

SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS

Moliere

L'ecole des Maris

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.

Story Moliere's dramas, unlike those of Shakespeare, say, are stripped down to basic themes, and characters who represent basic cultural tendencies. Even *Alceste*, Moliere's version of a Hamlet down on the sickness of the world, retains the firm outlines of a radical rationalist and cynic. *Alceste* may give in to his passions, out of frustration with *Celimene* (in *The Misanthrope*) but he

L'Ecole des Maris, *The School for Husbands*, centers around the split between two brothers. These brothers are the tutors of two young ladies, whom they, the brothers, propose to marry. But the brothers have radically different ideas about the best way to raise daughters. One of the brothers, Sganarelle believes in keeping his girl locked up at home, with as little access as possible to the outer world; that way he can control her development. The other brother, *Ariste*, believes in a far more lenient and supple way of educating women, by a mixture of control and freedom.

As the play proceeds, the two girls go their separate paths. *Ariste's* tutee goes to the theater, entertains her boyfriends, dresses in the trendiest style. *Isabelle*, the tutee of Sganarelle, sulks at home, washes her clothes, and has no company except for the old curmudgeon who supervises her, while training her for marriage.

The inevitable happens. *Leonore* is delighted with her tutor, and is happy to marry him, finds herself full of confidence and love in his presence. *Isabelle*, on the contrary, conceives a horror of her husband, and can think of nothing worse than spending her life with him. The result, not surprisingly, is that she falls for a young guy, and marries him, without a second thought. Her tutor is left with nothing.

Crafty Moliere is content with this conclusion, which at first sight seems to leave us puzzled. OK, we say, so what? Is Moliere saying that we should spoil our ladies, so that in the end they will love us? He is certainly not saying that, for in fact *Ariste* adopts a far more modest version of women's lib than that. He simply leaves *Leonore* to follow the trends of the day—in clothing, social exposure, and educational availability—which is enough to make her delighted with him.

The burden of the play lies on its emphasis. Moliere favors a humane loosening of the bonds of female development. (Hyper sensitive to the catty bitchiness of high class ladies like *Celimene*, in the *Misanthrope*, Moliere would lean toward the subtler, and more creative type of *Eliante*, *Celimene's* more flexible society mate.) As *Ariste* puts it,

les verrous et les grilles
Ne font pas la vertu des femmes ni des filles

Locks and grills

Will never guarantee a lady's fidelity.

With typical subtlety, Moliere declines to rub in his moral. In fact, he best makes his point, in characterizing the kind of affection Leonore feels for her tutor. She feels a liberating emotion of self-realization, rather than a subject-object gratitude to her tutor. In appreciating this fine tenor of relationship, between Ariste and Leonore, we need to remind ourselves that we are still in the historical ball game in which higher placed male suitors mark out the rules of the game for the women they fancy.

Themes

Humanism The present play, interestingly asymmetrical, inclines toward liberality, picks up a central perspective in all Moliere's work: he argues for humane behaviors, 'the natural,' the simple, and the honest. Moliere is no idealist, but a moderate humanist.

Feminism On the surface, in this play, we seem to deal with a phallocracy, in which men make up all the rules of the game. In actuality, though, it is the women who call the shots. One woman says no thank you, to her over possessive tutor, while the other says thank you very much, to the guy who set up the conditions for her to love him.

Characters

Sganarelle is a dominator who wants to keep his girlfriend, Isabelle, locked in a safe box, where no other men can have contact with her. Naturally enough, his desire is counterproductive, and Isabelle repays him, for his possessiveness, by running off with a younger man and marrying him.

Ariste, Sganarelle's brother, is liberal with his tutee, gives her plenty of room for a life of her own, to see friends, go to the theater, dress in style. But he makes it clear, in a subtle way, that he is the one responsible degree of liberality. The results couldn't be better; he wins the object of his heart 'without even trying.'

SGANARELLE (unconscientious)

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?