outward manifestations of an individual's essential virtue and caractère. They constituted for him and for others the conditions of any contacts he would make and any relationships he would form; and his awareness and understanding of them would determine his prospects for success—and the expectations of others for his success—in any courtship or seduction, anoblissement or usurpation, that he attempted.

Unlike the medieval société d'ordres that it had replaced by the seventeenth century, the société d'états afforded the prospect of limited social mobility. All opportunities for advancement depended on the possession of large sums of money, and a formidable apparatus for social closure stood in the way of anyone who presumed to rise in society without first satisfying—slowly and at great expense—the conditions of his occupying the place in the hierarchy to which he aspired. In his theater of social differentiation, Gaines concludes, Molière successfully mediated the multifarious disparities among the highly diverse groups that made up the société d'états. His contemporaries found in his drama an illustration—*in praxis* and not merely in theory—of the great chain of social being. As the consummate comic playwright and social commentator of his time, Molière ingeniously exploited what became in his hands the virtually unlimited possibilities of combining the incongruities of humor—the joke, the trick, the pun, the humiliating episode or situation—with the social dissonances of his time: unworthiness, usurpation, pretentiousness, and parasitism. His genius enables us to perceive that the clown who fails to retain his balance on the stage, and the fool who loses his equilibrium in society, are, at bottom, victims of the same vertigo.

James E Gaines is associate professor of foreign languages at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond.

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