaires". See Despois, II, 339.

of an embroiled plot, a skein of deceptions and errors, with no roots in the inveterate weakness of the comic hero. In a careful analysis of the plot, we shall sense these new dramatic techniques that Molière was effecting in comedy.

The play opens in medias res, at a moment of tension and dispute: "Mon frère, s'il vous plaît, ne discourons point tant, / Et que chacun de nous vive comme il l'entend." The function of the brothers' ensuing dialogue is to portray character, especially the character of Sganarelle. Ariste, about twenty years older than his brother, believes that one should conform reasonably to the manners of contemporary society, even to the extent of wearing contemporary clothing, and be humane to one's fellow man. His rude and narrow-minded brother totally disagrees; and, as he proceeds to expound his own views, Sganarelle at once reveals the comic flaw which will prove his undoing: his intransigent individualism. In these two contrasted portraits the playwright exhibits an ingredient absolutely essential to a good comic plot - an exact balance and proportion between the main protagonists. It is not without significance that the dramatist firmly establishes their true natures at the rising of the curtain, before presenting any of the specific facts of the plot; for as the plot unfolds, the clever stratagems of Isabelle develop simultaneously as the character portraits of Ariste and especially Sganarelle are completed and progressively intensified. One basic weakness in this introductory scene will be considered after the remainder of the act has been

examined.

The main function of the second scene is to form a link between the initial character study and the ensuing dramatic action. The sisters, Isabelle and Léonor, are presented, and we are introduced to the antithetical educational systems of the two brothers: the benevolent attitude of Ariste and the austere methods of Sganarelle. We learn that the brothers are the legal guardians of Isabelle and Léonor, whom they have brought up, each according to his respective method, after the death of their father, and whom they are engaged to marry. Under the guardianship of Ariste, Léonor enjoys complete freedom and independence: in accordance with his liberal understanding he permits her to attend balls and receive gifts -- in short, to indulge in all the pleasures of youth and delights of worldly society. Moreover she is free to marry the man of her choice. Sganarelle, on the other hand, is determined to coerce Isabelle into marrying him. Carefully immured within the walls of his house, never free from the closest surveillance, Isabelle is Sganarelle's prisoner. By having no contact with the outside world, she is to remain in a state of innocence and perfection. Ariste's efforts to reason with Sganarelle are of no avail; of less effect is the indignation of the maid, Lisette, at what she calls a Turkish method of imprisoning women. Sganarelle, moreover, is confounded at hearing his brother say that Léonor will continue to enjoy complete freedom even if she

marries him. He makes his own ward leave so as not to be vitiated by these contaminating ideas. Ariste and Lisette warn him that his reasoning is fallacious, but Sganarelle, relentlessly intransigent in his theories, resolves to take Isabelle to the country where she will be free of any moral contagion.

In this scene the link between the plot on the one hand, and the character study and main idea of the play on the other, emerges with clarity. Sganarelle's despotic attitude towards the education of girls, firmly rooted in his feeling of superiority, will be directly responsible for the subsequent comic intrigue, in which the goal of his endeavours eludes him. Moreover the introduction of the girls reinforces the antithetical views of their guardians. Ariste and his ward now disappear until the middle of the last act, but the effect of both educational systems is constantly kept before the minds of the audience.

The third scene reveals the presence of young Valère, already in love with Isabelle. Accompanied by his valet Ergaste, he politely accosts Sganarelle. However the latter, suspicious as usual, retorts abruptly, and cutting short the conversation, returns home. Valère and his valet are left alone in the last scene. The former laments that for four months he has loved Isabelle but has not yet been able to establish relations with her. Ergaste tries to console him, explaining that "une femme qu'on garde est gagnée à demi":

tutors or severe husbands often unwittingly facilitate lovers' difficulties, for their suspicious nature makes them all the more prone to becoming an unsuspecting agent. Valère and Ergaste must consider how to convey Valère's love to Isabelle.

Thus when the curtain falls on the first act, all the important characters have been introduced, the dramatic situation has been explained, and the moral problem stated with clarity. This dramatic technique by which a comedy is simultaneously a character portrait, the unfolding of a dramatic situation, and the development of a moral idea is a salient feature of the classical comedy Molière was to establish.

Although by the end of the first act the theme has been enunciated and the situation unfolded, the actual intrigue, or method of communication between Isabelle and her lover, has not yet been set in motion. However the major weakness in the first act lies in the first two scenes which, though constructed on similar lines to the opening scenes of L'Ecole des femmes and Le Misanthrope, are less masterly, because less simple. Though the two brothers are introduced and their divergent character traits delineated in the first scene of L'Ecole des maris, it is not until the second scene that the moral problem of the play is enunciated. In the opening scene of L'Ecole des femmes, on the other hand, the comic material of the first two scenes of the former "school" play is combined: the characters of Arnolphe and his friend

Chrysalde are portrayed, and the former's repressive marital theories are contrasted with Chrysalde's tolerant views. The misunderstanding on which the entire plot revolves -- namely, the confusion over the identity of Monsieur de la Souche -- is already indicated, although the plot itself which provides the structural framework of the play is not disclosed until the appearance of Horace in the fourth scene. In the opening scene of Le Misanthrope, a masterful scene in its simplicity, we find the emergence of all three elements: the delineation of the character of the comic hero and his friend, the presentation in argument form of their diametrically opposed views regarding social usage, and the one dramatic factor which provides a plot and sustains the entire play -- namely, Alceste's confession of his love for Célimène. Molière has achieved remarkable progress between the opening scenes of his first "school" play and the play considered by many to be his greatest. For the opening scene of Le Misanthrope is a complete exposition of the play, while the first scene of L'Ecole des maris serves merely as a character sketch.

In comparison with L'Ecole des femmes and Le Misanthrope, the extended exposition of L'Ecole des maris -- it is not complete until the beginning of the second act -- may appear tedious and insipid; and it is certainly much less comic than the first act of L'Ecole des femmes. However, it is lucid, quite informative, and of a steadily increasing dramatic interest. The exposition of L'Ecole des maris is,

as we shall see, the only part of the play that may be criticized from a technical point of view.

The brilliant second act, praised by Lancaster as "one of the cleverest that Molière had written",² recounts Isabelle's scheme to outwit her guardian by transforming him into an unsuspecting agent. Feigning outrage at affronts made to her dignity as a woman, she informs him that Valère's unwelcome attentions must cease. In the opening lines, spoken by Sganarelle, the intrigue is already underway: "Va, je sais la maison, et connais la personne / Aux marques seulement que ta bouche me donne" (vv. 359-60). Sganarelle goes to Valère's house and tells the young lover that Isabelle, his pupil and future wife, wishes him to cease importuning her. While Ergaste explains to his master that Sganarelle's message is not inauspicious to him, the comic hero triumphs in fatuous exuberance. Fearing that Valère has not fully understood her real intention, Isabelle informs Sganarelle that a messenger who came to her on behalf of her unwelcome suitor threw a gold box containing a letter into her room. Sganarelle agrees to return the missive to Valère, but first wants to read its contents. When Isabelle says she

²Lancaster, III, 236.

prefers not to break the seal as an indication of her scorn for Valère, Sganarelle recognizes the behaviour he has always advocated; convinced of the intelligence and faithfulness of his ward, and reassured of his own superiority, he concurs with her decision, admiring her for it. Nowhere in the play does the development of the plot coincide more closely with the minds of the characters than in this letter device. Molière has, indeed, discovered the secret of true drama -- the development of the plot by and through the characters.

Congratulating himself on the success of his educational policy, the unwitting messenger returns the box to Ergaste. Upon opening it, Valère finds a love-letter, in which Isabelle apologizes for her audacity, and hopes that the constraint imposed upon her will excuse her immodesty in wishing Valère to confirm his love for her. While the conjoined cecity and optimism of the comic hero increase in intensity, Valère proves that he can act as astutely as Isabelle: he tells Sganarelle he will cease importuning his ward, but would like her to know that his interest in her was always honest and legitimate. Sganarelle promises to convey the message to her, and leaves, pitying the misfortune of a seemingly innocuous rival. Reassured of the success of her stratagem by Sganarelle's almost perfect repetition of Valère's words, Isabelle proceeds to disclose her latest complaint: she has learned that her impudent young lover is boasting of eloping with her. Sganarelle, who has obviously been too

lenient, must appease her indignation. He performs this duty to perfection, even deciding to conduct Valère into Isabelle's presence so he can speak for himself. This leads to the ninth scene, the culminating scene of the second act. Isabelle equivocates, telling Sganarelle and Valère in terms which each interprets differently that they must marry her as soon as possible. The zenith of the act is reached when she falls into the arms of Sganarelle, extending her hand to Valère, who kisses it while her guardian looks in the opposite direction. Valère displays his talent for equivocation in his promise to remove from before her eyes "l'objet qui [lui] est odieux" (v, 786), and Sganarelle, outwardly commiserating with his rival while inwardly rejoicing in his supposed success, concludes the scene with the supremely ironical: "Pauvre garçon! sa douleur est extrême. / Tenez, embrassez-moi: c'est un autre elle-même" (vv, 791-2). However Isabelle's performance of her rôle has been too astute: to comply fully with her "wishes", Sganarelle decides to advance the date of their wedding to the next day. Isabelle despairs.

In the concluding act of the comedy the character portrayal and comic intrigue continue to support and strengthen each other until the educational doctrine of Sganarelle finally collapses. Leading Sganarelle to believe that it is Léonor whom he has trapped in Valère's house, Isabelle cleverly contrives to induce her unwitting guardian to assist at her own wedding. The success of this stratagem

is directly dependent on Sganarelle's initial self-infatuation and resultant self-deception and obtuseness.

In her attempt to flee, Isabelle meets Sganarelle; however she quickly invents a clever pretext: Léonor has fallen in love with Valère, and, in the hope of winning him, has begged Isabelle to permit her to entertain him under her name in her room. Isabelle claims that, despite her aversion to Léonor's idea, she finally consented, and was on the point of going to find someone who would assure the innocence of the trick when Sganarelle met her. When he threatens to force Léonor to leave, Isabelle implores him to spare her sister from shame, returns to the house, vociferously orders Léonor to leave, and, disguised, finally leaves herself and goes and joins her lover. Meanwhile Sganarelle arranges to have a magistrate and royal notary come to draw up a marriage contract in order to punish Valère and save the honour of the girl he supposes to be Léonor. In order to assert his own superiority and rejoice in Ariste's discomfiture, he reveals everything to his brother. The latter remains, however, true to his principles of liberty and tolerance; convinced that he should renounce his claims to Léonor's hand if she wants to marry Valère, Ariste signs the marriage contract. Léonor returns from a ball, happy to be relieved of the "jeunes fous" she met there; to Ariste's gentle reproaches, she replies that she is and always has been willing to marry him. All

misunderstandings are dispelled when Valère and Isabelle emerge from the house. The latter asks forgiveness of her sister for having assumed her identity, and Sganarelle, finally realizing that he has been instrumental in the lovers' skilful machinations, bursts forth in an explosion of frenzied wrath and leaves the stage, repudiating and damning woman for her innate perfidiousness. The play ends with the conjugal felicity of two couples, and Lisette's final invitation to members of the audience who happen to know any "maris loups-garous" to send them "à l'école chez nous".

Thus the relationship between the lovers corresponds to, and is dependent on the ever-increasing blindness of the comic hero and his growing self-confidence at the supposed success of his educational policy. This aspect of the comedy is its most salient structural merit; for it results in an ascending movement, in a true crescendo.³ And it is this constant forward motion in the plot which absorbs the interest of the spectators.

The dramatic effectiveness of this crescendo is enhanced by Molière's strict adherence to the classical unities of time, place, action. Any exaggerated or extraneous element which would impede the mounting tension is suppressed. The time represented in the play is one day, the place is

³See Adam, III, 278.

Paris, in front of the house of Sganarelle,⁴ and the action is remarkable for its homogeneity-- it is all one piece. Each scene, sound and interesting in itself, has an organic relation to other scenes, a direct effect on the main intrigue, and on the dénouement. In fact no scene could be deleted without leaving the impression of incompleteness or fracture.⁵ The consistency with which the play is developed is further increased by the linking of all scenes.

The effectiveness of the crescendo must also be attributed to the artistry with which the development of the entire drama is consummated in a flawless dénouement. Molière has often been reproached for the arbitrary and artificial nature of his denouements. In order to create a happy ending in the last few minutes before the curtain falls, he not infrequently introduces a new element for which no preparation has been made. In L'Ecole des femmes Molière resorts to a romantic discovery in which Agnès is found to be the long-lost daughter of Enrique. Even a great

⁴A contemporary document by L. Mahelot indicates: "[Le] théâtre est des maison et fenêtre". See Despois, ii, 349. In his adherence to the rule of unity of place, it is interesting to note that, after his two "school" plays, Molière most often refines his dramatic technique by substituting a bourgeois interior for the open street or public place of classical comedy. By laying the scene in a room he gives his play a greater dramatic immediacy and eliminates the palpable absurdity of Sganarelle's and Ariste's expostulations about moral and social problems in the street.

⁵In his subsequent comedies Molière seldom fails to adhere to the unities of time and place, though he often neglects to respect the unity of action, preferring to unify his play by a central character.

comedy like Tartuffe is slightly marred by its use of the deus ex machina (in the person of Louis XIV) to untangle the complication. However in the concluding scene of L'Ecole des maris there is no extraneous element; the scene is, in the words of R. Jouanny, "la réponse à la question clairement posée au premier acte".⁶ The dénouement is, moreover, a good illustration of Molière's subordination of plot to character: Sganarelle's final betrayal and disillusionment are a direct and deserved consequence of his overweening vanity.⁷ The intrinsic excellence of the dénouement of L'Ecole des maris has rarely been more highly extolled than by the discerning critic Voltaire in his brief summary of the comedy: "Le dénouement de L'Ecole des maris est le meilleur de toutes les pièces de Molière: il est raisonnable, naturel, tiré du fond de l'intrigue; et ce qui vaut bien autant, il est extrêmement comique."⁸

It is important to note that several of the elements of the comic intrigue of L'Ecole des maris are reproduced

⁶ Oeuvres complètes de Molière, edited by Robert Jouanny (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962), I, 314.

⁷ This aspect of the denouement is all the more apparent when contrasted with the awkward and improbable denouement of El Marido hace mujer: Mendoza introduces a deus ex machina in the person of don Fernando, the sisters' uncle, who intervenes to take doña Juana away from the tyrannical don Sancho.

⁸ Voltaire, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1879), XXIII, 102-3.

in subsequent comedies. We are reminded of the equivocal remarks of Isabelle as Elmire utters words that have different meanings for Tartuffe and Orgon (Tartuffe, iv, 5). The dramatic technique in which Sganarelle unwittingly assists Isabelle to escape to the house of Valère by confusing her with her sister reappears in Le Sicilien. The motif in which Sganarelle is deceived and tricked into agreeing to a marriage he wishes to prevent recurs in the last act of L'Ecole des femmes where Arnolphe, incognizant of the identity of Agnès, urges the marriage of Horace and Enrique's daughter. The dramatic device by which Sganarelle coerces Ariste into signing a marriage contract which will unite Isabelle and Valère is reproduced in the denouement of L'Amour médecin when Sganarelle is persuaded to sign a contract without knowing that by so doing he will lose his daughter Lucinde.

In spite of the weakness in the exposition, Molière has, in the creation of L'Ecole des maris, proven himself a great dramatic constructor. Throughout the play the two antithetical ideas are balanced with considerable felicity; the structure is lucid, compact, and climactic. The unique aspect of the comedy is the flexibility whereby character moulds plot and plot reveals character. Described by a leading critic as "un chef d'oeuvre de construction dramatique",⁹ L'Ecole des maris affords irrefutable evidence that from the standpoint of aesthetic form Molière was already a master.

⁹Adam, III, 278.

CHAPTER III
CHARACTERIZATION

In the delineation of the rôle of Sganarelle, Molière has surpassed most of the comic creations of his predecessors and all of the comic characters already established in his own repertoire by bestowing genuine life and a definite individuality upon his comic protagonist. Dorante in the elder Corneille's Le Menteur and Lélié in Molière's L'Etourdi are undoubtedly improvements over the denatured stereotypes of traditional farce; however, they have been somewhat dehumanized in being portrayed by one single eccentric trait apiece -- one "humour" which takes the place of character. The mendacity of Dorante and the heedlessness of Lélié are merely a mechanism to trigger a series of events, and consequently are examined with little psychological penetration. Mascarille, completely Italian in character and costume, is merely the clever rascal-valet. Nor is Sganarelle of the Cocu imaginaire an admirable human creation endowed with a definite personality, for he is portrayed by the conflict between two outstanding "humours"-his vanity and his cowardice:

Oui, le courroux me prend; c'est trop être poltron:
Je veux résolûment me venger du larron.
Déjà pour commencer dans l'ardeur qui m'enflamme,
Je vais dire partout qu'il couche avec ma femme.
(vv. 471-4)

Molière's maturity is nowhere more apparent than in

the transformation of his earlier comic characters into Sganarelle of L'Ecole des maris, the first of his great comic characters. The playwright has given Sganarelle an enlarged personality, combining in a single individual the characteristics of his namesake in the Cocu imaginaire and of the bourgeois Gorgibus in the same play and in Les Précieuses ridicules: as Isabelle's prospective husband, he is the egoistic, conceited Sganarelle of the Cocu imaginaire, while as her legal guardian, he is reminiscent of the two inelegant Gorgibus with their intense hostility to polite society. Sganarelle stands out from the play as a distinct individual, the most complex and vivid character Molière had yet created. In the words of Nisard, he is "the first man in French comedy".¹ Though I attempt to give no proof of the historical accuracy of Nisard's statement, I tend to agree with him, feeling that Sganarelle of L'Ecole des maris has a claim to be regarded as the most complete creation in French literary comedy up to 1661.²

It is apparent by the end of the third scene that

¹Quoted in A. Tilley, Molière (Cambridge, 1921), p. 72.

²Because the jealous hero of Dom Garcie de Navarre fails to elicit laughter, we can disregard him as a comic hero prior to Sganarelle of L'Ecole des maris.

the rôle of Sganarelle gives considerable scope to Molière's powers of eccentric characterization. In a few deft strokes the dramatist delineates his comic hero as a rude and narrow-minded individualist, a man who calls his brother a fool, who makes repeated references to his advancing age, who blatantly flouts the customs of contemporary society. The very essence of his character is epitomized in a phrase attributed to him by his brother -- "farouche humeur"³ (v. 13) -- a phrase suggesting the unsociable and self-assertive type. In the presence of his ward and her sister, Sganarelle interrupts everyone before he has a chance to speak; and he expounds with arrogance his educational plan for Isabelle -- an odious, anti-social, and utterly absurd policy. His brusque treatment of Valère in the third scene is not out of keeping with his "farouche humeur". Thus the comic hero is carefully presented as a ludicrous and unreasonable tyrant, eliciting no sympathy at all, condemned in advance, precipitating his own nemesis.

In a search for the cause of Sganarelle's unusual social behaviour, we should recall that every comic hero in

³The word farouche is repeated in lines 347 and 519, each time in reference to the comic hero.

the theatre of Molière is motivated by one passion -- a passion which is not only potent, but paramount. Sganarelle's ruling passion is an overweening vanity. This character is the most conceited and self-sufficient creation in the whole of Molière's gallery. On all matters he trusts solely in his own judgment; for he invariably knows better than the rest of humanity, to whose opinions he opposes his "fantaisie":

"... j'ai pour tout conseil ma fantaisie à suivre, / Et me trouve fort bien de ma façon de vivre" (vv. 7-8). Sganarelle is an exception and a law unto himself, a character convinced he is not only superior to the rest of humanity, but actually infallible: "Je voudrais bien savoir, puisqu'il faut tout entendre, / Ce que ces beaux censeurs en moi peuvent reprendre" (vv. 11-12).

Like Arnolphe, Sganarelle is determined that feminine perfidiousness shall not destroy his marital dignity: "Enfin la chair est faible et j'entends tous les bruits. / Je ne veux point porter de cornes, si je puis" (vv. 125-6). But although Arnolphe's one fixed idea is a pervasive fear of cuckoldry, this fear in Sganarelle is accessory to his vanity. Nor does he, as Lionel Gossman seems to imply,⁴ regard Isabelle as his instrument for asserting his superiority over the rest of mankind. Sganarelle sees himself gaining ascendancy over

⁴L. Gossman, Men and Masks. A Study of Molière (Johns Hopkins, 1963), pp. 211-12.

his fellow man by their recognition of his own "fantaisie" as the only valid criterion on all matters. The very centre of his character, the one motivating force of all his thought and action is his mania to transform himself into a super-ego, into an absolute.

Though vanity, however ingrained and congenital it may be, is often presented as a colourless passion, Molière has given this abstraction the sharp precision of a definite personality. He delineates his comic hero with skill and pungency in the descriptions of Sganarelle's tyranny and intransigent rejection of social conventions. Society is inextricably involved with innovation in fashion, but Sganarelle rejects all contemporary styles, clinging tenaciously to simple, antiquated dress. He prefers the old-fashioned, narrow-cut breeches to the new style of wide ones, and remains faithful to the "beau pourpoint bien long et fermé comme il faut" (v. 68).⁵ Sganarelle's theory of severity and repression for the education of women is described with the same force and exactitude:

. . . Mais j'entends que la mienne
Vive à ma fantaisie, et non pas à la sienne;
Que d'une serge honnête elle ait son vêtement,
Et ne porte le noir qu'aux bons jours seulement,
Qu'enfermée au logis, en personne bien sage,
Elle s'applique toute aux choses du ménage,
A recoudre mon linge aux heures de loisir,

⁵In his preference for unfashionable clothing our comic hero is a forerunner of Harpagon who, like Sganarelle, wears a "fraise à l'antique". Cf. L'Ecole des maris, v. 83; L'Avare, II, 5. Despois indicates that the ruff dates back to the preceding century (Vol. 2, p. 364, n. 1).

Ou bien à tricoter quelques bas par plaisir.⁶
(vv. 115-22)

Sganarelle is, indeed, no pale embodiment of an abstraction. Molière has taken pains to bring to the fore the distinct individuality of his vain comic hero.

In L'Ecole des maris Molière begins his practice of analyzing the psychological ramifications of the malady of his comic hero -- a practice he will pursue with greater intricacy in subsequent masterpieces. Because of his one besetting sin, his overweening vanity, Sganarelle is determined to obey implicitly every whim and caprice of his "fantaisie" -- an unhealthy activity indeed, for it inevitably leads to intellectual myopia. The comic hero becomes so enclosed within his own world of private fantasy that his normal judgment and reason soon become debilitated. There is evidence of his intellectual decline in the first scene where, to the sound advice of Ariste, "Toujours au plus grand nombre on doit s'accommoder" (v. 41), Sganarelle's only retort is a ridiculous reference to the black wig with which his brother covers his white hair (vv. 55-6). The cogency of Ariste's argument as opposed to the sheer inanity of Sganarelle's retort underlines

⁶It is a sign of the kinship of Molière's ridiculous bourgeois characters that Arnolphe (L'Ecole des femmes, vv. 100-2) and Chrysale (Les Femmes savantes, vv. 577-84) also advocate the degradation of a woman to a state of domestic servitude.

the latter's inability to pursue a logical argument. In the second scene, Sganarelle admits he does not know why he is totally convinced that Léonor's liberties must be curtailed (v. 217). He is, in short, rigid, unthinking, stultified.

As Sganarelle becomes increasingly estranged from the normal world of common experience, he degenerates emotionally. His credulity is apparent in the advancement of the plot; his puerility is evident in his ludicrous expressions of ecstasy over Isabelle's "virtuous" submissiveness, and in the joy with which he informs Ariste of Léonor's infidelity and vindicates his own educational theory. Though eccentric, Sganarelle initially seems to possess definite human attributes, but, as the plot unfolds, he intensifies our growing impression that we are witnessing a puppet moving towards self-destruction. However, as Robert Jouanny implies, Sganarelle is not the grotesque puppet of traditional farce: "Il faut au départ un caractère très vrai pour qu'il puisse être ainsi gonflé sans risque de le voir devenir une baudruche crevée".⁷ In his next "school" play Molière manages to maintain the human element of his comic hero throughout the comedy. In the concluding act of L'Ecole des femmes Arnolphe suffers excruciatingly and expresses deep preoccupations and torments.

⁷Oeuvres complètes de Molière, ed. R. Jouanny (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962), I, 903, n. 459.

When finally convinced of betrayal, Sganarelle consigns all women to perdition without once expressing the anguish of despised love. Moreover it is evident that he has never loved Isabelle, nor ever been capable of loving her. For Sganarelle's love is an egoistic, possessive love, a love in which any kind of spontaneous reciprocal relationship is impossible. Isabelle is his "trésor" (v. 505), which he possesses as avariciously as Harpagon grasps his "cassette"; for Isabelle is indicative of the success of his own educational ideas, of the supremacy of his "fantaisie". As he becomes increasingly convinced of the apparent devotion of his ward, his explosions of affection are not expressions of true love, but of sensuality, pride and self-sufficiency. In Sganarelle's myopic world vision, self-love alone is regarded as a reality.⁸

There is, moreover, a potentially tragic element in Sganarelle's self-love. A sense of purpose and feeling of happiness can be derived only from relations of reciprocity with others. However Sganarelle, incapable of communicating either in friendship or in love with the living world, cuts himself off from humanity. By virtue of his inaccessibility and isolation he may be said to enter the realm of tragedy.

Nor is Sganarelle's isolation transitory. Having profited nothing from his unfortunate experience with Isabelle, he will, in all similar circumstances, repeat his

⁸ Sganarelle's egoistic, possessive treatment of Isabelle is similar to that of all Molière's inept bourgeois lovers: cf. L'Ecole des femmes (vv. 125-8); Le Mariage forcé, sc. 2.

unwitting march towards self-defeat. An impassible gulf severs him permanently from his fellow man. Impotent to alter this situation, Sganarelle is not free, but like the tragic hero, ineluctably fated.

However Sganarelle differs considerably from the tragic hero. According to Aristotle the tragic hero is to inspire pity and fear, and, for this reason, must be neither completely good nor completely bad. He must be a normal man with one serious moral flaw. Sganarelle, like the tragic protagonist, has a moral flaw, but he is an abnormal man with little or no good in him. Upon his first entry on stage he reveals himself as a thoroughly disagreeable and unattractive individualist. And his crudity, vanity, and tyranny continue unabated throughout the comedy. Sganarelle, with the exception of Harpagon, is a unique character in the repertoire of Molière. For both of these comic figures are so obsessed by one dominant and invincible trait that their entire character becomes permanently vitiated. An analogous condition in tragedy would be wholly injurious to the theatrical effect. Unlike the tragic hero, Sganarelle enlists no sympathy from the audience. Any reasonable man has an absolute incapacity for empathy with Sganarelle or with his philosophy.

On the stage, however, the ridiculous rather than the repellent aspect of Sganarelle's character is emphasized. His unbridled desire to be superior and his general behaviour throughout the play strike us as preposterous and eccentric.

Sganarelle can only elicit laughter. We laugh, but while laughing we realize that he fully deserves the comic revenge which befalls him. He is unjustified in his odious method of treating his ward, in his vindictiveness, and in the joy with which he savours the spectacle of Ariste's discomfiture. Sganarelle becomes his own nemesis, and is duly punished for his sin of overweening vanity by his final humiliation. And this is the true dramatic form of punishment.

Sganarelle of L'Ecole des maris, the first and least profoundly studied of Molière's great comic characters, provides an excellent stance from which to observe the increasing complexity of the playwright's subsequent creations and the greater intricacy of their comic situation. Sganarelle's first avatar, Arnolphe, shares his predecessor's rudeness and vanity; however his character has been expanded and deepened. While Sganarelle is continuously obsessed with one fixed idea, Arnolphe is sometimes free from his haunting fear of cuckoldry, and is thus capable of altruistic behaviour -- of disinterested and faithful friendship, of unostentatious generosity. He therefore illustrates Aristotle's concept of the hero of tragedy: he is a man endowed with much good, but with one inveterate weakness. Sganarelle, on the contrary, always remains the selfish egoist. Moreover, between Sganarelle and Arnolphe there is a definite progression in the complexity of the comic situation. While Sganarelle is unaware of the machinations of the lovers, Arnolphe is fully

cognizant of events transpiring around him through the consistent blundering of Horace. But despite his awareness of the situation and his determination to outwit his rival, Arnolphe is unable to avert the force of events making him comic.

The rôle of Orgon, a natural sequel to the obsessed heroes in the two "school" plays, represents a greater advance in human complexity. Nothing about the character of Sganarelle or Arnolphe remains undisclosed; however the factors motivating Orgon's exaggerated worship of Tartuffe are suggested and partially revealed, but escape our complete comprehension. And the consummate scoundrel of the comedy even further approaches the complexness of a living man. Tartuffe is a composite figure: sensual, covetous, vindictive. Moreover he is enigmatic: whether his hypocrisy is wholly intentional or partially unconscious⁹ is difficult to determine. Tartuffe's comic situation has progressed beyond that of the comic dupe to the point where it is Tartuffe who supplies the motive powers of the comedy.

Alceste, Molière's most complex character, his first comic hero to awaken the sympathies of the audience, and to be aware (at least partially) of the situation making him comical (vv. 773-4), bears a most marked resemblance to the Sganarelle of L'Ecole des maris. In his opposition to Alceste's views regarding social usage, Philinte draws a direct

⁹Cf. Adam, III, 316.

comparison between himself and his friend, and "ces deux frères que peint 'l'Ecole des maris'" (v. 100). The very essence of both comic heroes is the "farouche humeur" attributed to Sganarelle by Ariste; and as a further sign of their kinship Molière employs the phrase "noirs chagrins" in both plays in reference to the comic hero (L'Ecole des maris, v. 319; Le Misanthrope, v. 1584). Alceste's petulant cry, "Je veux qu'on me distingue" (v. 63), is reminiscent of Sganarelle's inordinate desire that his "fantaisie" be the sole criterion in all matters. Sainte-Beuve made a significant statement when he noted, "Sganarelle et Alceste, voilà tout Molière".¹⁰ Alceste is a unique example of Molière's ability to transform a relatively simple comic figure into a complex three-dimensional creation capable of stepping forth from the stage.

The Sganarelle of L'Ecole des maris does not typify a primitive stage in Molière's skill in characterization, he marks the beginning of a remarkable progression along the comic ladder, terminating with the complex Alceste.¹¹ Moreover, more important is the fact that in Sganarelle we can discern the prototype of each of Molière's subsequent comic heroes. The general idea behind Sganarelle's peremptory remark, "Quoi qu'il en soit, je suis attaché fortement / A

¹⁰ Quoted in W. G. Moore, Molière, A New Criticism (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 70.

¹¹ After 1666 we have the general impression that Molière is avoiding the depths he explores in Tartuffe and Le Misanthrope.

ne démordre point de mon habillement" (vv. 65-6), can be applied equally well to all of Molière's comic heroes, each of whom is obsessed by one fixed idea. And in each case, the fixation reveals a violent amour-propre exaggerated to pathological intensity, and results in self-deception and imperviousness to the most obvious truth.

Ariste, the first raisonneur in Molière's theatre, belongs to that class of characters whose rôle is to reason with the comic hero and combat the fixed idea by which he is obsessed. In his consummate understanding of human nature Molière was fully aware that to try to reason with a man who is dominated by one idea will merely irritate him, thus intensifying his obstinacy, and inciting him to a more intemperate (and comic) expression of his views. Ariste has this very effect on Sganarelle, well illustrated in the humorous episode (vv. 218-34) where he pushes his opponent to a sufficiently extreme point to elicit the ironical: "Que j'aurai de plaisir si l'on le fait cocu!" (v. 234).¹² Ariste thus fulfills the dramatic function of a foil, helping to

¹² Ariste is, in my opinion, serious in his exchanges with Sganarelle, and forces him into this comic reaction unintentionally; he does not "prendre plaisir à ahurir son frère à force de libéralisme." Cf. Bénichou, P., Morales du grand siècle (Gallimard, 1948), p. 194.

bring out in sharper relief the folly of the ridiculous Sganarelle. The same dramatic function is fulfilled by Chrysalde in L'Ecole des femmes, Cléante in Tartuffe, Philinte in Le Misanthrope, Ariste in Les Femmes savantes, and Béralde in Le Malade imaginaire, all of whom accentuate the eccentricity of the comic hero and provide symmetry to the play by the expression of their own temperate viewpoint.¹³

Ariste undoubtedly has a greater significance in the drama than can be measured by the number of lines allotted to him. Though he appears only at the beginning and conclusion, he is contrasted so strongly and illuminatingly with his brother that his presence seems to pervade the entire comedy. Our initial and abiding impression of Ariste is that of a cheerful, moderate, and wise gentleman, indulgent to his ward by virtue of a sincere conception of a guardian's duty. As was outlined in chapter II,¹⁴ Ariste has granted Léonor complete freedom to satisfy her "jeunes désirs" (v. 185), and to marry the man of her choice. If she chooses her guardian, he intends to continue granting her the freedom she enjoyed before her marriage since there is nothing in this way of life "où l'honneur soit blessé" (v. 218). Ariste wisely and

¹³ Rather than combatting the folly of the bluestockings, Ariste in Les Femmes savantes encourages Chrysalde. It should further be noticed that Ariste in L'Ecole des maris differs from Molière's other raisonneurs in being one of the principal characters of the play.

¹⁴ Supra, p. 35.

convincingly shows that a woman's virtue is assured not by severity and constraint, but by love and honour.

Ariste never acts inconsistently. Though temporarily and mistakenly disappointed in Léonor's fidelity, he maintains with dignity his principles of gentleness, discretion, and tolerance. In contrast to Sganarelle's explosion of wrathful fury, there is a note of pathos in the sincerity of Ariste's reproach:

Je ne me repens pas de mon doux traitement;
 Mais votre procédé me touche assurément;
 Et c'est une action que n'a pas méritée
 Cette tendre amitié que je vous ai portée. (1061-4)

Ariste has acquired a consummate knowledge of life, enabling him to face its vicissitudes. It is no ordinary man who is capable of such moral balance and calm discretion in a moment of crisis.¹⁵

Ariste's utilitarian philosophy of common sense and conformity to a sensible norm, expounded with no trace of cynicism or pessimism, undoubtedly coincides with Molière's views within the framework of L'Ecole des maris.¹⁶ Thus, as opposed to the fou of the comedy, Ariste may be rightly described as le sage de la pièce -- hence the appropriateness

¹⁵ Ariste's moral equilibrium can undoubtedly be attributed to his Stoic belief that fate controls the events of life (v. 235).

¹⁶ Whether Ariste's philosophy is identifiable with Molière's convictions outside of the framework of the play is impossible to prove, since the dramatist left no private documents indicating his personal viewpoint. In my opinion, Molière's personal feelings are reflected in the moral message of L'Ecole des maris.

of his name, with its Greek derivation meaning "the best". Moreover, there is an interesting evolution among Molière's subsequent raisonneurs, some of whom are undeserving of the appellation sage. The term should not be attributed to either Chrysalde or Philinte. Chrysalde has no constructive philosophy comparable to Ariste's ideal Weltanschauung. An extreme advocate of the doctrine of laissez-faire, he leaves all matters to chance and believes a man can avoid cuckoldry only by celibacy. His cynicism and complacency make him less a spokesman of Molière's views than Ariste. In Le Misanthrope Philinte's advice of a happy mean between two extremes:

"La parfaite raison fuit toute extrémité, / Et veut que l'on soit sage avec sobriété" (vv. 151-2), echoes the words of Ariste: "L'un et l'autre excès choque" (v. 43). Nevertheless, the former, like Chrysalde, is a cynical man of the world, who, taking a pessimistic view of human nature (vv. 173-8), counsels Alceste to endure as best he can a society he will never be able to ameliorate. Though Philinte takes a lenient view of man's natural vices (vv. 145-52), he, nonetheless, should not be considered the sage de la pièce. Cléante of Tartuffe expounds Molière's ideal philosophy of the golden mean, "le milieu qu'il faut" (v. 1624), and like Ariste, expresses this view with no trace of cynicism or pessimism. Cléante is especially deserving of the appellation sage, which was, in fact, applied to him by the writer of the

Lettre sur l'Imposteur. Ariste in Les Femmes savantes is a true sage; and Béralde of Le Malade imaginaire proves in his lengthy expatiations on Argan's folly (III, iii) that he is equally identified with the comedist's viewpoint within the context of the play.

The identification of Cléante with Molière's point of view tends to make him slightly monotonous, while Béralde, in the expression of his commonplace philosophy, is even more pallid and tedious. In the delineation of the rôle of Ariste of L'Ecole des maris, Molière has been quite successful in creating a raisonneur who engages the attention of the audience (vv. 179-208). However, I do not go so far as to agree with Antoine Adam that Ariste is presented in a comic light, that "il faut qu'il fasse rire ou sourire".¹⁷ Ariste is the urbane man of the world, a man with an incorruptible intellectual stability. And it is improbable that Molière, by virtue of his innate sympathy with human and mundane wisdom, would introduce an element of amusement in the manner or matter of Ariste's lines.

Molière has endowed his comic heroine with perspicacity and ingenuity. It is Isabelle who engineers the elaborate intrigue of the second and third acts. And she is capable of her adroit performance because, after years of long and painful experience, she has acquired a thorough knowledge of her guardian's character. Isabelle has sufficient

¹⁷Adam, III, 278.

insight into human nature to realize that Sganarelle's vanity blinds him to reality, and she plays on his vanity in basing each of her tricks upon it. The schemes she evolves to send Valère her first note and to escape to his house illustrate the extent to which she succeeds in turning Sganarelle's most trusted weapons against him. Sganarelle's educational policy would probably have been successful if his ward had not been a woman of unusual perspicacity and ingenuity.

Molière has been reproached for the immodesty and duplicity of his heroine.¹⁸ It is she who makes the first advances in her love-affair, it is she who precipitates the marriage; and she lies with a regularity and skilfulness that may seem disturbing. However, to dispel severe criticism of his heroine, Molière has taken special care to indicate that Isabelle's schemes are quite legitimate since she has no other means of escaping a tyrannical and unreasonable man. The first important words she utters attest to the purity of her intentions: "O Ciel! sois-moi propice et seconde en ce jour / Le stratagème adroit d'une innocente amour" (vv. 361-2). Isabelle is sincerely convinced that the injustice of her situation will excuse her effrontery:

Je fais pour une fille, un projet bien hardi;
 Mais l'injuste rigueur dont envers moi l'on use,
 Dans tout esprit bien fait me servira d'excuse.
 (vv. 366-8)

¹⁸See Michaut, Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, p. 127, n. 1.

In her letter to Valère she excuses her breach of the proprieties by explaining that the impending threat of marriage in six days to a tyrant forces her to "passer sur des formalités où la bienséance du sexe oblige" (II, v). On receiving Valère's reply in the equivocal words of Sganarelle, she is reassured regarding the purity of her intentions, and is gratified that her lover realizes her innocence: "Ses feux ne trompent point ma secrète croyance, / Et toujours ses regards m'en ont dit l'innocence" (vv. 611-12). Her most daring step, namely her nocturnal flight to the house of Valère, is the result of Sganarelle's advancing the date of the wedding to the following day; we can hardly doubt the sincerity of her cry: "O Ciel, inspire-moi ce qui peut le parer! (v. 802). Moreover, she will join her lover only after she has obtained his promise that they will be united in a legitimate marriage. And finally, when begging pardon of Léonor for having implicated her in her scheme, Isabelle again attributes her conduct to the exigency of her situation: "Le pressant embarras d'une surprise extrême / M'a tantôt inspiré ce honteux stratagème" (vv. 1079-80). Thus, despite her dishonesty and forwardness, Isabelle is represented as virtuous: each of her tricks is merely a legitimate means of self-defence.

Isabelle's recourse to deception constitutes a basic theme pervading the theatre of Molière. In the world of Molière's comic hero, a world where fanaticism and tyranny

prevail, the innocent victim's only instrument of survival is duplicity. Elmire, in Tartuffe, realizes that ruse and hypocrisy are her only means of exposing the "faux dévot" (IV, v). In the opening scene of L'Avare, Valère combats Elise's moral scruples by admitting that "la sincérité souffre un peu au métier que je fais;" but, he continues, "quand on a besoin des hommes il faut bien s'ajuster à eux; et puisqu'on ne saurait les gagner que par là, ce n'est pas la faute de ceux qui flattent mais de ceux qui veulent être flattés". Similarly Covielle, in Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, chides his master for his ingenuous conduct in refusing to claim to be a nobleman (III, xiii). Even the child Louison in Le Malade imaginaire must resort to deceit in order to escape a beating (III, viii). Like Isabelle, each of Molière's innocent victims is forced to transgress the boundaries of respectable behaviour and recognize ruse and dishonesty as legitimate means for the attainment of happiness.

In his analysis of L'Ecole des maris Arthur Tilley avers that "Isabelle is a first sketch of Agnès."¹⁹ These two young heroines are quite different creations: while Isabelle is represented as a sophisticated young woman of extraordinary cleverness, Agnès is the ultra-naïve girl who wondered "si les enfants qu'on fait se faisaient par l'oreille" (v. 164). Agnès's ignorance does not, however, preclude

¹⁹ Molière, p. 73.

natural intelligence. As a new and unsuspected feeling draws her toward her lover, her intelligence awakens and expands, and she develops a capacity for deception almost equal to that of her predecessor. In this newly developed state, Agnès may be regarded as a recreation and elaboration of Isabelle. However the progression from ignorance to cleverness is so fundamentally different from Isabelle's pervasive ingenuity that the contention that "Isabelle is a first sketch of Agnès" is, I feel, untenable. Isabelle's extreme resourcefulness is hardly a preparation for the subtlety of delineation and the human veracity in the portrait of Agnès. Psychologically speaking, the latter is a human being, while the former is, though only slightly, tinged with the exaggeration and inverisimilitude of farce.

Although less skilfully drawn than Agnès, Isabelle is not lacking in human interest. By sheer force of character and by an ineluctable charm, she wins the admiration of the audience. Adam is perfectly right in stating: "Molière est, lorsqu'il compose ce rôle, un pur artiste et un poète. Il est le premier à subir le charme."²⁰ Moreover, this charming figure will live on and be recreated in succeeding comedies. Isabelle shares her cleverness with Angélique of George Dandin and Henriette of Les Femmes savantes; she possesses Elmire's

²⁰Adam, III, 275-6.

virtue, grace, and gift for equivocation (Tartuffe), and the many excellent qualities of Eliante in Le Misanthrope. Her vivacity and gift for intrigue are undoubtedly perpetuated in the delightful servant girls whom Molière stamped with his immortal genius.

Valère is almost as clever as his fiancée: he collaborates with her in transforming Sganarelle into an unwitting messenger between them, and shares her talent for making brilliantly equivocal declarations. He is not, however, her equal in discretion; for he unwisely attempts to establish relations with Isabelle's morose guardian by mentioning the pleasures of Parisian society (vv. 297-9) -- obviously the least probable means of making friends with an intransigent non-conformist. Valère provides, moreover, an interesting comparison with his counterpart in L'Ecole des femmes. Both Valère and Horace indulge in the fashionable language of this day and both have a similar attitude towards women: Valère admires and loves Isabelle for her feminine cunning no less than Horace loves Agnès for wrapping a note around the stone with which she had been ordered to greet him. However, the dissimilarities between these two characters are almost as great as the difference between Isabelle and Agnès. While Valère is sufficiently clever to abet the schemes of his mistress, Horace is almost as much of a blunderer as Lélie in L'Etourdi. He is unable to refrain from relating his love adventure to the first person he meets, and fails to see the connection

between Arnolphe's frequent presence near Agnès's house and the identity of M. de la Souche. Compared with the careless and simple Horace, Valère has no faults. However, for this very reason, he is a less human character. And there is, accordingly, less interest in the contest between Sganarelle and Valère, in which the combatants are unevenly matched, than in the duel between Arnolphe and Horace, where the latter's impulsive thoughtlessness is cancelled by the former's overweening self-confidence.

Though the portrait of Valère is rather conventionally drawn, this character nevertheless serves admirably the purpose of the play. Valère is, moreover, the forerunner of Molière's many engaging young lovers who, by their grace and charm, win the immediate sympathy of the audience.²¹

Although Léonor only makes a short appearance at the beginning and conclusion of the comedy, she is absolutely indispensable for the symmetry of the plot and for Molière's entire conception of L'Ecole des maris. Despite the paucity of her lines this young girl emerges with a degree of individuality; she has a mind of her own, evident in her categorical disapproval of Sganarelle's educational theories

²¹The name Valère, already used in Molière's two provincial farces, as well as in Le Dépit amoureux, is also given to the uncouth servant of Le Médecin malgré lui and the young lovers of Tartuffe and L'Avare.

(vv. 137-42). Lancaster's assertion that Léonor is "too obviously introduced to throw into relief the character of Sganarelle"²² is true in the light of her pronounced antipathy to young men of her own age. Her remarks, in this regard, are quite incredible: "Et moi d'un tel vieillard je prise plus le zèle / Que tous les beaux transports d'une jeune cervelle". (vv. 1051-2). Michaut rightly compares Léonor's attitude to that which Frosine attributes to Marianne in L'Avare: "Elle a une aversion épouvantable pour tous les jeunes gens, et n'a de l'amour que pour les vieillards".²³ But though Frosine's statement is a mere ruse, Léonor's affection for a man some forty years her senior is perfectly genuine. She remains a rather enigmatic character, and it is interesting that Molière chose not to reproduce this figure in L'Ecole des femmes. Her virtue and true love, her dignity and common sense are, however, perpetuated in many of the dramatist's subsequent female characters -- for example, in Elvire of Dom Juan, and Alcmène of Amphitryon. Léonor is, in the words of Percy Chapman, Molière's "first model girl".²⁴

²²Lancaster, III, 238.

²³Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, pp. 128-9.

²⁴P. Chapman, The Spirit of Molière (Princeton, 1940), p. 103.

Lisette (the name recurs in L'Amour médecin) emerges from the play as a thoroughly realistic and completely French creation: "Elle a ses boutades à elle qui n'ont pu fleurir que sur la terre de l'esprit Gaulois."²⁵ Dominated by the precepts of the bienséances to a less extent than Isabelle and Léonor,²⁶ Lisette speaks vigorously, castigating the comic hero with frank enjoyment (vv. 143-60). One line in particular gives the impression that people of a low social background are not precluded from common sense and truth: "Sommes-nous chez les Turcs pour renfermer les femmes?" (v. 144). In this speech -- her only significant one in the play -- Lisette regards Sganarelle's precautions for guarding his honour as "visions de fou" (v. 153); and explains that the idea that constraint and tyranny produce the first signs of true virtue would naturally repel any honest and free woman. In the treatment of women there can be, according to Laharpe's interpretation, no compromise between complete freedom and total subjection: "Il faut ou les enfermer comme font les Turcs, ou s'y fier comme font les Français."²⁷

Though she does not assist materially in the plot,

²⁵ Martinenche, RHL V (1898), p. 116.

²⁶ See Bénichou, p. 195.

²⁷ See Despois, II, 368, n. 1.

Lisette serves the important dramatic function of reinforcing the morale of the comedy by reiterating Ariste's liberal ideas in an amusing manner. Despite their difference of approach, Ariste and Lisette are complementary figures. An advance over the slapstick servants of traditional farce, she represents the emergence of a domestic servant with definite ideas of her own. Thus Lisette is (together with the less complex suiivante of the Cocu imaginaire) a true forerunner of the admirable Dorines, Nicoles, Martines and Toinettes -- down-to-earth, realistic embodiments of a sturdy common sense.²⁸

The valet Ergaste illustrates, as does Lisette, Molière's conviction that common sense is a bond transcending class: "Le bon sens n'a point de place déterminée à la comédie."²⁹ His reasoning is perfectly sound, and his insight into human nature is almost equal to that of Isabelle. For he understands that excessive severity on the part of the husband or guardian will merely expedite the intrigues of his rival:

Apprenez, pour avoir votre esprit raffermi,
 Qu'une femme qu'on garde est gagnée à demi,
 Et que les noirs chagrins des maris ou des pères
 Ont toujours du galant avancé les affaires.
 (vv. 317-20)

And it is Ergaste who is the first to elucidate the stratagem of Isabelle (vv. 436-40). This valet is undoubtedly guided

²⁸ Though Lisette and Dorine are called suiivantes, they have nothing to distinguish them from Martine and Toinette, called servantes.

²⁹ La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes, sc. v.

by the sound instinct and natural wisdom of his class.

Ergaste was a typical name for the valet of comedy, found also in Rotrou's La Soeur and Molière's L'Etourdi. The figure in L'Ecole des maris, though not a scheming inventor, is an avatar of the resourceful Mascarille. It is of historical interest that, after Ergaste in L'Ecole des maris, Molière was inclined to replace the conventional valet of comedy (the cunning and ingenious figure) by a less talented and therefore more human type of man-servant -- Sganarelle in Dom Juan, Sosie in Amphitryon, Maître Jacques in L'Avare. The only examples of the conventionally shrewd and inventive valet in plays following L'Ecole des maris are La Flèche in L'Avare, Covielle in Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, and the immortal Scapin.

We may conclude that character-portrayal is the most salient feature of L'Ecole des maris. Molière's precept of exhibiting real life on his stage, of portraying men according to nature,³⁰ is beginning to merge into practice. Although Sganarelle is not a complex character, he is, nonetheless, endowed with human qualities. He possesses, together with Ariste, the relief of an individual personality. In spite of Isabelle's exaggerated cleverness and Valère's rather conventional character, neither of the lovers is devoid of

³⁰ Ibid., sc. vi.

human interest. The servants are both admirable, living creations. In general, the characterization in L'Ecole des maris makes for good humanism as well as good comedy. La Fontaine was, in all probability, thinking of this aspect of L'Ecole des maris (in addition to the realistic sketches of Les Fâcheux) when, in August 1661, he suggested to his friend Maucroix:

Nous avons changé de méthode:
Jodelet n'est plus à la mode,
Et maintenant il ne faut pas
Quitter la nature d'un pas.³¹

³¹Letter to Maucroix, August 22, 1661.

CHAPTER IV
THE COMIC ELEMENT

Molièresque comedy is social comedy seen against the background of a stable social order. It is, however, first and foremost character comedy, dealing with the relationship of individuals to society, displaying the ridiculousness of individual men in conflict with organized society. The criterion of this comedy is reason and common sense, the sanity of humanity at large; and everything judged by this standard to be excessive, ill-balanced, or disharmonious becomes the victim of the comedist. A Molièresque play indicates to each member of society that he must always be conscious of and attentive to his social environment. For, as Henri Bergson explains, "Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings".¹ Such a character would constitute Molière's typical comic hero. However, in the majority of cases, the laughter of Molière serves as the individual's defence against excess or

¹H. Bergson, Le Rire, trans. in Comedy (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 147.

extravagance, thus averting his tendency toward absentmindedness and unsociability. In this sense, the laughter of Molière is tantamount to the "social gesture" Bergson describes, restraining one within the limits of a middle course.²

As a social comedy of character, a comedy in which most of the humorous effects arise from the inveterate weakness of the comic protagonist, L'Ecole des maris illustrates one of the most widely accepted theories of the comic, the theory of contrast or incongruity. This theory is inherent in the didactic lesson of the play: as Sganarelle deviates from the established norm, his inordinate vanity becomes increasingly opposed to the practical wisdom of Ariste. The structure and theme of the comedy are constructed around this same basic principle: we laugh at the incongruity between vanity and love, so effectively illustrated in the outwitting of a conceited, despicable tyrant by his repressed and seemingly innocent ward.

Contrast is implicit in the very nature of the comic hero. Obsessed by the idea of his superiority over the rest of mankind, trusting solely in his own judgment, Sganarelle becomes blinded to the reality of the normal world around him, and fails to realize that he is a docile intermediary between his ward and his rival. He is thus comic by virtue

²Ibid., p. 73.

of the flagrant contradiction between his own conception of himself as an infallible super-ego, and his real self -- an impotent fool. Sganarelle may flauntingly assert: "J'ai pour tout conseil ma fantaisie à suivre" (v. vii), and may, if he pleases, wear "une coiffure en dépit de la mode" (v. 67); but he is as dependent on and as manipulated by others as Monsieur de Pourceaugnac and Monsieur Jourdain. He is thus a true comic character: he becomes amusing through his own fiat, through the insistence of his blind egoism.

Bergson's theory that comedy lies in "something mechanical encrusted on the living",³ in the substitution of the artificial for the natural, is a subtle variation on the theory of the comedy of contrast. For mechanization where one would expect normal and dignified life undoubtedly involves a striking contrast. In L'Ecole des maris mechanization produces some of the most keenly humorous effects. As Sganarelle's pathological fixation inexorably transforms him into an automaton, his rigidity is manifested in short, jerky, puppet-like movements. The most notable example occurs at the beginning of Act II, sc. ii: Sganarelle is so mesmerized by one fixed idea that, on knocking on Valère's door he is startled by the sound of the knocker and automatically cries: "Qui va là?" as if he had heard a knock on his own door. For a moment, with the reflection "Bon, je rêve", he is jolted

³Bergson, p. 84.

back into the world of reality. However his lapse back into normalcy is immediately suppressed, and, resuming his harassing thoughts, he rebounds into the world of his private mania: "Je ne m'étonne pas, après cette lumière, / S'il y venait tantôt de si douce manière" (vv. 371-2). Oblivious of the real world around him, Sganarelle moves perfunctorily through the play in the manner of an automaton. And he elicits our laughter; for, according to Bergsonian theory: "We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing".⁴

As our unwitting messenger runs back and forth between Isabelle and Valère, he remains blithely unaware of the dramatically ironical nature of his message: one meaning is intended only for himself, while an opposite meaning is conveyed to the lover, and, of course, to the audience. In his deft performance of his rôle, Sganarelle goes so far as to explain his own function as a messenger: ". . .enfin les douleurs d'une contrainte extrême / L'ont réduite à vouloir se servir de moi-même" (vv. 427-8). Thus the comic hero unconsciously betrays himself. He is incapable of realizing that his words "contrainte extrême" are double-edged, reflecting his own severity rather than the alleged importunities of his rival; and he similarly fails to

⁴Bergson, p. 97.

comprehend the ambiguity in his use of the verb "se servir" -- Sganarelle himself is a mechanical contrivance that is being manipulated.

While Sganarelle is unaware of the double meaning implicit in many of his own remarks, Isabelle is designedly equivocal in her declaration of love to Valère in the very presence of her guardian:

Oui, je veux bien qu'on sache, et j'en dois être crue,
 Que le sort offre ici deux objets à ma vue
 Qui, m'inspirant pour eux différents sentiments,
 De mon coeur agité font tous les mouvements.
 L'un par un juste choix où l'honneur m'intéresse,
 A toute mon estime et toute ma tendresse;
 Et l'autre, pour le prix de mon affection,
 A toute ma colère et mon aversion,
 La présence de l'un m'est agréable et chère,
 J'en reçois dans mon âme une allégresse entière,
 Et l'autre par sa vue inspire dans mon coeur
 De secrets mouvements et de haine et d'horreur.
 Me voir femme de l'un est toute mon envie;
 Et plutôt qu'être à l'autre on m'ôterait la vie.
 (vv. 735-48)

These words are a masterpiece of specious communication.

The brilliantly comic effect resides in Sganarelle's total unawareness of the double meaning lurking in Isabelle's words and in the entire dramatic situation. Molière was perfectly aware of the effectiveness of dramatic irony, a principle which he goes so far as to define for us in the preface to Tartuffe: "La plupart des contrariétés viennent de ne pas entendre et d'envelopper dans un même mot des choses opposées." The playwright frequently exploits this dramatic device, but nowhere more remarkably than in Tartuffe itself. In Tartuffe's own admission of his guilt

(III, vi), and in Elmire's mock confession of love to Tartuffe (IV, v), the meaning conveyed to one character is the complete antithesis of that carried to the other, and, of course, to the audience.

Though L'Ecole des maris is replete with ironic effect, Molière's comic genius becomes most evident in his adroit use of irony near the conclusion of the second act. Moved by the apparent defeat of his seemingly contrite rival, Sganarelle cries out in a tone of absurd sentimentality: "Pauvre garçon! sa douleur est extrême. / Tenez, embrassez-moi: c'est un autre elle-même" (vv. 791-2).⁵ The incongruous hiatus between Sganarelle's joy in his assumed success, concealed under a mask of apparent pity, and the actual dramatic situation, makes these lines, in my opinion, the most comic in the play.

The irony in L'Ecole des maris is ubiquitous: it occurs in specific remarks,⁶ it is inherent in the nature of the intrigue, and even extends beyond the framework of the play in the truth that Sganarelle, an intransigent enemy of entertainment, becomes himself a comic spectacle

⁵The 1666, 73, 74, 83, 1734 editions of the play read: "C'est une autre elle-même." Despois, II, 412, n. 2.

⁶Cf. vv. 91, 234, 273, 941, 1042.

not only for the audience, but for the other characters on stage. This special feature of a comedy within a comedy is used with consistency throughout the theatre of Molière. The newly clad Monsieur Jourdain and the totally bewildered Monsieur de Pourceaugnac become supreme comic creations, mocked simultaneously by the spectators in the audience, and by the spectators "on stage". The Countess of Escarbagnas, who "performs her part" with consummate mastery before Julie and the Viscount, elicits a delightfully ironic remark from the former: "Notre comtesse d'Escarbagnas, avec son perpétuel entêtement de qualité, est un aussi bon personnage qu'on en puisse mettre sur le théâtre" (sc. 1). Molière is undoubtedly a master in his ability to create and sustain irony in the theatre.

L'Ecole des maris is an excellently constructed comedy with a structure that contributes to the comic effect; for Molière has utilized in the structural formula for his play one of the commonest comic devices -- repetition. The first act is a preparation for and forewarning of the comic intrigue to follow; the second act presents this intrigue in which Sganarelle promotes the very transaction he wishes to avert; the intrigue continues into the third act with the tricking of a guardian into marrying his ward to his rival. This kind of symmetrical repetition of the comic material serves as a rough model for Molière's next "school" play

in which one phenomenon is repeated in three tempi: first Horace imparts to Arnolphe the scheme he has contrived to deceive M. de la Souche; secondly, Arnolphe believes he has successfully countervailed the scheme; thirdly, through the efforts of Agnès, it is Horace who profits from Arnolphe's excessive precautions. This kind of three-fold repetition reaches the zenith of its technical perfection in George Dandin where the second act repeats the first, and the third, the second. Three incidents, Dandin's discovery of Angélique's infidelity, his efforts to obtain the assistance of his parents-in-law, and his final humiliation, are reproduced in each act and generate an acceleration in the comic rhythm. Moreover, the repetitive effect of Sganarelle's comical expressions of elation is refined in L'Ecole des femmes and George Dandin into a series of monologues showing the emotional states through which the comic hero passes.

A character's remarkable (and somewhat incredible) talent for repeating verbatim several lines previously uttered by another character is more immediately comic than repetition within the architectural framework of a play. Sganarelle can perform to perfection his rôle as messenger since Molière has endowed him with the singular ability of a verbatim reporter. At the beginning of the seventh scene of the second act he repeats to our amazement the concealed message expressed by Valère in three short speeches at the

Conclusion of the preceding act. An incredible example of repetition occurs in the middle of the last act (vv. 948-54) when Sganarelle, in order to reaffirm the absurdity of a lenient attitude in education, repeats, better than a parrot, part of a speech spoken by Ariste in the second scene of the play (vv. 165 ff.). This example represents a modest preparation for Molière's more accomplished treatment of repetition in Le Misanthrope. Wishing to hurt her rival's feelings, Arsinoé warns Célimène, under the guise of friendship, about the effect her conduct is having upon her reputation, and ends her elaborate speech with four lines of excessively genteel peroration (vv. 909-12). Célimène repays Arsinoé's service by offering some advice herself, and concludes her equally long and elaborate reply with exactly the same four lines. This episode indicates clearly the degree to which Molière refined upon the comic device of verbatim repetition first exploited in L'Ecole des maris.

Molière is fond of repeating his material in the form of a theme with variations -- a comic device similar to what Jacques Scherer calls "répétition molièresque", and defines as "type de répétition. . .où des idées ou des sentiments indentiques sont répétés sous des formes différentes."⁷ An admirable example occurs in the second scene of L'Ecole

⁷J. Scherer, La Dramaturgie classique en France (Paris: Nizet, 1966), p. 438.

des maris where Sganarelle and Ariste are discussing the education of young Leonor:

- S: Quoi? si vous l'épousez, elle pourra prétendre
Les mêmes libertés que fille on lui voit prendre?
- A: Pourquoi non?
- S: Vos désirs lui seront complaisans,
Jusques à lui laisser et mouches et rubans?
- A: Sans doute.
- S: A lui souffrir, cervelle troublée,
De courir tous les bals et les lieux d'assemblée?
- A: Oui, vraiment.
- S: Et chez vous iront les damoiseaux?
- A: Et quoi donc?
- S: Qui joueront et donneront cadeaux?
- A: D'accord.
- S: Et votre femme entendra les fleurettes?
- A: Fort bien.
- S: Et vous verrez ces visites muguettes
D'un oeil à témoigner de n'en être point souû?
- A: Cela s'entend. (vv. 219-30).

This repetition of the same thought in different words establishes a casual, conversational tone, reveals remarkably the character of the protagonists, impresses the idea indelibly upon the mind of the audience, and is, moreover, exceptionally comic.⁸

Molière's use of repetition reaches its culmination in the comic device wherein one character constantly and perfunctorily repeats the same short phrase, the best-known examples of which are the "Et Tartuffe?" and "Le pauvre homme!" of Tartuffe, the "Sans dot" of L'Avare, and the

⁸The device is utilized with extreme finesse in Dom Juan (II, iv), Le Misanthrope (vv. 1609-22), and Les Femmes savantes (vv. 1009-26).

"Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?" of Les Fourberies de Scapin. There is a slight possibility that in one passage in L'Ecole des maris, in which Sganarelle ludicrously repeats the verbs "savoir" and "apprendre" (vv. 398-405), Molière was beginning to feel his way towards this ingenious procedure. The examples of repetition in the three above-mentioned comedies, and their possible adumbration in L'Ecole des maris, all reveal to perfection the character's one ruling passion, and disclose the progressive transformation of a living person into a rigid mechanism.

Though primarily a character comedy depicting personal eccentricities, L'Ecole des maris contains a slight admixture of the comedy of manners. However the term "comédie de moeurs", as applied to L'Ecole des maris, should be interpreted more in the sense of an authentic portrayal of contemporary society, than as a satire of social customs such as Molière exemplified in Les Précieuses ridicules. Sganarelle is no longer an abstract character moving about in unreal and fantastic surroundings, like his predecessor Mascarille or his namesake of the Cocu imaginaire. He is, in the words of Michaut, a true "bourgeois français de 1661,"⁹ firmly rooted in a milieu which is accurately defined both socially and historically by references to manners -- some of which produce delightful comedy.

⁹Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, p. 123.

The year is 1661, the year of the birth of the Dauphin (v. 296); and the social background of the play is the seventeenth-century emancipation of women. The force of Sganarelle's austere moral code, by which a man is a tyrant over his family, is being attenuated by the ever-increasing progress of the new salon society. Consequently he opposes all modernity, all of the liberal modern doctrines which contravene ". . .cette sévérité / Qui composait si bien l'ancienne honnêteté" (vv. 269-70). The contrast between these two ideologies -- the normally indulgent and the excessively severe -- generates a comic atmosphere, which is intensified by the addition of several concrete details: an amusing remark about the French attitude towards the Turks (vv. 144-6), a humorous description of the various forms of social life (vv. 221-9), a comical glimpse of country life (vv. 261-2), and Sganarelle's incongruous and absurd variation upon the latest royal edict forbidding excessively luxurious materials:

Oh! que je sais au Roi bon gré de ces débris!
 Et que, pour le repos de ces mêmes maris,
 Je voudrais bien qu'on fît de la coquetterie
 Comme de la guipure et de la broderie! (vv. 537-40)

The comédie de moeurs is most fully and realistically developed in the detailed references to costume in the first scene. Sganarelle produces keen humour as he caricatures the small hats which let their wearers' feeble minds evaporate and the sleeves that dip into the sauces (vv. 25-6; 31). In

his defence of the plain style of his ancestors, he scathingly disapproves of the fashionable ribbon-trimmed shoes which make their wearers look like feather-legged pigeons (vv. 33-4). There is a meritorious comic element in Sganarelle's comparison between the legs of the person wearing canons and two shuttlecocks turned upside-down:

. . .ces grands canons où, comme en des entraves,
On met tous les matins ces deux jambes esclaves,
Et par qui nous voyons ces Messieurs les galants
Marcher écarquillés ainsi que des volants.
(vv. 35-8)

Comic effect is attained by Sganarelle's precise description of the simple bourgeois dress of his youth (vv. 67-73). He intends to dress for comfort rather than appearance, and, though obtrusively conspicuous, is indifferent to other people's reactions: ". . .Qui me trouve mal n'a qu'à fermer les yeux." (v. 74).¹⁰ Such a character, at odds with society, convention, normalcy, is a legitimate butt for laughter.¹¹

The careful analysis of character and the study of manners furnish the play with a definite measure of reality,

¹⁰The engraving reproduced from the original edition of 1661 contains a picture of Sganarelle's costume, a picture so accurately and realistically drawn that Adam (III, 277) suggests that Molière may have modelled his character on the libertine philosopher La Mothe le Vayer, notorious for his recalcitrance to fashion.

¹¹Sganarelle's description of the fashionable men of the day in the first scene of L'École des maris is partially reproduced in Dom Juan (II, i), and in Le Misanthrope (vv. 475-88). In all three passages Molière is more interested in realistic description for comic effect than in satire of contemporary styles.

raising it above the level of pure farce. However farce was a mode harmonious with Molière's genius; and the great tradition of the Commedia, which he began to absorb as a child, lives in his works from the earliest farces to Le Malade imaginaire. Though there is a marked difference between our comedy and farce, due to the refinement of Molière's dramatic technique, L'Ecole des maris has nonetheless a farcical basis, comprised of elements reminiscent of both the French and Italian farce genre: the names of some of the characters, the setting and resultant improbabilities in the plot, the subject matter, the denouement, certain jeux de scène, grotesque expressions of the comic hero, the final apostrophe to the audience, the number of acts. L'Ecole des maris can be best classified as a drama intermediary between farce and high comedy. In this sense the work is unique in the repertory of Molière.

L'Ecole des maris retains an element of farce in the name of the comic hero. The name Sganarelle, original with Molière, has an Italian etymology meaning the dupe, and indicates the extent to which Molière was influenced by the farce tradition of the commedia dell'arte. However from L'Ecole des maris on, the recurring figure of Sganarelle is not masked, thus showing his closer affinity with the French tradition. Isabelle was a conventional name in French and Italian farce for the young heroine. Valère

(Valerio) was a stock name for the jeune premier in Italian comedy.¹²

The atmosphere of farce is accentuated by the setting of the play: a common meeting place where each character is available when needed, or, in the description of Michaut, "un carrefour cyniquement machiné pour la commodité de l'intrigue."¹³ Windows opening onto the street permit Isabelle's feigned reproach to her sister to be heard by Sganarelle; adjacent houses facilitate her flight from her room to the house of Valère. Moreover, the setting in a "carrefour de ville" results in certain improbable situations, such as the immediate availability of the royal notary and the magistrate to draw up a marriage contract.¹⁴ In farce, gross improbabilities of this nature were unquestioningly accepted.

L'Ecole des maris is built upon a traditional farce theme: "la ruse de la Femme triomphant de la lourdeur de l'Homme."¹⁵ Woman's natural shrewdness is a well-worn theme,

¹² See Adam, III, 275, n. 2.

¹³ Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, p. 121.

¹⁴ To lend verisimilitude to the sudden and unexpected availability of these two characters, Molière suggests, by the use of the imperfect tense in line 922, that they were on the point of leaving on another business matter.

¹⁵ Oeuvres complètes de Molière (ed. R. Jouanny; Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962), I, 314.

common to both France and Italy; it provided the substance of many of the mediaeval French farces and Renaissance French comedies, as well as furnishing a basis for some of the tales of Boccaccio and for the conventional Italian comedy. Molière diverges slightly from the conventional Italian comedy in making his heroine escape from her tyrannical guardian by her own ingenuity rather than through the schemes of her fiancé and his servant. Nor is Sganarelle the traditional dullard of French farce, but a normally intelligent man whose mind is obsessed by one dominant passion. But despite these differences, the basic idea is constant: the outwitting of a ridiculous eccentric by an astute female.

In Isabelle's extreme cleverness and Sganarelle's credulity there is a pronounced exaggeration, reminiscent of farce. Moreover it is the credulity of the comic hero which results in the denouement. Though the denouement of L'Ecole des maris is integrally and inseparably linked with the development of the comedy, the marriage of two couples and the disillusionment of an unreasonable tyrant is of the essence of farce.

Several jeux de scène bear unmistakable resemblance to the stock tricks of Italian farce. When Valère tries to accost the obsessed Sganarelle (I, iii), the latter remains unaware of the young man's presence. After persistent efforts to communicate with him, Valère and Ergaste, both of whom are bowing respectfully, hat in hand, succeed in

eliciting from Sganarelle the exclamation: "Encore? Que de coups de chapeau" (v. 282). This incident is a typical lazzi of the commedia dell'arte.¹⁶ Sganarelle's immediate attempt to avoid the unwelcome presence of Valère by his impolitely curt retorts is equally characteristic of Italian farce. The ludicrous episode (III, ii) in which Isabelle feigns to converse with her sister inside the house while, outside in the street, her guardian grimaces with vain self-satisfaction is a lazzi not uncommon in Italian scenarios. However, the best example of a jeu de scène occurs in the ninth scene of the second act, in which Isabelle, feigning to declare her love for Sganarelle, expresses her true love for Valère, and while pretending to embrace her guardian, gives her hand to her lover to kiss (v. 768). Sganarelle remains so obsessed with the idea of his own cleverness that he fails to understand this vicarious exchange of words and gestures.¹⁷

Convinced of Isabelle's devotion to him, Sganarelle

¹⁶In his Molière et la comédie italienne (Paris: Didier, 1867), p. 194, Louis Moland draws a comparison between this jeu de scène in L'Ecole des maris and an identical comic device in the seventeenth-century Italian comedy Il Convitato di Pietra. A somewhat similar episode is reproduced in L'Ecole des femmes in the farcical scene of the notary (IV, ii) where Arnolphe's fierce preoccupation with cuckoldry makes him oblivious to reality.

¹⁷This lazzi was not indicated in the text until the edition of 1682; but it was shown on an engraving in the original edition. In his edition of Molière's works R. Jouanny adds the interesting note: "Il est arrivé que l'acteur jouant Valère alourdît la mimique en dévorant de baisers la main qui lui est tendue" (p. 903, n. 457). It is indicated in the 1734 edition

expresses his admiring gratitude in the most grotesque explosions of affection. His ludicrous expression of endearment: "Oui, ma pauvre fanfan, pouponne de mon âme" (v. 763), the infantile cajolery of his "Hai! hai! mon petit nez, pauvre petit bouchon" (v. 769), and his ridiculous offer to Valère: "Tenez, embrassez-moi, c'est un autre elle-même" (v. 791), are all strongly characteristic of farce. Sganarelle's grimaces of unfounded self-satisfaction are reminiscent of the wild grimaces and rolling of the eyes of his jealous namesake in Le Cocu imaginaire.

By ending the play with Lisette's address to the audience, Molière was complying with the conventional manner of concluding a French farce. This final apostrophe: "Vous, si vous connaissez des maris loups-garous, / Envoyez-les au moins à l'école chez nous," is so deeply rooted in the popular spirit of the farce that Molière never again employs this type of ending.

In the arrangement of his comic material into three acts, Molière was indubitably influenced by the conventional Italian comedy. The number of acts in the commedia dell'arte was generally three, as compared with the five acts of the

¹⁷ of the play that Sganarelle again embraces Valère at the supremely ironical conclusion of this scene. See Despois, II, 412, n. 2.

commedia sostenuta. Adam indicates that out of 579 known scenarios, only one is constructed in five acts.¹⁸ He further notes that Molière was so aware of the close similarities between L'Ecole des maris and the farce genre that he usually had this play presented at the end of a performance, after a tragedy or a high comedy.

Thus L'Ecole des maris has obvious affinities with primitive comedy. However the care with which Molière restrains the farce element clearly indicates that he was making a determined effort to conform to the classical insistence on the bienséances. Though he combines features of the old French farce with Italian lazzi, he dispenses entirely with the cruder forms of farce episode: the coarse buffoonery, the boisterous laughter. The scurrilous episode in Dorimond's L'Ecole des cocus where the young heroine gives birth to a child in a corner of the stage is ribaldry to which he does not care to descend.

In L'Ecole des maris Molière has succeeded in his desire to prove himself more than a mere writer of farce. He has not yet attained the subtle, refined laughter of his celebrated high comedies, but he has, nonetheless, managed to elevate the quality and tone of his craft by provoking laughter (if only partially) through the reasoning and discourse of living characters, by the intellectual nature

¹⁸ Adam, III, 273.

of some of the forms of humour. L'Ecole des maris is intermediary between farce and high comedy. However our overall impression is that the work resembles more closely the literary urbanity of high comedy than the broad laughter of farce. In this sense the play constitutes an admirable preparation for the great work of Molière.

CHAPTER V

STYLE

In considering the literary quality of L'Ecole des maris, we are immediately impressed by a smoothness of execution, by a finished pervasive elegance. However this initial impression is somewhat irreconcilable with the many severe attacks the critics have made on Molière's use of language. La Bruyère, Bayle, Fénelon, Vauvenargues all accused him of writing badly. Vauvenargue's remarks were especially censorious: "Il y a peu de poètes, si j'ose le dire, de moins corrects et moins purs que lui."¹ And as late as the nineteenth century, the eminent critic Edouard Schérer renewed the attack by his own disapprobation of Molière's style: "Notre grand comique est aussi mauvais écrivain qu'on peut l'être".² In the light of his adverse criticism, we would do well to scrutinize the text of L'Ecole des maris for imperfections or asperities of diction.

In a close examination of Molière's syntax, we detect

¹Quoted in G. Lafenestre, Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1929), p. 173.

²Ibid.

a solecism in line 151: ". . . nous nous mettons quelque chose à la tête". Here the dramatist has sacrificed grammatical normality for metrical regularity; for the normal grammatical construction in the seventeenth century was either "se mettre quelque chose en tête", or, "se mettre quelque chose dans la tête".³ The construction in line 886, though grammatically correct, is somewhat obscure in meaning: ". . . je n'en voudrais pas tenir vingt bons écus". Sganarelle possibly means that he would not exchange his opportunity to inform his brother of the downfall of his educational theory for a sum of twenty crowns -- an interpretation confirmed in lines 959-60.⁴ And in line 748 the meaning emerges clearly despite a confusion in syntax; "plutôt qu'être à l'autre" is an example of a misplaced modifier.

Molière's metre is the alexandrine couplet from which he departs only once in the use of prose in Isabelle's letter. The versification is not entirely free of technical defects: chevilles⁵ and examples of faulty rhyme⁶ can be

³Other grammatical abnormalities occur in lines 243, 594, 757, 1066. That each of these irregularities was rectified in later seventeenth-century editions of the play (either in 1664 or 1682) indicates that they were abnormal at the time of Molière.

⁴The meaning in line 633 is perfectly clear, but the construction is unusual.

⁵vv. 21, 171, 686, 691.

⁶vv. 567-8, 929-30, 991-2.

found. Nor is Molière's vocabulary devoid of archaic and rare words. The playwright not infrequently employs an archaic word in keeping with Sganarelle's hostility to modern ideas,⁷ or an archaic form of a word when it rhymes more closely for the eye than the usual form of his day.⁸ In line 310 we find "repart" (a rare variant of "repartie"), a noun not indicated in Richelet's seventeenth-century French dictionary.

There are, therefore, a limited number of places in L'Ecole des maris where the aesthetic absolutists could resent Molière's artistic liberties. However, the crowning merit of Molière's style is that it is a living style. Surely an occasional solecism, obscure construction, metrical defect, or archaic word, though proscribed by classical canons, should be excused on the basis of the greater importance Molière gives to movement, relief, colour. Moreover, his style contains slight imperfections because spoken language is not infrequently imperfect, and Molière's supreme aspiration is being natural. He is, above all, a writer for the stage, and conceives his plays as performances before the words are written at all. "On sait", he explains, "que les comédies ne sont faites que pour être jouées".⁹ Thus his style is a spoken style, derived from life itself.

⁷ Infra, p. 100.

⁸ vv. 217, 229, 653, 770, 945.

⁹ Preface to L'Amour médecin.

Molière's adroit use of versification contributes to the living, natural quality of his style. The alexandrine, with its regular succession of masculine and feminine rhymes, is a natural device for the conveying of good sense, thus suited to a comedy of observation and truth.¹⁰ The playwright displays considerable facility in his manipulation of the alexandrine, an ability to rhyme effortlessly, which, in 1664 elicited the admiration of Boileau: "Enseigne-moi, Molière où tu trouves la rime".¹¹ An easy spontaneity is also felt in the rhythm of the line. To Donneau de Visé's criticism that the verse of L'Ecole des maris is "less good" than that of Sganarelle ou Le Cocu imaginaire, Michaut¹² replies that the movement and comic spirit are less animated, but notes that this is due to the fact that in L'Ecole des maris Molière is treating a more elevated subject in a more dignified manner. He affirms that the rhythm in both plays is equally spontaneous: "les couplets ont bien la même allure et la même spontanéité entraînante"; and offers as an example of rhythmic spontaneity Lisette's indignation at Sganarelle's tyrannical treatment of her sister (vv. 143-60).

¹⁰ Molière's use of the classical alexandrine is evidence that L'Ecole des maris aspires to the dimensions of a five-act high comedy.

¹¹ Satire, II, v. 6.

¹² Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, p. 122.

Molière's versification is more dramatic than literary: he shapes the rhythmic pattern of his lines in order to give his characters life. In Sganarelle's explanation of the brothers' guardianship of the girls, he expresses himself in a demonstrative, magisterial tone which is effectively reinforced by the extremely broken rhythm of the lines:

Elles sont sans parents, et notre ami leur père
 Nous commit leur conduite à son heure dernière,
 Et nous chargeant tous deux ou de les épouser,
 Ou, sur notre refus, un jour d'en disposer,
 Sur elles, par contrat, nous sut, dès leur enfance,
 Et de père et d'époux donner pleine puissance.
 (vv. 99-104)

The smooth flow of Ariste's speeches acts as a foil to Sganarelle's emphatically rhythmical language, bringing out in relief the comic hero's overbearing, self-opinionated character. The jerky, staccato quality of some of Sganarelle's lines reflects and reaffirms his automatism, springing from his obsession with the idea of superiority.¹³ In his description of contemporary fashions (I, i), the retarding effect of the rhythm, produced by the accumulation of a great number of significant details, stresses Sganarelle's fatuous vanity. The diversity of rhythm registers his mental attitude with remarkable vividness, thus creating the illusion of real life. This merit more than compensates for a few technical imperfections, for a cheville which, in any case, fits naturally into a spoken style.

¹³ vv. 271-84; 369-70.

In an article on Molière's dramatic stylistics, Robert Garapon notes that "Molière donne une langue et un style particuliers à chacun de ses personnages".¹⁴ This individuality in the speech of Molière's various characters contributes immensely to the impression of life created by his theatre. Moreover, one of the principal reasons for the comparative failure of many of the comedies of his predecessors was that the dramatist did not differentiate his characters by their speech. Corneille's Le Menteur, in many respects an excellent comedy, is relatively defective in character portrayal, and this is partially due to the fact that the language does not vary sufficiently with the characters.

Molière's exquisite artistry is demonstrated in his careful choice of language to suit the character of his comic hero. In accordance with his antiquated ideas and outmoded clothing, Sganarelle often expresses himself in archaic language. In the first two scenes of the play he uses the word "muguet" three times, a word which, already archaic in 1661, is especially in keeping with his hostility

¹⁴"Le Dialogue Molièresque", Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises, XVI (1964), p. 212.

to modernity.¹⁵ He not infrequently employs a word which was termed "bas" by the grammarians of his day. In his ludicrous expressions of endearment he chooses the words "fanfan" and "pouponne" -- examples of "mots bas" which appropriately reveal the sensual, proprietary nature of his love: "Oui, ma pauvre fanfan, pouponne de mon âme" (v. 763).¹⁶ When elated over Isabelle's "submissive" behaviour, Sganarelle expresses himself in a turgid style, with the most inappropriate metaphors: "Dans quel ravissement est-ce que mon coeur nage, / Lorsque je vois en elle une fille si sage" (vv. 503-4).¹⁷ This bombast is psychologically important in reflecting his overweening vanity, and is irresistibly comic in its contrast with his regular mode of speech. Sganarelle's abrupt conduct is reinforced by his brusque, clipped retorts (I, iii), and by his predilection for using trenchant expressions like "Je veux", and the verb "taire".¹⁸ These little idiosyncracies of language mark him as a distinct figure and a forerunner of subsequent comic heroes. When he is reincarnated in *Alceste*, his favourite expression will be "morbleu".

¹⁵The word occurs in lines 24, 123, 228, used twice as a noun, once as an adjective. In his *Dictionnaire Français* (Geneva, 1680) Richelet describes the word as "un peu vieux"; see Despois, II, 358, n. 2. Other examples of archaic words or forms used by Sganarelle are: "sai" (v. 217), "soû" (v. 229), "mamie" (vv. 717, 883), "répond" (770).

¹⁶Richelet terms the words "pouponne" (vv. 675, 763) and "fanfan" (v. 763) as "bas". Other words he condemns as

Ariste, too, has his distinctive language and style. He expresses his well-balanced advice in urbane, polished speeches, certain lines of which are memorable and of a lapidary excellence: ". . . Il nous faut en riant instruire la jeunesse" (v. 180).¹⁹ There is a depth of sincerity and a quiet vigour in his language, which is not, I believe, characterized by the "ton goguenard" suggested by Adam²⁰ or by the "résonance de raillerie ou de scandale" mentioned by Bénichou.²¹ Ariste's tone is smooth and consistent throughout, always dignified and elegant in accordance with his rich and generous feeling for life.

Apart from expressions indicating her extreme aversion to young men ("O l'étrange martyre!" v. 1040), there is little

either "bas" or "burlesque" are "donzelle" (v. 947), "lâche" (v. 991). Both Vaugelas in his Remarques sur la langue française and Richelet agree that the verb "taxer", used by Sganarelle in line 936, is not good usage. See Despois, II, 422, n. 4.

¹⁷ Cf. L'Ecole des femmes, v. 643. Similar examples of this excessive, almost superlative style of speech occur in L'Ecole des maris at the beginning of the sixth scene of the second act, and in Sganarelle's final renunciation of women (vv. 1101-1110).

¹⁸ His use of the verb "vouloir" in the first person singular occurs throughout the play; his use of the verb "taire" abounds in III, vii.

¹⁹ Lines 41-2 lend themselves equally well to quotation. They well illustrate what J. Scherer defines as "sentence": La Dramaturgie classique en France, p. 438.

²⁰ Adam, III, 278.

²¹ Bénichou, Morales du grand siècle, p. 193.

in Léonor's mode of speech that distinctly fits language to character. This may be partially due to the paucity of her lines. However, Molière displays his artistry in giving to the rôle of the young gallant of the play a figurative language that suits his character. Valère expresses himself in the most hyperbolic metaphors, totally in keeping with his youthful exuberance: Sganarelle is "cet Argus que j'abhorre" (v. 263)²² and "un dragon surveillant" (v. 313). He is especially fond of the usual précieux commonplaces of his day -- "feux" (v. 344; 705), "l'âme atteinte" (v. 408), "gloire" (v. 1089). Isabelle's lines breathe a natural charm despite the force of her equivocation. Her language, well-suited to her character, is characterized by a recurrence of the words "innocence" and "honneur",²³ as well as by an abundance of précieux metaphors.²⁴ Valère's and Isabelle's précieux terminology is a modest beginning for Molière's frequent use of the conventional language of gallantry in Tartuffe, Le Misanthrope, and L'Avare.

²² Cf. vv. 908-10,

²³ vv. 362, 483, 612, 621, 649, 889.

²⁴ vv. 451, 491, 611, 764, 835, 856.

Lisette and Ariste hold substantially the same views but express them differently -- a dramatic technique well illustrated by a comparison between their corresponding speeches in the second act (vv. 143-60; 163-78). Lisette defends a woman's freedom in an amusing tone²⁵ evoked by language so simple and natural that it produces the illusion of reality. Ariste then proceeds to reiterate the ideas Lisette has enunciated, expounding them in a more sophisticated tone and erudite manner, clearly evident in his choice of vocabulary,²⁶ in the relative complexity of his syntax (vv. 175-8), in the overall cohesion of his discourse. "Lisette. . .ne fais que confirmer en style de soubrette," explains Laharpe, "ce qu'Ariste a dit en homme sage".²⁷

Because Molière did not comply with the taboos of Classicism regarding popular speech, he was able to give his two servant characters language characteristic of their type.²⁸ The language of both Lisette and Ergaste, often popular and colloquial, has a concrete particularity,

²⁵This tone is evoked in her reference to the Turks (vv. 144-6), in her inelegant manner of expression (vv. 151-2), in her amusing solution to the problem (vv. 159-60).

²⁶Compare his frequent use of abstract nouns with Lisette's clumsy phraseology.

²⁷

Quoted in Despois, II, 368, n. 1.

²⁸Expressions of these servant characters which are indicative of their class are: "pain bénit" (v. 246), "loup(s) - garou(s)" (vv. 310, 1113), "ces brutaux fieffés"

reflecting the sound vitality of the peasant living in close contact with his environment. The terse vigour of Lisette's reproach to Sganarelle: "C'est conscience à ceux qui s'assurent en nous; / Mais c'est pain bénit, certe, à des gens comme vous" (vv. 245-6), and the expressive force of Ergaste's final remark: "Au sort d'être cocu son ascendant l'expose. / Et ne l'être qu'en herbe est pour lui douce chose" (vv. 1099-100), enliven the dialogue, making the play a transcript of real life. Lisette and Ergaste both emerge as typical individuals, and reveal, as well as the main characters, the truth of Mornet's statement: "Jamais Molière ne cherche à se créer un style. Là, comme dans la création des caractères, il laisse la vie créer pour lui".²⁹

A master in the choiceness and precision of his words, Molière is equally a master in the grouping of words. L'Ecole des maris is a triumph of dialogue. The range of effects extracted from the conversation is extensive. A passage profuse in words is often followed by an exiguous retort.³⁰ The various retorts are placed in the exact position that will give them their maximum dramatic force. To the insults hurled at him by his brother, Ariste makes the appropriate rejoinder, wholly in keeping with his

(v. 327). That both of these servants brand the comic hero as "loup-garou" is evidence of the kinship between them.

²⁹Molière, p. 186.

³⁰I, i; I, ii; II, vi; II, vii.

reasonable and tolerant attitude (v. 10). Sganarelle's short, almost one-word replies in the sixth and seventh scenes of the second act strike exactly the right note. The characters express their opinions in exquisitely modulated verses. A notable example occurs at the beginning of II, vi, where Sganarelle's initial grandiosity ("trois et quatre fois béni", v. 533) merges into pomposity ("lu hautement", v. 542),³¹ modulates into a lyrical key (vv. 545-8), and finally into the bathetic "troussez-moi bagage" (v. 552).³² The dialogue of L'Ecole des maris is beautifully orchestrated and unfailingly dramatic.

In the style of L'Ecole des maris there is a certain improved quality which elicited the praise of Voltaire: "[Le style] de Molière, dans cette pièce, est plus châtié que dans les autres. L'auteur français égale presque la pureté de la diction de Térence".³³ Voltaire undoubtedly recognized the variegation of style among the characters and the wide range of effects drawn from the dialogue -- qualities which contribute to the richness and maturity of

³¹Sganarelle foreshadows Arnolphe who makes Agnès read aloud the text of Les Maximes du Mariage. (L'Ecole des femmes), III, ii.

³²Ariste's speech (vv. 179-208) is an equally fine example of merging tonalities. (He is not presented here in a comic light.)

³³Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1879), vol. XXIII, p. 103.

L'Ecole des maris and foreshadow the consummate workmanship and classical grandeur of Le Misanthrope and Les Femmes savantes.

CHAPTER VI

MORAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL IMPORT

Molière was, in the first place, the manager of a theatrical company, secondly a dramatic artist (playwright and actor), and only thirdly a moralist and philosopher. Nevertheless moralistic thought and a philosophical doctrine can be extracted from L'Ecole des maris.

The keynote of the play is liberty -- liberty in bringing up children, freedom of choice in marriage, liberty in education, and freedom of the married woman. Perhaps stimulated by his source material, Molière treats the moral question of liberty versus restraint in bringing up children in considerable detail, convincingly demonstrating the wisdom of the one policy and the folly of the other. He seems in favour of parental control, provided it is wisely and unselfishly exercised in the best interests of the child. Such is the avowed intention of Ariste, while Sganarelle's proprietary control over Isabelle is based on selfish and unreasonable motives, inimical to the development of her natural ability and personality. Opposed to all abuse of parental control, Molière particularly inveighs against parents who arrange the marriage of their daughters merely to satisfy their own vices or whims. He enunciates this theme in Sganarelle ou Le Cocu imaginaire, where he treats

it not only as a playwright but as a moralist, develops it more fully in L'Ecole des maris, and recurs to it in many subsequent plays.¹ Molière's belief that a father or guardian is obliged to respect the child, and that mutual inclination is an essential requisite to a happy marriage, is typical of the practical common sense that characterized his attitude towards the problems of his day.²

Faguet notes that "Molière, dans L'Ecole des maris ne soulève rien de moins que la question de l'enseignement et de l'éducation des filles".³ Molière strongly implies in L'Ecole des maris that he is in favour of a reasonable education for women -- a theme he will discuss more fully in Les Femmes savantes. This was a novel idea in 1661; for, despite much discussion on boys' education from the time of Rabelais and Montaigne, the first theses on girls' education had not yet been written. Sganarelle, an uncompromising opponent of education for women, desires to reduce the female sex to a state of domestic slavery. However Molière does not agree with the idea of destroying

¹L'Ecole des femmes, Tartuffe, Le Médecin malgré lui, George Dandin, L'Avare, Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, Les Femmes savantes, Le Malade imaginaire.

²It should be noted that Molière's views were by no means in accord with the general practice of his day.

³En lisant Molière, p. 26.

a woman's natural faculties by keeping her in total ignorance. His ideal, strongly implicit in the words of his spokesman,⁴ is a woman who has received a sound education "avec des clartés de tout",⁵ an education that will equip her for domestic life as well as for life in the "salon". Instruction is indispensable to a woman, for without it she will be either an ignoramus or a false précieuse.⁶

In L'Ecole des maris Molière defends the freedom of the married woman as regards her husband. He firmly believes that a wife's fidelity is not guaranteed by the closeness with which she is guarded. Thus to Sganarelle's question: ". . . Si vous l'épousez, elle pourra prétendre / Les mêmes libertés que fille on lui voit prendre", Ariste's only retort is, "Pourquoi non?" (vv. 219-21). Molière, a champion of the freedom of women, attacks the men⁷ who believe in ignoring the natural rights of a married woman with sufficient severity to prove he has no sympathy with them.

⁴vv. 185-96.

⁵Les Femmes savantes, v. 218.

⁶Molière was an advanced thinker on the subject of women's education. This same idea was expressed in 1687 by Fénelon in his De l'éducation des filles (Paris: Didot Frères, 1848), p. 5.

⁷Sganarelle, Arnolphe, and even Chrysale.

Molière interweaves his general principle of freedom as opposed to repression in the conduct of human affairs with the idea of a life of social intercourse versus a life of solitary isolation. Léonor is free to indulge in all the social amenities of the day, while Isabelle is Sganarelle's prisoner. Moreover, Ariste's description of the amenities of polite society reflects the principal tenets held by the leading précieuses. Elegance and refinement in speech and manners, implicit in Ariste's reference to "les belles compagnies" (v. 187) and "l'école du monde" (v. 191) echo the principles which characterized the drawing-room of such feminists as the Marquise de Rambouillet. Like the promoters of the salons, Ariste realizes that polite society exerts a beneficial influence upon one's moral and social development, for it helps to palliate the natural asperities of our dispositions, to lubricate the natural friction of social intercourse, in short, "former l'esprit des jeunes gens" (v. 190).

It will be noted that Ariste's indulgence towards Léonor includes "les divertissements, les bals, les comédies" (v. 188); for entertainment, especially the theatre, exerts an educational and moral influence upon the young and old alike. For the spectator of a moralizing comedy like L'Ecole des maris, it becomes logically impossible not to apply the message of the play to life. Thus the tyrannical Sganarelle, who in real life attempts to coerce Isabelle

into a marriage against her will, would, in all probability act otherwise after witnessing the happy ending of L'Ecole des maris. He might even be persuaded that freedom and virtue are mutually and inextricably bound. Thus, as opposed to the contemporary Christian⁸ viewpoint, comedy (and other forms of entertainment) not only offer legitimate pleasure, but are morally edifying. Throughout his theatrical career, Molière consistently rises to the defence of entertainment. Dorimène of Le Mariage forcé, though no paragon of virtue, echoes the same liberal ideas of Ariste: "J'aime le jeu, les visites, les assemblées, les cadeaux et les promenades, en un mot, toutes les choses de plaisir" (sc. ii). Béralde, Molière's spokesman in Le Malade imaginaire recognizes the salutary influence of the arts when he suggests that the hypochondriac attend some of Molière's plays on the subject of doctors and their cures (III, iii).

Ariste's belief that true virtue lies in the suppression of constraint and repressive asceticism, and in the encouragement of mutual understanding and a sense of honour constitutes the focal passage of L'Ecole des maris:

⁸ Bénichou notes a cleavage between the Christian viewpoint on the one hand, and the secular attitude of the court and of Molière's comedies on the other: Morales du grand siècle, p. 157 ff. Calvet suggests that Molière had the austere and uncompromising Confrères du Saint-Sacrement in mind when he made Sganarelle an intransigent exponent of the doctrine of moral constraint: Molière est-il chrétien? (Paris: F. Lanore, 1950), p. 41 ff.

Leur sexe aime à jouir d'un peu de liberté;
 On le retient fort mal par tant d'austérité;
 Et les soins défiants, les verrous et les grilles
 Ne font pas la vertu des femmes ni des filles.
 C'est l'honneur qui les doit tenir dans le devoir,
 Non la sévérité que nous leur faisons voir.
 C'est une étrange chose, à vous parler sans feinte,
 Qu'une femme qui n'est sage que par contrainte.
 En vain sur tous ses pas nous prétendons régner:
 Je trouve que le coeur est ce qu'il faut gagner.
 (vv. 165-74)

This theme of Ariste's, also a favourite tenet of "precious" thought,⁹ finds its philosophical source in the humanism of the Renaissance. Molière had been influenced, if only indirectly, by the epicurean philosopher Gassendi, whose liberal, positivistic ideas were firmly rooted in the thought of the Renaissance era. The close similarity between Ariste's philosophy and Renaissance humanism is brought out superlatively well in the episode of the foundation of the "Abbaye de Thélème" in Rabelais's Gargantua.¹⁰ Rabelais's insistence on freedom is epitomized in the monastery's one and only precept: "Fay ce que voudras"; like Ariste, Rabelais sees freedom as an essential requisite to true virtue. Moreover, after the inhabitants of Thélème throw off their "joug de servitude", their moral life is based on a code of honour. The striking parallel in thought between the novel and play, and the repetition in corresponding passages of the terms

⁹Cf. Adam, III, 277.

¹⁰Cf. L'Ecole des maris, vv. 165-72, and Gargantua, chap. LVII, par. 1.

"liberté" (libres), "vertu", "honneur", "contrainte", unequivocally confirms the influence Rabelais's humanistic principles exerted upon the work of Molière.¹¹

Honour, Rabelais's basis for the moral life of the inhabitants of Thélème, was a principle which found expression in the seventeenth century in the important concept of honnêteté. The true representative of the age was the honnête homme, the gentleman, embodying such virtues as reason, prudence, moderation -- virtues deemed indispensable for dignified and successful behaviour in society. Within the play the concept of honnêteté is reflected in Isabelle's desire for a legitimate marriage with Valère (v. 903), but more explicitly in Ariste's apology for conformity to the customs of polite society:

Toujours au plus grand nombre on doit s'accommoder,
 Et jamais il ne faut se faire regarder.
 L'un et l'autre excès choque, et tout homme bien sage
 Doit faire des habits ainsi que du langage,
 N'y rien trop affecter, et sans empressement
 Suivre ce que l'usage y fait de changement.
 (vv. 41-6)

This idea of conformity to social usage is a fundamental and pervasive element in seventeenth-century French thought.

¹¹The affinity between the minds of Rabelais and Molière is also seen in their ideas on education. In his new, enlightened educational program the young Gargantua learns less from books and theories than from the concrete realities of daily living (chaps. XXI-XXIV). Similarly, Ariste is no exponent of Sganarelle's "maximes sévères" (v. 211). Cf. vv. 191-2.

In his Remarques sur la langue française Vaugelas had recognized good usage as the sole criterion in linguistic matters. And La Rochefoucauld proclaimed that in matters of social conduct it is unwise to make oneself conspicuous: "C'est une grande folie de vouloir être sage tout seul".¹² Sganarelle would prefer to be the one wise man in a company of fools; Ariste, on the contrary, would rather be a fool than the one wise man in the world (vv. 53-4).

Without going so far as to call L'Ecole des maris a pièce à thèse -- the interest lies less in the establishment of a thesis than in the character of Sganarelle -- we can aver that Molière puts into the mouth of his spokesman an idealistic message. Ariste's plea for conformity does not, in Molière's view, entail the suppression of the individual's need to express his personality: the man of common sense conforms in small matters to gain greater freedom in essentials. Ariste's understanding of this principle lets him rise to the knowledge that life and society are good, that human relationships in society will contribute to happiness and lead to the emancipation of the individual.¹³ In this sense L'Ecole des maris contains a transcending ideal.

¹²Réflexions morales, no. 231.

¹³See Adam, III, 276.

CONCLUSION

L'Ecole des maris is something new in comedy. The work's revolutionary nature is evident in the dependence of the comic action upon the protagonist's moral flaw. Each incident in the strictly logical succession of events is the inevitable outcome of character. Molière begins his practice of delineating his comic hero by analyzation rather than by the traditional method of stylization. Thus Sganarelle is given a degree of human realism that was unusual in French comedy of the time. The most complex figure Molière had created up to 1661, Sganarelle serves as the first of a series of comic heroes, some of whom are drawn with great subtlety and examined with deep penetration.

In L'Ecole des maris Molière presents his first raisonneur, embodied in the admirable figure of Ariste. Thus a stock plot of the old farce develops into a moral and social problem - the problem of the position of woman in society. The excellence of the dramatic structure of the play is, in most respects, unusual in the theatre of Molière. The dramatist shows evidence of poetic skill in attributing to his characters a distinctive mode of speech; and begins to elevate the nature of his laughter by appealing to the intellect. While introducing matters of topical concern, he maintains a scope of universality. His comic vision

transcends the limits of seventeenth-century France; for a vain comic hero can be considered a symbol of universal and everlasting significance.

In short, L'Ecole des maris is both intrinsically and historically important. Though the work is not ranked among Molière's supreme achievements, it is undeniably a work of true merit. "Quand il n'aurait fait que ce seul ouvrage," affirms Voltaire, "il eût pu passer pour un excellent auteur comique."¹ With the first performance of the play in 1661, Molière was accomplishing a revolution in comedy, a revolution which, after the performance of L'Ecole des femmes, would be tantamount to the evolution Corneille had effectuated in tragedy with his epoch-making Cid. In announcing the mercurial dramatist to come, L'Ecole des maris occupies an important place within the canon of Molière's works; in its innovational nature, the play can be rightly regarded as a landmark in the history of French comedy.

¹Voltaire, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1879), XXIII, 102.

APPENDIX

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PLAY

L'Ecole des maris was first performed in Paris in the theatre in the Palais-Royal on June 24, 1661, and its success was immediate and unquestionable. On July 9, only fifteen days after the initial performance, Molière obtained a privilège which he ceded to the Parisian publisher de Sercy; The printing was completed by August 20. The work was hurried in order to prevent the first publication of the play in an unauthorized edition, as had been the case with Sganarelle.¹ In a dedicatory epistle to Louis XIV's brother, le duc d'Orléans, protector of the troupe, Molière referred to L'Ecole des maris as "le premier ouvrage que je mets de moi-même au jour".² Though he called his new comedy a "bagatelle", he undoubtedly attached great importance to it.³ In the margin of his Registre, La Grange referred to L'Ecole des maris as "5^e pièce nouvelle de Mons^r Molière"⁴ -- an obvious effort to obliterate any lingering memory of

¹See Despois, II, 350.

²L'Etourdi, Le Dépit amoureux, and Dom Garcie de Navarre were not yet published; Les Précieuses ridicules had been published against Molière's will; Sganarelle had been published by an usurper. See Oeuvres complètes de Molière, ed. R. Bray (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1951), p. 389.

³See Michaut, Les Débuts de Molière à Paris, p. 131.

⁴Le Registre de La Grange (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1947), I, 35.

his unsuccessful preceding play, Dom Garcie de Navarre.

The success of L'Ecole des maris, following the tragic fiasco of Dom Garcie, established Molière's troupe firmly in their new theatre in the Palais-Royal. The new play received many private performances -- at the home of Fouquet at Vaux, and before the court at Fontainebleau, to mention only two.⁵ In his account in his Muse historique of the presentation of L'Ecole des maris at Vaux, the gazetteer Loret praised the subject of the comedy as "riant" and "beau", and attested to the fact that the play was "fort prisée" and "le charme de tout Paris".⁶

Molière was a complete man of the theatre -- playwright, producer, director, actor. In each play the part of the central comic character was usually played by the comedist himself. "Il s'attribua", notes René Bray, "tous les grands rôles, les plus longs, les plus lourds, les plus comiques. . . les plus dramatiques, les plus brillants".⁷ Though there was no contemporary account of Molière's performance of the rôle of Sganarelle in L'Ecole des maris, Despois inferred that Molière did act Sganarelle -- a

⁵ See Michaut, p. 131.

⁶ See Despois, II, 338.

⁷ Molière, homme de théâtre (Paris: Mercure de France, 1954), p. 226.

conclusion which he drew from the name Sganarelle itself, from the importance of the rôle within the play (Sganarelle appears in twenty out of a total of twenty-three scenes), and even from the costume which Molière wore and which was musk-coloured like Molière's own best outfit.⁸ An inventory of Molière's stage costumes describes Sganarelle's outfit as "un. . .habit. . .consistant en haut-de-chausses, pourpoint, manteau, col, escarcelle et ceinture, et tout de satin couleur de musc".⁹ Molière undoubtedly intensified the comic effect of this rôle by grotesque facial expressions similar to those by which he described the rôle of Arnolphe who professes his love for Agnès "avec ces roulements d'yeux extravagants, ces soupirs ridicules, et ces larmes niaises qui font rire tout le monde".¹⁰

Despois indicates that, according to Guéret, De L'Espy, who was not held in high esteem as an actor, succeeded suprisingly well in the play: "De l'Espy, qui ne promettoit rien que de très-médiocre, parut inimitable dans 'l'Ecole des maris'".¹¹ Despois thinks that, because of his age,

⁸Despois, II, 347, n. 1.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes, sc. 6. Cf. also Le Misanthrope, vv. 1278-80.

¹¹Despois, II, 347.

De L'Espy must have played the part of Ariste.¹²

In 1661 and again in 1685 the rôle of Isabelle was taken by Mlle De Brie,¹³ an actress noted for her grace, beauty, and douceur.¹⁴ Mlle De Brie later played the rôles of Agnès in L'Ecole des femmes, Marianne in Tartuffe, Eliante in Le Misanthrope, Elise in L'Avare, Armande in Les Femmes savantes.¹⁵ The part of Valère was played by La Grange in 1661 and 1685.¹⁶ His was the rôle of the "jeune premier": Horace in L'Ecole des femmes, Valère in Tartuffe and L'Avare, Clitandre in Les Femmes savantes, Cléante in Le Malade imaginaire. Interpreted by La Grange, these young lovers undoubtedly won the favour of the spectators; for, as Bray, indicates, his rôle coincided perfectly with his innate qualities: "Il présenta au public une figure qui ressemblait à la sienne, faite d'honnêteté, de dévouement, de bons sens avisé en général, ornée des qualités du coeur et de l'esprit".¹⁷

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Despois, II, 347-8.

¹⁴ R. Bray, Molière homme de théâtre, p. 229.

¹⁵ M. Descotes indicates that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the rôle of Isabelle was often preferred to that of Agnès: Les Grands Rôles du Théâtre de Molière (Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), p. 45.

¹⁶ See Despois, II, 347-8.

¹⁷ Bray, p. 238.

The part of Léonor was probably played originally by the beautiful Mlle du Parc. When she left Molière's troupe in 1667 to play Andromaque for Racine at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, she was replaced by Molière's wife Armande.¹⁸ Despois shows that Armande played the rôle of Léonor in 1685.¹⁹ Bray suggests that the part of Lisette was probably played by Madeleine Béjart, who excelled in other minor rôles: Dorine in Tartuffe, Jacqueline in Le Médecin malgré lui, Cléantis in Amphitryon, Frosine in L'Avare, Nérine in Pourceaugnac -- all of which required gaieté, malice, and enjouement.²⁰ Both Despois²¹ and Bray²² agree that Ergaste was played by Du Parc, already successful in the rôle of Gros-René in Le Médecin volant, and in Le Dépit amoureux where Molière mocked him on account of his corpulence (v. 14). He is undoubtedly the "gros boeuf" whom Sganarelle curses when he trips in bumping into him (v. 374).

¹⁸ See Despois, p. 347, n. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., II, 348.

²⁰ Bray, p. 229.

²¹ Despois, II, 348.

²² Bray, p. 235.

According to the Mémoire of L. Mahelot, the stage-requirements for L'Ecole des maris during the time of Louis XIV were the following: "[Le] théâtre est des maison et fenêtre. Il faut un flambeau, une robe longue, une écritoire et du papier".²³ Reference to the "flambeau" and the "robe" is made in lines 920-1.

By the end of 1661, L'Ecole des maris had been performed forty-seven times,²⁴ the receipts remaining high, and it was acted frequently throughout the remainder of the century. There was a slight decrease in its popularity during the reign of Louis XV, probably because the play was performed during this period in contemporary costumes -- a changewhich necessitated the suppression of some of the most comic lines.²⁵ Between the years 1789 and 1799 L'Ecole des maris stood first in order of popularity among all the plays of Molière's repertoire.²⁶ Though it did not maintain this position throughout the nineteenth century, it remained, nonetheless, a successful play. Between 1680 and 1963 L'Ecole des maris received 1,540 performances at the Comédie Française, standing seventh in order of popularity. The play is still successful on the stage. There must be something permanent about it.

²³ See Despois, II, 349.

²⁴ Lancaster, III, 238.

²⁵ See Despois, p. 361, n. 4.

²⁶ See Despois, p. 346.

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