

**MOLIÈRE'S LE
BOURGEOIS
GENTILHOMME**

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Molière's Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme by F. M. Warren

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MOLIÈRE.
(JEAN-BAPTISTE POQUELIN.)

Heath's Modern Language Series

MOLIÈRE'S
LE BOURGEOIS GENTILHOMME

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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INTRODUCTION

Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme was first played October 14, 1670, at the royal château of Chambord, near Blois, whither the king, Louis XIV., had gone for part of the hunting season with his court. Entertainments were in demand on such occasions, and it was the custom to summon companies of musicians or actors for the purpose of furnishing them. The previous autumn had also seen Molière and his troupe at Chambord, where they had brought out *M. de Pourceaugnac*, a comedy of the same kind as *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, with music and dancing. It was probably the success which his earlier play had won that spurred Molière on to renewed efforts in a like direction. For while we know from the register of the troupe, kept by its treasurer, La Grange, that other comedies were acted during this second visit, yet it is clear that *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* was the especial novelty. It met with such favor that three other performances of it were given before the king in the week following. On October 28, the players returned to Paris, but only to be summoned before the court again on November 8, this time at St. Germain, where the success of the new comedy was again affirmed. So the amusement-loving public of Paris was well aware of the royal approval before it had an opportunity to judge the play for itself. Delay, moreover, and rumor had only increased its expectation, and

the Palais Royal theatre was crowded when *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* finally came on the boards on November 23, 1670. The popular verdict must have been unusually favorable also, for excellent audiences saw seven repetitions of the comedy in the four weeks that followed, and it was profitable enough to be continued for twenty-eight evenings during the year 1671. It has ever since remained one of the standard plays at the Théâtre Français.

Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme is a "comedy ballet"; in other words, it is a play in which acting, singing and dancing are intermingled. The comedy proper forms the plot of the whole piece, and introduces the songs and dances, the last named generally filling in the intermission between the acts. In the eyes of contemporaries they seem to have been the chief attraction of this play. Ballets had long been danced at the French court. Louis XIII. had cultivated them, and Louis XIV. had himself led them during the first years of his reign. So any play which contained dance movements was quite certain in advance of the king's applause. The particular feature of the ballet in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* is the Turkish Ceremony, at the end of the Fourth Act. The intermissions between the other acts are less elaborate. Much speculation has been indulged in as to where Molière got the idea of this ceremony. The reception of an official of the Sultan's household by Louis XIV. in 1669 has been adduced as a starting-point. However, there seems to have been nothing extraordinary about this audience. More plausible sources for such a parody on Eastern manners might be found in the reports of soldiers returning from the wars between the Turks and Austrians, which allured many French nobles from their homes, and in the

narratives of travellers, one of whom at least, Laurent d'Arvieux, had been honored with a hearing by the king in 1669, and had not failed to excite much merriment by his stories of Oriental customs. All these incidents may have had their weight in deciding on the ballet to be introduced, though it is more than probable that they influenced some one else than Molière, for he seems to have received orders to furnish a play which should contain such a ballet, and thus have been in this respect merely the agent of the king. The musician Lulli, who had himself composed a Turkish mascarade, and who not only wrote the score for the songs and ceremony here, but even took the part of the Muphti himself, a proceeding which would indicate more than ordinary interest, may have been the real inventor of the Turkish farce. Some of the Turkish words or jargon in the body of the comedy are, however, directly traceable to a comedy of Rotrou's called *La Sœur* (1647), which contains a character whose youth was passed at Constantinople. Undoubtedly Molière's company had often performed *La Sœur*.

But the construction of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* is Molière's own, as well as the delineation of the characters it presents. The intimate connection of the dance with the comedy, so that all the movements of the former proceed naturally from the developments of the latter, is due wholly to the artistic skill and dramatic sense of the author. His apprenticeship in *M. de Pourceaugnac*, as well as in the less interesting *Amants Magnifiques* (given before the court at St. Germain in February, 1670), now serves him in good stead. From the beginning to the end of the new piece there is no episode nor scene which is not a complement to some previous episode or situation. It is

M. Jourdain's desire or vainglory that occasions all the songs and dances. He is the central figure of the comedy, and the pivot of the Turkish Ceremony also. To be sure, the *Ballet des Nations* which concludes the whole entertainment has no connection with him, nor indeed with the rest of the play, yet the audience receives from time to time notifications that something of the sort is coming, and one of the characters, Dorante, claims the authorship of it for himself. It is part of the diversion he offers, at M. Jourdain's expense, to his lady-love, Dorimène.

By this skilful handling of his subject, Molière not only made the entertainment one connected whole, but he also observed the rules of dramatic art which were prevalent in his day. The fortunes of M. Jourdain secured unity of action. The close sequence of dialogue and dance brought about the unities of time and place as well. The place is one and the same room in M. Jourdain's house. The time is limited to the exact interval required for the performance of the play. It is not necessary for the curtain to fall even once, since the actors of the comedy are either the actors or the spectators of the ballet.

We may safely assume, then, that Molière had orders to prepare a play in which the chief interest should be the Turkish Ceremony. All the remarks of his contemporaries on *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* point that way—they take the comedy purely as a setting to the ceremony—and the care which was bestowed on the costuming for it would tend to confirm this view. Besides, the participation of Lulli, the first musician of his time, both as composer and actor indicates unusual interest in the ballet and masquerade. Tastes have changed somewhat in the last two centuries. Comedy is taken much more seriously now