MOLIÈRE AND LIFE.

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I.

At the conclusion of Plato's *Symposium*, the reporter of the dialogue says that when he was awakened towards daybreak by the crowing of cocks he found the rest of the company asleep or departed, but Socrates and Agathon, the tragic poet, and Aristophanes were still awake and drinking, and Socrates was discoursing and was compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy was the same as that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also. Socrates was not the man to shrink from a paradox, and the assent of the other two must not be pressed, for the reporter says they were drowsy and did not quite follow the argument. It is greatly to be regretted that Plato has not preserved Socrates' arguments in some other form. We may be sure they were delightful and full of good sense and subtlety. Socrates had before him the practice of the tragic poets in winding up the trilogy of tragedies with a satiric play; if he had been living in the seventeenth century he could have pointed to Shakespeare and Racine and Corneille, and to the last with peculiar relevance for our subject. For although *Le Menteur* hardly rises above the level of a comedy of incident and errors, Molière himself has said, that if it had not been for this comedy he himself might have written his lighter comedies but would not have risen to the height of the serious comedy of *Le Tartuffe* and *Alceste*. Possibly Socrates was influenced unconsciously by the presence both in the tragedy and the comedy of his time of the chorus which in some fashion represents the grave

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library, 14th April, 1926.
opinion of the public and of life. For there is reason to believe that
the chorus or its equivalent enters implicitly or explicitly (that is in the
person of some character or characters) into the very structure of
comedy. At any rate in the comedy of Molière this is always so.
On the other hand, the chorus is accidental to tragedy in its structure.
From being originally a participant it becomes a commentary on the
real participants and then disappears.\(^1\) Now Socrates impressed by the
habit of his time may have thought that both forms of the drama,
sharing in so important a feature, were in essentials the same or had
the same genius. His arguments would have been subtler and in
appearance more profound. Yet perhaps it is here that the real
difference of tragedy and comedy may be found, that in the one the
judgment on the persons is absent or falls to the spectator, in the other
it is in the structure of the play.

Socrates, while he said that the true tragic writer was also an
artist in comedy, did not lay down the converse proposition that the
true comic writer is also an artist in tragedy. Molière, at least, if he
sometimes seems to skirt the borders of tragedy, is never really tragic.
We have to be on our guard against reading into him feelings different
from his intention or inspired by situations which are more seriously
regarded at times different from his. I know one sensitive person who
cannot read *George Dandin* because of sympathy with the hero in
his cruel deceptions. Yet he is too undignified in himself to be a
tragic character—"vous l'avez voulu, George Dandin": the helpless
resignation of a foolish man; and we must confess that Molière and
his audience were accustomed to regard conjugal infidelity with levity
when it did not touch themselves, and that the heartless wife in the
play is meant to and does emerge triumphant. Our sympathy with
the nobler side of Alceste's character may incline us to weep with him
rather than laugh at him; but there is no doubt of the intention of the
play. Molière comes nearest to tragedy in *Le Festin de Pierre.*
Yet the fate which overtakes Don Juan may give us a thrill of horror
but is too melodramatic to be tragic. In a tragedy the vengeance of
insulted right would not be left to the strange machinery of an animated
block; the just heavens would have embodied their vital presence in
the person of some character of the play; whereas Don Elvira,

\(^1\) C. E. Vaughan in *Types of Tragic Drama* sees it represented in later
tragedy in the lyric element of the speakers.
who warns Juan of his doom, finds no more tragic solution of the conflict than to retire repentant into a convent. True to his comic inspiration, Molière, on the contrary, leaves us with the great exclamation of the valet bewailing the loss of his wages. Once, indeed, Molière tried his hand not at tragedy but at an heroic play, *Don Garcie de Navarre*. But he had the good sense to recognise that he was forcing his natural vein, and made the best use possible of his failure by taking passages from the tediously jealous harangues of Don Garcie before his serious and constant mistress, and inserting them into the worthier setting of Alceste’s manlier, if still unreasonable, protests against the levities of Célimène.

In order to test the paradox of Socrates by a concrete instance let us ask why *Le Misanthrope* is a comedy and *Timon of Athens* a tragedy. Of the justice of the designations there is no doubt. Alceste upon the stage is laughable and meant to be so. *Timon*, which as a tragedy is not for a moment comparable in artistic merit with *Le Misanthrope*, and is indeed a poor tragedy and only in part, it is said, the work of Shakespeare, is a tragedy. They are worth comparing because in both the subject matter is the same, the turning of what is essentially a noble nature into misanthropy. In both, the hero is ennobled by passion and disfigured by foolishness; in both the issue is the rejection of the world. Here the likeness ends. The differences arise with the comic or the tragic development respectively.

The passion of Alceste lies in his sincerity and dislike of shows. The man who prizes the rude lyric “*Si le roi m’avait donné*” in spite of its archaic style and its poor rhyme, because it portrays a heart-felt passion may or may not have been a good literary critic (he was surely a good one); but at least he was a man of noble disposition. *Timon*

\[1 \text{Si le roi m’avait donné}
\text{Paris, sa grand’ ville,}
\text{Et qu’il me fallût quitter}
\text{L’amour de ma mie,}
\text{Je dirais au roi Henri :}
\text{Reprenez votre Paris ;}
\text{J’aime mieux ma mie, ô gue}
\text{J’aime mieux ma mie.}
\]

\[\text{Le rime n’est pas riche, et le style en est vieux ;}
\text{Mais ne voyez-vous pas que cela vaut bien mieux}
\text{Que ces colifichets dont le bon sens murmure,}
\text{Et que la passion parle là toute pure?}\]
is mere good nature, till ingratitude makes him flame up into hatred; adversity brings out the man; he ceases to be the genial fribble, under which his real force was disguised. "The old Timon with his noble heart," says Tennyson, "that strongly loathing greatly broke"—though the words are perhaps exaggerated. Alceste has his passion within control. Even when he is most agitated by hatred of conventional lies, he remains of the world which practises them. In the great scene with Oronte he is the perfect gentleman—"Je ne dis pas icela." Only when provoked beyond bearing does he tell Oronte flatly and coarsely that his sonnet is worthless. Timon becomes hatred personified, through revulsion from his own good nature. The difference of their fates flows from the difference in their faults. Alceste's foolish through the extravagance of his expectations. Being a large and not a mean character, he unreasonably asks of human nature more than human nature can bear, and the high pitch and tension of his sincerity pervades him so that comic as he is he is one of the really concrete and organic types of personality; like Tartuffe in this respect and unlike Harpagon in L'Avare perhaps, and certainly Argan in Le Malade Imaginaire. That is why, or one reason why, Le Misanthrope is so great a comedy and Alceste a comic hero. His fault is not tragic for it is the basis of his character. Timon's fault is not so much extravagance of judgment as foolish and innocent confidence in men. When the unthinking spendthrift discovers that he has placed his trust in summer friends he recognises the tragic fault (the àμαρτία) and his trust is converted into passionate hatred. Were he a more organic person, were he less a mere prey to the revulsion of feeling and the desire to give it vent, he would be more of a tragic figure than he is.

All the same we can in the indifferent tragedy trace all those elements which have been discovered to lie at the basis of tragedy by Aristotle and Hegel, and by Mr. Andrew Bradley in our day. There is the tragic fault into which he slips out of the blind simplicity of his inexperience of mankind. And the play may be said to exhibit within this noble and serious person, turned nobly serious by the issue of his defect, the conflict in which over-weening trustfulness is shattered against the real self-seekingness of mankind, and he perishes in the conflict. And at the end Alcibiades enters to pronounce like Fortinbras in Hamlet the words which reconcile his death with over-ruling
providence. These features do not stand out so clearly here as they
do in Lear, or Othello, or Hamlet; but they can be discerned in
spite of the imperfections of the play.

In Le Misanthrope, on the other hand, there is indeed a clash or
conflict between the high-strung demands of Alceste and the unbending
reasonableness of the social standard. But the clash is not so much a
clash as a contrast; and it can be so reduced in scale, and become
comic, because the conventional judgment which laughs at Alceste for
his extravagance and is embodied in the persons of Philinte and
Éliante and even, in her way, of the gay and bewitching and entirely
reasonable coquette Célimène who is the author of all Alceste’s woes—
because this conventional standard is not an elemental force in things
and human affairs, but rather a matter of sweet reasonableness and
moderate expectation, in which all men can settle down as to a minimum.
Thus Timon’s trust in human nature comes into conflict not with what
we may reasonably expect of men in society, but with self-regarding
human nature and the end is the destruction of Timon in the struggle.
Alceste’s revolt against society is not the simple failing of a sincere and
noble nature, but a crude misapprehension on his part of the conditions
under which society can be carried on. There wants in such a
situation the seriousness of issue which in tragedy is always raised.
Of the tragic poet it is true what Mr. Yeats says of himself with a
different application:

“The elemental beings go,
   About my table to and fro.”

The public standard against which Alceste rebels has not the high
solemnity of a great power like jealousy, or, to take again the Hegelian
case of the Antigone, loyalty to the state, or as in Hamlet, devotion
to a father’s memory. We are not torn in our sympathies between
the sincerity of Alceste’s passion for unbridled truth and our acceptance
of current opinion. Conventional standards do not seem to us to
deserve all that pother, and the gravity of tragedy is consequently
replaced by light-hearted observation of how the revolter goes under.

It will be urged that Alceste is passionately in love, and there is
tragedy in the sacrifice of his love to his sincerity; and it is true that
the conflict betrays a noble nature and excites our sympathy, and, if
Alceste were different, contains a tragic possibility. The conditions of
real tragedy are however wanting, the contention between vital elements in human nature. For Alceste’s sincerity is vitiated by its unreasonableness, which it is the very gist of the comedy to expose; it has not the “high seriousness” of Othello’s simple trust and honour, poisoned by a friend with suspicion (“it is the cause, it is the cause”). The sacrifice of his love has not the inevitableness of the tragic calamity, nor is the pity it excites a “cleansing” pity; it does but make the comedy a greater and higher comedy.

In his recent work on Psychology Mr. McDougall has suggested that laughter is a preservative against excess of sympathy which would be exhausting. In this play we take the side of Philinte and Éliante, and even Célimène, and laugh in order not to sympathise with the honest sufferings of Alceste. Those who, feeling so strongly his essential but misguided goodness, weep for him fail to take the point of view of the comic poet and to laugh at the somewhat trivial defiance of an accepted code or anything firmly enough based on common practice to claim reasonable recognition: much as we laugh at Beatrice and Benedict for their playful refusal to acknowledge the claims of their attraction for each other. Hence Alceste, for all his enthusiastic rebellion against the insincerities of polite society, is no grave champion of virtue but a light challenger of the claims of moderation and reason. Noble as he is, he is surrounded with an aroma of triviality. In the end his indignation hurries him into his rupture with the world:

Trahi de toutes parts, accablé d’injustices,
Je vais sortir d’un gouffre où triomphent les vices;
Et chercher sur la terre un endroit écarté
Où d’être homme d’honneur on ait la liberté.

The issue is too intense for the occasion. Significantly enough it is suggested that his resolution may not be unshakeable. The comedy ends, not like a tragedy with the hero’s overwhelming, but with the hope that after all he may acquiesce:

Allons, madame [says Philinte to Éliante] allons employer toute chose
Pour rompre le dessein que son cœur se propose.

I do not say that comedy is in the right to ridicule these generous rebellions against good sense and moderation. Heaven forbid that indignation at the insincerities of our accommodated social intercourse
should cease. Rather than that, let our Alcestes claim the liberty of saying no word but unvarnished truth, at whatever risk of hurting the feelings of others; or, if they are unfortunate enough to love in their own despite a Celimène who being young and full of the wine of life declines to abandon all society in order to devote herself to her lover’s whims and bury herself in hiding with him from the world whose injustice he cannot endure, let them endure their discomfort. The spirit of revolt is so precious that these sacrifices may be worth while. Yet comedy may still have something to say in its defence. It ridicules in Alceste not his sincerity but his petulance. It raises no laugh at the revolt against serious evils by the valiant champions of new ideals whose aim is to reform: your Francis of Assisi who, bred in luxury and the life of pleasure, gives his cloak to the beggar and embraces poverty. Comedy laughs at Alceste for rejecting what it is not reasonable or worth while to decline for the sake of something which it is not reasonable or worth while to secure. The standard from which it measures its victims may be itself a low one, may express no more than a minimum of requirement, may take human nature too lightly. But it can at least urge for itself that these standards are a solid achievement of good sense and at least something which it is worth while to conserve till a better is found.

The rights of comedy are more palpable when the sin against public use and wont is not the generous unreasonableness of Alceste, but the exaggerations of valuable elements of life into hypocrisy. When it ridicules the pretences of the false dévot it is still more obviously establishing the claims of moderation and good sense. It includes in its subjects (besides the Alcestes), the Tartuffes, and even as in the Femmes Savantes the supposed pretenders to a cultivation believed to be beyond their sphere, even when they do not, as in this play, carry their pretensions to the absurdity of refining their language into a ridiculous precision.

I cannot speak of comedy in general or the comic spirit. For that I must send you to Meredith’s great Essay on Comedy and the uses of the Comic Spirit. But of Molière’s comedy it is true that always the part of chorus is played by common sense, or sound sense, current in the cultivated opinion of the time. The comic motive lies in the contrast of certain characters which deviate from this standard with the others which represent it. Such good sense is not merely good
taste but right and goodness as they are conceived at the time in the general current of healthy life. Accordingly Mr. Bergson, who founds himself in the main upon Molière, declares in his book upon Laughter (Le Rire) that the comic character is one-sided and presents the appearance of something mechanical, something which does not share in the full tide of life. The point is well taken, for the exaggeration, which takes the hero out of the region of full good sense, whether as in Alceste it is an offence against good judgment merely, or as in Tartuffe against the true and balanced spirit of religious devotion, destroys the equilibrium of life. The criticism is, however, not perfectly good, if it implies that the comic personage is not in himself a personality organised completely by his controlling impulse. Such a view would not hold of Alceste, who is a very living person; it may be true of Harpagon or Argan, but it is certainly not of Tartuffe, who is a thorough-paced and vital rascal, who by a kind of fine art can harmonise his pretended exaltation of sentiment with very human sentiments of sensuality and vindictive love of gain. The great comic characters are in fact comic in proportion as they are also whole men, with not so much a mechanised life as a twisted one. Was there ever a more living man than Falstaff himself, who was perhaps beyond the reach even of Molière; whose want of principle is idealised into a new irresponsible kind of life, that is never troubled by current opinion and does not so much defy it as rather is innocent of it; who in no sense is like Satan who says “evil be thou my good,” but rather enjoys a merry and delighted obliteration of moral distinctions? The shock with common sense culminates in his case with his repudiation by the prince turned king, in whom indeed common sense in its harder and more brutal form is represented.

In a paper in the Cornhill for April, 1925, on “The Ladies of Molière,” to which I owe much, my friend Mrs. MacCunn dwelt on the good sense of Molière’s women, and wisely compared them, Léonor and Henriette and Éliante and the rest, with the heroines of Jane Austen, with Jane Bennet, Eleanor Dashwood and Fanny Price. It is not only the Philintes and Chrysales who play the foil to the comic personages, but the wise coquettes like Célimène, the modest and gracious and dutiful Henriette of the Femmes Savantes, the Léonor of the École des Maris and the enchanting Dorines and Nicoles.
Meredith has dwelt on the equality of the sexes in Molière’s plays, not equality of privilege but equal opportunity as members of society in their respective spheres. He even regards such equality as the true soil for the growth of pure comedy. “Where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty—in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted them by a fair civilisation—there, and only, waiting to be translated from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions.” Such an audience Molière found not so much in the society of the Court of Louis XIV as in the bourgeoisie of Paris, “sufficiently quick-witted and enlightened by education to welcome great works like Le Tartuffe, Les Femmes Savantes and Le Misanthrope, works that were perilous ventures on the popular intelligence, big vessels to launch on streams running to shallows.” And again, “Cultivated men and women, who do not skim the cream of life, and are attached to the duties, yet escape the harsher blows, make acute and balanced observers. Molière is their poet.” Meredith is doubtless right in the part which he assigns to women in the world comedy. “The man seeks freedom,” says the princess in Goethe’s Tasso, “the woman observance”—Nach Freiheit strebt der Mann, das Weib nach Sitte. Whatever may be thought of that antithesis, it is at least true that the equal participation of women with men secures the atmosphere of ordered custom, which supplies the standard of well-regulated judgment against which comedy in its Molièresque example sets out the laughable follies or extravagances of mankind.

II.

When I speak in the title of this paper of Molière and life, I mean by Molière not the man himself in his recorded life but in his plays. What we know of his life outside the history of his plays is scanty: his few years of study as a young man at the Lycée, Collège de Clermont; and in particular the conversations he had with and the lessons he had from the Epicurean or materialist philosopher Gassendi (Molière once began a translation of Lucretius which unfortunately is lost); the years of Bohemian experience when he was touring the provinces before he came to Paris; the somewhat
libertine life he then led; while all the while he was equipping himself in knowledge of the stage and of human nature for the extraordinary facility and the more precious wisdom of his later years; his tenderness to his actors and the dependents of his theatre, which made him persist in spite of his physical weakness in holding his performance lest they should lose their profits or their wages; his final word as an actor when as the bachelor in medicine in *Le Malade Imaginaire* he engages to observe the statutes of the faculty—*juro*, and his hugger-mugger burial at night because of the prejudices of the Archbishop of Paris against him as a reputed infidel. These things and the happy incidents of his friendships with Boileau and others are irrelevant to the great artist. Not even the most poignant incident of his life, his jealousy of and passionate love for his wife whom apparently there is no good ground to acquit of the infidelity with which he and the world credited her; not even this, though it affects us so deeply in reading him, is relevant except as supplying part of his experience of life. There is hardly anything more touching than the report which Saint-Beuve\(^1\) quotes of Molière's confession to his friend Chapelle in the garden at Auteuil of how knowing the unworthiness of his passion for the unfaithful Armande he was incapable of resisting it. Yet it is precisely not the legitimacy of the passion of the jealous husband which he poursrays in the comedies, from the *Cocu Imaginaire* onwards, but the folly of jealousy and the constant fear of a fate regarded as only too probable and the commonest subject of comedy, for which he had no need to go to his own life and which perhaps a wise man would accept with resignation. Consider the diatribe against jealousy of Done Elvire, the mistress of Don Garce, in her conversation with Élise (Act I, sc. 1).

\begin{verbatim}
Partout la jalousie est un monstre odieux:
Rien n'en peut adoucir les traits injurieux;
Et, plus l'amour est cher qui lui donne naissance,
Plus on doit ressentir les coups de cette offense.
\end{verbatim}

The voice of good sense. In *Les Fâcheux* Eraste is called upon as arbiter between Oronte and Clémène who champion respectively the unsuspicious and the jealous lover—and wishing to please both parties and be released from their detention of him, decides

\begin{verbatim}
Le jaloux aime plus, et l'autre bien mieux. (Act II, sc. iv.)
\end{verbatim}

\(^1\) *Portraits Littéraires*, vol. ii, pp. 41, sgg. (Paris).
A poet’s life may supply him with all manner of material for his art, but it is not necessary to suppose that his works are a transcript of himself. The real Molière writhed under conjugal infidelity; the dramatist mocks it. There is truth in Browning’s retort to Wordsworth’s saying of the sonnet: “with this same key Shakespeare unlocked his heart.” “Did Shakespeare? If so the less Shakespeare he.” What the artist puts of himself into his work is not always the emotions which he shares with his personages but at most the emotion of the dramatic situation which he describes; and this goes almost without saying. With this proviso, it is safe to identify Molière with the standard which laughs at his comic personages. Nor was it a particularly high standard. It was no more than the average standard of his time. But it was both serious and reasonable, according to those lights. He had no passion for virtue but he approved virtue. He was certainly not deeply religious, was probably enough touched with free thinking; as the story goes of what he said returning on a boat on the Seine from the house at Auteuil. Chapelle was maintaining the doctrine of atoms; Molière denied it but added, “Passe pour la morale!” But he hated pretence and he defends seemliness and wisdom and the good conduct of life, with all liberty for gaiety in the process. False devotion and the pretentiousness of the doctors he exposed, the first without mercy, the other laughingly and good-humouredly, though apparently the doctors did not take it so.

Of one thing we may be certain about Molière the man because it is attested by the poems themselves. His superabundant gaiety and humour and wit were the overflow of a profound and passionate mind trained into wisdom by experience and observation. His nickname of the Contemplateur was given him from his habit of watching people in barbers’ shops, and milliners’ shops, and elsewhere; but his observation was the intuition of a great mind. Perhaps, whatever may be true of wit, which is more the effect of intellectual skill, there has been no great humour which has not its roots in insight; it has been the outcome, where it has not been the cloak, of gravity and wisdom. The fool in King Lear is not mere comic relief to the sorrows of his master; he is continuous with them, and understands what he mocks. Consider as the first examples that occur the fatuity

1 Portraits Littéraires, ii., p. 45.
of the famous le pauvre homme! with which Orgon greets the recitals of Tartuffe’s austerities. How funny it is but how true and sincere. Or Vadius’s prefatory condemnation of the itch of authors to read their own productions; followed by his introduction of his own verses on young lovers.

Le défaut des auteurs, dans leurs productions,
C’est d’en tyranniser les conversations,
D’être au Palais, au Cours, aux ruelles, aux tables,
De leurs vers fatigants lecteurs infatigables.
Pour moi, je ne vois rien de plus sot, à mon sens,
Q’un auteur qui partout va gueuser des encens,
Qui, des premiers venus saisissant les oreilles,
En fait le plus souvent le martyr de ses veilles.
On ne m’a jamais vu ce fol entièrement;
Et d’un Grec là-dessus je suis le sentiment,
Qui, par un dogme exprès, défend à tous ses sages
L’indigne empressement de lire leurs ouvrages.
Voici de petits vers pour de jeunes amants,
Sur quoi je voudrais avoir vos sentiments.

In the Femmes Savantes a delightful instance occurs at the dénouement. Ariste, his brother, and his charming and reasonable daughter Henriette, have persuaded Chrysale to play the man in his house and resist his wife Philaminte’s proposal to marry Henriette to the poetaster. Chrysale is the embodiment of good sense and reason, though he has limited ideas of the function of women in society, according to our recent views though not according to the views of the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, as Henriette says,

Il a reçu du ciel certaine bonté d’âme
Qui le soumet d’abord à ce que veut sa femme.

His resolution, however, has been stiffened and he insists that Clitandre and not Trissotin shall marry Henriette. Yet when the moment arrives for the formal decision, Philaminte terrorises him; and sheepishly he proposes the compromise that Clitandre, who had given up the précieuse sister Armande because of her affected prudery, and devoted himself to her younger and unaffected sister, should still take Armande and Trissotin have Henriette. “Hé ! mon père!” says Henriette. “Hé ! monsieur!” says Clitandre. And Ariste cuts the knot by his fictitious news of Chrysale’s ruin, at which Trissotin retires from his suit.

Once more let me cite one of the confidential maids—Lisette, in
L’École des Maris, who joins Leonor in protesting to Sganarelle against his treatment of Isabelle by locking her up from the approach of other men to keep her for himself.

En effet tous ces soins sont des choses infâmes.
Sommes nous chez les Turcs, pour renfermer les femmes?
Car on dit qu’on les tient esclaves en ce lieu,
Et que c’est pour cela qu’ils sont maudits de Dieu.

Perhaps the stately measure of the Alexandrines would hardly have permitted to Molière the conceits in which Shakespeare abounded in his younger days, and Meredith to the end of his days. In any case there is no effort after effect. As Meredith himself observes, the wit itself and the humour flow naturally, without emphasis, without any appearance of dexterity. And the reason is the artist’s immersion in his subject and his conception of his characters as invested with life. Molière’s sympathy with life is the insight of a very wise man. And the very effortless flow of his speech makes it difficult to select instances of particularly glaring wit or humour. The speech is pointed but it is the bubbling over of a personality and the comedy lies in the situations. Just so in real life, humour is so elusive because its expression is found in implications unexpressed, in lights and shades which shift as the speaker proceeds and partly conceal and partly reveal the mind engaged.

In the Critique de L’École des Femmes, itself an excellent comedy where Dorante plays the part of good sense and moderation, we have at once one of the best pieces of literary criticism ever written and the best exposition of Molière’s attitude. The original play which it defends was a delightful exhibition of the triumph of human nature in the persons of Agnès and her lover over the silly old man (or comparatively old man) her guardian who had brought her up in complete ignorance to be the better wife for himself. Out of the very situation arose incidents which offended the purists in morals or language. Dorante, who is as it were a Philinte turned into a literary critic, urges in the first place that the object of a comedy is to please: "Je voudrais bien savoir si la grande règle de toutes les règles n’est pas de plaire, et si une pièce qui a attrapé son but n’a pas suivi un bon chemin"; and of the rules of art themselves he has just said what no aesthetic doctrine can improve upon: "Il semble, à vous oür parler, que ces règles de l’art soient les plus grands mystères du monde;
et cependant ce ne sont que quelques observations aises, que le bon sens a faites sur ce qui peut etre le plaisir que l'on prend a ces sortes de poèmes ; et le meme bon sens qui a fait autrefois ces observations les fait aisément tous les jours, sans le secours d'Horace ou d'Aristote."

Elsewhere he lays down this golden judgment on the right way of judging a play—"la bonne façon de juger, qui est de se laisser prendre aux choses, et de n'avoir ni prévention aveugle, ni complaisance affectée, ni délicatesse ridicule."  "Se laisser prendre aux choses"—there is the secret of your Shakespeares and your Molières and all great writers and artists, but particularly great dramatists. Comedy has its special difficulties as compared with serious pieces.  "En un mot dans les pièces sérieuses il suffit pour n'être point blâmé, de dire des choses qui soient de bon sens et bien écrites; mais ce n'est pas assez dans les autres, il y faut plaisanter; et c'est une étrange entreprise que celle de faire rire les honnêtes gens." Always good sense and the appeal is to decent men, les honnêtes gens. And for the description of the measure by which they judge I will cite from the speech of Philinte at the beginning of Le Misanthrope.

Mon Dieu! des mœurs du temps mettons nous moins en peine,
Et faisons un peu grâce à la nature humaine;
Ne l'examinons point dans la grande rigueur,
Et voyons ses défauts avec quelque douceur,
Il faut parmi le monde, une vertu traitable;
A force de sagesse, on peut être blamable;
La parfaite raison fuit toute extrémité,
Et veut que l'on soit sage avec sobriété.
Cette grande rigueur des vertus des vieux âges
Heurte trop notre siècle et les communs usages;
Elle veut aux mortels trop de perfection:
Il faut fléchir aux temps sans obstination;
Et c'est une folie à nulle autre seconde,
De vouloir se mêler de corriger le monde.
J'observe, comme vous, cent choses tous les jours,
Qui pourraient mieux aller, prenant un autre cours;
Mais, quoiqu'à chaque pas je puisse voir paraître,
En courroux comme vous, on ne me voit pas être:
Je prends tout doucement les hommes comme ils sont;
J'accoutume mon âme à souffrir ce qu'ils font,
Et je crois qu'à la cour, de même qu'à la ville,
Mon phlegme est philosophe autant que votre bile.¹

¹ Compare Ariste in Sc. I. of L'École des Maris.
Not a great ideal, as we observe, but sound and sweet. Comedy does not deal with great ideals, nor with grand passions. But it rests on the sound basis of usage established by serious men for the daily food of mankind. Perhaps in the passage quoted above from Dorante, Molière in drawing so marked a distinction between plays written to make the audience laugh (which was undoubtedly his purpose in the honest exercise of his craft, as much as Shakespeare thought mainly or only of pleasing in legitimate ways) is hardly conscious of the serious foundation of comedy and certainly does not do justice to it. On which subject enough for my purpose has been said above. It is in the long run only the serious nature which can amuse by legitimate means, and amuse eternally like Molière.

Two things follow from the standard which Molière works to. The first I half fear to mention lest it should be thought that I fancy art is under prudish obligations to morals. It is that Molière's comedy is always clean. Coarse enough he can be in the plain-spoken fashion of his time, calling a spade a spade. But he is never gross or inflammatory. (Our own time, just because it is less plain-spoken, conceals a greater peril or rather has a harder artistic problem to solve.) The reticence of the "honnêtes gens" follows the author who writes for them; and it is only prudes who could blush at the so-called indelicacies of the École des Femmes. On the stage, even the rollicking licence of speech of Le Médecin malgré lui disappears under the cloud of honest laughter. The other feature is that he is never venomous. Not even Tartuffe is drawn venomously, though indignation mixes with the laughter he provokes. Molière is a good fighter and strikes manfully, but though he mocks and as a comedian therefore falls short of the ideal of his scientific contemporary Spinoza, like Spinoza he does not despise. Only, being a comic writer and not a philosopher, the honest emotions of the "honnêtes gens" are reflected in his comedy. He never wearies of exposing the doctors; but it is their formalism and pretentiousness and traditionalism or professionalism at which he laughs. They seem not to have been altogether blameless. Locke in his diary describes a graduation scene in the medical faculty at Montpellier, where he was staying, in words of which the famous induction of the bachelor of medicine in Le Malade Imaginaire is hardly a caricature, and Molière may in his early days in the South have witnessed such a ceremony. But there is no trace
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in Molière of the venom which animates Mr. Shaw in our own days. Molière is content to laugh. Physiology was only beginning in his day, which saw the researches of Harvey, and medicine has now become a science. Yet possibly even now there would be honest physicians who would admit that their profession is in some degree open to the laughter of Molière. After all the doctors enter only into his farces, even the Malade is hardly more than half comedy, half farce. Molière did not believe that doctors were of much use. But whether the pitiful story is true that they refused to attend him in his last illness and revenged themselves, I do not know.

III.

The doctors take us into the world of Molière's farces, which no lover of Molière dare pass by without some brief mention. In his excellent work Molière (2 vols., Paris, 1908) Mr. Eugène Rigal has shown how the true comedy of Molière grew out of his farce. His early comedies, L'Etourdi and Le Dépit Amoureux, were imitations of the current Italian or Spanish types of comedy of intrigue, and incident, though the second of the two is relieved by the charming scene of lovers' misunderstanding to which he was to revert in Le Tartuffe and the Bourgeois. He found himself and prepared for his mission of serious comedy by "leaving clever and complicated intrigue and adopting the modest framework of farce, but filling it so well with studies of manners and character that the frame cracked." He did this with the two farces which stormed Paris, the Précieuses Riches, and Sganarelle ou Le Cucu Imaginaire, in which last the name Sganarelle replaces that of Mascarille borne hitherto by the farcical heroes of his plays. For it is still the Marquis Mascarille who in the Précieuses enters the drawing-room of Madelon and Cathos in the dress described by the diarists which sent the audience into vociferous laughter. After Sganarelle the name of Mascarille disappears for ever from Molière's plays, and the change marks the step from incident to character. Mr. Rigal reckons the École des Maris amongst the farce-like comedies, which lead on to the École des Femmes, and in the end to the great comedies which are the last stage of Molière's art. But all the while down to his death he was writing farces, and earning for himself the fou rire of his audience. Largely
they were made to divert the Court, and often written with great rapidity. Mr. Rigal observes how unjust accordingly is Boileau's insinuation against Molière, when the ties of friendship between them had been loosened, that he wrote farces to please the populace—

Molière illustrant ses écrits,
Peut-être de son art eût remporté le prix,
Si moins ami du peuple, en ses doctes peintures
Il n'eût point fait souvent grimacer ses figures,
Quitté pour le bouffon l'agréable et fin
Et sans honte à Terence allié Tabarin.

In the first place it was the Court ordered most of his farces; it was the bourgeoisie that made the success of the great plays; and next Molière required no inducement to write farces, and showed no repugnance in doing so. They reek, in fact, positively with their author's delight. Poor Molière had sorrows enough; but his spirits were irrepressible and the edge of his gaiety never dulled. When the writing of Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme became too difficult for the time at his disposal, he lapsed into farce after the third act. Some commentators please themselves in shrugging their shoulders over this lapse and over other cases in which more restrained farce turns into rollicking fun. For example, in Le Mariage Forcé, after the half grave interview with the sceptical philosopher whom the old man Sganarelle consults as to the wisdom of his marrying his very young ward—the succeeding visit to the Peripatetic Pancraces is a scene of the wildest and most outrageous fun, repeating more exuberantly the scene of Le Dépôt Amoureux in which Albert consults the philosophical tutor Metaphraste on the future of his pupil, Albert's son.

We may shake grave heads of disapproval over these frequent lapses of Molière from the highest levels of his art. But perhaps it is better to be thankful for what we have. Could the gaiety and wit of the comedies proper have been maintained had Molière had no outlet for his sheer love of fun? And does anyone seriously regret the conferring upon M. Jourdain of the dignity of Mamamouchi? or feel ungratefully unmoved when the Grand Turk and his attendants rise and pronounce the words, "Ha la ba, ba la chou, ba la ba, ba la da?" A good critic has declared Le Médecin malgré lui to be the greatest farce ever written, and it is certainly the most famous one.
I do not envy the feelings or the judgment of those who do not thank God for the Molière of the farces.

Moreover, even they are suffused with that air of good sense and reasonableness which is the very life blood of the comedies. The nurse, Jacqueline, in Médécin malgré lui, observes when they are going to bring in the new doctor to cure Lucile's dumbness, "la meilleure médecaine que l'an pourrait bailler à votre fille, ce serait, selon moi, un biau et bon mari, pour qui elle eût de l'amiquié." M. de Porçeaugnac, who thinks himself the incarnation of common sense, is mocked in the name of good sense for his foolish and impudent aspiration, being as he is a citizen of Limoges, to marry a Parisian girl; and being charged in the teeth of all evidence with having already a wife is gravely assured by two lawyers that polygamy is a hanging matter, on the authority of great lawyers and the customs of civilised peoples, whose names are strung together in a way which makes Molière the forerunner of our own W. S. Gilbert. In the

1 Premier Avocat.

La polygamie est un cas,
Est un cas pendable.

Second Avocat.

Votre fait
Est clair et net;
Et tout de droit,
Sur cet endroit,
Conclut tout droit.
Si vous consultez nos auteurs,
Législateurs et glossateurs,
Justinian, Papinian,
Ulpian et Tribonian,
Fernand, Rebuffe, Jean Imole,
Paul, Castie, Julian, Barthole,
Jason, Alciat, et Cujas,
Ce grand homme si capable;
La polygamie est un cas,
Est un cas pendable.

Tous les peuples policés,
Et bien sensés;
Les Français, Anglais, Hollandais,
Danois, Suedois, Polonais,
Portugais, Espagnols, Flamands,
Italiens, Allemands,
semi-farce, *Malade Imaginaire*, Toinette the maid is the last of those adorable young women, half servants and half confidantes, from Lisette, and Dorine in *Le Tartuffe*, onwards, who embody just judgment in racy speech and are perhaps the great glory of Molière's women, unless we rather incline to the Henriettes and the Célimènes.

In fine, the story is always the same. Whether Molière is writing farce and leaving the judgment of his extravagance not so much to the characters who take the side of good sense and reason as to the audience itself; or is writing in the grave mood which befits the highest comedy, he is always the humane and wise, who makes faulty human nature in all its forms show itself up for its folly or its wisdom or in some cases for its harmfulness. It is only that in the great comedies he rises to the highest point of that insight into our strength and our weaknesses from which his whole humour issues. He is so great an artist because he has this command of subject and because with him "se laisser prendre aux choses" overflows into clear and graceful and witty speech.

I have said and intend to say little or nothing of Molière's artistry of words. For two good reasons, the first that I am concerned with his outlook upon life as we find it in the plays. The second because I have not the competence to judge him as a stylist. Boileau himself in earlier days lost himself in admiration of Molière's facility and elegance. He is accused by those who know of carelessness of style, and on many occasions he was writing against time. You are struck by the ease and unrestraint of the verse. You desiderate the lyric gift which makes Shakespeare's lighter fancies so enchanting, or turns some of his heroes like Macbeth into poets. Molière is no romantic but the dramatist of good sense and moderation. Yet in all this equable speech there is the greatest variety. He was not, as everyone knows, scrupulous about where he found his goods, and stole where he

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Sur ce fait tiennent loi semblable;
Et l'affaire est sans embarras;
La polygamie est un cas,
   Est un cas pendable.

*Premier Avocat.*

La polygamie est un cas,
   Est un cas pendable.

---*(Act. ii. Sc. 3.)*
found. Sometimes he hardly varies a word, though the variation is
critical, and his victim is forgotten and Molière is immortalised by his
thievings.

Le véritable Amphitryon
C'est l'Amphitryon où l'on dine,
is taken almost verbally from a poet Rotrou. He took Cyrano's "que
diable aller faire dans la galère d'un Turc," and making the old
father ask the question in a very slightly different form and with equally
insane desperation he made it glorious. Perhaps the late E. Rostand
did justice to poor Cyrano's generosity when he makes him say sadly
of the rival (un handicapped by a portentous nose) who displaced him
in the affection of Roxane, and of the man who stole his wit:

Molière a du génie, et Christian était beau.

I could not trust myself for want of knowledge to compare his style
with that of other great writers of French. It seems to me both limpid
and sparkling. I should not equal it with that of his great contemporary,
Pascal, but what prose writer but Plato is worthy of such a com-
parison? and what poets but some who are greater than Molière
have such mastery of direct and passionate speech? He is rather to
be appraised in comparison with Corneille and Racine and Boileau,
with Lafontaine and Voltaire; and I have not the necessary com-
petence. One quality of Molière's writing deserves a special mention.
It is his amazing virtuosity; his power derived, no doubt, from his habit
of close observation, of making things and persons live by their details.
The best example that I know is the speech of the hunting bore in
Les Fâcheux (The Bores): the play he wrote rapidly for Fouquet's
entertainment of the king at Vaux (described by Dumas in the
Vicomte de Bragelonne) from which the host went to his arrest and
disgrace. The speech bristles with technicalities and detains the lover
from his engagement with his mistress with the arresting copiousness
which only a bore can inflict. This was "se laisser prendre aux
choses" with a vengeance.

Noscitur a sociis: a man is known by the company he keeps.
I hope it may not weigh greatly against my character if I confess that
two of my greatest intimates through life, perhaps the two greatest
intimates, outside the circle of philosophers, have been Dr. Johnson
and Molière; with whom as the old scholar says in Southey's poem,
"I take delight in weal and seek relief in woe." Others, perhaps, for hours of rapture; for habit and solid felicity, these two. No one would for a moment put Johnson (even at his best in conversation as he appears in Boswell's book), with Molière as an artist or a literary figure. Johnson belongs indeed to the English-speaking people, but Molière to the world. They have, however, one trait in common, their knowledge of life and their wise humanity. With what amateurish inadequacy I have appraised Molière in this paper I know well. But at least I have tried to express in some measure the gratitude that I feel to a great man, a great artist, an inexhaustible spring of wisdom and gaiety, and a most dear friend.