SOCIAL STRUCTURES
IN MOLIÈRE'S THEATER

By James F. Gaines

In an age obsessed with rank and preoccupied with social position, in which men were sedulous in their obedience to the imperious demands of a rigid etiquette and elaborate ceremonials, and in which ambitious and worldly men saw correct behavior as the means, and advancement and preference as the goal, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin assumed the role of jocular critic of behavioral abuse.

James F. Gaines has undertaken a sociocritical study that attempts to understand how the literary forms of Molière's plays relate to the social forms of the early modern period. He contends that the comedies represent an imaginary network of social relationships remarkably homologous to the world view of the literate French public during the reign of Louis XIV, and that it is possible both to identify the place in society of characters in Molière's plays through reference to an index of social indicators and to ascertain whether or not the patterns of behavior of those individuals are consistent with the norms governing the classes to which they belong—norms that Gaines has been able to reconstruct on the basis of seventeenth-century social theory and from historical evidence.

The audience's early identification of a dramatic character's status in society from clues planted by the dramatist was of crucial importance to the success of Molière's comedies; for his ability to deal effectively with a very wide range of social subjects depended on a rapid exposition of just what places his characters occupied in the intricate and complex network of social relationships. Seven of the most salient social indicators were the money a character possessed, the offices he held, the clothing he wore, the servants he employed, the houses and lands he owned, the mode of transportation he employed, and the language he spoke. Such externals as these were commonly regarded as the

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LES OEUVRES DE M. MOLIERE
TOME I.