CHAPTER TWO

FUNDAMENTAL SOCIAL STRUCTURES
IN MOLIERE'S THEATER

Before he created the series of intricate comedies of manners beginning with *L'Ecole des femmes*, Molière had already experimented with status indicators and explored simple hierarchical structures in his farces and in two full-length intrigue comedies, *L'Etourdi* and *Dépit amoureux*. His subsequent perfection of fully-developed networks of interaction in masterpieces from *Le Tartuffe* to *Le Malade imaginaire* did not prevent him from continuing to write a variety of short comedies, *comédie-ballets*, mythological plays, and pastorals, in which the use of social indicators remains limited and the organization relatively uncomplicated. A preliminary understanding of these simple structures is essential to the study of their elaborate counterparts.¹

Since all of Molière's works are set either in France or in three Mediterranean lands, they can be easily grouped according to the societies they depict. Though largely fictive, the non-French societies nevertheless reflect an existing set of mental values assigned to a geographic area. Moreover, plays with common settings exhibit quantitative and qualitative similarities in status indicators and tend to share predominant conditions and interpersonal concerns. A single exception to this pattern is *Dom Juan*, which supposedly unfolds in Sicily but contains numerous contradictory elements that are obviously French; its highly detailed relationships, focused on the problematics of examplar-
ity and unworthiness, call attention to the gulf between it and other plays set beyond the boundaries of French civilization.

The three distinctly different Mediterranean settings include southern Italy for *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, *Le Sicilien*, and *L'Etourdi*; classical Greece for *Psyché*, *Les Amants magnifiques*, *La Princesse d'Elide*, *Amphitryon*, and *Mélicerte*; Spain for *Dom Garçie de Navarre*. We will turn our attention first to the works set in Italy, a land that was for Molière a perpetual fountain of influence and from which he received plots like Beltrame's *L'Inavvertito*, stage techniques of the *comédie italienne*, and two brilliant (albeit temporary) collaborators, the stage designer Vigarani and the operatic composer Lulli.

THE ITALIAN PLAYS

The foreign setting in Molière's Italian plays serves to establish an atmosphere of exoticism, where the group boundaries of seventeenth-century France cease to apply. Sometimes this is expressed in extravagant costumes, as is illustrated in the Bris-sart and Sauvé engraving of *Le Sicilien*, where Hali, Adraste's zany Levantine valet, is shown wearing a strange costume topped with a conical hat. Hali refers to himself as an “esclave” in his first speech (scene 1), and the presence of slavery introduces an entirely new register of class relations. Isidore is described as “une esclave que l'on a affranchie, et dont on veut faire sa femme” (scene 6), but who is still in the power of Dom Pèdre. Four more slaves appear in the eighth scene to perform the Turkish serenade. Finally, there is Climène, the comely slave-girl who, by posing as Adraste's veiled bride and then changing clothes with Isidore, helps the lovers to succeed in their ultimate ruse.

As for the masters, their status as exotic “cavaliers” sometimes fails to correspond to any familiar condition in the French hierarchy. The rank of the young lover, Adraste, is not in question,
for he is repeatedly described as a “gentilhomme français” (scene 10). Yet, Dom Pèdre, Isidore’s former owner, is an ambiguous case. His title seems to suggest that he is a nobleman, but Adraste addresses him as “Seigneur” rather than as “Monsieur.” Dom Pèdre appears to have a great number of servants, since, to chase away some serenaders, he calls: “Francisque, Dominique, Simon, Martin, Pierre, Thomas, Georges, Charles, Barthélemy” (scene 4). He also has a veritable arsenal of weapons. However, when Hali, disguised as Dom Gilles d’Avalos, asks whether it is better to fight a duel with his enemy or to have him assassinated, Dom Pèdre responds immediately, “Assassiner, c’est le plus court chemin” (scene 12), which puts his honor in question. In fact, the status of Italian nobility poses a major problem; there was no clear line of demarcation between aristocrat and bourgeois in Italy, where the merchant-prince was a long-established tradition. Thus, we cannot accuse Dom Pèdre of committing a breach of nobility either in his disdain for the duello or in his appeal to a senator to set the law on Adraste (scenes 18–19).

In Les Fourberies de Scapin, which is set in Naples, we once again find a strong exotic element, centered around the character of Zerbinette, a Gypsy slave-girl (3. 3). Scapin himself takes advantage of the exotic atmosphere to spin his tale of the Turkish galley that carries off Géronte’s son (2. 7). This valet does not consider himself a professional servant, but a “fourbe” who has already had trouble with the law (1. 2). His boldness contrasts sharply with the poltroonery of Sylvestre, who resembles the traditional slave and Hali and always has before him the vision of “un nuage de coups de bâton qui crèvera sur mes épaules” (1. 1).

Another similarity between Le Sicilien and Les Fourberies is the ambiguous status of the leading families. Argante and Géronte appear to be bourgeois: they have gone off together on
“un voyage qui regarde certain commerce où leurs intérêts sont mêlés” (1. 2). Both carry substantial sums of money: Argante has 200 pistoles (2,000 livres) in his purse (2. 6), and Géronte has just received 500 écus in gold (1,500 livres [2. 7]). Both reveal a typical bourgeois attitude of reverence toward the law: the former insists on suing a swashbuckling bretteur (2. 5), and the latter wants to send the police across the high seas to bring back his “kidnapped” son (2. 7). The famous sack scene ridicules Géronte’s faith in a business agreement: he suffers two beatings although he has hired Scapin to protect him in exchange for some old clothes (3. 2). Yet, the sword carried by Géronte’s son, Léandre (1. 3), would be strictly a noble prerogative in the French hierarchy.

The same exotic elements abound in L’Etourdi, a comedy dominated by the schemes of Mascarille. Time and again the wily valet demonstrates his ability to dupe powerful merchants, only to see his efforts wasted by his dim-witted master, Lélie: emperor of scoundrels, he is doomed to serve a dunce. Set in the colorful port of Messina, this play has its slave-girl, Célie (1. 3. 91), who is loved by Lélie and his rival Léandre, as well as by the Egyptian mercenary, Andrès (5. 2. 1709–38).

The role of money is more developed than in the other Italian plays, and the large sums mentioned give some indication of the socioeconomic affiliations of the leading families. Trufaldin, alias Zanobio Ruberti, is a merchant who deals in slaves as collateral, and Anselme has loaned out as much as 2,000 francs (1. 2. 95 and 1. 5. 213–14). Lélie’s father, Pandolphe, would seem to belong to the same category of merchants, for he possesses a large number of promissory and credit notes, which Lélie briefly “inherits” when he claims his father has died (2. 2. 524). Yet, like the other Italian families, Pandolphe’s shows some noble characteristics and his son wears a sword (3. 6. 1208). The fact that the slave girl must be bought, rather than
simply seduced, necessitates much manipulation of money. Lélie's wily valet, Mascarille, tries to steal Anselme's purse while regaling him with stories of how a certain lady loves him (1. 5. 235–36). Anselme recovers his money by duping Lélie with the lie that some of the coins given him were counterfeit (2. 5. 639–49). Mascarille later intends to neutralize the threat of Andrés's carrying off Célie by bribing corrupt police officials to detain the "Egyptian" a while (4. 7. 1669–74). Both foreign money (ducats) and French currency (écus, francs) are mentioned, a technique that mixes the exotic with the familiar in the economic domain.

A similar social tension is found in the beginning of these three Italian plays: the young man wishes to marry below his station with a slave-girl (misalliance) and employs all sorts of ruses to overcome the twin obstacles of raising the purchase price and overcoming parental censure. In L'Etourdi and Les Fourberies de Scapin this "blondin" is the son of merchant aristocrats, and in Le Sicilien he is a foreign nobleman. In the former two plays, the wily valet dominates his master, whereas in the latter the master's boldness and delicacy contrast with his servant's cowardice. The practice of a man marrying a woman from an inferior social group (hypergamie des femmes, as Mousnier calls it) was not uncommon in seventeenth-century France, provided the girl brought with her a sufficient dowry. In these plays, on the other hand, we seem to find an example of extreme and perhaps unacceptable hypergamy, since the women are all penniless slaves. Sometimes this state of slavery allows Molière to subject the heroine to both the authority of a father and the desires of a potential husband, the two roles being combined in Dom Pèdre. Le Sicilien is also an example of how social ambiguity can permit the satire of bourgeois vices (avarice) and aristocratic shortcomings (breach of honor) in the same character.
But the theme of hypergamy is not sustained in the dénouements of these plays. Adraste cuts short his conflict with Dom Pèdre by obtaining approval to marry Isidore through the ruse of disguise. The social disarmament of Dom Pèdre is manifested in the last scene of the play, where the senator (symbol of the laws of society) refuses to interest himself in Dom Pèdre’s complaints. In *Les Fourberies de Scapin* and *L’Étourdi*, hypergamy is obviated when, in the recognition scenes, the slave girls are elevated into the merchant aristocracy, thus making the weddings perfectly proper. At any rate, the quest of the sons for money to marry their chosen brides is not very different from the problem of young men in the French plays, who try to pry *dots* and *douaires* away from tightfisted fathers. The social parallels exist, but the structures of these Mediterranean plays remain undeveloped. Ambiguity of social affiliations, use of money as a plot accessory rather than as a full-fledged device of classification, and the short-circuiting of potential social conflicts by ruse and chance typify the romanesque atmosphere of the Italian plays.

**THE GREEK PLAYS**

The Greek plays present an entirely different social orientation. The bourgeois element is entirely absent and the servant class is reduced to a single major character, usually a clown-servant characterized by ineptitude and cowardice. Indeed, since money and intrigue disappear in these plays, so does the scheming valet of the Italian plays. The atmosphere of the Greek pieces is refined and pastoral; they have been purged of most of the physical activity and concrete, colloquial speech associated with the *roturiers*.

Without going into detail over the genesis of the Greek plays, we must note that, except perhaps for *Amphitryon*, all were written expressly for the court. The haste with which Molière
composed most of them is shown by the fact that several are unfinished: he completed only two acts of Mélisande, one act plus a few scenes of Psyché, and rendered but one full act of La Princesse d'Elide into verse. The extent of this interested patronage is shown by the fact that Molière gives Louis XIV credit for "inventing" the plot of Les Amants magnifiques.\(^7\)

Considering the noble audience for which the Greek plays were intended, one is not surprised that the majority of the characters belong to the high nobility. Amphitryon and Alcmène are aristocrats; Jupiter and Mercury are immortals. At the court of Elis, we find princes from the houses of Messina, Pylos, and Ithaca. The "amants magnifiques," Iphicrate and Timoclès, are visiting princes who are wooing the Princess of Thessaly, and Sostrate is a general in the armies of that state. Psyché's father is a king, and her two earthly suitors, Cléomène and Agénor, are princes—not to speak of her other admirer, the god of love. Even the young Thessalian shepherds of Mélisande have elements of nobility, for we know that Mopse and Lycarsis are not the real parents of Mélisande and Myrtil. The favorite pastimes of these illustrious figures are hunting, warfare, pastoral entertainments, and solemn festivals, like the Pythian Games.\(^8\)

The thematics of love, particularly a refined and somewhat precious variation on the "dépit amoureux," assume primary importance in the Greek plays. Alcmène's dialogues with Jupiter and with her spouse, Myrtil's meeting with Mélisande, Amour's pursuit of Psyché, Eriphile's conversations with Sostrate, and Euryale's verbal sparring with the Princesse d'Elide all belong to this category. The aristocratic characters are extremely concerned with preserving their honor and reputation, fulfilling their duties, and otherwise retaining their "noble" traits in the face of the surrender that Love demands. This exchange is typical of such confrontations:
With a few significant exceptions, the vocabulary of these plays is purged of any words that might be associated with the "gross" world of the common people. The key terms are honor, courage, duty, merit, homage, and esteem. The following passage from a monologue, spoken by the Princesse d'Elide as she reflects on reluctance to fall in love, will serve as an illustration:

De quelle émotion inconnue sens-je mon coeur atteint, et quelle inquiétude secrète est venue troubler tout d’un coup la tranquillité de mon âme? Ne serait-ce point aussi ce qu’on vient de me dire! et, sans en rien savoir, n’aimerais-je point ce jeune prince? Ah! si cela était, je serais personne à me désespérer; mais il est impossible que cela soit, et je vois bien que je ne puis pas l’aimer. Quoi? je serais capable de cette lâcheté! J’ai vu toute la terre à mes pieds avec la plus grande insensibilité du monde; les respects, les hommages et les soumissions n’ont jamais pu toucher mon âme, et la fierté et le dédain en auraient triomphé! J’ai méprisé tous ceux qui m’ont aimée, et j’aimerais le seul qui me méprise! [La Princesse d’Elide, 4. 6]

Social conflict does not play an important role in the ideal courts of the Greek plays: commoners like Moron are only tolerated at the pleasure of the aristocrats. The nobles strive to outdo each other in appearing more purely aristocratic, honorable,
and refined. One might object that Sostrate, the general in *Les Amants magnifiques*, is not precisely the equal of his rivals, Iphicrate and Timoclès, who are princes. It is not, however, a conflict of groups, but at best a dispute of rank within the same group. An important social precept held that, despite different degrees of power attached to different fiefs, all nobles were of equally honorable birth. Thus, all three men are addressed with identical respect by their inferiors and enjoy the same honors from fellow princes. Clitidas makes this explicit when he tells Sostrate:

> Vous savez que votre présence ne gâte jamais rien, et que vous n'êtes point de trop, en quelque lieu que vous soyez. Votre visage est bien venu partout, et il n'a garde d'être de ces visages disgraciés qui ne sont jamais bien reçus des regards souverains. Vous êtes également bien auprès des deux princesses; et la mère et la fille vous font assez connaître l'estime qu'elles font de vous. [1. 1]

In addition, Sostrate is universally known as a man of valor, who has conquered Brennus and the Gauls. This disproportionate merit contrasts with the rather scurrilous behavior of the two princes (4. 3) who attempt to dupe the young princess by bribing an astrologer to arrange a convenient miracle in favor of their causes. If this conduct falls short of dérégance de noblesse, it nevertheless tends to diminish their status, for their behavior does not conform rigorously to the code of honor. The gap is further reduced when Sostrate bravely saves Aristione from a wild boar (5. 1). Yet, the most important factor in legitimizing Sostrate’s marriage to Eriphile is the presence of a higher authority, for the princess and her mother naïvely believe that Venus has decreed Eriphile should marry the man who saves her life. The code of absolutism that prevailed in the France of Louis XIV implied that any matter might be decided by appeal to a transcendent power, which was epitomized by
the divine king, the ultimate commander who might elevate the children of his mistress or his ministers or disgrace Fouquet or Catinat. Thus, as we shall see again in Tartuffe and in Dom Juan, the deus ex machina had a special relevance to Molière's audience.

The noble society of the Greek plays is not only homogeneous; it is stifling and narrow-minded—a perfect example of social closure in action. Comic opportunities do not flourish in such an environment. Realizing this, Molière sought to use special generic terms to classify these special works. La Princesse d'Elide is called a "comédie galante," Mélicerte is a "comédie pastorale héroique," Psyché a "tragi-comédie." Nevertheless, this author who had no difficulty creating galant roles for his troupe could not bring himself to play a noncomic role. In each play he portrayed a clown-valet, the only representative of the nonaristocratic world: Moron, Clitidas, Lycarsis, Sosie, Zéphyre. Far from initiating class conflicts, these clown-valets are obsequious and faithful. Like Zéphyre, they admire authority and love to follow and to be protected: "En tout vous êtes un grand maître: C'est ici que je le connois" (Psyché, 3. 1. 946–47).

The valet-clowns are in a unique social position. Since there is no intrigue of the type one finds in the Italian plays, no exchange of money, no possibility for a wily servant to assert his superiority to a foolish master, the mainstay of traditional comic potential is missing. Perhaps the only source left to Molière is to exploit the stereotypical cowardice of the servant. Not only does he welcome the protection of the nobles, but he is also afraid to fend for himself. Consider Clitidas's conduct when a boar attacks Aristione:

Le sanglier, mal morigine, s'est impertinemment détourné contre nous; nous étions là deux ou trois misérables qui avons pâli de frayeur; chacun gagnait son arbre, et la Princesse sans défense
Moron, the fool in *La Princesse d'Elide*, reveals his poltroon's spirit in the first lines he speaks: “Au secours! sauvez-moi de la bête cruelle.” (1. 2. 162) He reveals that he has dropped his arms and fled, leaving a woman to fight the boar that was chasing him. Later, when he addresses a menacing bear as he would a duke, he explicitly connects his cowardice to his conception of his own inferiority:

Ah! Monsieur l'ours, je suis votre serviteur de tout mon coeur. De grâce, épargnez-moi. Je vous assure que je ne vauz rien du tout à manger, je n'ai que la peau et les os, et je vois de certaines gens là-bas qui seraient bien mieux votre affaire. . . . Monseigneur, tout doux, s'il vous plaît. . . . Ah! Monseigneur, que Votre Altesse est jolie et bien faite! [Deuxième Intermède, scene 2]

The nobility of the court, watching the Greek plays, could only be pleased to see the contrast between the fright of the *roturiers* and the quintessential courage of their own estate. By dividing personality characteristics into two distinct groups and giving the nobility only the positive ones, Molière drew upon a social model that flattered the vanity of his prospective audience.

The remaining foreign play, *Dom Garcie de Navarre*, has always been considered a curious anomaly. The only outstanding failure among Molière's works, it is also one of the few plays where Molière himself played the role of a noble. Indeed, all the characters in *Dom Garcie de Navarre* belong to the aristocracy. Even the confidants, Dom Alvar and Dom Lope, possess noble titles. The play lacks even the limited *roturier* presence (and the humor) that the valet-clown furnishes in the Greek plays.

Dom Garcie is an ambiguous character, always treading the
thin line between pathos and bathos. Molière does not seem to have intended for the jealous prince to be totally ridiculous, since he enjoys the esteem of the wise and courtly Don Elvire (1.1.11–15). Yet, this fickle character changes his mood much too quickly after seeing two apparently incriminating letters (1.3.331–32 and 2.4.476–515), after finding his beloved with Dom Sylve (3.3.996–69), and after observing her in the arms of a “man,” who is really Done Ignes in disguise (4.7.1238–41). Such conduct can only lead us to lower our opinion of the prince and to ask ourselves exactly what it is that Elvire finds in him to admire. His alternate outbursts of temper and begging for forgiveness conflict certainly with the spirit, if not the letter, of the code of noble behavior.

Dom Garcie is juxtaposed to two other unworthy noblemen: the usurping tyrant Mauregat, who had brutally imprisoned Done Elvire, and Dom Lope, who chooses to play the role of evil parasite to Dom Garcie because of unrequited love for Elise, Elvire’s confidante. Mauregat stands at one end of the spectrum, for he commits the supreme crime of self-pride by acts of lèse-majesté against the royal family. On the contrary, Dom Lope has such a low opinion of his own gloire that he devotes his life to bad service of his liege lord, as he deliberately thwarts Dom Garcie’s courtship of the princess and exacerbates his self-destructive tendencies.

Despite his generous offer of military aid to his beloved Elvire, Dom Garcie shares some aspects with the negative exempla of both Mauregat and Dom Lope. His passion for Elvire resembles Mauregat’s usurpation in that it is based on an imperative of power that fails to consider the rights of others.11 In lines that will be echoed in Le Misanthrope (4.3.1422–32), he reveals this egotistical recklessness:

Oui, tout mon coeur voudrait montrer aux yeux de tous
Qu’il ne regarde en vous autre chose que vous;
No wonder the princess remarks, “Prince, de vos soupçons la tyrannie est grande” (1. 3. 283). Dom Garcie is similar to Dom Lope in his willingness to assume the worst about others and about himself—a gnawing distrust that fuels his jealousy and impels him to form suicidal thoughts. Vacillating wildly between the extreme self-pride of Mauregat and the cynicism and abjection of Dom Lope, Dom Garcie reveals a schizophrenic pattern of behavior that violates the aristocratic ideals of honor and self-respect.

There has been much debate about the failure of this play. Antoine Adam lists several possibilities: “Il est fort possible que le goût du public ait été blessé surtout par le jeu médiocre d’une troupe mieux faite pour jouer la farce que pour faire valoir les romanesques beautés d’une tragédie galante. . . . On peut imaginer également que Molière déplut parce que les Parisiens avaient pris l’habitude de l’applaudir en Mascarille ou en Sganarelle, et ne le reconnaissaient plus en prince chimérique.”12 There may be another, equally fundamental reason for the setback. The comic element in the predominantly aristocratic Greek plays resided in the discrepancy of class traits favorable to the nobility; the social closure was complete but group interaction and, to a limited extent, interdependence was upheld, for the ridiculous and cowardly servant was admitted as a contrapunctal factor to enhance the virtues of the well-born. In Dom
Garcie de Navarre, on the other hand, hidalgo society is totally closed off. Dom Garcie's character "infects" the nobility with vices that were reserved for the servants of the ideal Greek world. His jealous flaws, both petty and serious, challenge the essential superiority of his class; but they cannot be erased, for he is a prince and, in all other aspects, a virtuous one!

THE FRENCH PLAYS: THE BOURGEOISIE

In many of the French plays, Molière announces the setting at the very beginning of the text. We learn that Sganarelle, L'Ecole des maris, L'Amour médecin, and Monsieur de Pourceaugnac take place in Paris, L'Impromptu de Versailles in the "salle de comédie" of the palace, and La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas in Angoulême. These indications are supported by numerous textual allusions. In some of the other plays, we must rely entirely on allusions to furnish the setting. At the beginning of Les Fâcheux, Eraste recounts his afternoon with a ridiculous marquis, including an invitation to take a ride in the Cours la Reine, one of Paris's most famous meeting places: "Allons au Cours faire voir ma galèche" (scene 1, 76). La Jalousie du Barbouillé contains a reference to two villages near Paris: "Qu'il vienne de Villejuif ou d'Aubervilliers, je ne m'en soucie guère" (scene 2). In Les Précieuses ridicules, Mascarille tells the porters of his sedan chair to return to take him to the Louvre (scene 7). The fact that Le Mariage forcé is set in France is confirmed during Sganarelle's conversation with the philosopher Pancrace (scene 4). Elise, the wise lady of La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes, speaks of the Louvre and the place Maubert (scene 1). The "cautère royal," a type of iron used to brand French criminals, is mentioned by Sganarelle in Le Médecin volant (scene 14). Jacqueline, the voluptuous nursemaid who attracts Sganarelle in Le Médecin malgré lui, speaks in her native dialect of "toutes les rentes de la Biauce" (2. 1). The only play which
seems to have no clear indication of the setting is Dépit amoureux, which is very similar to an Italian play, L'Etourdi, but which we shall treat with the French works, as it offers some pertinent similarities.

The shorter French plays contain, on the whole, many more indicators of status than do the foreign plays. The sums of money, styles of dress, and other details serve not solely as pretexts for the intrigue but also to establish rather precise social identities for many of the characters. However, conflict between groups, which seems at first glance to play an important role in these plays, is in fact almost completely absent. This applies to both types of French plays: the bourgeois group (La Jalousie du Barbouillé, Le Médecin volant, Dépit amoureux, Les Précieuses ridicules, Sganarelle, L'Ecole des maris, Le Mariage forcé, L'Amour médecin, Le Médecin malgré lui, and Monsieur de Pourceaugnac) and the aristocratic group (Les Fâcheux, La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes, L'Impromptu de Versailles, and La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas).

To demonstrate the prevailing social closure in the former group, let us consider Les Précieuses ridicules. In the first scene, Molière establishes the social identity of two suitors, La Grange and Du Croisy, who address each other with the upwardly mobile bourgeois title “Seigneur,” and are rejected by the pair of précieuses. Commoners do not please these affected girls, who, like Mascarille, are guilty of trying to “faire l'homme de condition” (scene 1). They dismiss proposals of marriage as “marchand” (scene 4), but their own efforts to transform themselves into aristocrats by means of cosmetics are doomed to failure. Indeed, the ridiculous profusion of mouches they wear in the Brissart and Sauvé engraving clearly labels them as counterfeits. The bourgeois status of La Grange and Du Croisy is confirmed when Gorgibus, described in the dramatis personae as a bourgeois, addresses them simply as “vous” (scene 2). He
later explains that "je connais leurs familles et leurs biens" (scene 4), and the latter element would not be necessary, we presume, if they were nobles. As for old Gorgibus himself, his speech suggests that he is a businessman or merchant, for he repeatedly refers to the courtship as "affaires" (scenes 2, 16). Critizing the way his daughter and niece use expensive cosmetics, he declares that "quatre valets vivraient tous les jours des pieds de mouton qu'elles emplioient" (scene 3), a strictly economic evaluation. His language is that of the people, for he calls the girls "pendardes" and uses such quaint expressions as "se graisser le museau," 'balivernes," and "se mettre dans de beaux draps blancs" (scenes 4, 16). Gorgibus is literate and rich enough to have paid for an education for Cathos and Magdelon, with the result that they have been spoiled by the elevated notions of courtly novels such as *Le Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie*.

Clothing plays the central role in the social aspirations of all the "counterfeit" characters. The précieuses scorn La Grange and Du Croisy because they do not meet the superficial standard of foppishness that they associate with nobility:

Venir en visite amoureuse avec une jambe toute unie, un chapeau désarmé de plumes, une tête irrégulière en cheveux, et un habit qui souffre une indigence de rubans! . . . Mon Dieu, quels amants sont-ce là! Quelle frugalité d'adjustement. . . . J'ai remarqué encore que leurs rabats ne sont pas de la bonne faiseuse, et qu'il s'en faut plus d'un grand demi-pied que leurs hauts-de-chausses ne soient assez larges. [Scene 4]

The proper costume according to Cathos would thus be large *canons*, a hat with many plumes, a large wig, lots of ribbons, a large *rabat*, and a *rhingrave*. This is exactly the way Mascarille is dressed when he appears disguised as the marquis, as shown in the Brissart and Sauvé engraving and as described in the text. This exaggerated attire contrasts with the more sober clothing of
such gentlemen as Dom Garcie, Adraste of Le Sicilien, and Valère of L’Avare. It stresses the fact that Mascarille does not show the discretely elegant taste of a true aristocrat, and immediately casts doubt on his so-called nobility. Les Précieuses ridicules was, in fact, one of a long series of plays by Molière and his contemporaries that lambasted those whom the eminent social theorist Charles Loyseau called “nos modernes port-épées qui n’ayans point de seigneurie dont ils puissent prendre le nom, ajoutent seulement un de ou du devant celui de leurs pères.”

Mascarille’s vulgar behavior is announced by the manner of his entrance: he makes the porters carry his sedan-chair into the salon of Gorgibus’s house (scene 7)! For a marquis to appear in a rented chair is bad enough, but to argue over the fare with the porters and then to back down when threatened with a beating constitutes an appalling breach of propriety. To compound their unworthiness, Mascarille and Jodelet show that they have no knowledge of the essence of nobility, military skill; Jodelet ingenuously recounts, “La première fois que nous nous vimes, il commandait un régiment de cavalerie sur les galères de Malte” (scene 11). Rather than a commander, Mascarille is more like the convict rowers who propelled those sleek vessels, which were, of course, incapable of carrying horses! Yet, these would-be generals are actually subject to a master’s commands, an irony that is underscored when Mascarille, after calling out the names of nine imaginary lackeys, observes, “Je ne pense pas qu’il y ait gentilhomme en France plus mal servi que moi” (scene 11).

Under orders from their masters, the valets undertake an imposition so outrageous that they would never have seriously attempted it in a discerning environment. More than anyone else, they are stunned by the success of their deception and by the fact that the giddy girls have even less understanding of conditions than they do.

By stressing the fictitious nature of aspiration to nobility on
the part of the valets and the précieuses, the author makes it clear that there is no group conflict in the play. The only tension is between commoners who acknowledge their station and those who harbor wild notions of belonging to another social level. It is true that the criticism of false nobles applies by extension to those who are masquerading as nobles in the real world, but one must observe that the punishment here comes from within the bourgeois class itself, as the suitors strip and beat their valets, thus humiliating the snobbish women who had accepted the fakes as nobles.

A variation on the same theme of unreasonable aspirations by commoners is found in Monsieur de Pourceaugnac. In this case the false noble is a Limousin, and his disguise is not just a joke but a way of life. Like Mascarille, Pourceaugnac calls attention to his extravagant clothes from the beginning of the action:

MONSIEUR DE POURCEAUGNAC: Pour moi, j’ai voulu me mettre à la mode de la cour pour la campagne.
SBRIGANI: Ma foi! cela vous va mieux qu’à tous nos courtisans.
MONSIEUR DE POURCEAUGNAC: C’est ce que m’a dit mon tailleur: l’habit est propre et riche, et il fera du bruit ici. [1. 3]

This costume is described in the inventory made after Molière’s death as “un haut-de-chausses de damas rouge, garni de dentelle, un justaucorps de velours bleu garni d’or faux, un ceinturon à frange, un chapeau gris orné d’une plume verte.” The clash of red, blue, gray, and green naturally illustrates the sarcasm of Sbrigani’s comment on the clothes. The Brissart and Sauvé engraving, which shows Pourceaugnac pursued by the apothecaries, faithfully renders the excessive amount of lace. This gaudy outfit, with its trim of false gold, contrary to summertuary laws, clearly associates the Limousin with ridiculous mar-
quis and social usurpers. The illicit background of Pourceaugnac is reinforced by the fact that Limoges was a place of exile for prominent criminals, such as Fouquet’s wife.  

Nérine gives us an important indication of the wealth of this suitor when she notes that he has three or four thousand écus (9,000–12,000 livres) more than Eraste (1. 1). Eraste himself later quotes a figure of four to five thousand, which would push the difference in wealth alone to around 15,000 livres. We may estimate on the basis of these figures that Pourceaugnac’s fortune could easily exceed 30,000 livres, placing him above the level of all but the richest tradesmen.

We are also given an idea of the total wealth of Oronte, the father of the bride. The “Flemish merchant” (Sbrigani in disguise) characterizes him as being “riche beaucoup grandement” (2. 3). In addition, Oronte agrees, in the last scene of the play, to raise Julie’s dowry by 10,000 écus (30,000 livres). Although this falls short of the half-million livres that the richest burgher might leave his daughter, it still places him in the middle to upper reaches of the class.

In the third scene of the play, Pourceaugnac introduces himself as “gentilhomme limousin”; but he qualifies this by adding that he has studied law, which a born gentleman would scarcely do, for it would constitute a derogation of nobility. Thus, he is possibly an anobli, but it remains for us to determine his exact status. It seems unlikely that he could have been ennobled directly by holding office, for the Limoges area had no sovereign courts. He may have bought letters of nobility or he may simply be usurping the title and dress and pretending to own a seigneurie. His family contains other lawyers and officers: a consul, an assessor and an élu (1. 3). Through these offices the family would already have acquired the much-sought-after exemption from the taille, which would place them in the same
tax category as the real aristocracy. Sbrigani voices the opinion that the legal background and the pretended noblesse d'épée are incompatible:

MONSIEUR DE POURCEAUGNAC: ... Quand il y aurait information, adjournement, décret, et jugement obtenu par surprise, défaut et contumace, j'ai la voie de conflit de juridiction, pour temporiser, et venir aux moyens de nullité qui seront dans les procédures.

SBRIGANI: Voilà en parler dans tous les termes, et l'on voit bien, Monsieur, que vous êtes du métier.

MONSIEUR DE POURCEAUGNAC: Moi, point du tout: je suis gentilhomme.

SBRIGANI: Il faut bien, pour parler ainsi, que vous ayez étudié la pratique.

MONSIEUR DE POURCEAUGNAC: Point, ce n'est que le sens commun qui me fait juger que je serai toujours reçu à mes faits justificatifs, et qu'on ne me saurait condamner sur une simple accusation, sans un récolement et confrontation avec mes parties.

SBRIGANI: En voilà du plus fin encore.

MONSIEUR DE POURCEAUGNAC: Ces mots-là viennent sans que je les sache.

SBRIGANI: Il me semble que le sens commun d'un gentilhomme peut bien aller à concevoir ce qui est du droit et de l'ordre de la justice, mais non pas à savoir les vrais termes de la chicane. [2. 10]

Other unworthy acts serve to indicate that Pourceaugnac does not behave as a noble truly should. He allows himself to be struck by a gentleman of Périgueux without responding (1. 4). Furthermore, he comes all the way to Paris in a common stage coach (1. 1). The author returns to the question of dérogeance posed by Monsieur de Pourceaugnac's legal training and makes explicit the upstart's concern with proofs of nobility. After being told by consulting attorneys that "la polygamie est un cas pendable" (2. 11), he moans: "Ce n'est pas tant la peur de la mort qui me fait fuir, que de ce qu'il est fâcheux à un gen-
tilhomme d’être pendu, et qu’une preuve comme celle-là ferait tort à nos titres de noblesse” (3. 2). Treatises on nobility do in fact support the Limousin’s fears: certain infamous penalties could entail dérogeance.21

In Monsieur de Pourceaugnac, it is once again the bourgeois who take it upon themselves to put the false noble back in his place. To this end, they employ professional rogues like Nérine and Sbrigani, who have spent their entire lives in fraud and illicit activities (1. 2).22 They also engage all the resources of their own order to undo the Limousin: the doctors and apothecaries who are promised 560 livres if they “cure” the visitor, the exempt and his men who fleece him of the 200 livres in his purse, the suisses, the merchant who destroys his credit with Oronte, and the lawyers who give him false counsel. This connivance has led such eminent critics as Jules Brody to remark that Molière seems immoral in the play, a perception that is transcended by Pourceaugnac’s usurpation and by the homogamous imperative at work in the text.23

La Jalousie du Barbouillé is, in contrast, a brief farce, but Molière gives enough information on the background of the characters for us to include it among the bourgeois plays. Le Barbouillé, although a home-owner and family man (scene 8), squanders his money at the cabaret while his wife indulges in social frivolities (scene 1). In business-like fashion, he offers a philosopher good money in exchange for advice on his marital problems. Yet, his scholarly neighbor spurns the money in a long tirade:

Sache, mon ami, que quand tu me donnerais une bonne bourse pleine de pistolets, et que cette bourse serait dans une riche boîte, cette boîte dans un étui précieux, cet étui dans un coffret admirable . . . que je me soucierais aussi peu de ton argent et de toi que de cela. [Scene 2]
The conflict between the imbibing husband and the pleasure-seeking wife, resulting in the burlesque "lock-out" scene, remains on a bourgeois level, although Molière will transform the situation in *George Dandin* to reflect the incompatibility of *bobereaux* and *laboureurs*.

*Le Médecin volant*, another farce, contains several indicators of bourgeois status. Gorgibus, the father of Lucile, is rich enough to have a valet, Gros-René, and a fine house with a garden and a nearby summer house (scene 1). Valère, his child's secret suitor, also has a valet, Sganarelle, and is willing to pay 100 livres for him to impersonate a doctor (scene 2). When Gorgibus offers Sganarelle more money in order to cure his daughter, the valet tacitly accepts it (scene 8). The fact that Gorgibus has a lawyer for a friend suggests further that he is an important man in the community, and he finally agrees to take Valère as a son-in-law in view of his family's money and prestige (scene 16).

Wealth is relegated to a secondary role in *Dépit amoureux*, where inconclusive indicators recall the merchant-prince world of Italian plays and also give a glimpse of peasant life. The three main families in the plot (those of Albert, Ascagne, and Polidore) all seem to have a certain amount of riches and power. Both young men, Valère and Eraste, have valets, and even Ascagne has a follower in the person of Frosine. Dorothée takes on the Ascagne disguise in order to retain control over an inheritance that otherwise would have been lost (2. 1. 359–62). Both Lucile and Valère also stand to inherit fortunes, for their fathers are powerful men whose wealth can cause problems for their enemies, as we learn in the scene where they reach a marriage settlement through misunderstanding, only to fall out again when each knows the whole truth (3. 4. 832–33). A humorous sidelight is provided in the love affair of Gros-René and
Marinette, who at one point return each other’s meager gifts during a lovers’ spat:

Marinette
Voilà ton demi-cent d’épingles de Paris,  
Que tu me donnas hier avec tant de fanfare.  

Gros-René
Tiens encor ton couteau; la pièce est riche et rare:  
Il te coûta six blancs lorsque tu m’en fis don.

[4. 4. 1427–31]

Molière could not have found a funnier way of showing that the love of the young commoners is based on economic reciprocity and homogamy, whether the economic register be 30 sous or 30,000 livres.

Yet, the most prominent character of the shorter French plays, the bourgeois Sganarelle, is always as opposed to this reciprocity as one can be. Molière certainly seems to have discovered a whole new social dimension when he conceived of this character, who reappears in different forms in five plays: Sganarelle, L’Ecole des maris, Le Mariage forcé, L’Amour médecin, and Le Médecin malgré lui. Each time he is shown in a different context. In Sganarelle, he is a husband who fears that his wife may be unfaithful; in L’Ecole des maris, a guardian who has designs on his ward; and in L’Amour médecin, the father of a marriageable girl who is trying to arrange the best possible match. In Le Médecin malgré lui, he appears as a worthless père de famille and a drunkard, who is put in the unique position of being able to flirt with buxom Jacqueline and to escape from shrewish Martine, if only for a while; Le Mariage forcé, on the other hand, portrays him as an aging bachelor who stumbles
into an expensive and humiliating union, a ready-made cuckold.

Economically, Sganarelle’s status varies considerably from play to play. He is presented in Sganarelle as a bourgeois, but probably not a rich one, since his wife treasures Lélie’s locket as something beyond their means (1. 6. 150). The fact that he appears in the twenty-first scene wearing an old suit of armor may provide a clue. The strange apparel, which Sganarelle calls “un habillement / Que j’ai pris pour la pluie” (scene 21, 519–20), connects him with one of the municipal guards formed by the guilds since medieval times (and through the Wars of Religion) to protect French cities in time of strife. In this case, Sganarelle would belong to one of the artisanal métiers. His language confirms this, since he uses many colloquialisms (“voilà vraiment un beau venez-y-voir,” scene 6, 200), threatens to break his wife’s neck, and insults her with names like “Madame la carogne.”

In L’Ecole des maris, Sganarelle and his brother Ariste are comfortably rich bourgeois, for the latter mentions that he has 12,000 livres in rent at his disposal, just for the dowry of his ward, Léonor (1. 2. 201). Nevertheless, Sganarelle wants his wife to dress and live à la petite bourgeoise:

Que d’une serge honnête elle ait son vêtement,
Et ne porte le noir qu’aux bons jours seulement,
Qu’enfermée au logis, en personne bien sage,
Elle s’applique toute aux choses du ménage,
A recoudre mon linge aux heures de loisir.

[1. 2. 117–21]

Ariste gives his fiancée servants and money to spend for clothes (1. 2. 112 and 193), but Sganarelle does not have a single ser-
vant in his house (1. 4. 342)! This avarice is all the more aston­
ishing because Sganarelle owns land in the country: he talks of
sending young Isabelle back to “revoir nos choux et nos din­
dons” (1. 2. 262).

Le Mariage forcé once again portrays Sganarelle as a man of
substantial bourgeois standing, who has a house and servants, as
well as extensive financial enterprises (scene 1). The fact that he
has lived in Rome, England, and Holland suggests that he may
be involved in international commerce or banking. Géronimo
informs us that he can afford to buy jewelry, a luxury item
(scene 3). Sganarelle himself says he possesses neither carriage
nor chaise and uses this as evidence of his fitness.

L'Amour médecin shows Sganarelle on equal terms with his
prosperous neighbors, Josse and Guillaume, who represent two
powerful corporations, the goldsmiths and the tapissiers. Their
solicitations in the first scene prove that Sganarelle can afford
their expensive wares. (Molière himself owned tapestries valued
at over 900 livres.)27 Sganarelle also offers to buy his daughter a
dress and a cabinet from the fair, and to pay for clavichord
lessons (1. 2). However, he reveals that his reluctance to let her
marry stems in part from his unwillingness to provide dowry
money:

A-t-on jamais rien vu de plus tyrannique que cette coutume où l’on
veut assujettir les pères? rien de plus impertinent et de plus ridicule
que d’amonner du bien avec de grands travaux, et élever une fille
avec beaucoup de soin et de tendresse, pour se dépouiller de l’un et
de l’autre entre les mains d’un homme qui ne nous touche en rien?
[1. 5]

Unable to accept the positive and necessary changes in his fam­
ily, Sganarelle fails to see their advantages—further prolonga­
tion of his lineage and enhanced strength in the community
through the marriage alliance. When it finally comes to marrying off the girl, Sganarelle gives her 20,000 écus (60,000 livres), thinking at the moment it is a sham ceremony (3. 7).

The riches of Sganarelle are considerably reduced, however, in Le Médecin malgré lui, where his occupation as woodcutter is not even a real métier. Such a humble business is all the more puzzling, since he has some education. Yet, he is a drunkard who has sold all his wife’s furniture (he must have made a rather extraordinary marriage!) down to the bed they slept on (1. 1).

The distinctive mark of the bourgeois Sganarelle is his peculiar costume, which always contains anachronistic elements. The indispensable item is the fraise, an archaic piece of neckwear. The odd yellow and green costume he wears in Le Médecin malgré lui (doubtless something he would have collected at the friperie) leads Lucas to exclaim, in his rustic dialect: “Un habit jaune et vart! C’est donc le médecin des paroquets?” (1. 4). In order to justify to Ariste the somewhat old-fashioned clothes he favors, the protagonist mocks the new-fangled fashions of the foppish marquis in L’Ecole des maris:

Ne voudriez-vous point, dis-je, sur ces matières,
De vos jeunes muguets m’inspirer les manières?
M’obliger à porter de ces petits chapeaux
Qui laissent éventer leurs débiles cerveaux,
Et de ces blonds cheveux, de qui la vaste enflure
Des visages humains offusque la figure?
De ces petits pourpoints sous les bras se perdant,
Et de ces grands collets jusqu’au nombril pendants?
De ces manches qu’à table on voit tâter les sauces,
Et de ces cotillons appelés hauts-de-chausses?
De ces souliers mignons, de rubans revêtus,
Qui vous font ressembler à des pigeons pattus?
Et de ces grands canons, où, comme en des entraves,
On met tous les matins ses deux jambes esclaves,
Does Sganarelle's obsolete costume associate him with some past ideology, in conflict with current bourgeois ideas? If so, it would be difficult to determine exactly what he speaks for. What is certain is that his clothes reveal two essential aspects of his character: a reluctance to spend accumulated wealth and a streak of stubborn, extreme nonconformity. His attack on the fashions of court marquis, while quite accurate, does nothing to explain why Sganarelle himself cannot dress like a reasonable member of his own bourgeois group.

Sganarelle's presence focuses the public's attention on the definition of acceptable bourgeois behavior. Molière takes care to set the problem in relief by underscoring the diversity of function and wealth within the class as a whole. Sganarelle must often deal with men who, though they are also *roturiers*, seem to have more money and power than he does; such is the case with Gorgibus and Géronte, the fathers in *Sganarelle* and *Le Médecin malgré lui*, and with Valère, the young suitor who outwits Sganarelle in *L'Ecole des maris*. In the latter play, there even appear to be some socioprofessional differences between Sganarelle and his brother Ariste. Molière was certainly familiar with the intricacies of family business alliances, since, as Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller has shown, his mother's family comprised people involved in the trade of books, wine, gold, and bonnets, as well as shoemakers, barber-surgeons, doctors, writers, and officers. All the Sganarelle plays portray a double consciousness of definition of roles within the family and within the bourgeois world.

As a bourgeois, Sganarelle is particularly sensitive to the powerful mediating role played by the legal and liberal professions.
When, under duress, he usurps the status of a doctor in *Le Médecin malgré lui*, he exploits the opportunity to enrich himself not only at the expense of Géronte but also at the expense of poor peasants, Perrin and Thibaut, who give him their savings of two écus in payment for a useless remedy (3. 2). In *L'Amour médecin* Sganarelle becomes the victim of the same profession. Tomès, Des Fonandres, Macroton, and Bahys force Sganarelle to pay them in advance, and then give him only contradictory, worthless advice: "Il vaut mieux mourir selon les règles que de réchapper contre les règles" (2. 5). Sganarelle then squanders thirty sous on a bottle of worthless orviétan. Disguised as a doctor and surrounded by an aura of medical secrecy, Clitandre is able to visit his beloved Lucinde ("Un médecin a cent choses à demander qu'il n'est pas honnête qu'un homme entende" [3. 6]) and to trick him into permitting Lucinde's marriage. Ironically, Sganarelle insists on signing the marriage contract before a notary, thus sealing his fate through the most respected of bourgeois institutions.  

Nowhere is the institutional framework of justice more important than in *L'Ecole des maris*. As the legal tuteur of Isabelle, Sganarelle is bound by obligations so solemn that the eminent jurist Domat used the tutelle as a prime example of "involuntary engagement:" "Celui qui est appelé à une tutelle est obligé, indépendamment de volonté, à tenir lieu de père à l'orphelin qu'on met sous sa charge." Nevertheless, Sganarelle tries to circumvent the spirit and letter of the law by denying his ward access to her fortune or to the pleasures of life and by plotting to marry her himself, which smacks of incest, given his paternal duties. His contempt for the concerns of his lineage is apparent in his treatment of his brother, Ariste, whose honor, he says, is not worth twenty écus (3. 2). The same cynical distrust is extended to the police commissioner and the notary, representatives of bourgeois norms whom he suspects of being
susceptible to bribes, and tells, "Ne vous laissez pas graisser la patte, au moins" (3. 4). The duplicity of this attitude is evident to everyone except Sganarelle, who actually expects the officials to sanction the marriage he thinks he has forced between Ariste's ward, Léonor, and Isabelle's suitor, Valère. In fact, they serve as witnesses to Sganarelle's consent for Isabelle to marry Valère, as the tutor falls victim to his own machinations. Justice thus serves ironically to ensure the triumph of bourgeois conduct, as manifested in the reasonable marriages of Ariste with Léonor and of Valère with Isabelle (reasonable, because they are the result of mutual choice based on a clear appreciation of values, rather than simply on force or deception).

In many respects Le Mariage forcé furnishes a study in counterpoint to L'Ecole des maris, for although the latter builds toward a marriage involving the good faith of both partners, the former culminates in just the opposite. That Sganarelle is acting in selfish bad faith is shown in his first speech, when he bids his servants to accept immediately any incoming funds, but to delay indefinitely paying any bills that should arrive (1. 1). He goes on to explain to Géronimo that his desire to marry stems not from the willingness to assume conjugal and paternal responsibilities but from the pleasure he will receive from the presence of a mate and offspring. His in-laws likewise betray their falsehood as soon as they appear on stage. Alcantor is referred to as "seigneur," the same title shared by Sganarelle and Géronimo, yet his son "se mêle de porter l'épée" and his daughter wears a dress with a long train. These two aspects, the prerogatives of a chevalier and a duchess, reveal that Alcantor's children are usurping a higher station than that to which they are entitled. After consulting Géronimo, fortune-tellers, and a magician, and after hearing Dorimène's description of how she intends to live with him, Sganarelle attempts to withdraw from the commitment he had made to the Alcantor clan; but having
chosen to ally himself with would-be nobles and having refused the challenge or *cartel* offered him by Alcidas, he is beaten into submission. This display of violence, even though perpetrated by a false noble, denotes Sganarelle's acceptance of the role of victim, which is further underlined in the final ballet entries that depict a *charivari* and his bride’s flirtations.

The spirit of the shorter French bourgeois plays, particularly those that feature Sganarelle, is thus one of experimentation with the relationships between nonconformist characters and the behavioral norms of their group. It is when Sganarelle tries to defy or manipulate the most solemn codes, such as those dealing with marriage or other legal obligations, that he is portrayed in the most pathetic and ignorant manner. His lesser frauds, such as the medical trickery in *Le Médecin malgré lui*, appear to go unpunished, partly because they are not completely of his doing and partly because his victims are no worse off than they would have been if they were dealing with “legitimate” doctors. On a small scale, Sganarelle’s non-reciprocity and bad faith in such plays as *L’Ecole des maris* and *Le Mariage forcé* prefigures more detailed analyses of the type found in *L’Ecole des femmes* and *George Dandin*.

**THE FRENCH PLAYS: THE ARISTOCRACY**

In contrast to the intrabourgeois orientation of the preceding plays, Molière’s four remaining short works reveal a predominantly aristocratic milieu. Whether this society is close to the court, as in *Les Fâcheux*, *La Critique de l’Ecole des femmes* and *L’Impromptu de Versailles*, or situated in a provincial city, as in *La Comtesse d’Escarbagnas*, it contains two types of nobles: those who embody all the positive traits of the class (honor, elegance, wit, discretion, good judgment) and those who by their foolishness cast a bad light upon the order, but who are
nevertheless tolerated in aristocratic circles—at least, temporarily.

Eraste, the protagonist of *Les Fâcheux*, belongs to the former group. In recounting his afternoon with the fop, he reveals that he is a marquis, but he does not demonstrate the attributes of the ridiculous (visibly fake) marquis of *Les Précieuses ridicules*; the Brissart and Sauvé engraving shows a man in aristocratic dress, with a certain amount of lace but no flaring *canons* and no *petite oie.* He has a valet, La Montagne, has served fourteen years in the army (1. 6. 275), and is a member of the Court (3. 2. 650). As for his beloved Orphise and her uncle Damis, we are told very little about them—too little to confirm absolutely their nobility. However, all that we do know points to that conclusion. Orphise has a carriage and appears in the last scene carrying a silver torch (1. 5. 246). Eraste wins her in a typically noble way, by defending her uncle with his sword, thus manifesting aristocratic courage (3. 5. 791).

All the other characters in the play, the *fâcheux*, demonstrate unworthy or absurd behavior; they form a real panorama of all that was unsavory at the French court. Lysandre, the musician, Alcandre, the duelist, Dorante, the hunter, and Filinte, the protector, all are fellow nobles who employ the familiar pronoun *tu* when addressing Eraste. In contrast, Caritidès and Ormin are commoners who follow the court, *occasionaires*, trying to sell their schemes or to obtain pensions or appointments. It is interesting that Molière chose to enter into the rather delicate matter of the *donneur d'avis* at court, for many of the aristocrats there made a living from the graft involved in these affairs. Molière's Eraste discreetly dismisses the two offers made to him.

The same division of traits is evident from the beginning of *La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes*. Elise is witty and judicial and, like the chevalier Dorante, supports Molière's cause, but
Uranie, whose house is "le refuge ordinaire de tous les fainéants de la cour" (scene 1), sides with the affected Climène, the poet Lysidas and the ridiculous marquis. The latter immediately places himself in the same category as the imposter Mascarille, when he barges into the salon and roughs up the lackey, Galopin, in a most undignified fashion (scene 4).

Molière continues to juxtapose exemplary noblemen with ridiculous marquis in *L’Impromptu de Versailles*. As in so many other cases, he casts doubt on the status of the fops, played by himself and La Grange, though he never explicitly designates them as upstarts. Here, the unworthy behavior begins with a wager on which of the marquis served as the model for the one in the *Critique*. Apparently unable to appreciate the character's undesirable qualities, each claims credit for him and bets 1,000 livres, although between them they can raise only a tenth of the sum in cash (scene 3)! Inasmuch as these marquis overstep the new aristocratic codes of fine but modest dress and elegant but lucid speech, they present a vivid contrast with the Chevalier. Their infractions extend also into matters of taste, for they take it upon themselves to correct the abuses of Molière. When the Chevalier begins to defend the dramatist, the fops can only reply by chiding him for not wearing *canons* (scene 4). (In fact, the Brissart and Sauvé engraving shows Molière clad in an outrageous costume.)

The debate is interrupted by Madeleine Béjart's inquiry on the way Molière handled his polemic battle with Boursault (scene 5).

The final noble play, *La Comtesse d’Escarbagnas*, represents, in a sense, Molière's last word on the problem of the ridiculous aristocrat. In the character of this provincial countess, whom he contrasts to the exemplary nobles like Julie and to the ambitious officer Tibaudier, Molière puts many of the unworthy traits already observed in the marquis. She proves to be a distorter of speech who can neither communicate with her servants nor con-
trol them, a miser who buys tallow candles instead of waxen cierges, and an insensitive ingrate who had made her own soeur de lait a mistreated charwoman (1. 2). If her servants rebel against her, it is exactly what she deserves, since Audiger places responsibility for this relationship squarely on the master: “les bons maîtres font les bons valets.” Rather than being welcomed and acknowledged by the Parisian nobility, she has been obliged to stay at public inns like the Hôtel de Mouhy. As proofs of her late husband’s nobility, she can only cite such dubious marks as his hounds, his country house, and the fact that he “prenait la qualité de comte dans tous les contrats qu’il passait” (1. 2), which implies that he might well have been a simple businessman.

As Julie, a real noble, observes, the countess violates custom by entertaining the proposals of two roturiers, Harpin the tax-collector and Tibaudier the attorney. At least she is conscious enough of the laws of préséance to insist that Tibaudier take a folding chair instead of an armchair (1. 5). Yet, Charles Chappuzeau, a contemporary social theorist, expressed a common sentiment of the day when he discouraged any remarriage by widows with children, lest a divided family be created. The countess lacks culture, never having heard of the Latin poet, Martial, nor knowing any Latin at all (1. 5 and 8). We eventually learn that she has already sent letters to Harpin assuring him of their impending marriage and asking for money (1. 8). The letter that arrives in the last scene, informing the Vicomte and Julie that their aristocratic families have finally terminated their feud, allows Molière to end the play with a double humiliation for the countess: on the one hand, she is made a cocue avant la lettre, and on the other, she is forced to wed the commoner Tibaudier out of spite, thus providing a rare example of female hypogamy that forever compromises her already doubtful status as a member of the second estate.
The variety of models, both in the overseas plays and in the French ones, suggests that a major feature of Molière’s ideology is social polyvalence, a quality that he shares with theorists of the société d’états such as Bacquet, Loyseau, and Chappuzeau. From the nearly complete closure of the idealized Greek plays, where noble behavior is set in bold relief against that of vilains, through the vague affiliations of merchant princes and slaves in the Italian plays, to the relatively realistic group portraits of French bourgeois and aristocrats, the playwright offers a panorama of values that neither overlap nor infringe upon one another. Sostrate’s magnanimous courage triumphs in one play, Scapin’s knavish opportunism in another, Ariste’s sense of good faith and reciprocity in a third, the Chevalier’s honnêteté in a fourth. By refusing to construct his plays according to a single rigid behavioral standard, Molière tacitly accepts and reinforces the notion that the underlying principle of interpersonal relations must be difference. Values diverge, even contradict one another, and assume greater importance through specificity and distinction rather than through universality. The cement of legality, embodied in a sovereign monarch and a transcendant God, was necessary to hold the elements of this system in position. Since both king and church were banned from the stage by bienséances and could appear only in the form of proxies like Jupiter in Amphitryon or the Exempt in Tartuffe, cohesion was provided most frequently by a secular type of sovereign good that entails the happiness of the greatest number of characters. Achieved at the expense of alienated individuals such as Pourceaugnac, Sganarelle, and Le Barbouillé, this consensus often takes the shape of fiançailles or marriage contracts formalizing the acceptance of fulfillment and exchange. In Molière’s theater, human diversification is prescribed, mediated, and reconciled by Law, which channels the procreative drives into relationships that bear the seal of sociality and are accompanied by
symbolic mutual donations of commercial wealth. This interdependence of Law and differentiation is basic to the very concept of ideology, for as Françoise Gaillard has shown, the primordial Commandment, whether Mosaic code or incest taboo, served to define the subject (even before it set his limitations) and immediately inserted him into a legitimate order of temporal and spiritual exchange.\(^{37}\)

To a large extent, the abundance of social indicators in the plays shows the direction of development not only for Molière's major comedies but for the comedy of manners as a genre. The greater the number and significance of the indicators, the greater the opportunity to evaluate a character's actions and ideas in relation to others of his station. When social indicators are sparingly used, as in the Italian and Greek plays, comedy must depend on other factors, such as intrigue or the banter of a single witty clown, and runs the risk of confusion with the pastoral, the heroic drama, or other genres.

In the shorter French plays, where the frequency of social status indicators is greatest, Molière shows a growing preoccupation with the problems of unworthy nobles and unworthy bourgeois. The former, represented by several of the fâcheux, the ridiculous marquis of _La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes_ and _L'Impromptu de Versailles_, the comtesse d'Escarbagnas, and Pourceaugnac, threaten the existence of a system of valid social values and must be judged and dealt with by the peers or by others. The latter are represented by the bourgeois Sganarelle, who poses a different kind of danger. Although he does not claim the power or prerogatives of nobility, Sganarelle is a nuisance to the continued well-being of his own group because he will not adhere to its standards of reciprocity in such important matters as marriage, and—what is worse—he tries to prevent others from doing so. These sketches of misbehavior, combined with the tensions present in the foreign plays, provide the basic
material from which Molière created his major comedies, rich in detail and elaborate in social structure. The dramatist thus developed the simple discrepancies between status indicator and personal behavior toward their logical artistic conclusions.

1. Among the plays to be considered in this chapter are two, *Amphitryon* and *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, which are admittedly equal in comic achievement to such major works as *L'Avare* and *Les Femmes savantes*, but which owe this stature chiefly to dramaturgical elements rather than to social features. By virtue of their fairly simple detail of identity and their type of orientation, they may best be treated along with other plays set in Greece and Italy. Two other especially significant and complex three-act plays set in France, *George Dandin* and *Le Malade imaginaire*, deserve more lengthy analyses in later chapters devoted to their prominent structures of social closure and socioeconomic integrity. The allegorical implications of *Amphitryon* have been examined in Paul Römer, *Molières Amphitryon und sein gesellschaftlicher Hintergrund*, and Ralph Albanese, “Une sociocritique du mythe royal sous Louis XIV: Tartuffe et Amphitryon.”

2. *La Pastorale comique* seems to take place in Greece, but our knowledge of this fragmentary play is so slight that we cannot attempt to reconstruct its social framework.

3. Molière, *Oeuvres*, ed. Ch. La Grange and Vivot, 3:277. This edition of collected, but not complete, works will be henceforth cited as OC La Grange.

4. See especially *Le Sicilien*, sc. 5.

5. Judd Hubert, “From Corneille to Molière: The Metaphor of Value,” in French and English Drama of the Seventeenth Century, discusses how the attitudes of Molière’s characters are frequently reflected in terms dealing with money.


7. Louis’s influence is explicitly stated in the avant-propos of the *Divertissement royal* program description, OC Couton, 2:645.

8. Hunting is featured in *La Princesse d’Elide*, 1. 2, and in the first two intermèdes, as well as in *Les Amants magnifiques*, 5. 1. The five intermèdes of the latter play emphasize the importance of pastoral, as does *Mélicerte*, 2. 3, where Myrtil presents the heroine with a sparrow he has captured. The Pyhtian games are represented in the final intermède of *Les Amants magnifiques*. The chariot race held between acts 2 and 3 of *La Princesse d’Elide* also provides a symbolic test of noble quality for aristocrats in that play.

9. The role of the clown-valet, which is enhanced by his rhetorical use of the burlesque récit, has been studied in my article “The Burlesque Récit in Molière’s Greek plays.”

10. Lycarsis, the character played by Molière in the unfinished *Mélicerte*, manifests
the "baseness" of his condition mainly through coarse speech, which is liberally sprinkled with oaths and insults.

11. See Judd Hubert, *Molière and the Comedy of Intellect*, pp. 36–37
17. *OC* La Grange, 5. 128.
18. Charles Cassé, "Limoges et Quimper, terres d'exil au XVIIe siècle."
20. Ford, *Robe and Sword*, pp. 31–41, gives a list of the sovereign courts in France during the ancien régime.
21. H. Jouglia de Morenas, *Noblesse* 38, p. 73, notes that infamous crimes "faisaient perdre au noble et à sa descendance son état."
22. Sbrigani was probably as much a knave on the prison galleys as he was in the streets of Paris. Charles G. M. de la Roncière relates in his *Histoire de la Marine Française*, pp. 605–6, that the Spanish admiral called the commander of the miserable French galleys the "general de la comedia!"
24. A jeweled portrait locket valued at 1,500 livres is described in Hippolyte Roy, *La Vie, la mode et le costume au XVIIe siècle: époque Louis XIII*.
25. Roland Mousnier numbers the armed workers at 46,000 in *Paris*, pp. 194, 244.
26. A. Lottin notes that such coarse insults were common grounds for divorce in the ecclesiastical courts of Cambrai, in "Vie et mort du couple—difficultés conjugales et divorce dans le Nord de la France aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles."
28. These lines, which echo the seventeenth-century minor genre of the *pasquil*, or fashion satire, give additional evidence that Molière was willing to transform ironically the everyday forms of discourse in his society. For examples of the *pasquil*, see Godard de Donville, pp. 251–60.
29. Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller, "La Famille de la mère de Molière."
30. Molière's use of notaries, like that of his contemporary dramatists, was a mainly symbolic convention, necessitated in part by the prohibition against portraying the religious aspects of marriage on stage. According to Jean-Paul Poisson, the vast majority
of notarial acts concern credit and property transfer, rather than marriage; see his "Introduction à l'étude du rôle socioéconomique du notariat à la fin du XVIIe siècle."


32. OC La Grange, 2:84.

33. Molière’s portrayal of the occasionnaires, though fanciful, translates a true political phenomenon into the language of comedy; their presence at court was both evident and aggressive, as Ernest Lavisse related in his *Histoire de France*, 7:381–82. The fâcheux with a plan to transform all of France into seaports reflects, no doubt, the numerous schemes for building canals, as noted in Jean Meuvret, *Etudes d’histoire économique*, pp. 23–24.

34. OC La Grange, 7:87

