The Bungler: Background on Molière and his Times

I. The Era

A. Neo-classicism dictated a sense of decorum and appropriateness—art needed to be morally uplifting and drama needed to adhere to the unities. Behavior needed to be morally right.

B. The reign of Louis XIV (the “Sun King”) brought a time of ego, pageantry, laughter and dancing. The patronage of the king was essential to life, as Molière found.

1. it was a civilization so metropolitan, so insular, so self-sufficient
2. it was ignorant of events outside of France
3. it was disdainful of the provinces

C. Louis XIV was a patron of the arts, especially theatre

1. Molière’s troupe was frequently summoned to Versailles to perform or a private home where the King was a guest

II. Education and the Professions

A. Formal education remained very largely in the hands of the Church, and almost entirely concerned with the upbringing of boys

1. it looked backwards- towards Latin for literature and the language in which other academic disciplines were taught

B. Girls were taught at home, or else in convents (where standards were regarded as mediocre)

1. the educated ladies of this period acquired their intellectual formation through a combination of their own determination, and the help of an enlightened abbé or a tutor
2. the educated woman had to be careful not to make a parade of her learning, or she could fall foul of the gossips or satirists

C. The scientific and intellectual advances of the century took place outside the universities— and were due to thinkers working and experimenting on their own (like Descartes and Pascal)
D. The Academie-Francaise (founded in 1623) was not truly considered (yet) a major seat of independent, liberal thought.

1. few authors were able to live solely by the work of their pens, and those that were full time (journalists, translators, reviewers) were not considered to be illustrious
2. the few noteworthy literary works were written by gentlemen of independent means

E. However, an emerging movement which found social gatherings in the homes of titled French women were known as salons, provided an alternative to the uncomfortable and military atmosphere at Court

1. salons were responsible for introducing refinement of thought, delicacy of feeling, and a care for the purity of expression to the men and women who were to form Molière’s audience
2. the concept of preciosity developed in the salon of the Mme de Scudery

   a. her two books, Le Grand Cyrus (1649-53) and Clelie (1654-60), the favorite reading of Molière’s women spectators, were long episodic romances, and elaborated courtship rituals, estrangements, misunderstandings, kidnappings and every other kind of romantic obstacles
   b. the literary output of these salons expressed their members’ absorbing interest in affairs of the heart

3. the salons created an intelligent lay-public passionately interested in things of the mind and the critical discussion of literature
4. finally, the salons posed a real threat to male supremacy

III. Social Indicators in Seventeenth Century France

A. Molière managed to communicate social identities in numerous indirect ways.

B. The ability to notice outward appearances and to distinguish between them was vital to Europeans in the 17th century, when each social body had its place in a hierarchy of possessions, uniforms and behavior.

1. Money

   a. the livre tournois was the basic unit of account, containing 20 sous or sols, each of which contained 12 deniers- a scale similar to the former English pound, shilling and pence
b. the principal coins of the reign on Louis XIV were the *écu*, worth three livres, and the gold *louis* worth ten

c. peasants dealt with a barter system (with coins reserved for tax payments), artisans and merchants could amass enough for dowries and land transactions, but the Bourgeois’ estates were usually not very liquid (replaced by notes, offices, rentes and goods)

2. Offices

   a. The rather large proportion of bourgeois who scurried to pay a few thousand livres for the many insignificant offices (royal upholsterer, forest and road administration, notary bureaus) or settle for a meager appointment suggest their attractiveness as a foothold in the hierarchy of dignities that would lead to nobility.

   b. Office-holding generally signified substantial fortunes and social mobility

3. Clothing

   a. it was important to recognize immediately and by sight the status of those in one’s environment in order to render or demand the proper honors

   b. the robe was worn by clergy, legal and medical profession

   c. masculine attire consisted of a *chemise* (white shirt), *haut-de-chausses* (knee breeches), cotton hose, a vest-like *pourpoint*, a collar or *rabat*, a hat, a mantle, and buckle shoes- and a purse hung from the belt

   d. nobility could outrageous proportions in their attire; the aristocratic peacock might place hoops of lace (*canons*) over his silk stockings, and ribbons over his high-heeled shoes- making the “fop” a highly recognizable type

   e. distinguishing between bourgeois and noble attire, fabric and color were just as important as style, as well as their decorations of lace, feathers, fancy embroidery of gold or silver thread

   f. the lower classes wore what they could afford, with lackeys and valets better off than the working poor

   g. for women, there was less variation in style- with dress long, necklines low, with a *fichu* (kerchief) to cover the neck and bosom in case of cold weather or prudery

   h. for the rich, damask, velvet and satin; for the poor silk and wool (*camelot de Hollande*) or silk and cotton (*ferrandine*)
i. the extent to which this society was obsessed with clothing as a mark of rank is shown in the king’s repeated attempts to promulgate and enforce sumptuary laws

j. Louis’s influence on fashion was enormous: billowing wigs which forced shaved heads, and tried to intervene in ladies hair to discourage the two or three foot high creations

4. Servants

a. the basic manservant was the *lacquais* (footman) and was a utility worker whose tasks could include serving, errands, cleaning, tending the fire and receptionist

b. the female counterpart was the *servante* (maid) whose tasks were similar to the man’s, with the exception of the preparation of food (done by cooks)

c. these servants were completely at the mercy of their masters, and beatings were not out of the question

d. slightly higher in status were the wet nurse and *suivante* (a ladies valet) for the women and the cook, *maître d’hôtel* (supervisor of a domestic staff and household stores), tutor and *intendant* (the manager of several households, knowledgeable in mathematics and usually employed by a wealthy aristocrat) for the men

5. Houses and Land

a. no ordinary worker could own property

b. the sumptuous *hotels* of the aristocracy were the most prominent feature in the urban landscape

c. rural lands were subject to the seigneurial system: the demesne (manor and fields belonging to the seigneur) and the *censives or tenures*, where the peasants who lived there in effect “owned” the land in the face that they had the use of it, but owed fee to the seigneur and the requisite taxes on its use and products

6. Transportation

a. the farmer or shopkeeper would have a horse, while the laborer might also have a team and wagon

b. for the bourgeois, the *chaise a portuer* (sedan chair) was the favored mode

c. carriages were the most sophisticated and expensive way to travel, which the constant innovations and changes made throughout the century caused them to remain a luxury item
d. rental carriages were available to city dwellers who needed a vehicle for a limited amount of time
e. there were stage coaches linking Paris to the provinces for people of middle social ranks

7. Language

a. it was possible to differentiate between many social levels in the basis of a person’s language
b. the most prominent jargons in Molière are those of the “liberal professions”- doctors, lawyers and scholars
c. there is the use of titles and forms of address to signal status

IV. A 17th century attitude to character

A. According to Marin Cureau de la Chambre (a noted physiognomist and personal physician to the King whose 1659 work was the basis for this notion) stated that the human personality was formed by a properly proportioned mixture of the four fluids of the body:

1. blood,
2. phlegm,
3. choler (or yellow bile)
4. melancholy (or black bile)

B. This concept came to be known as temperament determinism and Molière’s audiences believed this

V. The Influence of the Italian theatre on Molière

A. The renaissance of Italian theatre began in the latter half of the 15th century, when the works of Plautus and Terence were discovered and translated into Italian and developed into two different forms: commedia erudita and commedia dell’arte

1. commedia erudita, or Italian literary comedy, accepted the rules of Aristotle and their style was sustained at a high level to please and aristocratic audience in the beginning
   a. five act comedies of intrigue in which ardent young men seek to gain possession of the girls they love (who seldom appear on stage)
   b. the hero must maneuver against a stern and miserly old father
   c. the hero is aided by crafty slaves or servants
   d. disguise, eavesdropping, impersonations and schemes for money are key plot elements
e. false identities or questions of birth are suddenly resolved; obstacles must disappear so a marriage can take place by play’s end
f. a time-span of 12 to 24 hours in a conventional setting, a street or square in front of two or three houses equipped with doors and windows
g. by the middle of the 16th century, themes and situations from the novella (romantic adventures, adultery and cuckolding, girls disguised as boys, mix-ups in darkened rooms) were introduced

2. commedia dell’arte flourished in Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries, found a warm and lasting reception in France and was a light popular entertainment

a. the troupes adopted dependable, standardized procedures for dramatic structure and characterization
b. comedies were divided into three acts, and their plots were appropriated from the Latin theatre, the novella and even the commedia erudita
c. it tended to duplicate the literary comedy, except that the coherent plotting of the comedy gave way to playfulness and spectacle
d. the unities of time and place are still honored
e. there was a collection of stock characters:
   - Pantalone: w/red breeches and jacket, black cape and hat, a mask w/a hooked nose and a pointed beard,
   - Dottore: dressed in black and endlessly talking with a foolish show of erudition
   - Capitano: dressed in an elegant colorful uniform, which stood out in contrast to his ridiculous tirades
   - two kinds of servants or zanni: a clever one and a stupid one
   - two pairs of young lovers (females appeared regularly on the stage which was a profound innovation of the commedia dell’arte)
f. the whole costume (w/masks) together with certain habitual tricks or mannerisms along with a few basic traits of character, which spectators expected to see repeated with minor changes and refinements in different dramatic situations

B. The earliest of Molière’s farces and comedies suggest a familiarity with the popular Italian theatre as well the medieval French comedies
1. Elements of medieval French farce featured:

   a. a complaining husband who wants to punish his wife (along with a servant, peasant, artisan or shopkeeper) all of whom were commonplace, coarse and stupid creatures
   b. all portrayed ludicrously and satirically
   c. a few scenes and a simple plot, climaxed by a ruse, beating or practical joke
   d. written in eight syllable verse
   e. by the 17th century, these plays dropped out of popularity in the city, but remained popular in the provinces (where Molière and his troupe gained much experience)

2. Elements similar in French farce and commedia on which Molière could draw were:

   a. simple or facile caricatures without much depth
   b. certain age-old themes like the avarice of men and the deceits of women
   c. chance encounters and other easy plot devices
   d. a vein of mockery and satire
   e. good measure of playful buffoonery

3. Molière was authorized to share the Petit-Bourbon theatre with the Italian plays of Tiberio Fiorelli (Scaramouche) who had been in residence for five years at that time and the extended residence in Paris caused the commedia to undergo many changes:

   a. a new emphasis on exaggerated acting and impressive stage techniques such as pantomime, buffoonery, vulgarity, farcical lazzi, satire and burlesque, dancing and even acrobatics
   b. they sought out melodramatic themes, ventured into mythology, devised spectacular scenery and invented machines to produce miraculous effects
   c. they put on sensational, smutty shows always clinging to the main structural features of commedia

4. The Italians borrowed French themes and satire of manners, while French actors borrowed the stock character, plots, gags and routines, and Molière appreciated the stylization and succeeded in combining that with the traditional materials of French farce.

5. Molière offers little information on stage business and interpretation of roles
VI. The audience and Molière’s plays

A. The lay-out of the playhouse at the Palais-Royal was in six sections:

1. *theatre*- two or three rows on either side of the stage (possibly some audience members even standing), exclusively male and the best paying seats
2. *loges*- the front row of boxes along the side walls of the auditorium
3. *amphitheatre*- the elevated seats at the back of the space
4. *loges haute*- the second row of boxes
5. *loges du troisieme rang*- the third row of boxes
6. *parterre (pit)*- the main floor, exclusively male (but not noblemen) and not seated