THE FEMALE CHARACTERS

IN

MOLIÈRE'S COMEDIES

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In treating this subject, we will discuss it for convenience and clearness under five main heads with their appropriate sub-heads, as follows:-

(1). A brief sketch of Molière's life.
(2). His purpose in writing the comedies with especial reference to the female characters.
(3). Woman's role in the home, in society and in literature.
(4). Comparison of types and characters.
(5). Human passions portrayed.

MOLIÈRE'S LIFE.

Jean Baptiste Poquelin, called Molière (1622 - 1673), was born at Paris. His father, who had a position under the king, gave him
a good education. He finished a full law course at college. The theater had, however, an irresistible attraction for him and he became an actor contrary to his father's wishes. He then assumed the name of Molière. For many years he was director of a troop of good actors and traveled through the provinces. In 1665, after writing and acting many comedies with great success, he became a protégé of Louis XIV, and the latter gave him a pension and called his troop "la troupe du roi." During thirteen years of his life he gave to the public twenty-five comedies, many of which are masterpieces. He did a great work in correcting the evils of society and in reforming the theater. He died at the age of fifty-one, working hard to the very last.

HIS PURPOSE IN WRITING

THE COMEDIES.

Horror of vice and love of virtue were strong motive powers in all his works. He desired to study and depict society and the world. For after his first great success at Paris he said:— "Je n'ai plus que faire d'étudier Plaute et Terence, je n'ai qu'à étudier la société, le monde" In society he found vice and on the stage, low morality, he, therefore, attacked both in his comedies. His instrument in carrying out his purpose was ridicule; by it he attempted and to a large extent succeeded in bringing about reforms. He tried to teach the gentler sex their proper sphere in life, as we shall show presently.

In the Precieuses Ridicules, he tried to discountenance
affectation of language. In Les Femmes Savantes, he dealt a severe blow to pedanticism. He said: "Un sot savant est sot plus qu'un sot ignorant." (Act IV, Sc.3.) Whenever he had a chance, and that was often, he made the doctors the butt of his wit and sarcasm. Their pomposity, their foggy sentences, intermingled with Latin so as to make them still more unintelligible and therefore more "learned" to the common people, their long robes and high pointed hats, without which they would not write a prescription — all these were opportunities which our comedian did not neglect. Bigotry and hypocrisy were ridiculed in Tartuffe and avarice in L'Avare. In many of his pieces the custom of marrying a daughter for money was strongly opposed. Whoever has the most money can have her, was the policy of many people then, and it is true even today.

There is still one other minor purpose that he had in writing his comedies, and it was a hindrance to him: The necessity of writing to support both himself and his company. To do that he was compelled to please the public, which was necessarily a hindrance to the accomplishment of the best results.

WOMAN'S ROLE IN THE HOME, IN SOCIETY AND IN LITERATURE.

Woman's role in the home: — Although it was not Molière's belief that the wife should be a slave in the home, yet he thought that the husband should rule. For example, he should rule in regard to the marriage of the daughter. We see this in the Femmes
Savantes. Henriette's mother wishes and declares that she must marry Trissotin, a bel esprit. Her husband is opposed to him and wishes Clitandre for a son-in-law. He says: "C'est une chose infâme que d'être si soumis au pouvoir d'une femme. .... Et je lui veux faire aujourd'hui connaître que ma fille est ma fille, et que j'en suis le maître, pour lui prendre un mari qui soit selon mes voeux." (Act II, Sc. 9)

In regard to a woman's being a savant or bel esprit instead of raising her children well and managing her household affairs wisely, Chrysale also says: "Former aux bonnes moeurs l'esprit de ses enfants, faire aller son ménage, avoir l'œil sur ses gens, et régler la dépense avec économie, doit être son étude et sa philosophie." (Act II, Sc. 7.)

He thought it was the daughter's duty to obey, but made a decided exception to this in regard to marriage. As stated above she ought not to be married to one man in preference to another simply because he has more wealth. Nor should she be married against her wishes to one whom she has never seen and whom she does not know, while at the same time she is in love with another who is very suitable in every way. The parent or parents may have merely taken a notion to marry her to a certain person and therefore are obstinate and declare that she must marry him. As a general rule his lovers are not married until the amante has obtained her father's consent. But in a few cases this rule is broken, for example: Lucinde, in the L'Amour Médecin, has the ceremony carried out contrary to her father's wish. This is also the case with several wards who are married without their guar-
Moliere thought that a woman's first duty was to her home, her husband, and her children, and that society and literature should be secondary. But in society she should be natural not affected. He protested earnestly against affectation. This is very prominent in many of his comedies, especially in Les Precieuses Ridicules, and to a minor extent in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme. Affectation in dress, in conversation and in actions were some of the things which he ridiculed; also the foolishness of a woman's trying to move in a higher social and intellectual circles than those in which she was born and higher than she was capable of filling. The two young ladies Magdelon and Cathos in Les Precieuses Ridicules are striking examples of his attitude on this subject.

He portrayed many disagreeable characters in society both men and women. One kind is the literary "crank" who, as soon as she has written something, must go and read it to all her friends. Or she has written or learned a song and almost compels every one to hear her sing it. In short she feels perfectly free to trouble and torment her friends and chance acquaintances with anything in which she herself is interested.

After reading his comedies one has a general impression that he thought women should hold an intermediate position in society,
neither too prominent nor too obscure.

Woman's role in literature:— The ideas which he held as to woman's place in literature were not exactly modern yet many of them were very sensible. He thought that the home should hold the first place in a woman's thoughts; literature and other things should be subservient to this. In Les Femmes Savantes (Act II, Sc. VII.) he makes Chrysale say in speaking of his ancestors: "Les leurs ne lisaient point, mais elles vivaient bien; leurs ménages étaient tout leur docte entretien; et leurs livres, un dé, du fil et des aiguilles, .... Les femmes d'à présent sont bien loin de ces moeurs: elles veulent écrire, et devenir auteurs. Nulle science n'est pour elles trop profonde."

His object was not to entirely forbid literary pursuits to women but to rid the public of the pedantry of "learned" women. He hated only, "La science et l'esprit qui gâtent les personnes."

COMPARISON OF TYPES AND CHARACTERS.

The wide range of Molière's characters is remarkable, they include so many classes and are so varied. Even those of the same class and with much the same surroundings are almost entirely different, each has an individuality of its own. The originality and quality of the characters are also remarkable. They are real and true to nature.

The main types portrayed and the ones which I will discuss are peasants, servants, confidentes et suivants, wives and lovers.
Peasants.—Molière has used but few peasants in his works. As a class they are as intelligent as could be expected. A part of them speak quite good French and others speak patois. It is not probable that they knew how to read and write, for most French peasants of that age did not, yet there is nothing in the comedies by which it can be decided either way. As might be expected, as a class they are coarser than the other female characters except some of the servants. They are coarser in morals, desires and language. Wealth dazzles them, whether it comes in the form of a bribe or an aristocratic and wealthy lover. Charlotte and Mathurine in Don Juan are examples of this latter class. Charlotte is already engaged to be married but on meeting Don Juan for the first time, she agrees to marry him because he is rich and a nobleman and declares that he loves her. Yet if she had married him, he would have deserted her in a few days as he had many others before her. Fortunately she was prevented from doing so.

Servants.—This class has a wide range. It includes nearly all kinds from the coarse, ignorant and vulgar to those who are faithful, intelligent, refined, and quickwitted. Some are from the lower classes such as the peasants but a large share of them are illegitimate children. These were quite numerous in France at that time; This was largely due to their customs and laws. It also accounts to a large extent for many servants being so intelligent and quickwitted. This class furnishes some very bright, interesting and very important characters.

The description of peasants already given is also a descrip—
tion of many among the lowest servants.

There is one servant who is an especially prominent character. Toinette in *Le Malade Imaginaire*. She is an exception among his servants. She reminds one strongly of Dorine, a suivante, in *Tartuffe*. Not that you would take them to be the same character, for they are different in many respects but the resemblance appears in the many fine qualities shown in both: the attractiveness, brightness, intelligence and quickwittedness. Toinette is very sarcastic and at times humorous in her replies. In this, as in so many of his comedies, there are two lovers who are in trouble on account of the opposition of the girl's father. The step-mother is also opposed to the marriage but for a far different reason. She hopes to get the daughter put in a convent and thus get all her husband's money herself. She pretends to love him very much but loves only his wealth. Toinette, meanwhile, through skillful planning and maneuvering gains the father's consent to the marriage. In the third act in order to carry out her plans, she dresses as a doctor and acts the part to such perfection that even her master is deceived. By her skill she also reveals the hypocrisy of the step-mother and the daughter's true love for her father.

Confidantes et suivantes:—Probably for most people to understand what a confidente or a suivante is, it will be necessary to say a few words about them. The dictionary of the French Academy says: "Une suivante est une
demoiselle attachée au service d'une grande dame." A suivante then is about the same as a waiting maid, sometimes, however, the word is synonymous with servant. Instances of its use with this meaning occur in these comedies. For example, Dorine in Tartuffe occupies about the same position that Toinette does in Le Malade Imaginaire.

Confidente is a theatrical term and is defined by the dictionary mentioned above as "Une personnage secondaire de la tragédie, et, en particulier, de la tragédie classique française, qui reçoit les confidences des principaux personnages; par quoi le spectateur se trouve instruit des desseins et des événements."

These characters thus have a role of minor importance though more important than the servants. The heroines usually share many secrets with them and often rely on them for help when in trouble. A higher moral tone, in general, pervades this class than that of the servants. In some cases they conform exactly to the wishes of their mistresses even though these wishes are wrong, and in others they do the opposite. Claudine in George Dandin aids her mistress in her evil designs. On the other hand, Élise in Dom Garcie de Navarre and Philis in La Princesse d'Élide both hold different opinions than their mistresses although the opinions of either party is morally good. Marinette, in the Dépit-Amoureux imitates her mistress Lucile even to ridiculous extremes. She has a falling out with her lover simply because his master has quarreled with her mistress. She "makes up" again on the same principle.

As an example of one of the best among this class, we would
mention Dorine in Tartuffe. She is the brightest and best female character in the above mentioned comedy, and what is more she is one of the most interesting and attractive of all of Molière's women; so many of whom are the master productions of a master hand. She has a good intuitive judgement. She is not deceived by Tartuffe, the imposter, but recognizes that he is an imposter almost from the very first. In reply to Madame Poernelle who believes in him, Dorine says: "Il passe pour un saint dans votre fantaisie: tout son fait, croyez moi, n'est rien qu'hypocrisie." (Act I, Sc. I)

She talks much but always talks good common sense. Her language is good and usually free from anything low. She is very independent, says whatever she pleases to whomever she pleases. If she engages in a dispute she usually comes out ahead. Her mistress, Mariane, loves Valère and hates Tartuffe whom her father wishes her to marry. Although Mariane dislikes the imposter yet she hesitates and does not speak up boldly against marrying him until Dorine comes to her help and gets her roused up. After using all kinds of persuasion she finally gets Mariane to say: "Je ne serai point à d'autre qu'à Valère." (Act II, Sc. 4) Dorine although a servant is the one who makes the plans for and successfully brings about the marriage of Valère and Mariane.

Wives.- Here again Molière seemed to have had one of the same objects in view that he had for the whole of his comedies, i.e., to show women their faults and how to correct them. Most of his wives have faults of various kinds, such as: Infidelity, dishonesty, groundless jealousy, quarrelsomeness, revengefulness, de-
ceitfulness, lying, pride of birth. The fault of trying to be a savante and in consequence neglecting household duties, has already been discussed.

Among the examples of infidelity which he gives are Angélique in George Dandin and Elmire in Le Tartuffe. Each of them permits the attentions of a young man not her husband and allows him to tell of his love.

Jealousy is shown in Sganarelle, both the husband and wife being jealous of each other. The dénouement discloses how utterly groundless is their jealousy.

In Tartuffe, it is a man who is portrayed as a hypocrite but Molière portrays a feminine hypocrite, Deline, in Le Malade Imaginaire. She pretends to be very loving to her husband but when she hears that he is dead and supposes that it is true, she says: "Le Ciel en soit loué! Me voila délivrée d'un grand fardeau." And she commences to lay plans to seize his money and papers, but the pretended dead comes to life.

For two women who are good and sensible, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme and Les Amants Magnifiques should be read. Madame Jourdain is the one referred to in the former and Aristione in the latter. The princess Aristoine is also a good example of how a mother should treat her daughter in regard to marriage, as Molière seemed to think. This leads us to the following topic.

Lovers.—France's great comedian was a continual and keen-sighted observer of nature. He was customarily taciturn and dreamy when in society, at court or elsewhere, but his mind was not asleep. He was watching those around him getting new characters
for some new farce or comedy. Nowhere is the result of this better shown than in his lovers. They are true to life and moreover are taken from almost every walk of life from the Greek slave in Le Sicilien to the princess in La Princess d’Élide and the countess in La Comtesse d’Escarbagnas. The lovers are very numerous in the comedies, almost every one has two or more. They are as interesting and amusing as they are numerous. Most of them resemble each other in certain respects. The general plot in which they are engaged is about as follows: When the comedy opens the lovers are already in love and engaged. But the parents or guardian of the amante are opposed to their marriage. Often the parents have another choice for their daughter. Then the lovers resort to strategy, deceit, and lying to obtain the parent’s consent or to get married without their consent.

There is an exception to the above outline in Les Amants Magnifiques. Aristoine permits her daughter to choose her own husband and does not try to influence her in any direction. The father, Iphitas, in La Princesse d’Élide, gives Aristoine’s views, when he says to his daughter in regard to making the choice of a husband: "Si tu trouves où attacher tes voeux, ton choix sera le mien, et je ne considérerai ni intérêts d’État, ni avantages d’alliance; si ton coeur demeure insensible, je n’entreprendrai point de le forcer." (Act II, Sc. 4) The daughters in both cases make wise choices. Molière, through Aristoine and Iphitas, seems to give his own opinion on this subject, and this, it might be added, was entirely different from the accepted opinion of the day. He seemed to think that the lovers should use all kinds of trickery
and strategy in order to gain the consent of the parents rather than that the amante should be married for wealth or married to someone who was entirely unsuitable.

One amante, who is very interesting, is the character Célimène in Le Misanthrope. For one reason she is very different from most of Molière's lovers. She is a coquette and a widow. Nearly all his amantes love some one person, she does not, she seems to love all alike. She is a character that you cannot entirely fathom at the first reading, but which after study and repeated readings of the comedy, you will come to appreciate more and more. What adds still greater interest are the circumstances of the representation of the comedy in Molière's day. He like many other geniuses had much trouble in his private life. Among the greatest of these troubles was an unfaithful and unloving wife. She was an actress and acted the role of Célimène and he that of Alceste, holding the same relation towards each other there that they did in private life. Imagine the feeling which they must have been able to put into their parts.

Alceste loves Célimène but he objects to her permitting so many lovers around her and showing them so many attentions. She retorts: "Des amants que je fais me rendez-vous coupable? Puis-je empêcher les gens de me trouver aimable? Et, lorsque, pour me voir, ils font de doux efforts, dois-je prendre un bâton pour les mettre dehors?"
HUMAN PASSIONS PORTRAYED.

The human passions portrayed, similar to his characters, are extremely varied. He describes almost all passions that are known. They were so vividly portrayed that he aroused the bitter enmity of many. For instance, with Tartuffe and its picture of religious hypocrisy, he stirred up the deep-seated and lasting enmity of the clergy. Even after his death they would not allow his body to have religious burial but it was necessary to bury him at night.

Besides the several kinds of passions that have already been mentioned, there are many others: Shameless vice is portrayed in Don Juan; coquetry and misanthropy in Le Misanthrope; pride of birth in George Dandin; coarse jealousy in Le Cocu Imaginaire; would be gentility in Les Précieuses Ridicules and Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme; and deception, lavish prodigality, womanly resignation, egotism, fashionable swindling, vanity, self-conceit, roguery, impiety, and love of display in various other comedies.

Although he attacked the low morality of the stage and so many evil passions yet his comedies are not entirely free from immorality. Some parts of Le Medicin Malgré Lui, and a few places scattered through the other comedies are usually omitted in the representation on this account. But this immorality is not to be wondered at, it is rather to be wondered at that there is not more for we must consider the age in which he lived in order to judge his work justly. The moral tone of the French society of that day even that of the court was low and Louis XIV him-
self did not set any example for the better. It is unfair to ex-
pect that Molière would make the stage as refined as it is today
and yet he reformed it to a large extent.

As a general rule his women are pure and refined and noble.
Many of them are famous characters in literature and they are all
exceedingly interesting and instructive.