INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to provide, by means of a sociocritical study, a deeper insight into the theatrical works of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622-1673), better known by his stage name Molière, the great Parisian dramatist who is credited with perfecting the comedy of manners and character. Two decades ago such an undertaking might have called for a lengthy apologia justifying the sociological branch of literary criticism and outlining its benefits, but during that span of time, there has been such an explosion of interest in this area that neither its legitimacy nor its utility can be seriously questioned any longer. Refinement of critical techniques has led to a profusion of research methods, from the empirical and quantitative work of Roger Escarpit and his associates at the University of Bordeaux to the ideological approach practiced at the University of Birmingham. During this period of critical proliferation, there has been much controversy, particularly in the wake of Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism, over how literary forms relate to the social forms of the early modern period and which structures best lend themselves to literary analysis. A work of such modest proportions as this cannot pretend to solve all these thorny questions or to offer anything more than a close study of one outstanding author in the context of his lifetime. My method involves two basic steps: first, an identification of the status levels of the characters through reference to an index of social indicators, and, second, a comparison of their behavior patterns with the norms of the groups to which they belong. These
norms are reconstructed as nearly as possible on the basis of historical evidence and seventeenth-century social theory. The discussion of Molière's major plays is then organized around four polar structures that coincide with important social concerns of Louis XIV's subjects: exemplary nobility and unworthiness, social closure and usurpation, bourgeois reciprocity and imbalance, and finally, socioeconomic integrity and parasitism.

The decision to write on Molière, whom legions of critics through the ages have treated in so many ways, comes not at all from disrespect for previous scholarship but rather from high personal admiration and from a feeling that he is great enough to deserve the tribute of each generation. He is, after all, an ideal subject for sociocriticism, having traveled the far-flung provinces as actor, director, and writer before returning to his native Paris. Along the way he performed for an audience of unusual diversity and learned to cultivate an acute sensitivity to human relationships. As his Parisian career developed, he was able to capture the imagination of the cosmopolitan public in the capital by enriching the stock characters of traditional farce and intrigue comedy with a far more penetrating perspective on social behavior.

Before proceeding to the inventory of social indicators, it may be useful to review a few important historical definitions and previous critical attitudes. Molière lived under the ancien régime, that unbroken line of French monarchical rule that stretched from the eighth century to the Revolution of 1789; furthermore, his life-span fell in the subdivision usually referred to nowadays as the early modern age, since it marked a transition from the medieval culture, which with its feudal-manorial system had largely disappeared by the late fifteenth century, to the subsequent phase of industrial culture. The rather complex social hierarchy that prevailed in France during this time is termed by historians the société d'états, or society of estates.
Today, thanks to the efforts of such scholars as Roland Mousnier, Pierre Goubert, Robert Mandrou, and Pierre Deyon, critics once again have at their disposal a reliable description of the environment in which Molière composed his masterpieces.

The *société d'états* supplanted the medieval system of the *société d'ordres*, which had divided the population into the three orders of the clergy, the nobility, and the common people, or *roturiers*. The first of these categories continued to exist as a separate formal entity in the seventeenth century, but social historians have pointed out that its economic activity and chain of command had fallen almost completely under the domination of prominent noble and bourgeois families and thus were subsumed into the other groups. As for the nobles, knighthood no longer existed as an independent military force; and the descendants of the knights, the *noblesse d'épée*, had to share their privileges with the *noblesse de robe* or *noblesse de fonctions*, relative newcomers who had been ennobled by the king in recognition of service in the courts or royal administration. The latter had access to a formal mechanism for making their nobility just as hereditary as that of the *épée*, by paying fees to the crown and occupying an ennobling office for three generations. The new *anoblis* often surpassed in wealth and influence a large segment of the gentry that lived in rural semi-poverty, being too poor to afford a stay at court and thus receiving the pejorative designation of *hobereaux*.

The common people had also changed drastically in composition since the Middle Ages. By Molière's time there remained only a handful of serfs, most of the peasants having achieved a measure of theoretical autonomy as tenant farmers, or *tenantiers*. Yet the standard of living in the countryside had for the most part declined in the seventeenth century, and the peasants were often obliged to tread the fine line between misery and extinction. The medieval flood of farmers to the towns had been
reduced to a mere trickle, as the bourgeois artisans and merchants organized ever stricter guilds to conserve their trade advantages. Often the only point of entry for a peasant in the town was in the lowest levels of urban life, as a servant, apprentice, or laborer. The bourgeois, those who exercised municipal rights, had formed a hierarchy of their own, each livelihood or métier having its own rung on the ladder, with artisans below merchants and merchants below royal officers, or officiers. The latter group, which included magistrates of the sovereign courts and parlements, was paralleled by another body of "bourgeois living nobly"—that is, those who had retired from active commerce to live off income from investments in anticipation of furthering their families' social ascension through advantageous marriages or the acquisition of offices.

Unlike the society of orders, the society of estates featured a limited social mobility. All opportunities for advancement depended on possession of considerable sums of money. To reach the coveted rank of maître in a guild or corporation, a workman had to spend what to him was a small fortune on a showy chef d'oeuvre, as well as on fees and on a banquet for the whole organization. Few passed this hurdle who were not already relatives of maîtres. The next great divide was the distinction between artisans and merchants; as soon as a lucky man passed this point, he hastened to designate himself in contracts as marchand drapier, marchand épici er, and so on. Acquisition of office was the apogee of bourgeois life and also the most significant road leading into the upper reaches of the nobility. The ideal plan was to purchase one that brought instant hereditary nobility, such as the post of secrétaire du roi. Failing that, a social climber could search for a lesser position that would entail personal nobility or at least exemption from the taille, a tax that was the distinctive onus of the common folk. Money alone was not enough to fulfill such a program of betterment, for the
changes required several generations, with great attention to marriages that would consolidate capital in dowries, match daughters with superior families that could be powerful allies, and produce heirs capable of carrying on the ascent through the hierarchy.

A formidable apparatus of social closure stood in opposition to anyone who tried to rise in society without meeting the slow, expensive conditions of social mobility. Almost all positions of power were in some way privileges granted by the monarch and protected by his law. Despite this, there seems to have been no shortage of usurpers. They ranged from those who invented officer ancestors to accelerate the formula *patro et avo consulibus* (the three-generation requirement for hereditary nobility), to those who tried to avoid paying taxes or institutional fees like the *franc-fief* and the *paulette*, to those who faked possession of noble lands. There were undoubtedly more than a few who spent their money to acquire the superficial trappings of aristocracy—houses, clothes, carriages, swords—in hopes that they might rapidly gain the acceptance of public opinion.

Additional controls on social status were provided by the conventions of *dérogeance* and *déchéance*, which prohibited some forms of behavior to privileged groups, on penalty of official loss of standing. The nobility was the group most directly affected by these restrictions covering all commercial and financial activity, as well as various infamous crimes. However, some of the provisions also applied to officers and bourgeois living nobly, on the principle that candidates for honorable conditions must demonstrate noble behavior before being admitted to the uppermost ranks.

With the main categories and the mechanisms of mobility and closure thus defined, we may examine the traditions of criticism that have shaped, and in some cases distorted, early social assessments of Molière’s comedies.
In an environment preoccupied with social status and ambition, Molière himself claimed the role of a jocular corrector of behavioral abuses. He expresses this axiom of *castigat ridendo mores* in the *Premier Placet présenté au roi sur la comédie de Tartuffe*: "Le devoir de la comédie étant de corriger les hommes en les divertissant, j'ai cru que, dans l'emploi où je me trouve, je n'avais rien de mieux à faire que d'attaquer par des ridicules les vices de mon siècle." The expression of this critique in terms of moral reform rather than social change is typical of Louis XIV's France, where political challenges to the hierarchy by commoners were generally punished by imprisonment, exile to the galleys of Marseille, or even public execution. Molière, who was born the son of a furnisher to the king's household, had already been jailed for debts in his youth and could allow himself only a limited amount of audacity.\(^3\)

Despite Molière's efforts at diplomacy and prudence, he became involved in personal quarrels almost from the moment he brought his wandering troupe of players back to Paris in 1658. These disputes quickly took on social overtones. Donneau de Visé accused him of satirizing certain *personnes de qualité*, and one suspects that the allusion in *L'Ecole des femmes* to a Monsieur de l'Isle, a noble surname usurped by Thomas Corneille, may have had much to do with this charge.\(^4\) Boulanger de Challusset repeated Donneau's claim in 1670 and further implied that Molière sought to please common groundlings rather than noble theatre-goers—although anyone who could afford the minimum admission of 15 *sols* was hardly destitute!\(^5\) Pierre Rouillé, among the most vitriolic detractors of the dramatist, called Molière an immoral monster, "un démon vêtu de chair," and an enemy of all society.\(^6\) This double association of Molière with *roturiers* and heretics was to have interesting repercussions as time went on.

Opponents of the theatre eagerly seized upon the view of a
libertine Molière in order to further their puritanical ends. Echoing Roulle and the converted prince de Conti, the preacher Bourdaloue denounced him from the pulpit, claiming that he confused the public by blending virtue with vice in his comedies. Bossuet, bishop of Meaux, joined in this attack after Molière’s untimely death on stage; he maliciously hinted that the comedian had been struck down in divine retribution. Such viewpoints did not die out with the end of the Classical Era, but continued to be expounded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by men such as the converted Italian comic Luigi Riccoboni and the overly zealous critic Louis Veuillot.

Even those astute contemporaries who sought to achieve an objective, aesthetic criticism of Molière’s work were profoundly influenced by the allegations of his enemies. Boileau and Fénélon, in their concern for the purity of literature, renewed the myth that Molière had been somehow contaminated by his popularity. Consequently, his language was sometimes too vulgar for their tastes, despite the fact that the speech of his characters, no matter how realistic, was far more refined than that of competitors such as Raymond Poisson.

Molière’s friends and admirers were quick to claim that he had indeed succeeded as a social reformer. His fellow actor Brécourt, Charles Perrault, and even the burlesque poet D’Assouci were among those to sing his praises. Donneau de Visé, antagonist turned ally, lauded Molière as a philosopher as well as a dramatist—testimony that was to be seconded by La Grange and Vivot in their preface to the 1682 edition of his collected works. As the word philosophe changed to take on increasingly political overtones during the eighteenth century, Molière was assimilated into a current of protest against the recently perceived injustices of the ancien régime. His legend grew, for Fontenelle, Bayle, and a legion of minor authors portrayed him in an increasingly glorious light, but the most deci-
sive step in the radicalization of Molière was the completion of his first major biography by Grimarest.\textsuperscript{13} The latter, a nearly unknown man of letters, compiled a multitude of anecdotes demonstrating Molière's humanitarianism and exaggerating his ties to the freethinking school of Gassendi.

Throughout the Age of Enlightenment, the prevailing attitude of the \textit{philosophes} toward Molière was one of high regard for his artistic achievements and solidarity with what they imagined to be his ideological hostility to the aristocracy. Voltaire, eager to claim the author of \textit{Tartuffe} as a distinguished precursor, wrote his own biography of the dramatist, retouching Grimarest to emphasize his compatibility with the goals of reform—beliefs that were generally shared by the Encyclopédistes Diderot and Marmontel and by other literary authorities, including Chamfort.\textsuperscript{14}

One great exception was, of course, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the \textit{Lettre à D'Alembert sur les spectacles}, he accused Molière of conspiring against the “honnête homme” Alceste, hero of \textit{Le Misanthrope}.\textsuperscript{15} To put an essentially good man in a ridiculous position was, he contended, to make the theater a vehicle for social evil. The attack was motivated by polemical concerns, for D'Alembert had, in his article on Geneva for the \textit{Encyclopédie}, suggested that the only virtuous institution lacking in Rousseau's homeland was a theater. By jumping to the defense of the theocracy, Rousseau hoped to effect a timely reconciliation. His lack of comic sensibility (that capacity of even the most virtuous men to laugh at themselves) led Jean-Jacques to several interesting contradictions, such as the hypothesis that the author and his characters have separate intentions for their society. Yet, many in the Revolutionary generation looked to Rousseau as a beacon of truth, and his impact is manifest in Fabre d'Eglantine's \textit{Le Philinte de Molière} (a “sequel” that crowns Alceste's outspoken virtue while castigating his friend's complacency
toward aristocratic abuse), as well as in the heavily revised versions of Molière that appeared after 1793.\textsuperscript{16}

If the partisans of the Revolution regarded Molière as a tool of the oppressors, a curious reversal took place once the Bourbons were restored to the throne of France, for \textit{Tartuffe} was hailed in turn as a denunciation of ultraconservatism and an important statement on the rights of the individual. A new generation of writers, including Sainte-Beuve, Hugo, Musset, and Michelet, helped form a different image of Molière, that of the brooding, melancholic philosopher who was incapable of fulfilling his visions of reform.\textsuperscript{17} Obviously, the Romantics had begun to project onto Molière and his theater the anxieties and social dramas of their own period, a process that was facilitated by a growing ignorance of pre-Revolutionary conditions and by the disappearance of much of Molière’s dramatic production—particularly the farces, court ballets, and early comedies—from the repertoire and consciousness of the age.

At the same time that the nineteenth-century literary public was losing track of much of Molière’s work, a great interest arose in his private life. Initiated by the research of the police official, Beffara, and carried on by Soulié and by the entire team of the review \textit{Le Moliériste}, this movement was to result eventually in a clearer picture of the dramatist, his family, and his environment. Equally important to the reconstitution of Molière’s social context was the publication by Paul Lacroix and Georges Monval of most of the polemical literature that attacked or supported him during the stormy moments of his career and after his death.\textsuperscript{18}

Academic critics, however, did not always greet the work of the Moliéristes with enthusiasm. On the contrary, the latter were sometimes regarded as fanatics chasing lost documents or as amateurish \textit{bon vivants}. To Ferdinand Brunetière and Emile Faguet, who reflect the school of positivism and the moralistic
atmosphere of the Catholic Revival, Molière incarnated *le bon sens bourgeois*—a materialistic mediocrity that was denounced as immoral and anti-Christian by Veuillot and defended, albeit weakly, by Charles Jeannel and others. It must be noted that this concept of Molière as a spokesman for bourgeois ideology came into being at a time when the bourgeoisie was profoundly different from what it had been in his own day. Neither Brunetière and Faguet nor Molière’s defenders take into account the disunity of Louis XIV’s common subjects, the ambiguous *petit officier* status of Molière’s family, or the patronage of the court.

The twentieth century has brought a proliferation of critical responses to Molière’s theater. Gustave Lanson helped renew interest in the farce element in his plays, Maurice Pellisson restored the status of his *comédies-ballets* and palace entertainments, and the great biographical and critical syntheses of Gustave Michaut and Antoine Adam swept away the influence of dubious anecdotes while calling attention more and more to the plays themselves as the final word on the dramatist’s views and ideology. At the same time French historians, led by the members of the *Annales* school, were laying a new foundation for socioeconomic history through the quantitative study of records and documents pertaining to every level of pre-Revolutionary society. These scrupulous documentary methods were eventually applied to the dramatist himself by such researchers as Jurgens, Maxfield-Miller, and Mongrédiens.

The traditional interpretation of Molière as bourgeois spokesman is still propounded by John Cairncross, and Rousseau’s view of a Molière with aristocratic sympathies has been renewed with greater objectivity and care by Paul Bénichou; but perhaps the most influential trend to emerge since World War II is based on the hypothesis that Molière was a strictly disinterested man of the theater whose preoccupations with the forms of the stage
left no room for social comment, a position strongly represented by W. G. Moore and René Bray. Even though its dismissal of a social component in Molière's work is rather peremptory, the latter standpoint has made some important contributions to the understanding of his comedies, for it stresses the relevance of the entire canon and reminds us that Molière's mode of expression was eminently theatrical and indirect. The man of the stage used a many-voiced form of discourse where speeches can only be analyzed in relation to other speeches, rather than as direct expressions of authorial intent. Indeed, the theatrical Molière complements, rather than negates, the social Molière; for early modern communities were intensely ceremonial in character, and the formalities of mask, mime, speech, and gesture are ultimately affiliated with the realities of collective life. The work of Moore, Bray, and their followers makes possible an enhanced social criticism that seeks to uncover the unity of dramatic evolution and behavioral analysis. This has been the object in recent years of research by Myrna Zwillenberg, Karolyn Waterson, and especially Ralph Albanese. The methodology of this book provides for a scrutiny of the entire theatrical production of Molière, with added emphasis on the problem of identity, and on the diverse forms of relationship between the individual and the social body. With this goal in mind, I have attempted to maintain as much as possible of the representational context of the social elements in Molière's masterpieces, while at the same time relying on an ongoing comparison between internal portrayal of manners and external codes of behavior.

1. Roland Mousnier, *La Vénalité des offices sous Henri IV et Louis XIII; Fureurs paysannes: les paysans dans les révoltes du XVIIe siècle (France, Russie, Chine); Les Hierarchies sociales de 1450 à nos jours; Les Institutions de la France sous la monarchie*

2. Molière, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Georges Couton, 1:889. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to Molière's plays. Additional references to supplementary writings or to Couton's critical material in this edition will be designated OC Couton.

3. The best account of Molière's life based on documentary evidence is Madeleine Jurgens and Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller, Cent ans de recherches sur Molière. For information on his imprisonment, see pp. 104–7

4. Jean Donneau de Visé, Nouvelles Nouvelles, 3e partie (1663), in OC Couton, 1:1018–19. The persons alluded to by Donneau may have been in the same situation as the younger Corneille. See L'Ecole des femmes, 1.1. 175–82.

5. Boulanger himself notes that many bourgeois returned five or six times, paying 30 sols (a worker's weekly salary) each time to see a "hit" like L'Amour médecin. See his Elomire hypocondre ou les médecins vengés (1670), in OC Couton, 2:1241.


9. Luigi Riccoboni, De la réformation du théâtre, pp. 14–16, 62, 312. The contrast is vivid between this work of repentance and Riccoboni’s earlier Observations sur la comédie et sur le génie de Molière; Louis Veuillot, Molière et Bourdaloue.


minor works one must note the anonymous Molière le critique et Mercure aux prises avec les philosophes, an unusual tract in which a philosophical Molière debates points of theology with Bayle, Jean Le Clerc, and others. J. L. de Grimarest, La Vie de M. de Molière. (see especially pp. 101, 112).


21. Madeleine Jurgens and Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller, *Cent ans de recherches*. Georges Mongrédién, *La Vie privée de Molière*, and *Recueil de textes et de documents du XVIIe siècle relatifs à Molière*. Also see the numerous articles by these writers listed in the bibliography.


Arnolphe and Agnès in bourgeois attire, receiving laurel crowns from the comic muse. Frontispiece to volume two of the 1666 Paris edition of the *Oeuvres* published by J. Guignard fils and his associates. Reproduced by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.