CHAPTER 1

A Bourgeois at Court

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(Translated by Jan Clarke)

When we first see or read Molière's plays, they seem to us to express an unusual spirit of freedom in absolutist seventeenth-century France where, thanks to a mistaken kind of shorthand, all transgression is thought to be off-limits. In fact, as Roger Chartier has shown in connection with *George Dandin*, in an argument that could be extended to the whole of the Molière repertoire: 'Molière makes us laugh, but was that his only aim? [...] Does the text of *George Dandin* not constitute a comment on society that could be expressed nowhere else in the seventeenth century?'[1] Thus, if we move beyond those characters who are caricatures, several of the dramatist's works highlight the customs of his time and evoke situations in which social ascension and/or mobility play an important role. In order to illustrate this, the present essay will focus primarily on three plays. An example of an upward mobility that is both positive and deserved is the character of Sostrate in *Les Amants magnifiques*, whom I have discussed in my article 'Sostrate ou l'ascension sociale au XVIIe siècle'[2] and who will consequently not feature in detail here. In a more ridiculous or even cynical register, it is the names of the eponymous George Dandin or Monsieur Jourdain from *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* that first come to mind. These two characters, the first a well-off peasant and the second a rich member of the bourgeoisie, represent the archetype of those men who wanted to rise above the social condition into which they had been born. Moving beyond the reception of these plays, which were performed and read both at court and in town, we will try to grasp in what ways Molière was an author at the intersection between these two domains, who made possible the meeting of two different social worlds, as much on stage as in the audience – a topic discussed by Roger Chartier in his highly thought-provoking article mentioned earlier. This interrogation of the idea of a 'society made up of classes' will lead us to question Molière's own social status: was he a transgressive and subversive bourgeois author or not?

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108694933.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Social Class in Molière's Works: Between Disparity and Upward Mobility

Following a custom in place since the Middle Ages, France was divided into three orders: the *oratores* (those who pray), the *bellatores* (those who fight) and the *laboratores* (those who work). In the first category were the men of the church, in the second the nobles and, finally, in the third, which was also called the Third Estate and which represented almost 98 per cent of the population, was everyone else, that is not only the peasants but also the members of the bourgeoisie. This idea of social class is omnipresent in Molière's plays. While Monsieur Jourdain is at the stage of just starting to be upwardly mobile, or even of just wanting to be, in *Les Amants magnifiques* and *George Dandin*, the situation is the opposite of what was usual. Generally, it was the daughters of rich bourgeois or lawyers who, thanks to their wealth, married gentlemen with a view to achieving upward social mobility. Whereas Sostrate, a mere general, marries the princess Ériphile, and George Dandin, a rich peasant, marries the *demoiselle* Angélique de Sotenville, who is the daughter of a gentleman. We are presented, then, with the social disparity that is brought about by cases of masculine hypergamy (marrying someone from a higher social background), which necessarily involves feminine hypogamy (marrying someone from a lower social background).[3]

Social Disparity

George Dandin's long monologue in Act I, scene 1 opens with this idea of social disparity. The deceived husband evokes from the outset the difference in class between himself and his wife: 'Ah! It's a proper business and no mistake to wed a member of the nobility; my marriage is a clear warning to all those of farming stock who want to rise above themselves and marry into a noble family as I have done.' The picture is clear: according to George Dandin, the failure of his marriage can be explained by their social mismatch. Dandin, who curses himself for having made such an alliance, returns to the topic repeatedly, and the whole play revolves around the disparity in his marriage. See, especially, Act I, scene 7: 'You asked for it, George Dandin, my old friend, you asked for it and it serves you right.' And Clitandre and Angélique also remind us of it: 'It must be said that the man who was given to you is hardly worthy of the honour he has received and that the union of a person like you with a person like him is an outlandish thing' (III. 5). Angélique's parents are not to be outdone. The

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Sotenville couple regularly evoke their superiority to Dandin (as in Act II, sc. 7), and it is clearly accepted by all the noble characters in the play that Angélique is socially superior to her husband, which Dandin feels bitterly, as when he declares to his wife: 'I know full well that because you are of noble birth you look on me as far beneath you' (II. 2). Nonetheless, immediately after this accusation, he reminds her that the ties of marriage are stronger than any social difference and outweigh it. The social disparity in *Les Amants magnifiques* does not appear as clearly, since it is only the denouement of the plot that makes possible the alliance of Sostrate and Ériphile, the victorious general's love for the princess having previously been hidden.

The Desire for Upward Social Mobility

In *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Monsieur Jourdain symbolises the desire to rise to a rank that is superior to his own. He has at his disposal sufficient means to expect to be able to buy a new social position. However, much of what he says reminds people that he is a bourgeois and, worse, a merchant, as when he goes over the sums that Dorante owes him (III. 4). Similarly, he thinks that he will be able to 'buy' the love of the marquise: 'There is no expense I would spare if I could only find the way to her heart. A woman of rank has charms for me that ravish my very soul. No price would be too high to pay for such an honour' (III. 6). The new class to which he aspires also requires him to dress 'like a person of rank' (II. 5) and imitate the behaviour of members of the nobility. All of this arouses mockery, whether from his servant Nicole (III. 1) or even his wife, the voice of common sense, who informs him that everyone is laughing at his manners (II. 2) and who continues: 'You're crazy, husband, with your notions. This has all come since you took to frequenting the aristocracy.' To which he replies: 'I show my good sense in frequenting the aristocracy. It's better than hobnobbing with shopkeepers' (III. 3). All the people on his payroll, fully aware of the reality, enter into the game, and the tailor and his apprentices address him by increasingly exaggerated titles (II. 5) to obtain his good graces and also his money.

In this burlesque comedy, where the ridiculous hero is obsessed with rising in social status, there remain nonetheless a few honest characters like Cléante, who refuses to pretend to be something he is not (III. 13). In the same way, the dancing master, even if he is pleased to earn money, would prefer it if Monsieur Jourdain understood better and appreciated more what he is teaching him. The music master shares this sentiment but is less

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scrupulous – 'that kind of incense [applause] won't keep the wolf from the door' – and comments that 'his [Monsieur Jourdain's] money outweighs his judgement' (I. 1). Ultimately, the mechanism of upward social mobility that Monsieur Jourdain desires – not immediate but for the subsequent generation – does not work because his daughter Lucille ends up marrying Cléonte (a union that Madame Jourdain finds more reasonable), who is not a gentleman. On the other hand, it can still function for George Dandin – who does not necessarily still desire it – because Madame de Sotenville comes from a region where women can transmit nobility, that is one where in customary law, nobility passed through the female line. In fact, as Anatole de Barthelemy notes, heirs could inherit noble maternal fiefdoms but were not properly ennobled: 'In 1661, those searching out false nobles challenged the use of the title *écuyer* (squire) by those who claimed to be noble through their mothers.' They did, however, have a particular status.[4] Thus, Madame de Sotenville reminds her son-in-law that he has the honour to be allied with the de la Prudoterie family, 'into which I had the honour of being born; a family whose nobility passes through the distaff side, through which your children, by this great privilege, will become gentry' (I. 4). At the same time, George Dandin gains the name of Monsieur de la Dandinière, which is just as ridiculous as that of his mother-in-law.

Is Molière a Transgressive and Subversive Bourgeois Author?

According to the dictionaries of the time (those of Richelet, Furetière or the Académie Française), tragedy and comedy were 'representations', designed to show human characters in a realistic way, as opposed to the novel, which belonged to the domain of 'fiction'.[5] As a bourgeois author operating in town and at court, Molière expressed the sentiments of his time, without us being able to know for sure whether or not he shared them. However, the important thing would seem to be that they were able to be expressed in public, although it is difficult to know what the spectators would actually have taken away from the royal entertainments of 18 July 1668 at Versailles (*George Dandin*), February 1670 at Saint-Germain-en-Laye (*Les Amants magnifiques*) or October 1670 at Chambord (*Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*).

The Criticism Contained in Molière's Plays

By satirising the preoccupations and customs of his age, Molière necessarily evokes contemporary points of view, in which social status

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plays a large part. The comic author regularly flirts with important and topical societal problems. Thus, when Cléonte requests Lucille's hand in marriage (III. 12), Monsieur Jourdain asks him if he is gentleman. The lover replies in the negative, preferring to allude to his true estate with origins that are nonetheless honourable, thereby challenging usurpers of nobility and those who pretend to be something they are not (which also constitutes a direct attack on Monsieur Jourdain). And the nobility searches, begun in 1661 and formalised by a decree of the King's Council on 22 March 1666, which were designed to flush out false nobles who were not paying taxes, were still a topical issue in 1668. In the face of Monsieur Jourdain's declaration of an unsurmountable defect – 'You are not a gentleman. You shan't have my daughter' – Madame Jourdain reminds him of their shared bourgeois and even mercantile origins. Speaking of her daughter, she also evokes the ideas of the time regarding the careful matching of marriage partners: 'What your daughter needs is a husband of her own class. Far better to have a decent man who is handsome and well off than a gentleman who is needy and a freak.' Indeed, Antoine Furetière, in his *Roman bourgeois* (1666), mentions (fictitiously) that 'a tariff was established to evaluate people and to match them'.[6] Jourdain has money to give his daughter and wants to marry her into the nobility. Madame Jourdain is opposed to female hypergamy, which was common in courtly (rather than bourgeois) circles, and advocates instead social endogamy, with only slight restrictions. Here we are in town, in the commercial milieu: 'Marriages above one's station always end badly. I don't want my son-in-law ever to reproach my daughter with her parentage, or her children be ashamed to call me granny' (III. 11).

The question of marital alliances is omnipresent in all three plays and reflects the conceptions of the time, namely the complete control of parents, and of the father in particular, in forming unions. These were often geared to obtaining upward social mobility, and Monsieur Jourdain reminds his wife strongly of this fact when he says: 'I shall think of marrying off my daughter when a suitable party presents himself' (III. 3), which the son of the Great Turk (in fact Cléonte) appears to be (V. 6). As for Angélique, she represents the (young) coquette who wants to be free from her (old) husband and to be courted (II. 2). She reproaches Dandin with the fact that she did not consent to her marriage and that this only came from her parents, even though this was the norm in the seventeenth century. Angélique consequently

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exempts herself from the undertaking contracted by her parents and her husband and puts forward a modern vision of matrimony:

> Do you really think that it's possible to cherish certain husbands? One marries them because one can't avoid it, and because one is dependent on parents whose only concern is money; but one knows how to give them no more than is their due, and one is not the least bit inclined to show them greater consideration than they deserve. (III. 5)

How Efficient Is This Criticism?

Molière sometimes seems to criticise the nobility head on but always does so in an exaggerated way that makes the person who utters the social criticism seem ridiculous. Besides, the programme distributed to accompany the entertainment of 18 July 1668 – apparently either written by Molière or else closely overseen by him – includes the following: 'The subject is a peasant who has married the daughter of a gentleman and who, during the course of the play, is punished for his ambition' (*OC*, 1, 1016). Molière seems, then, to be toeing the line dictated by royal power and expressing a real judgement, since Dandin has contravened the social order by marrying above his station. The commentary is, though, more nuanced in the account of the event given by Félibien: 'The subject is a rich peasant who, having married the daughter of a country gentlemen, receives only scorn from his wife and her parents, who had only accepted him as their son-in-law on account of his great wealth' (*OC*, 1, 1161). George Dandin is not, then, the only person responsible for his situation, and the Sotenvilles must also bear their share since, in order to raise up their house, they have accepted to marry their daughter to a rich peasant. These members of the country gentry are well aware of what they have to lose when their daughter asks for a separation (III. 7) and do not want to agree because the consequences will be too considerable for them. Angélique is obliged to go along with them and consents to obey her father's injunction ('You must, daughter, because I tell you to'). It is through such lines that Molière depicts society, reminding people above all that a woman remained an eternal minor, first as the daughter of her father, then as the wife of her husband. But it was not inevitable, and Madame Jourdain is there to remind us of women's importance, particularly when she replies tartly to her husband's suggestions regarding their daughter: 'She's as much mine as yours' (V. 7).

Molière also proposes a reflection on what constitutes 'true' nobility. For him, this does not reside in the Sotenvilles, those members of the country

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gentry who put the commonplaces of their caste – honour, virtue, *honnêteté* (respectability), the family's venerability and so on – above everything. The baron de Sotenville appears ridiculous when he claims to be known at court and to occupy important functions (I. 5). Faced with Clitandre, who is a man of the world and seasoned in the ways of the court (as the perfidious Angélique suggests when she opposes the court and the provinces in Act II, sc. 3), they appear, like Dandin, to be mere provincials. Molière is not, then, criticising the nobility of the court, which he could not allow himself to do, but rather another type of nobility: one that was excessively satisfied with itself and consequently ludicrous. Thus, Félibien writes that:

> The entire play is handled in the same manner as the sieur Molière habitually used in his other plays. That is, he represented the traits of the characters he introduced in so natural a way that nothing could be seen that was more lifelike than his manner of showing the pain and grief of those who marry above their station. And when he depicted the mood and manners of certain country nobles, he gave them no characteristics that did not perfectly express their true image. (*OC*, 1, 1161–2)

Nobility is no more to be found in Monsieur Jourdain who, by his exaggerated attitudes and gestures, imitates it while trying to attain it. Admission and assimilation into the nobility generally occurred through imitation, and if Monsieur Jourdain plays the game, albeit by making himself ridiculous, the same cannot be said for George Dandin. It was necessary to 'live nobly' in order to validate one's new status, and there was also the idea of 'reputation'.[7] Nor does nobility lie in Dorante, a great lord, but one who takes advantage of the apprentice gentleman, nor even in Dorimène, whom Dorante seems to love only for the financial opportunities she represents (she is a widow and mistress of her property). For the dramatist, nobility resides far more in Cléonte, who refuses to pass for what he is not. In this way, and like Sostrate, Lucile's young lover attains the greatness of soul and heart that Molière is defending. Through these characters with their exaggerated traits, Molière directs his ridicule at all classes of society (as with the philosopher in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* who, in Act II, scene 3, claims by virtue of his knowledge to be superior not only to the masters of music and dance but also the fencing master). It is ridiculous people who are attacked, not nobles or non-nobles.

Finally, the major point that Molière raises in these three plays is a constant questioning of the social hierarchies and the very conception of nobility during the reign of Louis XIV. This could either be a question

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of race (birth), or be obtained by a position conferring it, or be obtained by the simple will of the King, who bestowed it by means of letters of nobility. Nevertheless, it was understood in different ways, and the heroes each have their own idea of how to attain it. Sostrate gains it through virtue and courage,[8] while Dandin and Jourdain hope to obtain it by an automatic mechanism: the exchange of money for nobility. In fact, if it was possible to accede to nobility through imitation (which numerous manuals on contemporary civility tried to teach),[9] this came about above all by constant frequentation of the court, as is show by the chapter La Bruyère devotes to it in *Les Caractères*. The court was a microcosm that moved and evolved daily, and it was necessary to live there in order to understand perfectly its codes and customs. It is precisely because of these last aspects that George Dandin and Monsieur Jourdain fail in their ambition. The latter remains obsequiously deferential and does not appreciate the scale of the status he would like to have. He continues to talk to Dorante as if he were a simple servant (see, notably, Act III, sc. 6: 'Oh, Sir, your goodness overwhelms me. I am all confusion to think that a gentleman of your rank should condescend to do for me what you have done'). Appearances also count, and it was necessary to embrace the ideas as well as the behaviour of the nobility in order to join the second order.

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By presenting different comic situations, Molière never expresses a unified view but offers various suggestions and then leaves it up to the public, according to its rank or the environment in which it sees the play, to receive them in one way or another. The nobles at court, in town or in the country, either could not or did not want to recognise themselves in the Sotenvilles or Dorante, any more than the bourgeois in the Parisian theatres seem to have seen their own representative in Monsieur Jourdain.

Notes

1. Roger Chartier, '*George Dandin*, ou le social en représentation', in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 49 (1994) (pp. 277–309), p. 281. I would like to thank Anne-Madeleine Goulet for having drawn my attention to this extremely useful reference.
2. Mathieu da Vinha, 'Sostrate ou l'ascension sociale au XVIIe siècle: entre mythe et réalité?', in Laura Naudeix, ed., *Molière à la cour*: Les Amants magnifiques *en 1670* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020), pp. 253–66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108694933.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Émmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jean-François Fitou, 'Hypergamie féminine et population saint-simonienne', in *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 46 (1991), pp. 133–50.
4. Anatole de Barthelemy, 'Recherches sur la noblesse maternelle', in *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*, 22 (1861) (pp. 123–55), pp. 128, 131.
5. Roger Chartier, '*George Dandin*, ou le social en représentation', pp. 281–2.
6. Antoine Furetière, *Le Roman bourgeois* (1666), in *Romanciers du XVIIe siècle*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 919.
7. Arlette Jouanna, 'Mémoire nobiliaire. Le rôle de la réputation dans les preuves de noblesse: l'exemple des barons des États de Languedoc', in Chantal Grell and Arnaud Ramière de Fortanier, eds., *Le Second Ordre: l'idéal nobiliaire* (Paris: Presses de l'université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999), pp. 195–206.
8. See my article 'Sostrate ou l'ascension sociale'.
9. Alain Montandon, ed., *Pour une histoire des traités de savoir-vivre en Europe* (Clermont-Ferrand: Association des publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, 1995).

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