

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

**SGANARELLE**

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**Sganarelle (in Moliere's *L'Ecole des Maris*)   unconscientious**

**Overview** Published in 1661, *L'Ecole des Maris* (*The school for husbands*) goes for a classic dilemma in pedagogy: is discipline or leniency more effective, in training a youngster or (in the present case) a candidate for the marriage market? (The sources of this farce are multiple, and include Terence's *The Brothers* and Boccaccio, but the distinctive framing of the marital issues derives from sophisticated local issues of the elite in 17th century France. While Moliere is on the whole sympathetic to youth-culture and life-style flexibility, he played (typically for him) the role of Sganarelle himself, who is hidebound and inflexible.

**Character** Sganarelle is one of two unmarried brothers, whose inherited responsibility it is to care for the appropriate marrying off of their two younger sisters. (Sganarelle himself is forty years old, while his brother is two decades older, and yet feels much more sympathetic than Sganarelle to the 'new generation.')

While the older brother (Ariste) believes that the best school for learning, and behavior is life itself, Sganarelle believes that a parent or guardian has the responsibility to train, shape, and discipline any younger persona left in his care. For Sganarelle, slackness in training younger family members will only lead to later suffering, as one loses control of the people around him.

**Parallels** Two major themes play out in Molière's *Ecole des Maris* : how do different educations affect different people? Is it better to give a child a liberal or a strict education? Both of these questions, and various answers, intersect in the vast literature of child rearing. The Roman playwright Terence, in *The Brothers* (160 B.C.), voted for 'a draw' in response to liberal vs. traditional; Jean Jacques Rousseau, in *The Confessions* (1789) broke radical ground for the wholistic view he brought to the problem of liberal education, defending a (to us) quite modern view of the rich openness of the human as learner; Paul Goodman, carrying these larger issues to Industrial modernity, argues in *Growing up Absurd* (1960) for education tailored above all to life and its requirements.

**Illustrative moments**

**Traditional** From the outset Sganarelle makes it clear that he is completely satisfied with his own life, and has no interest in following his older brother's advice about the training of younger siblings within their family. The brothers agree to disagree about lifestyles in general, and in particular agree to train their two younger sisters in their two different life styles. Sganarelle takes on the training of Isabelle, who is quick to see that she did not get the luck of the draw. She's lucky, if at all, Sganarelle didn't lock her up or take her along with him, wherever he went.

**Disciplinary** In Scene 2, already, Sganarelle explains to his brother some of the details of the regimen he will impose on his younger sister Isabelle, as preparatory to her eventual marriage. Sganarelle himself is eager never to 'wear horns' and therefore will forbid Isabelle to run with a fast crowd. She will wear simple fabrics—no black (the sign of luxury) except on feast days—and she will spend a good deal of downtime 'dealing with household matters like sewing my underwear,' or knitting stockings. She will never go out without her female accompaniment, and will at all times avoid the places where fashionable young gossipers hang out.

**Threatening** Sganarelle does his best to convince Valere that Isabelle has no use for him. Because Isabelle has tricked Sganarelle into believing that she is a totally compliant younger sister—a pretence she makes so that she can buy time with Valere—Sganarelle believes that (as she herself puts it) Isabelle is outraged by Valere's whole courtship of her. Accordingly he feels justified in giving Valere the bum's rush: 'you've done enough flirting; if you have an ounce of

intelligence, you'll turn your attention elsewhere. So long, til we meet again, from now on make yourself scarce...'

**Satisfied** In Scene 6 of Act 2, Sganarelle expatiates to Valere, the lover of Isabelle, on his pleasure at a recent royal edict, 'forbidding the wearing of gold or silver ornaments on garments,' and cutting back on the public wearing of such finery as embroideries. The fact is, says Sganarelle in an only half joking tone, that he would be happy if even 'coquetry' were covered by the royal edict, for in coquetry he sees nothing but pain for happily married husbands. As he makes this declaration Sganarelle sees Isabelle's lover approaching, and congratulates himself on the certainty that 'Isabelle is faithful to him (Sganarelle), and that—but he is totally duped—she is indifferent to Valere's protestations of love.

### **Discussion questions**

In the end Sganarelle turns out to be a classic dupe. Would you say that Moliere has all along been 100 % on the side of Ariste, the elder brother of Sganarelle?

What conception of woman does Moliere have—to judge from Isabelle and Leonor? Does Moliere assume in women a strong independent intelligence?

On what social class level does this comedy seem to depend? Has marriage, in this society, been stripped of all use-value, and reduced largely to a frivolous mating game?