

**DISCUSSIONS OF THE
DRAMA. II: GOLDONI
ON PLAYWRITING**

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Discussions of the Drama. II: Goldoni on Playwriting by F. C. L. Van Steenderen & H. C. Chatfield-Taylor

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F. C. L. VAN STEENDEREN & H. C. CHATFIELD-TAYLOR

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Carlo Goldoni
DISCUSSIONS OF THE DRAMA

II

Goldoni on Playwriting

BY

F. C. L. VAN STEENDEREN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

H. C. CHATFIELD-TAYLOR



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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Among the writers of whom Italy is justly proud, Carlo Goldoni, the Venetian dramatist, holds a commanding place. Tho not a world genius such as Dante, Petrarch or Boccaccio, he is nevertheless the foremost playwright of his native land. Furthermore, he is the pioneer poet of a people, no previous dramatist having painted the life of the common people in colors so truthful as his.

Being simply a naturalist, he had no avowed purpose, such as Molière's, to correct the vices of his time; his ambition being merely "not to spoil nature." Yet he spoiled it whenever he transplanted some exotic story to the soil of his native Italy; since only when he painted the life of Venice, was he *Gran Goldoni*, the tribune of her people.

His work fairly covers the entire range of the drama,—tragedy, tragi-comedy, comedy, farce, extravaganza, opera and opéra-bouffe; yet he is eminent only in comedy. Thru this dramatic form, he blazed a virgin path; for

altho he has been called the Italian Molière, his dramatic naturalism is peculiarly his own, his genius being quite apart from that of *Le Grand Comique*.

Goldoni's merit lies in his fidelity to nature. When using the plots of Molière and other Frenchmen, or in attempting to emulate them, as he sometimes did, he forgot his own dictum that "every clime has its national taste;" for whenever he strayed into a land to which his southern blood was not acclimated, his work became insignificant.

His ambition was to reform the Italian stage; yet, his reform was brought about so gradually and he wandered away from his beloved Venice so frequently that perhaps no writer of a world-wide repute has ever written so unevenly. Not only did he write many kinds of plays, but many kinds of comedies as well, his dramatic output, roughly speaking, being a hundred and fifty comedies and a hundred tragedies, operatic tragedies and opéras-bouffes. Indeed, his comedies in verse alone fairly vie in number with all the plays of Shakspeare, and equal those of Molière; therefore, in judging him, the terrific pace at which he worked should be borne in mind.

He wrote comedies in Tuscan and comedies wholly or partly in the Venetian dialect; comedies in prose and comedies in verse; some dealt with the life of Venice, others were exotic in subject; some were comedies of character, others of intrigue; some were serious, others light; some dealt with fashionable life, others with the bourgeoisie or the common people. At no time, however, in his long career did he confine his work to any particular style; his choice of subject being determined either by his mood or the demands of his managers. Prose was the natural medium of his art; verse a form of expression forced upon him by the exigencies of contemporaneous literary taste.

He was not a palpable imitator; yet there are points of similarity between the creator of French comedy and himself which justify to a certain degree his sobriquet of "the Italian Molière." Both he and the great Frenchman, for instance, learned their technic in the same school—the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, or *Improvised Comedy*—and by discarding the stereotyped characters and farcical intrigues of that comedy for true characterization and human situations, each

created a national comedy of manners. Certain coincidences, too, may be found in their lives, since both dramatists attended a school taught by Jesuits, and both studied law; although Goldoni alone practised at the bar. Moreover, each of these masters of comedy when harassed by the critics of his day, defended his art by a dramatic skit in which he set forth his theories of the drama, Molière's being the 'Critique de l'Ecole des femmes,' and Goldoni's the 'Teatro comico.'

Altho these coincidences establish a casual relationship between the two dramatists, such occurrences are merely fortuitous; Goldoni's character being as different from Molière's as his genius is foreign to the Frenchman's. The one was light-hearted by nature, the other overborne at times by sorrow or misfortune; Molière's views, like his experiences, being deeper and farther reaching than those of his transalpine rival. Yet both were at heart optimists, else they could not have express themselves best in comedy. There is a serious phase in Molière's work, however, indicative of the tragedy he lived—a sadder note than is ever sounded by his Venetian rival. The Frenchman, moreover,