

MOLIÈRE: COMEDIAN OF SOCIETY

BY STARK YOUNG

WITH anyone but Molière—who knew that a light touch is not always a thin one—I should be afraid of seeming flippant if I said that his third centenary brought to my mind something Whistler once said at a dinner. At the end of many speeches his turn came, and he said that though he hesitated to speak after so many distinguished Professors and Ambassadors, he would like to say that in France they taught the student which end of the brush to put into his mouth, but in England it was all a matter of taste. The hit-and-miss of Anglo-Saxon civilization lies in that remark; the individuality, the whimsy, the obstinate self. This Anglo-Saxon civilization blunders along the ground, or it flies; whatever happens it does not learn a sense of the general, the type. The French has a sense about it of society, of learning the general way of things. Civilization as Latins mean it implies that sort of thing. It implies a levelling for social considerations and with regard to people's opinion of one, a dislike of eccentricity and of ridicule, a subordination of the individual to the whole. It is not so much a passionate concern as it is an instinct; and its feeling for morality has this public and civic aspect. Latin civilization is a prose thing. It prefers bounds to any risk of chaos. The Italians, and even more so the French, are the most prosaic people in Europe. And for that matter their prose shows in their faces, which have a more even and typical and a less personal, peculiar or fantastic expression than an Englishman's. For all their vivacity and heat and explosiveness they keep their feet in the pathway trodden by men—though it must be said they strive to make this pathway as agreeable as possible. For one illustration of all this, look into their marriages; in spite of their passionate loves, their despairs, their experience which has all the variations of opera itself, their magnificent erotic art, it must be remembered that many and

many an Italian or Frenchman, if he does not kill himself in a frenzy, will marry at length to please his family or to his own scheme of advantage.

Your Anglo-Saxon has not this instinct for the social or for the whole. Morality for him has more tortuous personal meanings, very often of sex. He is capable of crusades in his own soul or in public for the good of men in a mass; he works and prays and frets for the betterment of society. He wants to make it better. But he has no particular instinct for making it more agreeable, though he may have a conscience for making it so; and only theoretically does he come down out of his own tower, or tree, to make himself an affable part of the general. The Anglo-Saxon common man has not the lively mentality or sheer spirits to make him social. He never easily gives up his self and the fence about it for the sake of the general pleasure; and only with labor can he keep his eye on a general opinion and harmony. So that he has little feeling for manners or for the surface of living; and only after an intense and long culture that is possible for a few small groups does he become civilized as a Latin takes the word.

And he is not a prose creature; he is poetic. Dull or intelligent, he has something within him that throws him against life with a quiet hunger; he tends toward inhibitions for private reasons or simply for their own sake; he is romantic because of his hunger; and because he lacks to a certain extent taste and vivacity, he is often sentimental. He makes a comfortable and sometimes a sodden world about him, but he lives on illusions, one way or another. In the opinion of his spirit there are no bounds. He is your born dreamer; and he likes to believe that his dreams are deep and important whether anybody ever stirs by them or not, and whether or not they even take any shape in his own mind or merely remain his own confused and precious inner comfort. This shows in his face—as that more open and type thing shows in the Latin—and gives to an Englishman in Paris or Rome a certain distinction, noble or eccentric; and causes no little perplexity to Latins in general, who solve it, I am afraid, by regarding all Anglo-Saxons as practically insane. Out of all this a great and profound poetry has come. But we never had

a society out of it. And that is why we have never had a Molière, why we have not comedy to rank with his.

Molière descends on his literary side from Plautus and Terence, who descend—too fine a word for them, since very often they almost reproduce their Greek originals, especially Terence—from the Greek comic writers, such as Menander. These Greek comedies came out of a life that lived itself in the air and the sun, in piazzas, squares, streets and markets; where all men were observed, where the normal was admired; where there was in sum the beginning of a society. On his other side, that is to say the life about him from which he drew his matter and for which he turned it into comedy, Molière had under Louis le Grand what could be truly called a society. The king had taken measures to further this public unity, under himself of course; though what concerns us here is not that so much as the fact that Molière had a definite, special thing to study and write for and play to.

In English social comedy Ben Jonson is the biggest figure; though, by way of promise wholly unfulfilled dramatically, I should except Fielding, who had in his genius a possibility of comic character invention and observation equalled nowhere in our literature. Ben Jonson, who left a monumental comedy behind him, had on one side Plautus and Terence, and on the other a sort of gorgeous, poetic, half barbaric state of things. The Elizabethan atmosphere was magnificent, rich, violent, brutal and poetic. And the mass of comic tradition behind Jonson was for the most part clumsy, broad, full of loutish spirits; its manners were rough, however full of ballad charm and folk poetry they might be; and its humors were worked with a cudgel. Jonson's world never completes itself and cannot be seen in the round. Congreve is our most distinguished comic genius, with a fine wit, restraint, and, within limits, sense of character; and in his style a finish and rhythm that Molière never achieved. But Congreve's lack of any deep foundation in a society is evident; at the most he belonged to the elegant few; and the failure of his best play, and his withdrawal from the theatre on that account before he was thirty, attest the slightness of his theatrical connections. And though the bright names of Sheridan and Goldsmith bring the remembrance of their great talent, they wrote

too few plays to have much scope, and their work's connection with any general society is almost casual.

As for the Restoration, you cannot read Molière and the comedies of that English epoch without seeing how they pillaged from him, these English dramatists,—Betterton, Shadwell, Dryden, Otway, Farquhar, Etheredge, Wycherley, Vanbrugh, Flecknoe, Congreve, Davenant and the rest. For the curious there is a long list of their borrowings in Professor Miles's excellent *Influence of Molière on Restoration Comedy*. They regarded Molière as a convenient storehouse for theatre material, and pilfered and plundered till one of their songs could begin with "Molière is quite rifled, so how shall I write?" But none of them saw as Molière saw his material, saw it distributed, proportioned, related to social limits, ventilated with a wide sanity, and fed with large observation and social ardor.

But no dramatist could be expressive of so much of his race without his nature's finding for itself somewhere a strong social passion. In Molière this passionate concern, as everybody knows, took the direction of a hatred of hypocrisy, of all affectation. "You only lacked hypocrisy to make you wholly bad, perfectly bad," Don Juan's servant says to him; and we are to believe that none of Juan's sins, rape, seduction, murder, cheating and lying, were so bad as hypocrisy. For Molière the great sin in hypocrisy, then, is that it undermines social living by taking advantage of men's faith in one another, to deceive them for one's own ends. Hypocrisy discredits the mutual trust that makes society possible to live in. And in the individual it rots away the sincerity that is at the bottom of all character; and in the end makes it impossible for him to tell when he is sincere and when he is not; in other words may make him an unconscious hypocrite, a pious fraud, as well as a conscious deceiver. Affectation is only another form of hypocrisy. It may be a deliberate pose, an arrangement, a deception through pretending to have qualities which one has not. Or it may be an unconscious pose, derived from seeing oneself in some special light or as possessing eminently some special quality or interest. Quite admirable people as well as knaves may have a weak spot of affectation. The result of affectation of any kind is that it sets up an indirection in oneself that pre-

vents straight dealing and clear living either with oneself or with others. Whether it comes intentionally or not, the confusion is the same.

Hypocrisy and affectation are English sins if ever there were any. They may come about from exalted sentiments and a real desire for excellence, a desire too strong for any admission of shortcomings. They may come from a distrust of the mind, a refusal to give up the illusion, a persistence in seeing things not as they are but as they ought to be, and a recourse in the evasions of sentimentality or even of faith. Or they may arise from a man's being too much like Lady Macbeth's poor cat i' the adage; he wants the fish, but does not want to wet his paws. Or they may come from a strong self-consciousness, thinking on oneself, one's individuality, one's effects on others. Affectation is a more inward thing; and an Englishman will be affected where a Frenchman is only mannered. Hypocrisy and affectation come out in Anglo-Saxons in the form of cant and isms, in posing, in fads, hobbies, whimsies, and snobberies. There is nothing so easy to deceive, however, as a fraud; he is not sure but that the other man may be the real thing that he himself pretends to be. As a race we do not like to set down anything as straight hypocrisy or as affectation. Perhaps it is so; partly, not wholly, who knows? That is our attitude; and it may be a good one, coming from our accent on the individual soul involved. But despite its advantages, one result of it at least is confusion and indirection. So that Molière and his French world are removed from us even in the nature of the two hypocrisies; and the certainty of his attack could never have come from Anglo-Saxon society.

This fundamental sincerity and this large proportionate nature of Molière's genius are at the bottom of one's devotion to him; they are not the qualities that bring him leaping into our veins. They are the excellences of character and mind on which we rely in him, and through which we are free to be happy in his plays. Without these solid elements he might be merely witty, inconsiderable, like Oscar Wilde in his comedies. What brings Molière to us really is his animation, his tremendous welling up of spirits, his gift for taking the things dearest to us and expressing them under the liveliest circumstances.

I do not think that even in this vivacious aspect, however, do we get Molière aright. All that line of borrowers from him, Etheredge, Farquhar and the others, regarded Molière as merely a tremendous clown, a fellow of a thousand droll devices, an easy fountain of comic motive and hilarity. We are at least ahead of that, for we realize that Molière is a great comic writer. But we shall have to admit, nevertheless, how far Molière is still from the Anglo-Saxon. For one thing our mere attitude toward high spirits is misleading when Molière is concerned and, for another thing, the farcical pattern that Molière keeps nearly always even in his most serious plays, gets in our way. He had it from Terence and Plautus and the *commedia dell' arte*, and he found that it was a good working form; found it a pattern that is healthy and fluent, well-rounded and easy to follow. But for us it has given the impression of Molière as a writer of farces. It has persuaded us that his genius is the genius of *Le Medecin malgré lui* and of Mascarille, Sganarelle and those other broadly drawn and robustious eccentrics that bluster through some of his work. We are prone to think his characters mere types, whereas in fact they are individuals so subjected in treatment to Molière's intellect that they can take on the aspect of the typical and yet at the same time remain alive, a miraculous achievement.

I remember once sitting at a performance of *Fanny's First Play* with a very eminent critic; and after the final scene, the one in which the stage critics are discussing the play, and Shaw is parodying all critics and vaunting himself, my companion said to me that Molière could never have done so brilliant and clever a scene. But Molière would not have done a scene so clever and brilliant and egocentric even if he could, which I think might have been the case. Molière had more taste than that and more lasting charm, as you have only to read the *Impromptu de Versailles* to know; and he was so much more of an artist that the particular emphasis and insistence employed by Shaw would have been impossible to him; impossible to Molière, who waited in every bitterness of soul and every injustice for five years before he got his heart's labor, *Tartuffe*, performed, and then—as with his funeral—only at the King's intervention, but left no trace of all this in the work itself, which swings as free and varied and

wholesome and right as if it had been written by the very sun itself.

As time passes, too, and one goes back to Molière in comparison with other work, one notices more and more the things that Molière did not do or say; and one realizes more and more as one watches life and the expression of life in art, the great endowment of mind and heart that in the midst of a terribly stricken body and a wretched love affair kept Molière in all his work so poised and sweet and abundant. There are moments when Molière means nothing to us; certainly through him one could never become a great saint or a poet or lead a crusade. But a member of society needs other things as well as halos and laurels and holy emblems. Molière was at home in the world, the type of soul that at the outset was made so well in heaven that it holds out on earth without pining.

But apart from these more solid qualities in Molière's genius, how much there is that merely bubbles up from him into almost any mood we have! They are little gaieties, pocket philosophies, the mere happiness and health and jollity of the mind, that dart across the business of thinking and observing the world around us as a shaft of light falls through the shutters across the room. They catch the little bird of our vanity on the wing, which we might have mistaken for the flight of the soul. They poke solemnity under the ribs, and show how much of it is egotism. They ventilate the ordinary house of life. And most of all they chart out the track of the single ego in the social map. A handbook of these moments would not be a book of reverie, for there is no twilight in them or spiritual thirst; but rather a sort of Noonday Notebook. The list would begin with absurdities manifest, little humanities of absurd people; famous cases, most of them; with Mascarille in *Le Dépit Amoureux*, who couldn't die if anybody was looking at him; or Monsieur Jourdain, who had spoken prose all his life and never known it; or Sganarelle, with the old joke about the heart's being changed to the right side; or those heavenly learned ladies, Bélise and Philaminte—Bélise, who agrees with the doctrine of atoms but finds it difficult to understand a vacuum and much prefers subtle matter; and Philaminte, who finds in ethics charms that delight her heart, and, though ethics was

formerly the delight of great geniuses, for her part nowadays prefers the Stoics and thinks nothing so grand as their founder. Or the Lord Jupiter who comes on a cloud with his eagle, in thunder and lightning as well, and after having seduced Amphitryon's wife by taking her husband's shape, explains to the wounded husband in that delicious speech, so full of a god's tact but more to Molière's credit than to Jupiter's, I am afraid:

Behold, Amphitryon, who has thus imposed upon thee; and in thy own likeness see Jupiter appear. By these tokens thou knowest him; enough, I trust, to bring back peace and happiness to thy heart. My name, worshipped over all the earth, silences all that might be said. To share with Jupiter is not dishonorable; it is doubtless glorious to see oneself the rival of the first of the gods. Why should thy love complain? It is I who should be jealous. Alcmena loves only thee; thou shouldst be pleased to know that one cannot please her except by taking thy shape. Jupiter himself in all his glory could not triumph over her virtue; and all he received was given by her loving heart to thee.

And then the servant Sosia's remark: "*Our Lord Jupiter knows how to gild the pill!*"

There are scores of these. And afterward would come the speeches at the opening of *Tartuffe* about cant and gullibility and virtue; and then the talk about the rules of art in the *Critique de L'Ecole des Femmes*. And so on through the plays with their radiant sanity and their flexible and lively Horatianism, so on through this world which is always trying to end with supper; because Molière knows what peace that pleasure brings to conflicting bosoms, who have, besides, to be got from off the stage somehow or other.

And last to remember what the wife of the comedian writes in Monsieur Voltaire's *Vie de Molière*:

He was neither too fat nor too thin: he had a stature rather large than small, a noble carriage, a fine leg; he walked gravely with a very serious air, the nose big, the mouth large, the lips thick, the complexion brown, the eye-brows black and strong, and the diverse movements that he gave it made his physiognomy extremely comic. With regard to his character he was sweet, complaisant, generous. He loved to orate; and when he read his pieces to the comedians, he wished them to bring their children in, in order to sense their impressions from their natural movement.

STARK YOUNG.

UNHONORED EDUCATIONAL HONORS

BY JAMES HENLE

Professor of History—I must confess that I found the style of your essay very dull and commonplace.

Student (feebly)—But that comes in English Lit.!

IN his annual report President A. Lawrence Lowell of Harvard emphasizes a point which has disturbed and distressed our educators for many years. In this country little attention is paid to high grades in college courses; the *summa* men, the *magna* men and the ordinary graduates stand upon an equal footing in the view of the general public and of the business world. If anything, the rank and file of the graduates have a little the better of it in common estimation.

In the case of graduates of professional and technical schools exactly the opposite is true. These men, to be sure, have been trained for some definite work, and the degree to which they have absorbed this training, roughly measured by their scholastic standing, may be taken to indicate their fitness for the tasks ahead. The purpose of college is more general and accordingly more difficult to achieve. Yet the popular verdict, as expressed in society's attitude toward those whom college has delighted to honor, is anything but favorable.

It is only fair to say that this opinion is shared by the honor men themselves. I cannot remember that my classmates of ten years and more ago who distinguished themselves in their studies felt that these were, as the mathematicians say, necessary and sufficient, or that the attainment of high scholastic standing was a matter of great importance. On the contrary, the best students were hurrying through their college work in order to be able to enter professional school a year earlier. For my own part, I must admit that the possession of a Phi Beta Kappa key has never seemed to me any reason why captains of industry should seek my services.