AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF THE VALET DE COMEDIE

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF THE VALET DE COMEDIE AND HIS EMANCIPATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The role of the *valet de comédie* was, until the Revolution, one of the most widely employed and one of the oldest traditions of the French theatre. The famous monologue of Figaro, in *le Mariage de Figaro*, was his swan song, for Figaro was the last to fulfil this role. We propose to trace the life of this dramatic character from his earliest days until his disappearance, discussing most particularly the role of the valet in relation to the role of the common man in society.

We do not presume to suggest that any dramatist deliberately used this often minor character to paint a valid picture of contemporary society. We would merely suggest that, by a study of the role of valet, one can frequently observe definite changes in social patterns. Sometimes, when a dramatist was attempting to show reality in his play, he eliminated the role of valet altogether, as being as of such minor importance that he would have no interest to the audience. This in itself is indicative of the attitude of the upper classes towards those beneath them. Sometimes, quite unintentionally, as we are sure was the case of Dancourt and Regnard, the reality of the audacity of the valet and his self-interest is all too obvious to a modern reader.

Most authors, inadvertently or otherwise, expose to

their readers or to their audiences, their own attitudes towards their fellow man. The origin of the role of the "running slave", the forebear of the _valet de comédie_, was directly attributable to the declining religious beliefs of the Middle Greek period. Since the Greeks no longer expected the Gods to manage the action of their plays (the scepticism of the period cast considerable doubt on the efficacy, or even the existence, of the Gods) they were forced to look elsewhere. Who else would work without thought of reward, with utter devotion, and with the skill necessary to accomplish what the noble Greek could not, except the slave, a fixture in every household. The Gods could be beseeched for help, or bribed with sacrifices and offerings, but the slave could be commanded. Thus was the menial role of the clever, hardworking jack-of-all-trades servant created.

All of the slave's characteristics, including his brushes with the law and his fear of reprisals if all did not go well, were ultimately transmitted, with overtones of the _Commedia dell'Arte_, to the _valet de comédie_. Yet, whereas the slave was in reality unable to change his status, was enslaved in every sense of the word, the _valet de comédie_ was, ostensibly, a free man. In sixteenth or seventeenth century France he could not, theoretically, be summarily sent to the galleys, or condemned to work the treadmill at the whim of his master. His life - or death - did not rest wholly in the hands of the man who employed him.

But despite the artificiality of his role, the mask he wore to distinguish him from men of quality, and his traditional costume, as essential as the short white tunic and the _bonnet d'esclave_ of the slave, underneath the mask was a real man, a free man, with the needs and expectations of all men. This man underneath the mask was not, however, recognised by the dramatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In all the comedies written in the traditional manner, the valet is treated with no more consideration for his personal life or his dignity as a man than if he were still a slave.

There are a few exceptions. Pierre Corneille, attempting a new type of comedy, wrote in a realistic vein, with understandably human characters, in believable situations. Since a servant was not considered sufficiently interesting, or perhaps worthy, to be portrayed on stage, in such realistic comedies the _valet de comédie_ is excluded completely. [1] Molière, whose greatest contribution to the French theatre was the perfection of a truly national comedy, replaced the _valet de comédie_ by the sensible, garrulous, down-to-earth female servant, unimpressed by pomp and circumstance, and with an every-ready wit. He retained the valet in only the most traditional of his farces or comedies. The valets of Molière have style and personality, but they are no more human than their predecessors in the plays of Larivey or Belleau, they are, once again, masks, not men.

That the valets, and by inference, the common man,

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1. a _servante_ or a _nourrice_ is frequently substituted for the traditional valet role.

accepted the status quo is not in question. No trace of genuine concern for a change of situation creeps into the usual valet-type complaints, which are mostly concerned with the satisfaction of physical needs.

However, as the glories of the reign of the Sun King faded, the misery of the menu peuple became too great to bear in silence. In real life there was wide-spread dissatisfaction among the people. There also appears in the comedies of the last years of the reign of Louis XIV, more than a hint that the valet (and as such, the representative of the common man) can change his situation, by using cunning and skill not, as heretofore, in the service of his master, but for his own ends. The daring of a Crispin, or the outright robbery of a Frontin, give a very clear picture of the type of society in which such men could move upwards. Clothed in their traditional garb, playing their traditional role, they nevertheless managed to break out of their rigid mold and show initiative and determination on their own behalf.

As early as 1635 the law had taken upon itself to restrict the scope of the valet in real life, and to put him firmly in his place. In that year a Règlement général pour la police de Paris issued this injunction.

"Faisons défenses à tous pages, laquais et hommes-de-chambre de porter aucunes épées, bâtons, ni armes offensives et deffensives, à peine de la hard". [1] Apparently the

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[1] Gaston Deschamps, Marivaux, p. 170.

restraints placed upon them did not alter the trend towards emancipation. The paper empire of John Law and the Compagnie du Mississippi provided ample opportunity for nobles, bourgeois and even valets, who could, by honest or dishonest means come by a sufficient sum of money to invest, the opportunity to multiply their investment overnight, or to lose their entire fortune. In real life the valet, like LeSage's Crispin or Frontin, found finance the road to an improved social condition, and becoming more and more insolent became the subject of another edict prohibiting the carrying of arms. Issued in 1719, this edict also added restrictions as to their manner of dress. "On leur prohiba les vestes de soie ou brodées, les bas de soie, les galons d'or ou d'argent, (hormis sur les chapeaux). On défendit à tous serviteurs, sauf aux Suisses des églises, de porter des cannes. Les infractions étaient condamnés au carcan, et en cas de recidive, aux galères". [1] The valet was obviously getting ideas above his station and needed to be put firmly in his place.

From this point on comedy takes a distinctly different direction, away from the comedy of intrigue to the comedy of manners, to the new comédie larmoyante, and eventually right away from comedy all together to the drame bourgeois. The reign of the philosophes had begun, and the inherent goodness of natural man, the need for a re-evaluation of good bourgeois values as opposed to the

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1. Marc Monnier, Les Aïeux de Figaro, p. 221.

continuing abuse of privilege and immoral behaviour of the aristocrats of the Court became the prime subject of all kinds of writers. Sermonising became the order of the day, although religion did not enter into it, and playwrights juggled their actors and actresses to demonstrate their views.

Such noble sentiments, echoed in the comedies of Destouches, Nivelle de la Chaussée and Sedaine, might give the casual reader the impression that this is real life, that reason has prevailed and that the common man has at last been given his place in the sun. Quite the contrary. His lot is the same as ever - to work all his days with little reward, to test his hand at many different jobs, only to find that those with the upper hand, the ruling classes, the aristocracy, can manipulate him at will, like a puppet on a string, make him or break him, use prestige and wealth to silence him or ruin him, toy with him or ignore him. This was life as even Beaumarchais himself, a man of extraordinary talents, found it, fraught with injustice and prejudice, a game of chance in which the loaded dice are in the hands of the nobility.

Thus, in an unreal situation, in the most artificial of plots, with Commedia dell'Arte masks on all sides, we finally see portrayed on the comic stage a valet who embodies the real spirit of his age, whose complaints are not about hunger or second-hand livery, or the wearisome waiting for an inveterate gambler to return from

a night at the tables, but about basic human rights, which have been denied him. This is Figaro's claim to immortality, that he speaks for all mankind, against oppression and prejudice, against favouritism and a partisan system of justice. Le Mariage de Figaro was an immediate and outstanding success, but the audience, including the members of the aristocracy, who laughed and applauded the wit and the humour of the play, missed the truth of Figaro's statement and underestimated the deep discontent it illustrated only too well. Speaking for himself, Beaumarchais was speaking for all men. It is very easy to look back and point out what appears obvious to a twentieth century audience, that this was the ultimate reality, not the self-righteous moralising of Figaro's immediate predecessors. Had the eighteenth century audience been more perceptive, the holocaust of 1789 might yet have been avoided.

CHAPTER I

ORIGINS OF THE VALET DE COMEDIE

The quick-witted valet of the French theatrical comedy did not spring fully-fledged on to the Parisian stage. He was part of a continuing dramatic tradition which had its origins in the Greek theatre of the New Period, represented by the dramatist Menander. Although only fragments of Menander's original works remain we have in the plays of Plautus and Terence, translations and adaptions which throw a good deal of light on the original works.

The Greek Comedy of the earliest period, dating from the fifth century B.C., has been handed down to us in the works of Aristophanes, of whose fifty-five or so comedies, eleven remain intact, with numerous fragments of others. In this Early Greek Comedy, contemporary political figures were frequently the target of Aristophanes' satire, particularily Cleon, the radical demagogue, who appears in several plays, most notably The Knights. Liberal ideas on education and philosophy were also a prime target for the poet's wit, with Socrates, for example, caricatured in The Clouds, and the popular courts parodied in The Wasps. Aristophanes was not loth to attack current mythological concepts as is evident by

his treatment of the Gods in Cloudcukooland. The Peloponnesian War was vigorously assailed in The Peace and Lysistrata, in both of which his pacifist attitude is very pronounced.

There was no love interest,, little intrigue, in the plays of Aristophanes. They were more of a platform for his own views on life. Written with a specific target in mind, the Chorus, which was an essential part of his work, reinforced his opinions by pointing out to the audience just where he wished to emphasise a point, and although the other side of the picture was also portrayed the Aristophanic point of view was clearly the only reasonable one. These choral passages are among the most poetic of all that Arisophanes wrote,but his language is, throughout the play, always full of wit, puns, topical allusions, caricature and comic invention.

In the last extant play by Aristophanes, The Plutus, we find a direct link with Middle Comedy, for the Chorus disappeared, and the characters and the plot must reveal the author's ideas. The play still, however, retains the Early Greek Comedy interest in mythology and the Gods, this time portraying Plutus, the blind God of Wealth.

The early Greek devotion to the Gods, and the concept of the Gods in human form, led to the widespread use of Gods, in the theatre, to lead the action. A God could, unlike a man, accomplish anything. Dionysus, in Aristophanes'The Frogs, descends to the underworld to

choose one of the dead to help the Athenians. He leads Aeschylus back to life after a series of very human encounters. The God thus fullfilled the role of meneur d'intrigue, promoting the action and affecting the ultimate solution.

Writing in the latter part of the third century B.C. Menander, the dramatist of Middle Greek Comedy, abandoned the Chorus completely, and ultimately eliminated the Gods from the stage as well, in keeping with the current trend away from the ancient religions. He became the first to introduce stock characters into Greek Comedy, ordinary people with ordinary roles to play. Among these stock characters appeared the clever servant, for example, the bashful cook, and the talkative woman. These characters, who had no place within the dignified atmosphere of Tragedy, became part of the fabric of dramatic comedy, where they lend themselves readily to laughter.

Other characters from all walks of life, the pimp, the parasite, the slave trader, were slowly added to the Dramatis Personae of Greek comedy as it developed over the years from the abstract or philisophical approach of Aristophanes, to the more realistic and critical approach of the prosaic world the writer saw around him.

It is in this context that the slave, later to appear as the valet (in spite of minor changes due to differences in time, country and civilisation, he is

essentially, the same person) first makes his appearance. Jack of all trades, the slave was indispensable, an integral part of every household, essential to the smooth operation of all aspects of daily life. Owning nothing, being nothing, except by the grace or whim of his master, he had no self-interest but to live with as little trouble as possible. Beneath contempt, having no value as a person, he was treated as a piece of furniture, an object, listening in to the most private and intimate conversations, part of the res privata of the family. Nevertheless, it is he who activates the plot in these plays as the Gods had done in earlier times, for it is frequently he and he alone who knows how to get things done. While the young master stands by wringing his hands in desperation, his slave is plotting, by devious means, to further his master's ends. Enslaved, he has no ambitions of his own.

With no axe to grind, the slave can associate himself freely with any of his masters, the young or the old. But it is always with the young that he aligns himself, plotting against the old man, to bring about the happy ending demanded of comedy. In what Northrop Frye calls the mythos of spring[1] the young must always be united at the end of the comedy, to form a new society and to procreate. To ensure that life goes on, the new must constantly replace the old. The reason for this universal design lies, according-

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[1] Comedy-Meaning and Form, edited and introduction by Robert W. Corrigan (San Fransisco, Chandler) p.141

ing to those who view comedy from an anthropological point of view, in the origins of comedy itself, which comes from the Greek Comos, a word relating to the ancient village festivals associated with spring fertility rites. Coarse jests and lewd actions, including the display of a giant phallus, characterised the rituals. Refined through the years, dramatic comedy has nevertheless retained this aspect of the most ancient revels, and the slave, like the author of the comedy himself, must dedicate himself to youth and to the continuance of the race.

The question of pride in his abilities might also be raised here. Frequently more cunning, more intelligent and infinitely more able than his master, the slave can feel a certain amount of pride in outwitting the old master, in pitting his wits against the scheming slave trader, in raising money where none is to be had - in doing, in fact, the impossible. Pride is the one thing the slave can call his own, and frequently pride in his accomplishments is his only reward.

This then was the situation of the slave in real life and in the theatre, where first Menander, and later Plautus, in imitation of the Greek, brought him on to the stage. Plautus' play Amphitryon, adapted from Menander, is an illustration of the bridge between Middle and New Greek comedies, since, for the last time a God appears on stage in person, and at the same time a slave is depicted in his new role. Jupiter, accompanied by his son Mercury, descends to

earth to seduce Alkmena, the wife of Amphitryon, who is completely faithful to her husband. It is in the guise of Amphitryon that Jupiter finally satisfies his desires, and assures the birth of the demi-God Hercules. Yet, in the tradition of the New Comedy, there is a humorous portrayal of Sosia, the slave of Ampyitryon, a cowardly, lazy drunkard, who is impudent when all is going well, grumbling when he has to work hard, and cringing before the inevitable beatings of his master. While he does nothing to promote the action of the play, he does add considerably to the comedy.

In the plays of Plautus as a whole, the role of the slave is clearly defined - he is there to serve. Whether he does so out of affection or loyalty is doubtful. Negative reinforcement would appear to be the key phrase - if he <u>does</u> serve his master well then he will <u>not</u> be beaten. The slave, who has not even the dignity of a name, expresses this very well in the <u>Pot of Gold</u> (Aulularia):

> I am a good slave, I am. I think a good slave should do as I have always tried to do - serve his master without hesitation or complaint. Any slave that wants to please his master should put hismaster's good first and his own last. He should never forget that he is a slave - not even when he's asleep. For instance, if his master is in love, as my young master is, and if he sees that love is getting him down, it's his duty in my opinion, to rescue him from danger, not push him over the brink. [1]

The good slave goes on to compare the slave to a life preserver for his master, insisting he should anticipate

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1 Plautus <u>The Pot of Gold and other Plays</u>, translated E.F.Watling, (Baltimore, Penguin) p.32

his master's every whim. The picture is one of utter devotion to his master. But the final sentence puts a different complexion on the matter:

> That way he'll save himself a dose of the strap - and won't find himself putting a polish on a nice pair of fetters. [1]

Pseudolus (the liar) in the play of the same name, is the first in a long line of slave/valets that leads on through Scapin, Crispin and Arlequin to Figaro, all of whom are of sufficient importance to warrant their name being used in the title of the play. He is the chief character; it is his cunning that saves the day, and well he knows it:

> Wheresoever we may grapple with the adversary - and I say this my friends in the confidence inspired by the valour of my forebears, by my own determination and my unscrupulous villany - victory is certain, deception will despoil and defeat the enemy. [2]

Pseudolus' master, Calidorus, leaves everything to the slave with the utmost confidence, and without a great deal of gratitude,

> Oh he's a living marvel. He's my _chargé d'affaires_. He has undertaken to bring off the scheme I told you of [3]

-knowing full well that all of Pseudolus' time and talent will be directed towards

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[1]Plautus _The Pot of Gold and other Plays_, p.33

[2]_Ibid_. p. 239

[3]_Ibid_. p.244

helping his master.

Messenio, in the Menaechmi, is another slave utterly devoted to his master, but like the slave in the Pot of Gold he reveals the other side of the picture, the fate that awaits those who do not serve their masters willingly and well:

"It's the mark of a good slave, I always say,- one who can be trusted to watch and provide for his master's welfare, plan and organise his affairs - that he attends to his master's business just as well in his master's absence as in his presence, or better. Every right-thinking slave ought to value his own back more than his own throat, look after his shins rather than his belly. He'll remember, if he has any sense, how their masters reward worthless, idle, and dishonest slaves; floggings, chains, the treadmill, sweating, starving, freezing stiff - that's what you get for laziness. I'd rather take the trouble to keep out of that sort of trouble. That's why I've decided to be a good slave, not a bad one. I can bear a lash of the tongue more easily than the lash of the whip, and I'd much rather eat corn than grind it. So I do as my master tells me, carry out his orders in an efficient and orderly manner; and I find it pays me. . . . Anyway, that's my idea of service - making sure my own back doesn't suffer." [1]

In the six plays of Terence, the slave is set in what is by now a stock role. Davus, in the Woman of Andros, is a wily slave, torn between fear of his old master, Sino,

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[1] Plautus, The Pot of Gold and other Plays, p .138

and a desire to help his young master Pamphilus, helpless and hopeless without the aid of his trusty slave. The name Davus re-appears as that of a slave in Phormio, one of the most nearly typical of the plays of the Roman Theatre. It has love intrigue, mild social satire, rapid and witty dialogue, and a series of stock characters, the lovelorn young man, the old father (stubborn and self-willed, but not unkind), the shrewish wife, the pimp, the parasite, and the clever slave. While the action revolves around Phormio, the pimp, it is the slave Geta who shows real concern for his master, who thinks up ways of solving his problems rather than escaping from the situation, which he could have done. Loyal to the old master who left him in charge of the boys, he nevertheless sympathizes with the young master, Antipho, to such an extent that he puts Antipho's happiness before his own desires to escape:

> If it weren't for him, I'd have taken care of myself all right, and I'd have gotten back at the old man for shouting at me. I'd have packed up a few things and run out of here in a hurry. [1]

There is a slight change, slight but significant, in the attitude of Geta, the slave, towards Antipho. Concern for his own protection is not the prime reason for his attitude. Yet the slave mentality is still the same, the total surrender to the whims or desires of the master. Even while expressing dissatisfaction with his treatment (and he obviously resents being

1 The Comedies of Terence, translation and introduction by Frank O. Copley (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill) p.68

shouted at although he is only a slave) the idea of himself as a person, with a valid reason for existence outside his servitude, is far from his mind.

This then is the slave mentality, this servile attitude which, whether designed to protect the person of the slave or not, appears time and time again in the Greek Comedy, in the _Commedia dell'Arte_, in early French comedies of the sixteenth century, and even in the _haute comédie_ of the seventeenth century. Despite marked increase in the liberties the _valets de comédie_ might take, particularily in their remarks to their masters, the role of the valet continues to be essentially that of a slave, bound to his master, thinking only in terms of working for his master, cheating, scheming, lying for his master, with very little hope of personal gain, sometimes without even the satisfaction of receiving his wages. There is no hint that a valet, bound to his place by tradition, could ever leave it, not the faintest suggestion that as a man he might be worth more than someone whose birth placed him in a higher positon. It is not until the end of the seventeenth or beginning of the eighteenth century that the valet begins to think of a more positive reward for his talents. It is not until the advent of Figaro himself that he begins to question the justification of his inferior role.

With the decline of slavery following the fall of the Roman Empire, the servant lost his chains, and became, nominally at least, a free man. However, as Marc Monnier,

speaking as Figaro himself, says in his book Les Aïeux de Figaro, "nos chaînes, quoique tombées, avaient laissé leur marque nous n'étions plus des choses,mais nous n'étions pas encore des citoyens".[1] The freed man, depending wholly on his master for his well-being, and frequently for his very life, was, in reality, no more free than the antique slave of Terence or Plautus, and retained the "slave mentality" in full. When, after the long dark years of the Middle Ages, he re-appeared on the comic stage, he was still a stock character, still bound to his master, now wittier, more amusing, and, if possible, even more cunning than his predecessors, but still a mask, a type turned out of the ancient mold. The new servant, the valet, had no more thought for his own improvement, no more audacity to question the status quo than a Davus or a Pseudolus. To serve his master well and in doing so evade (as far as possible) physical punishment, to amuse and entertain by his various skills - this was the role of the male servant in theatrical comedy, and well he knew it. It is thus that he re-appears in the fifteenth century, after centuries of neglect, in the Italian Commedia dell'Arte.

The origins of this native Italian theatre are unknown, although many historians believe it to be derived from the fabulae Atellanae, rough, popular farces and parodies, more ancient even than the Roman comedies of Plautus

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[1]Marc Monnier, Les Aïeux de Figaro, (Paris, Librairie Hachette) p.80

and Terence. In the Campagna region around Rome, in the third century B.C., groups of strolling players set up their trestles and performed coarse farces and mime shows for the amusement of the people. Whether it owes its origins to these ancient farces or not, the Commedia dell' Arte, like the fabulae Atellanae, was performed al improvviso by professional actors, whence its name dell'Arte. Although refined in many ways, it still retained the licentious aspects of the older theatre and many of the jokes are vulgar and unrepeatable in twentieth century polite society. A basic scenario (the canovaccio), more than one thousand of which are preserved in libraries and archives in Italy, was prepared, giving the main outline of the plot, from which the players evolved their own play, improvising with dialogue and lazzi (stage jests belonging to individual characters), with dances and songs, and frequently humorous references to local affairs or to current events. With a permanent cast made up of stock characters, and a series of scenarii dealing with situations remarkably similar to those of the Roman comedies, the various troupes travelled the land, entertaining people in all stations of life, and venturing beyond the borders of Italy into France, where the interest of Catherine de Medici and their own talents ensured their continuing success.

Still in the tradition of the Roman comedies, or of the Atellane farces, where there were five permanent types which formed the mainstay of the company, the Commedia dell'

Arte relied heavily on the stock characters, appearing and re-appearing in stock situations. In these the central theme "is always the loves of the young people, the jealousies and rivalries of the old ones, and the intrigues of the zanni - a Lombardo-Venetian dialect word adapted from the proper name Giovanni which was used in the sixteenth century as a generic name for servants from Bergamo".[1] Each of the stock characters wore a mask, revealing his role and also his stage personality to the audience, each character was no more real than the mask he wore and each character was limited to the scope of activity of his mask. Following the ancient tradition, the young lovers, the only actors who played in the Commedia dell'Arte with their faces uncovered, always defeated the old man - portrayed as either Pantaleone, a senile merchant of Venetian origin, or perhaps a counsellor to the Doge or a prince, or else as the Dottore, the old man of letters, a lawyer or a doctor, who invariably, seeking amorous adventures, is tricked and duped and more often than not cuckolded.

Prime mover of the attempts to dupe Pantaleone or the Dottore, and instigator of the jests and tricks aimed at the old grey heads is once more, the slave of Roman Comedy. Provoking the laughter of the audience, showing off his talents, transformed into a valet, a male servant of varying degrees of agility, cunning and intelligence, the anciet slave re-appears. One stereotyped servant, however, was not

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[1]Giacomo Oreglia, The Commedia dell'Arte, translated by Lovett F. Edwards, (New York, Hill and Wang) p.17

sufficient. In the original scenarii of the *Commedia dell' Arte* we find three basic valet masks, from which numerous others evolved, and which led ultimately to the *valet de comédie* of the French theatre, a yet more refined version of the original, but undeniably a direct descendent.

Like the ancient slave, recognisable, as soon as he stepped on the stage, by his short white tunic and *bonnet d'esclave*, each of the valets of the *Commedia dell'Arte* was also recognisable from the very back of the theatre not only by his mask, but by his clothes. The three principal valet masks were Brighella, Arlecchino and Pulcinella, the first two from the city of Bergamo, the third a Neapolitan mask, with accent to match. Brighella, the first *zanni* always, was from the upper city of Bergamo, and more intelligent and crafty than Arlecchino, who came from the lower part of town. He was the cunning servant *par excellence*, resourceful, cynical and unscrupulous.

> His greatest desire is, in his own words, to outwit an old lovesick fool, to rob a miser and to beat up a creditor! [1]

Adaptable, he could work at other jobs too, like Figaro three centuries later, but always his mask and his costume, which by the end of the sixteenth century had become stabilised as a sort of white livery trimmed with green frogs, braid and chevrons, remained the same. Even his hair was unvaried, it was always long and black, heavily pomaded, as were his moustaches and

[1] Giacomo Oreglia, *The Commedia dell'Arte*, p .71

his peaked beard. His quips were coarse and shameless, although not without a good deal of wit, and he was also an accomplished musician, having an excellent singing voice and a certain talent on various instruments. French masks, or stage characters, who owe their origins to Brighella, and his close kin Scapino, are Scapin, Turlupin, Gandolin, Sganarelle Frontin and Mascarille.

Arlecchino, the second _zanni_, who began his theatrical career as the stupid, ever hungry servant, reminiscent of the ancient Greek and Roman slave who thought only of his stomach, gradually developed into a more complex mask, a mixture of cunning and ingenuousness, awkwardness and grace. His earliest costume, covered with odd shaped patches to signify the patches on the clothes of the poor peasants, soon became more stylized, with regular diamond shaped lozenges of many different colours entirely covering his tight-fitting jacket and pants. At his belt he carried a leather purse and a wooden sword, essential for his _lazzi_, and on his head he wore a felt cap in the style of Francis I, adorned with the tail of a rabbit or a fox, which according to ancient tradition made everyone who wore it a figure of fun. As second _zanni_ only, Arlecchino took no active part in the development of the plot, but maintained the rhythm of the comedy as a whole, always on the go, very agile and full of acrobatic stunts. As Arlequin he was a popular figure in French comedy, notably in those plays which Marivaux wrote for the _Comédie-Italienne_ in the eight-

eenth century.

The third valet mask, Pulcinella, would appear to have even more direct relationship with the Atellane farces than the other two, for he always used a clucking voice (Pucinella is a diminutive of pullicino or pulcino, a day old chick), and the character Maccus, the buffoon of the Atellane comedies, whose mask had a beak-like nose, was known as pullus gallinaceus because he imitated the clucking of chickens when he spoke. When he first appeared in the Commedia dell'Arte, Pulcinella was a simple zanni, but as the years passed his role became more individual, and, like Arlecchino's, more contradictory. Although usually a servant, he also appeared as a retired general, a peasant a dentist, or even a painter. But whatever craft or calling he followed he too was always immediately recognisable by his mask and his costume - a white cloak or shift, drawn in at the waist, a tall sugar-loaf hat, and in his hand a horn in the shape of a shell or a vase full of macaroni. A master of intrigue and deceit, he was often the victim of deceit himself because of his kind and generous heart. Unable to keep quiet, he was always on the go, a real chatterbox, receiving as many beatings himself as he administered to others. Pulcinella, known as Polichinelle in France, gained a good deal of renown in Paris in the seventeenth century through the talents of Giovanni Brocci who was praised by both La Bruyère and Scarron for his mazarinades, satires aimed at the great Cardinal Mazarin.

These then were the servants of the Commedia dell' Arte, funny, agile, cunning, occasionally stupid, always ready with a clever turn of phrase or a physical trick, all their talents put to serve their master, as the slave of Roman Comedy had done before them. A typical scenario, The Stone Guest,[1] shows Pulcinella in the employ of the notorious Don Giovanni. Throughout the play Don Giovanni enjoys himself, tasting every pleasure and then departing, while Pulcinella, left behind to explain the situation, is covered with blows. Although his master murders the Commendatore, seduces young girls at every turn (one of whom throws herself into the sea and drowns), Pulcinella does as he is told, looks after his master's welfare, warns him of impending danger and helps him to escape, follows him, albeit unwillingly, to the funeral vault of the Commendatore, and flees only when his master descends into Hell. Such selfless devotion, as unreal as the plot itself, can only be explained by viewing it as a continuation of the slave mentality of a Davus, a poor man, chained, metaphorically at least, to his place.

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[1]Taken from Gibaldone comico di vair soggetti, a collection of varied scenarii for comedies and beautiful works, transcribed by Antonio Passante, known as Orazio il Calabrese; Count of Casamarciano's collection, National Library of Naples.

CHAPTER II

THE VALET DE COMEDIE IN 16th AND 17th CENTURY FRANCE

Comedy as a literary genre developed more slowly in France than in either Italy or England, and it was not until the middle of the sixteenth century that any number of comedies were written. Even then, comedy was rated much lower than tragedy, and even lower than tragi-comedy or the pastoral, and performances were rare. Not only were facilities scarce - there were few theatres available - but there were no acting companies with theatrical traditions, such as the Italian companies which were beginning to gain popularity in France. Many of the French comedies of the sixteenth century were probably written as literary exercises, without ever being performed at all.

French Renaissance comedies therefore are far from numerous. Influenced by both the _farces gauloises_ performed on trestles in the town square and the elegant Latin of Terence, whose style was more to the French taste than the more robust comedies of Platus, they reflect facets of both these two widely divergent forms of comedy. _L'Eugène_, for example, portrays an abbot who tells Guillaume quite openly that he intends to sleep with his wife, and gives his sister to Florimond (no one ever mentions marriage) without turning a hair. In _La Tresorière_, Constante deceives her husband quite openly, and sells herself to the highest bidder, while

in Les Contens Alix, making a mockery of her avowed intention to make a holy pilgrimage, deceives her husband by putting herself at the disposition of the local pimp. The first of these plays are also written in the octosyllabic verse of the farce, as were several others, particularly those by Pléiade writer, Jean de Baïf (L'Eunuque). But the scholarly pre-occupation with Latin writers (and most of these plays were writen by students, to be performed by students, before an audience of students) is evident in the structure of the play, the division into five acts, for example, the larger number of characters (usually nine, as opposed to the four or five of farce) and finally, by the cast of characters themselves.

Stock characters from the Roman comedies, adapted for French audiences, become the basis for French comedy, and the slave/servant reappears, as the plot changes from the marital complications of farce to the problems and final triumph of young lovers. Renamed laquais, or valet, or simply serviteur, once again the Davus of Ancient comedy puts his wits to work to help his master.

According to Brian Jeffery, this valet is a new creation of French Renaissance comedy: -

> .... although certain features of the Roman slave and parasite survive in him. He is part of the same process of sixteenth century modernisation of comedy, which resulted in the substitution of European proper names for Graeco-Roman ones, and of Italian and French marriage customs and problems for Roman ones. The Roman slave was bound to obey his master, and might fear a beating if he did not.

> The Renaissance servant, however, is not bound in the same way, whether he is called _valet_, _serviteur_, or _laquais_. He is based upon something in Sixteenth Century society which had no precise equivalent in the Roman. [1]

The ancient Roman slave, it is true, was bound legally to his master, was a permanent fixture in the household, and may even have been born there. Changing social conventions freed the servant from his chains, gave him more freedom to talk and to act, but the basic attitude of servant to master and master to servant changed very little. Despite his freedom and his wages, the _valet de comédie_ of Sixteenth Century France is little different from his Roman counterpart. He fears a beating, he goes hungry and cold in the service of his master and knows only too well the humble place in society he must occupy. Like the mass of the people, his lowly rank is pre-ordained. He expects, and receives, no consideration of himself as a person, and little gratitude for his service. His is accorded no value or worth outside his immediate usefulness to his master and is, in fact, Davus in French dress. The clever valets of French comedy are more lively than their Latin counterparts, and towards the the end of the century the influence of the _Commedia dell' Arte_ adds considerably to their comic value, but they are still, as Fournel says, "plus ou moins coulés dans les moules, comme ceux de la comédie italienne. Les traits grossis à

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[1] Brian Jeffery, _French Renaissance Comedy 1552-1630_ (Oxford, Clarendon Press) p. 145.

plaisir y prennent une sorte de rigidité grimaçante".[1]

To present just a few examples of the attitude we have referred to as the slave mentality, we would quote Richard of La Trésorière. He repeats the very same sentiments of selfless devotion to duty and service that the Roman slave expressed:

> Monsieur, il ne fault qu'employer
> Richard, quand il est question
> De conduire une faction;
> Ainsi le serviteur doit faire,
> Pour à son bon maître complaire,
> Jusques à la mort, s'il convient
> L'endurer pour l'amour de lui.[2]

Although Richard sees only too well just what kind of a woman La Tresorière is, he would not dream of incurring his master's wrath - or of hurting his feelings - by revealing the truth. In fact, he does all in his powers to raise money to further his master's suit with Constante, even against his better judgement. It is his job to do as he is told.

Similarly, in Les Esbahis, Julien, valet of L'Advocat, is delighted that his master puts his trust in him, very proud of his achievements, and, when all turns out well, exults over the felicitous outcome:

> Hé Dieu! Comment nostre amoureux
> Se mettra dessus le hault bout,
> Mais qu'il entende comme tout,
> C'est si bien manié par moy.
> Il me semble que je le voy
> Pour un si grand contentement,

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1 Victor Fournel, Le Théâtre au XVIIe siècle.- La Comédie (Genève, Slatkine Reprints) p.79

2 Jacques Grevin, La Trésorière, Act 1, Scene 1

Au milieu d'un esbatement,
Rire et saulter, jouer, danser,
Et puis en un coup m'embrasser,
Pour estre cause de son bien,
Encor quand je pense combien
La nouvelle de mon message
Luy augmentera le courage,
Mon coeur et mon âme sautelle. 1

He is not, however, so selfless as to forego his own pleasures completely. When all has ended happily he hopes that he too may find some personal gratification:

Vrayment, en faisant votre affaire
Pourtant ne m'oublieray - je pas
Si je puis rencontrer le bas
De quelque garse à mon apoinct. 2

It is not a reward he expects anyone to give him in return for his services, but rather a little something extra he might pick up for himself while still serving his master first and foremost. Apart from this, there is no mention of a life of his own outside of service.

In all these comedies there is no hint that a servant has a right to anything, least of all to the comforts of a more or less normal life. Indignities are heaped upon him, he is blamed by the old for the behaviour of the young (Loys, in Les Néapolitaines, is upbraided by Ambroise for not keeping his son, Augustin, on the staight and narrow path), he is even expected to go without food and sleep in the service of a love-sick master. Potiron, of

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1 Jacques Grevin, Les Esbahis, Act IV, Scene vi

2 Ibid., Act IV, Scene vi

La Reconnue, stationed outside the house of M. L'Advocat, bemoans the fact that he must spend so much time running around instead of eating a regular meal:

> S'il y a quelque cas de nouveau
> Tousjours quand le disner s'apreste,
> Potiron sus, avant, en queste,
> Potiron, il vous faut trotter,
> Potiron, il vous faut éventer
> Soudain. 1

This play does present a good picture of bourgeois life, in this instance a lawyer's family circle, but it also shows quite clearly the attitude of the master towards servant, either Jehane, the hardworking maid servant of the family, or Potiron, the valet of l'Amoureux. Potiron laments the fact that when all is finally worked out to everyone's satisfaction, everyone has gained

> "fors que moy,
> Qui a demeslé l'échevant" 2

After the arrival in France of the travelling Italian players, such as the Gelosi, the Confidenti, and the Raccolti, the comedies of the sixteenth century France show the influence of the Commedia dell'Arte on the role of the valet. In Les Contens, by Turnèbe, Les Néapolitaines, by d'Amboise, and all the plays by Larivey, (who was of Italian origin) the valets are "fins fretés, rusés en toute espèce de malice, s'il en fût oncques",[3] and they

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1 René Belleau, La Reconnue, Act II, Scene ii

2 Ibid., Act V, Scene v

3 Pierre Larivey, Le Morfondu, Act I, Scene ii

> ne tiennent pas seulement de Davus, ils tiennent de Scaramouche, d'Arlequin, de tous ces personnages dont la vivacité d'esprit égale la souplesse de corps, aussi abondant en cabrioles qu'en lazzi, qui bernent et rossent les Cassandre et les Pantalon. 1

The valet is ostensibly a free man, yet he never acts upon his own desires. He does his master's bidding unhesitatingly, even when he is doubtful of the propriety of the orders, and he is still a poor slave, chained metaphorically to his place. The mask of cardboard and leather might fall, the "uniform" be no longer mandatory, but the valet is still as firmly fixed in his lowly place as any Davus or Pulcinella.

It is not until 1630, with the production of Mélite, that any distinctive, new type of comedy appears in seventeenth century France. Farce was still extremely popular. In Paris the Farces du Pont-Neuf delighted the people with their mockery of social or academic types, the medical profession being particularily subject to attack. Three of the most notable farceurs of the seventeenth century, Turlupin, Gros-Guillaume and Gautier-Garguille, later played at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where they parodied, in brief farces, the subject matter of the tragedy performed in serious manner as the main part of the programme. In these farces, Turlupin, playing the knave or the valet, wore the traditional garb of Brighella of the Commedia dell'Arte, the uniform of white two-piece costume, trimmed with green frogs

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1 Victor Fournel, Le Théâtre au XVIIe siècle p.80

and braid.

It is evident from the continuing popularity of the farce and the Commedia dell'Arte types that the Parisians were not yet prepared to accept a realistic type of comedy, but preferred to be entertained and amused by the same old comic types, from the pedant to the braggart to the astute valet, who had made their audiences laugh for years. Rarely do the characters appear on stage with any resemblance to the real life characters they are intended to portray.

In speaking of "les ordres de la nation", Antoine Adam says:

> La France était constituée d'ordres et de corps particuliers, ayant leur esprit propre, leurs traditions intellectuelles et morales. Ces différentes catégories apparaissent avec une importance inégale, dans le développement de notre littérature . 1

Throughout most of the seventeenth century, the frequency of appearance of various types is very varied. There are few truly noble, aristocratic figures, there is a a preponderance of crooked lawyers, incompetent doctors, narrow-minded fathers or guardians, and few good honest bourgeois, shopkeepers or family men, and an almost total lack of the vast majority of the population, the poor, working class, whether peasant or working man. The lowest social caste is represented by the illiterate country dolt, a figure of fun, or more often by the servant, the saucy maid or the insolent and cunning valet, introduced to parody

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1 Antoine Adam, Littérature française - L'Age classique, (Paris, E. Arthaud) I, 25

his master's noble qualities and to provide the comic aspects of the plot.

Most attempts at portraying social reality with any frankness failed miserably. A comedy dealing with the marriage of a widow and a decent elderly gentleman (Alizon, by Discret, 1636) and another dealing with a financier, a courtesan and her pimp, all real figures of society (Le Railleur, by Andre Mareschal, 1637) both failed completely. The public loathed them both. However, Pierre Corneille's first venture into the theatre, the comedy Mélite, met with a resounding success, and it too is realistic in nature. In his Vie de Corneille, which introduces the Oeuvres de Corneille, Fontenelle says:

> Mélite est belle, si on la lit après les pièces de Hardy qui l'ont précédée. Le théâtre y est mieux entendu, le dialogue mieux tourné, les mouvements mieux conduits, les scènes plus agréables. Il y règne un air assez noble, et la conversation des honnêtes gens n'y est pas mal représentée. Jusque là on n'avait guère connu que le comique le plus bas, ou un tragique assez plat. On fut etonné d'entendre une nouvelle langue. 1.

Corneille himself stressed the same point in the Avis au Lecteur when La Veuve was published in 1634:

> La comédie n'est qu'un portrait de nos actions et de nos discours, et la perfection des portraits consiste en la ressemblance. Sur cette maxime je tâche de ne mettre en la bouche de mes acteurs que ce que diraient vraisemblablement en leur place ceux qu'ils représentent, et de les faire discourir en honnêtes gens, et non pas en auteurs. 2.

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1 Oeuvres de Corneille, introduction, Vie de Corneille, by Fontenelle.

2 Ibid., Avis au Lecteur, Pierre Corneille. La Veuve

The language of *Mélite* is indeed new. It is simple, straightforward and totally natural. The reality of the author's conception extends to the cast of characters, from which the valet is excluded. The *vraisemblance* of which Corneille speaks means that the traditional masks of comedy, the stereotyped characters, no longer provide the material for comedy. Neither in *Mélite* nor in *La Veuve* is there any trace of the cunning valet or the comic servant among the authentic, believable characters. This is not surprising, since in real life itself the valet was scarcely the resourceful, cunning figure of fun as he was depicted on the stage. When the masks are dropped and real men, rather than marionnettes, are shown on stage, the valet is conspicuous by his absence. The nurse, or the sympathetic and witty maidservant, is there to comfort and aid her mistress, but in a realistic play, with real characters, there is no valet.

French comedy, however, had not emerged as a national form, and yet another influence was making its mark on the French theatre. This was the growing popularity of the Spanish type of comedy, represented by such writers as Lope de Vega, Calderon, or Cervantes, all of whom originally imitated the Latin comedies, but developed a more romanesque type of comedy than the Italians, with cloak and dagger effects, disguises, midnight assignations, silken ladders from locked balconies, duels, family honour and seductions, all of which regaled French audiences for some twenty or thirty years. With such serious aspects as appeared in the

Spanish romanesque comedy, the valet once more came into his own, to provide comic relief, to parody by his cowardice his master's noble dignity and courage when faced with a slight to his honour, to raise a laugh by his mockery of courtship when he tries to woo the heroine's maidservant, and to ease the tension building between the noble protagonists. Again, the valet is a fixed type, not an individual, the gracioso, a type created by Cervantes with Sancho Panca, "un mélange de lâcheté cocasse et de goinfrerie, avec le goût des moralités sentencieuses où s'étalait un égoisme ingénu". [1] Corneille himself wrote two plays in this vein, Le Menteur and La Suite du Menteur. Le Menteur, the original of which has been variously attributed to Lope de Vega (by Corneille himself), Goldoni and Alcaron, was the first of the Spanish style comedies to transfer the scene of the play from Spain to France, where references to Parisian names and places, and French customs, make the play more French than it actually was. The plot is Spanish through and through, with scenes at night under the heroine's balcony, jealous lovers, mistaken identities, intercepted letters, nocturnal adventures, and all manner of romantic situations. Yet this is also innovative, in that the comedy is truly one of character, for the focal point of the play is the total inability of the hero, Dorante, le menteur himself, to tell the truth.

In all these comedies written in the Spanish style, the valet appears in his sterotyped role, of no importance as

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1. Antoine Adam, Histoire de la littérature francaise au XVIIe siècle, I, 176

a person, merely as an adjunct to his master. Cliton, Dorante's valet, has been in the service of his master only one or two days, yet he automatically accepts the limits of his position without question, and behaves as though he were an old family retainer. Service and support of his master is his only function. Although shocked by the enormous lies told by Dorante, he does make a slight attempt to curb this habit, but when Dorante is finally caught out in a lie about his supposed wife, and his father is probing suspiciously for more details, Cliton is prepared to back his master up to the full extent of his limited talents by offering a new excuse. "Dites que le sommeil vous l'a fait oublier"[1] he says in the traditional role of allegiance to the young against the old, when Dorante's father requests the name of the invented wife once more.

Cliton is a stock character, speaks and acts like any of the stereotype valets, and offers as his final comment of the play a real plaisanterie de valet, not a valid statement on the true consequences of lying:

> 'Vous autres qui doutiez s'il en pouvait sortir
> Par un si rare exemple apprenez a mentir. [2]

In the Suite du Menteur, the valet Cliton is, if possible, even more solidly entrenched in the ancient role. He has not seen his master, Dorante, for several years, after his original service of one or two days, yet he automatically takes up again his position of service and his attitude of "my master right or wrong". This time he shows the other

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1 Pierre Corneille, Le Menteur Act V. Sc. iii

2 Ibid., Act V. Sc. vii

aspect of the valet's role when he mirrors, in comic fashion, the love affair of Dorante.

One very amusing aspect of the Suite du Menteur is the introduction, by Cliton, of references to the play Le Menteur now being performed on the Paris stage. He himself is being played by Jodelet, a farceur who became a type himself, and whom we shall discuss in more detail later. Cliton is perfectly aware that he (Cliton) is nothing but a valet de comédie and not a real man, and when Cléandre wishes that he too could have such a devoted and helpful valet, such a perfect treasure of a servant, Cliton replies:

> Croyez qu'à le trouver vous auriez de la peine,
> Le monde n'en voit pas quatorze à la douzaine,
> Et je jurerais bien, monsieur, en bonne foi,
> Qu'en France il n'est point que Jodelet et moi. [1]

-which merely re-iterates the fact that Cliton knows only too well that he is not a real person, merely a character in a play.

The Spanish "cloak and dagger" influence is seen very clearly also in the comedies of Paul Scarron. In Jodelet, ou le maître valet we see only too clearly, in the subtitle chosen by Scarron, the comic value in the very idea of a valet pretending to be a master. The scene of the play is Spain, and, were it not for Jodelet, the play might almost be considered a tragi-comedy, with the murder of the hero's brother, the ravishing of his sister, a duel fought to avenge the family honour and scenes of outright despair. To counteract the seriousness of the plot, Jodelet, the farceur, is

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1. La Suite du Menteur, Act 111, Sc. i.

given the role of the valet who fails miserably in his attempt to take his master's place. A truly grotesque figure, a clown with a bulbous nose, a beard and moustache, a face whitened with flour, Jodelet spoke through his nose and was invariably crude, illiterate, cowardly, clumsy and greedy. He is not a man (even his true name, Julien Bedeau, was forgotten when he became the stage personality Jodelet) but a caricature of a man. He became a type, as rigid in character and manner as Arlecchino or Pulcinella. As such, he is doomed to his place forever, making a mockery of all that is fine and noble as soon as he steps out of his lowly position. Unlike Crispin of the following century who acquits himself tolerably well in his masquerade as a noble (_Crispin rival de son maître_), Jodelet reveals only too well what is expected of him - no redeeming graces, no trace of either culture or sensibility, no sense of honour, no manners and not even a decent wit. In fact he shows exactly what the contemporary opinion of a servant was - to his masters he was a boor, unable by either his physical or mental make-up to play the role of master without making a complete farce of it.

Jodelet, as valet, is the centre of the comic action in each play in which he appears, although he does not activate the plot. He appears, at the very beginning, to be on most intimate terms with his master, when he complains in the opening lines of the play:

> Oui, je n'en doute plus, ou bien vous êtes fou
> Ou le diable d'enfer, qui vous casse le cou,

A depuis peu chez vous élu son domicile.
Arriver à telle heure, en une telle ville!
Courir toute la nuit sans boire ni manger!
Menacer son valet et le faire enrager! [1]

However, Jodelet's fairly legitimate complaints receive no more consideration than did those of the tired and hungry Potiron of La Reconnue. Don Juan pays no attention to him at all - a valet is of no consequence - and merely replies: "Taisez-vous, maître sot." [2]

When master and valet change places, the inherent nature of each, as seen by their contemporaries, shows through the masquerade only too well, indicating once again that a valet could never hope to equal, or even pretend to equal his master. Don Juan, of course, as the valet, cannot disguise his noble bearing and his aristocratic upbringing, and leaps to the defence of his "master's" honour. His language and his noble manner, his protestations on behalf of Jodelet-maître, are so unlike those normally expected of a valet that Don Louis, the seductor and murderer, rebukes him for stepping out of his ordained place: "Vous vous émancipez", [3] he says, employing the very term used in speaking of the freeing of those who have been enslaved.

By producing a new and distinctive valet type, Scarron added to the already ample ranks of servant figures, but he did nothing to change the rigidity of his position. The

1. Jodelet ou le maître valet, Act 1. Sc. i
2. Ibid., Act 1, Sc. i
3. Ibid., Act II, Sc. xiv

floured face of Jodelet replaced the comic mask of the Commedia dell'Arte or the Latin Comedy, but he is no more a valid person in the eyes of his master or of the audience than any of his predecessors.

The French taste for this type of Spanish comedy lasted until about 1656, although the plays of Scarron continued in popularity throughout the century. Don Japhet, one of the comedies in which Jodelet does not appear, was a great favourite with Louis XIV in his declining years, and it was played every year at Versailles, from 1690 until his death in 1715.

However, in 1658, as public approval turned from the romanesque Spanish-style comedy, a new playwright and actor appeared on the Paris scene, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, the self-styled Molière. In that year he brought his travelling troupe of actors to Paris after years of experience in the provinces, and began a career which brought him lasting fame and changed the course of French comedy. Drawing on all types of comedy, the farces gauloises, the Commedia dell'Arte, the Italian and the Spanish theatre, Molière produced a new, totally different, type of comedy, national in spirit and personal in interpretation. Molière, says Marc Monnier, was "celui qui a le mieux connu toutes les conventions de son métier, et celui qui a pénétré le plus avant dans l'âme humaine". 1

Because he was familiar with all the traditions and all the conventions of the theatre, Molière could not help

1 Marc Monnier, Les Aïeux de Figaro, p. 176

but be influenced by all that had gone before. Travelling through the provinces with his troupe of actors, he performed farces to the delight of countless audiences. In Lyons, where he spent several years, the Italian players were already firmly entrenched and Molière had ample opportunity to study, at first hand, this form that he admired so much and which had such an important influence on his work. Whether or not he really was taken by his grandfather, as some historians would have us believe, to watch the farces performed at the Pont-Neuf, the farces of the Italian theatre, which Molière enjoyed at a much later age, undeniably impressed him. Their very physical type of comedy, a performance studded with lazzi and enriched by gestures and movement, their subtle - and sometimes not-so-subtle - jeux de théâtre, which were received with gales of laughter, showed Molière only too clearly the way to make people laugh.

It is not surprising then, that L'Etourdi, the first full-length comedy he wrote, while still in the provinces, and which was to be so well received when he brought it to Paris in 1958, was modelled on the Commedia dell'Arte, (the Inavvertito of Beltrame) and the ancient Roman comedies of Plautus. Mascarille, whose very name means "little mask" is the "running slave" of ancient Rome, always on the go, ready to offer an opinion or a suggestion at the drop of a hat (it is, indeed, often very difficult to keep him quiet), prepared to put his not inconsiderable talents to work to

solve his master's difficulties. In keeping with the ancient tradition, the young lovers are united at the end of the play, despite, rather than because of, Mascarille's efforts, for the dénouement here does not depend on the valet's cunning, but on a chance circumstance of recognition. True to tradition of the comic theatre, Mascarille is just another in a long series of valet masks.

> C'est un masque, sorti d'un passé qui remonte à Plaute. Il porte le poids de mainte convention, lui aussi. Mais il ne nous laisse pas respirer. Multipliant ses inventions, les prodigant jusqu'à les perdre en chemin, exécutant ses tours aves prestesse, étourdissant ses interlocuteurs de son bagout, il avance de pirouette en pirouette, de tirade, en tirade, jamais à court d'idées, jamais avare de bons mots, et il nous entraine jusqu'au dernier vers, qu'il fait sonner comme un éclat de fanfare:
> ' ... Allons donc, et que les Cieux prospères
> Nous donnent des enfants dont nous soyons heureux' [1]

Mascarille, as a true descendant of Davus, puts his talents to work for no other reward than the happiness of his master. Ten times in five acts he renews his efforts to obtain the lovely Célie for Lélie, ten times he puts his wits to work, to think up a new plan, a new trick, and ten times his master unwittingly upsets the whole intrigue, not because, as the title suggests, he is stupid, but simply because Mascarille, in his cunning pride, has not revealed to Lélie just what his plans are. Lélie, just like the ancient Roman master, had left everything in the hands of his able slave. Yet for all this hard work that is unavailing, despite

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1. René Bray, Molière, Homme de Théâtre (Paris: Mercure de France, 1968.) p. 194

his constant disappointment, Mascarille is not the least bit daunted. Having anticipated no reward, he has nothing to regret. His highest ambition is to serve his master well and earn for himself the title of King of Knaves, a title he richly deserves.

This ancient slave type of valet appears three times in Molière's work, dominating the action, intriguing, pitting his wits against the old so that the young lovers may triumph. Each of these valets is no more a man than the "little mask" Mascarille, whether he wears the traditional Commedia mask or not. Sbrigani, of Monsieur de Pourceaugnac, is not, strictly speaking, a valet at all, but he does offer his services freely to M. de Pourceaugnac, and is, in actual fact, little more than the intriguing slave, leading the action, concocting schemes to rid Julie of her unwanted suitor. The whole play is as farcical as l'Etourdi and as unrealistic. Sbrigani, a name that appears to have been concocted by Molière himself from two Italian words, sbrigare (to hurry) and Sbricco (a knave) is again nothing more than a running (hurrying) slave.

The third of these purely traditional type comedies is Les Fourberies de Scapin, a play loosely based on Terence's Phormio, with overtones of Commedia dell'Arte and farce gauloise. Although the name Scapin, from the Italian Scappino of l'Inavvertito is of more recent origin (Scappino was an offshoot of the Brighella mask, his name derived from the verb scappare = to escape), the actions and words are

frequently those of the slave Geta, whom we quoted earlier. Like Geta, Scapin, and his fellow valet (the second zanni) Sylvestre, have been left in charge of their young masters with the same disastrous results - both have fallen in love with unacceptable girls. It is the same old story. The clever valet manages to arrange everything, deceiving the old, enjoying himself mightily in the process, and seeking no personal reward, except perhaps the sheer joy of exercising his cunning, and the delight of belaboring the back of poor old Géronte, whom he has hidden in a sack. During almost the entire play, Scapin is hardly still a minute. He is bouncing, jumping, dancing, fooling, right up until his supposed death. His apotheosis in the final moments of the play leads to a dénouement that dates all the way back to Aristophanes - the final celebration or feast.

"Allons souper ensemble, pour mieux goûter notre plaisir", says Argante in the final lines of the play, as Scapin is carried in on his bier to be placed at the foot of the festive board - the only possible place for a valet.

In his introduction to Les Fourberies de Scapin, Robert Jouanny describes Scapin thus:

> 'L'empereur des fourbes, le roi des équilibristes, agile, souple, indolent, cruel, blasé, orgueilleux, déshumanisé comme un chat. . . [1]

Deshumanisé is the word one could apply to all three of these valets; they are not persons with any true existence, they have no

1 Oeuvre Complètes de Molière, II, 588.

life outside their role as servants, they are masks hiding the man from view. Like their predecessors, the Roman slave, Molière's valets too have frequently had brushes with the law, another point of resemblance that marks the origin and tradition of the <u>valet de comédie</u>.

In his very interesting book, <u>Les Valets et les servantes dans le théâtre de Molière</u>, Jean Emmelina divides the servants, male and female, into three distinct types, the <u>fourbes</u>, whom we have already discussed, the <u>valets maladroits</u>, whose role is necessarily small and mainly used to provoke laughter, and the <u>valet de bon sens</u>:

> Ces valets sont conscients de la justesse et de la valeur de leurs observations. Mais ils n'en tirent pas de gloire face au maître qui reste dans l'erreur. Leurs interventions n'ont rien de sermons hautains; elles restent en accord avec leur condition de valet, dans un style propre au personnage. [1]

Again, these valets might, and frequently did, have decidedly individual personalities, but their whole life was geared to service, to a state of near slavery to a master whose faults they saw only too well.

Molière's approach to this type of servant, however, brought an entirely new aspect to comedy, for he frequently changed the <u>valet</u> into a <u>servante</u>, and for the first time we see women playing an important role in the comic situations of the play. Before Molière's time there was no true <u>comédie féminine</u>. It was he who made the transfer, and we see as a result not only feminine characters in such major roles as

[1] Jean Emmelina, <u>Les Valets et les servantes dans le théâtre de Molière</u>, p. 7.

Madelon and Cathos of _les Précieuses ridicules_, or Armande and Philaminte of _Les Femmes savantes_, but also such minor characters as Dorine and Toinette. Dorine, the maid servant in _Tartuffe_ cannot resist trying to open Orgon's eyes to the true nature of his protégé, and Toinette, in _le Malade imaginaire_, just like the ancient Roman slave, contrives by revealing the true nature of Béline to reunite the young lovers, Angélique and Cléante. Even Cléanthis, the wife of Sosie in _Amphitryon_, is a Molière invention, for she does not appear in the Plautus original, and as such adds to the comedy of the situation as she, with the two Sosies, doubles the complications of Alcmène and the two Amphitryons. However liberated she might be as far as voicing her opinions is concerned, the _servante_ is nonetheless firmly ensconced in her lowly position and is given as little consideration as her counterpart the valet.

Could one say that Molière presented a true picture of contemporary society in his works? From time to time he does indeed give such an impression, from his portraits of the _pecques provinciales_ in _Les Précieuses ridicules_, or the manners of high society in _Le Misanthrope_, but we are convinced that this was by no means his principal aim. He was first and foremost an actor, and his chief desire was to please, provoking thoughtful laughter, if possible, in the process. Therefore, if he put on the stage a series of valets, clumsy or agile, gossipy or silent, cunning or stupid it was not because all valets were like that, but simply because that

was what the public expected of a valet. There was no reason why a valet should be treated with any more consideration on stage than off, and he could therefore be maligned, or debased at whim. Dramatic tradition had cast the valet in the role of subservient slave, and Molière simply continued this tradition. It is interesting to note, moreover, that it is in the more realistic comedies of family life, such as Tartuffe, and Le Malade imaginaire, or the comédies de moeurs such as Les Femmes savantes and Le Misanthrope that the valet is either transformed into a female servant or fails to appear at all. If he does enter into the action, it is in a purely functional capacity (to announce dinner, for example, of the arrival of visitors) or to provide a moment of comic relief when the tension grows too heavy for a comedy (as in the jeu de théâtre of Dubois, for example, who has left the all-important letter he is frantically searching for at home on the table.)

In all, Molière's theatre includes approximately fifty valets, or servants of one type or another, and some (notably Mascarille, Scapin and Sganarelle) are as well known both by name and character as the immortal figures of comedy such as Tartuffe and Harpagon. From the Spanish gracioso (Sganarelle) to the mask (Mascarille) of the Commedia dell'Arte and the Roman Geta reincarnated in Scapin, they are all representative of that dramatic tradition by now centuries old that put the slave/servant firmly in his place and kept him there: "Tous (les valets) constituent une sorte de fonds commun, un

arsénal comique, où chaque auteur a puisé - Molière, Larivey, Rotrou, Scarron."[1]

We must look to the successors of Molière to find a change, however subtle, in the role of the <u>valet de comédie</u>, and his ultimate emancipation and emergence as a truly free citizen.

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1. Jean Emmelina, <u>Les valets et les servantes dans le théâtre de Molière</u> p. 61.

CHAPTER III

SIGNS OF REALISM IN THE EARLY 18th CENTURY

"Laughter, says Frederick Green, did not vanish from the theatre when Molière left it. On the other hand, it was Molière's genius that paralysed two generations of French comic dramatists."[1] Molière's genius was not, it is true, to be equalled, but we would question Mr. Green's assertion that the following two generations of comic dramatists were paralysed. Several showed a wit and observation that produced many comedies, which, if not of the calibre of Molière's *grandes comédies*, are worthy of recognition. One of the most skilful interpreters of the genre, and one who, in his own day, was hailed as Molière's successor, was Florent Carton Dancourt. Unlike Molière, Dancourt did not comment on the eternal truths of man, but rather on the "manners, usages and customs"[2] of man in his own time. That is to say, he criticized not life itself but contemporary society only.

During the thirty-five years he spent as writer, director and actor with the *Théâtre Français*, Dancourt wrote more than fifty plays, some of which have been lost to

1. Frederick Green, *Literary Ideas in 18th Century France and England*, (New York, Frederick Ungar) p. 149

2. *Eighteenth Century French Plays*, ed. Clarence D. Brenner and Nolan A. Goodyear, (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts) p. 3

posterity. Those that remain present a vivid panorama of life at the turn of the century, and have frequently been used to study social conditions of the period. Dancourt comments freely on the idiosyncracies of his time, yet fails to portray the underlying universal significance. The titles of his plays indicate the preoccupations of the day - La Désolation des joueuses, which mainly concerns the reaction of a group of inveterate gamblers to the prohibition of lansquenet; le Chevalier à la mode, about a chevalier d'industrie, who preys on women, including a wealthy bourgeoise in search of a "name"; La Maison de campagne, in which a Parisian magistrate is pressured by his socially inclined wife into buying a country house, with disastrous results; Les Bourgeoises à la mode, who rival M. Jourdain in social ambition; La Femme d'intrigue; La Famille à la mode; and le Retour des officiers. Twenty-five years before the Regency, we are treated to what amounts to a preview of what is to come: "Il (Dancourt) nous ouvre sur les coulisses et les dessous des moeurs officielles, sur le fond réel plus ou moins caché par la beauté du décor et la solemnité des apparences, une multitude d'échappées!"[1]

If Dancourt's plays are based on a "fond réel" as far as manners of the day are concerned, his treatment of the servant role is strictly in the ancient tradition. Although the importance given to the valet declined appreciably in later plays, he remains throughout a stock comic figure, a mask of comedy. Many working men, peasants and gardners,

1. Victor Fournel, Le Théâtre au XVIIe siècle - La comédie, p. 380.

soldiers, millers and shopkeepers appear in realistic roles in the comedies of Dancourt, but the role of valet is stamped with the die of Italian comedy. He is a clever rogue, quick-witted and resourceful, and very funny. In the style of the Commedia dell'Arte, he reflects in comic fashion the love affairs of his master, repeating the courtly gallantry of his master in a coarser or burlesque fashion. Sometimes he fulfills his role of laugh-raiser by mirroring the valour expected of a noble, the heroism and honour of his master turned to laughter, as when Merlin, in the Impromptu de Garnison routs the bragadaccio Don Juan with a spy-glass which he pretends is a pistol.

There are, however, subtle differences in the master/servant relationship which indicate the changes in society and point clearly towards later developments. Let us consider Le Chevalier à la mode, Dancourt's masterpiece, which enjoyed a prestigious and legitimate success when first produced and which is attributed to Dancourt alone, although this, like several others of his earlier plays, was written in collaboration with a fellow actor and writer, St. Yon.[1]

In this play we find a wonderfully satirical picture of bourgeois life - Madame Patin, the wealthy bourgeoise widow with aspirations to high society; her brother-in-law, M. Serrefort, who is concerned not that his brother's widow will suffer for her ambitions but that her arrogant display

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1. H. C. Lancaster, A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century, p. 587.

of wealth will attract unwanted attention, reveal the source of the family finances and involve his own fortunes; M. Serrefort's daughter, Lucile, who, like her aunt is enamoured of the charming Chevalier, and ready to flaunt her father's authority by entertaining the noble gentleman in her rooms, and then running off to her aunt's house to plan an elopement; and M. Migaud, lawyer, friend of the family, and suitor to Madame Patin, partly because he cares for her and partly, it would appear, because he cares about the distribution of her wealth! All show the condition of a certain section of Parisian society, the wealthy bourgeoisie - enriched by doubtful means, seeking ratification of a purchased position by marriage with a noble house and acquisition of an inherited position, the lack of parental authority, the enrichment of lawyers through litigation that dragged on in the courts for years, and the disintregation of the old standards of conduct. It is not a pleasant picture.

The other side of the social coin is no better. We see the aristocracy represented by an impoverished Marquise, who never actually appears on stage, but whose personality fills the first few scenes as Madame Patin recounts how her beautifully equipped carriage had been forced to retreat before the shabby coach and emaciated lackeys of this old harridan, whose noble birth and self-assured arrogance give her the right of way; la Baronne, infatuated with the Chevalier, ready to lavish expensive gifts upon him, or even to fight a duel with her rival for

his favours; and, of course, the Chevalier de Villefontaine himself, an impoverished scoundrel, living off women, any woman who might be susceptible to his charms and willing to pay for them.

Subordinate to these characters, all quite plausible, are the usual servants, lackeys and a coachman, who function in a purely realistic manner, and the two contrasting roles of the female servant, Lisette, and the valet Crispin. Lisette, like Molière's Dorine and Toinette, is a girl of good, sound common sense, whose ironic comments on Madame Patin's behaviour emphasise the satirical nature of the comedy. Crispin is at first glance the traditional valet, "plein de souplesse et de ressource, rusé comme un singe, vicieux jusqu'aux moelles"[1] - a real valet de comédie in the Italian manner. Always ready to support his master, he even elaborates on the Chavalier's excuse. "Assurément, Madame, et il ne serait pas honnête que mon maître essayât son carosse devant vous. La femme de son sellier est causeuse",[2] says Crispin when Madame Patin threatens to come and inspect the new carriage the Chevalier says he has bought to impress her, and which, in reality, is a gift from the Baronne.

But the impression of devotion to his master is not

1 Victor Fournel, Le Théâtre au XVIIe siècle - La Comédie, p. 383

2 Dancourt. Le Chevalier à la mode, Act I, Scene viii

supported by his manner when the two are alone together, nor by his actions, and the relationship between the two shows a marked change from that of earlier comedies. Crispin lives with the Chevalier "sur le pied d'une sorte de camaraderie éhontée, se sachant indispensable et se sentant de la même famille, moralement son égale."[1] Morally, Crispin views his master with admiration, for he is every bit as knavish as the valet. Far from condemning his master's unethical conduct, as in Le Menteur, the valet Crispin lauds his master's finesse and accords him the supreme compliment of calling him "un excellent fourbe"[2]. When the Chevalier extricates himself from a tricky situation Crispin applauds, saying "Vous êtes un fort habile homme".[3]

The disrespect of the valet for master is understandable, given the laxity of the master's morals. Le Chevalier has made no attempt to appear other than he really is to his valet - in true ancient tradition, the master is naked before his servant for the servant's opinion is of no consequence - and Crispin shows that he understands his master only too well! As the Chevalier plays off one admirer against the other, and takes all he can get from each, he demurs

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1 Victor Fournel. Le Théâtre au XVIIe siècle - La Comédie, p. 383

2 Dancourt. Le Chevalier à la mode, Act IV, Sc. ii

3 Ibid. Act IV Sc. ii

somewhat at having to leave Madame Patin at an inauspicious moment to run to the Baronne at her request. But Crispin knows what the outcome will be. "Vous viendrez parce que vous voulez garder l'équipage,"[1] says he with perfect candour.

Yet Crispin's easy familiarity with his master does not blind him to the fact that he is still merely a valet, and, as such, beneath contempt in the eyes of society and the law. He knows only too well that noble birth is the excuse for a great many things, and that if the Chevalier's plan to abduct Lucile goes astray and the law steps in, he will be the scapegoat: "La justice se mêlera infailliblement de cette affaire, et il lui faudra quelqu'un à pendre. Monsieur le Chevalier se tirera d'intrigue, et vous verrez que je serai pendu pour la forme".[2] What more likely than that a humble servant, a man of no consequence, be hanged for his master's crime? Crispin is in no position to expect either consideration or justice.

Crispin does, however, allow himself to daydream a little. He imagines that perhaps, if all the Baronne wants is a husband, she might consider him if the Chevalier is no longer available. "S'il était vrai, que Madame la Baronne ne voulût qu'un mari, je serais fait aussi bien qu'un autre; elle pourrait bien m'épouser par dépit. Il arrive tous les jours des choses moins faisables que celle-là, et je ne

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1 Dancourt, Le Chevalier à la mode, Act I Sc. vii

2 Ibid., Act IV Sc. vii

serais pas le premier laquais qui aurait coupé l'herbe sous le pied à son maître."[1] Which is a very telling comment on society!

Crispin's lack of respect for his master leads him to take unheard of liberties, such as drawing up a list of the Chevalier's mistresses with the help of Jeanneton, the flowerseller at the gate of the Tuileries. When the list falls into the hands of Madame Patin (through Crispin's own carelessness) all his ingenuity is needed to explain the existence of these names. However, in true slave/servant tradition his wits are hastily sharpened by the threat of a beating, "cent coups de bâton"[2], by the Chevalier.

Not only was the character Crispin cast, basically, in the ancient mold, with a few minor realistic touches, but he became, rather like Jodelet, a stock figure of dramatic comedy. Originally created by Raymond Poisson, the role was handed down from father to son, and played in various different comedies, always with the same characterisics and mannerisms. He developed over the years, as the _valet de comédie_ in general developed, but his stage personality remained the same, as did his outfit, which, like the uniform of a Brighella or Arlecchino, stereotyped immediately the man who wore it. Modelled on the dress of the Spanish _gracioso_, with whom he has much in common, he wore a "fraise,

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1. _Le Chevalier à la mode_, Act IV. Sc. vii.
2. _Ibid._, Act III, Sc. iv.

épée, moustache, justaucorps à courte basque, serré d'une large ceinture en cuir, livrée reproduisant à peu près l'uniforme de certains déserteurs de par delà les Pyrénées qui, après avoir mené la vie de bandouliers dans la montagne étaient entrés dans la domesticité pour vivre."[1]

If Dancourt's comedies are, as Brenner and Goodyear maintain, a mirror of contemporary society, we have a sordid picture of a "society tending towards greater freedom, more ease in business, a looser mingling of the sexes, luxury beginning to blend rank and condition, money duly extending its empire over the prejudices of the nobility, mis-alliances re-establishing the fortunes of the great lords, newly rich buying titled estates and taking their names: everything preparing in a word, as early as 1700, for the great upheaval that was to mark the end of the century."[2] In this picture the valet still has a very insignigicant place. If he has grown disrespectful and less devoted, he has not yet grown any more independent or self-seeking. He knows his place and how little worth is placed on his life and his achievements, but it is not until yet another Crispin, Regnard's, makes his mark in the theatrical world that we see a valet who dares to use his wits for his <u>own</u> reward, rather than his master's.

The laxity that appeared in Dancourt's <u>Le Chevalier à la mode</u> is even more pronounced in the plays of Regnard.

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1. Victor Fournel, <u>Le Théâtre au XVIIe siècle - La comédie</u>, p. 118.

2. <u>Eighteenth Century French Plays</u>, ed. C. D. Brenner and N. A. Goodyear, p. 4.

Moralising about the current state of affairs is, however, the last thing on his mind, his main ambition being to make people laugh "Le rire pour le rire, spontané, irréfléchi, d'autant plus irrésistible et contagieux parfois qu'il est moins raisonné et moins raisonnable, constitue un des éléments principaux de ce comique extérieur, qui roule plus souvent sur les mots que sur les idées."[1] Regnard, whose earliest comedies were written for the Théâtre-Italien, with Arlequins and Columbines and all the traditional plot situations and lazzi inherited from the Commedia dell'Arte, continued, even when writing for the Théâtre-Français, to follow the ancient tradition, closer to Plautus than to Terence, with a good deal of the style of Scarron, "le rire extérieur éclatant en boutades, en bons mots, en folles échappées".[2] No close observer of humanity, he does not seek to probe the depths of the human soul. The exterior is the main interest, the mask that man presents to the world, and the roles in his plays are therefore more caricature than character, more marionnette than man.

Yet, even though Regnard's works are pure fantasy, in the old Italian style, whether Arlequinades for the Théâtre-Italien, or more literary comedies for the Théâtre-Français, there are traces of reality in them, and the changing social conditions are reflected quite clearly. The laxity shown already in the plays of Dancourt, the disrespect of servant for master, the weakening of moral standards, all

1. C. Lenient, La Comédie en France au XVIIIe siècle, I, 20

2. Ibid., p. 19.

are much more marked in the plays of Regnard, as they were in real life, heralding the immoral and dissolute search for pleasure that reached its peak during the days of the Regency. In the plays of Molière the social condition of the characters is well defined. The nobleman is always a nobleman, haughty, arrogant, contemptuous of those beneath him. He may be a knave and a thief, as Dorante in Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, an atheist and a seducer, as is Don Juan in the play of the same name, but he always keeps the dignity of his position and title, and though he may use those who are socially inferior to him, he does not stoop to talk with them on an equal footing In the plays of Regnard, however, all conditions seem to mingle and fuse. All distance and respect are gone, and with them the right to command: "Les classes dirigeantes ou supérieures perdent le droit de commander, quand elles n'ont pas su conserver le prestige de leur naissance et de leur fortune."[1]

The masters in Regnard's comedies have retained little of their ancient authority, and although they sometimes appear to expect the same devoted and selfless service that characterised the Potirons of the sixteenth century, the attitude of the servant is no longer one of complete acceptance of his role of unquestioning slave. In one of the earliest plays Regnard wrote for the Théâtre-Français, a discordant note appears that elicited no comment at the time, and which,

1. C. Lenient, La Comédie en France au XVIIIe siècle, I. 23.

though relatively minor, gives some indication of this change in attitude. La Sérénade is a typical one-act comedy in the Italian manner, with the intrigue directed by the usual wily servant, in this case Scapin, a rogue of a valet loosely modelled on the Pseudolus of the Roman play. All his wits are put to his master's use, though not without the usual complaints.

> On s'acoquine à servir ces gredins-là, je ne sais pourquoi. Ils ne paient point de gages, ils querellent, ils rossent quelquefois; on a plus d'esprit qu'eux, on les fait vivre. Il faut avoir la peine d'inventer mille fourberies, dont ils ne sont tout au plus que de moitié; et avec tout cela, nous sommes les valets, et ils sont les maîtres. Cela n'est pas juste. Je pretends à l'avenir travailler pour mon compte; ceci fini, je veux devenir maître à mon tour. 1

These words, in the mouth of a stock character, a true valet de comédie, must not be taken too seriously. Regnard, in his position as Trésorier, would doubtless have been horrified if anyone had suggested he was giving indications of a possible future revolution. Yet no other valet up to this point has hinted so strongly at the inequality of the master/servant relationship, based as it is, not on capability or worth, but on name alone. "Cela n'est pas juste", says Scapin petulantly, knowing only too well that that is the way things are, and so far as anyone can tell, that is the way they will always be.

Hector, of Le Joueur, also bemoans his fate. Left to

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1 Regnard, La Sérénade, Sc.xii

await his master's homecoming after a night at the card tables, he laments his role of servant to a gambler. A mixture of simplicity and ruse, he resembles the Sganarelle of Don Juan in his views on what is right and wrong, and shows himself to be more scrupulous than his master, as when he objects to the fact that Valère is perfectly willing to sell his mistress's portrait to raise money for gambling. "Vous faites là, Monsieur, une action inique"[1], he admonishes him. Like Crispin of Le Chevalier à la mode, Hector understands his master only too well, has no illusions at all about him, and refuses to consider seriously Valère's avowed intention to commit suicide. Hector's free and easy attitude changes however when he talks to Géronte, Valère's father, a noble of the old school. He is an upright gentleman, who abhors his son's behaviour and who demands that Hector speak to him with respect, delivering a hearty slap to reinforce his words. Géronte treats Hector in the old master/slave tradition, not in the comradely manner his son frequently employs, and feels that the valet has no reason to be closely involved in his son's financial affairs (despite the fact that Hector has not been paid for five years and would personally like to see an improvement in Valère's financial situation). To remind Hector of his very subordinate position, when asked if he intends to settle Valère's debts, Géronte replies curtly: "Que je les paye ou non, ce n'est pas ton affaire"[2], putting the valet firmly in his

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1 Regnard, Le Joueur, Act II Sc. xv

2 Ibid., Act III Sc. iv

place.

True to the Commedia dell'Arte tradition Regnard uses names to typify characters; Géronte as the old man Eraste or Valère as the young lover, and frequently Crispin as the knavish valet. Played at this time by Paul Poisson, the son of Raymond Poisson, creator of the Crispin role, this character always appeared in his well known gracioso uniform, his role permanently cast in the ancient mold, the valet/ slave contriving, in both Les Folies Amoureuses (where Agathe is really the meneuse de jeu and Crispin merely a subordinate, or second zanni) and Le Légataire universel, to reunite the young lovers, overcoming all manner of difficulties and tricking with glee the Pantaleone figure. Marc Monnier calls Crispin a "bamboche qui n'a jamais existé",[1] a fantastic creature, boastful, lying, disguising himself, in Le Légataire, in male or female attire, a mask of the theatre, who never existed in real life. Mr. Monnier is right up to a point. Crispin is the wily slave, the artful Arlequin, a mannequin, a puppet on a string. In Le Légataire universel, however, the puppet Crispin, quite out of the slave-like character of his fellow valets, takes a drastic step towards shaping his own destiny.

Having disguised himself as the possible inheritors of Géronte's wealth, and disgusted the old man by his potrayal of his relatives, Crispin leaves the field clear for his

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1 Marc Monnier, Les Aïeux de Figaro, (Paris, Librairie Hachette) p. 214

master, the sole heir. He further puts his freedom in jeopardy by pretending to be the old man himself (presumed to have died intestate) and dictating a will in Eraste's favour. Crispin is thus entirely in the old tradition - willing to risk his very life, or at least long imprisonment, to help his master, to whom he is utterly devoted, apparently. But there is one small, but very important difference - Crispin, while dictating Géronte's will to the lawyers, takes care to leave Lisette (his future bride) well provided for, and also to feather his own nest in the process, knowing full well that Eraste can do nothing about it without giving the game away. He therefore leaves "quinze cent francs de rentes viagères"[1] to himself, and to Eraste's fairly legitimate objections: "Pour un valet, mon oncle, a-t-on fait un tel legs?"[2], he merely answers: "Si vous me fâchez, j'en laisserai deux mille".[3]

How far Crispin has come from the valets of the sixteenth century, whose main ambition was to enjoy a good meal or the delights of a pretty serving wench! Deploring their condition, they did nothing actively to improve their lot, least of all rob their own master, which is exactly what Crispin is doing, in essence. He is acting in his traditional capacity, in the traditional manner, with this

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1. Regnard, Le Légataire universel, Act IV. Sc. vi.
2. Ibid.,
3. Ibid.,

one difference, that he has taken it upon himself to do something for himself as well as, not instead of, for his master. It is a significant, but small, step towards his eventual emancipation. As we have already mentioned, Regnard had certainly no idea of heralding the Revolution, of pointing out to his audiences that the common people were beginning to question their unhappy lot, and yet the fact that an extremely funny play, which enjoyed a considerable success in his own time, evinced no criticism is sufficient to prove the underlying reality. Supposedly based on a real-life situation, although there is much speculation on that point, the criminal aspects of the plot are turned to laughter. There is no censure of the behaviour of Eraste, the instigator, or of Crispin, the author, of the crimes. If this is indeed, as we believe, a reflection of the current moral climate, the crack in the ancient valet/slave mold has widened.

LeSage possessed, as a playwright, "just what Regnard lacked: a clear perception of the social changes that were offering comedy rich possibilities of new situations and characters. His light one-act play _Crispin rival de son maître_, is not only brilliant and witty, but gives some food for thought; bettering Molière in the _Précieuses ridicules_ he shows the servant Crispin, who impersonates his master, acquitting himself on the whole very well. This is a distinct step forward in the direction of human equality. At the end of the process we shall have the servant as a man of wit and

talent, or a hero - Figaro or Ruy Blas."[1]

Although LeSage originally studied philosophy and law, and was actually called to the Bar, it was mainly due to the influence of his friend Dancourt, the actor and playwright, that he turned his hand to writing plays. Having successfully translated several plays from the Spanish of Calderon and Lope de Vega, and adapted others by Rojas and Cervantes, he enjoyed his first real personal success with his one-act comedy Crispin rival de son maître, produced in 1707. Inspired by Mendoza's Los Empeños del mentir, Crispin is nevertheless an entirely original work and one of the very few of the more than eighty one- and three-act comedies LeSage wrote to enjoy a lasting success. A brilliant comedy of intrigue, Crispin sets on the stage a new and exuberant type of valet, one able to take his master's place without too much difficulty and, unlike the gross, vulgar Jodelet, able to carry off the deceit with a certain amount of wit and charm for a considerable length of time.

Played, of course, by a Poisson in the traditional costume of the Spanish gracioso, this Crispin, appearing the year before Regnard's Le Légataire universel, is very different from any of the preceding Crispins in that he becomes his master's rival. No longer concerned with the interests of his master, a world apart from the ancient Roman slave who disguised himself as the master to give his noble master a chance of freedom, totally unlike either Jodelet or Mascarille,

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1. L. Cazamian, A History of French Literature, p.239.

both of whom affect aristocratic garb at their master's command, this valet for the first time is "solely concerned with his self-advancement and usurps the function of his master".[1] Usurps is here the operative word. Crispin wants to marry Angélique, not because he loves or even desires her, but because he wants to get her dowry for himself. By subtle flattery, he manages to charm his future mother-in-law, Madame Oronte. His wit and audacity amaze and impress his future father-in-law. The only one who does not fall under the spell being Angélique herself, who is revolted by his boldness.

Angélique and her lover, Valère are cardboard figures, the young lovers of countless comedies. Madame Oronte, however, so easily swayed by the last person she talks with, is quite original. Even Monsieur Oronte, with his grudging admiration for the two _fripons_, Crispin and La Branche, is far from being the usual stock father figure of comedy. However, it is Crispin himself who stands out as a totally valid person rather than a stereotyped comic mask. If he cannot carry out his impersonation to the very end, he does acquit himself creditably, and by his astute assessment of Madame Oronte (he praises her beautiful eyes to ensure her continued support) manages to escape punishment when his ruse is discovered.

With M. Oronte's financial backing the two partners in crime plan to embark on a career in business where they will no doubt make their fortune. Crispin expresses himself

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1. R. Nicklaus, _A Literary History of France_, p. 84.

thus: "Que je suis las d'être valet!... je devrais présentement briller dans la finance."[1] This sentiment presages the ambitions of a future Frontin, but there is nothing revolutionary in Crispin's words, or in LeSage's intentions. Crispin belongs to "a world that still hopes for reform and does not foresee revolution."[2]

Unlike Regnard, Lesage does make a definite attempt to portray reality, and his Crispin is an indication of the growing emphasis on money and financial dealings of all kinds which characterised the last years of the reign of Louis XIV. For the first time the theatre audience sees a _valet de comédie_ rise in the world by means of his own cunning ability. The emphasis is not on any idea of a man's worth determining his place in society, but on the importance of money and on the role of the financier. The _Compagnie de quarante financiers_ formed by Colbert in 1681 had grown increasingly important. The defeats suffered by the French at Lille and again at Malplaquet were the last in a series of disastrous military excursions conceived by Louis XIV. The royal treasury was at an all-time low, and the national debt at an all-time high. The aging King and Madame de Maintenon, cut off from the world of poverty outside the palace walls, turned to religion and the pleasures of the old well-known and well-loved comedies that had delighted the court forty years or more earlier. The aristocracy lost vast fortunes in the mad passion for gambling. The peasants, the

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1. _Crispin rival de son maître_, Act 1. Sc ii.
2. R. Nicklaus, _A Literary History of France_, p. 85.

vrai peuple, faced with the rising cost of living and crippling taxes, sank deeper into the dire state of poverty where they barely maintained an existence.

In this world where money was the key, the financier ruled. Those forty originally appointed by Colbert to collect the traites, the taxes on drink (aides) or on salt (gabelle) gathered around them a whole army of tax collectors at various levels, commis, agents de change, fermiers, sous-fermiers, traitants, partisans, maltôtiers, etc. The traiteur, granted a lease to collect taxes in a specific area for six years, received 4000 livres for his services. Around him gathered other officials, directeurs, inspecteurs, contrôleurs, ambulants, vérificateurs, commis buralistes and so on. None of this growing army of extortionists (the word is not too strong in this context) paid any taxes themselves; that was the unhappy lot of the peuple. It can readily be seen therefore that a man with no scruples, given an entry into the world of finance, could, in very short term, amass a considerable fortune. If one adds usury to their activities (and members of the impoverished aristocracy were forced to resort more and more to the services of the money-lender) one can appreciate the hatred with which the rich, bourgeois financier was viewed by peasant and aristocrat alike.

This, then, is the world of Turcaret, the world of sudden changes in fortune and position, the world of the chevalier d'industrie living off a woman, of a Baronne accepting gifts and money from a lover she despises, a world

in which a valet can become a financier and a financier a jail-bird. This is the world LeSage paints so aptly and satirically in his full-length comedy, _Turcaret_. Faguet calls LeSage an "excellent homme... qui n'y a pas mis malice, et bon auteur qui a laissé un chef d'oeuvre de bon sens, d'observation juste, de narration facile et vive, de satire douce et fine".[1] His satire was, however, such that he had a great deal of trouble in staging the play. Pressure was brought to bear from several influential quarters, and although _Turcaret_ was well received by Parisian audiènces and the receipts were high, it was withdrawn after the seventh performance, and not performed again until LeSage's own son, Montmesnil, joined the _Comédie-Française_ in 1730. LeSage meanwhile returned to the novel and to writing numerous comedies for the _Théâtre de la Foire_. Another one-act play, _La Tontine_, which he wrote before _Turcaret_, was also subject to criticism, and although accepted by the _Théâtre-Français_ in 1708 was never actually produced until twenty-four years later.

The financier had been the object of ridicule and attack for many years before LeSage entered the field. From Molière, (Harpin in _La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas_) to Dancourt (_Les Agioteurs_) the financier had been portrayed as a type. _Turcaret_, however, takes us a step further and shows only too clearly how a valet (Frontin), with a certain amount of wit

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1. Emile Faguet, _Dix-huitième siècle, Etudes littéraires_, p. xii.

and a large measure of dishonesty, can rise to become a financier exactly as Turcaret himself had done some years before.

Frontin, the valet, leaves the employ of his noble master, the Chevalier, to work for M. Turcaret and thereby further the cause of the Baronne. Indirectly he is also aiding the Chevalier, who receives, in his turn, the presents showered on the Baronne by the foolish and enamoured Turcaret, dazzled as only a petty bourgeois can be by the title and the fine manners of his noble mistress. Frontin is a man of the people, not the real people of the countryside, dying in their hundreds from starvation - their suffering was no fit subject for a comedy - but of a new breed of Frenchman. Seeking the means of attaching himself to someone on the way up, he hopes to serve one master while enslaving others, in his turn. He is not cast in the ancient mold of the Commedia dell'Arte or the Roman Comedy. No Bergomask he, but a true product of eighteenth century France: "Frontin est un fils de nos hivers, un garçon qui, ayant eu froid, ayant eu faim, a compris, dès ses premiers pas, que la vie est une lutte... Vrai galopin de Paris, souple et fin, délié, plein de ressourses, ne croyant à rien mais craignant les galères....."[1] Delighted to be at last given an opportunity to use his wits and his cunning, Frontin intends to make the most of it, and, far from having any scrupules about the almost universal trickery and

1. Marc Monnier, Les A'eux de Figaro, Paris, p. 226.

dishonesty around him, revels in it: "J'admire le train de la vie humaine. Nous plumons une coquette, la coquette mange un homme d'affaires, l'homme d'affaires pille d'autres: cela fait un ricochet de fourberies le plus plaisant du monde."[1] With an eye to the future, Frontin arranges for the Baronne to engage a young servant to replace the too outspoken Marine, a maid carefully chosen by Frontin for her lack of scrupules and her willingness to go along with his schemes.

Frontin does, in this respect, follow the ancient theatrical tradition of the servant/slave, for it is he who leads the action, who runs hither and yon. But he is only pretending to serve his old master the Chevalier by serving the new master, Turcaret. In reality he is serving only his own ends.

Apart from the constant involvement in the action, there is little resemblance between Frontin and a Davus, a Scapin or a Mascarille. Frontin serves no-one but himself. Not only is he a clever actor, he is a consummate liar and a thief, ever on the look-out for a means of filling his own pockets at the expense of any master, old or new. Unlike the "running slave" he anticipates a life of ease in the future: "Je ne manque pas d'occupation, Dieu merci. Il faut que j'aille chez le traiteur; de là, chez l'agent de change; de chez l'agent de change au logis; et puis il faudra que je revienne ici joindre M. Turcaret. Cela s'appelle, ce me

1. Turcaret, Act I. Sc. xii.

semble, une vie assez agissante; mais patience, après quelque temps de fatigue et de peine, je parviendrai enfin à un état d'aise: alors quelle satisfaction! quelle tranquilité d'esprit! je n'aurai plus à mettre en repos que ma conscience."[1]

The easy camaraderie that was evident in Dancourt's *Chevalier à la mode*, and even more obvious in Regnard's *Le Joucur* or *Le Légataire universel* is here carried even further. In a world where many of the old aristocratic values have disappeared, the Chevalier shows a marked interest in the new maid, Lisette, complains that Frontin, who is *au courant* of all his master's affairs is secretive about his own, bemoans the fact that he is not "un ami sincère" [2] and even offers to exchange his old Countess (in reality Madame Turcaret) for Lisette. Whether the Chevalier's interest in Lisette is genuine or not, his bantering tone when talking to his valet is indicative of the great changes that have come about in the master/servant relationship.

In the topsy-turvy world of finance, the distinguishing lines between one social class and another are blurred, and often obscured. Crispin, who was to marry the daughter of a *sous-fermier* and "briller dans les finances", could be Turcaret a few years later, only to be replaced in turn by Frontin, cheating noble and bourgeois financier alike. Only Frontin in this comedy of biting satire is a winner. With

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1. LeSage, *Turcaret*, Act II, Sc. xii.
2. *Ibid.*, Act II, Sc. viii.

forty thousand ill-gotten francs at his disposal, and Lisette at his side, he is ready to embark on his career. "Voilà le règne de M. Turcaret fini; le mien va commencer." [1] Frontin may have started his career in the highly stylised tradition of Davus or Arlequin or Scapin, but the mask is dropped, and by the acquisition of wealth he is ready to step into a social class superior to that of his origins. LeSage has emancipated the _valet de comédie_, by depriving him of "l'habit, le masque, l'office de convention" [2] which tradition had imposed on him for two or three thousand years.

This giant leap forward in the role of the _valet de comédie_ was in no way a tribute to a new egalitarian spirit emerging in France, merely a commentary on the enormous power wielded by money. LeSage drew on a very serious situation for his comedy, yet fails to moralise, or offer any philosophy of his own. His role is one of observer and recorder, and this he does admirably within the bounds of his own knowledge. The audacity of his choice of subject, and the wit and humour he brought to its treatment made _Turcaret_, and above all Frontin himself, memorable.

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1. LeSage, _Turcaret_, Act V, Sc. xviii.
2. Marc Monnier, _Les Aïeux de Figaro_, Paris, p. 233.

CHAPTER IV

SENSIBILITY AND MORALISING IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY COMEDY

Comedy had always been the genre which had been allowed the most liberties. Molière knew only too well how to provoke laughter by ridiculing man's vices, and although he may only have been making an astute political move when he spoke, in his first Placet on Tartuffe, of "le devoir de la comédie étant de corriger les hommes en les divertissant . . ."[1], there is a certain amount of truth in his statement. However neither Dancourt, nor Regnard nor LeSage had used their comedies to instruct or to change society. Following the traditon of seventeenth century comedy, their aim was to induce laughter. Despite certain aspects of realism, particularily in Turcaret, their plays belong to the tradition of the old style of comedy rather than to the new, moralising, intructive form of the eighteenth century. M. Lenient calls the theatre of the eighteenth century a

> véritable forum où s'agitent et se débattent chaque soir les idées qui troublent les têtes, les systèmes qui passionnent et divisent déjà la société [2]

This philosophising tone is one aspect of the new theatre. The other is the direct appeal to the

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1 Molière, Oeuvres complètes, I,632

2 C.Lenient, La Comédie en France au XVIIIe Siècle (Paris, Libraire Hachette) p. 159

emotions:

> As tragedy approaches the faster tempo of the melodrama on the one hand and *sensibilité* of the *larmoyant* current on the other, and as comedy becomes more and more serious and moral, and develops into the *drame*, violence will vie with tenderness in producing this appeal. It is here we first notice the breakdown in distinctions between genres. The aim of comedy will no longer be exclusively to cause laughter, and in tragedy, though laughter will still be excluded, joy will not, for the period has its tragedies with happy endings. [1]

The scale of dramatic tone could be said to range from the terrible, through the grand, pitiable, tender and pleasant right on down to the ridiculous. Whereas comedy had previously limited itself to the ridiculous, with few exceptions (Corneille's realistic comedies for example), it now turned more to the *plaisant* and the *tendre* and even, at a later date, to the *pitoyable*. For the moment, however let us consider only Marivaux, the master of the *comédie tendre et plaisante*.

Writing mainly for the *Comédie-Italienne*, (twenty-one of his thirty comedies were written for the Italians) Marivaux created characters with certain actors or actresses in mind, and the "types" found in one play tend to reappear again and again in others. Zanetta Rosa Giovanna Benozzi, for example, whose stage name was Silvia, played the *jeune amoureuse*. "Elle avait la taille élégante l'air noble, les manières aisées, affable, riante, fine dans ses propos, obligeant tout le monde, remplie d'esprit et sans la moindre

1 E.B.O.Borgerhoff, *The Evolution of Liberal Theory and Practice in the French Theatre 1680-1757*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press) p. 6

prétention",[1] said Casanova in his Mémoires. All the jeune première roles were therefore tailored to fit the style and the personality of Silvia.

Similarly, the role of Arlequin, whether country bumpkin or valet, was always filled by Thomassin, the stage name of Thomas-Antoine Vicentin, and became as stereotyped a figure as the original Arlecchino of the Commedia dell'Arte Arlequin had gradually replaced Brighella as first zanni and had, with his increased importance, changed his nature also. Although he still wore the dark mask of the Commedia and the lozenged uniform of his predecessor, Arlequin, as he appears in Marivaux' plays, is more refined, more subtle in his approach. There are no traces of the lazzi, the farcical jeux de theatre that originally characterised him. He has kept his agility, his name and his costume, but with Thomassin, a sensitive mime and skilled acrobat, who could move audiences to tears as easily as to laughter, he has become a lively, refined and even galant figure. He has not, however become any more realistic or representative of the valets of the eighteenth century France, and no trace of the suffering of the common people, of the growing unrest, or even the disgust with the debauchery of the Regent's court show through his mask.

In the earliest play in which Marivaux utilises the Arlequin mask, we find the last remnants of the Bergomask

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1 Casanova. Quoted in introduction to Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard, by Marivaux (Nouveaux Classiques Larousse) p. 12

clod, clumsy, inept, and we must admit, crude. A country bumpkin, he is actually polished and refined by his love for fair Silvia. This evolution of the mask was not limited to Marivaux, having already been begun in L'Amant difficile (1716) by Rémond de Sainte Albine, and Les Amants ignorants (1720) by Autreau, but it was Marivaux who clarified the nature of this new Arlequin and introduced him continuously into his comedies.

In Arlequin poli par l'amour, the role of valet is that of Trivelin, who also reappears in other plays, a valet more in the moralising tone of Gresset. Admonishing the Fée in the first scene for considering Arlequin as her lover when she is already betrothed to the magician Merlin, it is Trivelin who helps Silvia and Arlequin to triumph over the Fée, and justifies his treachery to his mistress by saying

> Ce serait bien dommage d'abandonner de si tendres amants à sa fureur; aussi bien ne mérite-t-elle pas qu'on la serve, puisqu'elle est infidèle au plus généreux magicien du monde, à qui je suis devoué. 1

In La Double inconstance we meet Arlequin again, not as a valet, but as a rather naive and rough peasant, the young lover who spurns the courtly life and letters of nobility to return to the tranquility of his simple village home. Thomassin is here promoted to the position of jeune premier. It is he who points out most forcefully the social satire of the play. Written during the last year of the Regency, 1723, not long after the failure of the Mississippi Company and the

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1 Marivaux, Arlequin poli par l'Amour, Sc. xviii

bankruptcy of Law had ruined him financially Marivaux shows no bitterness on that score, nor does he show disgust at the debauchery and licentiousness of the Court. Instead, by subtle means, he satirises the prevailing ambitions of the bourgeois and aristocrat alike, the signs of wealth demonstrated by ownership of more than one house, by acquiring letters of nobility, or by hiring a suite of lackeys to parade along behind their master. Marivaux' prince is the direct antithesis of the Regent, and the politeness and fine manners of his court are those of the salon of Madame de Lambert, but it is Arlequin, with his native good sense, who is the voice of reason, speaking out against the love of luxury, which he finds merely an encumbrance.

Yet Arlequin, for all his avowed love of the land and his little house, is not a typical peasant. He is good-natured, at times witty and sensible, able in fact, to arouse feelings of love in the heart of a lady of the Court. He is therefore neither the ancient Arlecchino, nor yet a realisic French peasant of the eighteenth century, who would no doubt have repulsed a real-life Flaminia. Marivaux' psychological portrayal of his characters may have been real as far as their emotions are concerned, but the action of his plays is so limited to this narrow area, the study of the emotions, especially the nascent feeling of love, that the overall impression of his plays is one of fantasy and total unreality. Frederick C.Green maintains that Marivaux' world is far more real than any of those created by his predecessors. He quotes

Lanson's judgement that his comedies are enacted in an ideal society, in the land of dreams, and also that of Larroumet, who compares Marivaux' theatre to the atmosphere of unreality that pervades Watteau's Embarquement de Cythère.

> Both judgements, says Green, are completely false, unless, indeed, we confine ourselves to Marivaux' scanty mythological plays, which are frankly féeries, and make no pretence at anything more. The opinions expressed by these critics, however, concern Marivaux' well-known comedies, which, on the contrary, present very real characters moving in a real milieu. Marivaux was not interested in the life of the haute noblesse His heroines are drawn from the bourgeoisie and the provincial nobility, where forced marriages and cases of forced professional vows were not the rule but the exception. His women are free to follow the inclination of their hearts, unhampered by external interference, and this for various but probable reasons. 1

We would question Mr. Green's judgement on the point of reality. Each of Marivaux' heroines is Silvia, under one guise or another. The young lover is usually Lélio, Luigi Riccobini, worthy, handsome, well-mannered, perhaps in reduced circumstances, but in all other respects all one could ask for in a suitor. The valet, or in some cases, the honest countryman, is invariably Thomassin, sprightly, sensitive and even charming. The mother in Les Fausses Confidences is Madame Argante, the one name calculated to evoke a picture of the domineering, meddling mother of comedy. Each of these characters is as stereotyped in his or her way as Davus or Brighella or Crispin. As a psychologist of love Marivaux is

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1 Frederick C.Green, Literary ideas in 18th Century France and England, p. 155

unequalled, but as a realist we would rank him low on the scale.

Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard, first performed by the Comédie-Italienne in 1730, continues the same pattern. Arlequin, "un rôle, un emploi, bien plus qu'un caractère"[1] is cast in the traditional role of the Commedia dell'Arte once more:

> C'est un personnage de fantaisie, qui apporte avec lui son costume et son style concrèt, figure, burlesque et précieux, sa vivacité de manières et de langage. Comme valet, il peut se permettre d'être pince-sans-rire. 2

His function is simple - to echo, by his affair with the soubrette Lisette, the growing love between Dorante and Silvia. He is, from time to time, extremely witty, for instance when he must reveal his true identity to Lisette, but like the ancient slave he must do his master's bidding whether he likes it or not. When Dorante affects the role of valet he does not take the name of Arlequin - it is identified too strongly with the actor Thomassin - but the more French name of Bourguignon. When the Comédie-Francaise took over performance of the play, they too changed the name of the valet, from Arlequin to Pasquin, in the hope of eliminating some traces of the Commedia dell'Arte tradition. Even with the change of name, however, the master/servant relationship remains the same. Dorante, adopting the valet's role, shows only too well what he thinks of the valet's position. Introducing

1. Marivaux, Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard, p. 21.
2. Ibid.

himself to Monsieur Orgon, he says "J'appartiens à Monsieur Dorante qui me suit," [1] indicating his situation as that of a wholly owned object, rather than an employee, a man worthy of consideration in his own right.

Following the death of Madame de Lambert, Marivaux became a regular visitor at the salon of Madame de Tencin, where several of the future encylopédistes gathered to discuss philosophical questions. Yet Les Fausses Confidences, written in 1737, and the last of the great comedies by Marivaux, shows little of their influence. Nor are any of the current social or economic conditions reflected in his work. Although Marivaux prided himself on being a moralist, and an honnête homme, the refined world of the salon is his only milieu, the careful analysis of love, somewhat in the style of the précieuses of the Hôtel de Rambouillet his main concern.

Once more in the Fausses Confidences we find the same stereotyped characters of the previous plays, except for Araminte, the young widow, who is quite unlike any of Marivaux' previous heroines. Far from being overawed by the attentions of the noble Count and his desire to marry her, she rejects him in favour of Dorante, an impoverished young man who has obtained a position in her household as intendant. Apart from Araminte, however, the roles are the old familiar ones: Madame Argante, as we have already mentioned, is the usual unsympathetic, ambitious and frequently choleric mother:

1. Marivaux, Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard, Act I. Sc. vi.

Arlequin, due to the advanced age of Thomassin, is here a mere lackey, a minor role, played in the true dell'Arte tradition, right down to the final lines of the play: "Pardi, nous nous soucions bien de son tableau à présent! L'original nous en fournira bien d'autres copies." [1]

Dubois is here the main valet figure, but he too is quite in the ancient tradition. Although he has left the employ of Dorante, who can no longer afford to retain his services, he is still devoted to his former master and with almost machiavellian cunning and a stubborn perserverance, which, like his wit, is infinitely superior to that of the master, he schemes and lies (the false confidences originate with him) not, as in the ancient comedies to defeat a Pantaleone or a Dottore, but to conquer the prejudies of his own mistress. His ultimate aim is the same as that of a Mascarille or a Scapin, but now he is scheming to awaken the love that Araminte tries to disavow, and to bring about the final union of the lovers in the traditional happy ending. Quite without conscience, in the traditional role of the valet de comédie, Dubois' chief claim to originality is his name. In a modern performance of the play, Jean-Louis Barrault defined quite clearly the mold in which this valet was cast by playing the role of Dubois in the traditional costume of Brighella, the white suit trimmed with green braid.

Although Arlequin, in La Double Inconstance, philosophises on the use, or rather the abuse, of riches,

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1. Les Fausses Confidences, Act III. Sc. xiii.

Marivaux' plays are on the whole concerned only with the interior life of the soul and the outside world enters little into his plays. Quite the opposite can be said of the majority of comedies written during the mid-eighteenth century. If Marivaux represents the sensibilité and the refinement of the eighteenth century salon, Destouches represents the côté moralisant of the eighteenth century. Faguet mentions that "au XVIIIe siècle l'idéal moral est toujours présent aux esprits, du moins dans le domaine des lettres." [1] This is true of all four of the authors we propose to discuss in the following paragraphs.

Destouches, whose first play appeared in 1710, the year after Turcaret, felt that he was indeed a true heir of Molière, and intended to restore to the French stage the comedy of character as it had flourished in the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, as far as talent was concerned, Destouches lagged far behind Molière. Where the latter has the action of his plays stem from the character of his players, the former puts his actors into situations where their characters will be revealed to the audience in the desired light. Although Destouches has a certain quality of style and observation, the result is frequently cold and calculating. He is determined to show what is wrong with such and such a person and, in so doing, to moralise on the situation. Unlike Molière, whose misers or hypocrites are

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1. Emile Faguet, Dix-huitième siècle. Etudes littéraires, p. 82

quite unchanged at the end of the play, Destouches tries to reform his characters, to have them see the error of their ways and to reconstruct them as worthy members of a just society. Unfortunately, the comedies of Destouches are not particularly amusing. Lenient points out that Destouches "ne perd jamais de vue cette sage maxime, que le théâtre doit corriger les hommes en les amusant," [1] but the correction takes precedence over the amusement, to the detriment of the comedy as a whole.

In the preface to his first play, Le Curieux impertinent, Ariste speaks of the author, Destouches, thus:

> L'auteur de notre pièce en tout ce qu'il écrit
> Evite des auteurs des écarts ordinaires;
> Il a pour objet principal
> De prêcher la vertu, de décrier le vice. [2]

As Borgerhoff says, this implies a serious end, even if the means are still comic:

> But if the end remains serious long enough, the means will eventually become serious as well. This is, up to a certain point, what happens during the next thirty or forty years to Destouches himself, as well as to comedy in general. [3]

Given this preoccupation with moralising it is not surprising therefore that the role of valet de comédie either disappears altogether (Destouches wrote no part for a valet in le Philosophe marié, for example) or adopts a

1. G. Lenient, La Comédie en France au XVIIIe siècle, p. 181.
2. E. B. O. Borgerhoff, The Evolution of Liberal Theory and Practice in the French Theatre, 1680 - 1757, p. 12.
3. Ibid., p. 12.

moralising tone himself. In Le Glorieux the valet Pasquin is, up to a certain point, cast in the ancient mold. He knows his place, and like the traditional valet de comédie, shows himself to be completely at his master's disposition. "Disposez de ma langue," he says to the Count, "Je la gouvernerai comme il vous plaira". [1] Yet Pasquin is, at heart, simple and good. There is little occasion for him to be unscrupulous or cunning, although he does admit to being an expert at telling lies: "Oh quand il faut mentir, nous avons du courage." [2] Where he excels is in pointing up his master's overweening pride. Speaking to Lisette, he describes his master, the comte de Tufière, very aptly

> Enfin, pour ébaucher en deux mots sa peinture,
> C'est l'homme le plus vain qu'ait produit la nature" [3]

Yet Pasquin is not above adopting his master's airs himself. Arrogant in his treatment of the lackey who brings a letter for the count, Pasquin demands recognition as a person of some importance, and requests that he be addressed as Monsieur Pasquin with respect. [4] Yet when he is with his master, he is himself all respect, speaking only when spoken to, for the most part, reading the letter which the count does not even deign to open, and transmitting the contents, with some hesitation, to his master. His reward for doing exactly as he is told is a hearty slap. However, Pasquin is not one to take such unearned punishment lightly. He goes so

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1 Destouches, Le Gloriex, Act. III, Sc. i.
2 Ibid., Act III, Sc. i.
3 Ibid., Act I. Sc. iv.
4 Ibid., Act I. Sc. viii.

far as to complain: "Quoi, vous me maltraitez pour les fautes d'autrui",[1] without, of course, any reaction from the count. This leads Pasquin to compensate himself from his master's purse.

By his subtle analysis of the one great vice of his master, Pasquin shows himself to be very perceptive. He would like to point out to the comte de Tufière that he is in danger of losing the wealthy bourgeoise Isabelle by his arrogance and pride. Yet he dare not reproach his master for fear of reprisals. He therefore uses the comments of Lisette, the maid, in an attempt to reason with the count, without any success. Pasquin even attempts to show his master that he should be more respectful to his future father-in-law. "Il faudrait vous lever pour l'aller recevoir"[2] he says, in an effort to get the count to be a little more unbending. This care for his master's well-being is not rare in the plays of Destouches: "Destouches crée le type de domestique fidèle et sensible, qui fait vivre ses maîtres ruinés, les aime méchants, partage leur misère et endure leurs coups, qui a en lui une inépuisable source de dévouement et de pleurs".[3] This is particularily true of Pasquin in L'Ingrat and in Le Dissipateur (both far less successful than Le

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1 Destouches, Le Glorieux, Act I Sc. xiii

2 Ibid., Act II Sc. xiii

3 G. Lanson, Nivelle de la Chaussée (Paris, Librairie Hachette) p.122

Glorieux) but also of the comte de Tufière's valet Pasquin. In this, Destouches' finest play, he supports his master whole-heartedly, and although eager for his reform, he is indeed "fidèle and sensible".

In his prologue to *Le Glorieux*, Destouches emphasises the moral aspects of his comedies.

> J'ai toujours eu pour maxime incontestable que, quelque amusant que puisse être une comédie, c'est un ouvrage imparfait et même dangereux, si l'auteur ne s'y propose pas de corriger les moeurs, de tomber sur le ridicule, de décrier le vice, et de mettre la vertu dans un si beau jour, qu'elle s'attire la vénération publique. [1]

All the characters in *Le Glorieux* are good and honest, kind and virtuous, even Pasquin. The only exception is the *glorieux* himself, whose sudden conversion redeems him in the eyes of the family and the audience.

It is interesting to note that neither in the plays of Destouches, nor in any of the other moralising plays we propose to discuss, is there any hint of a religious basis for this upholding of the moral and virtuous life. While the Church had taken a much more lenient view of the theatre, and no longer condemned it as immoral and ungodly, the theatre had not taken upon itself to preach. Its teaching was that of the *philosophes*, the recognition of the individual worth of a man, and the return to the simple and domestic life of the bourgeois family. The moral question is purely philosophical,

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1 *Eighteenth Century French Plays*, p. 153

not religious, and the moral proccupations of the dramatists do not descend to consideration of the unhappy lot of the common man, the _menu peuple_ of the streets and the fields.

If Destouches was the first to write a comedy which made the audience cry (_Le Philosophe marié_), it was Nivelle de la Chaussée who perfected this new genre of _comédie larmoyante_:

> Toute la comédie larmoyante est donc dans _Le Glorieux_: moralité, caractères vertueux, fictions romanesques, scènes touchantes; aucun élément ne manque. La Chaussée n'eut, semble-t-il, rien à inventer. Qu'eut-il donc à faire? Et comment l'honneur de l'invention lui revint-il? Destouches était arrivé au genre larmoyant, mais par la force des choses et sans le vouloir. Il avait prétendu faire une comédie de caractère. S'il était plus sérieux que plaisant, il ne renonçait pas moins à faire rire: il voulait être plaisant. La Chaussée n'aurait qu'à renoncer aux prétensions de Destouches: le comique et les caractères. Il étendra le romanesque et la sensibilité sur toute la pièce; ce qui était épisodique deviendra le principal, et la comédie, renonçant même au rire décent, au rire de l'âme, ne cherchera que l'émotion et les larmes.[1]

In plays of this type, where the intention is to arouse the emotions, and essentially the tears, of the audience there is no place for a comic _valet de comédie_. There is no intrigue to be carried on, no noble acts of valour to be parodied by the servant, no _dépit amoureux_ to be echoed by the valet and soubrette. The valet is relegated therefore to the simple role of servant.

Although la Chaussée's comedies were extremely

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1 G. Lanson, _Nivelle de la Chaussée_, p. 124

popular during his life-time, they hold little interest for twentieth century audiences and we will confine our remarks to one of his earliest, and certainly his most successful, plays, Le Préjugé à la mode. Attacking the "prejudice that it was unbecoming and bourgeois for a husband to appear to love his wife"[1] la Chaussée reduced the audience to tears with this play, despite the fact that the plot is improbable and the style dull and pretentious. To bring the valet into the realistic picture of the period he is given the perfectly ordinary French name of Henri, which is his only claim to distinction. He fits into the picture of corrupt court life by his support of his master's extra-marital affairs, which, in his opinion, are all too few. For as he says, "plus un maître aime et plus le valet gagne!"[2] He fulfils his role adequately, but shows no originality, nor real traits of character in either words or actions.

Gresset is another eighteenth century playwright revolted by the debauchery and libertinage of the Court and seeking to correct morals and promote virtue by means of his comedies. Originally dedicated to the Church, and a Jesuit novice, Gresset read the comedies of Plautus and Terence, of Molière and Regnard while at school in Paris, at the Collège Louis-le-Grand. Following publication of his poem Vert-Vert, which was considered inpertinent, Gresset was expelled from

1 Eighteenth Century Plays, p. 262

2 Nivelle de la Chaussée, Le Préjugé à la mode, Act III, Sc. xi.

the Order and returned to Paris in 1735. Here he frequented the salon of the duchesse de Chaulnes, a lady renowned for her pitiless comments and her scathing remarks upon all and sundry. It is this encounter with malice merely for the sake of entertainment or diversion that gave Gresset the necessary background for his masterpiece Le Méchant. He saw only too clearly how "la frivolité menait à l'égoïsme, et l'égoïsme à la méchanceté. On devient perfide et cruel avec grâce: la fausseté élégante fut un mérite; le sentiment un ridicule."[1]

The plot of le Méchant is traditional - the projected marriage of two young people is disrupted by some means, here by the sheer malice of the méchant himself, which must be overcome before the play can end happily. In keeping with the moralising tone of mid-eighteenth century comedy, all the characters in the play, with the exception of the malicious Cléon, are, in the final analysis, good, honest and upright, even Valère, who has, temporarily at least, allowed himself to be corrupted by Cléon and the dissipated life of Paris, and Florise, whose head has been turned by Cléon's flattery. In this play good is rewarded and evil is punished, as Cléon is once more requested to leave a home where he had been welcomed as a guest. Even the servants of the patriarchal Géronte are good and honest and devoted to their masters. Frontin, Cléon's own valet, who has trailed around behind his master from place to place, and served him faithfully without

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1 Léon Fontaine, Le théâtre et la philosophie au XVIIIe siècle (Geneva, Slatkine Reprints) p. 175

question, now sees the error of his ways and elects to leave the service of such an odious master and remain as the valet of Valère and the husband of Lisette.

Frontin is no longer the loyal servant who will stand by his master in thick or thin, in right or wrong, support him and aid and abet him in his malicious schemes. True, Frontin is not entirely above reproach. He has, up to this point, been only too happy to continue in the service of such a master, for Cléon is indeed extremely liberal and the wages are good.

It is good, honest love however that causes Frontin to change his mind. Basically sentimental and even modest, he is no traditional valet de comédie. It is Lisette who takes it upon herself to lead the intrigue against Cléon, not Frontin. He is but a willing tool in her hands. Unlike Mascarille, when he repudiates the actions of Cléon it is with a genuine sense of his own honour. Bemoaning the fact that no sooner does he make a few friends in one place than his master's behaviour leads to their abrupt departure, Frontin makes his choice:

> Je ne puis plus souffrir cette humeur vagabonde,
> Et vous ferez tout seul le voyage du monde.
> Moi, j'aime ici, j'y reste. 1.

Cléon is, naturally, horrified to think that a valet of his should show such bourgeois sentiments, but Lisette understands Frontin much better;

> Il peut bien par hasard avoir l'air d'un fripon,
> Mais dans le fond il est fort honnête garçon. 2

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1. Gresset, Le Méchant, Act II. Sc. i.
2. Ibid., Act V. Sc. vii.

One of the main influences on French theatre after the middle of the eighteenth century was the invention, by Diderot, of a new genre, the *drame bourgeois*. His principal aim was, in keeping with the current trend, to use the theatre as a means of social reform. To this end he advocated the study of a social class, not character, as theme. The social problem, to be found in domestic life, was to be treated seriously, with actors representing, in life-like manner, the realities of bourgeois life. Stage settings and costumes were to be simple and realistic - no more romantic park-like settings or antichambers in elegant mansions, but modest homes with all the accoutrements of daily life. Extolling virtue and family ties, Diderot stressed the use of *tableaux vivants*, in the manner of the paintings by Greuze, to show the family unified against the corruption of the outside world.

Diderot's own plays are not much more than illustrations of his theories. But a comedy by Sedaine, *le Philosophe sans le savoir*, written in 1765, is a far better example of the drama than either the *Père de famille* or the *Fils naturel* of Diderot.

Although published as a comedy, the *Philosophe sans le savoir* is a serious play and deals with the question of the aristocratic versus the bourgeois style of life. M. Vanderk, the philosophe of the title, is a loving father, a good master, and an honest businessman, who has renounced his title to become a merchant and find happiness in the simple

pleasures of home and family. He is horrified to find that his son plans to fight a duel, the cause of his own renunciation of his noble birth and flight to Holland many years before. The family scenes are touching, M. Vanderk is admirable, as is his handling of his household and his business acquaintances. Following the general trend of eighteenth century comedy there is little to amuse, except perhaps for the snobbish and arrogant tante du Berry, who does not shed a very kindly light on the aristocracy.

Moreover, there is no valet. With no intrigue, no love affair to foster, no miser to rob or ancient guardian to confound such a character would be completely out of place. What we see instead is a new, exemplary attitude towards the servants, in fact to all social inferiors. Antoine, _homme de confiance_ to M. Vanderk, is a loyal and trusted employee, ready to risk his life in the service of his master, [1] privy to his master's hopes and fears, not as a slave, because he is of so little account one can speak freely in front of him, but because he is a man worthy of sharing his master's problems. Victorine, Antoine's daughter, is treated with kindness and consideration, both by M. Vanderk père, and M. Vanderk fils.

Even the domestic of M. d'Esparville comes under the benevolent eye of this excellent aristocrat turned bourgeois, M. Vanderk. Learning that the domestic has been waiting for three hours, and dozed while the family dined

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1. Sedaine, _Le Philosophe sans le savoir_, Act IV, Sc. v.

(reminiscent of Potiron in La Reconnue) M. Vanderk is quite concerned, going so far as to consider that the domestic's time might be precious. [1] Even when seeing to the last details of his daughter's wedding M. Vanderk is mindful of his servants' welfare, instructing Antoine to see that their table is as well served as his own. [2]

Such consideration of all men, regardless of birth, was the noble ideal of the new drame bourgeois, but we seriously doubt whether it was indeed indicative of a new relationship between master and servant in general.

It would appear that the days of the valet de comédie are over. A realistic figure in his days of slavery, where his job in real life corresponded closely to his role on stage, he was gradually transformed into a mask, a caricature, a stereotype. The eighteenth century, which begins with the the Crispins and the Frontins, who gave some signs of reality under their masks, and who dared to think and act for themselves, as their counterparts in life must surely have done, saw the valet conform once again to the demands of the playwright. Used to support the moral tenor of the play, he loses his ebullience, otherwise he is suppressed altogether.

It would appear that the theatre, after more than two thousand years, has no more use for this particular role. Then suddenly there appears on the scene, in the most conventional of intrigue, amid the most stereotyped of characters,

1. Sedaine, Le Philosophe sans le savoir, Act II, Sc. v.
2. Ibid., Act I, Sc. iv.

the most unconventional, unstereotyped valet ever to appear on the French stage - Figaro.

CHAPTER V

THE EMANCIPATION OF THE VALET DE COMEDIE

Strangely enough, Beaumarchais' first ventures into the theatre, now largely forgotten, were strictly in the style of Diderot's _drame_. His first play, _Eugénie_, which was first produced in 1767, although it was the result of sketches and notes made several years before, was accompanied by a good deal of theorising on the part of the author on the true function of the theatre. It was, he maintained, the role of serious comedy to present social conditions against an easily recognisable background, with language, costumes and action all realistic, meaningful and instructive. The _drame sérieux_, said Beaumarchais, should employ simple, natural dialogue, should leave the spectator in no doubt as to the value of the message being presented.

Eugénie concerns a young girl, seduced by a noble by means of a pretended marriage and abandoned by him when he discovers that she is pregnant. Cast aside so that Lord Clarendon, her supposed husband, may marry an heiress, Eugénie nevertheless continues to love her husband and to hope for his return. Many felt that Beaumarchais had modelled the play on his own experiences when, as an angry brother rushing off to Spain to defend the family honour, he sought to clear the name of his ravished sister. However the play was largely

written before he ever left for Spain, and the true story of that *affaire d'honneur* and of Beaumarchais' negotiations with Clavijo are not as straightforward as he would have liked people to believe. Although the play, after numerous alterations, including the transposition of the action from France to England, enjoyed a modicum of success, it is not relevant to our discussion except for one minor point. Pressed to improve the "tone" of his play by making various changes in the dialogue, Beaumarchais held fast to one sentence, which like the monologue of *le Marriage de Figaro*, he felt was of sufficient importance to warrant his taking a stand on it.

The censor Marin underlined as dangerous the following sentence, which he described as "une énormité": "'Le règne de la justice naturelle commence où celui de la justice civile ne peut s'étendre.' L'auteur modifia ce passage ainsi: 'La justice naturelle reprend ses droits partout où la justice civile ne peut étendre les siens.' Le sens restait le même, et la phrase y gagnait comme construction."[1]

The second of the *drames* of Beaumarchais, *Les Deux amis*, is of even less interest to us. It was a dismal failure from the start. The plot was minimal, the dialogue slow, and interest in the affairs of a tax collector and a *négociant* almost completely non-existent.

These two plays are relevant to this thesis solely

1 Louis de Loménie, *Beaumarchais et son temps* (Paris, Librairie Nouvelle) II, 214

because they illustrate the theatrical theories of Beaumarchais at this stage of his career. Between the production of les Deux amis ou le Négociant de Lyon in January 1770 and the production of the Barbier de Séville in 1775 Beaumarchais had been involved in a law-suit with the Comte de la Blache, a law-suit which was not finally settled until 1778; had been involved in a ridiculous fight, both verbal and physical, with the duc de Chaulnes, which led to his imprisonment in For-l'Evêque for having dared to attack the person of a duc et pair; had polished his writing style by publishing his Mémoires of the Goezman affair, and had undertaken a highly cloak-and-dagger type mission on the behalf of his King, Louis XV, which led to journeys to England, Holland, and Austria. Reading the various accounts of these missions is frequently like reading the adventures of Figaro himself, for Beaumarchais showed a fertile imagination, a ready wit, and an obvious desire to put himself in the limelight.

Having learned at first hand how much influence a noble name could wield, and how little a man without fame or fortune can expect from those of noble birth, or from the conventional methods of administering justice, it is small wonder that Beaumarchais used Figaro as mouthpiece, and avenged himself of the insults and injustices he had experienced.

The Barbier de Séville appeared on stage for the first time while Beaumarchais was preparing the fleet, which, under the banner of the Société Roderigue, Hortalez et Cie., was to be France's contribution to the American War of Independence.

Written originally in 1772 as a comic opera, and refused by the Comédie-Italienne (because, rumour had it, Clairval, the principal actor who would have been expected to play the role of Figaro, had once been a barber himself and refused the role as being too much of a reminder of his humble origins) the play underwent many changes before its final appearance on the stage of the Comédie-Francaise. Postponed in 1773 because of the quarrel with the duc de Chaulnes, and again because of the case brought against him by Goezman, the Mémoires, widely distributed and eagerly read, enhanced the anticipation with which Parisian audiences awaited the play. The first night was an almost total disaster, but bowing to the opinions of others, Beaumarchais eliminated one entire act, and the final version, produced again three days later, was welcomed enthusiastically by the audience.

In the light of his own recent experiences, Beaumarchais made several minor changes which slipped by undetected in the final version, and which would certainly have elicited some comment from the censor at the initial reading had they appeared in the original version presented to him in 1772. Since the first copy had been passed by the censor, the changes, sometimes no more than a word or two here and there, slipped by undetected. We are indebted to the work of M. Louis de Loménie, Beaumarchais et son temps, for his analysis of these minor but revealing changes.

Figaro, recounting his adventures since he left the employ of the comte Almaviva, added to the words "loué

par ceux-ci" the words "blâmé par ceux-là",[1] a direct reference to the fact that Beaumarchais himself was "blâmé" in the affaire Goezman. One other example, among many cited by Monsieur Loménie, is particularly revelant to our thesis. Furious with his domestics because they have let Figaro in to Rosine's apartments, contrary to his orders, Bartholo reduces l'Eveillé to tears.

La Jeunesse éternuant. - Eh, mais monsieur, y a-t-il . . . y a-t-il de la justice? . . .

Bartholo. - De la justice! C'est bon entre vous autres misérables, la justice! Je suis votre maître, moi, pour avoir toujours raison.

La Jeunesse, éternuant - Mais pardi, quand une chose est vraie . . .

Bartholo. - Quand une chose est vraie! Si je ne veux pas qu'elle soit vraie, je prétends qu'elle ne soit pas vraie.[2]

Where, in the final version, the words "justice" appear, in the original the word was "raison", showing once again Beaumarchais' concern with justice.

The same quotation also illustrates the ancient slave/master relationship between Bartholo and his servants. Justice does not enter into the situation, for the master is a law unto himself. This is the attitude Beaumarchais encountered in his dealings with the nobility. A duke or a

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1. Beaumarchais, Le Barbier de Séville, Act I, Sc. ii.

2. Ibid., Act II, Sc. vii.

count might be only too happy to appear on friendly terms with the former watchmaker. He was, after all, a personable and witty companion, and was received by the daughters of the King. But the friendliness went no deeper than the surface. When it came down to personal involvement, the aristocratic point of view obviously demonstrated that any real friendship, implying, as it does, concern for another, was totally out of the question. Just as the aristocrats put themselves in a virtual position of slavery to their King, and expected no real recognition of their human worth, so did they enslave all those beneath them, and treat them with contempt.

Bartholo himself is, in Le Barbier de Seville, the Pantaleone figure of the Commedia dell'Arte, the avaricious guardian seeking to enrich himself by marrying his ward and acquiring her fortune. Bazile is probably the Dottore, here a maître de musique, a repulsive figure, given to calumny and shady dealing. Almaviva and Rosine are the traditional young lovers who, with the help of the cunning valet, will eventually be united in the face of all opposition. Set in Madrid, to avoid repercussions, the plot itself is strictly in the Spanish style, with balcony scenes, disguises, secret assignations and smuggled letters, all in the vein of the seventeenth century.

But the valet is no ordinary valet de comedie:

> Figaro est autre chose qu'un valet de Molière ou de Regnard; tout le long de la pièce les revendications sociales, la peinture des conditions, le besoin de stimuler les sympathies ou les antipathies du spectateur, de ranimer l'intérêt par l'originalité du costume, le

> pittoresque, des tableaux, les mots qui font balle et passent en proverbe, tout cela est bien daté de cette époque bouillante". 1.

Figaro is, to a large extent, Beaumarchais himself, a man of many talents, who committed himself to many causes, whose life was marked by victories or defeats, and who rose above both. Such a man was no ordinary citizen himself, but we cannot emphasise too strongly that Beaumarchais was a good citizen, that he himself never advocated any change in the situation of the common people, and that Figaro was the mouthpiece for his own frustrations and despairs, which just happened to mirror the feelings of thousands of other Frenchmen far worse off than himself.

This unconcern for a possible national upheaval is evidenced by Beaumarchais' remarks on the theatre, contained in his earlier dramatic theories. Maintaining that a volcano erupting in Peru is of more immediate interest to himself and Parisian audiences than tragedies concerning the death of a foreign king, he refuses to show any concern for the execution of Charles I of England, which cannot possibly affect him or his country the way an erupting volcano might: "Je ne puis jamais appréhender rien d'absolument semblable au malheur inouï du roi d'Angleterre". 2

Despite his reflections of dissatisfaction and occasional bitterness, the Figaro of Le Barbier de Séville

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1. Felix Gaiffe, quoted by Jacques Vier, Le Mariage de Figaro, miroir d'un siècle, portrait d'un homme, p. 20

2. C. Lenient, La Comédie en France au XVIIIe siècle, II, p. 249.

is a merry soul, as talented as his predecessors, if not more so. Musical, like his creator, witty and cunning, the first impression is of another Scapin, perhaps a Frontin. But beneath the exotic costume, indicated in great detail by Beaumarchais, and the exterior appearance of the traditional fourbe of a valet, is an infinitely richer character, a much more perceptive person, and a much less slave-like figure. Neither money nor devotion to his master, to whose service he returns at the beginning of the play, activate this valet, but simply the love of intrigue. Figaro schemes for the love of scheming, nothing more. "Agent d'affaires et d'intrigue",[1] he is at one and the same time the typical valet de comédie, the stereotyped mask of classical comedy, yet also a thoroughly natural man, with a natural appreciation of his own position and the world around him.

When the Count embraces him and calls him "mon ange, mon libérateur, mon dieu tutélaire" [2] Figaro is not deceived for an instant. He knows only too well that this effulgence is due only to the fact that he has an entrée to Bartholo's house: "Peste! comme l'utilité vous a bientôt rapproché les distances!" [3]. Before the end of the scene, the Count has shown only too well what he really thinks of the average

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1 C. Lenient, La Comédie en France au XVIIIe siècle II, 264

2 Beaumarchais, Le Barbier de Séville, Act I, Sc. iv

3 Ibid., Act I, Scene iv

man. Trying to coach Almaviva in the art of acting as though he were drunk, Figaro demonstrates what he means, to which the Count retorts, "Fi donc! tu as l'ivresse du peuple", [1] which indicates only too clearly that a gentleman is still obviously a gentleman, even when drunk, and not to be confused with a common drunkard.

Le Mariage de Figaro, written in 1781 and accepted by the comité de lecture of the Comédie-Francaise in the same year, did not reach the theatre until three years later when, after many frustrating attempts to obtain royal permission for the performance, it was finally produced. The reasons for its delay are obvious at the most cursory glance. A more mature Figaro, having lost some of his gaiety, is faced with a situation where, as an honest man of lowly birth, he can, despite all his wit and ingenuity, do nothing to thwart the intentions of the Count Almaviva: " . . . the thrusts at social privilege grow more aggressive, and the shadow of the impending Revolution looms larger", [2] says Cazamian. The shadow of the Revolution, however, is only visible when one stands on this side of the year 1789.

The intrigues, the secret agreements, the frantic attempts to rally support around his play, all make Beaumarchais' life at this time sound like a play itself. The wit and the audacity shown by the author rivalled that of his creation, for Beaumarchais was determined that his play

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1. Beaumarchais, Le Barbier de Séville, Act I, Sc. iv.

2. L. Cazamian, A History of French Literature, p. 276.

would be produced as he wrote it, complete with criticism of the judicial system, of the aristocratic denial of human rights, and with his plea for a man's right to happiness all intact. It took three years, but finally, on April 27th, 1784, the Mariage de Figaro was presented at the Comédie-Francaise and was an immediate and outstanding success.

The point of departure of the play is the decision by Count Almaviva to re-assert his droit du seigneur, a right he had gladly relinquished upon his marriage to the lovely Rosine. Now, however, after three years of marriage, marked by scandals barely hinted at, boredom with his life and the charms of the soubrette Suzanne have led him to change his mind, despite the fact that Suzanne is about to become the wife of his valet and former "ange tutélaire" Figaro. Neglect of his dutiful and dignified wife have led the Count to lose the respect of his household and of his peasants. The dénouement of the play, in which Figaro triumphs over the Count in full view of the assembled crowd, is a vindication of the rights of the common man over the autocratic demands of an ignoble aristocracy. The humiliation of the Count is glossed over quickly and the play finishes on a note of revelry:

> Or, messieurs, la co-omédie
> Que l'on juge en ce-et instant,
> Sauf erreur, nous pein-eint la vie
> Du bon peuple qui l'entend.
> Qu'on l'opprime, il peste, il crie,

Il s'agite en cent fa-açons:

Tout finit-it par des chansons. . .'[1]

But despite the gaiety and the wit that prevail throughout the play, the note of discontent is remarkable, not only in Figaro's famous monologue, but in speeches given to other characters in the play. The criticism is social in nature, not political, as in the case of Marceline, who defends her rights as a person, complaining that as a woman she is considered a second-class citizen, a plaything for a man, a virtual slave with no freedom to employ any talents she might have, but relegated to the job of simple femme de charge. Everything she has to say about the position of women in society is true about the lowly born of either sex.

The courtroom scene furnishes many examples of a system of law and justice which was weighted heavily in favour of wealth and position. Beaumarchais uses Brid'oison constantly to avenge himself on Goezman. In the most humorous fashion he points up not only the judicial abuses such as the selling of judgeships, but also the arrogant stupidity of Brid'oison-Goezman. Brid'oison horrifies Marceline when he reveals that he bought his charge. She shakes her head in disgust, and sighs: "C'est un grand abus que de les vendre!" Whereupon Brid'oison, misunderstanding her completely, replies; "Oui, l'on-on ferait mieux de nous les donner pour rien".[2]

1 Beaumarchais, Le Mariage de Figaro, Act V, Sc. xix

2 Ibid., Act III, Scene xii,

Even the heavy solemnity of Brid'oison's style of speech was modelled on the slow, provincial accent of Goezman.

Satire of the judicial system was nothing new. Molière had already, in <u>les Fourberies de Scapin</u>, very wittily pointed up the perils and the costs that confronted anyone who took his case to the courts.

> Pour plaider, il vous faudra de l'argent. Il vous en faudra pour l'exploit; il vous en faudra pour le contrôle; il vous en faudra pour la production, pour la présentation, conseils, productions et journées de procureur; il vous en faudra pour les consultations et plaidoiries des avocats, pour le droit de retirer le sac et pour les grosses d'écritures; il vous en faudra pour le rapport des subsituts, pour les épices de conclusion, pour l'enregistrement du greffier, façon d'appointement, sentences et arrêts, contrôles, signatures et expéditions de leurs clercs, sans parler de tous les présents qu'il leur faudra faire. . ., 1

There is one important difference however between the satire of the seventeenth century and that of the eighteenth. Scapin, who seeks to deter Argante from his proposed action in order to further the happiness of Argante's son Octave, seeks nothing for himself. He serves unselfishly and devotedly, with all the wit and cunning at his command, in true slave tradition. He has, personally, no axe to grind with the judiciaries, there is no personal involvement. Figaro and Marceline are involved in court action on their own behalf, and the satire of the system of justice as seen in <u>Le Mariage de Figaro</u> illustrates in no uncertain manner how rarely true justice could be expected by those who were

1 Molière, <u>Les Fourberies de Scapin</u>, Act II, Sc. v

forced to seek it.

It is mainly in the famous monologue of Act V that we see the true nature of this new, liberated *valet de comédie*. Figaro is still the gay and witty figure of *le Barbier de Séville*, but he is also more talkative, given to introspection and apt to view in a more realistic light the misadventures and frustrations of his early years. More caustic than the madcap Barber, he elaborates on the many positions he held, the many jobs he turned his hand to. Whereas in *le Barbier de Séville* he made fun of his failure in the business world and as an author, and maintained that he was always "supérieur aux événements"[1], in the *Mariage de Figaro* he reveals that at one point, after numerous setbacks, he actually reached the point where he seriously considered suicide:"Pour le coup, je quittais le monde, et vingt brasses d'eau m'en allaient séparer lorsqu'un Dieu bienfaisant m'appelle à mon premier état".[2]

Figaro's thoughts take on a far more serious and philosphical tone than ever before. He questions his very existence and wonders, in fact who he really is, what is this "moi" which pre-occupies him. The first version of the monologue ended on a far more somber note but Figaro's morbid reflections on life and death had no place in the comedy and Beaumarchais very sensibly deleted them.

In his Preface to the *Mariage de Figaro*, Beaumarchais

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1. Beaumarchais, *Le Barbier de Séville*, Act I, Sc. ii.

2. Beaumarchais, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Act V, Sc. iii.

reiterates his intention of criticising the abuses of society and not the monarchy or the aristocracy itself: " . . . au lieu de poursuivre un seul caractère vicieux, comme le joueur, l'ambitieux, l'avare, ou l'hypocrite, ce qui ne lui eût mis sur les bras qu'une seule classe d'ennemis, l'auteur a profité d'une composition légère, ou plutôt a formé son plan de façon à y faire entrer la critique d'une foule d'abus qui désolent la société". [1]

Beaumarchais goes on to say that if he had made Figaro a tragic hero, speaking sententiously, avenging his honour by the sword against a worthy adversary, such as a merciless tyrant, then his work would have been performed without question and greeted with applause. But his hero is a valet, an insolent fellow, a stock comedy figure who has no right to expect justice or consideration, who has no business questioning the actions of his lord and master, and who, finally, has the unmitigated gall to scheme <u>against</u> that master, and to win. It was precisely because honour and reason belong <u>naturally</u> to the valet Figaro that Louis XVI found the play tasteless and ridiculous. Whether or not he was astute enough to make the remark credited to him, to the effect that the Bastille would have to fall before such a play could be produced, is in some doubt. It was not on political grounds that he found the play objectionable, nor did its many aristocratic supporters see any great political significance in the play.

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1. Beaumarchais, <u>Le Mariage de Figaro</u>, p. 30.

Le Mariage de Figaro was viewed by some as an immoral, subversive work, which tried to destroy all authority, and as an offense against the nobility (in the person of Almaviva); as an attack against the magistrature (in the characters of Brid'oison and Doublemain); even as a protest against the type of hanger-on at Court who knew only too well how to flatter and receive, how to take, but not to give. Beaumarchais replied to all these criticisms in his preface. He calls the play: "la plus badine des intrigues. Un grand seigneur espagnol, amoureux d'une jeune fille qu'il veut séduire, et les efforts que cette fiancée, celui qu'elle doit épouser, et la femme du seigneur, réunissent pour faire échouer dans son dessin un maître absolu que son rang, sa fortune et sa prodigalité rendent tout-puissant pour l'accomplir. Voilà tout, rien de plus. La pièce est sous vos yeux". [1]

How trite and banal the plot appears when reduced to a bare outline - a Commedia dell'Arte scenario with Spanish overtones, a farcical imbroglio, and a couple of dépits amoureux as well. The plot alone is not what makes Le Mariage de Figaro memorable. There are many of the ingredients of the drame bourgeois, too, the recognition of an illegitimate son, for instance, the neglected but loving wife to whom the erring husband finally returns. Yet Le Mariage de Figaro is unique principally because of the nature of its totally untraditional valet. No Mascarille,

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1. Beaumarchais, Le Mariage de Figaro, p. 30.

or Scapin, or even Frontin had gone so far as to question his master's right to his position. When Figaro asks the absent Almaviva: "Qu'avez-vous fait pour tant de biens? Vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître, et rien de plus", [1] he is speaking not only for himself but for all the "enslaved", the poor, the oppressed who see no valid reason for their plight, and, equally, no valid reason for the position another, of less talent, has over them.

For Beaumarchais' contemporaries, the "secret of Figaro's appeal lay in what Beaumarchais himself called the disconvenance sociale, the inherent contrast between his hero's social condition and his inexhaustible genius for intrigue. To see in him, however, a staunch and audacious champion of the tiers etat is to be wise after the event." [2]

It is true that Beaumarchais had no intention of arousing the downtrodden, or of inciting them to revolution. But in the face of almost unsurmountable opposition he insisted that his play remain as he had written it, that his criticism of social conditions be put before the audience. He did make Figaro a living, breathing person, rather than a comic mask or a moralising mouthpiece for current philosophies. It would indeed be wrong to see in Figaro " the mouthpiece of the tiers etat," a figure of political propaganda. He has a greater stature. The power and danger of Figaro within the society of his time is that he is a manifestly free man."[3]

1 Beaumarchais, Le Mariage de Figaro, Act V, Sc. iii

2 F.C.Green, Literary Ideas in Eighteenth Century France and England, p. 186

3 R.Nicklaus, A Literary History of France, p. 328

The *valet de comédie* has at last been emancipated. The two plays that put on stage this very singular *valet de comédie* "mark at once the culmination of life under the *ancien régime*, a turning point, and a signpost to a still uncertain future." [1]

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1. R. Nicklaus, *A Literary History of France*, p. 328.

CONCLUSION

We have traced the role of *valet de comédie* through two thousand years of dramatic tradition, from the totally owned slave of the Greek or Roman theatre to his final emancipation in the eighteenth century. Through the ages this lowly figure has illustrated the view of the upper echelons of society, be it noble or bourgeois, of the common man. The change from slave to free man did not affect the situation of the poor working class, the peasant or the servant. Vis-a-vis his master he was still without rights, unworthy of any consideration as a human being.

The *Commedia dell'Arte* valets, who had such a great influence on the French *valets de comédie*, added humour, often coarse, and slapstick to the already talented servant. Yet despite his many talents, as an entertainer, as an intriguer, and as a household necessity, the sixteenth century valet had no more liberty and showed himself even less realistic than the ancient slave.

The seventeenth century saw little improvement in his lot. Despite a development in personality and finesse, his function in the theatre remained unchanged, as his situation in life remained unaltered. The servant was little better than a domestic animal, to be used or abused by his master according to his whim. Frequently the theatrical function of the valet is usurped by a female servant, and from the *meneur d'intrigue*, the valet descends to the simple

role of mirror, echoing, in baser fashion, the loves or affaires d'honneur of his master. There is no hint of possible equality. The mores of the time demand that breeding alone can confer fine manners, discernment, nobility of soul, or any real worth:

> Les hommes de ce temps ont un besoin impérieux d'ordre et de régularité. La hiérarchie et l'étiquette marquent à l'individu son rang dans l'état et dans la societé, et commandent toutes ses actions. Cela est dans l'ordre, cela n'est pas dans l'ordre, voilà le mot qui dans la bouche du roi justifie ou condamne sans appel. 1

It appeared that the hierarchial system was unshakable, that the only way for a man to elevate himself in life was by trickery and deceit, principally in the world of finance, in the manner of a Turcaret or a Frontin. But early in the eighteenth century a new element made its subtle entry into the comic scene - - a valet talented enough to hide his lowly beginnings, and intelligent enough to usurp the rôle of master and succeed, up to a certain point:

> A partir de l'année 1707, où LeSage fit voir sur le théâtre Crispin rival de son maître, la littérature du XVIIIe siècle s'encanaille de plus en plus dans la glorification des domestiques. Ce siècle marche vers les triomphes de ce Suisse génial qui s'appelle Jean-Jacques Rousseau et vers l'apothéose de ce faquin redoutable qui se nomme Figaro. 2.

Theatre-goers were even exposed to men, and women, of noble birth who were rogues and rascals themselves, and for

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1. G. Lanson, Nivelle de la Chaussée et la comédie larmoyante, p. 85.

2. Gaston Deschamps, Marivaux, p. 170.

whom no valet or servant could entertain feelings of respect.

Following the triumph of Turcaret, the theatre took a new turn, and for the next fifty years or more, literature as a whole, not just the theatre, preached the sensitivity of man, the nobility of man, the inherent goodness of natural man, even the equality of man, in the most basic sense of the word. In the theatre, the valet vied with his master in proclaiming good honest bourgeois sentiments and moralising on the unworthy behaviour of those in positions of wealth and power. He was used by dramatists to proclaim the anti-aristocratic propaganda of the philosophes. Marivaux portrayed the narrow world of sensitivity and refinement of the salon, where the valet, (unlike the coarse and gluttonous Jodelle, aping his master in a parody of good taste and valor), rivalled his master in sensibilité. Destouches, La Chaussée and Gresset depicted the world as they would have liked it to be, with servant edifying or reforming the master, showing the way to an enlightened society and renouncing the libertinage and méchanceté of the Court and the Parisian nobility.

None of these dramatists really looked at the actual situation of the great majority of the common people, the starving, the oppressed, the poor. Their comedies were illustrations of their own philosophy, not an indication of real life. In Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, one of the most farcical of Molière's comedies, we have an excellent example of this type of metaphysical approach, which is not necessarily translated into action. The maître de philosophie, after

having preached calmness and self-control, flies into a rage when his own area of study is questioned. Words are useless if they are not supported by appropriate action, and the time was fast approaching when the common man, the _menu peuple_, all those who had felt the weight of the master's assumed superiority, were to take action themselves.

It remained for Beaumarchais, a man who loved his King and his country, a man with no particular interest in politics, to put his finger on the hidden potential of a Scapin, a Crispin, a Figaro. Without any intention of spreading liberal or republican ideas, he put into the mouth of the most famous of all _valets de comédie_ the pent-up feelings of a whole generation of downtrodden men and women who were shortly to reach the end of their endurance. Figaro's famous monologue is, in retrospect, a last _cri de coeur_ of a people seeking recognition and respect. Unfortunately for all, his cry went unheard: "The power of the mob, unleashed from a vast powerhouse, fed on repression and starvation to sweep away the Monarchy, the aristocracy and the privileges of the Church." [1]

On July 14th, 1789, the enraged mob of St. Antoine looted the Hôtel de Ville and stormed the Bastille. The _valet de comédie_ was vindicated in a manner neither he nor his many creators ever dreamed possible. France lost, in one fell swoop, her King and one of her oldest theatrical traditions. Figaro, and with him the traditions of the

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1. R. Nicklaus, _A Literary History of France_, p. 15.

valet de comédie role, was swept away in the upsurge. The emancipation of the *valet de comedie* was complete, and the ancient mold broken beyond repair.

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