

LA PRINCESSE D'ELIDE AND LES AMANTS MAGNIFIQUES

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DEFENCE

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: A detailed external and internal examination of La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques, considering the two plays as an integral and essential part of Molière's work and attempting to rescue them from the oblivion into which they have so unjustly fallen.

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INTRODUCTION

Of all Molière's comédies-ballets only two, Le Bourgeois gentilhomme and Le Malade imaginaire, usually receive any serious critical attention. Even though most modern critics acknowledge that the comédies-ballets are an integral and important part of Molière's work, they nevertheless are content to deal with them in a few hasty sentences, devoting the rest of their attention to plays like Tartuffe, Le Misanthrope and Les Femmes savantes. This is in some ways understandable for these "great" plays have much to offer. And yet we can find much in the lesser plays that is worthy of our consideration.

The two plays which we shall study are perhaps the least popular of all Molière's works as far as actual performances are concerned. They make demands which most producers are unwilling to meet, and yet it is obvious simply from reading them as literary texts that La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques are as closely associated with seventeenth-century French society as anything that Molière wrote. They are fine examples of literary préciosité -- a préciosité whose development can be traced to the present day. Their major theme is an age-old one: love and attitudes towards marriage, with numerous secondary themes to retain our attention. They throw light on some of the attitudes which were prevalent among women of the time -- varying from a militant opposition to marriage to an obvious desire for the marital state. They show that the feelings of seventeenth-century society concerning the most basic of human relationships were really no different from our own.

Moreover, in them we can easily discern the touch of Molière's master hand in characterization and situation.

And yet, in spite of all this, the plays are, for the most part, neither read nor performed. It is in the belief that they do not merit this lack of attention that this thesis has been written.

CHAPTER I

CHOICE OF SUBJECT

By the time he came to write La Princesse d'Elide in 1664, Molière was already firmly established as a dramatist. In 1659 his Précieuses ridicules had been a tremendous success, as had L'Ecole des maris (1661). Jouanny says of the latter play: "Le public de la ville fit le meilleur accueil à la pièce. Elle était, dit Loret, le charme de tout Paris."¹ This successful vein was to be continued with L'Ecole des femmes (1662), which is still considered one of Molière's masterpieces. The years prior to the first performance of Les Amants magnifiques in 1670 saw the production of much of Molière's finest work -- those plays which immediately spring to mind whenever Molière's name is mentioned: Tartuffe (1664), Dom Juan (1665), Le Misanthrope (1666) and L'Avare (1668). One thing all these plays have in common is that they create laughter by using situations and characters which the audiences of the time were accustomed to see around them, and at the same time they convey a serious message to the spectators. Even though most critics today would accept that Molière's chief aim in writing for the theatre was to amuse, it would be foolish to dispense completely with the didactic element.

In La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques Molière turned his attention to characters of antiquity and an imaginary pastoral setting. In neither case can the change be ascribed to a lack of contemporary

¹Molière, Oeuvres complètes, ed. R. Jouanny (Paris: Garnier, 1962), Vol. I, p. 315.

subjects or settings, for La Princesse d'Elide preceded some of his finest works, and Les Amants magnifiques was followed by six more plays, of which three at least, Le Bourgeois gentilhomme (1670), Les Femmes savantes (1672) and Le Malade imaginaire (1673), can be counted among Molière's major creations. It will be seen later that the changes were in part forced upon him by circumstances, and were in part a concession to contemporary taste. We must certainly beware of equating pastoral with frothy and insubstantial, for although this is how the two plays might at first sight appear, they certainly have more to offer than other lesser works of Molière, e. g., Les Fâcheux (1661) or Psyché (1671). Admittedly, they do not have the depth of Tartuffe or Le Misanthrope, but nevertheless they are in part an embodiment of ideas that were much in circulation at the time. The definition is perhaps facile, but basically true, that the Princesse d'Elide and the Amants magnifiques are a treatment in a précieux manner, and with the addition of certain other themes, of the question of love and marriage and of attitudes towards them. This had long been an important topic for discussion among the précieuses, and was obviously equally important to Molière, for why else should he choose to make marriage the primary theme, as in the two plays under consideration, or a major secondary theme in so many of his plays, e. g., Les Femmes savantes, L'Ecole des maris?

The fact that women in the seventeenth century did gather together to discuss, among other things, marriage, is an indication of the importance of the feminist movement at the time, and indeed the seventeenth century can probably be considered as the beginning of the feminist movement in France. Traces of feminism can, however, be found in earlier periods.

The Querelle des femmes had its origin in the Middle Ages, and by the fifteenth century writers were considering the mutual duties and rights of marriage partners. In an essay in which he traces the development of feminist ideas in France, Georges Ascoli mentions various works which can be considered as precursors of the growing interest in feminism, among them Barbaro's De re uxoria libelli duo, a fifteenth-century treatise which enjoyed great popularity after the publication of a new edition in 1513. The author comes down firmly in favour of "la toute puissance masculine dans le ménage", as do several other writers of the early sixteenth century.

Their assertion of masculine superiority gave rise to some controversy, but it was not until Cornelius Agrippa wrote his De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus in 1529 that any attempt was made to treat the question of marriage in relation to society, and Ascoli suggests that this man is the real ancestor of feminism in France.² He goes on to quote a page in which Agrippa considers the unfortunate position of women in society, and there can be little doubt that for all the influence of the salons conditions for a considerable number of women had changed very little by the middle of the seventeenth century:

Pourquoi donc, direz-vous, les femmes sont-elles réduites partout à la quenouille et aux simples soins du mariage? Le voici. La tyrannie des hommes, qui prévaut sur tout, agissant contre le droit divin, violant impunément l'équité naturelle, a privé notre femelle de la liberté qu'elle reçoit en naissant: oui, par des lois iniques,

(Continued on page 6)

²See G. Ascoli, "Essai sur l'histoire des idées féministes en France", Revue de synthèse historique, 13, 1906, p. 36.

on lui en interdit la jouissance, on l'abolit par l'usage et par la coutume; enfin, on l'éteint absolument par l'éducation. Car dès qu'une femme est entrée sur la terre, du moins dans ses premières années et lorsqu'elle est sortie de l'enfance, on la tient comme prisonnière au logis, et, comme si elle était entièrement incapable d'une occupation plus solide et plus élevée on ne lui fait apprendre qu'à manier l'aiguille. Ensuite, est-elle propre au joug? A-t-elle atteint l'âge mûr et compétent pour la multiplication de l'espèce? On vous la livre à un mari qui trop souvent par la fureur de la jalousie, ou par cent autres travers d'humeur, la met dans une condition déplorable; ou bien l'enferme pour toute sa vie dans une vraie prison, en une retraite de soi-disant vierges et vestales, où elle essuie mille chagrins, et surtout un repentir rongé qui ne finit que par la mort.³

In the later part of this extract, Agrippa is referring to the convents with which several of Molière's irascible fathers threaten their recalcitrant daughters. The author goes on to give advice to husbands in his Sacrement du mariage, published together with the first work. He insists that theirs must be the dominant position, but that they must treat their wives with respect:

Quoique votre inférieure, qu'elle soit à côté de vous et vous assiste toujours par sa fidélité et par son conseil. Qu'elle soit donc chez vous non pas comme une esclave mais comme la maîtresse du logis; qu'elle soit dans votre domestique, non pas comme la première et maîtresse servante, mais comme mère de famille....Par cette voie-la il est presque impossible que vous n'avez pas le gros lot d'une bonne femme et d'une brave lignée, car, ordinairement, la mauvaise épouse n'échoit et n'arrive qu'au méchant époux.⁴

It is true that Agrippa makes many concessions to his opponents. He speaks, for example, of "équité naturelle" and yet refers to women in the

³ Agrippa, quoted by Ascoli, op. cit., p. 36.

⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

Sacrement as "votre inférieure". Nevertheless, the important thing is that in his works certain ideas concerning the equality of the sexes and the rights of women have found expression -- all that remains is for them to take root in the minds of people of the time. As Ascoli says: "Les idées une première fois affirmées ont encore à s'affermir. Elles sont affirmées pourtant, et les esprits les plus intelligents s'y arrêtent."⁵

Obviously, in the seventeenth century, we must not look for an established doctrine, nor must we expect clearly formulated demands or actions from the women of the time (though there is evidence that some of them were considerably in advance of their time). The rising feminist feeling seems to be a tendency in a particular direction by a considerable number of women. It is a tendency which finds expression in terms which are sometimes contradictory, but this is to be expected of a movement which still did not possess full awareness of itself -- it would, however, be futile to deny that the movement existed.

One of the most obvious manifestations of resurgent feminism was the growth of the salons and cercles. The women of French upper-class society in the first half of the seventeenth century were the main force behind these institutions. They took the initiative for, and directed everything that happened in their salons. The women responsible for the growth of the salons were cultured and intelligent, and yet they almost certainly had no preconceived plan -- they sought merely to create an environment in which personal relationships could be conducted in a

⁵ Op. cit., p. 38.

manner which they found congenial, and they unwittingly prepared the way for very considerable later developments.

The prototype of seventeenth-century salons was that of the Marquise de Rambouillet, which was attended by most of the eminent writers and wits of the day, including Malherbe, Vaugelas, Chapelain, Voiture, La Rochefoucauld, Georges and Madeleine de Scudéry, and even Bossuet and Corneille for a time. By 1664, the year of the first performance of La Princesse d'Elide, the place of the Hôtel de Rambouillet had been taken by other similar establishments, though none with quite the same éclat as the "chambre bleue de l'incomparable Arthénice". One could mention the Hôtel de Nevers which was frequented by La Rochefoucauld, Mme. de la Fayette and Mme. de Sévigné, and where in 1665, Racine, accompanied by Boileau, came to read three and a half acts of his Alexandre le Grand. This particular salon closed its doors in 1669 after the enforced retirement of M. du Plessis-Guénégaud from his post as Secretary of State. Its place was soon taken by the Hôtel de Richelieu which counted among its visitors "ce qu'il y avait de meilleur à Paris".⁶ Other less famous salons were those of M. et Mme. de Pélissari (Madeleine de Scudéry paints a portrait of the latter in her Clélie), and of Mme. de la Sablière. Somaize, in his Dictionnaire des Précieuses,⁷ describes a considerable number of the people associated with the different salons.

⁶ A. Adam, Histoire de la littérature française, au 17e siècle. (Paris: Domat, 1952), Vol. 3, p. 35.

⁷ Paris: Jannet, 1856, 2 vols.

The fact that the women in his list are by no means all précieuses or savantes is perhaps an indication of the important social rôle played by the salons at the time.

The conversation in the salons was on every kind of subject -- the news or scandal of the day, the latest literary event, points of ethics, the precise character of certain sentiments or the meaning of certain words. The salons were important for the influence they enabled women to exert. They favoured the growth of polite manners, delicacy of sentiment and purity of language -- in the earlier part of the century their effect was particularly salutary after the social disorganization of the civil wars. As an institution they had a clarifying but occasionally pedantic tendency, which in time was carried to excess, for instance in the periphrases used instead of calling an object by its everyday name. One could quote many examples of this. Instead of saying "j'aime" it was customary to say "j'ai un furieux tendre pour"; "se marier" became "se donner dans l'amour permis"; books were called "les maistres muets", and "la jalousie" was "la perturbatrice du repos des amants". The ladies who practised this art were known as précieuses and Molière reacted against them, although it has not been adequately demonstrated how much his Précieuses ridicules is exaggerated in order to make his point. Certainly, Somaize has no listing for "les commodités de la conversation" as a periphrasis for "chaises".

The history of the salons would seem to indicate that in the seventeenth century French women enjoyed a great deal of personal freedom, and for some of them at least, this was true. On the whole, however, it

is very much a surface freedom, for the women of the time were in reality very limited. Education and the professions were closed to them. Marriage was considered a very permanent state; divorce, though not impossible, was very infrequent and marriages were still arranged, often against the will of the participants. As examples of this in Molière one could quote the attempts made to force children to marry in L'Avare or in Tartuffe. In view of these conditions, it is hardly surprising that the conjugal state should be such a favourite topic for discussion in the salons.

This preoccupation with marriage and the rights of women is reflected not only in the discussions of the salons, but in much of the literature of the time. There was, of course, the usual crop of outspoken pamphlets, both defending and attacking women, but even more important indications of the state of opinion can be found in contemporary novels and plays.

The influence of writers, and in particular of the romantic novelists on the women of the salons was very considerable. Because they had more women than men among their readers, the novelists quite understandably slanted their novels towards a female audience. The women of the time knew that the books were written for them, they considered them a means of increasing their own importance, and a representation of the triumph of the female sex. The novels portray women in a position of authority over men and the world -- nowhere else were women quite so highly extolled. Perhaps no one book enjoyed greater influence than L'Astrée by Honore d'Urfé, which first appeared in 1610,

and continued to delight the reading public for over a century -- long after the pastoral genre of which it is the prototype, had gone out of fashion.

It is perhaps understandable that, following upon a period of civil disturbance, the French should have experienced a certain war weariness; it was natural, too, that this feeling should find expression in a hankering after an illusory golden age. This undefinable longing was reflected in the novel, which proceeded to stage its adventures in a pastoral setting reminiscent of Theocritus, or Vergil in his Eclogues, and yet it requires no great gift to discern behind the cloak of fiction a portrayal of the manners of French aristocracy in the seventeenth century. L'Astrée is a portrayal of what, to the women of the time, seemed like an ideal union between two lovers. Reynier was aware of this:

Le grand roman de l'Astrée qui a été leur bréviaire, répond parfaitement à tous leurs goûts; les longues histoires qui le suivent, celles de Gomberville ou de La Calprenède exaltent pareillement la passion généreuse et épurée, opposent à la fierté, à la pudeur susceptible de l'héroïne, la constance, la patience, la soumission complète de l'amant....C'est bien sur ces bases que les dames veulent que soient réglés les rapports des deux sexes. 8

This presentation of ideas concerning the relationships between the sexes was continued by Madeleine de Scudéry in her novel Le Grand Cyrus, the first volume of which appeared in 1649, and the tenth in 1653. It would be a leisured reader indeed who today could find time to digest this work, yet the readers of the seventeenth century, whose leisure was

⁸G. Reynier, La Femme au 17e siècle, (Paris: Tallandier, 1929), p. 17.

plentiful, and who had not grown blasé with a surfeit of fiction, were delighted by its picture of contemporary, fashionable life, and eagerly scanned each volume for its portraits or descriptive sketches of well-known people. In both Le Grand Cyrus and in the later Clélie, Madeleine de Scudéry acted as a virtual reporter of the thoughts and ideas which had widespread circulation in the salons. At first sight it would appear that "l'on y pèse des oeufs de mouche dans des balances de toile d'araignée", as Voltaire was later to say of Marivaux. Certainly both books consist of little more than infinite variations on stock themes -- male honour and female gloire, constancy and infidelity in love, loyalty and treachery, coquettishness and simplicity, and discussions of the merits of every kind of lover.⁹ This, of course, is préciosité as the term is usually understood. Nevertheless, not far below the surface, we can discern a distinct suggestion of the opposition to marriage which is just as typical of another, more militant kind of préciosité. The conclusion to be drawn from Mlle. de Scudéry's works, no less than from those of the Abbé de Pure, is that in the years before Molière returned to Paris in 1658, préciosité had become what Baumal calls "un véritable foyer de revendications féministes".¹⁰ The following quotation from volume seven of Le Grand Cyrus will serve as an example of the essentially militant quality of some of Madeleine de Scudéry's writing:

⁹See C. Aragonnès, Madeleine de Scudéry (Paris: A. Colin, 1934), p. 69.

¹⁰F. Baumal, Le Féminisme au temps de Molière (Paris: Renaissance du livre, 1926), p. 39.

Comme on parlait alors de divers mariages dans Tyr, chacun se mit à dire ce qu'il en savait. Elise, qui avait son dessein caché, se mit à blâmer ceux qui disent qu'il fallait de nécessité qu'une fille se mariât ou se mît parmi les vierges voilées, soutenant qu'on ne pourrait rien dire de si outrageant pour le sexe dont elle était que de croire qu'il fallait un mari ou des murailles fort hautes pour conserver leur vertu. 11

Madeleine de Scudéry gave further expression to these ideas in her Clélie (1654-1660). Women, love, marriage, the rôle of the two sexes in society -- on all these her observations are sensible and delicately expressed. She attacks the husbands who treat their wives as skivvies:

Mais aussi ne trouvé-je pas bon qu'un mari fasse éternellement le mari et le mari impérieux, regarde sa femme comme la première esclave de sa maison, qui ne lui confie rien, qui ne la considère point, et qui la traite enfin comme si elle n'avait pas l'usage de la raison, comme s'il n'était pas obligé de l'aimer, et comme s'il lui était permis d'en aimer cent autres. 12

Moreover, in an attack which has been referred to as "la première levée de boucliers du féminisme",¹³ she turns her attention to the institution of marriage itself, and the subject state of women in society -- an attack which must have seemed particularly bold at the time. She has one of the characters in Clélie make the following speech:

Si je portais des fers qui se puissent rompre, il y a longtemps qu'ils seraient rompus. En quelle condition pouvons-nous trouver la liberté? Quand nous naissons nous ne sommes pas seulement esclaves de nos parents, nous le sommes de la coutume et de la bienséance.... Nous n'avons pas même la liberté de choisir nos

(Continued on page 14)

¹¹ Aragonnès, op. cit., p. 81.

¹² Ibid., p. 140.

¹³ Ibid., p. 141.

maîtres, puisqu'on nous marie bien souvent contre notre inclination....Il faut apprendre à régler ses regards, il faut éviter la conversation des gens qui plaisent, et il faut n'avoir jamais la liberté d'aller seule nulle part. Les voyages nous sont défendus, la solitude même est quelquefois mal expliquée. Il faut qu'il y ait toujours quelqu'un pour répondre de nos actions. De sorte que de la manière dont le monde est établi, nous naissons avec des passions qu'il nous faut toutes enchaîner, car il ne nous est pas permis de rien aimer, ni de rien haïr. L'ambition nous est inutile, et l'obéissance seule est notre partage. 14

From the novels of the period, it would appear that women reacted quite definitely against marriage, and attempted to assert their desire for a less subject role in society. It is important to consider, however, whether this was a movement of a very few enlightened women authors, or whether in fact it was more general, affecting a considerable section of the women of upper-class and haut-bourgeois society of the time. Certainly, Madeleine de Scudéry never married, and in spite of her long-lasting, but wholly platonic relationship with Pellisson, she wrote to a friend on the occasion of his marriage: "Moi, qui ne me suis jamais réjouie du mariage de personne et qui aurais été fort affligée si l'on m'avait forcée d'épouser quelqu'un",¹⁵ and further declared in the Histoire de Sapho (in Le Grand Cyrus): "A moins d'aimer jusqu'à en perdre la raison, elle ne perdrait jamais la liberté".¹⁶ Moreover, she praised very highly a project for a work to be called L'Ile imaginaire by Mlle. de Montpensier, in which the latter, revolting against the marital yoke, imagined a corner

¹⁴Quoted by Aragonnès, ibid., p. 140.

¹⁵C. Aragonnès, op. cit., p. 169.

¹⁶Ibid.

of the world "où l'on puisse dire que les femmes sont maîtresses d'elles-mêmes".

Mme. de Rambouillet, who passed as something of an authority on the subject, declared that if she had been left at liberty until the age of twenty rather than being married off at twelve years old, she would certainly have remained widowed. Other examples spring to mind. Why did Mme. de Sévigné choose to remain a widow? Was it purely out of maternal devotion, or did she prefer the single state? In view of the letter she wrote to her son-in-law, suggesting he refrain from demanding his conjugal rights on pain of having his wife taken away,¹⁷ it would appear that the latter was the case, and that she was doing her best to proselytize others.

Most of our information on the topic, however, comes from the writers of the day, and there is little reason to doubt that they paint a very realistic picture. Girls were often married off at a very early age without being allowed any choice in the matter. In a sermon preached against this custom, Bourdaloue asked: "De tant de mariages qui se contractent tous les jours, combien en voit-on où se trouve la sympathie des coeurs?"¹⁸ The choice of a husband was determined by a number of contributory factors: wealth, position, influence. Reynier gives an eminent example of one of these ill-assorted marriages:

Mlle de la Motte, si fine, si délicate, si charmante,
est ainsi liée au duc de Ventadour, laid, mal bâti,
presque bossu, dissipateur et qui vit dans la

(Continued on page 16)

¹⁷ See F. Bauman, Le Féminisme au temps de Molière, p. 60.

¹⁸ Quoted in Reynier, op. cit., p. 198.

débauche, mais cousin du Prince de Condé. Sa seule compensation, pour le moment, sera d'avoir au cercle de la reine, un tabouret de duchesse. 'Hélas, qu'on le lui donne, il lui coûte assez cher', murmure tristement Madame de Sévigné qui assiste à sa présentation à la cour. 19

The Abbé de Pure in La Précieuse (1656-1658) has one of his characters proclaim:

Je fus une innocente victime sacrifiée à des motifs inconnus et à des obscurs intérêts de maisons, mais sacrifiée comme une esclave, liée, garottée....On m'enterre ou plutôt on m'ensevelit toute vive dans le lit d'Evandre. 20

No less than the novels, Molière's works are a reflection of this very real social problem. In many of his plays the question of marriage arises. These are marriages proposed by parents or guardians for their own selfish reasons without any regard for the happiness of their children or wards. One could quote for example L'Avare in which Harpagon resolves to marry his son to "une certaine veuve dont ce matin on m'est venu parler", and says to his daughter: "Et pour toi je te donne au Seigneur Anselme"²¹ -- his motive in each case being purely financial; the ageing widow will pay for a husband, while Seigneur Anselme will accept a bride without a dowry. There is L'Ecole des femmes in which Arnolphe is resolved to marry Agnès without any thought of whether she wishes to marry him, and the dupe Orgon in Tartuffe who, in face of the unwillingness of his daughter Mariane to marry the hypocritical impostor, stands on his

¹⁹ Quoted in Reynier, op. cit., p. 198.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

²¹ L'Avare, Act I, sc. v.

paternal rights:

Mais je veux que cela soit une vérité;
Et c'est assez pour vous que je l'aie arrêté.²²

One might also mention Argan in Le Malade imaginaire who, when he is asked why he wishes to marry his daughter Angélique to the booby Thomas

Diafoirus replies:

Ma raison est que, me voyant infirme et malade comme je le suis, je veux me faire un gendre et des alliés médecins, afin de m'appuyer de bons secours contre ma maladie, d'avoir dans ma famille les sources des remèdes qui me sont nécessaires, et d'être à même des consultations et des ordonnances. ²³

In view of this supremely selfish attitude on the part of so many parents of the time, it is little wonder that there should have been a considerable disenchantment with the state of marriage. Admittedly, not all the précieuses went as far as the Abbé de Pure's Guéridée whose grief, as she pronounced the words "je suis mariée", was such that she appeared inconsolable.²⁴ But even those who appeared quite happily married had as little as possible to do with their husbands (which was apparently the fashion anyway -- witness Somaize's statement that Mme. de Brégis was living "en célibataire" even though her husband was still alive).²⁵ They listened eagerly to the anti-marriage opinions of their unmarried sisters, and of the men who frequented their salons, one of whom, now unknown, coined the curious expression l'amour fini as a periphrasis for marriage.

²² Tartuffe, Act II, sc. ii.

²³ Le Malade imaginaire, Act I, sc. v.

²⁴ Quoted by Baumal, op. cit., p. 70.

²⁵ Quoted by M. Magendie, La Politesse mondaine au 17e siècle (Paris: Alcan, 1925), Vol. II, p. 597.

With some women spinsterhood was a case of necessity, as they were probably too unattractive (either physically or financially) for any man to want to marry them, but others, of their own free will, chose not to "se claquemurer aux choses du mariage".²⁶ They preferred to keep their liberty and the freedom to dispose of themselves as they chose. This freedom, as Baumal says, was:

...la grande ambition des Ruelles. Les femmes y plaçaient leur gloire, c'est-à-dire leur honneur. Mlle. de Scudéry n'eût pas parlé autrement ni les philosophes de l'Abbé de Pure, ni les héroïnes de Corneille le tragique, ni les coquettes de Molière le comique, qui, toutes, avec des visages changeants avaient la même âme précieuse. 27

From the literature of the time and the conversations of the salons which have been related, it is obvious that the theme of marriage was very much in the air, that there was much amiss in the social organization of marriage, and that Molière in particular saw admirable material for several plays in this "conjugal climate".

²⁶ Chappuzeau, quoted by Magendie, op. cit., p. 596.

²⁷ F. Baumal, Molière, auteur précieux (Paris: Renaissance du Livre, 1924), p. 32.

CHAPTER II

CHOICE OF MANNER AND GENRE

We can now consider why, in La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques, Molière should choose to treat the question of marriage in such an obviously précieux manner, and why he should use the genre of the comédie-ballet.

It was long considered that the production of Les Précieuses ridicules in 1659 caused the virtual collapse of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and, by extension, of the whole précieux movement. This is far from being the case, as Gustave Charlier has shown in an article published just before the war.¹ Many of the habitués of the Hôtel de Rambouillet attended and applauded the first performance of Molière's play, for they did not consider themselves attacked.

Certainly Molière alone could not have halted the progress of the précieux movement, nor, indeed, would he have wished to. What seems more probable is that the word préciosité, which had already fallen to some extent into disrepute in view of the exaggerations of certain précieuses, was, after Molière's attack, used only in a pejorative or ironic sense, but the précieux way of life continued unabated. Indeed, so deeply had the influence of the précieuses penetrated into French literature that it would have been quite impossible to eradicate it. Larromet writes:

¹G. Charlier, "La fin de l'Hôtel de Rambouillet", Revue belge de philologie, 18, 1939.

Il y a bien peu d'écrivains du XVII^e siècle même des plus grands qui aient échappé entièrement à la contagion du style précieux. Celui-ci était devenu le langage naturel de la galanterie; on l'employait donc plus ou moins toutes les fois qu'on avait à faire parler l'amour: il y a des scènes entières écrites en style précieux dans Corneille, dans Racine, dans Molière même. 2

How strange that Larromet should speak of préciosité as if it were some sort of disease with which the writers of the day were afflicted! In any case, he defeats his own argument by using the word "naturel". Why indeed, since the writers were members of the society of the time should they not write in terms which they heard, and no doubt used, daily? One might as well attack Shakespeare for writing old-fashioned English. Moreover, need we limit ourselves merely to this préciosité de langage? There is every evidence, as Adam has suggested,³ that Molière was in complete agreement with many of the ideas proposed in the salons (ideas which we can refer to as préciosité de sentiments). Baupal, writing on Molière, says:

Dans son oeuvre, il ne s'agit pas seulement de scènes 'écrites en style précieux'. Il s'agit de pièces entières où sont traités des sujets précieux, où sont exposées des idées précieuses, où sujets et idées sont développés selon le goût précieux...pour capter les suffrages des précieux....Force est de convenir que l'auteur des Précieuses ridicules et des Femmes savantes à toutes les époques de sa carrière, a choisi, ou s'est laissé imposer, des sujets propres à flatter le goût des galanteries précieuses, toujours vivace, non seulement à la Cour, mais encore à la ville. 4

²Quoted in Baupal, Molière, auteur précieux, p. 52.

³A. Adam, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 277.

⁴F. Baupal, Molière, auteur précieux, p. 55.

This dictum can be applied to many of Molière's plays, but it is particularly true of the Princesse d'Elide and the Amants magnifiques -- the theme and the language are précieux, and the ideas are developed in a manner which would be pleasing to most of the précieuses.

When we come to consider why Molière wrote these plays as comédies-ballets it is at once evident that critics are sharply divided. (The term comédie-ballet will be used for convenience. The original edition of La Princesse d'Elide referred to the play as a "comédie galante mêlée de musique et d'entrées de ballet", that of Les Amants magnifiques as a "comédie" -- the intermèdes being published separately in 1670 under the title: "le Divertissement royal meslé de comédie, de musique et d'entrée [sic] de ballet".)

One critical viewpoint is represented by Paul de Saint-Victor writing in Deux Masques in 1883:

Il y a deux hommes dans Molière: le poète créateur et libre qui a jeté sur la scène des types impérissables de la comédie; mais il y a aussi l'imprésario surmené, affairé, pressé, qui bâcle des ballets, peint des pastorales en détrempe, mêle les masques aux figures, les marionnettes aux personnages, dans les pièces qu'il n'a pas le temps de finir. Son Alceste, son Don Juan, son Arnolphe, son Harpagon, son Chrysale vivent de la vie des marbres; ils seront les contemporains éternels de l'humanité. Ses bergers, ses dervis, ses matassins, ses tritons chantants et dansants ne sont plus que les masques vides d'une fête finie depuis deux cents ans. 5

This type of criticism was further voiced in 1910 by the German critic Wolff:

⁵ Quoted by Pellisson, Les Comédies-Ballets de Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1914), p. 220.

En examinant ces pièces composées pour les fêtes de la Cour, nous ne pouvons nous défendre d'une impression pénible. Que de temps, que de travail dépensé par le grand poète pour écrire ces oeuvres en partie manquées en partie insignifiantes. Son activité poétique à Paris comprend quatorze années, et dans ce temps si court, il lui fallut fournir au roi une douzaine de pièces à divertissements. 6

The suggestion behind this latter criticism is that if he had not spent a considerable amount of his time writing the pièces à divertissements, Molière would no doubt have produced several more plays of the calibre of Tartuffe or Le Misanthrope. In the first place it seems most odd that critics, should consider entertainment as a concept inappropriate to the stage, and in the second place, there are absolutely no grounds to support Wolff's claim. Indeed, we could take quite the opposite line of argument, and say that by writing the comédies-ballets Molière was able to afford himself a certain amount of relaxation, and was stimulated to produce some of his greatest works. This suggestion has been made by Maurice Donnay:

Il ne faut pas plaindre Molière quand il écrit ces petites pièces; cela ne lui coûte aucun effort, aucune peine, mais le détend, le délasse....On sent qu'il s'amuse beaucoup en les écrivant, et il entend d'avance les rires du parterre. 7

Molière's first comédie-ballet was Les Fâcheux of 1661.

Circumstances at the first performance obliged him to combine ballet and comedy -- the original intention having been to play them separately. Molière himself writes in the preface to the play:

⁶ E. Wolff, Der Dichter und sein Werk, quoted by Pellisson, op. cit., p. 12.

⁷ M. Donnay, Molière, (Paris: Fayard, 1911), p. 222.

Le dessein était de donner un ballet aussi; et comme il n'y avait qu'un petit nombre de danseurs excellents on fut contraint de séparer les entrées de ce ballet, et l'avis fut de les jeter dans les entr'actes de la comédie, afin que ces intervalles donnassent temps aux mêmes baladins de revenir sous d'autres habits. De sorte que, pour ne point rompre aussi le fil de la pièce par ces manières d'intermèdes, on s'avisa de les coudre au sujet du mieux que l'on put, et de ne faire qu'une seule chose du ballet et de la comédie; mais comme le temps était fort précipité, et que tout cela ne fut pas réglé entièrement par une même tête, on trouvera peut-être quelques endroits du ballet qui n'entrent pas dans la comédie aussi naturellement que d'autres. Quoi qu'il en soit, c'est un mélange qui est nouveau pour nos théâtres, et dont on pourrait chercher quelques autorités dans l'antiquité; et, comme tout le monde l'a trouvé agréable, il peut servir d'idée à d'autres choses qui pourraient être méditées avec plus de loisir.

In view of this last sentence, there seems little reason to suppose, as has been claimed, that Molière wrote his comédies-ballets unwillingly, on orders from the King. Certainly the orders did come from the King, and of the eleven comédies-ballets subsequent to Les Fâcheux, only one, Le Malade imaginaire, did not have its first performance at court. In all probability, Molière actively enjoyed working for the court, not least because it was extremely rewarding work financially, and also because it won a great deal of fame for his troupe. Moreover, if, as the evidence would seem to indicate, Molière in his private life was a lover of beautiful things, why should he not jump at the chance of putting on performances of his comédies-ballets, with no expenses spared, at the magnificent royal palaces of Versailles, Chambord, or Saint-Germain-en-Laye? In any case, as Sainte-Beuve realized, this kind of play must have answered a particular need in the man himself. Speaking of the genre, Sainte-Beuve says: "Mais Molière s'y complit très vite et s'y exalta comme éperdument. Il fit même des ballets et intermèdes au

Malade imaginaire, de son propre mouvement, et sans qu'il y eût pour cette pièce destination de cour ni ordre du roi."⁸

Admittedly, Molière is best remembered for his "great" plays which have rightly become classics, and no one would suggest that the comédies-ballets are literary masterpieces. They constitute the "petit théâtre à côté de son grand théâtre", but nevertheless, as Pellisson points out, they have their own particular charm:

Il a donné des oeuvres où la vie du coeur, la vie de l'âme n'est plus seulement représentée par des personnages de second plan, mais fait le fond, l'objet même de la pièce; qu'il a écrit, en un mot, outre ses comédies réalistes, des comédies qui sont expressément sentimentales et poétiques....Oui, il s'en faut que ces pièces soient des chefs d'oeuvre....Mais telles qu'elles sont, elles offrent toutes des parties exquisés et Molière y a tracé des figures dont le charme ne peut échapper à quiconque se garde des partis pris. 9

Fortunately, the attitude that the plays are unimportant trivialities, unworthy of critical consideration, is now almost extinct. As early as 1922, speaking of Despois and the "universitaires libéraux", André Le Breton said:

Faut-il répéter après eux que la protection de Louis XIV a coûté bien cher à Molière, qu'elle l'a mis dans l'obligation d'écrire des pièces sur commande et au galop pour les plaisirs du souverain, qu'elle l'a gêné, diminué, un peu dégradé même, en le rabaissant au rôle de poète courtisan? Que ces antiques rengaines si longtemps en honneur dans notre enseignement nous semblent donc puériles. 10

⁸ Sainte-Beuve, Oeuvres (Paris: Pléiade, 1951), Vol. II, p. 37.

⁹ Pellisson, op. cit., p. 95.

¹⁰ A. Le Breton, "Les Comédies-Ballets de Molière", Revue bleue, 1922, p. 76.

One of the reasons why the old criticism continued for so long was perhaps that the theatre-going public of the seventeenth century (and it should be remembered that the comédies-ballets for the most part, enjoyed success in town as well as at court) had always been considered as eminently serious, delighting in the masterpieces of classical literature, in which "un art simple et vrai cherche avant tout à satisfaire la raison".¹¹ This is no doubt true to some extent, and yet, as Le Breton goes on to say in the same article:

Il n'en suit pas qu'il ne pût goûter et ne souhaitât autre chose que le parfait dialogue de deux ou trois acteurs dans le "palais à volonté" de Bérénice ou sur la "place publique" de l'Ecole des Femmes. Déjà son imagination, ses yeux, et ses oreilles voulaient leur part de plaisir.¹²

Can we not see here an analogy with a modern audience which can enjoy the austerity of, say, Montherlant's Le Maître de Santiago, and yet also delight in a performance of My Fair Lady or West Side Story? It may even be true that far from being unimportant, these comédies-ballets are closer to the spirit of the time than anything else Molière wrote. This suggestion has been made by Bénichou:

C'est pourtant par ces pièces que Molière tient le plus directement à son temps et à son public: écrites presque toutes pour les divertissements de la cour et destinées à flatter le goût du monde elles établissent mieux que les grandes oeuvres le contact entre Molière et ses contemporains.¹³

¹¹A. Le Breton, op. cit., p. 76.

¹²Ibid., p. 77.

¹³P. Bénichou, Morales du Grand Siècle (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 160.

CHAPTER III

SOURCES

The whole court and most of Parisian society must have been gathered in force at Versailles shortly before the 7th May, 1664, for the King was to hold a celebration which was to become one of the most famous in the history of Versailles. It was known as the Plaisirs de l'Ile enchantée and lasted from 7th to 13th of May. Voltaire writes of it:

La fête de Versailles en 1664, surpassa celle du carrousel par sa singularité, par sa magnificence et les plaisirs de l'esprit qui, se mêlant à la splendeur de ces divertissements, y ajoutaient un goût et des grâces dont aucune fête n'avait encore été embellie. ¹

The whole affair is best remembered, in fact, from the point of view of the literary historian not because of the performance of the Princesse d'Elide on 8th May but because, on 12th May, Molière was to perform before the King and his guests three acts of one of his finest plays, Tartuffe. The details of the first performance of the Princesse d'Elide will be dealt with in a later chapter. I intend here simply to consider the reasons why the King gave this celebration, and the actual form it took.

The reasons behind the celebration are not far to seek. Ostensibly, the whole affair was in honour of the two Queens -- Anne of Austria, the Queen Mother, and Louis' young wife Marie-Thérèse -- though

¹Voltaire, Le Siècle de Louis XIV. (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 906.

in fact it was widely held that the real recipient of these favours from the twenty-six year old King was Mademoiselle de la Vallière, maid of honour to the Duchess of Orléans and the King's mistress. Voltaire states as much quite openly: "Le roi, parmi tous les regards attachés sur lui, ne distinguait que ceux de Mlle de la Vallière. La fête était pour elle seule; elle en jouissait confondue dans la foule."² This same lady was later to spend thirty-five years of expiation as Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde, a humble Carmelite nun -- an act which Bossuet referred to as one of the "merveilles de la grâce" of the century.

Several accounts are available as to the magnificence and form of the Plaisirs, and there would be little point in repeating them here. Perhaps the most up to date is the article by Sylvie Chevalley of the Comédie-Française, to which the reader is referred,³ but mention should also be made of the Relation de Marigny -- a "relation des divertissements que le roi a donnés aux reines dans le parc de Versailles, écrite à un gentilhomme qui est présentement hors de France".⁴ The theme of the Plaisirs can, however, be summed up briefly: the basic idea for the whole fête was suggested by Viganari, "gentilhomme modénois, fort savant en toutes ces choses", and the Duc de Saint-Aignan was ordered "de faire un dessein où elles fussent toutes comprises avec liaison et ordre". He took his subject from Ariosto, and divided it into three episodes or

²Voltaire, op. cit., p. 906.

³S. Chevalley, "Les Plaisirs de l'Ile enchantée", Europe, janvier-fevrier, 1966, 34-43.

⁴See Molière, Oeuvres, ed. by Despois and Mesnard (Paris: Hachette, n. d.), Vol. IV, p. 251ff.

journées. Gustave Michaut sums up the whole as follows:

Alcine, la magicienne, retenait auprès d'elle, par sa beauté et surtout par ses enchantements, le brave Roger et ses vaillants compagnons. Pour les mieux captiver, elle ajoutait à ses sortilèges "les divertissements des promenades, de la danse, des tournois, des festins, de la comédie et de la musique"...Elle aborde en France...elle ordonne à ces guerriers de faire en faveur de Sa Majesté tout ce qu'ils auront pu inventer pour lui plaire par leur adresse et par leur magnificence. Ils font donc une course de bagues. Et ce devait être la première journée. Le lendemain ils donnent à la magicienne et à la reine le plaisir de la comédieL'intrigue de la comédie, étant de soi fort galante, est encore augmentée par des concerts, des récits, et des entrées de ballet, qui entrent bien dans le sujet et le rendent fort agréable. Et ce devait être la deuxième journée. Mais le ciel avait résolu de donner la liberté à tant de braves guerriers retenus dans l'île enchantée d'Alcine, par la fin de ses charmes et la ruine de son palais.... Au bruit du tonnerre et des éclairs le palais est réduit en cendres et les captifs sont libérés. Et ce devait être la troisième journée. 5

The programme was in fact extended over four more days, and included performances of Les Fâcheux, Tartuffe and Le Mariage forcé. Of particular interest to us is that on the second day, the 8th May 1664, the Princesse d'Elide was presented and extremely well received.

Michaut states quite categorically that Molière took his subject for La Princesse d'Elide from a famous Spanish comedy by Moreto, Dédain pour dédain (El desdén con el desdén).⁶ Jouanny further expands this statement:

⁵ G. Michaut, Les Luites de Molière, (Paris: Hachette, 1925), pp. 17-18.

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

Au reste, il avait simplement traduit en le transposant dans un paysage antique et en l'écourtant une comédie espagnole très connue de Moreto, Dédain pour dédain. On voit parfois dans cette imitation ouverte et pure de toute contamination - fait exceptionnel chez Molière - un hommage aux deux reines, toutes deux espagnoles. ⁷

Ernest Martinenche, in his attempt to show that the Spanish play was Molière's source, has quoted only one example of scenes where the two plays closely correspond, and other critics have tended to accept this as adequate proof. Martinenche writes that the Princesse d'Elide begins as an adaption in verse, and from II, ii, becomes a prose translation of the jornadas of the Spanish play. The two scenes which he suggests for comparison are Dédain, I, vi, and La Princesse, II, iv.⁸ That Molière was greatly influenced by Moreto can be seen when a major speech from the scene in the Spanish play is compared with the French version. At this point, Diana, Moreto's heroine, is addressing her father, who she thinks has come to insist upon her marriage:

Tout d'abord, tu sais que, vis-à-vis de toi, je ne puis avoir, je n'ai aucune volonté; ce que tu m'ordonneras sera ma loi. Mais cependant laisse-moi te dire encore que me marier serait même chose que m'étrangler ou m'empoisonner. Me marier et mourir c'est tout un. Je sacrifierai ma vie pour t'obéir. Cela dit, fais de moi ce que tu voudras. ⁹

The situation in La Princesse is very similar. The princess sees her father coming, and speaks to him immediately in an attempt to forestall

⁷ Jouanny, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 576.

⁸ See E. Martinenche, Molière et le théâtre espagnol (Paris: Hachette, 1906), p. 144.

⁹ Dédain pour dédain, I, vii. (I, vi, in Spanish original), translated by C. Habeneck, Chefs d'oeuvre du théâtre espagnol (Paris: Hetzel, 1862).

anything he might say to her about deciding on one of the two suitors:

Il y a deux vérités, seigneur, aussi constantes l'une que l'autre, et dont je puis vous assurer également: l'une que vous avez un absolu pouvoir sur moi et vous ne sauriez m'ordonner rien où je ne réponde aussitôt par une obéissance aveugle; l'autre que je regarde l'hyménée ainsi que le trépas et qu'il m'est impossible de forcer cette aversion naturelle. Me donner un mari, et me donner la mort c'est une même chose, mais votre volonté va la première, et mon obéissance m'est bien plus chère que ma vie. Après cela, parlez, Seigneur, prononcez librement ce que vous voulez. 10

We might well ask ourselves whether one example of parallels between the two plays can be considered adequate proof. In fact Martinenche could have quoted many such examples, and basically it appears that the parallels between the two plays are too numerous to be ascribed to coincidence. One might compare as a further very obvious example La Princesse d'Elide, IV, i, with Dédain pour dédain, III, v. In the former scene, the princess tries to make Euryale decide whether the Prince of Messena would make a good husband for her, whilst in the latter Diana asks Carlos: "Ne vous semble-t-il pas que le Prince de Béarn est le plus digne de devenir le maître de ma couronne?" Just as in Molière's play Euryale overcomes his dismay, and confesses his love for Aglante, even so Carlos confesses his infatuation with Cintia -- to the discomfiture of the princess and of Diana respectively. There are numerous other examples of speeches which were either directly copied, or obviously paraphrased from Moreto, and of scenes for which the Spanish play was

¹⁰ Princesse d'Elide, II, iv.

evidently the source.¹¹

On the other hand we can also find ways (some of them admittedly slight) in which the two plays differ. In noting these differences it is important to remember the actual event for which Molière was writing, and also the fact that French society of the time seems far less permissive in respect of the bienséances than that of Spain. Nowhere is this more evident than in the dénouements. In Dédain Diana eagerly agrees to marry Carlos -- we might almost say that she throws herself at him! In Molière's version the princess asks for time to come to a decision concerning the proposed marriage with Euryale (though it is obvious what that decision will be). Riccoboni, in his Observations sur la comédie et sur le génie de Molière published in Paris in 1736, had this to say about the dénouements of the two plays:

Molière, après avoir lu l'original, trouva ridicule que la princesse qui ne pouvait douter que le prince n'aimât sa cousine s'offrit elle-même à lui en le choisissant pour époux. Le sexe, le rang, la bienséance, tout était blessé puisqu'elle s'exposait à un refus certain si ce prince avait aimé une autre personne. Notre auteur, qui connaissait parfaitement les mouvements du coeur, arrange si bien la fable que la princesse, apercevant son amant avec son père, et ne sachant pas de quoi il s'agit entre eux, découvre à celui-ci, dans l'embarras où elle est devant tout le monde, qu'elle aime le prince, sans cependant se déclarer tout à fait. Le moyen dont elle se sert est la prière qu'elle fait à son père de refuser au prince sa cousine en mariage; elle cherche à se faire illusion et veut persuader qu'elle n'agit de la sorte que pour punir le prince de son insensibilité. Ce

(Continued on page 32)

¹¹ Compare: Princesse, I, i, ii and Dédain, I, i;
Princesse, II, i and Dédain, I, v;
Princesse, IV, iv and Dédain, III, viii.

prétexte, tout spécieux qu'il paraît, fait assez entendre le motif qui l'anime. Cependant, le père consent à sa demande et lui propose en même temps pour empêcher le prince de se marier avec sa cousine de le choisir elle-même pour époux. En ce moment, Molière, par un coup de maître, fait dire à la princesse: "Vous vous moquez, Seigneur, et ce n'est pas ce qu'il demande." Alors, le prince se jette à ses genoux. Sur cela le père presse le mariage, mais la princesse, pour s'épargner la confusion où la jette l'aveu qu'elle vient de faire, lui demande le temps d'y penser, et la pièce finit - le goût, la finesse du sentiment naturel et de la vraisemblance se trouvent dans l'économie de ce dénouement. Les égards du sexe et du rang, la délicatesse du coeur et toutes les bienséances y sont marquées avec un art que l'on ne peut trop admirer. Ainsi, malgré les difficultés qu'il avait à surmonter, Molière a rendu ce dénouement excellent de défautueux qu'il était dans l'original. 12

Riccoboni accepts without question that Moreto's play was Molière's source, and it is a perfectly reasonable hypothesis. It should be pointed out, however, that other works of the time may have had some influence upon Molière. In the speech from the Princesse, II, iv, quoted above, he could well have been influenced by Honoré d'Urfé who also puts into the mouths of his characters a similar set of thoughts on filial duty. Astrée, d'Urfé's ideal of maidenly virtue, affects to subscribe unreservedly to the doctrine of complete parental authority. Addressing Céladon she says: "Vous pouvez dispenser de vous à votre gré, mais non pas de l'obéissance que vous devez à votre père, sans faire une grande faute."¹³ However, in view of the number of young girls in Molière's plays who evade the parental will (and obviously with the author's

¹²Quoted by Martinenche, op. cit., p. 147.

¹³Quoted by G. Hainsworth, "Traces of d'Urfé and Balzac in Molière", M.L.R., Vol. XXIV, January, 1929.

blessing) we may wonder whether Molière had his tongue in his cheek in having the princess speak the way she does.

Another quotation which may possibly have served as a starting point for the whole play occurs in Madeleine de Scudéry's Clélie. In this work there appears a "Don Juan au petit pied"¹⁴ who delivers his philosophy on women in these terms:

Il faut presque autant d'esprit pour savoir toutes les diverses manières dont on doit agir avec les femmes...il y en a avec qui il faut être soumis comme un esclave, il y en a qu'il faut presque mépriser pour en être aimé. 15

It is possible that the quotation gave Molière a basis on which to build, and that the Spanish play provided the material for what was, after all, a rapidly-produced play, as was the case with most royal command performances.

If we accept Moreto as Molière's source, as is only reasonable, we must avoid the pitfall of stating that Molière was lacking in originality. Like all his contemporaries, he took his material from any source that appealed to him (there was no copyright in those days). In any case, the seventeenth-century attitude towards borrowings of this kind was completely different from that of the twentieth century. The important thing at that time was whether the author's treatment of his material was original, and not whether the material itself could so be called. Certainly, Martinenche is going too far when he claims that Molière's play is merely a stale imitation of the Spanish model. In the

¹⁴ See Aragonnès, op. cit., p. 139.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 140.

next chapter, I hope to show that there is much in La Princesse d'Elide that is both original and typical of Molière at his best.

As for Les Amants magnifiques, it, too, was first presented as court entertainment at the Divertissement Royal held at Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1670.

D. B. Wyndham-Lewis has imagined a rather pleasing conversation between Molière and Louis XIV which might have taken place in the spring of 1670:

"You sent for me, Sir?"
 "I did, Molière; I want something for the Autumn."
 "Yes, Sir."
 "Something on the grand scale this time, Molière.
 Everything in it. Heroic comedy, ballet, singing,
 dancing, machines, masques, mythology, astrology.
 You know the sort of thing. I have spoken to Lully.
 I propose taking part in a ballet or two myself."
 "Yes, Sir."
 "Say as Neptune or Apollo, or something of the sort."
 "Very good, Sir."
 "I take it you have no idea at the moment, Molière?"
 "Not at the moment, Sir."
 "Good, I have the idea for you, as it happens."¹⁶

If such a conversation did in fact take place, it must have been in the autumn of 1669, for the play which resulted from the meeting, Les Amants magnifiques, was performed not on 7th September, 1670, as Wyndham-Lewis suggests,¹⁷ but on 4th February of that year, a fact which can easily be proved by reference to the Gazette of 8th February, 1670:

¹⁶ D. B. Wyndham-Lewis, Molière - The Comic Mask (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1959), p. 139.

¹⁷ Ibid.

De Saint-Germain-en-Laye, le 7 février.

Le 4, Leurs Majestés prirent pour la première fois un Divertissement justement appelé Royal, puisque les belles choses dont il est composé sont accompagnées de toute la magnificence imaginable, et qu'il a pour sujet deux princes rivaux qui appliquent tous leurs soins à bien régaler une princesse. 18

Of all Molière's plays, this was probably the one most directly suggested by the King. The author himself writes in the avant-propos:

Le Roi, qui ne veut que des choses extraordinaires dans tout ce qu'il entreprend, s'est proposé de donner à sa Cour un divertissement qui fût composé de tous ceux que le théâtre peut fournir; et pour embrasser cette vaste idée, et enchaîner ensemble tant de choses diverses, sa Majesté a choisi pour sujet deux princes rivaux, qui, dans le champêtre séjour de la vallée de Tempé, où l'on avait célébré la fête des jeux Pythiens, régalaient à l'envi une jeune princesse et se mère de toutes les galanteries dont ils se peuvent aviser.

It would appear that the King did not carry out his intention of actively participating in the ballets. Boileau, in a letter to Monchesnay (September, 1707),¹⁹ wrote that since the first performance of Britannicus (13th December 1669) the King had resolved to dance no more before the Court, for he remembered the lines where mention is made of Nero's addiction to making a public exhibition of himself at the Games:

A disputer des prix indignes de ses mains,
A se donner lui-même en spectacle aux Romains.²⁰

Another interesting point arises in connection with this play. It has been observed that the story of Eriphile and Sostrate bears

¹⁸Quoted in Despois and Mesnard, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 351.

¹⁹Boileau, Lettre à M de Monchesnay sur la Comédie, quoted by Despois and Mesnard, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 354.

²⁰Britannicus, Act IV, sc. iv.

distinct resemblances to that of Lauzun and the Grande Mademoiselle.

Jouanny sums the whole affair up briefly as follows:

La petite histoire du Grand Siècle mentionne à deux reprises Les Amants magnifiques. Un hasard fit qu'à la même époque se déroula la fameuse et romanesque aventure de la Grande Mademoiselle et du duc de Lauzun. Elle avait quarante ans et elle était de sang royal; il était cadet de Gascogne et homme à bonnes fortunes. Habilement, il lui laissa faire les premiers pas. Lorsqu'elle le consultait sur les mariages qu'on lui proposait, il affectait de ne pas comprendre, et doucement ferrait sa prise. La Grande Mademoiselle s'inspira d'Eriphile. C'est le 2 mars, un mois après la représentation de la pièce, qu'elle jouait pour son compte la scène iii de l'acte II, où la princesse demande à Sostrate son avis sur Iphicrate et Timoclès. Mais Lauzun n'était pas Sostrate, et Louis XIV mit fin brutalement à l'idylle et à l'intrigue. 21

Various suggestions have been made as to the reasons for the obvious similarities, one of them being that Molière was ordered to write a play dealing indirectly with the affair between the Grande Mademoiselle and Lauzun. The reader is referred to the Despois and Mesnard edition of Molière's works where the whole question is treated in some detail. Did the Grande Mademoiselle herself ask Molière to write a play with such obvious analogies to her own situation? Did the suggestion perhaps come from the King, or did Molière pick up court gossip and indirectly support the Grande Mademoiselle in her love? The answer to the problem would seem to be that it was merely by coincidence that there was a parallel in the play to what was happening in real life. The whole affair seems to indicate that truth is indeed stranger than fiction -- a point which Despois and Mesnard make in their notice to the play:

²¹R. Jouanny, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 379.

L'invention dramatique qui reproduit si étrangement des événements vrais, presque à l'heure où ils se passaient, reste au-dessous de leur piquant intérêt; nous pouvons le reconnaître sans peine, rien n'étant moins étonnant que la supériorité de la vie sur la fiction d'un poète, même quand ce poète est un maître. La cour de Louis XIV fut alors le théâtre réel d'une comédie dont le génie même de Molière aurait eu peine à imaginer toutes les scènes. 22

It is less easy to say with any certainty what was the source of Les Amants magnifiques than it is for La Princesse d'Elide. We know that the subject was provided by the King, though in merest outline, and that Molière "a cherché à le féconder".²³ In fact, what Louis XIV really wanted amounted to a second version of La Princesse d'Elide, and it is to Molière's credit that he avoided following too closely the royal dictate, and added a considerable amount to the bare bones supplied by the King.

In trying to demonstrate Molière's indebtedness to Spanish models, Martinenche finds many examples of scenes in Spanish literature which bear resemblance to scenes in Les Amants magnifiques. This, however, is almost certainly a case where we can concede that Molière must have used his own very fertile imagination. In any case, it would be very difficult to prove that Molière had either seen or read some of the very obscure plays which Martinenche mentions.

Certainly, in Les Amants magnifiques, Molière must have been to some extent influenced by Corneille's Don Sanche d'Aragon (1650) for the theme of the man of humble birth in love with a noble lady. In Corneille's

²² Despois and Mesnard, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 362.

²³ E. Martinenche, op. cit., p. 197.

play, Isabelle, Queen of Castile, falls in love with Carlos, who, though actually the lost son of the King of Aragon, is believed to be the son of a humble fisherman. (Sostrate in Les Amants is a mere army general.) There is an important difference in the two plays: whereas in Corneille Carlos is able to marry Isabelle only because his true identity is revealed, Sostrate, in Molière's play, wins the hand of Eriphile by his own valour, and in spite of his low position.

Les Amants magnifiques may have had a number of sources for all we know. It is no more important that we should know its sources than that we should know definitely that Moreto provided the source for La Princesse d'Elide. What is important is that in both plays Molière treats his material with a considerable amount of originality and verve, and that the plays merit more attention than they are usually given.

CHAPTER IV

PLOTS, CHARACTERS AND THEMES

La Princesse d'Elide is a comédie-galante in five acts and six intermèdes. The intermèdes which occur at the beginning of the play and at the end of each act are really little more than pretexts for the introduction of music and ballet, and in particular of comic elements. They are, however, loosely connected with the text in that, with the exception of Intermèdes, I, ii, and II, ii, the major theme of both play and intermèdes is love. The play opens in verse which continues for the first act and half of II, i, where there is a change to prose.

Iphitas, prince of Elide, is celebrating games in the hope that one of two suitors, Aristomène, prince of Messène, or Théocle, prince of Pyle, will win the heart of his daughter. But she, the princess of the title, professes to be averse to marriage and to disdain all men. Euryale, prince of Ithaca, who is in love with her, adopts a stratagem: unlike the other suitors he professes to be indifferent to her, and she is, in consequence, much piqued. To provoke him she tells him that she has determined to marry Aristomène. He retorts by declaring his love for her cousin, Aglante. Her jealousy is now aroused, and when she finds him apparently asking her father for Aglante's hand she can resist no longer, and surrenders rather than see him marry another woman. Other characters who appear in the play are Moron, the jester; Cynthie, cousin to the princess; and Arbate, governor to Euryale.

The play opens with the premier intermède in which Dawn sings the

praises of love:

Dans l'âge où l'on est aimable,
Rien n'est si beau que d'aimer.

-- a statement which suggests the message of the whole play. In scene ii, four dog-keepers try to arouse Lyciscas, a fellow-valet, in preparation for the hunt. They eventually force him to get up, and he becomes even more vociferous than they in waking the others. A discussion follows between Euryale and Arbate in which the prince reveals that he is in love with the princess of Elide (I, i). But the princess has resolved to have nothing to do with men, and accordingly Euryale has so far not declared his love for her. However, he has enlisted the support of Moron, who, as court jester, has ready access to the princess, and has agreed to inform her of Euryale's feelings.

At this point, Moron enters, believing himself pursued by a fearsome boar. His fears are eventually calmed, and after reliving at some length his recent hunting experiences, he reveals that he has not yet found the proper occasion to speak to the princess, but further pledges his support. The princess herself enters, accompanied by her two suitors who have just killed a boar which threatened to attack her. She, in most scathing terms, asks if they considered her incapable of killing such an animal without assistance. Finally, however, she mockingly admits that they have saved her life and goes off to inform her father of the fact. When they are left alone, Euryale tells Moron and Arbate that he has thought of a new stratagem to win the princess's heart, though at the moment he prefers not to reveal what that stratagem is.

In the second intermède, Moron announces his love for Philis to

the elements, and amuses himself with the strange echo, which turns out to be caused by a fierce bear. The jester finally manages to escape up a tree from which he descends only when a group of huntsmen have killed the intruder. We can readily imagine Molière, who played the part of Moron, making the most of the farcical possibilities of this scene.

The second act begins with a conversation between the princess and her two cousins. The latter speak in glowing terms of love, but the princess scorns them both, and announces her intention of having nothing to do with men or love. In this scene (II, i) following line 366, there is the well-known avis au lecteur in which we read:

Le dessein de l'auteur étoit de traiter ainsi toute la comédie. Mais un commandement du Roi qui pressa cette affaire l'obligea d'achever tout le reste en prose et de passer légèrement sur plusieurs scènes qu'il auroit étendues davantage s'il avoit eu plus de loisir.

This change from verse to prose elicited the following rather charming comment from Marigny:

Il avoit si peu de temps pour la composer, qu'il n'y avoit qu'un acte et demi en vers, et le reste étoit en prose, de sorte qu'il sembloit que pour obéir promptement au pouvoir de l'enchanteresse Alcine, la Comédie n'avoit eu le temps que de prendre un de ses brodequins, et qu'elle étoit venue donner des marques de son obéissance un pied chaussé et l'autre nu. ¹

Prince Iphitas now makes his first appearance, but before he has time to speak his daughter announces that marriage for her is equivalent to a death sentence. She says that she will do whatever her father commands, but Iphitas has no intention of forcing her hand, though he hopes she will marry of her own accord. Théocle and Aristomène announce

¹Quoted in Despois and Mesnard, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 256.

that they are competing in the forthcoming race only in the hope of winning the princess's heart, but Euryale maintains that he has no interest in the princess, and is competing merely for the sake of the race itself. The princess is intrigued by this attitude, and resolves to try and make Euryale fall in love with her. She is confident of her ability to do this in spite of Cynthie's warning that she might fall in love herself in the process (II, iv).

The troisième intermède introduces once again the theme of Moron's love for Philis. She will not listen to his advances because he is unable to sing like Tircis. She runs off, and Moron demands singing lessons from a passing satyr. The satyr sings his latest composition, and all goes well until the note fa is reached. Moron, confusing this with the word fat, believes himself insulted, and the intermède ends.

In Act III, scene i, Cynthie tells the princess that she is sure to succeed in her attempt to win Euryale's heart. As if to prove her words Euryale informs the jester that he is finding it extremely difficult to play his assumed role (III, ii). Moron encourages him to keep up the pretence as success is within his grasp. In the next scene the jester further arouses the princess by telling her she will find her intention of winning Euryale's heart very difficult to carry out, since the prince is adamant in his resolve to have nothing to do with love.

A discussion ensues between the princess and Euryale in which both announce their intention of abstaining from love, but Euryale is forced to retire before he is overcome by his feelings. The princess then enlists Moron's support in her cause, informing the jester that if

Euryale does fall in love with her, he will then be punished in the most cruel fashion possible. Once again, she is told that her mission is impossible, and the act ends with her announcement of a new plan.

Moron is no more successful than previously with his advances in the fourth intermède. He comes across Tircis and Philis, and, spurred on by his rival, he tries to sing. Finally he announces that he will kill himself for love of the girl. The two watch in awe as he draws his dagger, but he then laughs in their faces for having believed that he was serious.

In Act IV, scene i, the princess reveals that she intends to marry Aristomène. Euryale is momentarily discomfited, but regains his composure, and turns the tables rather neatly by announcing that he is in love with Aglante. The princess admits her dismay to Moron, and asks Aglante to refuse to marry Euryale, to which she unwillingly agrees (IV, iii). Aristomène enters, having heard from Euryale that the princess intends to marry him. He is coldly received, and goes away dismayed. At this point, Moron suggests to the princess that her actions are proof of her love for Euryale. This arouses her anger, and she banishes the fool from her presence. She proceeds to analyse her feelings in a very charming soliloquy (IV, vi), and asks for soothing music, but in the fifth intermède Clymène and Philis discuss the nature of love -- a discussion which hardly serves to increase the princess's composure.

As Act V begins, Iphitas tells Euryale that he will be an ideal son-in-law if his stratagem succeeds. Their conversation is interrupted by the princess. She is totally aroused, and asks her father to refuse

permission for the marriage with Aglante. He agrees to this, but only on condition that she herself takes Euryale for her husband. She claims that this is not what he desires, but he now confesses his stratagem, and says he will do whatever she commands. The princess asks for time to reach a decision, and is duly reconciled with the jester. In the penultimate scene, Aglante and Cynthia are paired off with the two rejected suitors, who accept the new arrangement with equanimity, and the play closes with a dancing chorus of rustics, who, in the sixth intermède sing of what has been the theme of the whole play:

Il n'est rien qui ne se rende
Aux doux charmes de l'amour.

The characters in La Princesse d'Elide can be divided into two distinct groups: four major characters -- the princess, Euryale, Moron and Iphitas (whose rôle is important for the ideas it expresses rather than its actual length), and the minor characters who have diverse functions. They act as an audience for the main speakers, or they are instrumental in illustrating a particular attitude towards love.

The rôle of Philis in the play itself is a mere five lines in which she comes at the end of the play to announce the joy of the populace at the princess's change of heart. She is, however, rather charmingly portrayed in the intermèdes as a fickle and flighty young girl. Moron loves her, but she in her turn loves Tircis, not least for his ability to sing -- a gift denied the fool. She is also somewhat empty-headed, thinking that Moron is serious when he says he will kill himself for love of her (she obviously enjoys every minute of the attention). It is she

also who, in the fifth intermède, discusses with Clymène the nature of love. This is a very précieux discussion -- an echo of what was almost certainly being heard in the salons. The two opposing points of view find expression. Clymène maintains:

On m'a dit que sa flamme est pire qu'un vautour,
Et qu'on souffre en aimant une peine cruelle.

To this Philis retorts:

On m'a dit qu'il n'est point de passion plus belle,
Et que ne pas aimer, c'est renoncer au jour.

They discuss their two friends, Chloris and Amarante, one of whom finds joy, the other sadness in love, and the two girls are puzzled: "Si de tant de tourments il accable les coeurs", asks Philis, "D'où vient qu'on aime à lui rendre les armes?" And Clymène answers:

Si sa flamme, Philis, est si pleine de charmes,
Pourquoi nous défend-on d'en goûter les douceurs?

They think about this for a moment, and finally reach the conclusion:

Aimons, c'est le vrai moyen.
De savoir ce qu'on en doit croire.

Just as there were précieuses who displayed a militant attitude towards love and marriage, even so there were those who idealized love, were on friendly terms with men and far from hostile towards marriage, and in this fifth intermède Molière naturally speaks out in favour of the latter.

This enlightened attitude towards love and marriage is further expressed by Aglante and Cynthie, cousins to the princess, but quite different from her. Two of their appearances are very brief. There is the speech by Cynthie in which she tells the princess: "Lorsqu'on veut

donner l'amour, on court risque d'en recevoir" (II, iv). This sums up in a nutshell the action of the entire play. There is also Act IV, scene iii, in which Aglante unwillingly agrees to reject Euryale's advances. The most important scene as far as an attitude towards love is concerned is Act II, scene i, which is essentially précieux in nature. Here the princess is an example of militant préciosité, scorning love, and resolved to have nothing to do with her suitors: "Je me tromperai fort si pas un d'eux l'emporte." Immediately, Cynthie suggests the opposite point of view, which was shared by many of the précieuses:

Est-il rien de plus beau que l'innocente flamme
 Qu'un mérite éclatant allume dans une âme?
 Et seroit-ce un bonheur de respirer le jour,
 Si d'entre les mortels on bannissoit l'amour?
 Non, non, tous les plaisirs se goûtent à le suivre,
 Et vivre sans aimer n'est pas proprement vivre.
 (II, i, 361-365)

This opinion is further voiced by Aglante who maintains: "Pour moi, je tiens que cette passion est la plus agréable affaire de la vie; qu'il est nécessaire d'aimer pour vivre heureusement, et que tous les plaisirs sont fades, s'il ne s'y mêle un peu d'amour." However, in spite of their wish that she might change her attitude and Aglante's warning that "L'Amour sait se venger des mépris que l'on fait de lui", the princess remains adamant in her resolve.

Already, then, in three minor characters Molière presents to us the attitude of the enlightened précieuses pitted against the narrow-minded préciosité of the princess.

The figures of Aristomène and Théocle, suitors of the princess, seem typical of many of the male habitués of the salons as far as we can

judge from the literary works of the time. They have certain romantic notions about saving the princess from harm, and are exceedingly surprised when she refuses to show gratitude at having been saved from the wild boar (I, iii). Like the men of the salons they are very much shadowy figures in the background, occasionally stepping forward to produce galant and précieux speeches, but never really coming to life like the minor female characters in the play.

The other minor character is Arbate, governor to Euryale, whose chief function seems to be to listen to the prince of Ithaca and, in very précieux terms, to encourage him in his love for the princess -- an encouragement which has been seen as a barely veiled reference to the love of Louis XIV for Mademoiselle de la Vallière (I, i, 15-44). Arbate's rôle is perhaps the least important of all -- his main appearance is in the expository Act I, scene i, and even here he really serves only to prevent the prince from addressing thin air.

Of the major characters of the play, Iphitas comes closer than any of the others to the personification of an ideal -- that of the enlightened parent. He desires to see his daughter married: "Je ne demande, dis-je, au Ciel autre bonheur que celui de te voir un époux." However, he has no intention of standing on his parental rights and forcing a husband on her:

Si tu trouves où attacher tes vœux, ton choix sera
le mien, et je ne considérerai ni intérêts d'Etat,
ni avantages d'alliance; si ton coeur demeure
insensible, je n'entreprendrai point de la forcer.

(II, iv)

Iphitas is more aware of his daughter's feelings than she is herself, and tells her quite openly in the dénouement that she is in love with Euryale.

He realizes that for the sake of her happiness she must marry Euryale, and is not afraid to use a trick to ensure that she does so. When the princess asks for time to reach a decision, it is Iphitas who practically guarantees that the marriage will take place: "Vous jugez, Prince, ce que cela veut dire, et vous vous pouvez fonder là-dessus" (V, ii). Emery has summed Iphitas up as "Un Ariste de sang bleu, sage et débonnaire".²

The character of Moron is an innovation in Molière, and was to be further developed in the shape of Clitidas in Les Amants magnifiques. Voltaire's social conscience was aroused by the idea that in the seventeenth century there should still have been jesters at the court of France. Writing of Les Amants magnifiques he says: "Ces misérables étaient encore fort à la mode."³ However, although he speaks of Clitidas as "un homme adroit, et qui ayant la liberté de tout dire, s'en sert avec habileté et finesse",⁴ he refers to Moron as "un fou ridicule", which in fact he is not. Paradoxically, Moron the fool is no fool, and Euryale, in Act I, scene i, of La Princesse d'Elide reveals that Moron is not what everyone thinks:

Par son titre de fou tu crois le bien connaître;
Mais sache qu'il l'est moins qu'il ne le veut paroître,
Et que, malgré l'emploi qu'il exerce aujourd'hui,
Il a plus de bon sens que tel qui rit de lui.
(149-152)

Although he creates a considerable amount of farcical comedy (e. g., Intermède II, scene ii), Moron is also the epitome of common

²Leon Emery, Molière du métier à la pensée (Lyon: Les Cahiers libres, n. d.), p. 56.

³Voltaire, op. cit., p. 908.

⁴Ibid.

sense. He is clumsy in his pursuit of Philis, but refuses to be too dismayed when she spurns him for Tircis. It is he who realizes that Euryale has found the right method of winning the princess (that of pretending to be uninterested in her), and who encourages him in his endeavour when his spirit weakens (III, ii). He also stirs up the princess's feelings by assuring her that she has no chance of winning Euryale for herself, and of course, is also extremely useful to Euryale in that he has ready access to the princess, and while pretending to help her, can pass on all the information about her which Euryale requires. It is Moron who first openly states to the princess that she is in love with Euryale, and is disgraced for his pains. He is reconciled with her in the end, and remarks: "Seigneur, je serai meilleur courtisan une autre fois, et je me garderai bien de dire ce que je pense" (V, ii). This throws an interesting light on the falseness of court life at the time. Molière himself played Moron, and we can readily imagine him making the most of all this role has to offer. It is Moron who brings to the play almost all of its essentially light and amusing quality. As Emery says:

En ces représentations de haut rang, l'habituel valet de comédie devient le fou de cour, un fou bien sage et de bonne compagnie qui ne manque ni de grâce ni de gaîté. Le gentil Moron illumine l'oeuvre de ses chansons, de ses dialogues avec l'écho, de ses amours naïves, de ses impertinences mesurées, de ses terreurs enfantines. 5

We come now to the two main characters with whose relationship the play is chiefly concerned. The actual situation of the princess and

⁵Emery, op. cit., p. 54.

Euryale is one that must have appealed to the précieuses. There is evidence in contemporary works that a woman was supposed to remain aloof from men. The princess of antiquity is voicing the opinion of many women of the salons when she says: "Il est beau qu'une femme soit insensible, et conserve son coeur exempt des flammes de l'amour" (III, iv). The men, of course, were supposed to accept this situation with equanimity, and after pining for their mistress for a considerable time, they were eventually rewarded by her favours. Euryale refuses to do this, and tries a new stratagem. As Baupal has said: "Le dédain est une tactique utilisée couramment dans la stratégie galante des romans précieux. Molière ne ferait ici que retourner la clause en faveur du sexe laid."⁶ This new method of approach must have held a certain piquant interest for the women of the time, and one wonders whether the men would agree with Moron, who, in Act III, scene iii, voices the opinion that Euryale has found the best way of treating women:

Les femmes sont des animaux d'un naturel bizarre;
 nous les gâtons par nos douceurs; et je crois tout
 de bon que nous les verrions nous courir, sans
 tous ces respects et ces soumissions où les hommes
 les acoquent.

The irony of the situation is that Euryale finds the pretence very difficult to sustain. He is almost on the point of breaking down and confessing the truth to the princess, and is only prevented from doing so by Moron's insistence that the princess is about to succumb. However, in spite of his faltering will, he is still able to choose his barbs well

⁶Baupal, Molière, auteur précieux, p. 76.

and to use them to their best advantage. Immediately after Théocle and Aristomène have proclaimed their desire to win the princess's heart by being victors in the race, Euryale announces: "Je n'ai aucune prétention sur votre coeur, et le seul honneur de la course est tout l'avantage où j'aspire" (II, iv). These words arouse the princess's curiosity and initiate her downfall, since from now on she resolves to subdue Euryale. Similarly, though it costs him a great effort, he can control his feelings adequately to maintain that he would preserve his liberty even if Heaven were to create the perfect beauty (III, iv). This particular speech is essentially comic, since it is obvious that he is actually describing how he feels about the princess as he looks at her.

Euryale is also interesting from a psychological point of view. He reveals (I, i) that he had seen the princess on an earlier occasion but had been unmoved by her beauty. It was only after he heard of her scorn for love that he resolved to win her for himself:

Ce que n'avoit point fait sa vue et sa beauté,
Le bruit de ses fiertés en mon âme fit naître,
Un transport inconnu dont je ne fus point maître.
(76-78)

Is this not typical of the person who ardently desires that which is seemingly forbidden him? Throughout the play, Euryale gets the better of the princess. This is only natural, for in view of Molière's feeling concerning her attitude, and if the truth of the opening lines of the first intermède is to be born out,⁷ it is essential that the princess

⁷ Moquez-vous d'affecter cet orgueil indomptable
Dont on vous dit qu'il est beau de s'armer:
Dans l'âge où l'on est aimable,
Rien n'est si beau que d'aimer.

should fall a victim to his stratagem, as of course she eventually does. However, when Euryale does finally admit his love to her, it is without reserve, and he is willing to do anything she might command. His speech in Act V, scene iii, is a sure indication of how much he really does love the princess, and is also typical of a précieux declaration of love.

The most interesting character of all is that of the princess herself, who is an excellent study in female psychology. She displays "une masculinité un peu farouche",⁸ is totally independent, and proud of her skill with the bow and arrow. From the very beginning of the play we are left in no doubt as to her attitude towards love. Euryale, speaking to Arbate, says of her:

Et tu sais quel orgueil, sous des traits si charmants
Arme contre l'amour ses jeunes sentiments
(I, i, 51-52)

and Moron adds weight to this statement in Act I, scene iii:

Et qu'elle a dans la tête une philosophie
Qui déclare la guerre au conjugal lien,
Et vous traite l'amour de déité de rien.
(242-244)

The princess herself expresses her own opinions in Act II, scene ii. She refers to love as "une passion qui n'est qu'erreur, que foiblesse et qu'emportement, et dont tous les désordres ont tant de répugnance avec la gloire de notre sexe" -- a speech typical of the militant précieuses of the time who were intent on upholding above all else the gloire of the female sex. The princess refers to men as: "Ces gens qui font les esclaves auprès de nous, pour devenir un jour nos tyrans", and in her

⁸Emery, op. cit., p. 57.

desire to remain free she is prepared actively to challenge love: "Je brave tous ses traits."

The speech in Act II, scene iv, where the princess tells her father that for her marriage is the same as death, has already been quoted in another context.⁹ This scene also marks the first stage in her downfall. Euryale has scorned her; it is the first time she has known this, and she is led to remark: "Ne trouvez-vous pas qu'il y auroit plaisir d'abaisser son orgueil, et de soumettre un peu ce coeur qui tranche tant du brave?" Thereafter, her chief aim is to win Euryale for herself. Moron asks her what she would do if Euryale fell in love with her (III, v), and she replies: "Je prendrois plaisir à triompher pleinement de sa vanité, à punir son mépris par mes froideurs, et exercer sur lui toutes les cruautés que je pourrois imaginer." Her expressions of intention become increasingly violent. In Act III, scene iii, she first states: "J'ai toutes les envies du monde de l'engager pour rabattre un peu son orgueil", and in the same scene she says: "Il n'y a rien que je ne fasse pour le soumettre comme il faut." By Act III, scene v, she is ready to maintain: "Je donnerois volontiers tout ce que j'ai au monde pour avoir l'avantage d'en triompher." She is quite hypocritical about her attitude towards love and men, and is prepared, as the précieuses were, to reject men and still expect them to love her. She upbraids Euryale for avoiding love, and informs him that by not paying homage to female beauty he is offending women greatly (III, iv). He replies that

⁹ Supra, p. 30.

those women who have themselves vowed to abstain from love could hardly be insulted by such an action on his part, to which the princess replies: "Sans vouloir aimer, on est toujours bien aise d'être aimée" -- a supremely selfish attitude.

By Act IV, scene i, she is extremely worked up by Euryale's attitude towards her, and when he turns her trick upon herself by saying that he wants to marry Aglante, the princess can only cry out in exasperation to Moron: "Ce coup, que je n'attendois pas, triomphe absolument de toute ma fermeté." If this is true, she makes a valiant effort to disguise the fact, and from this point on, she is living proof of the adage: "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." She insists that Aglante should reject Euryale's advances, and angrily dismisses Moron when he points out that she evidently loves Euryale herself. However, in a delightful monologue (IV, vi), she attempts to come to terms with her own feelings. The change has been too sudden, and she cannot believe that she could possibly be in love. What particularly annoys her is that she who has had the world at her feet should have been overcome by pride and scorn. "J'ai méprisé tous ceux qui m'ont aimée", she cries, "et j'aimerois le seul qui me méprise." She prays that the new feeling in her heart might become a wild beast which she could attack and kill. This is an obvious attempt to come to terms with her feelings, since she is at home as a huntress among the wild beasts of the forest. Finally, in Act V, scene ii, her defences are torn down completely, and it is obvious from her every word and action that she loves Euryale. She begs her father to forbid the marriage with Aglante,

as she cannot bear a man to marry by whom she has been scorned before so many onlookers. Finally, when Euryale has confessed his stratagem and announced his love for her, all she can do is ask for time to reach a decision, though it is obvious what the decision will be.

The portrayal of the princess is a penetrating one for all its abruptness. Lack of time prevented Molière from going into her character quite as deeply as he would have wished, but it still remains essentially realistic, and very typical of many of the précieuses of the time. In fact, this is true of practically all of the characters in this play. For all their surface antiquity, they really represent different facets of seventeenth-century préciosité. Baupal has summarized them as follows:

A l'exception du prince Iphitas, qui est un père aussi bon que sensé, ils raisonnent leurs sentiments et 'tirent leurs passions du coeur à l'esprit' selon l'expression de Saint-Evremond. Ils parlent en maximes et en sentences: ils dissertent sur des lieux communs de l'idéologie passionnelle; sauf les différences qu'impose la diversité des genres, ces personnages de comédie se comportent comme des héros de roman. 10

Like La Princesse d'Elide, Les Amants magnifiques is essentially a comédie-galante although it is referred to simply as a comédie. The play is in five acts, in prose, with six intermèdes arranged exactly as in the earlier play. The intermèdes are more remote from the text than was the case in La Princesse d'Elide, and are far more a pretext for music and dancing. They can, however, be introduced at the appropriate

¹⁰ Baupal, Molière, auteur précieux, p. 83.

moment because there are frequent references to festivities in the body of the text.

The play is concerned with the proposed marriage of Eriphile, daughter of princess Aristione, an enlightened mother who parallels the enlightened father in La Princesse d'Elide. There are two suitors for her hand, Iphicrate and Timoclès, the "amants magnifiques" of the title. Eriphile, however, is really in love with Sostrate, the general in her mother's army, and he loves her, though because of the difference in rank this mutual love has not been declared by either of the two. Clitidas, the jester, is an advanced species of Moron, and there is a complete innovation in the person of Anaxarque, the court astrologer. Other minor characters are Cléonice, Eriphile's confidente; Chorèbe, a page-boy; and Cléon, the astrologer's son.

The play opens with an intermède in which cupids sing the praises of the two princesses (Aristione and Eriphile), and Neptune appears to sing his own greatness in what is obviously a panegyric of Louis XIV.

We hear a discussion between Sostrate and Clitidas (I, i). The former laments over his fate, while the fool, unobserved, listens. After a brief interrogation, Clitidas comes to the heart of the matter and maintains that Sostrate is in love with Eriphile. This the general admits, but pleads that his love must under no circumstances be revealed. He feels that in view of his low station in life his love must go no further. Clitidas, however, like his counterpart Moron in La Princesse d'Elide, believes that the princess is kindly disposed towards Sostrate, and resolves to help him, since he has easy access to the princess and

is favourably received by her.

Aristione enters, accompanied by the two suitors and by Anaxarque. She asks the suitors for a progress report, and mentions that her daughter has a completely free hand in the question of her marriage. Timoclès reveals that he has made no progress at all. Iphicrate has resolved to win the daughter through the mother, and proceeds to flatter Aristione, who sensibly turns a deaf ear to his praises and is content to be her daughter's mother rather than her rival. She commissions Sostrate to discover where her daughter's true feelings lie. After protesting his unsuitability, he finally agrees, though unwillingly, to do as he is ordered (I, ii). Iphicrate and Timoclès, hoping to further their suit, at once begin to flatter Sostrate who declines to speak in favour of either one (I, iii).

Scene v marks the first appearance of the princess Eriphile who speaks of her love of solitude, and is then entertained by pantomimes in the second intermède. Clitidas appears, and after a considerable amount of teasing and a lengthy eulogy of Sostrate, he finally reveals that the general is in love (II, ii). Eriphile at once flares up, angry that the general should have the audacity to be in love with her. In an amusing stratagem, the jester maintains that Sostrate is actually in love with Arsinoë, one of the ladies-in-waiting. It is only too obvious from Eriphile's words that she herself is in love with Sostrate. Clitidas then tells her the truth, and though the princess pretends to be angry, she soon forgives the jester, and is particularly glad that Sostrate asked for his love not to be mentioned.

At this point, Sostrate comes to carry out his commission (II, iii). Eriphile all but reveals that she loves him, and asks him to decide which of the two suitors she should choose. He is unwilling to commit himself, but finally produces a very galant little speech suggesting that no individual is really worthy of the honour of marrying her. She still insists that he choose, and he is saved only by the announcement of the arrival of Aristione, who leads her daughter off to Diana's wood to see the entertainment which has been planned for them by Timoclès.

The two princesses are shown a charming pastoral play, which forms the third intermède. A shepherd complains to two companions that his love is cold. They console him, and all three retire to watch the shepherdess's arrival unobserved. She sings of her love for the shepherd, then falls asleep. (This, of course is very much a précieux fashion. The woman, though pretending to be indifferent towards the man, is really in love with him.) The shepherd steals up to watch his beloved, but she awakes, and, after scolding him, finally agrees to return his love. There follows a dépit amoureux between two different characters which is a translation of Horace's ode Donec gratus eram tibi,¹¹ and the intermède ends with a chorus of shepherds and shepherdesses proclaiming the message:

Jouissons, jouissons des plaisirs innocents
Dont les feux de l'amour savent charmer nos sens.

In the single scene of which Act III is composed Eriphile tells her mother that she is unable to reach a decision and would like Sostrate to choose for her. To this Aristione agrees. Sostrate, of course, is

¹¹Book III, ode ix.

most unwilling to comply on grounds that a close friend is in love with the princess and he would be unwilling to hurt his friend's feelings. Iphicrate slyly suggests that Socrate is the "friend" in question, but the general denies the allegation, saying that he is aware of the limitations of his station in life. Eventually, it is decided that they will follow the predictions of the stars, although both Eriphile and Sostrate mock astrology and astrologers. The scene ends with a mass exodus in the direction of further fêtes and galanteries.

For the fourth intermède, the two royal ladies are led into a grotto where eight statues dance a ballet in their honour. After the ballet, Aristione discusses with her daughter the latter's reluctance to come to a decision (IV, i). She assures her that her choice is not limited to the two suitors. Eriphile asks for more time to reflect, and just as her mother is about to say that there has been too much delay, we witness the descent of Venus, who announces the will of Heaven: whosoever saves Aristione's life should become Eriphile's husband. On hearing this, Aristione declares that there will be no further discussion, and that the dictates of the gods will be implicitly followed (IV, ii).

We learn in scene iii that the descent of Venus was a mechanical contraption set up by Anaxarque who is in the pay of Iphicrate. His intention now is to have a group of hirelings set upon Aristione, who will then be rescued by the deceitful princely suitor.

In a further meeting with Sostrate (IV, iv), Eriphile openly confesses her love to him, but cannot now find her way open to marry him, as she must follow the dictates of the gods. If the gods had not

intervened she is convinced that they could have been married. Sostrate is overjoyed at the news that the princess loves him, and announces that he will die happily, though he asks to be allowed to live until the marriage which will be the occasion of his demise. The scene ends sadly as the two lovers separate. In the fifth intermède the dancers enact a dance which is wholly in keeping with the sad mood of the princess.

Clitidas then enters to inform the princess of the wishes of the gods (V, i). She asks to be left alone, and, on the point of leaving, the jester says he thought she would be pleased to hear that Sostrate is her intended husband. Eriphile hastily summons him back, and though he pretends to be reticent, she obtains from him the story of how Sostrate saved Aristione from a fearsome boar, and was immediately named as Eriphile's husband-to-be. Aristione presents Sostrate to her daughter, but the general cannot as yet believe his good fortune. The two jealous suitors speak scathingly of Sostrate's low rank, and even though Aristione announces his elevation to a rank equal to theirs, they begin to utter threats. Aristione, however, remains regally unperturbed and leads the procession out to crown the day with the pompous spectacle of the Pythian Games. These games form the sixth intermède which closes the play and are little more than an excuse for a lengthy and rather tedious encomium of Louis XIV.

Among the minor characters of the Amants magnifiques the rôles are very short -- the longest being that of Anaxarque. Cléonice, Eriphile's confidente, is amusingly portrayed. She is a kind-hearted

person, always willing to present new entertainers to the princess, who tells her: "Vous avez une affabilité qui ne rejette rien" (II, v).

Chorèbe, as page-boy, we can leave aside, and Cléon, Anaxarque's son, is there only to pose the necessary questions to his father to obtain information concerning the fausse Vénus.

The two suitors, like their counterparts in La Princesse d'Elide, remain shadowy figures. They are as magnificent as one could desire in the organization of fêtes, but they are also vain and quick to anger. When they discover that Anaxarque has not served them as they wished, they express their displeasure in no uncertain terms by having him beaten to the point where his life is in danger. Also, although they are willing to accept the rules with regard to each other as far as winning the princess's hand is concerned, they are incensed when Sostrate, a man of lower station, is eventually victorious, and even go so far as to threaten Aristione. "Mais peut-être aussi vous souviendrez-vous que deux princes outragés ne sont pas deux ennemis peu redoutables," says Iphicrate in Act V, scene iv. To this Timoclès adds: "Peut-être, Madame, qu'on ne goûtera pas longtemps la joie du mépris que l'on fait de nous." These threats, incidentally, leave Aristione singularly unmoved. Certainly, the two suitors are both very précieux figures. This is most in evidence in Act I, scene ii, where Iphicrate tries to win Eriphile by heaping compliments on her mother, and Timoclès, in giving a progress report of his pursuit of Eriphile, lists the attentions which he has paid her. This list would correspond almost exactly to that of the attentions which the women of the salons expected from their male friends, and to which

they, like Eriphile, did not respond:

Madame, je ne suis point pour me flatter, j'ai fait ce que j'ai pu pour toucher le coeur de la princesse Eriphile, et je m'y suis pris, que je crois, de toutes les tendres manières dont un amant se peut servir, je lui ai fait des hommages soumis de tous mes vœux, j'ai montré des assiduités, j'ai rendu des soins chaque jour, j'ai fait chanter ma passion aux voix les plus touchantes et l'ai fait exprimer en vers aux plumes les plus délicates, je me suis plaint de mon martyre en des termes passionnées, j'ai fait dire à mes yeux, aussi bien qu'à ma bouche, le désespoir de mon amour, j'ai poussé à ses pieds, des soupirs languissants, j'ai même répandu des larmes; mais tout cela inutilement, et je n'ai point connu qu'elle ait dans l'âme aucun ressentiment de mon ardeur.

Anaxarque, like the fou de cour, is an innovation in Molière -- the first, and only astrologer to appear in his works. The reasons for this appearance will be dealt with in a later chapter.¹² He is, of course, essentially a comic figure, and although he is supported by Aristione, he is the target for the pointed comments of Clitidas, Eriphile and Sostrate. He has a high opinion of himself and his calling, and does not like to be insulted. He tells Aristione in Act I, scene ii, that one of the annoying things about her court is that everyone is at liberty to express his opinion! He is also a greedy man, willing to serve the master who pays best -- with dire results.

Of the major characters, Aristione, like Iphitas in La Princesse d'Elide, is typical of a truly enlightened parent, and is admirably portrayed. She is generous and courteous, and a completely likeable person. But the picture of her is not without a touch of humour, for,

¹²Infra, pp. 88 and 89.

as Emery says:

La bonne dame a plus de coeur que de cervelle; elle est naïvement crédule et admire les fêtes qu'on lui prodigue avec des yeux de petite fille conduite à la foire du Trône. Elle parle d'elle-même avec une franchise sans apprêts, dans laquelle se glisse un accent de familiarité bourgeoise. Nous ne pouvons nous la représenter qu'affectée d'une certaine obésité qui lui va bien et ne manque point de bonne grâce. 13

In spite of this touch of humour, she is nevertheless completely enlightened. She tells her daughter that her choice is by no means limited to the two suitors, and adds: "Le mérite auprès de moi tient un rang si considérable que je l'égale à tout" (IV, 1), and Eriphile herself tells Sostrate that if it had not been for the intervention of the gods her mother would certainly have agreed to their marriage.

It is Aristione who ends the play so splendidly. With regal composure, she dismisses the threats of the two rejected suitors "in the very accents of a Grande Dame of the Primrose League dismissing a scuffle between a couple of M. P.'s at her garden party",¹⁴ and leads the procession out to the "pompous spectacle" of the Pythian Games.

Clitidas, the jester, adds even more piquancy to his role as fool than did Moron. He makes sound judgements and firm friendships, but is not averse to teasing his friends on occasion. He delights in intrigue, and finds so much amusement in the love affairs of others that he does not need to be in love himself. Like Moron, it is he who enlivens the

¹³Emery, op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁴Wyndham-Lewis, op. cit., p. 141.

action as he pokes fun at the astrologer, plays off the suitors one against the other, teases Eriphile, and does his utmost to help Sostrate further his suit. For a fool he is very perspicacious, and has women summed up in a nutshell: "Les belles, croyez-moi, sont toujours les plus clairvoyantes à découvrir les ardeurs qu'elles causent" (I, i).

Les Amants magnifiques is a short play, written quite rapidly, but this does not prevent the two principal characters from being particularly well portrayed. Unlike the princess of Elide, Eriphile is a woman who wants to love, and is not averse to marriage. Emery refers to her as a Cornelian lover seeking to reconcile love, esteem and duty.¹⁵ She is unwilling to display her love for Sostrate too openly at first, but she cannot help revealing her feelings. She pays no attention when Clitidas mentions the two suitors (II, ii), but as soon as she hears Sostrate's name she asks why he was not at the promenade. Clitidas uses a cunning stratagem to get Eriphile to declare her love, and when the truth is eventually revealed, Eriphile is delighted that Sostrate should choose not to declare his love. Her words express a very précieux sentiment: "C'est par son seul respect qu'il peut me plaire; et s'il étoit si hardi que de me déclarer son amour, il perdrait pour jamais et ma présence et mon estime."

She reveals her love to Sostrate, though in veiled terms: "Je serai bien aise de témoigner que je veux faire quelque chose pour l'amour de vous" (II, iii), and she laughingly asks him: "N'ont-ils pu découvrir,

¹⁵Emery, op. cit., p. 57.

vos yeux, ce dont tout le monde est en peine, et ne vous ont-ils point donné quelques petites lumières du penchant de mon coeur?" (II, iii).

Like the princess in the earlier play, Eriphile needs time to come to terms with her situation. She certainly loves Sostrate, but in the seventeenth century it was a far more serious step to marry below one's rank than it would be today, and we must remember that although both plays are set in antiquity, La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques are very much an expression of seventeenth-century attitudes. Eriphile's state of indecision as to the right move can be seen in Act IV, scene i, where, when she has been given complete freedom of choice by her mother, she says: "Vous avez des bontés pour moi, Madame...et tout ce que je leur demande c'est de ne point presser un mariage où je ne me sens pas encore bien résolue." It is only after the appearance of the false Venus when she thinks her fate is sealed, that Eriphile openly admits her love for Sostrate: "Votre passion à paru à mes yeux accompagnée de tout le mérite qui me la pouvoit rendre agréable" (IV, iv). And although she believes she can no longer marry him due to the intervention of destiny, she goes on to say:

Soyez sûr, Sostrate, que c'est avec toutes les répugnances du monde que je m'abandonne à cet hyménée, et que si j'avois pu être maîtresse de moi, ou j'aurois été à vous, ou je n'aurois été à personne.

Finally she is so overcome that she has to ask him to leave in order not to lose control of her feelings altogether. Eriphile is a very real woman. She strikes a pleasing balance between sentiment and reason. She is dignified, and discreet in her sadness, but not without a streak of

fun when she laughs at the astrologer. She is certainly the kind of woman that Molière must have enjoyed portraying.

Sostrate, the army general, is one of the most interesting of Molière's characters. Throughout the play, even when in despair, he maintains a calm dignity. What a contrast there is between him and the two suitors! Right from the start he realizes that his condition in life is too low for him to be able to win the princess's hand, and he is resolved to die leaving his love for her undeclared. He is quite lucid about his situation, and in Act I, scene i, he lists for Clitidas those things which condemn him to silence: lack of fortune, the high rank of the princess, the competition of two princes "appuyés de tous les grands titres qui peuvent soutenir les prétentions de leurs flammes", and lastly, "le respect inviolable où ses beaux yeux assujettissent toute la violence de mon ardeur". In short, Sostrate suffers from an acute social inferiority complex!

It is, of course, torture for him to be delegated to investigate the state of the princess's feelings, and when Eriphile tries to make him decide whom she should marry, he declares in very galant terms: "Tous les princes du monde seront trop peu de chose pour aspirer à vous; les Dieux seuls y pourront prétendre, et vous ne souffrirez des hommes que l'encens et le sacrifice" (II, iii). This seems to have been the guiding philosophy of many of the male habitués of the salons. Perhaps only in modern America are women quite as spoiled as they were in the salons of seventeenth-century France.

Like Euryale in La Princesse d'Elide, Sostrate finds it difficult

to keep up a façade and not declare his love for Eriphile. The nearest he comes to breaking down is in Act III, scene i, when, refusing to accept the commission of deciding who shall be Eriphile's husband, he uses the age-old excuse of a friend "qui brûle, sans oser le dire, d'une flamme respectueuse pour les charmes divins dont vous êtes épris".

Iphicrate immediately makes the cutting remark that Sostrate himself appears to be the friend in question, and the general, remembering himself, says: "Les malheureux comme moi n'ignorent pas jusques où leur fortune leur permet d'aspirer." When, in Act IV, scene iv, Eriphile has declared her love for him, Sostrate is ready to die happy in the knowledge of this love, and expresses his feelings in a précieux speech which certainly does not coincide with the average picture of an army general.

Sostrate is best summed up by Clitidas:

En vérité, c'est un homme qui me revient, un homme fait comme je veux que les hommes soient faits: ne prenant point des manières bruyantes et des tons de voix assommants; sage et posé en toutes choses; ne parlant jamais que bien à propos, point prompt à décider; point du tout exagérateur incommode; et, quelques beaux vers que nos poètes lui aient récités, je ne lui ai jamais ouï dire: "Voilà qui est plus beau que tout ce qu'à jamais fait Homère." Enfin, c'est un homme pour qui je me sens de l'inclination; et si j'étois princesse, il ne seroit pas malheureux. (II, iii)

In short, Sostrate is the image of the honnête homme of the seventeenth century, and stands out in admirable contrast to the rather unpleasant figures of the two suitors.

A striking fact about both major and minor characters in La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques is that, far from being the

mere stereotyped puppets which they so easily could have become, they are portrayed with a good deal of originality and a very definite lively quality. They are, moreover, in so many ways typical of the précieux society of seventeenth-century France in their attitudes towards love and marriage. These attitudes represent completely different ends of the scale, from the militant préciosité of the princess of Elide to the considerably more enlightened attitude of Eriphile in Les Amants magnifiques.

Let us now in summary consider the essential points of comparison and contrast between the two plays. An important element that both have in common is the pastoral setting. The 1682 edition of La Princesse d'Elide notes: "La scène est en Elide", and in Act II, scene i, the princess and Aglante describe the setting to us. Similarly the edition of Les Amants magnifiques of the same year says: "La scène est en Thessalie, dans la délicieuse vallée de Tempé", and in Act I, scene ii, Aristione proclaims: "La campagne a lieu de nous paroître belle, et... nous n'avons pas le temps de nous ennuyer dans cet agréable séjour qu'ont célébré tous les poètes sous le nom de Tempé."

Molière chose to use such settings for two main reasons. Firstly, he was following conventions of the time. Things pastoral were still very much in vogue -- the tone had been set by the pastoral novel so beloved of the précieuses and the salons, and there seems little doubt that Molière was catering to essentially précieux tastes. The vogue continued right through the eighteenth century -- witness Marie-Antoinette's hameau at Versailles. Secondly, of course, the settings were dictated to Molière by the very fêtes for which he was writing. It might be thought

that the settings are too artificial -- an evocation of nature dependent upon the art of the machiniste. This is not however the case. For one thing, since the plays were performed at Versailles and Saint-Germain-en-Laye respectively the settings were probably less artificial than they might appear to the reader. Actual trees and bushes could have been, and no doubt were, used.

It is also important to remember that the plays were written for a seventeenth-century audience. Although expressions of nature in literature had lost some of their force since the time of the Renaissance, contemporary audiences were able, even with the help of stereotyped and artificial symbols of nature, to summon up emotions which were enriched by their knowledge of the pastoral poetry of antiquity. Rivers, rocks and fields were seen as a fitting habitat for the satyrs, nymphs and naiades of the intermèdes. One could quote in this context the words of the princess in Act II, scene i, of La Princesse d'Elide:

Ces arbres, ces rochers, cette eau, ces gazons frais
Ont pour moi des appas à ne laisser jamais.
(331-332)

The style in both plays is wholly in keeping with the subject. As I have already tried to show in an earlier chapter, précieux language had become "le langage naturel de la galanterie", and it was inevitable that Molière should have used it.¹⁶ One could go through both plays picking out numerous quotations to illustrate préciosité of style. The reader is referred in particular to the following scenes in La Princesse

¹⁶ Supra, p. 20. See also Bauman, Molière, auteur précieux, p. 51.

d'Elide: Act I, scene i, where much of the précieux terminology of love is employed -- Arbate speaks of love as "les langueurs d'une plaie invincible", and mentions "les doux transports de l'amoureuse flamme"; Act II, scene i, for the important discussion on love between the princess, Aglante and Cynthie; Act III, scene iv, where the princess and Euryale speak of their attitudes towards marriage; likewise Act IV, scene ii, and of course the splendidly poetic prose of the princess's soliloquy (IV, vi), which should be read by anyone who thinks that true emotion can only be expressed in verse.

In Les Amants magnifiques, one could quote in particular Act I, scene i, where Sostrate speaks of the seeming futility of his passion; Act I, scene ii, for an extremely précieux exchange of dialogue between Aristione, Iphicrate, and Timoclès; Act II, scene iii, where the préciosité borders on marivaudage, as Eriphile constantly uses innuendo in referring to the state of her feelings for Sostrate without stating openly what they are; and of course Act IV, scene iv, where Eriphile and Sostrate take leave of each other.

In any one of these scenes between characters of antiquity we could quite easily be eavesdropping during a conversation in any of the contemporary salons. It would appear that there still existed, at court at least, a public d'élite which would applaud this kind of comédie-galante, that Molière realized the importance of this public, and that he did his best to provide them with the kind of plays which they would enjoy.

Apart from the settings and the strikingly précieux style there are certain obvious similarities in the action of the two plays. In both

plays, the action takes place among the nobility of an imaginary and stately world of antiquity. Farce has little place here, and even in the characters of the two fools it is considerably attenuated. Life is ordered and ceremonious. Emery speaks of La Princesse d'Elide as follows, and the quotation could just as easily be applied to Les Amants magnifiques:

...une comédie qui exclut le ridicule et doit conserver un ton très élevé. Dès lors, il n'est plus possible d'y introduire les effets de la rupture et les étincelants allegros dont nous avons vu maintes fois le rôle capital. Les personnages ne sauraient marcher et parler qu'avec cérémonie, d'autant plus qu'une étoffe assez courte doit s'étendre aux amples dimensions des cinq actes. La ligne de l'action est loin de nous présenter les descentes, les montées, les saccades et les reliefs dont nous avons pris l'habitude; elle est flexible, régulièrement balancée, elle ondule avec lenteur. 17

Moreover, in spite of differences in attitude on the part of the characters involved, the action is essentially the same in both plays. In each we have a woman placed between two suitors, who is expected to choose one of them, and yet who is attracted, willingly or not, to a third man. In intrigues of this kind, an author could so easily make use of equivocations, misunderstandings, and deceptions. The comedies of Marivaux in which ruse and dissimulation seem second nature to the characters at once spring to mind. This is not the case in the two plays by Molière under consideration. Euryale, in La Princesse d'Elide, finds it extremely difficult to play the rôle of a man who scorns love, and as the play progresses the princess, too, finds increasing difficulty in

¹⁷ Emery, op. cit., p. 52.

preserving what is essentially a façade in the sense that she, who has for so long opposed love, cannot, when she falls in love herself, immediately abandon all her former attitudes. Les Amants magnifiques goes even further along the road to clarity, to the extent that even uncertainty of feeling has little part to play. Both Eriphile and Sostrate at first attempt, for social reasons, to conceal their feelings, but they are unable to do so, and reveal them in spite of themselves.

The essential clarity of both plays seems to indicate a remarkably sane outlook on life on the part of the author. Emery puts it thus:

C'est de la comédie à ciel ouvert, et cette atmosphère pleine de franchise presque anormale dans un tel genre, est la marque d'un tempérament d'écrivain. Jamais personne n'eût l'esprit moins tortueux que Molière. 18

There is perhaps a suggestion behind this attitude that love, for Molière, was not the complicated, convention-bound affair that the précieuses made it out to be, but something far more free and open.

An important theme common to both works is that of the enlightened parent. It is obvious from many of his plays that Molière was opposed to the overbearing parents of his time who tried to force their own wishes on their offspring. We can find adequate proof of this opposition: in all his plays where the theme of marriage occurs innocent young love always triumphs over the intentions of the older generation. Molière, it seems, is presenting Iphitas in La Princesse d'Elide and Aristione in Les Amants

¹⁸Emery, op. cit., p. 56.

magnifiques as ideal, enlightened parents, and their respective relationships with their children as examples of the kind of relationships parents can establish with their children if they consider them as human beings with feelings of their own, rather than as mere pawns in the game of marriage. In this, too, Molière was almost certainly catering to the tastes of women of the time, many of whom, having themselves suffered under domineering parents, must have believed that Molière portrayed parents as they really ought to be.

Bearing the synopses of the plays and the analyses of the main characters in mind, can we now discern a basic major theme common to the two plays? The answer is a categorical yes. The main theme of both plays is one of attitudes towards marriage, and the action is almost wholly concerned with whether or not, and whom, the two heroines will in fact marry. There are, of course, certain basic differences in the attitudes of the two. In La Princesse d'Elide, the heroine's attitude almost to the end of the play is one of opposition to marriage, of opposition, indeed, to the male sex in general. At least this is true of her outward attitude -- in actual fact, she is far less sure of her inner feelings. Eriphile, on the other hand, in Les Amants magnifiques gives evidence of no such opposition. The only reason she does not want to marry is that she finds the two suitors uncongenial, and is thinking of marriage with someone from a station of life considerably lower than her own. This difference in rank, but for the intervention of the gods, would not have been an insurmountable obstacle for her.

The reasons why the two princesses are portrayed with such

diametrically opposed attitudes is not far to seek. There can be little doubt that Molière's chief message in these plays is that it is a good thing to be in love. This message is stated quite openly in the lines from the first intermède of La Princesse d'Elide:

Dans l'âge où l'on est aimable
Rien n'est si beau que d'aimer.

It is echoed by a chorus of shepherds and shepherdesses in Les Amants magnifiques who proclaim, in the third intermède:

Jouissons, jouissons des plaisirs innocents
Dont les feux de l'amour savent charmer nos sens.

This theme can, of course, be found in many of Molière's plays.

It is important to remember that he is thinking here of well-matched couples, and not the ill-assorted unions which so many of the parents in his plays try to inflict upon their offspring. Accordingly, intent on upholding his thesis of the essential desirability of love and marriage, Molière presents the princess of Elide as the negative side of the picture -- a satire of those militant précieuses who held the same ideal as she, whilst the positive side of the picture is Eriphile -- typical of the woman who is in love, and desires marriage. There is no reason why the précieuses should find her attitude necessarily disagreeable. True, the more militant faction who were opposed to marriage per se would probably attack it, but the majority of the précieuses were opposed only to the ill-assorted marriages which were apparently so common at the time. Their enormous interest in the ideal unions portrayed in contemporary novels is an indication that they did not consider the institution of marriage itself as evil.

In all of this, we are left in little doubt as to Molière's attitudes. He obviously disliked the kind of préciosité represented by the princess of Elide, and in having her succumb to Euryale he is certainly indicating that there are far better ideals in life than a violent guard kept over female gloire. There seems to be a suggestion also that men would do far better to assert themselves rather more instead of following every whim and dictate of their mistresses as so many of Molière's contemporaries in the salons were obviously prepared to do. The author insists, however, that men should treat women with respect and display a genuine love for them, as both Euryale and Sostrate do. He presents men like Euryale and Sostrate, typical of the honnête homme, as examples to be followed, rather than the other suitors. He is an ardent supporter of enlightened parenthood, and earnestly believes that marriage should be in the interests of the partners rather than of the parents.

Molière makes these points in two delightful plays. Both works are an expression of a précieux subject, and of précieux ideas which are developed in accordance with enlightened précieux tastes, in a précieux style, and obviously aimed at a précieux audience. This may be one reason why the plays never really enjoyed much popularity other than at court, where précieux attitudes reigned supreme. But préciosité has continued to the present day, and the plays contain such admirable characters that it seems a pity they should be so neglected. In the next chapter we shall trace the fortunes of the two works, discover what critics have had to say about them, and try to discern why they have never really had much success on stage.

CHAPTER V
SUCCESS AND FAILURE

By no stretch of the imagination could either La Princesse d'Elide or Les Amants magnifiques be described as popular works. In the course of his writing career Molière produced some thirty-two plays, all of which have become part of the répertoire of the Comédie Française in Paris. The total number of productions which a classical play has had at this greatest of French theatres is a useful indication of its success. Since 1692 when it became part of the repertory, La Princesse d'Elide has been produced only eighty-nine times, whilst Les Amants magnifiques, since 1688, has seen 181 productions. Only four plays by Molière have been presented on fewer occasions than La Princesse d'Elide: Mélicerte (fourteen), Le Médecin volant (forty-seven), La Jalousie du Barbouillé (four), and Dom Garcia de Navarre (two). To these must be added La Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes (167), L'Impromptu de Versailles (142) and Dom Juan (136), all of which figure lower in the production list than Les Amants magnifiques, though Dom Juan did not enter the repertory until 1847.¹

Equally indicative of the lack of success of these two plays is the fact that from 3rd January, 1757, to 30th May, 1946, there was not a single performance of La Princesse d'Elide. Les Amants magnifiques was even less favoured. It was never produced in Paris during Molière's lifetime, and after 17th November, 1704, there was no further performance until 20th October, 1954.

¹Performance figures accurate to 31.7.'60.

ADDENDUM TO p. 76

Since this thesis was typed, I have been able to obtain completely up-to-date figures for the performances of Molière's plays at the Comédie-Française, thanks to the kind assistance of Mme Sylvie Chevalley, the archivist and librarian of that venerable institution. This occasions certain corrections to the figures to be found on page 76. If we consider performances up to the 31st December 1966, there is a difference in the totals: Mélicerte increases from fourteen to twenty-two performances, while La Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes shows a marked increase from 167 to 241 performances, which places it ahead of Les Amants magnifiques in the production list. The figure for Dom Juan remains at 136, but there has been a reprise this year (1967) with thirty-nine performances up to 4th June 1967. Although this still leaves Dom Juan slightly behind Les Amants magnifiques in the production list, it is nevertheless evident that it is far more in the public eye than the comédie-ballet, and as Mme Chevalley said in her accompanying letter: "La mise en scène (of Dom Juan) a été très discutée et le succès public a été grand."

We have very few details concerning the first performance of La Princesse d'Elide. We know the names of the actors² but the Gazette for 21st May, 1664 (number sixty) has very little to say about the actual play, concerning itself mainly with the intermèdes:

On découvrit un fort beau et fort vaste théâtre, éclairé de quantité de lustres, et l'on y donna à Leurs Majestés le divertissement d'une comédie.... Outre que l'intrigue en étoit galante, elle fut entremêlée d'entrées de ballet, et de flûtes et de violons, en sorte que rien ne pouvoit être plus agréable ni plus divertissant que cette seconde journée.

There is absolutely no mention of either Molière or his troupe, but the play seems to have been well received.

After the first performance on 8th May, 1664, there was a reprise in July of the same year and four performances at Fontainebleau of which at least one was before Cardinal Chigi, legate from the Holy See, who apparently found the spectacle "tout à fait agréable et digne des plaisirs d'une Cour si galante".³ In August, 1669, the play was presented at Saint-Germain before the King and his guest, the prince of Tuscany. The Gazette for 7th September relates that the play was:

accompagnée de nouvelles entrées de ballets, dont la beauté charma toute la cour, ainsi que les changements de théâtre et les concerts qui rendoient ce spectacle des plus magnifiques.⁴

La Princesse d'Elide had its first public performance on Sunday,

² Gazette, 2 August, 1664. Quoted in Despois and Mesnard, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 94.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

9th November, 1664, and a fairly honourable run, for the time, of twenty-five performances, closing on Sunday, 4th January, 1665.⁵ There were no further performances until after Molière's death. The years 1692-1706 saw forty-two performances of the play, with thirty-three productions between 1716 and 1757.⁶ There was a royal command performance on 14th February, 1722, at which all the dancers from the Opéra participated in the intermèdes. The Mercure de France for that month relates:

Les principaux rôles de la Princesse d'Elide, du prince d'Ithaque et de Moron...viennent d'être remplis avec un applaudissement général par le sieur de la Thorillière, par le sieur Quinault et par la demoiselle Quinault, sa soeur.

(pp. 121-124)

The 4th December, 1728, saw a further royal command performance with the great Adrienne Lecouvreur playing the role of the princess. The second volume of the Mercure de France for December reads:

Le duc de la Trimouille...ordonna aux Comédiens-Français et à MM de Blamont, surintendant de la musique, et Balon, compositeur de ballets de SM, de remettre au théâtre, pour être représentée devant la Cour, la comédie héroïque de La Princesse d'Elide de Molière, avec tous ses intermèdes et agrémentsCela fut exécuté par les Comédiens du Roi et par les meilleurs sujets de l'Académie royale de musique dans le chant et dans la danse avec tout l'art et la magnificence qu'on peut concevoir, et à la satisfaction de Leurs Majestés et de toute la cour.⁷

⁵ See Lagrange's Registre. Edited by B. E. Young (Paris: Droz, 1947), pp. 70-72.

⁶ Full details of performances between 1703 and 1757, together with the number of spectators and receipts can be found in H. C. Lancaster, The Comédie-Française 1701-1774, Plays, Actors, Spectators, Finances (Philadelphia: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 1951), Vol. XLI, Part 4.

⁷ Quoted in Despois and Mesnard, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 97.

The play was presented at the Comédie-Française in 1756-1757, but it was probably unrecognizable, having been put into verse by an anonymous author. This would almost certainly account for its having only four performances at that time. After 1757 the play disappears from the boards. There was a charity performance on 23rd April, 1869, at the Grand Hôtel, but the next public performance was not until 30th May, 1946, when it was performed at the Comédie-Française with Jean-Louis Barrault in the part of Moron, and Mony Dalmès playing the princess. La Princesse d'Elide ran for fourteen performances, and has not been played since in Paris. There was, however, a rather magnificent production at the Lyon-Charbonnières festival in 1953. This was staged in the Roman theatre at Fourvière, and was done on the grand scale as the play was originally intended to be. The "stage" was fifty-four metres wide and 108 metres deep! Jean-Jacques Gautier writing in Théâtre de France said:

La comédie, le ballet, le spectacle, le divertissement se jouaient tout le temps, simultanément, à toutes les hauteurs et les distances, donnant ainsi, comme dans les tableaux anciens, l'impression de la perspective, de la fuite des lignes vers l'horizon. Et, comme dans ces tableaux, l'oeil, accroché par mille scènes diverses, ne sait où regarder, où se reposer. Le spectateur ravi n'a jamais fini de découvrir ce qu'il veut voir....En un mot, spectacle enchanteur, qui vaut d'abord par le choix du motif. 8

We have even fewer details of the first performance of Les Amants magnifiques than we do for La Princesse d'Elide. The Gazette for the period speaks in glowing terms of the splendour of the intermèdes but makes no mention of Molière or his troupe. We do not even have a record

⁸ Théâtre de France, 1953, Vol. III.

of the actors, other than that Molière played the rôle of Clitidas. However, from the praise accorded the whole fête by the Gazette it appears that the play must have been a considerable success.

After its first performance on 4th February, 1670, Les Amants magnifiques was presented four more times at court: on 13th February in the presence of Casimir, King of Poland; on 17th of the same month, and on 4th and 8th of March. Although the play was favourably received in royal circles, it was not performed in Paris until after Molière's death.

The 15th October, 1688, saw the first of ten performances in Paris at the Théâtre de l'Hôtel Guénégaud, and there were six more in the following year when the play achieved a certain amount of success. From 1690 to 1694 the play was presented twelve times, although it is no longer certain whether it was presented with or without the intermèdes.

In 1704 there was a reprise of the play, this time with completely new intermèdes furnished by Dancourt. According to the edition of his collected works, the first performance of the "new" play was 21st June, 1704,⁹ but Lancaster makes no mention of it before 11th July, 1704.¹⁰ Although the play was apparently unfavourably received, there were ten further performances in 1704, though by 27th July (ninth performance) the number of spectators had dropped to 204 (from 626 on 11th July). Thereafter for 250 years the play was not produced at all in Paris. It was revived on 20th October, 1954, at the Comédie-Française where it had a run of 141

⁹ Oeuvres de M. d'Ancourt, 2de édition (Paris: 1711), Vol. VI. Quoted in Despois, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 374.

¹⁰ Lancaster, op. cit., p. 609.

performances. Lulli's original scores were used, and new intermèdes were provided drawn from the Fables of La Fontaine. Under the direction of Jean Meyer, Clitidas was apparently admirably played by Robert Hirsch, with two great actresses, Annie Ducaux and Renée Faure in the rôles of Aristione and Eriphile. Paul-Louis Mignon commented on the production in Théâtre de France:

Les Amants magnifiques bien à leur place sur la scène de la Comédie-Française, ont illustré avec éclat un genre auquel Molière s'était particulièrement attaché, et qui est, à sa manière, du théâtre total. 11

The retired actress-scholar, Mme. Dussane, who was by this time theatre critic for Mercure de France, wrote a lengthy review of the play:

Nous aimons de nouveau cette brillante convention de la comédie-ballet, injustement délaissée pendant près de deux cents ans. Il y fallait, sans doute, les virtuosités de la machinerie moderne, et le talent des peintres. Nous y gagnons de retrouver une éblouissante synthèse de tous les arts du spectacle, et d'y voir, à l'occasion, s'épanouir certains textes, comme resplendit mieux la beauté d'une femme dans l'éclat d'une fête....Enfin, quand, parmi toute cette musique s'éploie la prose de Molière, elle nous apporte avec ses heureuses cadences, quelques scènes exquises et quasiment toutes neuves. On y trouve des reflets du Corneille tendre qui bientôt écrira Psyché, et à d'autres endroits Marivaux s'annonce, celui du Prince travesti comme celui de la Mère confidente. Si l'on ajoute à tout cela la beauté et la grâce des interprètes...on jugera la Comédie amplement justifiée d'avoir osé ce spectacle exceptionnel. 12

It can be seen that it was at the court, for which the plays were written, that they enjoyed their greatest success. The reasons for this

¹¹Vol. V, 1954.

¹²Mercure de France, 1st December, 1954.

are not far to seek. In part it is because, as we have seen, these plays cater to essentially précieux tastes which remained more in fashion in courtly circles. However, there is a far more basic reason why the plays were never very popular in town -- they were never presented as splendidly as at court. The cost of putting on plays seems to have mattered very little to Louis XIV, and no details were spared in an attempt to please him. In any case, the amounts given to a troupe of actors must have seemed negligible in comparison with the fortunes that were flowing into the construction of Versailles. Naturally enough, Molière seized the opportunity of presenting his plays under these excellent conditions. He had elaborate settings at his disposal, and costly machines for the intermèdes. When it came to presenting the plays in Paris it was quite another matter. The cost of production would leave only a narrow margin of profit, and there were many mouths to feed in the troupe. It is hardly surprising that Molière and his fellow-actors preferred to present established money makers which could be produced on a shoestring budget when they had no royal finances to fall back on.

For an example of the financial differences between royal and public performances we can refer to Lagrange's Registre. When the troupe presented La Princesse d'Elide before Cardinal Chigi, they received 3,000 livres from the King¹³ (and were, of course, fed and housed during their stay at Fontainebleau). The performance in Paris on Tuesday, 9th December, 1664, brought in only 233 livres, and the average takings for one night

¹³ See Registre, Edited by Young, p. 68..

during the play's twenty-five performances in 1664-1665 was only 611 livres, out of which all extraordinary expenses for costumes, machines and the rest had to be met.

Moreover, performances in town were unduly cramped by the exceedingly small stages of contemporary theatres, with chairs for spectators still on the stage. The original productions were in spacious royal gardens, well-lit, and with plenty of room for free movement. Even the better-lit and more spacious stages of modern theatres are far from ideal for productions of this sort. Le Breton speaks of this in his article on the comédies-ballets:

Ils supposaient un cadre qu'aucun de nos théâtres ne peut suppléer, celui d'une résidence royale ou princière, celui d'un jardin dessiné par Le Nôtre et qui devenait le décor de la pièce ou tout au moins un élément essentiel de son décor. 14

The main reason for the lack of success of the two plays in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the Paris stage was financial -- they simply were not a paying proposition, and to present them without the costly intermèdes and away from their original settings would be to detract considerably from their charm. Voltaire realized this, and wrote: "On a depuis représenté La Princesse d'Elide à Paris, mais elle ne put avoir le même succès dépouillé de tous ses ornements et des circonstances heureuses qui l'avaient soutenue."¹⁵

We must look for other reasons for their marked unpopularity in

¹⁴ Le Breton, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁵ Quoted in Despois and Mesnard, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 106.

the nineteenth century, when there was not a single performance of either play from 1800-1900, nor indeed for the first half of the present century. In a country which could afford to build such a palatial Opéra; lack of production could hardly be ascribed to financial difficulties, and there were gifted machinistes who could have taken charge of this aspect of the plays. The main reason, of course, is that in that age of Molière scholarship the comédies-ballets were considered unworthy of France's greatest comic author. It was felt that he wrote them under pressure, and himself considered them unimportant trifles. In Chapter II of this thesis I have tried to show that this was far from being the case. It is only as the present century has progressed and critics have come to realize that plays like La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques are an integral part of Molière's work that they have again been seen on stage.

Finally, let us briefly consider what various critics have had to say about these two plays. Molière's contemporaries made little reference to either work. Marigny reported that those who saw the first performance of La Princesse d'Elide found a message in the play, as well as being entertained by it:

Toute l'assemblée sortit charmée de ce divertissement; les dames avouèrent de bonne foi que l'on avoit découvert dans la comédie le véritable moyen de les ramener à la raison, lorsqu'elles font les difficiles et les farouches; les cavaliers jurèrent de se servir plutôt de cet expédient que de se pendre de désespoir pour la plus belle Anaxarète de la terre. 16

In the eighteenth century, Voltaire's judgement on La Princesse

¹⁶Quoted in Despois, op. cit., p. 258.

d'Elide was quite harsh. The audiences at court, he claimed, were far from discriminating, and would tolerate plays which were quite unacceptable in Paris. He then goes on to say:

Le genre sérieux et galant n'était pas le génie de Molière; et cette espèce de poème, n'ayant ni le plaisant de la comédie ni les grandes passions de la tragédie, tombe presque toujours dans l'insipidité,¹⁷

a remark which seems to indicate an inability to penetrate beneath the upper surface of the play.

Nineteenth-century critics, as we have seen, tend to condemn the comédies-ballets out of hand, and it is only in the first half of this century that there have been voices prepared to speak out in their favour. However, it could certainly not be claimed that critics have reached a state of agreement. Ramon Fernandez in his Molière, the Man seen through the Plays¹⁸ writes of the Princesse d'Elide: "It is a mediocre comedy, all on a dead level, though of a dainty turn; after promising to be Shakespeare or Marivaux, it breaks its promises without causing us any unbearable sorrow." Jouanny, on the other hand, suggests that Molière has imprinted upon the play the mark of originality.¹⁹

On the whole, modern critics have been kinder towards Les Amants magnifiques than to La Princesse d'Elide, though we still have a choice between the condemnation of J. D. Hubert ("more spectacular than literary")²⁰

¹⁷Quoted in Despois, op. cit., p. 106.

¹⁸New York: Hill and Wang, 1958, p. 121.

¹⁹Jouanny, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 576.

²⁰J. D. Hubert, Molière and the Comedy of Intellect (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. xiii.

or Jouanny's statement ("malgré quelques tentatives de réhabilitation... la pièce est morte pour nous"),²¹ and the praises of A. J. Guibert ("un modèle de finesse et de charme")²² or Emery's reference to the play as "une des créations les plus parfaites de Molière".²³

Certainly the most spirited defence of Les Amants magnifiques came from Gonzague Truc writing in the Revue bleue for 1922. He speaks of a play "sacrifiée dès son temps, à peine à demi-ressuscitée du nôtre à l'occasion de nos réjouissances, et qui ne mérite pas tant de dédain" (p. 181). He relates how biographers and literary historians have neglected this work because Molière himself chose never to present it at Paris, and because productions subsequent to his death were a failure. Truc poses the question: "N'a-t-on pas étouffé ainsi une chose exquise, écrite avec une grâce et une délicatesse toutes singulières?" He mentions the careful character portrayal in the play, and pleads for its production, ending with the suggestion that the play is as typical of Molière as anything he ever wrote -- a point which too many critics seem to have missed. In the concluding chapter we shall try to discover in what ways the two plays are typical of Molière, whether they should be considered as pure entertainment or a combination of entertainment and social criticism, and, lastly, their considerable influence on later developments in the French theatre.

²¹ Op. cit., Vol. II, p. 380.

²² Bibliographie des Oeuvres de Molière (Paris: CNRS, 1962), Vol. I, p. 430.

²³ Op. cit., p. 55.

CHAPTER VI

DEFENCE

At the beginning of this thesis, I suggested that, although we must not ignore the didactic element in Molière's theatre, we must remember that his chief aim in writing was to amuse. This, of course, is particularly true of both La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques. However, Emery is going too far when he writes:

La cour royale de 1670 avait raison en somme de voir dans Les Amants magnifiques seulement ce que Molière voulait qu'elle voie, un beau spectacle noble et majestueux, plaisant et fin. Et tel doit bien rester en définitive le jugement vrai sur cet échantillon accompli de l'art monarchique. ¹

Gonzague Truc comes closer to the truth when he says of Les Amants magnifiques: "Cette chose, Molière n'a pu se résigner à la composer sans rester Molière...et sans la doubler d'un tableau de mœurs."² This is further echoed by Jouanny who says of the 1954 production of the play: "Elle amusa aussi par instants l'esprit de ceux qui découvraient là, sous les arabesques poétiques d'un poète en service commandé, leur franc Molière de toujours."³

Admittedly both plays are highly amusing, and, if properly presented, very entertaining, but this should not blind us to the considerable elements of social criticism which they both contain.

¹Op. cit., p. 59.

²Op. cit., p. 182.

³Op. cit., Vol. II, p. 380.

Certain of these elements have been dealt with in Chapter IV -- the attack on the kind of préciosité which was militant against love, the suggestion that men should stand up for themselves, though not ceasing to treat women with every respect, the statement that love and marriage are natural, but only if both partners are suited to each other, and, of course, the plea for parents to be enlightened and not to interfere in the marriage of their children. In these two plays, as in all his works, Molière was very much aware of the realities of life around him. There are, however, two very important elements of criticism which we have not yet considered; both of these occur in Les Amants magnifiques, the more socially conscious of the two plays.

Firstly, there is an obvious statement from Molière that marriage between persons of different rank is quite permissible providing that each partner is worthy of the other. Sostrate, a humble army general, marries princess Eriphile purely on his own merits and through his own valour. In Molière's century, to say that a man's character was more important than his rank was almost revolutionary. The standard attitude of the time is best seen in the two rejected suitors in Les Amants magnifiques.

A very important element of criticism in Les Amants magnifiques is directed against astrology and astrologers which here take the place of the doctors and criticism of the medical profession to be found in other Molière plays. Despois and Mesnard write in their notice to the play: "Une ingénieuse satire vient encore une fois marquer de traits plus forts une légère et rapide esquisse dramatique, y ajouter un intérêt

plus sérieux."⁴ Superstitious belief in astrology was still rife in French society in the seventeenth century and nowhere more than in upper-class and court circles. Nor can we of the twentieth century afford to mock when we consider the continued popularity of newspaper horoscopes. Only two years before the first performance of Les Amants magnifiques, La Fontaine had written in one of his fables:

Charlatans, faiseurs d'horoscopes,
Quittez les cours des princes de l'Europe.⁵

And in a letter written to Lionne in 1666, Retz used a phrase which would have delighted Molière: "Les médecins et les astrologues sont presque à bout sur la maladie du Pape, et il paroît que les uns n'en ont guère plus de connaissance que les autres."⁶ Other examples can be found for which the reader is referred to Despois and Mesnard.⁷ To see how admirably Molière satirizes the astrologers we need only turn to Sostrate's speech (III, i), which is a useful indication of the sort of things of which seventeenth-century society believed astrologers capable. And, of course, Molière seizes every opportunity throughout the play to have either Sostrate, Eriphile or Clitidas poke fun at Anaxarque. He must have realized that astrologers were just as dangerous spiritually as so-called doctors were physically, and he consequently raises a voice in protest.

Finally, it is obvious that we cannot leave aside from consideration

⁴Op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 369.

⁵Book II, xiii, "L'Astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits."

⁶Quoted in Despois and Mesnard, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 371.

⁷Op. cit., Vol. VII, pp. 371-372.

the influence which these two plays, and in particular Les Amants magnifiques have had on subsequent developments in French literature, especially the work of Marivaux.

Numerous critics have commented on the connection between Molière and Marivaux, although this connection only seems to have been discovered in the first part of the nineteenth century. The theory was first proposed by Auger in his commentary on Molière (1819-1825). As a good disciple of Voltaire, who attacked Marivaux quite bitterly, Auger was scandalized to think that Molière could possibly have been a source for the later dramatist:

Quelle est l'explication de cet étrange phénomène? Je vais essayer de la donner. Molière, jeté deux fois hors des voies de la bonne comédie, et transporté, comme de force, dans le domaine de la galanterie romanesque, essaya de parler la langue du pays et eut le triste avantage d'y réussir. En l'absence de l'amour naïf et des sentiments naturels il développa la théorie subtile et quintessenciée de l'amour métaphysique; à la place des discours énergiquement passionnés, il mit les entretiens froidement polis et spirituels; aux mots de caractère et de situation, il substitua les phrases fines et recherchées; aux saillies d'une gaieté vive et franche, les traits d'une plaisanterie froide et contrainte. Toutefois, si la gloire pouvait en tirer quelque lustre, si plutôt elle n'avait besoin de s'en excuser, je dirais qu'il fit mieux que personne dans un genre où il est impossible de faire bien. Qu'est-il arrivé cependant? Marivaux, porté par l'instinct vers ce même genre que Molière n'avait traité qu'involontairement, Marivaux, parmi toutes les productions de l'auteur du Misanthrope, du Tartuffe, des Femmes savantes, n'a vu que la Princesse d'Elide et les Amants magnifiques qui méritassent d'être imités par lui. 8

Auger, of course, was hopelessly prejudiced, failing to see that La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques were as much an integral

⁸Quoted by Pellisson, op. cit., pp. 110-111.

part of Molière as everything else he wrote.

Later critics have been far less biased. Ramon Fernandez writes of Les Amants magnifiques: "The mechanistic psychology of Marivaux evinces itself here in sharp definition, already aglitter with the sensual polish in which the eighteenth century specialized",⁹ and Rigal echoes this:

Comme dans les pièces de Marivaux, dans les Fausse Confidences surtout, qui ressemblent aux Amants magnifiques, il faut forcer deux amours discrets à se trahir; et la finesse, la subtilité de bon aloi que Marivaux a fait baptiser de son nom le marivaudage, Molière la montre déjà ici dans une large mesure.¹⁰

Indeed, it would be difficult to deny the connection if we consider what Marivaux himself wrote of his plays:

J'ai guetté dans le coeur humain toutes les niches différentes où peut se cacher l'amour lorsqu'il craint de se montrer, et chacune de mes comédies a pour objet de la faire sortir d'une de ces niches.

Is this not precisely what happens in both the plays by Molière which we are considering? In La Princesse d'Elide the niche is one of pride and amour-propre, in Les Amants magnifiques of difference in rank, but in each case love is forced to come out and declare itself.

In his "théâtre d'amour", all Marivaux really did was to repeat with a thousand variations, changes and subtleties, situations which were treated more soberly and with less marivaudage in the Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques. As Donnay says: "Marivaux voulait s'éloigner

⁹Op. cit., p. 177.

¹⁰E. Rigal, Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1908), Vol. II, p. 86.

de Molière; il s'en éloignait comme une rivière s'éloigne de sa source."¹¹

La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques themselves form a "théâtre d'amour" within the much wider framework of Molière's plays. They are a first successful attempt to portray love with all its doubts and uncertainties and joys, and Molière's influence can be traced through further developments in French literature. Despois and Mesnard refer to this in their notice to Les Amants magnifiques:

Régnard, LeSage, dans la grande route qu'ils ont trouvée ouverte, Marivaux, Beaumarchais, quelque voie nouvelle qu'ils aient cherchée, leurs successeurs aussi, n'ont pu ne pas rencontrer et suivre maintes fois les traces de Molière, qui, depuis le jour où elles se sont marquées si profondément, ont été faciles à reconnaître jusque dans les moindres parcelles du champ de la comédie française. 12

It is strange that La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques which contain such admirably drawn characters and such interesting material, and have won comparison with the still popular productions of Marivaux, Beaumarchais and Musset, should be virtually ignored by producers and critics alike, and not least by students of Molière. It is no exaggeration to say that these are good plays, enjoyable as texts even without the music and visual elements which would add so much to them in production. And yet, they are only too obviously neglected. One can only think that the reason for this neglect is that so much emphasis

¹¹ M. Donnay, Molière (Paris: Fayard, 1911), p. 309.

¹² Op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 373.

has been placed on Molière, author of the great plays, that we tend to forget that in lesser works like La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques there is much that is typical of France's greatest comic author. The last word in defence of the two plays must in fairness go to Gonzague Truc -- one of the few critics who have been prepared to speak out loudly in their favour. His praise of Les Amants magnifiques in this closing passage is equally applicable to La Princesse d'Elide:

Et qu'on ne m'accuse pas d'avoir fait la part trop belle à une oeuvre un peu spéciale et de circonstance, et de vouloir à tout prix, sur une vieille matière, dire du nouveau. Tout Molière est encore dans cette fantaisie de Molière. Il y montre ce sens des caractères qui lui permet, comme dans le Misanthrope, de se passer d'action, ou, comme ici, d'utiliser la fable la plus banale; il y fait entendre ce langage savoureux qui a eu pour lui jusqu'ici la défaveur des pédants ou des délicats; il dresse une fois de plus le bon sens, le bon sens fondé sur l'entente, l'observation et la méditation de la vie, contre les engouements de l'ignorance, de l'insouciance et de la frivolité; il enseigne en divertissant et sans détourner, en faveur de la morale, un atome du divertissement. Il apparaît enfin, dans cette somptueuse et fine bagatelle, ce qu'il est, si grand et si prenant parce qu'il ajoute aux qualités les plus hautes de l'esprit, cette vertu suprême de l'homme, la bonté. 13

¹³ Op. cit., p. 183.

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