Clues to social status were of paramount importance to Molière's audience, for the spectators had no program or critical apparatus to acquaint them rapidly with the essential facts about dramatic characters. Although the seasoned spectator was familiar with the actors of the major troupes and their usual roles, Molière's plays demanded special attention. As an actor, Molière was capable of portraying any condition from servant to nobleman and even the single figure of Sganarelle appeared sometimes as a valet and other times as a bourgeois. The treatment of broad and varied social subjects called for a quick exposition of group affiliations through both the verbal and physical aspects of the comedy. In general, Molière's use of such clues is subtly effective, for he manages to communicate social identities in numerous indirect ways, without interrupting the flow of the dialogue by plodding, stereotypical descriptions or heavy-handed introductions.

Seven of the most salient groups of social indicators in Molière’s theater are money, offices, clothing, servants, houses and land, transportation, and language. Lest these factors be dismissed as merely picturesque, superficial effects, it should be remembered that the ability to notice outward appearances and to distinguish between them was vital to Europeans in the seventeenth century, when each social body had its place in a hierarchy of possessions, uniforms, and behavior. The success of a courtship or a seduction, an anoblissement or a usurpation,
often depended on the existence of conspicuous indicators, which were thought to be the outward manifestations of an individual's essential virtue or caractère. La Bruyère's parallel of Giton and Phédon, the quintessential rich man and pauper, illustrates the ideal union of appearance and identity, as well as the aristocratic uneasiness over the domination of money in all forms of success. Externals, whether they reflected conditions of birth, financial strength, or simply aspirations, established the basic conditions for interpersonal contact at court, in the marketplace, in the village, or in the theater. The seven categories of indicators to be examined are those that recur most frequently in Molière's work, and, though they are not all-inclusive, they do permit reference to a significant cross-section of early modern society.

MONEY

In order to evaluate the sums of money mentioned in Molière's comedies, it is necessary to understand the rather complex monetary system of the ancien régime. Louis XIV's coinage carried no direct numerical value; its worth was fixed by the government in relationship to an arbitrary scale. Thus, there were two separate economic systems: the coins themselves, or units of exchange, and the theoretical units of account.

The basic unit of account in the seventeenth century was the livre tournois. The "franc," taken from the name of a sixteenth-century coin debased in the monetary reform of 1641, was an unofficial unit of account synonymous with the livre. The livre tournois contained twenty sous or sols, each of which contained twelve deniers, a scale of values similar to the former English pounds, shillings, and pence.

The principal French coins of the reign of Louis XIV were the silver écu, worth three livres, and the gold louis, worth ten. There were also half and double louis, and some rarer multiples of four louis and above. In addition, there had been a gold écu,
worth approximately five livres, which had been officially replaced by the silver écu in 1641, but some of these coins continued to circulate as late as 1653. The existence of the gold écu has led some editors to make disturbing errors in evaluation, but we must emphasize that it was already a rather rare coin by the time Molière returned to Paris, and that when his characters said “écu,” his audience certainly would have understood the common silver coin worth three livres. There also existed various coins of copper and alloy in multiples of sous and deniers, such as the liard (3 d.), the double (2 d.), the blanc (5 d.), and the “pièce tapée” (1 s. 3 d.), but their value was so questionable that they were often not accepted in trade.

Besides the French coins, certain foreign coins came to be assimilated into the French economic system. Such was the case of the Spanish double escudo, popularly known as the “pistole,” a coin of very high quality first minted by Charles V in 1537, tacitly accepted into the French system by Henri III forty years later, and fixed at a value of ten livres in 1652. The pistole circulated widely in France, particularly after the marriage of Louis XIV to Maria Theresa in 1660.

To add to this confusion, the coins tended to fluctuate in value according to supply and demand, despite governmental efforts at regulation. When Harpagon figures the interest on twenty pistoles at the denier douze to be 18 livres, 6 sols, and 8 deniers, (one for twelve, or about 8%) he shows us that the current value of the pistole was eleven, rather than ten, livres (L’Avare, 1. 4). Other illegal practices, such as counterfeiting and coin-trimming, forced the public to be constantly on guard against bad coins. Scoffing royal authority, merchants and servants alike resorted to weighing coins on a scale (trébuchet) to assure themselves of their value. Even Alain, the blockheaded swain in L’Ecole des femmes, complains that Horace has given him two old écus “qui n’étaient pas de poids” (3. 1. 670).

Money held a different place in the life of each social group.
Peasants dealt largely through a barter system, making payments in kind and saving their coins for tax payment. Only a small minority of them could amass, through several generations, a modest herd of livestock, worth perhaps 2,000 or 3,000 livres, and so become a *laboureur*. The urban worker earned between forty sols and ten livres per month, enough to provide lodging, bread, and vegetables for himself and perhaps for a small family, provided that a grain shortage did not send staple prices skyrocketing.⁶

Only at the income level of the artisan and the merchant does one begin to see the possibility of considerable sums of money, usually in the context of dowries and land transactions. Marriage contracts, postmortem inventories, and other documents reveal a surprising lack of liquidity in bourgeois fortunes, for cash is rare and is often replaced by notes, offices, *rentes* (which represent about \( \frac{1}{12} \) of the capital invested), and goods. In seventeenth-century Paris, most bourgeois dowries were under 5,000 livres, with many under 1,000 livres, even in the relatively prosperous neighborhood of the Marais, where the most frequent figures hover between 2,000 and 8,000 livres.⁷ Dowries of 10,000 livres and above seem to have been reserved mainly for the strata of officers, lawyers, and the wealthier merchants.⁸ It is worth noting that Molière's maternal grandmother, Marie Asselin, was married with the modest *dot* of 4,000 livres.⁹ Above the level of 10,000 livres, fortunes tended to escalate rapidly. For example, the *parlementaire* Bullion, whose parents married with 22,000 livres, eventually commanded a fortune of 8,000,000 livres.¹⁰ In fact, fortunes above 100,000 livres usually coincided with the ascension from the common order into the nobility, as was the case for Louis XIV's *secrétaires d'état*, who were worth 800,000 to 900,000 livres.¹¹

Money is thus a rather remarkable social indicator in Molière's comedy, for it specifies, whenever mentioned, a minimal level for a character in the social hierarchy. In the case of dowries, the
sum may even permit a narrowing of possible identities to two or three distinct groups. Other indicators may then contribute to a clearer parallel between a given character and a condition in the social order.

OFFICES

The multitude of offices available to buyers in Molière's time included such relatively insignificant charges as his father's post of royal upholsterer, minor places in the forest and road administrations, or provincial notary bureaus. The rather large proportion of bourgeois who scurried to pay a few thousand livres for such offices (1,000 officers out of 22,000 townsmen in Dijon) tended to settle, if no royal appointments were available, for even the most diminutive ones in princely service, even "piqueur au vol pour corneilles!" Meager honors were often matched by meager remuneration, which suggests that the main attractiveness in offices was their status as a foothold in the ascending hierarchy of "dignities" that led eventually to tax exemption and nobility.

Above the minor offices just mentioned were the lower levels of the provincial magistrature and financial administration, costing between 10,000 and 20,000 livres. These posts, including élu, bailli, and receveur-général, were typical of a somewhat dull, endogamous layer of society that sometimes opened the way for continued aspiration. The more important offices in the provincial sovereign courts, such as président à mortier, were worth upward of 60,000 livres, compared with nearly half a million livres in the capital. In the parlements, the post of conseiller cost at least 45,000 livres, whereas less prestigious (but more accessible) places in the cour des monnaies and grand conseil began at 30,000 livres. High offices such as these were naturally rewarded with the dignities and privileges of the noblesse de robe.

Office-holding generally signified substantial fortunes and
social mobility, a combination of circumstances that led to a particular set of social values. For the families associated with the sovereign courts, it meant an emphasis on lineage at least as important as that encountered in the ranks of the noblesse d'épée. A royal edict in 1600 had set forth the rule whereby the third generation to possess an office acquired not only the personal nobility of the officer himself but also a full hereditary and perpetual dignity. Because the office itself was irrefutable proof that could stand the test of any challenge or inquest, it stayed in the family as long as nine generations. This led to a high degree of endogamy and clannishness among officers, whose fortunes usually alienated them from the penniless hobe-reau, as well as from the "vile" artisan.

The officer group was neither as placid nor as secure as their enviable privileges may suggest. In reality there were many rifts between different corps of officers, such as the prolonged dispute between the trésoriers de France and the élus, on the one hand, and the magistrates of the cours des aides and chambres des comptes, on the other. The struggle resulted in the victory of the latter party in the matter of authority over financial administration. Bickering between the sovereign courts and the royal governors and intendants eventually prompted Louis XIV to effect dictatorially a reduction of the courts’ powers. This coincided with the king's intention to separate power and privilege, dispensing one or the other when it suited his purposes. He seized upon every opportunity to abolish "independent" offices, such as the municipal government of Marseille.

The ideological effects of the officer corps in seventeenth-century France were all-pervasive. Jan De Vries has given a name to the mentality of this slow economy, dominated by nepotism and patronage, which immobilized the most important accumulations of capital through the purchase of offices—he calls it empleomania. Its influence extended over all the urban
groups, from artisans to judges, as well as rural entrepreneurs, and impinged on the noblesse de robe and the noblesse d'épée, for even aristocrats were concerned with offices of a type. The old nobility did not need to worry about acquiring status, but rather about preserving it. Military service was the only activity sanctioned for them and the only proof they could muster for the recherches de noblesse, but most of the desirable commands in the army and navy were just as subject to venality as the sovereign courts! In 1653 the duc de Noailles was obliged to borrow 500,000 livres to purchase a post as capitaine-lieutenant des chevau-légers. As money became a deciding factor in the military, many a prepubescent boy became the titular captain of a ship or commander of a unit in the field. Unless he was very lucky, the scion of a warrior family had to pay for his position, just as the son of a merchant would. It is no wonder, then, that Molière associated many of his important characters with the anxieties and privileges of the officer groups.

CLOTHING

Seventeenth-century society insisted upon observance of certain conventions in dress, for it was important to recognize immediately and by sight the status of those in one's environment in order to render or demand the proper honors. Failure to do so could result in a sound caning from a superior, interrupted economic or class cooperation among equals, or a loss of face before inferiors.

One of the most distinctive garments was the robe, worn by most of the clergy and by the legal and medical professions. Clerical robes ranged from the simple black soutane of the village priest to the splendid fur-lined and embroidered costumes in fine red cloth worn by a cardinal. Much of the clergy also wore the familiar rounded hat with a wide brim. The medical robe was an outgrowth of university attire, the traditional black
gown. As for the men of law, they were divided into those of the long robe and those of the short. The latter were subordinate officers such as *huissiers* and *sergents*. Among the wearers of the long robe, the costume ranged from the relatively simple black cloth for a young lawyer to expensive satin and velvet, sometimes in bright colors and trimmed or embroidered, for royal attorneys, high judges, and *parlementaires*.

Masculine attire for the bourgeoisie consisted of a white shirt, or *chemise*, a pair of knee breeches called the *haut-de-chausses*, cotton hose, the vest-like *pourpoint*, a collar, or *rabat* (of lace if the wearer was wealthy), a hat, a mantle, and buckle shoes. At the beginning of Molière's career, this outfit would lack pockets (hence, the necessity of a purse hung from the belt) or buttons (fasteners, laces, and pins were used), but by 1700 these items had become the key to fashion. On the other hand, ribbons, which were an indispensable part of the earlier costume (to cover the fasteners), had almost disappeared from masculine apparel, even for nobles, by the turn of the century.

As bourgeois fashions were soberly evolving, the court nobility, led by such eminent dandies as Cinq-Mars, Montauron, the duc de Candale, Lauzun, Vardes, Villeroy, de Guiche, and Lengléé, outdid each other to launch ever newer and more outrageous styles. The *pourpoint*, which in the early part of the century reached the waist, shrank during the 1660s into a small brassière with puffy sleeves. The *chemise* became vast and was allowed to protrude in great folds over the stomach, making the distinctive *jabot*. From the neck, a cascade of lace descended toward the navel. The *haut-de-chausses* might be quite voluminous, as in the so-called *rhingrave* style. Over his silk stocking, the aristocratic peacock might place hoops of lace (*canons*); his high-heeled shoes might be made even more awkward by a profusion of ribbons. The largest clusters of ribbons, called the *petite oie* or *affûtiaux*, could reach ridiculous extremes. The
truly smitten fop would top this all off with a long blond wig and a hat adorned with a cluster of expensive plumes.

Foppish attire coincides with usurpation of rank in many "nobles," especially the marquis, to create a particularly troublesome ambiguity. Of course, a legitimate marquis could attract ridicule by dressing immoderately. In addition, however, there seems to have been an unusually large number of upstart bourgeois who laid claim to this title, so much so that the term *faux marquis* became a synonym for usurper. It is often difficult to tell whether one of these gaudy aristocrats is a fool or a fraud, or both. Perhaps Molière is suggesting that there is not much difference between the two. In any case, Brossette, informed by a highly reliable source, reports that Molière modeled his ridiculous marquis figures on the usurpers: "M. Despréaux m'a dit que les *faux marquis* de la cour étaient enragés contre Molière parce qu'il les jouait et qu'il mettait leurs mots aussi bien que leurs manières dans ses comédies." If we are to believe this testimony by Boileau, the fool and the upstart do indeed go hand in hand in Molière's plays.

In distinguishing between prescribed bourgeois and noble attire, fabric and color were just as important as style. The middle and upper bourgeoisie generally wore black broadcloth or other dark-colored fabrics, with a *chemise* of fine linen. Nobles preferred as much silk, satin, and velvet as possible. They chose lively colors, and some were veritable walking sunbursts. In addition, their costumes were often decorated with a profusion of lace, feathers, and fancy embroidery of gold or silver thread or imitations.

The engravings by Brissart and Sauvé in the 1682 edition of Molière's works show that, nine years after the playwright's death, fashions had already made considerable progress toward a more reasonable and modest standard. Serge and *droguet* were rapidly replacing silk and satin in the outer garments. Both
court and town adopted the *justaucorps*, a kind of ancestor to the frock coat, which almost completely covered the other clothes and became the focus of design; a minor change in the angle of a pocket or the location of a buttonhole would send ripples through the fashion-conscious world. Already in 1672 Mme de Sévigné's son-in-law, Grignan, was paying between 800 and 1,000 livres for a *justaucorps*.26

People of the lower classes, men as well as women, wore whatever they could afford, which generally was a somewhat coarse gray linen called *grisette*. Slightly more elegant was the *toile de Troyes*, which appealed to the *petites bourgeoises*. The poorer laborers, such as water-carriers, could not afford a *rabat*. Often the *haut-de-chausses* was replaced by a loose culotte and the hose by rough leggings. Footwear was simple, for the wooden *sabot* was still very much in use among the people. Men wore various types of floppy hats, ancestors of the Revolution's Phrygian cap, and women favored bonnets. Old, baggy *pour-points* and slightly-used brimmed hats were available at the used clothing shop, or *friperie*.27

Lackeys and valets were frequently better off than the working poor, for they might be provided with their master's livery. They might receive smocks or other work clothes, or even some castoffs from their employer's own wardrobe. The beret was the common headwear for servants, although special domestics such as cooks and coachmen might have different hats: one thinks of Maître Jacques in *L'Avare* (3.1), who had a different hat for each of his jobs. Sometimes the costumes of the valets in Molière's comedies were influenced by the stylized stage costumes of the *commedia dell'arte*; this is the case, for instance, with Sbrigani of *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* (1.3), who wears a "Neapolitan" suit.

Molière's characters occasionally wear obsolete items of clothing. The most noteworthy example is Sganarelle's "fraise," a
kind of ruff dating back to the reign of Henri IV. Sganarelle's
association with this collar makes him appear to be a relic left
behind by the rush of other bourgeois toward powerful offices
and a noble lifestyle.

As for women's clothes, there was less variation in terms of
style. Dresses were long and necklines low for all classes of
society. *A fichu*, or kerchief, could cover the neck and bosom in
case of cold weather or pruderie. Several petticoats were worn
under the dress. Materials and workmanship were even more
important than in men's clothing. For the rich there were dam-
ask, various types of velvet, and satin. Economy-minded wives
might content themselves with *camelot de Hollande* (silk and
wool) or *ferrandine* (silk and cotton). With fancy stitching and
perhaps a few pearls as well, the price of a dress could easily
exceed 300 livres. Jewelry ranged from the jade hairpins of the
middle bourgeoisie to gold and diamonds for the wealthy. Rich
women dispensed with bonnets in order to preserve their expen-
sive and towering coiffures, but only those of the rank of duch-
ness or higher had to trouble themselves with more than three
yards of train on their dresses.  

The extent to which seventeenth-century French society was
obsessed with clothing as a mark of rank is shown in the king's
repeated attempts to promulgate and enforce sumptuary laws.
Louis's informal influence on fashions was tremendous: it was
he who launched the billowing wigs that forced men to shave
their heads until the turn of the century, and they rushed to
trim off their moustaches as well, when he shaved his in 1680.
In this as in all other matters, Louis strove for absolute control,
which proved elusive. He intervened in 1691 to suppress cloth-
covered buttons and tried eleven times to ban all "étoffes d'or et
der argent et ... broderies, piqures, chamarrures, guipures,
passements, etc."  

Establishing an elite uniform, the famous
"justaucorps bleu," he allotted sixty of them to the most presti-
gious people in the country. He even intervened, in vain, in the field of women's hair styles, ordering ladies to abandon their two- or three-foot-high creations. No wonder that everyone in France was constantly scrutinizing what everyone else was wearing!

**SERVANTS**

The domestic staff required by the aristocratic or upper bourgeois household could be very numerous, and its management was consequently a complex problem. An eminent contemporary guidebook to domestic management, Audiger's *La Maison réglée*, informs us that the proper gentleman required no fewer than thirty-seven servants, of which five were servants to other servants! Wages would amount to more than 4,000 livres per year, room and board to 9,000 or more livres. A président in the Bordeaux parlement, for example, could make do with a minimal staff of a cook, a coachman, a valet, two lackeys, and several maids.

The basic manservant was the *laquais*, or footman, a utility worker whose tasks could include serving table, running errands, cleaning, tending the fire, and acting as receptionist. At dinner one man was required for each guest just to serve his wine, for drink and glasses were kept on a sideboard rather than on the table. These lackeys were often peasants who had left the land because of the chronic famine during Louis's reign, and many went by the name of provinces, hence, the profusion of Bourguignons, Picards, and Champagnes. Even in the best houses, they could not expect to collect much more than 100 livres per year in wages, and the average must have been far lower, with frequent lapses in payment. It is true that the *laquais* were fed and sometimes clothed, but we can understand their avidity for gratuities from any source.

The valet enjoyed a better position than the *laquais*. His main
duties consisted of dressing his master and looking after his personal effects. He might be called upon to serve as cupbearer or to do all sorts of odd jobs. Although he was more closely supervised than the *laquais*, and just as expendable, his salary was generally two or three times higher, 200 livres or more. In addition, he might expect to receive a fairly substantial bequest, should he survive his master: Boileau gave his valet 6,000 livres.

Maids, or *servantes*, were the female counterparts of the *laquais*. A *servante*’s tasks, which were as tiring as a man’s, included such unglorified work as emptying chamber pots and scrubbing floors. The one field with which she had nothing to do, at least in the larger houses, was the preparation and serving of food. For her efforts she received a meager compensation of some 25 livres per year.

These low-ranking servants were completely at the mercy of their masters and mistresses. Any infraction or misbehavior could result in a beating with fists or sticks, although, fortunately, it was considered ignoble to draw sword against a mere servant. Although there are examples of “upstart” servants going unpunished, there are also incidents of servants being crippled or even killed. On the conventionalized stage, these kickings, poundings, and canings were sublimated into the *bastonnade*, a ritualized beating that involved the traditional slapstick. This instrument was made of sticks fastened together to produce a loud clack at the least impact.

There were other members of the domestic staff who belonged to an ambiguous category somewhat above that of the preceding servants, but who would still have been considered by the master as “mes gens.” Apart from apprentices and journeymen in the trades, these included the wet nurse and the *suivante* among the women, and the cook, *maître d’hôtel*, tutor, and *intendant* among the men.

Wet nurses were required for all children of the aristocracy
and of the *haute bourgeoisie*, for it was definitely unfashionable for women of those classes to nurse their own offspring. The nurse could be hired from a Parisian agency or selected from among trusty servant women. Pay was better than that of a maid, 24–33 livres per year. The nurse could expect relatively good food and light work, for the health of the child depended on hers. Her own infant would become the *soeur* or *frère de lait* of the young aristocrat, which traditionally entitled the child to some form of preferential treatment.

The term *suivante* is used to designate a type of woman servant who served a single mistress and whose duties, like the valet's, included dressing and grooming this person. As a result, the *suivante* had a certain status that protected her from the corporal punishment inflicted upon lesser servants. The latter were usually of peasant origin, but the *suivante* might well be a *petite bourgeoisie*, perhaps a widow. The *suivante* would be expected to possess, if not some education, at least a talent for matters of fashion and etiquette, for she must not embarrass her mistress before her friends. She would usually profit from her proximity to the mistress in sharing her more comfortable living conditions and, perhaps, more elegant clothes.

The cook, or *cuisinier*, was a sort of semiprofessional in seventeenth-century France. Although not a member of a corporation, like a pastry cook, he had to possess all kinds of diversified skills, for he might have to judge meat "on the hoof" and to dress entire animals. Consequently, he enjoyed a certain respect and a salary of about 300 livres, which surpassed that of many artisans.

The authority of the cook ceased at the threshold of the kitchen, where the *maître d'hôtel* took over. Like the cook, the *maître d'hôtel* would be addressed as "Maître" or "Monsieur" by the other servants. His salary of 500 livres was equal to that of eight or ten *laquais*. Often he would be in charge of the entire
domestic staff and most of the household stores. Besides supervising work, he would greet visitors and orchestrate the serving of elaborate meals.

If a man of means had a male child, he would generally provide him with a private tutor. (Girls were usually sent to convent schools.) Since the three main requirements for the tutor were that he be unmarried, poor, and more or less learned, it is not surprising that most were penniless members of the clergy. From the time the boy ceased wearing infants' skirts to the time he entered a collège, the tutor woke him, instructed him in manners, ate with him, taught him a little reading and writing (Latin, naturally), and put him to bed.

An intendant would have been employed only by an extremely wealthy bourgeois or aristocrat. His job would be to manage not just one but several households, and his presence would indicate the existence of large real estate holdings. Such a man would have to have a solid background in mathematics, a rather rare thing in the seventeenth century, and at least a rudimentary knowledge of farming, agricultural tenant leases, and the collection of land taxes and duties. The fact that such men were beginning to be seen more and more frequently in bourgeois households corresponds to the growing power of the upper bourgeoisie and their desire to consolidate both status and investment income in land holdings.

All of these different servants and workers appear in Molière's plays and can be used as clues to the status of the householder. Moreover, the relations between the master and the servant tell us much about whether the head of the household is behaving in a manner consistent with his social status.

HOUSES AND LAND

By 1684 Paris was estimated to have 23,372 houses, to accommodate a population of about a half million. If we consider,
then, as a rough average, that there were twenty people per house, we are not surprised to find foreign visitors reacting with surprise to the crowded conditions: "Tis also most certain, that for a quantity of ground possessed by the common people, this city is much more populous than any part of London; here are from four to five and to ten ménages, or distinct families in many houses."33

Who owned these twenty-three thousand homes? No servant, peddler, or laborer, no worker below the rank of maître in a corporation could hope to own one. A small artisan’s house in provincial Troyes cost between 600 and 1,200 livres, and Paris property was much more expensive! For example, Molière lent his father, Jean Poquelin, 10,000 livres to rebuild his modest home under the pillars of Les Halles, and this does not include the cost of the land.34 Unless he made a fantastic marriage or came into a miraculously large inheritance, no ordinary worker could expect to acquire a house.

The sumptuous hôtels of the aristocracy were certainly the most prominent feature in the urban landscape, but this does not mean that the nobility dominated the housing market. In fact, some large hôtels were kept solvent by renting the ground floor space to merchants. Certainly the average nobleman, arriving in Paris from the country in search of royal appointments or personal amusement, could hardly afford to buy an entire building. Even the relatives of so illustrious a person as Mme de Maintenon were forced to rent. She recommended that her brother, D’Aubigné, spend no more than 1,000 livres on housing; but then, she was notoriously tightfisted and D’Aubigné’s household relatively small. Molière himself, who did not have to make much of a show of luxury, spent between 550 and 1,300 livres each year to rent apartments of up to ten rooms with kitchen, cellars, attics, and, in the case of the higher figure, stable space.35 Suffice it to say that many a noble must have rented rooms costing more than 1,000 livres per year.
The majority of urban real estate seems to have been in the hands of the middle and upper levels of the bourgeoisie, men at or above the station of Jean Poquelin. Jean-Baptiste himself lived in houses owned by a royal physician, a royal apothecary, a royal secretary of finance, and a tailor to the queen. The possession of a house in Paris implied a capital investment of tens of thousands of livres.

Rural lands, with few exceptions, were subject to the seigneurial system. A seigneurie consisted of two parts: the demesne (manorial residence and fields belonging directly to the seigneur) and the censives or tenures. Peasants living in the latter (censitaires or tenanciers) "owned" the land in the sense that they enjoyed hereditary usufruct of it (domaine utile), but they still owed fees to the seigneur (domaine éminent). These included the manorial dues (cens), payments for all milling, wine-pressing, and bread-baking (banalités), a tax on all exchange of property (droit de mutation) and a kind of manorial tithe on the produce of grain fields (champart), which amounted to from \( \frac{1}{9} \) to \( \frac{1}{3} \) of the crop. The seigneur held monopolies on hunting, fishing, use of waterways, and dovecotes. In addition, he often disputed the peasants' ancient right to collect wood in the forests and graze livestock on the meadows without charge. Since it was the seigneur who, through a corps of legal officials, administered civil law in the seigneurie, the peasants seldom had a chance to win disputes with the overlord. Such arguments were manifold, but only in the Midi did the peasants succeed in gaining a more or less equal footing, achieving parity in the courts and often converting the complicated and onerous dues into a single annual payment.

Not all the peasants were tenanciers. Many held no land in their name and wandered from farm to tenant farm or worked as day laborers, sleeping in a stable or ruined building, or perhaps in a cottage loaned by the seigneur. Some peasants, like the mainmortables of Burgundy, were virtual slaves. Resident
tenanciers could be reduced to wanderers by taxes, debts, a few bad harvests, an illness in the family, or a military campaign in the area. Moreover, they were not free to dispose of their own land; all transfers of title other than hereditary had to be approved by the seigneur, who could exercise his universal option, the retrait, thus substituting himself for the buyer.

By far the most lucrative part of the seigneurie was the demesne, which usually contained one or more farms owned entirely by the seigneur himself. The products raised on these lands could be harvested and sold before those of the tenanciers. The seigneur might exploit these farms himself, often using the indebted tenanciers as a labor force. On the other hand, the seigneur was increasingly an absentee and resorted to tenant farming on his domaine lands.

Known as fermage or métayage, tenant farming was widespread under the ancien régime. The true métayer received half of the advance costs from the seigneur and, in turn, repaid half of the crop to him, but this could vary under the different local types of fermage. Obviously, this arrangement offered a ridiculously high percentage of profit to the overlord, but it had its problems, too. It was common for métayers to break their contracts and flee in bad years, perhaps after eating the seed grain and a few of the seigneur's animals to keep from starving. The seigneur himself might lack the tools, seed, or livestock necessary for métayage. Thus, in order to provide for a more stable income (though at a lower rate of profit), the seigneur might enter into an agreement with an agricultural contractor or laboureur.

Laboureurs formed the upper stratum of the peasant world, for as more and more seigneurs became absentees and as smaller farmers became increasingly impoverished, they came to enjoy a virtual monopoly on draught animals, plows, farm equipment, and seed; these vital materials were not only used on their
contract farms but also rented to poorer peasants. In return the *laboureur* took cash, crops, labor, or even parcels of land in lieu of debts, which were inevitable in the famine-ridden countryside. Many *laboureurs* thus became large-scale entrepreneurs, stockpiling agricultural materials, involving themselves in money-lending and the commerce of grain, and sometimes owning properties themselves. Becoming the general manager of a *seigneurie* (*receveur*) was often a crucial step in the acquisition of power and opportunities for advancement. By purchasing a tax official’s office and gaining exemption from the *taille*, a person from a *laboureur* family could enter the comfortable and upwardly mobile world of the bourgeoisie.

While the most successful peasants sought to join the mobile urban world, the most prosperous city-dwellers were consolidating their economic and social gains by procuring land, in almost any quantity imaginable. Even an actress like Madeleine Béjart could afford a small farm. Many bourgeois became landowners by a mechanism called *rente constituée*: a bourgeois would lend a sum of money to a noble, but this would be disguised as the sale of an annual rent on the noble’s lands, which, in case of nonpayment of the rent, became the property of the creditor. Officers, legal men, notaries, craftsmen, even members of the clergy commonly engaged in this practice.

A burgher’s purchases were not limited to the *censives*, for he could buy fiefs within the demesne, provided he paid the king a duty called the *franc-fief*. This tax amounted to $\frac{1}{20}$ of the land’s production, with another $\frac{1}{20}$ for each change of ownership. The advantages of these acquisitions were not merely economic; they could provide a veritable “back door” into the nobility. If a family was unable to acquire nobility directly by purchasing letters or high offices, they might assume nobility gradually by purchasing a fief, procuring a minor but *taille*-exempt office (since absence from the tax rolls was used as a way
of verifying nobility), changing their name, and eventually paying the king's agents a fee to certify their noble standing.

TRANSPORTATION

Modes of transportation are often reliable indicators of social status. It is important to remember, in the first place, that most people in Molière's France did not travel long distances: they grew up, married, worked, and died within the scope of a small community, whether urban or rural. For this majority, walking was the only way to travel. The average farmer or shopkeeper did not have a saddle horse, and the title chevalier remained a descriptive term, inasmuch as horsemanship was still largely a noble prerogative. Pierre Deyon mentions that the great merchants of Amiens, who were compelled to make commercial voyages to neighboring provinces, did use saddle horses, but had no carriages. For a winegrower a mule and a cart were marks of distinction, and a laboureur's teams and wagons made him a man to be reckoned with in the farm country.

For the bourgeois who possessed sufficient means and was unwilling or unable to use his feet, many types of conveyances were available. The foremost of these was the sedan chair, or chaise à porteurs, which was fairly economical and carried people of such diverse rank as the actor Louis Béjart (who had a leg injury) and the more old-fashioned members of court society. Charles Perrault owned a sedan chair valued at only 50 livres, as opposed to 550 livres for his small carriage. Thus, almost any merchant with a couple of strong lackeys could probably afford a chair. Even if this modest investment was too much, he could always hire a chair borne by professional carriers. A cheaper and less appealing vehicle was to be found in the vinaigrette, a sort of Parisian rickshaw.

The most sophisticated and expensive way to travel was by the carriage, which underwent rapid technological evolution in the
course of the century. French and English coachmakers led the world in their increasingly refined craft, fitting their creations with rear suspension and pivoting front axles, for greater comfort and maneuverability. Soon steel springs and glass windows were added; the body of the carriage was elegantly shaped and adorned with rich fabrics, painted decorations, and metal ornaments. The carriage became an indispensable part of a gallant aristocrat's possessions, since it was necessary for the carrousels, excursions, and ritualized parades that took place in the Cours la Reine and other fashionable gathering-places. The king's fondness for the vehicle did much to encourage this wave of fashion. Elaborate forms of coaching etiquette and rules on ornamentation became so complex as to vex even princes of the blood. To ride in the king's coaches, one had to prove one's noble ancestry back to the fourteenth century. As La Bruyère noted, carriages were so exclusive that ladies would immediately become excited when one stopped at their door, for it meant the visit of a high aristocrat or a distinguished magistrate.

It is not surprising that increasing expenses caused carriages to remain a luxury item: in 1658, when Molière returned to the Parisian stage, there were only about 300 of them in the city. Most carriages needed four to six horses, with the exception of the lighter cabriolet, which took only two. Besides the large quantities of fodder consumed by these animals, there was the necessity of hiring a coachman at about 400 livres a year, plus room and board; a lady's écuyer might cost even more because of his more extensive duties. Additional money had to be spent on a stable and storage rooms for feed and tack, and for the rental of a large house with porte cochère, as well as for incidental expenses like shoeing. In all, Audiger estimates the median expenses for a nobleman's stable and carriages to be over 10,000 livres per year.

Rental carriages catered to city dwellers who needed a vehicle
only for limited lengths of time, and could be rented yearly for about 2,400 livres. The Englishman Lister notes that they were numerous enough to make business difficult for hired cabs. The first omnibuses, the carrosses à cinq sous, were fashionable for a while, especially after the king took several rides in them, but at that price they proved uneconomical. More successful were the stage coaches linking Paris to the provinces; these vehicles were too crude and uncomfortable to be used by ceremonious noblemen, but they provided an essential service by facilitating long-distance travel for people of the middle social ranks.

LANGUAGE

In Molière's day, linguistic indicators offered much vital information to the theater-going public. Because of limited mobility and poor communications, local dialects flourished everywhere in France, a fact that allowed the average man to be geographically identified by his speech. Molière took advantage of Parisians' delight with geolinguistic mimicry in such plays as Monsieur de Pourceaugnac, where he introduced characters who masqueraded as Picards and Gascons, complete with their provincial patois.

An equally important dimension is sociolinguistics, for it was likewise possible to differentiate between many social levels on the basis of a person's language. Peasants, townspeople, and aristocrats had particular vocabularies suited to their needs and livelihoods. This fragmentation was superimposed on the jigsaw puzzle of regional dialects: stevedores on the Paris waterfront, lawyers in the Palais, and courtiers in the Louvre all had their own idioms, thriving within a few hundred yards of each other. Part of the reason for this may be the strong professional ties of urban guilds and métiers, which protected manufacturing and trade secrets with a formidable armor of shibboleths and obscure cant. The most prominent jargons in Molière's theater
are those of the "liberal professions"—doctors, lawyers, and scholars. These groups were set apart by their uniforms and by their association with the taboo areas of death, courts, and schools, which were shrouded in the mysteries of Latin. This fact suggests that Molière may have been tapping an unseen but powerful reservoir of primitive, superstitious resentment in his culture.

Obviously, it would be impossible to reproduce, in the narrow confines of this study, a comprehensive guide to sociolinguistics in Molière’s France. Seventeenth-century dictionaries, especially Furetière’s, and reference works, such as Livet’s lexicon and Francis Bar’s study on the burlesque genre, furnish a wealth of information on this topic. For our purposes, it must suffice to call attention to specific instances of linguistic identification in the context of individual plays.

Mention must be made here, however, of one aspect of language that affects almost every play—the use of titles and forms of address to signal status. Curiously enough, these forms of address are least revealing among the nobility, for the ubiquitous appellatives, Monsieur and Madame, were used everywhere in aristocratic surroundings. After all, there existed a parity of quality for all those born into the hereditary nobility, regardless of whatever fiefs they might possess. A vicomte, a marquis, and a landless chevalier were entitled to equal respect. This becomes clear when one considers that in the same family three sons might have very different titles but identical birth.

There were a few significant exceptions to the homogeneity of the nobility, with respect to title. Certain of them, such as baron, had fallen into disuse and disregard, mainly through the whims of fashion and the prejudice against hobereaux. Other titles (for instances, écuyer and marquis) were frequently usurped by commoners. The term gentilhomme was reserved for a person of the highest degree of nobility and thus withheld
from *anoblis* and their sons. De facto authority was conferred upon dukes by their vast wealth and power (they had the prerogative of being addressed as Monseigneur) and upon the *maréchaux de France* by virtue of their service to their king as delegates in civil and military crises.

It is among the socially mobile bourgeoisie that one finds a true obsession with title. *Bourgeois de Paris* was in itself not only a description but also a legal distinction that conferred advantages in taxation and other areas, especially in the ownership of farmland in the Parisian Basin. Merchants were almost always explicit in their claim to this title, so prestigious that some officers and recently ennobled individuals continued to use it.\(^50\) Marcel Couturier, in his socioeconomic study of Châteaudun, traces the evolution of the term *bourgeois* through the seventeenth century, from its beginnings as a designation of those who participate in municipal government, to a stage where it meant someone free of manual labor, often the owner of a *seigneurie*, until it eventually implied status as a *rentier*, a possessor of ennobling office, or someone retired from commerce and "living nobly."\(^51\)

The bourgeois also laid claim to other titles in order to distinguish themselves as landowners or officeholders. Meyer notes the inclination of the leading families of Rennes to intermarry and to call each other "sire" or "noble homme," and Frondeville finds that almost all of the *conseillers* in Normandy designate themselves as "sieur" (*seigneur*) of a certain country estate, displaying coats of arms to support their noble ambitions.\(^52\) Furthermore, Roland Mousnier discovered that bourgeois who were usurping the title of *écuyer* often called each other "sieur" in an attempt to sway public opinion.\(^53\) The same people might try to abandon their family name: first they would append the name of a property, transforming Corneille into Corneille de l’Isle, then eventually dropping the former in order to leave a noble-sounding name beginning with the *particule*. 

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Yet, there were also methods of reminding a bourgeois of his low birth. The title Monsieur, usually used alone to address an aristocrat, when coupled with the family name of a roturier, implies not only identification of his "vile" origin, but also a personal degradation. It is as though the luster of the polite form of address emphasizes the unworthiness of the commoner's lineage and his failure to achieve social acceptance.

Having discussed the most common types of status indicators present in Molière's comedies, we will turn to a practical analysis of their appearance in the texts. It will prove most useful, in dealing with such a variety of works, to begin with the simplest uses of indicators and to proceed to the more complex questions. Thus, before approaching the major plays, which portray profound challenges to the basic norms of ancien régime society, attention will be given to an unjustly neglected area: the collection of early works, short farces, and plays with foreign settings, which complete the corpus of Molière's theater and on which the dramatist spent much of his career.

1. To appreciate the quality of Molière's exposition, one need only compare the smooth unfolding of his comedies to the turgid beginnings of plays by such contemporaries as Poisson and Chevalier. On the comic unity of the multiple Sganarelle characters, see Jean-Michel Pelous, "Les Métamorphoses de Sganarelle: la permanence d'un type comique."


4. An example of an error in calculation is to be found in Léon Lejealle's edition of L'Avare in the Nouveaux Classiques Larousse series (Paris: Larousse, 1965). On page 32 Lejealle confuses "dix mille écus en or" (1. 4) with "dix mille écus d'or" and thus inflates a sum of about 30,000 livres to 100,000.

5. The anxiety over the instability of the lesser currency is evident in the riots in the Rouergue in 1643 caused by a reduction of the value of the "double" to one denier. See
Monique Degarne, "Etudes sur les soulèvements provinciaux en France avant la Fronde: la révolte du Rouergue en 1643."

6. Louis Gueneau, *Les Conditions de la vie à Nevers (denrées, logements, salaires) à la fin de l'Ancien Régime*, pp. 93–98. See also Georges Mongrédien, *La Vie quotidienne sous Louis XIV*, p. 134. For a broad perspective of the development of money in the theater, see Leo Forkey, *The Role of Money in French Comedy during the Reign of Louis XIV*

7. Jean-Pierre Labatut, "Situation sociale du quartier du Marais pendant la Fronde parlementaire (1648–1649)."


9. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, "La Famille de la mère de Molière."


11. François Bluche, "L'Origine sociale des secrétaires d'état de Louis XIV."


17. Roland Mousnier, "Recherches sur les syndicats d'officiers pendant la Fronde: Trésoriers généraux de France et élus dans la révolution."


21. For an illustration of a somewhat ornate medical gown trimmed with fur, see Max Barsis, *The Common Man through the Ages*, p. 93.
22. Charles Sorel's hero, Francion, discovers the unfortunate consequences of his failure to recognize and respect these robes when he is beaten by a greffier. See the Histoire comique de Francion, in Romanciers du XVIIe siècle, p. 216.

23. Useful works on seventeenth-century clothing include: Camille Piton, Le Costume civil en France du XVIIe au XIXe siècle; Georges G. Toudouze, Le Costume français; and for neckwear, Doriece Colle, Collars, Stocks, Cravats: 1655–1900. Mongrédiens, La Vie quotidienne sous Louis XIV, contains a good presentation of men's clothing on pages 67–83. A very useful text on fashions in the decades prior to Louis XIV's reign is Louise Godard de Donville, Signification de la mode sous Louis XIII.

24. Interesting illustrations are found in Jurg Stockar, Kultur und Kleidung der Barockzeit, pp. 36–102.

25. Correspondence entre Boileau-Despréaux et Brossette, pp. 565–66.


27. See for instance the illustrations provided by John Laurence Carr in Life in France under Louis XIV, pp. 119–44.


29. Ibid., p. 67. Regarding the women's hairstyles attacked by the king, see Carr, Life in France, p. 62.

30. Audiger, La Maison réglée et l'art de diriger la maison, pp. 12–14. For the situation of the Bordeaux président mentioned below, see Ford, Robe and Sword, p. 157. Mongrédiens's La Vie quotidienne sous Louis XIV presents useful information on servants' conditions on pages 56–60, 95, 209, and 222. In the light of such factual information on servants, it is curious to note that they have been analyzed mainly as stock comic figures in Marcel Gutwirth, "Le Comique du serviteur chez Molière"; L. Leon Bernard, "Molière and the Historian of French Society"; and in Jean Emelina's study, Les Valets et les servantes dans le théâtre de Molière. Emelina's more recent work, Les Valets et les servantes dans le théâtre comique en France de 1610 à 1700, gives greater weight to the social significance of this group, as do Millie Gerard Davis, "Masters and Servants in the Plays of Molière," in Molière: Stage and Study; Essays in Honour of W. G. Moore, ed. W. D. Howarth and Merlin Thomas, and J. Van Eerde, "The Historicity of the Valet Role in French Comedy during the Reign of Louis XIV."


32. Ibid., p. 59.

33. Martin D. Lister, A Voyage to Paris in the Year 1698, p. 6. Conditions in the capital are discussed in Mousnier, Paris, pp. 18–32. François Lebrun mentions about 4,000 houses for 30,000 inhabitants to Angers in his Histoire d'Angers; and Charles Carrière estimates 9,000 houses for a population of 75,000 in Marseille in Négociants marseillais, 1:198, which shows that the provincial centers were also crowded.

35. Ibid., pp. 136-39.


41. Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller, *Cent ans*, p. 188.


49. Denis Godefroy, *Abbrégé des trois états du clergé, de la noblesse et du tiers état*, 2:47-48. See also pages 70 and 75 regarding the use of the terms gentilhomme, seigneur, and sieur, as discussed below.


