

## MOLIERE

**Molière the man; the early career.** Jean Baptiste Poquelin Molière (1622-1673) was raised in the heart of Paris, son of an upholsterer, who became valet de chambre to King Louis XIV. He was educated by the Jesuits, in whose College he became active in Latin learning and in acting of Roman comedy. The following years found Molière gradually making his way into the world of street theaters—he spent thirteen years on the road as an itinerant actor--and getting a sense of the whole dramatic territory. His confidence at last well established, after the favorable reception of certain of his youthful efforts, he returned to Paris in 1658, and had the perfect luck to catch the favorable attention of King Louis XIV. (Acquiring a stage and theater in which to perform was of top importance, and Molière skillfully ingratiated himself with royalty, never touching that target in his wide ranging career as a dramatic satirist. Even so, he spent considerable time in deep poverty, and had at one point to be rescued from debtor's prison by his father.) In 1668 he returned to Paris from a barnstorming tour of the provinces—with a number of high successes to his credit—*Le Medecin malgre lui* (*The Doctor in spite of himself*) 1666; *Tartuffe* 1664; *The Misanthrope* 1666-- and the final fifteen years of his life were spent in a high creative mode. He created nineteen plays during this period, many of them among the highest achievements of French literature.

**The nature of Molière's plays.** In the highest, and most universal of his comedies, Molière comes close to portraying universal types, characters who act out, indeed almost become, traits of what is 'always and everywhere valid.' *The Doctor in spite of Himself*, *The Would be Middle Class Gentleman*, *The Miser*, *The Misanthrope*; all these characters are known to all at all times. Underneath this level of broad humanity, in many of Molière's satirical dramas, lies a level of farce and slapstick, which was always part of the French dramatic tradition, from the times of the rough and tumble streets dramas of mediaeval times. Molière himself was used to the street performance, and the local country farce.

**Middle Class Society and its Foibles.** Racine and Corneille are tragic or tragic-comic dramatists, but Molière introduces us to a new register in French literature, irony or satire. (Rabelais seems to write a mixture of caricature and fantasy.) For that, French literature needed an analytic genius as playwright; in return French culture served up, to Molière, a new phenomenon, the middle class. This class was starting to make prominent appearance throughout Europe, by the mid-17th century. Once again, many factors—economic, political, military-- contributed to that social phenomenon, which was sure to generate all those foibles that assert themselves when what we might call "family values" are called to perform like the chivalric values of old. Molière had an ample field for satire in the pretentious or self-deluded individuals who surrounded him in the court and streets of Paris. It was only when Molière attacked the clergy, physicians, courtiers, bores and *precieuses* that the critics closed in savagely on Molière. At such times only the protection and patronage of the king saved him. It comes as a supreme irony that Molière met his death while playing the lead role in *Le Malade Imaginaire* (*The Imaginary Invalid*); while playing that character he was seized by a hemorrhage and died a few hours later.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*Tartuffe*, tr, Richard Wilbur, 1992.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Scott, V., *Molière, a Theatrical Life*, 2000.

#### **Further reading**

Riggs, L., *Moliere and Modernity*, 2005.

### **Original language reading**

Simon, Alfred, *Moliere, une vie*, 1988.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Is the growth of Middle Class society essential for the development of comedy like Moliere's? What is it about Middle Class society that generates the character types Moliere needs for his process of ridiculing? Is American society today oriented around the Middle Class? Is it comic?

Is it a healthy sign, when a society, through its drama or fiction or tv, is able to make fun of itself? Is it a sign of self-confidence? Are we in the West able to make fun of ourselves? Do we enjoy the portrayal of stock types of 'losers,' such as the character types Moliere pillories?

**Excerpt** <http://moliere-in-english.com/doctorinspiteof.html>

GERONTE

That's my baby's wetnurse.

SGANARELLE (*Aside.*)

A juicy bit of crumpet, I must say ...

(*Aloud.*) Ah, nurse, my doctorship is but the clay  
To which your nurseship gives a shape and form.

Ah, would I were the tot, all snug and warm,

(*Putting his hand on her breast.*)

Who tastes here at the font of your good graces.

At such abundance, my small art abases.

Would that my skills might by you yet be known ...

LUCAS

Your pardon, sir, please leave my wife alone.

SGANARELLE

What! Is this girl your wife?

SGANARELLE

(*Going as if to embrace LUCAS, he embraces JACQUELINE instead.*)

Oh such a wondrous joy that is to me!

I celebrate your mutual affection.

LUCAS (*Drawing SGANARELLE away.*)

That's fine, sir, please, not quite such strong inflection.

SGANARELLE

I do delight to see you so well matched,

I do commend you two, so well attached.

I thrill for her, and risking some redundancy,

Salute you, finding wife of such abundance.

(*Makes, again, as if to embrace LUCAS, but passes under his arm to throw himself on JACQUELINE.*)

LUCAS (*Pulling him off again.*)

Good Lord, sir! Not so many compliments!

I beg you --

SGANARELLE

You'd not place impediments

To celebration of how your rare hearts  
Should join in blessed union of fair parts.

LUCAS

Ay, celebrate unto your hearts content,  
With me, but not my wife to such extent.

SGANARELLE

I share the joy of both; know, if I clasp  
You in such honor, that I also grasp  
(*Repeating business.*) Your lovely wife for such respectful aim,  
To fully know the breadth of --