

Oxford French Series

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MOLIÈRE

L'ÉCOLE DES FEMMES

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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NEW YORK

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

AMERICAN BRANCH: 35 WEST 32ND STREET

LONDON, TORONTO, MELBOURNE & BOMBAY

1919

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AMERICAN BRANCH

Milton C. Lee
Hassley Hall
Columbia
University
New York
U.S.A.

Oct 30, 1923



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MOLIÈRE.

dans le rôle d'Arnolphe de l'École des femmes

(Comed. Française.)

(Année 1670.)

PREFACE

The text of this edition of the *École des Femmes* reproduces that of the *Grands Écrivains*. All the difficult words, and those whose meaning in modern French differs from that of Molière's time, are translated in the notes, thus making a vocabulary unnecessary.

The editor desires to thank Mr. Raymond Weeks for the loan of two rare portraits from the collection of Hypolitte Lecompte, and for his careful reading of the manuscript. The editor also wishes to express her gratitude to Mr. A. G. H. Spiers, Associate-professor of French in Columbia University, for many valuable suggestions.

H. H.

INTRODUCTION

LIFE OF MOLIERE

I

To attempt to write a life of Molière when so many extensive and excellent biographies already exist is superfluous. A mere outline, therefore, will suffice to keep before the reader the salient facts in Molière's interesting career.

Molière, whose real name was Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, was born in Paris on January 5, 1622. He was the son of Jean Poquelin, upholsterer and *valet de chambre du roi* Louis XIII, and of Marie Cresse. Molière was educated in the Collège de Clermont and was admitted to the bar at Orléans. Upon the death of his father he inherited the office held by him. It is told that from early childhood he was interested in the theater. In 1643, together with the Béjart family and some friends, he founded the *Illustre Théâtre*. For three years this company played in Paris. In 1646 they began traveling, touring the provinces and visiting large cities such as Nantes, Limoges, Bordeaux, Toulouse (1648). In 1650 they played at Narbonne. In 1651 Molière came to Paris. In 1653

he visited Lyons, then Pézenas, then Montpellier, again Pézenas, Narbonne, Lyons, Nîmes, Dijon, Avignon, and Rouen. In 1658 he again returned to Paris where he played first at the Louvre, before the king, then in a theater called the *Petit Bourbon*, a house favored by the King, and two years later at the *Palais Royal* theater. Among his early plays are *La Jalousie du barbouillé*, *Le Dépit amoureux*, and *Le Docteur amoureux*. In 1659 Molière produced the *Précieuses ridicules*, in which he already proved himself far above the ordinary writer of comedies. In that play he poked fun at the exaggerated manners and language of certain ladies and gentlemen of the society of his day. In 1660 he played his *Sganarelle*; then followed *Don Garcie de Navarre* (1661), which was not very successful. *L'École des maris* came shortly after that and was a great success. In August of the same year he played *Les Fâcheux*. In 1662 Molière married Armande Béjart, the sister of one of the actresses of his company, a girl much younger than he. On December 26, 1662, *L'École des femmes* was played. This play was a greater success in every respect than all the preceding plays of Molière. It was quite epoch-making and aroused for a while as much comment, perhaps, as the *Cid* of Corneille. Molière was attacked from all sides, mostly on account of professional jealousy. He finally answered the attacks by a comedy in one act,

tilhomme the same year. Among the later plays are *Psyché*, a tragedy with a ballet; *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, May, 1671; *La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas*, December, 1671; *Les Femmes savantes*, March, 1672, and finally *Le Malade imaginaire*, 1673. Molière died during one of the productions of this play, on February 17, 1673.

II

The *École des femmes* has been the subject of almost endless comment and discussion. It has been treated from every possible angle and has been given a number of interpretations, many of them quite contradictory. In relation to the literary production of Molière, the *École des femmes* may be called a *transition play*. It conforms in every respect to the preceding comedies of Molière and to those of his contemporaries. It has many of the earmarks of the Italian masques and is a direct descendant of the mediæval French farces. But it is something more. It gives us more clearly defined characters, deeper psychology. There is no progress in this play from the point of view of plot, but there is a great step forward in the direction of characterization, of faithfulness to life, to society. Molière's early plays, like the farces of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were also pictures of life, but they were less profound, less delicate, less individualized. The *École des femmes*, in

called *La Critique de l'École des femmes* (June 1, 1663). We will not go into the intricacies of the quarrels. Molière came out of them all triumphant and the *École des femmes* remained one of the most popular plays of the century. In October, 1663, Molière again, this time by the order of the king, answered the attacks directed against his play, in the *Impromptu de Versailles*; here he stated his dramatic theories and seized the opportunity of ridiculing the actors of rival companies. In 1664 *Le Mariage forcé* appeared on the boards, in the spring of the same year *La Princesse d'Élide*, and finally three acts of his *Tartuffe*, another play which aroused a great deal of hostility, mainly for religious reasons. Molière was accused of impudently laughing at piety. In 1665 the company of Molière became the company of the king, and Molière received a pension of 6000 pounds. In 1667 *Tartuffe*, under the sub-title of *L'Imposteur*, was played privately and again attacked. In 1668 *Tartuffe* was given at Paris and at Chantilly at the home of the prince of Condé. In February, 1669, Molière was at last allowed to produce *Tartuffe*. In the intervening years he wrote *L'Amour médecin* (1665); *Le Misanthrope* (1666); *Le Médecin malgré lui* (1666); *Mélicerte*; *L'Amour peintre*; *Amphitryon* (1668); *Georges Dandin*, July, 1668; *L'Avare* in September of the same year; *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, September, 1669; *Les Amants magnifiques* (1670); *Le Bourgeois gen-*

spite of all the farcical elements which it contains, has behind its laughter a good deal of seriousness.

The argument of the play is as follows: Arnolphe, a man of forty-two, has remained unmarried because he has seen around him no end of husbands betrayed by their wives. He has a horror of that fate. He finally decides, however, to marry and confides his purpose to his friend Chrysalde. Arnolphe is the guardian of a girl, Agnès, whom he has brought up from the age of four, when he virtually bought her, and whom he keeps in utter ignorance of life. She spends her time in a house opposite the one occupied by Arnolphe, in the company of two stupid servants, and sees no one but them and Arnolphe. The latter is convinced that, thanks to her ignorance, which is almost miraculous, she will make him a perfect wife. He has no qualms of conscience concerning her happiness, nor does the fact that he has done nothing to develop her trouble him. He is certain that she will spare him the humiliation so feared by him, of being deceived and betrayed by a clever wife. Chrysalde predicts no good from such a marriage, claims that ignorance offers no guarantee, and besides, makes sport of Arnolphe for having assumed a name (*la Souche*) which gives him the tone of nobility. Arnolphe, incidentally, is the name of the patron saint of unfortunate husbands, and if Arnolphe knew it, which probably he did, this was an added reason

for his desire to be known by another name. A young man, Horace, the son of a friend of Arnolphe, meets the latter on the street in front of his house. He does not know that Arnolphe is the guardian of Agnès, with whom he is in love. He has been told that the guardian's name is la Souche, and he asks Arnolphe whether he knows the gentleman in question. Arnolphe, naturally eager to hear the details of the young man's adventures, hides his identity. It is around this *qui pro quo* of mistaken identity that the whole play is built, a trick which Molière found ready-made in the plays of his predecessors. Horace makes Arnolphe his confidant on three different occasions, always in the street in front of his house, and as M. Bergson aptly says in his *Le Rire* (Paris, 1912, p. 93): "Ainsi *L'École des femmes* ne fait que ramener et répéter un certain effet à trois temps: 1^{er} temps, Horace raconte à Arnolphe ce qu'il a imaginé pour tromper le tuteur d'Agnès, qui se trouve être Arnolphe lui-même; 2^e temps, Arnolphe croit avoir paré le coup; 3^e temps, Agnès fait tourner les précautions d'Arnolphe au profit d'Horace." It is this recurrence of the same series of events, which correspond symmetrically under different circumstances, that brings about the comic situation. Arnolphe's precautions all come to naught; he is frustrated in his designs of making Agnès his wife, who, once taught by love, progresses with gigantic strides .

from the stupid and innocent young girl to the ingenious woman. The play ends in a traditional way: Agnès proves to be the daughter of a rich merchant to whom the father of Horace, without his knowledge, has betrothed him. Arnolphe, humiliated and ridiculous, has to resign himself to the realization that his theories were all wrong. It is interesting to know that Molière himself played the rôle of Arnolphe.

We see, then, that there is nothing original in the makeup of the play. Molière owed a great deal to sources of all kinds. Without going into detail, it might be mentioned in passing that he drew from Scarron's *La Précaution inutile*, based upon the Spanish of Maria de Zayas y Sotomayor, *El Prevenido engañado*. The rôle of the old woman who helps Horace win the love of Agnès is also to be found in Spanish literature. Other details, too, can be traced to Spanish sources (cf. Bibliography). But Molière made of all this material, which is a blending of traditional forms, of foreign sources and devices, something decidedly human, decidedly original, and decidedly French. He breathed into it an observation and an understanding of real life, of life as he knew it and felt it.

The character of Arnolphe has been the object of much study. We know that Molière meant him to be ridiculous and comical. As time went on, especially in the nineteenth century, actors began

to depart from Molière's interpretation. Critics saw in the play and in the rôle something tragic and lost sight of the humorous side of the character. And as it happens in the case of all great writers, people began to read into Molière's *École des femmes* ideas that were never put into the play. Some saw in it a treatise on the education of women; others looked upon it as nothing but a continuation of *L'École des maris*, likewise considered a treatise on education. Some thought that Molière meant to show that nature always triumphs, — Horace the young man, wins the heart of Agnès because he is young. Others were certain that Agnès would have loved Arnolphe had he been less despotic, less selfish and that his age had nothing to do with her refusal. In a word, literary critics, who have a tendency to classify everything, tried to make *L'École des femmes* fit into the category of problem plays, in other terms, they wanted to show that Molière set out to prove a thesis. This was probably not the author's intention. Still one cannot deny that under the gayety of the play, for gayety is its dominant note, there is the treatment of many serious problems of life. Before *L'École des femmes*, the right of comedy was not yet acknowledged to handle the serious aspects of vital questions. The spectator laughs at Arnolphe; he goes home amused, but his traditional ideas have been rudely shaken up. In this lies the novelty of the play and the

reason, or pretext, of many of the attacks upon it. Molière had made his name in farce, and here was the *farceur*, still using much of his former blunt language, grimacing caricature and audacious disregard for conventional ideas, to comment on the everyday life of middle-class society and hold up to ridicule its most cherished traditions!

From his contemporaries we know that the play was Molière's greatest success from the point of view of receipts, — between Christmas, 1662, and Easter, 1663, the play was given thirty-one times, not to speak of performances at court and in private houses. In June it was produced again, together with the *Critique de l'École des femmes*, and ran again continuously for ten weeks. That was unheard of at the time of Molière. Even Molière's enemies admitted that the play was highly entertaining, and what is the purpose of a comedy if not to entertain? *L'École des femmes* is still considered by many the most popular and the most delightful play of Molière, and the letter which the love-instructed Agnès wrote to Horace is judged a classic of simplicity, charm, and genuineness. The play was produced simply. We are told that the "properties" consisted of a chair, a purse, and some coins.

A few words must be devoted to the *Critique de l'École des femmes*. Although the *École des femmes* strikes the modern reader as being a very innocent

story, the enemies of Molière, jealous of his success, found in it many causes for attack. He was accused of impiety (the scene in which Arnolphe reads the maxims on marriage). The open-minded person can easily see that there is not a very strong justification for that accusation. His contemporaries were not aware of the fact that Molière imitated in the *Maximes* an almost parodying French version of the precepts of one of the Church Fathers. Molière was accused of indecency (Act II, sc. 6). Here again the charge can be dismissed with no comment, especially by those who know the quality of the plays of Molière's contemporaries. As for plagiarism, of which Molière was likewise accused, no attempt was made by him to hide his borrowings. It was a custom of the time to incorporate into plays ideas gleaned from all possible sources. It is not what is taken but the use that is made of the borrowing that determines whether the author deserves to be called a plagiarist.

In the *Remercîment au Roi* Molière thanked the king for the pension of a thousand pounds given him after the success of the *École des femmes*, which also meant the moral support of the ruler. In the *Critique de l'École des femmes* Molière came out with a public answer to his critics. The play, in one act and seven scenes, takes up one by one the various objections made by Molière's enemies.

The *Critique* only increased the popularity of the *École des femmes*. The two were played together beginning with June, 1663, and Molière's enemies, all inferior in talent, helped to keep the play on the boards instead of to suppress it. A chronological list of the attacks and defenses of the *École des femmes* will show the reader the interest taken in the question.

1. *Nouvelles nouvelles*, by De Visé, published February 9, 1663.
2. *Zélinde*, by De Visé, August 4, 1663.
3. *Le Portrait du peintre* or *La Contre-critique de l'École des femmes*, November 17, 1663.
4. *Le Panégyrique de l'École des femmes*, by Robinet, November 30, 1663.
5. *Réponse à l'Impromptu de Versailles* or *La Vengeance des marquis*, De Visé, December 7, 1664.
6. *L'Impromptu de l'hôtel de Condé*, Montfleury, January 19, 1664.
7. *La Guerre comique*, or *La Défense de l'École des femmes*, Philippe de la Croix, March 17, 1664.