

**THE LIAR: A
COMEDY IN
THREE ACTS**

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The liar: a comedy in three acts by Carlo Goldoni

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CARLO GOLDONI

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THE LIAR.

THE LIAR

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

BY
CARLO GOLDONI

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
GRACE LOVAT FRASER

WITH DECORATIONS BY
C. LOVAT FRASER

AND AN INTRODUCTION BY
E. GORDON CRAIG

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INTRODUCTION

BY E. GORDON CRAIG

CARLO GOLDONI was born in Venice on the 25th of February, 1707, in a house at the corner of the Ca' Cent'Anni.

For forty years he was doing everything, going everywhere. He was Advocate, Candidate for Holy Orders, Coadjutor of the Criminal Chancellor, Clerk of the Procurator, Consul of the Republic of Genoa at Venice, writer, compiler of almanacks, once nearly a monk—no kind of “adventurer,” and always having adventures; and for forty years meeting every kind of person from diplomats and ladies of pleasure to swindlers and poets: utterly young in a quiet old way—old in that he seldom gave way to despair. Not sentimental, not tragic, smiling always—a good little disposition; absent-minded, yet living entirely in the present; frank, but neither vain nor proud; full of good qualities,—what we should call a dear little man. No more like the other Venetians of those sceptical times than Voltaire was like the disbelievers of his land—a child like Voltaire, but less roguish; and very fond of the theatre.

The reason I do not say he was passionately fond of it is that this is just what he was *not*.

In those days every Italian went to the theatre and went into raptures or furies with what he saw. But every Italian was not passionately fond of the theatre. *Only the actors were that*, and the theatre of Italy in the eighteenth century was still the theatre of the actors.

Unless you know something about the European theatre of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries you will not know that the Italian actors practically made it. Some poets and architects lent it a generous hand, dowered it with a superb setting: but the heart, the fire, and the voice of the European theatre from 1550 to 1780 were given to it by the actors.

By 1564 they had swept all over Europe, these magicians; and so tremendous was their force, so countless were their numbers, they were able to wander far afield and yet leave at home many thousands of their kind to enchant the princes and the people in Siena and in Rome, in Florence, in Perugia, in Naples, Pisa, and Verona.

They travelled far and wide—no trains, no motor cars then, and yet

these men of energy and genius carried their companies to Lyons, to Paris, to Madrid, to London, to Germany, to Vienna, and to Russia. For them the Seine and the Tagus and the Thames were willing to be set on fire. They inspired Molière, Shakespeare, and Lope de Verga; and having done all this, they had the amazing audacity to permit themselves to feel tired.

Then arose a good man and did an awful amount of harm. To be brief, he killed the great actors.

When actors grow lazy and loose they may expect defeat from a man who will take pains.

Carlo Goldoni was the good man who took pains.

Unless Molière had been actor first and foremost, he could never have evolved the comedies which later on flowed from him like extemporaire.

Now compare Goldoni for a moment with Molière.

Molière never took pains—was no good man. Molière was a kind of *gamin*, so passionately fond of the theatre that he made plays rather than wrote them: acting all the time—always acting and finally writing drama. Goldoni did not act in his own plays.

Goldoni was of a literary turn of mind and of a theatrical inclination. He wished very naturally to invent new characters for the Italians to see and hear. So the little advocate persuaded the chief actors to take it easy, and he wrote up the parts of the minor actors until it was these that the folk came to know, while they came to forget the principal figures of the Italian comedy.

These principal figures were: Arlecchino, Pantalone, il Dottore, Brighella, il Capitano, Pulcinella, Scaramuccia, Tartaglia, Coviello.

Two or more of these appeared in all comedies; they ruled the stage; they had been the glory of the Drama; they were not in any way like anything we have ever seen. They were at once actors and dramatists. They had but to decide the evening beforehand what tale they would act tomorrow, and all was done. A chair, a bottle, three rings, and a letter was all the paraphernalia they needed to complete their scene, which was a back-cloth and four to six side wings.

And the performance would be a remarkable one, remember. Not something one would suppose might easily result from such haste. For if there was rapidity in executing the work, beginning at 7 o'clock on Monday evening and being ready by 2 o'clock the following afternoon, we have it on record that these Italians had long been perfecting the whole art of spontaneous acting. They had given some centuries to it.

So conceive the astonishment and indignation of these masters of the

stage on finding a little advocate on their boards, writing for them what they considered milk-and-water plays with pretty enough dialogue, but lacking all the ancient virility of the masters of dramatic art—the old actor-dramatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

But astonishment and fury gave way to sadness as these poor lazy descendants of the giants perceived that this same milk-and-water dramatist offered only the purest milk and the cleanest water. Then they recognized that the wine they had been serving out was but the dregs, the lees, of the old vat—and not too clean at that.

Goldoni was in the best sense of the word a respectable little Venetian gentleman. Molière, highly unrespectable, was just an inflammable torch set alight by the actors with whom later on he is willing to share his fire as theirs dwindle.

Not so Goldoni. Much as he is devoted to the theatre, he is never of it. There is therefore no more meaningless phrase to use to Goldoni than to call him the "Molière of Italy."

He is just what he is—the Goldoni of Italy—and there is one only.

While Molière is purer "Commedia dell'arte," more genuine theatre of the grand and traditional manner, Goldoni is pure Italian comedy and of a little kind which has never been equalled: it is the best of its kind.

Do I exaggerate when I say that I consider Goldoni the father of all good modern comedy, not only in that he is respectable—beyond reproach—but because he is mild and beautiful?

The days of fierce passions were past, it would seem. No longer was fun to be so terrible and so excruciating. The tears were no longer to be wrung from us as we rocked in our seats. The slapstick and the sack were all right in those ages when single combats between men counted: but when propaganda and the lie came into fashion as weapons the comedy had to change its tone. The old joke was of no more use.

Occasionally the old joke will even nowadays evoke the old roar; but that it is not popular with dramatists is, after all, some sort of a sign.

Goldoni has the true gaiety of a lovely mind.

And his characters are all so new to us, and his settings so original—so varied.

The very last thing anyone can call the author of *The Liar* is the "Molière of Italy"—the very last thing.

That is perhaps why everyone does it first of all. It is innocent and charming after all:

For who knows whether to know is as happy as to not know?

The wise really know nothing—and the fools too—and can anyone discern