

**PITT PRESS SERIES. LE
BOURGEOIS
GENTILHOMME, COMÉDIE-
BALLET EN CINQ ACTES**

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Pitt Press Series. Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, Comédie-Ballet en Cinq Actes by J. B. Poquelin de Molière & A. C. Clapin

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J. B. POQUELIN DE MOLIÈRE & A. C. CLAPIN

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LE
BOURGEOIS GENTILHOMME,
COMÉDIE-BALLET EN CINQ ACTES
PAR
J.-B. POQUELIN DE MOLIÈRE
(1670)

WITH A LIFE OF MOLIÈRE AND
GRAMMATICAL AND PHILOLOGICAL NOTES.

BY
REV. A. C. CLAPIN, M.A.

ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, AND BACHELIER-EN-LETTRES OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF FRANCE.

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INTRODUCTION.

(Compiled chiefly from Besant's *French Humourists* and Jules Janin's *Critique on Molière.*)

JEAN-BAPTISTE POQUELIN, known to fame as Molière, was born at Paris on the fifteenth day of January, 1622, the eldest of ten children; his father and relations being respectable *bourgeois*, connected with upholstery, his father being also *valet de chambre* in the Royal household. Young Jean-Baptiste received the best education possible at the Collège de Clermont, afterwards called Collège de *Louis-le-Grand*, where he had the Prince de Conti, brother of the great Condé, for a schoolfellow. He here imbibed a profound respect for Lucretius, whom he tried to translate, when he began to study law as a profession. But all his earlier projects were thrown to the winds when he took to acting. While frequenting the courts he had frequented the theatre as well, and at length joined a band of young men, students chiefly, like himself, with whom he acted for pleasure at first, at fair time, the company being known by the name of *l'illustre Théâtre*¹. They held together for a year or two, when the troop was broken up, and Molière with the Bédjarts and a few more set off on a journey, which was destined to last for twelve years, through the provinces as professional actors. Before taking the decisive step of adopting the stage as a pro-

¹ The two brothers Bédjart, their sister Madeleine, and Duparc, nicknamed *Gros Rent*, formed part of this ambulant troop.

fession, the young Poquelin changed his name, and was thenceforth known as Molière.

This change of name is significant. It shows how, in taking a step which seemed then to condemn him to social infamy, young Poquelin broke voluntarily with the whole of his family. Comedians in those days enjoyed no social position, and obeyed no social law. Excommunicated by the Church, they considered themselves freed from all restraints, save those only imposed by magistrates. They got their money freely and spent it carelessly¹.

So Molière set forth on his appointed tour with his friends the Béjarts. This part of his life, the most obscure because only a few traces of him can be discovered here and there, was perhaps the happiest. He was young, successful so far, ambitious; and going about with his comedians from place to place, noted silently, in his undemonstrative way, the manners and talk of the people.

In 1654, while at Pézcnas with his company, Molière received from the Prince de Conti the offer of becoming his private secretary. He had the good sense and the extraordinary good luck to refuse the post, although he was already past the period of early manhood, and as yet had made no mark. It was in 1658 that he returned to Paris, and then, through the good offices of the same prince, performed before the king Louis XIV, in the *Nicomède* of Corneille, and received the royal license to establish his company in the theatre of the Hôtel du Petit Bourbon, under the title of the *Troupe de Monsieur*, every actor being entitled to a pension of 300 livres. It was here that for twelve years Molière's company played the pieces which their manager wrote for them, until his death put an end to their power of cohesion².

Molière was the stage-manager, principal partner, orator, author and chief actor. As a manager, he seems to have been despotical, arbitrary, and irritable. Off the stage the most gentle,

¹ For a description of the theatrical equipment and the life of strolling actors in Molière's time, see Besant's *French Humourists*, pp. 308, 315.

² See Sainte-Beuve's *Portraits Littéraires*, vol. II. p. 19.

tractable, and amiable of men: on it the most rigid and inflexible tyrant. The consequence was that his pieces were played with an attention and precision to which the Parisian stage had been previously a stranger. As an actor he was the greatest artist of his time. "Molière was comedian from head to foot; it seemed that he had different voices. Everything in him *spoke*; and with a step, a smile, a movement of the hand, a dropping of the eyelash, he imparted more ideas than the greatest talker would have managed to convey in an hour."

His first great triumph was in 1659, when he put on the stage his *Précieuses Ridicules* (a mere sketch, expanded later into the *Femmes Savantes*) in which he ridiculed the pedantic talk and affected airs of the then fashionable literary circles of learned ladies (notably that of the *Hôtel de Rambouillet*). After this his success is assured; his career as the greatest dramatist of France is one continued triumphal march. He is loaded with favours by the king; he can hold his own against the insolent nobles who are jealous of his favour; he has a large income; he has a country-house at Auteuil; but as a set-off against all this, he has a wife (Armande Elizabeth Béjart) who is unfaithful to him. And then, too, he has delicate health and is in constant anxiety about the future. Only he is happy in his friendships, for to Auteuil come Boileau, Racine, Chapelle, Bachaumont, and all the crowd of scholars and freethinkers—for Molière was not a religious man. Grave, contemplative, no careless scoffer, he yet evidently considered religion as something which had no concern with him. Perhaps it was the consciousness of being excommunicated by the Church. Perhaps it was the absorption of his whole mind into his art. Be this as it may, Molière shows no religion either in his life or in his writings¹.

Molière died on the 17th February, 1673, after fifteen years of success, and in the fulness of his powers. He was taken with a convulsive fit while acting the leading part in the *Malade Imaginaire*, and died within an hour after leaving the stage.

¹ See *Portraits Littéraires*, by Sainte-Beuve, vol. II. p. 8.

This last scene as told by Jules Janin is very affecting : "Molière était perdu : il le sentait. Il était devenu vieux avant l'heure ; il succombait sous sa triple tâche de comédien, de poète et de directeur de théâtre. Il avait craché le sang le matin même, et ses amis demandaient un relâche... Il voulut tenir sa parole. Il paraît donc : à son aspect, sans se douter de ses tortures, cet affreux parterre se met à rire. On bat des mains, on applaudit ; on trouve que le comédien n'a jamais mieux joué. En effet, regardez comme il est pâle. Le feu de la fièvre est dans ses yeux ! Ses mains tremblent et se crispent ! Ses jambes refusent tout service ! A le voir, ainsi plié en deux, la tête enveloppée d'un bonnet et affaissé dans ses coussins, ne diriez-vous pas d'un malade véritable ? N'est-ce pas que cette agonie est amusante à voir ? Ris donc, parterre, et ris bien, c'est le cas ou jamais, car au milieu de tes grands éclats de rire cet homme se meurt. Heureuse foule ! pour ton demi petit écu, tu vas voir expirer, devant toi, le plus grand poète du monde. Jamais les empereurs romains, dans toute leur féroce puissance, n'ont assisté à une parçille hécatombe.

"15 Janvier 1622—21 Février 1673!... qui dira jamais le travail, le génie et les douleurs contenus dans cet étroit espace ? Il lutta jusqu'à la fin, passant d'une torture à l'autre, et quand enfin, dans la mascarade finale, il s'écria : 'Furo !' sa poitrine se déchira tout à fait. On l'emporta du théâtre. Il mourut à dix heures du soir. Le curé de Saint-Eustache, sa paroisse, refusa à cet excommunié la sépulture ecclésiastique, et l'archevêque de Paris ne permit qu'au bout de trois jours qu'il fût enterré sans prières, sans cérémonies, et sans honneurs."

Molière had two subjects of satire which he shared with every comedian and every buffoon, namely, the stock subjects of the aspiring citizen and the quack physician ; and he had two others which he made peculiarly his own, which were his own creation, the hypocrites who sham piety, and the pedants who set themselves up for judges of good taste.

Content at first to imitate the Spanish school of intrigue, in which all the *dramatis personæ* are cast in uniform moulds,

and delineation of character is entirely out of the question, it was not till late in his dramatic life that he found his real field and attacked the follies and foibles of the day. His *Avare*, his *Dépit Amoureux*, and even his *École des Maris* belong to no time and all time; while the *Précieuses Ridicules*, the earliest of his satiric comedies properly so called, was yet a sketch, and had to wait for six years before it found a true successor in the *Tartuffe*, the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and the *Femmes Savantes*, all of which belong to the last five years of Molière's life. His muse was to be a tree whose best fruit comes late, and in too small quantity.

The *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* has been put upon every stage; the rich citizen aping the manners of the great has been ridiculed in every literature; but never has this character assumed such fresh and bright colours as when handled by Molière. Exception has been taken to the last two acts of this play. "I allow" (says La Harpe) "that, in order to ridicule in M. Jourdain that pretension so common among wealthy plebeians, to appear on a par with the nobility, it was not necessary to make him so silly as to give his daughter in marriage to the son of the 'Grand-Turk,' and to turn 'Mamamouchi.' This grotesque exhibition was evidently intended to fill up the time usually taken up by the performance of two plays and to afford amusement for the crowd; but the first three Acts bear the stamp of good comedy."

No character in Molière's plays is more ludicrous than that of M. Jourdain; every one about him sets him off, his wife, his servant Nicole, the several masters whom he has engaged, the nobleman (his confidential friend and at the same time his debtor), the lady of rank with whom he is in love, the young man who loves his daughter and cannot obtain her hand on account of his not being a gentleman, all combine to set off the folly of the aspiring citizen, who has almost persuaded himself that he is of noble extraction, or at least believes that he has succeeded in making people forget his birth. The blunt and peevish humour of Madame Jourdain, the unreserved drollery of the servant Nicole, the quarrel of the masters about the ~~successes~~