The Comic in the Theatre of Moliere and of Ionesco: a Comparative Study.

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THE COMIC IN THE THEATRE OF MOLIÈRE AND OF IONESCO:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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by
Sidney L. Pellissier
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1963
August, 1965
DEDICATION

The present study is respectfully dedicated

to the memory of Dr. Calvin Evans.
The writer wishes to thank his major professor, Dr. Elliott D. Healy, for his knowledgeable suggestions and sympathetic guidance, without which the writing of this dissertation might not have been possible.

The writer is also grateful to Mr. Henri Janin and to Dr. Rebecca Cassel for having carefully read this work and having proffered many helpful suggestions.
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Many of the comedies of Molière (1622-1673), France's greatest writer of neo-classical comedy, and those of Ionesco (1912- ), a leading figure in the French avant-garde theatre, are essentially similar. Both playwrights possess rich comic vision, for there is to be found in their plays an impressive variety and intensity of comic effects. The present study demonstrates largely via structural analyses that although the plays of these writers may differ apparently, they manifest a number of organic similarities.

The first part of the study is concerned with two basic problems implicit in a comparison of Molière and Ionesco. The first is to formulate some working conclusions concerning the nature of the comic. A survey of selected theories of laughter and the comic discloses that there is no definitive work on the subject, but that certain constants such as the notions of contrast, surprise, and utility (personal and social) can be derived from the various theories investigated. Bergson's contention that the comic constitutes something mechanical or rigid encrusted upon the living was deemed both the most comprehensive theory as well as the one best suited to the structural analysis of dramatic comedy. The second problem was to attenuate the traditionally proffered critical opinions of Molière which imply that he is primarily a moralist.
This was effected by carefully exposing the tenets of the new Molière criticism which insists upon interpretation of his theatre as disinterested, purely theatrical art.

In the second part of this study a detailed comparative structural analysis of Les précieuses ridicules (Molière) and La Cantatrice chauve (Ionesco) demonstrates that many of the same comic techniques are employed in these one-act comedies to create a totality of comic tension. A consideration of the analogous use of delusion as a comic technique in painting personages such as Molière's M. Jourdain of Le Bourgeois gentilhomme and Ionesco's old man of Les Chaises creates awareness of the authors' similar ability to create comedy of things essentially pathetic. An investigation of disguise as a comic technique as manifested in the presentation of the central character of Tartuffe and La Legon likewise demonstrates the talent of Molière and Ionesco for comic treatment of the sinister. The views expressed by both dramatists on the nature of dramatic comedy and its criticism as seen in three polemic pieces, La Critique de l'école des femmes, L'Impromptu de Versailles, and L'Impromptu de l'Alma, are analogous. Both authors express faith in the Aristotelian concept of theatre and state that plays are to be criticized primarily according to their success or failure as vehicles for entertainment.

It was concluded that the comic is difficult to define because it constitutes a multiplicity rather than a unity, and that it manifests greatly varying moods or qualities. Examples of the comic of gaiety, of pathos, and of the sinister in the repertory of both dramatists were cited. It was further concluded that their plays are essentially similar because both playwrights are representational artists who view the world
with all-pervasive comic vision which enables them to turn virtually all they witness to the purposes of comedy.
Molière, France's greatest writer of neo-classical comedy, and Eugène Ionesco, a leading figure in the French avant-garde theatre, are kindred spirits. Such a statement may seem unwarranted in view of the traditionally ventured critical judgments of Molière; he is seen as a moralist, the bon bourgeois giving dramatic form to his philosophy of life, the creator of a number of regular comedies that are universally acclaimed masterpieces. Ionesco, on the other hand, is a self-declared enemy of the bourgeois way of life, has made no attempt to fit his comedies into any regular form, and has not been accorded unanimous critical acclaim. How then, can these two men separated by nearly three hundred years and apparently polar points of view and dramatic literary production be compared? A careful study of the plays of these two writers will reveal a number of organic similarities. Both Molière and Ionesco possess a highly developed sense of the comic, and their plays bear witness to their intense comic vision. There is to be found in their comedies an impressive variety of comic effects produced through skilled manipulation of character, situation, and language. Above all, they both manifest theatrical sensitivity and know how to create unflailing comic tension.

It will be the purpose of this study to investigate the affinities
of the comedies of Molière and those of Ionesco. No attempt will be made to trace any direct influences Molière may have had on Ionesco; such an attempt would be tedious and unrewarding. Neither will there be emphasis placed upon the superficial similarities inherent in the dramatic literature of the two men. Instead, we will proceed to a direct consideration of the many manifestations of the comic element in their plays. It is our opinion that the literary critic of comedy must not be overly concerned with the philosophic, moral, or didactic elements of comedy; it should be his task to deal with the comic aspects of a piece. Such a study of the comedies of Molière and Ionesco will reveal essential similarities of comic style.

There are two basic problems which are implicit in a study such as the one proposed. In order to be able to select and give an appreciation of the various comic elements in the theatre of Molière and Ionesco, we must make an effort to discern that which is comic. So the first, and more difficult of the two problems is to come to some workable conclusions about the nature of the comic itself. The second major difficulty to be encountered in the present study is that the focal emphasis of traditional criticism of Molière, the work of nearly three centuries of scholarship, must be dismissed. This is not to imply that such criticism is worthless; it is merely not applicable to our needs. Traditionally Molière has been looked upon as the greatest French comedian, and it would be difficult to dispute such a position. Yet very little can be found in the writings of most moliériastes that deals directly with his comedy as comedy; he is seen primarily as a moralist and thinker. However, there is a major block of twentieth century criticism, which we shall refer to as the new criticism, that takes a decidedly
different approach by relegating the "ideas of Molière" -- the bourgeois philosophy of life attributed to him by traditional critics -- to a position of negligible import. The new criticism deals directly with Molière as a comedian, and analyzes the dramatic structure of his comedies in an effort to understand the sureness of his ability to excite laughter. In short, the new criticism concerns itself with the comic element in Molière's comedy. Since our approach to his comedies will be much the same, and since we will be completely neglecting the traditional critical point of view, it will be necessary to review at close hand the tenets and methodology of the new criticism.

Only after having formulated some workable conclusions pertaining to the nature of the comic and having discussed the new criticism of Molière will we be able to begin our discussion of the affinities to be noted in the comedies of Molière and Ionesco. From that discussion we should be able to conclude that their comedies are only apparently different but essentially similar.
CHAPTER II
LAUGHTER AND THE COMIC:
A DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY OF SEVERAL PROMINENT THEORIES

In order to formulate some conclusions about the nature of the comic that will serve as tools in the critical analyses to be made of the comedies of Molière and Ionesco, it will be necessary to refer to the theories of outstanding students of laughter and the comic. A survey of selected theories will disclose that laughter and the comic have escaped definitive analysis, at least until the present; it is a simple fact that there is no universally accepted explanation of what constitutes comic effect. It will be the purpose of the following descriptive survey to indicate the most common points of agreement of the several theories to be discussed. Although the conclusions to be drawn from the theories presented for consideration will be somewhat critical in nature, the survey itself is not intended to be critical, but merely a factual resume of the theories which are presented in chronological order. Precedence has been given those theories which are most closely related to dramatic comedy.

Plato made the observation that laughter and the enjoyment caused

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by dramatic comedy are closely related to playful malice\textsuperscript{2}, a state of mind which causes the individual to take pleasure in the misfortunes of others. The comic personage suffers from one of several possible forms of self-ignorance regarding his material, physical, or spiritual worth. In order to be truly comic, the personage whose fault is one or more of these forms of self-ignorance, must also be weak, for if he were powerful as well as deluded about his personal merit, he might readily become odious. That one should laugh at another's weakness and his self-delusion implies a certain relation between pain and pleasure, for malice is a painfully toned emotion.\textsuperscript{3} Thus, for Plato laughter is accompanied by a mixed feeling of pleasure and pain.

Whereas Plato's treatment of laughter and the comic is only incidental to his consideration of the notion of pleasure as an admixture of emotions, Aristotle deals more directly with the comic as a dramatic genre in his \textit{Poetics}; here too, however, the discussion is somewhat brief, comedy being relegated to a position inferior to that of tragedy. Aristotle states that comedy presents an imitation of persons of an inferior moral bent, faulty not in any and every way, but only in so far as their shortcomings are ludicrous. He classifies that which is ludicrous as part of the \textit{genus} ugly, but not painful or displeasing. To illustrate this point he calls attention to the comic mask which is ludicrous, that is, at once ugly and distorted without suggesting pain.\textsuperscript{4}


\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 74.

The quality which provokes laughter is one that is disproportionate or unsymmetrical, and as one student of Aristotle has pointed out, the disproportion can be both moral and intellectual as well as the merely physical distortion manifested in the comic mask. Aristotle promised to elaborate on his theories of comedy and the comic, but whether he ever did so or not remains a mystery, for no such manuscript has ever been located. However, his summary treatment of comedy in the Poetics forms a groundwork for the opinions of the critics of the Renaissance, and is thus significant.

In De Cratere Cicero affirms, as did Plato, that the ridiculous or comic is concurrent with baseness and deformity:

All matter for ridicule is therefore to be found in such defects as are observed in the characters of men who are not esteemed, nor in miserable circumstances, nor deserving to be haled to punishment for crimes; such topics neatly handled excite laughter. Jests may be nicely turned also on deformity and bodily defects.

Cicero is aware, however, that the true nature of laughter is not readily grasped by the reason; he dismisses the issue not without a measure of wit, saying that he wills the task to Democritus, who, as it was traditionally believed, laughed whenever he beheld human folly. One of Cicero's significant observations on the nature of laughter is that laughter can be occasioned by a defeated expectation, a notion which has been more thoroughly explored by modern students of laughter.

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Quintilian's opinions on laughter are largely the same as those expressed by Cicero; he did, however, make the observation that laughter arises from no single cause. One laughs not only at witty and agreeable utterances and actions, but also at timid, angry and stupid ones; thus the ludicrous cannot be said to have a fixed origin. He notes that laughter, though apparently playful and trifling, has a nearly despotic power; that is, people often laugh against their will, or involuntarily. Laughter also frequently dissipates hatred and anger. Modern behaviorists have come to much the same conclusion in noting that laughter is one form of release of inner tension.

As was earlier mentioned, and as Smith emphasizes in *The Nature of Comedy*, many of the critics of the Renaissance base their notions of laughter and comedy upon the fragmentary remarks of Aristotle. Castelvetro maintains that comedy has to do with human turpitude, either physical or mental, and then lists the comic devices employed on the Roman stage. Maggi adds to the standard Aristotelian maxims the idea of surprise that both Cicero and Quintillian had already noted: one laughs not only at that which is not offensively deformed or ugly, but also at that which is unexpected. Much attention was directed to the actual form of the comic dramatic poem in Renaissance critical and didactical literature. For example, in his *Poetices Libri Septem* (1561), Julius Caesar Scaliger writes:

> The beginning of a comedy presents a confused state of affairs, but this confusion is happily cleared up at the end. The lan-

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8 Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 93.


guage is that of everyday life. In subject matter we have: reveling, weddings with drunken carousals, tricks played by slaves, drunkenness, old men deceived and cheated of their money.11

However, considerations of the role of comedy as a social corrective were not neglected. The Ars Poetica (1563) of Minturno states that comedy has a dual mission, that it must teach as well as entertain. He was early in his declaration that comedy has a humanizing influence: "The comic poet awakens in the souls of those who listen pleasant and humane feelings."12 Thus, if tragedy is to cause an emotional catharsis, comedy is to act as a mild emotional purgative. In more basic terms, comedy is pleasurable and intended for enjoyment.

With René Descartes one finds a direct treatment of the nature of laughter. It will be remembered that the writers of antiquity were not primarily interested in the nature of laughter per se, but focused their attention on what caused laughter, namely the ludicrous, and that the critics of the Renaissance concentrated their efforts on the form of the dramatic poem and its social import. Descartes describes laughter itself in Article CXXIV of Les Passions de l'âme:

Le Ris consiste en ce que le sang qui vient de la cavité droite du cœur par la vena arterieuse, enflant les poumons subitement & à diverses reprises, fait que l'air qu'ils contiennent, est contraint d'en sortir avec impetuosité par le sifflet, où il forme une voix inarticulée & esclatante; & tant les poumons en s'enflant, que cet air en sortant, poussent tous les muscles du diaphragme, de la poitrine, & de la gorge: au moyen de quoy ils font mouvoir ceux du visage qui ont quelque connexion avec eux. Et ce n'est que cette action du visage, avec cette voix inarticulée & esclatante, qu'on nomme le Ris.13

11 Smith, op. cit., p. 17.
12 Ibid.,
Thus one has here a description of the physiological processes which occur to produce laughter: blood rushes from the right cavity of the heart into the lungs at remittant intervals, forcing air out of the lungs in small quantities, the air causing the voice mechanism to produce hissing and inarticulate sounds. Sound is not the only apparent result of laughter; as air rushes from the lungs, all the muscles of the diaphragm contract, causing the neighboring muscles of the neck and face to contract likewise, or to smile.

Descartes does not confine his discussion of laughter to a purely physiological description; he also proffers some philosophical considerations on the subject. The six basic emotions, or passions primitives of which man is capable are admiration, love, hate, desire, joy, and sadness; all other emotions are composites or varieties of these six.\textsuperscript{14} Laughter is one of the principal outward signs of the emotion joy when that emotion is colored by an admixture of admiration and/or hate; for it is Descartes' opinion that when one is truly joyful, laughter is not occasioned.\textsuperscript{15} An example of the emotion joy colored by hate is cited in Article CLXXVIII, "De la moquerie." If one unexpectedly discovers some small flaw (mal) in the personality of a person who is otherwise above reproach (digne), the element of surprise provokes one to laughter. The laughter in this instance is tinged with malice, a variety of the emotion, hate.\textsuperscript{16}

Descartes acknowledges, as did Cicero and Quintillian, that laughter

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 115.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 153.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 195.
is difficult to control:

Ainsi plusieurs ne scauroient s'abstenir de rire estant châtouillez, encore qu'ils n'y prennent point de plaisir. Car l'impression de la Joye & de la surprise, qui les a fait rire autrefois pour le même sujet, estant reveillée en leur fantaisie, fait que leur poumon est subitement enfle malgré eux. 17

So Descartes is forced to view laughter as an involuntary response, even in an article entitled "Un remede general contre les passions," (sic) from which the above quotation is excerpted. The scientific concepts upon which Descartes based his theory have, of course, been greatly modified as a result of subsequent scientific research. Yet his contributions to the literature of laughter are significant as one of the earliest such considerations of this phenomenon. It must be noted, however, that there were many medical works which antedate Descartes' physio-philosophic treatment of laughter, such as the Traité du ris (1579) of Joubert, De risu causis et effectis (1603) of Laurentius Politianus, The Anatomie of Humours (1609) of Grahame, and Gelatoscopia seu Divinatio ex Risu (1611) of Aldrovisii. 18

Perhaps the best known theory of laughter and the comic of the seventeenth century is that of the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. In The Elements of Law he writes:

There is a passion which hath no name, but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance we call LAUGHTER, which is always joy; but what joy, what we think, and wherein we triumph when we laugh, hath not hitherto been declared by any. 19

The key word in this passage is triumph; laughter is occasioned by a feeling of superiority, a "passion which hath no name." In his Leviathan

17 Ibid., p. 216.
18 Smith, op. cit., pp. 36-37.
Hobbes gave this passion a name which has become quite famous; he called it "Sudden Glory."

Sudden Glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their (one's) own, that pleaseth them (one); or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.20

Thus one laughs when he suddenly senses his superiority, whether it be a question of his being superior to another person or to himself. The laughter which arises out of a feeling of superiority or "sudden glory" over oneself is explained by Hobbes as that laughter which occurs when one remembers a past folly that he has committed, one which he would not commit in his actual state of superiority. It will be noted that Hobbes' theory treats only the laughter of derision or scorn, and is reminiscent of Plato's idea of playful malice. Though it has been severely criticized, Hobbes' hypothesis has been used as a starting point by some modern philosophers and psychologists.

After the flowering of Molière's comic genius in the latter half of the seventeenth century, the French stage witnessed a decline in comic production which lasted for nearly a century. Two general reasons have been cited for this decline: 1) the public taste veered toward subrational entertainment such as the Italian opera, harlequinades, spectacles featuring animals, etc., and 2) the gradual but overpowering infiltration of the comic stage of sensibilité, which was manifested in the bourgeois tragedy, the comédie larmoyante, and the melodrama.21 Public taste in the eighteenth century also favored the witty or sardonic epigram, perhaps nowhere so aptly handled as by Voltaire. In an article entitled "Esprit"

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in his Dictionnaire philosophique he writes:

Ce qu'on appelle esprit est tantôt une comparaison nouvelle, tantôt une allusion fine: ici l'abus d'un mot qu'on présente dans un sens, et qu'on laisse entendre dans un autre; là un rapport délicat entre deux idées peu communes; c'est une métaphore singulière; c'est une recherche de ce qu'un objet ne présente pas d'abord, mais de ce qui est en effet dans lui; c'est l'art de réunir deux choses éloignées, ou de diviser deux choses qui paraissent se joindre, ou de les opposer l'une à l'autre; c'est celui de ne dire qu'à moitié sa pensée pour la laisser deviner.22

This passage demonstrates a keen insight into the workings of the comic element in language. Upon careful analysis it will be noted that in each item in Voltaire's list can be found an example of contrast, incongruity, or surprise. He does not, however, make any attempt to arrive at a philosophic appreciation of the nature of the comic, and has been quoted as saying that laughter is inexplicable.23 The opening phrases of his very brief article entitled "Rire" in the Dictionnaire philosophique clearly indicate that he places little merit on scholarly investigation of laughter:

Que le rire soit le signe de la joie comme les pleurs sont le symptôme de la douleur, quiconque a ri n'en doute pas. Ceux qui cherchent des causes métaphysiques au rire ne sont pas gais; ceux qui savent pourquoi cette espèce de joie qui excite le ris retire vers les oreilles le muscle zygomatique, l'un des treize muscles de la bouche, sont bien savants.24

Despite such invective, such scholarly investigations of laughter and the comic continued to be pursued.

21 Ratermanis and Irwin, op. cit., p. 3.
22 Voltaire, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Garnier Frères, Libraires-éditeurs, 1879), XIX, p. 3.
23 Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de gens de lettres, edited by Denis Diderot. An unsigned article on p. 299 of Volume XIV states: "La cause du rire à la comédie, dit Voltaire, est une de ces choses plus senties que connues; l'admirable Molière, ajoute-t-il, et Regnard quelquefois, excitent en nous ce plaisir, sans nous en rendre raison et sans nous dire leur secret."
Under the direction of Denis Diderot, the formidable Encyclopédie, which had been originally conceived as a translation of Chamber's Encyclopaedia, was to become a storehouse for a wealth of knowledge in all the sciences, arts, and trades. Specialists in every field of knowledge contributed articles to the Encyclopédie; among such contributors was Marmontel, an esteemed student and critic of literature, who wrote some articles pertaining to humour, laughter, and comedy. In his article entitled "Comique," Marmontel insists upon the relative nature of the comic, saying that what is funny for one society or one individual need not necessarily be so for another, the reason being that comic effects are the outgrowth of social surroundings. A comic effect is the result of a comparison (conscious or unconscious) that one makes between his social behaviour and that of another person, the prime condition being that the person comparing must have the more favorable social behaviour:

L'effet du comique résulte de la comparaison qu'on fait, même sans s'en appercevoir, de ses moeurs avec les moeurs qu'on voit tourner en ridicule, & suppose entre le spectateur & le personnage représenté un différence avantageuse pour le premier.

In the above excerpt, Marmontel is speaking of comic effect as it is produced theatrically. He implies that theatrical comic effects depend upon haughtiness or superiority in the spectator, or, more simply, upon malice. And indeed, in his article entitled "Comédie" he makes the statement that comedies find their origin in malice:

\[ \text{24} \text{Voltaire, op. cit., XIX, p. 374.} \]
\[ \text{25} \text{Encyclopédie, III, p. 681.} \]
\[ \text{26} \text{Ibid., pp. 681-82.} \]
La malice naturelle aux hommes est le principe de la comédie. Nous voyons des défauts de nos semblables avec un complaisance mêlée de mépris, lorsque ces défauts ne sont ni assez affligeants pour exciter la compassion, ni assez révoltants pour donner de la haine, ni assez dangereux pour inspirer l'effroi.

Thus we laugh at others' faults as long as these faults are not serious enough to cause us to react emotionally. A number of modern students of comic laughter, notably Henri Bergson, insist upon the incompatibility of laughter and emotion. In order for a comic effect to be produced, a certain distance, which Marmontel calls complaisance vicieuse is necessary between the laugher and the object of the laughter.

Marmontel observes that the joy and laughter produced by one's feeling of superiority are intensified if an element of surprise is introduced. He also stresses the corrective powers of laughter; if laughter at the expense of others is something less than worthy in its essence, it is just that such laughter at least have the power to correct other human vices. Here he touches upon the concept popularized in the Renaissance that comedy plays the role of a social corrective, and is a didactic art.

Elsewhere in the Encyclopédie can be found an unsigned article dealing with laughter from a physiological point of view. In the article "Ris ou Rire" laughter is vaguely defined as an "émotion subite de l'âme que paroit aussitôt sur le visage, quand on est surpris agréablement par quelque chose qui cause un sentiment de joie." The article gives a

27 Ibid., p. 665.
28 It must be remembered that the present survey is concerned primarily with comic laughter. There also exist types of laughter which are unrelated to comedy and comic effect, such as nervous laughter, hysterical laughter, etc.
29 Encyclopédie, ibid., p. 665.
30 Ibid., XIV, p. 298.
description of the physical manifestations of laughter (shortness of breath, contraction of facial muscles, etc.) and attempts to define the various types of laughter ranging from the most subdued smile to uncontrolled hysteria. Significantly, the author makes the prediction that man will probably never be able to explain completely the true nature of laughter:

On ne saurait expliquer comment à l'occasion d'une idée, ce mouvement se produit aux levres & au reste du visage; on ne doit même espérer d'y parvenir...31

Nineteenth century philosophers were quite interested in the unsolved mysteries surrounding the nature of laughter. A philosophic evaluation of laughter and comedy published in the mid-nineteenth century sees laughter as rooted in egotism and comedy as an artistic appeal made to the ego. In his Esquisse d'une philosophie, François Lamennais writes:

La comédie nous montre...le monde tel qu'il est, dans sa vérité mesquine et triviale, et flatte secrètement le principe mauvais de l'individualité égoïste. En un mot, selon les anciens... la comédie excite le rire.32

He then begins a discussion of laughter, observing that philosophers before him had done little to clarify the true nature of laughter. The work of previous philosophers on the subject could be summarized, he states, in a single affirmation: that laughter is an exclusively human phenomenon, and consequently, an attribute of intelligence. Lamennais, accepting this affirmation, proceeds to investigate to which element of

31Ibid., p. 299. We feel that this is a remarkable prediction. The present survey will disclose that laughter has escaped definitive analysis. Only Schopenhauer felt he had completely solved the problems of laughter and the comic.

human nature laughter makes its appeal.

Par son essence, il (le rire) nous paroit être l'instinctive manifestation du sentiment de l'individualité: d'où l'innombrable multitude des modifications qu'il présente, suivant les modifications également innombrables que peut éprouver l'individualité elle même...33

To clarify this statement he remarks that laughter occurs for the first time in human life at about the same time a child begins to sense that he is a separate, individual human being; 34 for laughter is naturally associated with the joy of being (existing) and of being oneself. As the child matures, laughter continues to be associated with self; not only comic laughter, but all other varieties as well.

Lamennais is also concerned with laughter stimuli, that which is generally referred to as the ridiculous:

Tout violation de l'ordre, des lois naturelles et même conventionnelles qui règlement les choses, choque l'intelligence, et, selon la gravité de cette violation et de ses conséquences par rapport à nous ou à la société, nous nous indignons, ou nous rions, et le ridicule n'est que le désordre réduit aux proportions de la sottise.35

Disorder provokes laughter, but he who laughs experiences either consciously or unconsciously some form of personal gratification. To illustrate this idea, Lamennais discusses the relationship of laughter and feelings of superiority: the laugher usually feels superior to the person being ridiculed. How then can one justify or explain self-directed laughter, or laughing at oneself? Lamennais explains this phenomenon as being produced when the super ego (le moi) perceives a form of the ridiculous "en quelqu'une des régions inférieures de l'être,

33Ibid., p. 269.
34Modern child psychology maintains that the human infant begins to distinguish that he is a separate being and not merely an extension of the mother when he is about one year old. Laughter is observed in much younger infants.
The implication here is that detachment or distance is necessary to laughter, even in the case of self-directed laughter. If, for example, one discovers within oneself the desire to indulge in some weakness and one can suppress the desire, laughter may result as a product of triumph; the laugher has been able to put distance between himself and one part of his personality. Not only does laughter imply superiority and detachment, it is also associated with ugliness. Lamennais views the smiling face as a distorted one and, as such, not worthy of association with moral grandeur: "Qui pourroit se figurer le Christ riant?" The smile, too, is fundamentally akin to the sentiment of individuality, or egotism.

Dramatic comedy, a stimulant of laughter, is a deterrent to man's moral perfection:

La comédie attache et plaît, en donnant à l'homme la conscience de sa supériorité personnelle, en mettant sous ses yeux le vivant tableau d'infirmités morales dont il se croit exempt; elle flatte l'amour propre, elle nourrit la satisfaction intime de soi-même. (…) Elle correspond au penchant natif, en vertu duquel l'homme se concentre et se complaît en soi. Sous ce rapport, sa tendance est opposée à celle d'où résulte le perfectionnement de l'homme moral."

Such is the philosopher Lamennais' evaluation of laughter and comedy.

35 Lamennais, op. cit., p. 370.
36 Ibid., p. 371.
37 Lamennais somewhat attenuates this rather harsh judgment that smiling is to be equated with ugliness by making the statement that smiles associated with goodness, tenderness, etc., do not vilify.
38 Lamennais, op. cit., p. 375.
In it we see an elaboration and extension of the ideas touched upon by Jean-Jacques Rousseau almost one hundred years earlier. His theory of superiority is an outgrowth of Hobbes' idea of "sudden glory."

In a "Remark" of the Critique of Judgement Emmanuel Kant writes:

"Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." There is a semantical difficulty which hinders one's understanding of the preceding statement; it is problematical as to exactly what meaning Kant attaches to the word "expectation." Sully's interpretation is a well-founded one in the light of Kant's other remarks; the former writes that:

"expectation" here stands for a general attitude of mind, a mode of apperceptive readiness to assimilate any idea of a certain order, that is to say, standing in a recognizable relation to what is presented. It is the attitude in which we appreciate the evolution of a plot in fiction when this appears natural and does not give a shock to the consciousness.

That is, as long as a given situation follows a course that we might "expect" it to take, it will be perceived as a normal or predictable occurrence. On the other hand, should events take a sudden turn, and thereby come to some unforeseeable or "unexpected" conclusion, we will...

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39 In his Lettre à D'Alembert Rousseau opposed the establishment of a theatre in Geneva on the basis that the theatre, and especially comedy, was a corrupting influence.


It would appear that the word "affection" is imperative to an understanding of Kant's theory; yet it seems to have escaped the attention of astute students of the comic such as Greig, Smith, Sully, etc. Some theoriciens see laughter as a purely intellectual process with physical manifestations, while others see it as emotion, or even instinct. To call laughter an "affection" seems to make it possible to include mental, physical, emotive, and instinctive aspects within a single definition.

laugh. It will be easily noted from the illustrative anecdote that
follows that the humour of a number of jokes can be explained according
to Kant's theory. A man trying to arrange an impressive funeral for a
deceased rich relative was upset because he was having a technical problem
with the mourners he had hired: the more he paid them to appear bereaved,
the more cheerful was their facial expression. 42

According to Kant, two other criteria for a successful joke besides
the disappointment of an expectation are that it must be momentarily
deceptive and must contain some absurdity. He equates laughter with grati-
fication, or the physical sensations associated with well-being. Laughter
is primarily a physical pleasure, although reason is incidentally called
into play and experiences a momentary, but active enjoyment. Kant des-
cribes the effect of laughter on the human body as similar to a cord being
stretched and then suddenly relaxed; when we perceive the absurdity in a
comic situation, the illusion previously created by our "expectation"
is dissipated. Then "the mind turns back to try it (re-evaluate) once
again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation
it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation. This...must oc-
casion a mental movement, and an inner bodily movement harmonising
therewith, which continues involuntarily and fatigues, even while cheer-
ing us..." 43

In addition, Kant makes the observation that a laughter provoking
stimulus and music both produce similar effects on man; namely, they
both induce "changing free play of sensations...that have no design at

42 Kant, op. cit., p. 224.
Further, both music and that which incites laughter are associated with games. Games set up a kind of internal motion in persons playing them by which all the vital processes of the body are stimulated; that is, games often call into play hope, fear, joy, wrath, and scorn. On the other hand, "music and that which excites laughter are two different kinds of play with aesthetical Ideas, or with representations of the Understanding through which ultimately nothing is thought; and yet they can give lively gratification merely by their changes." So even though laughter makes an appeal to the intellect, it is primarily a pleasurable experience for the body.

Both laughter and the enjoyment of music imply a reciprocal involvement of the mind and body. Kant makes this important distinction: that in the appreciation of music, bodily sensations proceed to esthetical ideas, whereas in laughter, the bodily sensations are occasioned by the mind. These considerations lend considerable clarification to his statement that laughter arises from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation. For Kant laughter is primarily physical, involuntary, stimulated by a defeated expectation, and is associated with good health. In laughter he sees a means by which man can counterbalance the miseries and stumbling blocks encountered in human experience.

Still another nineteenth century philosophic interpretation of laughter, that of Arthur Schopenhauer, takes a different approach to the problem of laughter and the comic. In The World as Will and Idea he writes that "here (in his treatise), after so many fruitless earlier

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44Ibid., p. 221.
attempts, the true theory of the ludicrous is given, and the problem which was proposed and also given up by Cicero is definitely solved."  

His theory maintains that all things comic result from a basic incongruity of that which is thought and that which is perceived. Whereas sense perceptions are unfailingly correct, thought processes are subject to error; when one finds that a judgment he has made proves to be erroneous, laughter may result. Schopenhauer writes:

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. It often occurs this way: two or more real objects are thought through one concept, and the identity of the concept is transferred to the objects; it then becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view. It occurs just as often, however, that the incongruity between a single real object and the concept under which, from one point of view, it has rightly been subsumed, is suddenly felt. Now the more correct the subsumption of such objects under a concept may be from one point of view, and the greater and more glaring their incongruity with it, from another point of view, the greater is the ludicrous effect which is produced by this contrast. All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous.  

Basically, Schopenhauer's theory maintains that laughter is caused by an awareness of a rational faux pas. When one realizes that things are not as he had previously thought them to be, he laughs. Although thought and reasoning powers are stimulated by sense perception, they are not as accurate and are often totally removed from the reality of things.


47 Ibid., pp. 276-77.
perceived. As was stated earlier, Schopenhauer maintains that perception is always right, for perception is a primitive source of knowledge. Laughter results when perception gets the better of reason:

As a rule laughing is a pleasant condition; accordingly, the apprehension of the incongruity between what is thought and what is perceived, that is, the real, gives us pleasure, and we give ourselves up gladly to the spasmodic convulsions which this apprehension excites. The reason of this is as follows. In every suddenly appearing conflict between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right; for it is not subject to error at all...Its conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter...cannot get down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades of difference of the concrete. This victory of knowledge of perception over thought affords us pleasure. (...) It must therefore be diverting to us to see this strict, un-tiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 279-80.}

When what is thought corresponds exactly with reality, the thinker is in a serious state of mind. A serious man is certain that things are as he thinks them to be; therefore, the transition from seriousness to laughter is easily occasioned. Schopenhauer states that the more a man is capable of seriousness, the more he is able to laugh. He gives an interesting explanation of the ludicrous as seen in obscene jokes: sexual relationships are fundamentally serious. When they are treated lightly, as in a joke, the resulting incongruity of a thing basically serious being treated in a flippant manner causes laughter. Laughter is also briefly treated as an agent of social correction. That is, when one is laughed at at a time when he is not trying to be ludicrous, he is deeply offended because his ability to see things as they are is put in question. Laughter in this case asserts that there is a great
incongruity between our conceptions and the objective realities." 49

Such is the essence of Schopenhauer's thoughts on laughter and the comic.

George Meredith's An Essay on Comedy was published in 1897, some twenty years after its author had delivered a lecture at the London Institution on the idea of comedy and the uses of the comic spirit. His essay has become quite famous and has been often employed as a textbook for university courses on the drama, on literary types, and on the theory of poetry in general. 50 For Meredith comedy is social in origin and dependent upon society. A good comic poet is a rare phenomenon because he needs a cultivated society which possesses a subtle delicacy -- too much or too little laughter or the penchant for sentimentality in his audience is deadly to the comic poet's art. Meredith maintains that with the exception of Shakespeare, the French produce better comedies than the English, the reason being that the French tend toward a generalized perception of human nature. 51 He writes that the comic poet is often misunderstood because he is chiefly concerned with externals, and yet must make his appeal to the intellect, for:

The laughter of comedy is impersonal and of unrivaled politeness, nearer a smile -- often no more than a smile. It laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; it might be called the humour of the mind. 52

Therefore, it is not good comedy's intent to arouse emotion.

He sees the Comic Spirit as rooted in the common sense of mankind,

49 Ibid., p. 281.


51 Ibid., p. 86. It comes as no surprise that Meredith's preferred comic poet is Molière.

52 Ibid., pp. 140-41.
its function being that of a social corrective. The Comic Spirit is wary of disproportion and helps man to develop a social sense by means of "humanely malign" laughter:

Men's future upon earth does not attract it (the Comic Spirit); their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk; the Spirit...will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them; followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit."53

In short, Meredith views comedy and the comic as a panacea for social ills, and sees the comic poet as a teacher whose duty is to show the world what ails it. The criterion by which good comedy is to be judged is the emotional or mental effect it produces on the spectator or reader. As Lane Cooper points out, for Meredith the pleasure afforded by the comic writer is primarily intellectual and only secondarily emotional.54

In the light of other theories of the comic and laughter presently under discussion, it is interesting that Meredith's viewpoint does not completely exclude comedy's appeal to the emotions. In fact, at one point in his essay he writes that one way to evaluate one's capacity for comic perception is by being able to laugh at a loved one without loving him less.55

53Ibid., p. 142. This listing of attitudes and situations which are corrected by laughter closely parallels comic characters and situations found in the comedies of both Molière and Ionesco.

54Ibid., p. 18.

55Ibid., p. 133.
Le rire, Essai sur la signification du comique by Henri Bergson offers probably the best-known theory of laughter and the comic, as well as one of the most universally accepted of such theories. It was originally published as a series of three articles in the Revue de Paris in the spring of 1899; slightly revised and published together as a single essay, the work had fifty printings during Bergson's lifetime. The fact that Bergson originally intended the essay for consumption by the general public accounts for the relatively simple form of the work and the avoidance of technical terms and formal refutations of former theories. However, due to certain difficulties of a semantic nature, we will here quote from the English version, Laughter; An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, a translation by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell authorized by, and done in collaboration with Bergson. Bergson's essay deals first with some general considerations of the comic, then with the comic element in situation and in words, and finally with the comic in character. The present discussion parallels Bergson's three-fold division, and is purposefully more detailed than the treatment of other theories discussed in our survey of selected theories of laughter and the comic. It will be largely from Bergson's point of view that we will later deal with the comic elements in the plays of Molière and those of Ionesco.

Of the comic in general Bergson cites three prime characteristics:

1. The comic is strictly human; although we laugh readily and often at persons, things and places rarely excite laughter. When we do laugh at a thing, for example, a strange straw hat, we are...

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56 David Victoroff, Le Rire et le risible, Introduction à la psychosociologie du rire (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953), p. 12. Victoroff also mentions that Bergson's theory is widely attacked in part or in whole, and then proceeds to dispute it himself. It is our opinion, however, that no one has been able to disprove definitively Bergson's theory.
not laughing at the straw itself, but at the peculiar form into which some human has fashioned it.

2. The comic makes its appeal to the intelligence alone and implies absence of emotional feelings. Indifference is laughter's environment, and for a comic effect to be total, something like a momentarily anesthesized heart is necessary.

3. The comic excites laughter, and laughter is a utilitarian, socially significant phenomenon. Laughter is a group function and serves as a corrective measure directed against individuals who differ from the socially accepted norm.57

Inelasticity is a key word to the understanding of Bergson's interpretation of the comic; he feels that any inelasticity or rigidity is readily comic because it is in direct opposition to life, which always implies freedom of movement and adaptability. That is, if we laugh at a running man who stumbles and falls, it is because he is guilty of inelasticity of movement. He seems to have been victimized by a mechanical bodily movement (running) that he was unable to change in time to counter the effect of stumbling. He is comic in this instance because his muscles continued the act of running when something else was in order; he fell because he was acting mechanically instead of freely.

Comic vices are similarly occasioned by a certain imbalance or rigidity. The comic vice, by its rigidity, simplifies us; that is, a victim of a comic vice is unable to make flexible adaptations in life, for he is constantly catering to the impulses and needs of his vice. Bergson cites this fundamental difference between comedy and drama; in a drama, passions or vices are so completely incorporated into the characters portraying them, that the vices become secondary and attention is drawn to the character; in a comedy, a vice always retains an independent existence.

and is itself the central character. It is for this reason that so many comedies have a common noun as title, such as Le Misanthrope, Le Menteur, for example.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 14-15.} He also makes the point that a comic character is generally comic in proportion to the degree of his unawareness or ignorance of self; a comic person is an unconscious one, for were he aware of being comic, he would adjust his actions, at least in appearance, in order to avoid being laughed at.

Bergson states that society is suspicious of all inelasticity, that of character, mind, and even of body, for they are signs of eccentricity or divergence from the norm, and may even imply some subversive and, therefore, threatening activity. Laughter at such inelasticity is seen as a social gesture because it inspires fear in the individual at whom it is directed. So that which is rigid is comic, and laughter is its corrective. It is for this reason that Bergson feels that laughter does not belong exclusively to the realm of esthetics; yet it does have something esthetic about it, since it comes into being at a moment when society and the individual are freed from the worry of self preservation, that is to say, emotionally inactive.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 19-20.} This concept is clarified in the closing pages of the essay where Bergson defines the relationship that comedy bears to life and to art.

When a human body reminds us of a machine, its attitudes, gestures, and movements are laughable. A public speaker’s gestures in themselves are not laughable, but when he continues to repeat them without variation, they become so. The reason is that a truly vital life should rarely re-
peat itself, so that whenever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always are suspicious of something mechanical at work. Such is Bergson's basic definition of the comic: it is seen as something mechanical encrusted upon the living. He stresses the idea that there is a logic of the imagination which is not the same as the logic of reason, which is called upon in comic perception. It is something like the logic of dreams, that is, fundamentally built upon free association. Bergson's illustration of such logic is pertinent; if we admit that a man in disguise is comic, then a man we regard as disguised is also comic. So be analogy, any disguise can be looked upon as comic, not only that of a man, but also a disguise of society or even one of nature. As an example of nature in disguise, Bergson cites the comic potential in a forest in which many of the trees bear posters and advertisements; such a scene could excite laughter. Of society in disguise he writes:

Since we are both in and of it (society), we cannot help treating it as a living being. Any image, then, suggestive of the notion of society disguising itself, or of a social masquerade, so to speak, will be laughable. Now, such a notion is formed when we perceive anything inert or stereotyped, or simply ready-made, on the surface of living society. There we have rigidity all over again, clashing with the inner suppleness of life. The ceremonial side of social life must, therefore, always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view.

In order for any social ceremony to become comic, our attention needs to be directed toward its form, and we must neglect its matter, or raison d'etre. For example, if we were to see a group of elegantly dressed

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60 Ibid., p. 34.
61 Ibid., p. 41. Sigmund Freud's theory of the comic, which will not be discussed in the present survey, is psychoanalytically oriented and stresses a similar idea. Le Rire antedates Freud's Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten (1905).
62 Ibid., p. 44.
people waltzing in a ballroom, there would be no occasion for laughter. However, were we not able to hear the music, the scene could well be hilarious; our attention would be drawn to the ceremony, the dance itself.

Bergson explains why certain professional men such as doctors are often the butt of comedies. Some professional men often forget that their professions were created to serve the public, and not vice versa. Their constant attention to form and the mechanical application of rules brings about a kind of professional rigidity or automatism. He cites Molière's L'Amour médecin as a case in point; Dr. Bahis states that it is preferable to die following the rules of the profession than to recover by violating them!

In the conclusion of the first chapter of his work Bergson makes the important observation that the comic is largely dependent upon powers of association:

Many a comic form, that cannot be explained by itself, can indeed only be understood from its resemblance to another, which only makes us laugh by reason of its relationship with a third, and so on indefinitely, so that psychological analysis, however luminous and searching, will go astray unless it holds the thread along which the comic impression has travelled from one end of the series to the other.63

It is for this reason that it is often difficult to appreciate rationally the "logic" inherent in a comic stimulus.

In Chapter II Bergson discusses the comic element in situations and in words. He feels that there is no break in continuity between the child's delight in games and that of the adult's delight in laughter; theatrical comedy is seen as a sort of game which plays at imitating life,

63 Ibid., p. 65.
which more or less mechanically arranges a series of events and places them on the stage for our amusement.

Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement. 64

Three children's games, all of which excite laughter in the child -- the jack-in-the-box, the dancing jack (marionette), and the rolling snowball -- are discussed in their relation to the comic element in situations employed by dramatic comedy to excite laughter in adults. The jack-in-the-box effect is basically a struggle between two stubborn elements, one of which repeatedly but unsuccessfully tries to subdue the other. This effect is readily noticed in a Punch and Judy puppet show: the policeman appears, he is knocked out of view with a bat, reappears, is struck again and again, but persistently springs back. Bergson states that many a comic scene can be referred to this simple arrangement, and cites Molière's Mariage forcé in which Sganarelle tries in vain to have himself heard by the philosopher, Pancrace, who is something of a talking-machine, working automatically. As the scene picks up momentum, it physically takes on the jack-in-the-box appearance; Sganarelle begins pushing Pancrace into the wings of the stage, only to have the latter spring back to continue his speech. Finally, Sganarelle succeeds in forcing the philosopher into the house, but suddenly, a window flies open, and out pops Pancrace's head. 65 In such a scene the central element of the seeming spring which is bent, released and then bent again, would appear to be repetition. Now such repetition as occasioned by a jack-in-the-box type of physical action can also exert a comic effect on a verbal plane. Bergson writes:

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64 Ibid., p. 69.
65 Ibid., p. 71.
In a comic repetition of words we generally find two terms: a repressed feeling which goes off like a spring and an idea that delights in repressing the feeling anew.\textsuperscript{66}

He turns again to Molière for an illustration, this time to the famous scene in Tartuffe in which Dorine, the maid, is trying to inform Orgon, who has just returned to his home, that his wife has been ill during his absence. Orgon repeatedly interrupts Dorine's speech with inquiries as to the health of the robust Tartuffe. Bergson sees in this speech pattern a spring or jack-in-the-box effect which is being unsuccessfully repressed. A similar effect can be noted when a comic character is in conflict with himself, that is, when he tries to suppress an aspect of his personality that is constantly trying to force its way to the surface. Alceste of Le Misanthrope is a case in point; his honesty, which he realizes is socially unacceptable, seems to keep him in a constant state of conflict with himself and his social environment.

The second children's game discussed is that of the dancing jack or puppet on a string, in which the child controls the movements of the puppet. Bergson notes that there are many comedies in which one character thinks he is acting or speaking freely, but in reality is being manipulated by the machinations of another character. This is especially true in comedies where a servant is in control of the outcome of events. He feels that all that is serious in life comes from our freedom; therefore, any given scene, real, serious, or dramatic, can become comic, given the point of view that our seeming freedom is always governed by necessities.\textsuperscript{67}

The third children's game under consideration, the rolling snowball,

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., p. 73.
\textsuperscript{67}Ibid., p. 79.
is linked with the idea of gathering momentum and increasing proportion: a snowball rolling downhill, much to a child's delight, goes faster and faster and becomes larger and larger. To illustrate the rolling snowball technique, a common device of light comedy can be cited: a man stumbles entering a room, bumps into a servant, who spills a tray of drinks on the hostess, who backs up suddenly, pushing her husband out of the window through which he was peering, etc.  

Now it is a characteristic of any mechanical arrangement to be totally reversible; therefore, a comic effect can also work in reverse, or "backfire." To cover a good deal of ground only to return to one's point of departure is to make a great effort in vain. So there might be a temptation to define the comic as did Kant when he said that all laughter results from an expectation which is suddenly defeated or left unfulfilled. Bergson feels this definition to be only partially valid; believing that he writes:

Lack of proportion between cause and effect, whether appearing in one or the other, is never the direct source of laughter. What we do laugh at is something that this lack of proportion may in certain cases disclose, namely, a particular mechanical arrangement which it reveals to us...at the back of the series of effects and causes.  

The mechanism which we detect is something of a foreign body in the living continuity of human affairs, an absentmindedness on the part of life. For, if events were unceasingly aware of their own course, there would be no possibility for the development of mechanization or inflexibility. In short, there would be no occasion for the comic. 

Beginning a discussion of specific comic devices employed by the writer of dramatic comedy, and considering the genre as an imitation of life,  

\[^{68}\text{Ibid.}, p. 81.\]  
\[^{69}\text{Ibid.}, p. 85.\]
Bergson expresses the following considerations on life and comedy:

Life presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space. Regarded in time, it is the continuous evolution of a being ever growing older; it never goes backward and never repeats itself. Considered in space, it exhibits certain co-existing elements so closely interdependent, so exclusively made for one another, that not one of them could, at the same time, belong to two different organisms: each living being is a closed system of phenomena, incapable of interfering with other systems. A continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series: such, then, are the outward characteristics...which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical. Let us take the counterpart of each of these: we shall obtain three processes which might be called repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series. Now it is easy to see that these are also the methods of light comedy, and that no others are possible.71

He then discusses each of these three comic devices. Repetition (not of words, but of situations) implies the reoccurrence several times of a combination of circumstances in its original form, and is in contrast with the changing stream of events of life. For example, the coincidence of encountering an old friend who has not been seen for years several times on the same day is laughable. Such repetition of circumstances on the stage is laughable in proportion as the scene repeated is more complex and more naturally introduced by the dramatic author.72 Bergson notes that such is the case in several of Molière's comedies. He interprets L'Ecole des femmes simply as the repetition of a single incident in three tempi: first tempo, Horace tells Arnolphe of the plan he has devised to deceive Agnes' guardian, who is in fact Arnolphe himself; second tempo, Arnolphe thinks he has checkmated the move; third tempo, Agnes contrives that Horace

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70 Ibid., p. 86.
71 Ibid., pp. 88-89.
72 Ibid., p. 91.
gets all the benefit of Arnolphe's precautionary measures. Bergson also states that such repetition of the same event with only slight variation is due to the fact that each of the characters represents a certain force applied in a certain direction, and, therefore, the same situation is capable of being repeatedly produced.

The second comic device pertaining to situations is that of inversion, which has to do with the idea of things topsy-turvy. Very often a comic character is one who has been caught in his own trap: in the well-known Farce du Maître Pathelin we have an excellent example of the device of inversion at work. At this point in the essay Bergson states a law that maintains that when a comic scene has been reproduced a number of times by a number of authors, it becomes amusing in itself. Therefore, new scenes which are reminiscent of such a stock scene may be funny only because they bear resemblance to the model. For example, the robber robbed is an arch-type of comic scene which casts over a host of other scenes a reflection of the comic element it contains, rendering comic any mishap that befalls one through one's own fault, regardless of what the fault or mishap might be. For Bergson, the robber robbed type of scene is the one where a character such as the lawyer in Maître Pathelin is cheated by the same device he uses to cheat others.

Bergson has called the third type of comic device to be discussed "reciprocal interference of series:"

A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the

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73 Ibid. Critics of the new school of moliéristes such as Arnavon, Audiberti, Guicharnaud, and Moore, base their analyses of the dramatic structure of his plays on a quite similar point of departure. Several of Ionesco's comedies are similarly constructed, but discussion of such similarities between the theatre of Molière and of Ionesco will be deferred in order not to interrupt the continuity of the present discussion.
same time. 75
An equivocal situation is one in which the audience sees the real meaning of the situation, because all of its aspects have been very carefully exposed; but each of the actors knows only certain of these aspects, and thus makes mistakes in judgment and actions. The audience proceeds from the incorrect judgment or action performed by the actor, to the one it knows to be correct, wavering between the possible meanings and the real one; such is the nature of enjoyment received from an equivocal situation.
Bergson writes that "...it is easy to see that the stage-made misunderstanding is nothing but a particular instance of a far more general phenomenon...the reciprocal interference of independent series." 76 That is, two or more independent events become meshed, each one throwing a different light on the other; because of the wealth of such comic situations and the rather lengthy exposition they involve, no illustrative example will be given here.

Bergson's concluding remarks on the comic devices of reciprocal interference of series, inversion, and repetition, maintain that the objective of such devices is always the same: to obtain what he calls a mechanization of life:
You take a set of actions and relations and repeat it as it is, or turn it upside down, or transfer it bodily to another set with which it partially coincides -- all these being processes that consist in looking upon life as a repeating mechanism, with reversible action and interchangeable parts. Actual life is comedy just so far as it forgets itself, for were it always on the alert, it would be ever-changing continuity, irreversible progress, undivided unity. And so the ludicrous in events may be defined as absent-mindedness in things... 77

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74 Ibid., pp. 95-96.
75 Ibid., p. 96.
76 Ibid., p. 98.
77 Ibid., pp. 101-02.
This, he feels, is the real explanation of light comedy: it is an artificial exaggeration of a natural rigidity in things. Such rigidity, or mechanization, it will be remembered, is the source of the comic.

Bergson admits that to discuss the comic in words is to create a rather artificial category, since almost all of the examples cited up to this point, being excerpts from dramatic comedies, were produced through the medium of language. However, he feels that distinction should be made between the comic expressed and the comic created by words. The former variety can be translated from one language to another without losing impact, other than that of being presented to a new society perhaps different in manners, literature, and association of ideas. However, the comic created by words is not readily translatable, for it owes its entire being to the structure of the sentence or to choice of words. It stresses those lapses of attention in language, in which cases it is the language itself that becomes comic.\(^78\) He states that the comic in speech corresponds point by point with the comic in actions and in situations. Thus to say or do what we have no intention of saying or doing as a result of inelasticity in language is equally laughable. A man who speaks in stereotyped phrases is comic; but for an isolated phrase or utterance to be comic in itself it must be clearly evident that it was uttered automatically. This happens only when a familiar phrase contains some evident absurdity; hence, the general rule: "A comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase form."\(^79\) For a lazy man to say "I don't like to work between meals" is comic because it is merely the commonplace phrase "One should not eat between meals" into which an absurd-

\(^78\)Ibid., pp. 103-04.

\(^79\)Ibid., p. 112. (Italics appear in the original.)
ity has been inserted.

Most words may be said to have both a physical and a moral meaning, according as they are interpreted literally or figuratively. Therefore:

A comic effect is obtained whenever we pretend to take literally an expression which was used figuratively, or, Once our attention is fixed on the material aspect of a metaphor the idea expressed becomes comic.\(^{80}\)

A concerned mother, trying to teach her son a valuable lesson, tells him that gambling is very risky, for one wins one day only to lose on the next. The son takes the expression literally and vows to his mother that he will gamble only on alternate days. Here we see the speaker trapped by her own words; she intended them figuratively, but they were interpreted literally.

Just as a series of events may become comic by repetition, inversion, or by reciprocal interference of series, parallel phenomena are witnessed in the case of a series of words. Bergson states three fundamental laws of what he calls the comic transformation of sentences. A phrase is likely to become comic if it still makes sense when reversed, or if it adequately expresses two quite independent sets of ideas, or if it is the result of a transposition of an idea into some key other than its own.\(^{81}\) Inversion is dismissed as the least interesting of the three possibilities; it is a device which puts the subject of the sentence in its object's place, and vice versa. The reciprocal interference of two sets of ideas in the same sentence is the least reputable of the three laws of comic transformation of sentences, especially when it takes on the form of the pun.\(^{82}\) In a


\(^{82}\) *Ibid.*, p. 120.
pun, the same sentence appears to have two separate meanings; but it is only an appearance. However, the play upon words is worthier as a comic device. Often there is very little difference between a play upon words and a poetic metaphor, except that the former usually makes us think of a negligence on the part of language -- that one set of words could express more than one idea -- whereas the latter seems to reveal the close harmony that exists between language and nature. Of the three laws of comic transformation of sentences, Bergson feels that transposition is the more far-reaching; it is to ordinary language what repetition is to comedy. The statement is made that: "A comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the natural expression of an idea into another key." To transpose the solemn into the familiar, for example, is to effect a parody: "The sky was beginning to change from black to red, like a lobster being boiled."

The comic in words thus follows much the same pattern as the comic in situation; language can be comic because it is a product of the mind:

We feel it contains some living element of our own life; and if this life of language were complete and perfect, if there were nothing stereotype in it, if, in short, language were an absolutely unified organism incapable of being split up into independent organisms, it would evade the comic as would a soul whose life was one harmonious whole...

Chapter III of the essay is a discussion of the comic in character and the nature of dramatic comedy. Convinced that laughter has a social significance, that the comic expresses inadaptability to society, and that there is nothing comic apart from man, Bergson states that a discussion of the comic in character has been the goal of the essay. Of the

83 Ibid., p. 121.
84 Ibid., p. 123. (Italics appear in the original.)
85 Ibid., pp. 129-30.
86 Ibid., p. 134.
comic in character he writes:

Comedy can only begin at the point where our neighbour’s personality ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact with what might be called *growing callousness to social life*. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream. 86

Essentially, the elements of a comic character in real life are the same as those of a comic character on the stage. In general, it is rigidity or the inability to adapt that renders a character comic: Alceste makes us laugh because he is rigid, even though his rigidity stands for honesty. Bergson cites this example because he feels that it is not altogether correct to say that it is a character’s faults alone that make him laughable. Alceste is comic because he is virtuous, but his virtue, honesty, is a rigid one, and consequently in opposition to life, which requires freedom of movement and adaptability. So a rigid virtue can be more comic than a flexible vice. Bergson’s basic theory of the mechanical encrusted upon the living comes into focus in this interpretation of the comic in character; the character who lacks freedom of movement, who is rigid, is comic. He feels that faults or vices are capable of being comic, but that they make us laugh by virtue of their unsociability rather than by their immorality. 87

The comic character is one incapable of arousing our feelings. An author of dramatic comedy prevents us from forming an emotional sympathy with his comic characters by directing our attention to their gestures; an author of drama causes us to sympathize emotionally with his characters

by directing our attention to their actions. For Bergson, actions in
龚atic characters are the outward manifestations of inner nobility; that
is, the only way the audience can be convinced of the hero's inner greatness
is to witness actions which will reveal it. The actions of dramatic charac-
ters are conscious and done purposefully; the gestures of comic characters
are done unconsciously and without purpose. If in an action the entire
personality of the dramatic character is engaged, only a part of the comic
character's personality is called into play in a gesture. Because a
gesture is isolated from the character's total personality makeup, we can
laugh at it and consequently at him, for it is impossible to become emotion­
ally involved with him. So when our attention is fixed on gesture and not
upon action, we are witnessing a comedy. 88

A comic character needs to be unsociable, that is, eccentric in some
way. The spectator needs to maintain some emotional distance in order to
appreciate the comic element of the comic character. Such are the two
essential conditions for the comic in character. They imply a third con­
dition, namely, the comic element of a comic character is necessarily
resultant from some form of automatism. The automatism usually takes the
form of inattention to self, and consequently, to others; such inattention
is Bergson's idea of unsociability:

Rigidity, automatism, absentmindedness and unsociability are
all inextricably entwined; and all serve as ingredients to
the making up of the comic in character. 89

In a sense, all character may be said to be comic, if by character we mean

88 Ibid., pp. 143-45.
89 Ibid., p. 147.
the ready-made element of our personality, that element which enables us to be unmistakably identified by others. A comic character on the stage is one we recognize, and every comic character is a type. Bergson states that not only does comedy deal with general types, it is the only one of all the arts that aims at the general.\(^9^0\) He then gives an extended discussion on the nature of art which, although enlightening and thought-provoking, would be too lengthy to develop in the present resume. The conclusions of Bergson's discussion of the nature of art are, however, pertinent; art's goal is to cause us to witness directly some aspect of truth about nature, to help us to get a glimpse of the essence of things. Art thus aims at reproducing something very particular or individual that can never be repeated. Comedy seems to be in direct opposition to art, in that it aims at the general:

Comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again. It takes note of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes... In this respect it forms a contrast to all the other arts.\(^9^1\)

The observation of the author of dramatic comedy proceeds to the general; it selects for reproduction on the stage those peculiarities of human nature which are most commonly witnessed. The comic author in transferring such observations to the stage, creates works which doubtless belong to art in that their only visible aim is to please, but which will be found to contrast with other works of art by reason of their generality, and also their intention -- conscious or otherwise -- to correct and to instruct. Bergson concludes:

\(^9^0\)Ibid., p. 149. Bergson feels that tragic characters are general only in particulars, but that they are markedly individual beings in their over all makeup. Hamlet, for example, is a complex, highly individualized dramatic personage. We may recognize in him some traits that we have recognized in other persons, but he is too complex, too individual to have a counterpart in life.
So we were probably right in saying that comedy lies midway between art and life. It is not disinterested as genuine art is. By organizing laughter, comedy accepts social life. And in this respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature.\footnote{Ibid., p. 163.}

Such is Bergson's theory of the comic, laughter, and the nature and techniques of dramatic comedy. Although published at the turn of the century, it can be considered as one of the major forces in literature of its type of the present century. The twentieth century has seen a flowering of literature dealing with theories of laughter and the comic. Such theoretical writings are philosophical, psychological, psychoanalytical, physiological, sociological, or literary in nature. Some of the theoriciens have formulated theories which incorporate two or more of the above mentioned fields of study. It will be remembered, for example, that we earlier quoted from Victoroff's \textit{Le Rire et le risible}; it is a psycho-sociological evaluation of the comic and laughter. A brief statement of some of the major theories of the twentieth century will give an insight into the nature of contemporary scholarship concerning our subject.

James Sully's theory of laughter is linked with the principle of play, laughter arising "from a sudden accession of happy consciousness."\footnote{Ibid., p. 170.} Laughter springs from a feeling that is highly complex and contains something of a child's joyous surprise before the new and unexpected, as well as something of a child's gay responsiveness in play.\footnote{Sully, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 72.} Sully writes in his preface that he believes his book to be the first attempt to treat comprehensively the subject of laughter under all its various aspects, and in

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 153.}
its connections with our serious activities and interests;\textsuperscript{95} general criticism maintains the excellence of his work as containing a wealth of scholarly information on the subject.

For Max Eastman, author of \textit{The Sense of Humour}, humour is an instinct. He writes:

\begin{quote}
The sense of humour is a primary instinct of our nature, functioning originally only in the state of play, and related not remotely in its development to that gregarious instinct of which smiles and smiling laughter appear to be an inherent part.\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

Eastman sees the sense of humour instinct as something of a shock absorber for the body; it helps the individual to regain emotional equilibrium when he has been upset by some unpleasant obstacle.

The English psychologist, J.Y.T. Grieg, gives an extensive treatment to the subject of laughter in \textit{The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy}. A behaviourist, his theory proceeds from a study of infant laughter; he then reviews all types of human laughter, showing how his thesis is applicable in each case. Laughter in every instance has love associations:

Examination of the earliest laughter of infants leads to the conclusion that the essential element in the situations provoking it is personal. This in turn suggests that the laugh is a response within the uncertain and ill-co-ordinated behaviour of the instinct of love. It appears to arise within such behaviour when an obstruction of some kind is first encountered, and then, no matter how, suddenly overcome; it marks the escape of psycho-physical energy mobilized to meet the obstruction, but not actually required for that purpose, and therefore for the moment surplus.\textsuperscript{97}

The appendix of Grieg's work is a very useful historical survey of the literature of laughter and comedy. In it he descriptively surveys all the major theories from Plato's to that of Eastman.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{95}]\textit{Ibid.}, p. vii.
\item[\textsuperscript{96}]Max Eastman, \textit{The Sense of Humour} (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), pp. 226-27.
\item[\textsuperscript{97}]\textit{Grieg, op. cit.}, p. 222.
\end{footnotes}
The Nature of Laughter by J.C. Gregory, takes a comprehensive view of the subject of laughter and treats it in a scholarly manner. His discussion of laughter includes, besides comic laughter, that of combat, amusement, self-congratulation, triumph, etc. All laughter is fundamentally linked with relief:

A quick interruption of activity that precipitates into relief is the essential characteristic of laughter as it is revealed in its characteristic bodily expression. Laughter is a diversion -- a pleasant expenditure upon the body of energy released from other activities.98

A valuable source of some of the more immediately contemporary ideas on the subject of laughter and the comic is the Revue d'Esthétique, third and fourth fascicles of 1950.99 It is a special edition devoted entirely to the subject of laughter and its theories, and contains several articles by noted critics and estheticians. It is also interesting because many of the articles criticize established theories and suggest still others that might be fertile ground for future research. Also, this single edition of a periodical implies what the present survey has intended to project, namely, the idea that the theories of laughter and the comic are as diverse as they are numerous.

We can now come to some workable conclusions about laughter and the comic which will help us to an understanding of the comic elements and dramatic techniques employed in the comedies of Molière and Ionesco. It would be impossible to try to reconcile all of the theories discussed in our survey; therefore, it will be our task to state the most common points


of agreement among the theories. It would appear that some notion of contrast is present in all of the theories discussed: we laugh at misfortune (Plato); things ugly are comical (Aristotle); laughter is pleasurable but despotic or involuntary (Qunitillian, Descartes); comedy is intended for enjoyment, but is largely didactic (Minturno, Meredith); laughter is a sign of mixed emotions such as admiration and hate (Descartes, Hobbes); laughter is a sign of superiority as well as of joy (Hobbes, Lamennais); a defeated expectation is comic (Kant); the sudden awareness of faulty reasoning provokes laughter (Schopenhauer), etc. We feel that Bergson's theory is a suitable explanation of the comic inherent in contrast: the contrast is never laughable in itself. Rather, it is the particular set of incidents or attitudes that underlie the contrast and/or produce it which are comic. We feel that Bergson is right in suggesting that for someone or something to be comic, some mechanical action or rigidity of attitude must occur. Because life itself is motion and continuous change, anyone or anything that would tend to slow the motion or stop the change would be comic, and laughter would reactivate the motion and change necessary to true vitality.

This brings us to the second most popular notion about the comic as seen in the theories surveyed, namely, the idea that the comic has a utilitarian function. The notion popularized in the Renaissance that comedy is a didactic or moralizing art has found widespread support in subsequent theories. Its most direct statement is found in Meredith's essay on the uses of the comic spirit; he feels that the comic and, consequently, comedy are above all else social correctives. He sees in the comic dramatic author a teacher whose duty it is to show the world what ails it. Paralleling this notion is the one found in a number of the theories which
view laughter as a force which restores equilibrium, or effects a return
to the norm. Bergson feels that laughter causes an awareness of any
action or attitude which varies from the normally expected one, intimidates
such eccentricities, and thus assumes the role of restoring the status quo.

Regarding dramatic comedy, the notion of surprise is seen in many
theories. The comic device must catch the spectator unawares, it must be
sudden. It is our opinion that comedies referred to as "sparkling" or
"fresh" are those in which the author has managed to surprise the audience
with most of his comic effects. Once again we turn to Bergson for an
excellent treatment of the nature of the devices of dramatic comedy. In
each instance, a comic device must belie some form of mechanical or rigid
attitudes or actions. The comic in words, in actions, and in events is
effected by repetition, inversion, or interference of series. These de­
vices are comic because they produce effects which come into conflict with
life's exigencies of novelty, forward motion, and independence of series
of events.

These considerations in mind, we now direct our attention to the new
criticism of Molière which focuses upon the comic aspects and dramatic
techniques of his comedies.
CHAPTER III
THE NEW CRITICISM OF MOLIERE

W.G. Moore in Molière, A New Criticism suggests a new approach to the appreciation of Molière's theatre:

The plays are comedies written and performed according to the theatrical conditions prevalent in Paris in the middle of the seventeenth century. They are the work of a man of whom we know little more than his professional activity of actor-manager. The first step toward sound criticism of Molière seems to be, therefore, the abandonment of all assumptions regarding his philosophy and his emotions, thus allowing us freedom to interpret his comedies as comedies and their author as an artist.¹

Such are the goals of the new criticism of Molière, a critical point of view which has earned the support of several contemporary professional and academic literary critics, as well as that of famous actors and directors. Moore's study is an excellent introduction to the tenets of the new criticism. It will be our task here to review the techniques employed by him in treating Molière's comedies as comedies and their author as an artist, as well as to present succinctly the point of view which gives genesis to and validates the use of those techniques. Moore writes further: "Perhaps the most obvious thing to say about Molière is that he was an actor."² It would appear that critics of drama often lose sight of the fact that almost all plays are written primarily to be performed; that they are within the realm of literature is only incidental to the necessity of having a

²Ibid., p. 27.
script from which the director and actors may work. It is from the pro-
fessional angle that Molière's comedies are treated by the new critics,
who, like Moore, insist upon reading his plays as theatre rather than as
vehicles for the philosophy of a subjective poet.

Molière was something of a pioneer in acting techniques. The Parisian
theatre-going public of the seventeenth century went to "hear" a play, for
the neo-classical notion of bienséance had stripped the tragic stage of
most physical action. Tragedians set the tone: they declaimed. Molière
broke with that tradition and established a new style of acting nearer to
mimicry than to declamation. Moore feels that the realism found in his
plays is largely the outgrowth of the exigencies of a natural type of act-
ing rather than the result of purely poetic or satiric intent, or of
literary attitude. Molière made full use of the comic tradition of ordi-
nary gesture; it is significant that he was called a farceur and that he
had contact with the Italian commedia dell'arte acting troupes then popular
in Paris and in the provinces. It is almost impossible to state with any
degree of accuracy what Molière owed to the traditional farce and the
Italian mime, but both were essential to his formation. The farce was
acted in masks which performed a double service: they fixed the dramatic
personage and freed the actor to mock without giving offence, by virtue of
the relative anonymity they afforded. The commedia dell'arte presented
rigidly fixed or stock character types which performed the same functions
as the mask in the farce. The notion of the mask, or fixed character, has
been seen as a motivating principle in Molière's comedies; his great
characters (Arnolphe, Tartuffe, Alceste, Harpagon, etc.) may be sobered by

3Ibid., p. 29.
misfortune, but they remain essentially unchanged at the end of the play. 4

Moore makes an interesting investigation of the connection between Molière's skill in portraying assumed attitudes (masks) and the comic vision that is the dynamic and formative element from which his theatre springs. He starts from the point of view that many comic effects can be obtained by the juxtaposition of the real and the assumed. 5 He cites two basic types of characters created by Molière who are comic because they are in essence related to the concept of the mask: deluded characters and deceptive ones.

M. Jourdain (Le Bourgeois gentilhomme) is a deluded character; he is comic because he lives in a world of his own and, dominated by a fixed idea, he imagines himself a man of quality. He is a victim of self-deception and is comic because he cannot deceive us, nor can he fool the other characters in the play. Even his servants find him comic, not so much because he is aping the gentry, but because he is doing it so badly. M. Jourdain is an unconscious character, that is, one unaware of the mask he wears; what he assumes to be true (that he can successfully imitate a gentleman) is in direct opposition with the reality of the situation.

A more refined comic personage in Molière's drama is the deceptive character; Moore writes:

But we meet yet another category, whose policy it is to play a part, rogues, schemers, charlatans. The doctors do not get things wrong; they lead others wrong; they are not deceived but deceivers. They assume a mask of omniscience for their own profit. Arnolphe is a tyrant, Tartuffe a hypocrite, Don Juan a libertine, each for his own ends. (...) Yet here again they have other qualities which they are anxious to hide, which are not assumed but almost completely surpressed. Arnolphe is timid, Tartuffe sensual, Don Juan is warm-hearted as well as calculating. They are clever, but not clever enough to take us in all the time. Is not their cleverness a mask, the more dramatic for being imposed by their own will? If this is so, Molière has turned the mask into a symbol of much more than a

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4 Ibid., pp. 34-35. Bergson's theory of the comic resultant from the mechanical or rigid forged upon the living readily explains the comedy inherent in the mask.
vice or defect that adheres to a man. It is a symbol of cleverness, art, skill on which a man prides himself, but which may well run counter to his real self. The struggle to keep the mask in place, to achieve one's end, becomes a struggle between art and nature, craft and habit, intelligence and character.®

This suggests that Molière's comic vision is wide in scope and not to be equated merely with the "funny" or non-sinister comedy afforded by a play such as Le Bourgeois gentilhomme. Why then, is Tartuffe still so amusing if it treats such a basically serious topic as is religious hypocrisy? It is because Tartuffe is a man who wears a mask, and his mask falls at various points in the play, revealing the man behind it. Certainly every hypocrite is a somewhat odious individual whose acts are out of step with his professions; if we assume someone to be a religious hypocrite, the assumption is not comic. But it is another case if that individual accidentally exposes us to the truth about himself. Tartuffe is a conscious, willful impostor whose scheme breaks down because he is too human to allow it to work.7 He is comic because he lets his appetites win out over his designs; nature triumphs over artifice, and we laugh.

Moore has some interesting notions about the language of Molière's plays, most of which are also applicable to Ionesco's diction. He feels that the dramatic quality par excellence of Molière's dialogue is its compressed and explosive life. The aim of the traditional farce was to be alive, to give the illusion of life even at the expense of utilizing crudity, unreality, and improbability. The same strain, refined and purified, runs through Molière's whole dramatic work, in which there is no rest or

®Ibid., p. 40. Schopenhauer's theory of the comic corroborates this opinion.
6Ibid., p. 42.
7Ibid., p. 49.
quiet moments, and into which there is always something new, alive, and unexpected being introduced.  

Whereas psychology, character-drawing, and satire might lead to an intellectual use of language, to precision, distinction, and differentiation, the concentration of dramatic energy in person and situation leads to the opposite. Excitability of any kind, be it irritation, mania, gaiety, anger, or fun, leads to incoherence, which is that state in which one's power of intelligent expression in words is defeated. Language in Molière shows with almost infinite variety this clash of man and speech. The gift of speech is the mark of the intelligent or civilized man; natural man, animal man is frequently speechless. He might, if he could, say with Dandin: 'Je ne dis mot, car je ne gagnerais rien à parler.' Or even more frequently his utterance escapes his control: he says what he does not mean, or less, or more, than he means. Here for a dramatist dealing chiefly in words was a wide field of evidence of human behaviour under the pressure of emotion. Molière has...exploited it as no other artist has done.

In order to so exploit language implies a firm understanding of its social function, which is communication. Speech which does not communicate the idea of the speaker is comic; a man who has nothing to say but speaks anyway is often laughed at. Or, what a person says may go unheard, be misinterpreted or misdirected. Sometimes one may have something to say but cannot find the right words to express himself; he is in the difficult situation of having to define the indefinable. Of the many examples cited by Moore of Molière's treatment of language, the following statement made by Orgon attempting to describe Tartuffe is perhaps the most illuminating: "C'est un homme...qui...ah...un homme...un homme enfin..." Moore points out that this line does more than merely mirror the stuttering of a person who has the desire, but not the ability to express himself. The speech is charged with a triple significance: "that Orgon cannot describe him, that he is indescribable (which is true, but in a different sense for Orgon and for us),

8Ibid., pp. 55-56.
9Ibid., p. 57.
10Ibid., p. 59.
and finally that any attempt to describe him can only say that he is...

a man, which in fact he hardly is.\textsuperscript{11} So we see that simple language, even when presented as helpless incoherence, can successfully unite allusions to widely differing states of mind.

Most speech, though intended to communicate ideas, is somewhat colored by the social exigency of politeness; this has led to a kind of ossification of expression. Ideas are often surpressed by fixed speech formulae; convention victimizes the speaker.

Molière's drama, by exposing this tyranny, relieves us of its strain and shows us countless situations in which conventions of speech break down. He situates his characters so that the veneer of politeness peels off like a crust, so that their animosity may have free play.\textsuperscript{12}

Moore feels that Molière was conscious of the delicacies and even of the philosophy of language, that his dramatic diction was borne of his perception of the gap between what is said and what is meant. A significant statement made by Molière in the preface to Tartuffe would bear out Moore's notion; the former writes: "...il ne faut qu'ôter le voile de l'équivoque."\textsuperscript{13}

Molière saw language as a disguise. A study of the French avant-garde theatre of the twentieth century, its estheticians, dramatists, and critics, reveals exactly the same attitude toward quotidian speech.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 65.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 67.

\textsuperscript{14}Martin Esslin, one of the foremost critics of the avant-garde theatre, writes on p. 299 of The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961):

"Language has run riot...It must be reduced to its proper function — the expression of authentic content, rather than its concealment. But this will be possible only if man's reverence toward the spoken or written word as a means of communication is restored, and the ossified clichés that dominate thought...are replaced by a living language that serves it."
The new critics are interested in stage craft per se, that is, the
dramatic structure of Molière's comedies. Many earlier scholars have sig­
aled the fact that the plot is not the key factor in Molière's dramaturgy,
and have stated that his interest was directed toward character development
and realistic observation. Yet neither of these two aspects of the drama
can be considered as principles of playmaking:

Drama is after all an imitation of human action; in a play some­
thing happens, something that, as Aristotle said, has beginning
and end. Character, realism, these are not things that happen;
they do not start or finish.15

Yet character and reality do furnish the dramatist with material that must
be selectively sorted out and arranged. It is Molière's arrangement of
events that gives his plays their sparkle. Moore insists that even if plot
is, as most critics have maintained, secondary in importance, it cannot be
ignored that all of Molière's plays do have some plot: things happen, get
confused, and eventually work out. The plot may be episodic (L'Avare),
tenuous and unimportant (Le Misanthrope), or stereotyped as in the many
plays where a marriage between young lovers is finally contracted after a
series of setbacks. To maintain, as have some critics, that character de­
development and realistic observation exclusively determine the dramatic
structure of a Molière comedy is fallacious:

To say that character conditions structure is in effect to reduce
Le Misanthrope to a series of dramatic illustrations of a certain
type of misanthropy. It is not so that the great dramas of the
world have come to life.16

Where, then, is the critic to turn in order to gain an understanding of
Molière's dramatic structuring? Moore suggests that we consider his appren-

15 Moore, op. cit., p. 68.
16 Ibid., p. 71.
ticeship with the farce and the commedia dell'arte, in both of which two outstanding figures are to be found: the fool and the rogue. Moore sees Alceste as a refinement and metamorphosis of the fool and Tartuffe as a rogue who has been transformed from a purely funny personage into a complex social type. Not only does Molière create rogues and fools which are very highly developed, he also fuses the two types in a single character such as Argan (Le Malade imaginaire), who is both tyrannical and gullible. Also, if we are to gain insight into the structure of a Molière comedy we must not assume, as do traditional critics, that the frequent appearance of a raisonneur implies that the playwright is philosophizing. There is a better and more logical reason which justifies the presence of the raisonneur. Such a character provides aesthetic balance or symmetry: if we are to clearly see the comic excesses of the rogue or the fool, we need someone with which these comic types may be compared. To assume that Molière thought as do his raisonneurs is to do an injustice to his incontestable genius.  

Le Malade imaginaire is cited by Moore as the ultimate case of Molière's skill in dramatic structuring. Considered as a plot, this comedy is disjointed and rather pointless; nor does it make better sense if considered as a comedy of character, for only a small part of the action portrays hypochondria. It has been sometimes assumed that the play is a comedy of character with a great deal of farcical padding and a generous seasoning of satire against doctors. Moore writes:

If the main episodes (of plot) be treated as equally important, a rather different picture of the dramatic subject emerges. These episodes appear to be seven in number:

A. Argan, alone and in the presence of his doctors.
B. Diafoirus, father and son, making a good impression with a view to a contract of marriage between the son and Ar-

\[17\] Ibid., pp. 72-74.
\[18\] Ibid., p. 75.
gan's daughter.
C. Béline, protesting affection and endeavouring to oust Angélique from the family fortune.
D. Toinette, impersonating a new and more wonderful doctor.
E. Beralde, arguing that one should trust nature rather than doctors.
F. Cléante, suitor to Angélique, and impersonating a music teacher.
G. Louison, fooling her father.

Only two of these episodes (A and D) highlight the theme of hypochondria; six of them illumine what Moore calls double identity:

Argan, by nature a healthy man, is persuaded to act as if he were ill. Diafoirus père devotes all his energies to proving that black is white. His son is a nitwit pretending to be clever. Béline protests an affection she is all too ready to disavow. Toinette adopts a disguise that deceives nobody but her master. The suitor gets into the house under false pretences. Louison feigns death. Argan's doctors parade a power they do not possess. So to think of the play as a satire on doctors is to consider only part of the evidence. The satire includes Béline, who has nothing to do with doctors; it also includes doctors in a non-professional capacity: Diafoirus's attempts to marry off his impossible son are a clumsy way of satirizing the profession.

Moore feels it more correct to see as the theme for this play a struggle between stupidity (a fool) and fraud (several rogues). Argan, the fool of the play, is head of the household, and thus a central figure around which the rogues gather, outwitting him for their own or for his benefit. All these rogues have a common weapon, jargon. Argan is taken in by words; because he is not able to make judgments on evidence. He wants to believe, rather than to understand; he is gullible. The rogues, on the other hand, are not taken in by jargon; they have the ability to judge things as they are and not as they are said to be.

All the situations in the play are about the same thing, the contrast between les discours (speech) and les choses (evidence):

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., pp. 75-76.
21 Ibid., pp. 76-77.
Not only is there a single connecting theme; the tone is maintained throughout, and is not one of realism but of fantasy. The effects are quick and living, as in farce; the point is obviously not in the motivation but in the suggestion of a state of mind. That state of mind is always the same, the contrast between words and evidence.\(^{22}\)

Molière has broadened the struggle between the rogue and the fool into a suggestion of the gap that often exists between reality and thought, or perception of reality. That is, our perception of things often varies greatly from their real state. Both Kant and Schopenhauer have explained the humour inherent in such fallacious rational interpretations of reality. Moore's concluding remarks about *Le Malade imaginaire* are significant:

The *Malade imaginaire* shows Molière's art at its full maturity. Its loose and poetic structure is proof that the play is not built as a study in psychology. Nor is it built as a satire, although it contains some obvious (and harmless) satire. The speed and fantasy with which the whole subject is covered is a structural design which deserves study. Molière has in this play illustrated an alternative to the usual step-by-step method of building up a dramatic action. The new principle of structure might be said to depend on suffusion rather than on deduction. The loosely linked scenes all stand in direct relation to the master concept; they build up a vision not of a person nor of a plot but of a choice of attitudes.\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\)Ibid., p. 78.

\(^{23}\)Ibid., pp. 78-79. This new principle of structure, suffusion, is very widely applied in the *avant-garde* theatre by dramatists who have turned their backs on discursive logic, motivation, and neatly ordered chronology of events in an effort to revitalize the theatre. Their goal is, in general, to create theatre poetry intended to bypass the spectator's intellect and to reach him on a more sentient or intuitive level. There may or may not be any conclusions to be derived from an *avant-garde* play. Ionesco, for example, says that he writes his plays and then reads them, inferring that he is primarily interested in their theatrical rather than their thought content. The new critics of Molière lead us to believe (and we feel they are correct) that Molière's creative process was much the same: he wrote plays, usually very quickly, to entertain his audience, and post facto, his critics saw in them doctrines of thought. Molière's plays are above all else comic and vital theatre. It would be difficult to explain his continuing box office appeal if his comedies are seen as vehicles for propaganda. It is our opinion that any thoughts, philosophy, or judgments they contain or suggest are far too common to justify three hundred years of popularity on the stage.
Moore's discussion and analysis of *Le Misanthrope* is along similar lines. He concludes that the play is not so much about Alceste as it is about the nature of sincerity, involving vanity, fashion, spite, convention; and that it is this complex of questions that determines the structure of the play. As in *Le Malade imaginare*, the scheme of construction seems to be one of suffusion, or the "poetic presentation of an abstract issue in concrete pictures." It has been pointed out by several critics that there is a noticeable lack of plot or action in *Le Misanthrope*; Moore feels this is so because one cannot expect such elusive and ethereal subjects as the nature of sincerity to be presented within the framework of a time-sequence plot. Thus the scenes in such a play do not narrate events so much as give exposition to an attitude.

Here briefly stated are Moore's conclusions about the art of dramatic structuring in Molière's theatre:

These are the factors which condition the structure of the comedies: as a basis the antinomy of fools and rogues, as setting the conditions of bourgeois life, usually within a family, as incident, a sequence of scenes loosely linked into a kaleidoscope or film of human attitudes. We are shown, not the time progression of a Tartuffe through triumph to failure, but rationally selected aspects of his humanity, which make up, not the complete hypocrite but a symmetrical vision of the comic disproportion that we call hypocrisy. The form is outwardly episodic; its links are internal, fibrous, poetic; it is what the Germans call 'inner form.'

In a chapter entitled "Scourge" Moore discusses Molière the satirist, stating at the outset that it is difficult to measure the satiric import of Molière's comedies because his rogues are never satirized away from their victims. That is, the wrong-doers are not the sole butt of our laughter,

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24 Ibid., p. 82.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 83.
27 Ibid., p. 86.
for their gullible prey are often delightful comic characters. This doubling of satirized personages has led many critics to conclude that Molière ridicules excess in any direction, and the frequent appearance of a raisonneur, who represents a norm, has been seen as the author's porte-parole. As has been stated briefly earlier in the present discussion, Moore holds a low opinion of such an assumption; it is his view that the comic writer, more than any other dramatist, needs to remain anonymous and impenetrable behind his creation.28 Concerning the nature of the satiric intent of Tartuffe, Moore indicates two possible assumptions other than the traditionally accepted one that Molière was satirizing religion in this play. The first alternative is that the play may be less impious, being a satire on religious people rather than on religion per se. The second, and in Moore's opinion, the most valid assumption to be made, is that Molière felt religious hypocrisy to be a good comic subject. The second alternative would imply that the religious issue was only incidental to the comedy. Rather than an attack on religion, he views the play as a comedy about the disproportion between a man's professions and his actions, or the conflict between falsehood and truth. Certainly the play is satiric, but it is comic first and foremost. Discussing Don Juan, the play from which some critics have deduced that Molière was a professed atheist or libertine, Moore makes the point that it is difficult to imagine the author foolhardy enough to use the stage as a propaganda machine for his personal ideas in an area where he was so likely to endanger himself considerably.29 Don Juan, the atheist, is not the only detailed personage in the play; his servant, Sganarelle, is contrasted with

28Ibid., p. 87.
29Ibid., p. 94.
him throughout. This contrast is motivated with great care and balance, and
the play can be seen as a dialogue on humanity: the master is inhuman in his
scorn for others, the servant all too human. Moore feels that there is noth­
ing in this play that could disprove that Molière was not in total agreement
with Pascal, who felt that the most outstanding sign of a weak mind was to
"faire le brave contre Dieu." 30

In short, the satiric element in Molière, although abundant and often
sharp-edged, is not the raison-d'être for his drama; it is incidental to the
author's comic perception of the gap between truth and falsehood, fact and
fancy. Parallel ideas are seen in a chapter entitled "Smile" which presents
some considerations of the nature of the comedy created by Molière. It
would appear that there is some conflict about Molière's own opinions as to
the role of dramatic comedy. At one point (Critique de l'Ecole des femmes)
he states that comedy should first and foremost be entertaining. Yet else­
where (L'Impromptu de Versailles) he states that it is the business of comedy
to represent the faults of men, especially contemporary men. And in the
first Placet for Tartuffe he makes the point that comedy is duty-bound to
correct men while entertaining them. Are these statements to be taken as the
evolution of point of view in a maturing artist, as replies to the critics,
or as an attempt to be in step with contemporary ideas?

When we turn from the theory to the practice itself, we become more
than ever doubtful whether it (the comedies) had any moral intention.
The basic fact is that the plays are full of the most lively charac­
terizations of fools and rogues, characters which we know Molière
portrayed to perfection as an actor. Surely we may assume from this
that his drama is that of a farceur in the Gallic tradition, minus
the indecency. This farceur excels in bringing out contrasts in
human behaviour of the most remarkable subtlety, but he does not for
that cease to be a farceur; his last play is farcical in much of
its word and act.

The position would seem clear enough. Yet the critics will not
have it. They show us a Molière who is a subjective or tragic or

30 Ibid., pp. 96-97.
moral author and suggest that the comedy was merely the salting of the didactic dish. They have thus succeeded in turning the most amusing and inventive of men into a mediocre moralist, whose guiding principle is nothing more exciting than moderation in all things. (...) Such facts as we do know about Molière's career suggest that he was adventurous and much more inclined to flout tradition than to respect it.\textsuperscript{31}

Moore insists that Molière's comedy is elemental, exploiting well-known themes of comic emotion via constant recourse to the obvious and the primitive, which must have seemed extremely comic to his highly refined social contemporaries. Many of his comic effects are produced by exposing the fallacies of social conventions, causing the mask of conventions to fall so that we may perceive the realities they conceal. It is often the relationship of the mask to the face, the lifeless to the living, the rigid to the flexible, from which we derive aesthetic pleasure in Molière's comedies.\textsuperscript{32}

Another basic feature of his comedies is the element of surprise; something new and unexpected is always happening. Sometimes the surprise is by its very nature intensified; that is, a commonplace statement or situation may suddenly be exposed to us, causing us to awaken to its only too obvious quality of truth. For example, consider the naiveté of a personage painfully arriving at an obvious and flat conclusion; M. Jourdain makes the delightful deduction that all things written in prose are not written in verse, and \textit{vice versa}.\textsuperscript{33}

In his "Conclusion" Moore succinctly states certain concepts developed at length in earlier chapters of the work; his concluding remarks may be

\textsuperscript{31}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 102-03.

\textsuperscript{32}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 107. Such a statement recalls Bergson's theory of the comic and gives insight as to why so many of his illustrative examples are drawn from Molière's theatre.

\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 113. \textit{La Cantatrice chauve}, Ionesco's first play, was inspired by the surprise the dramatist experienced while learning English. He suddenly perceived the humour inherent in commonplace speech which is largely populated by platitudes.
viewed as a kind of credo for the new criticism. He writes that the critic should not be primarily concerned with Molière's motives, but rather with his work itself in the form he has left it: "To consider... (Molière's comedies) as character studies, or as plots in the usual sense, or as social satires, is to leave certain successful parts of each play unaccounted for." Moore sees the distinctive feature of Molière's theatre as neither realism nor unreality, but the constant change from one to the other: "Within a scene the tone will change from banter to serious discussion. The actors behave naturally in unnatural situations; the keynote is variety." Concerning this admixture of realism and unreality Moore states that the action of the characters appears to be real, but we are given the suggestion, and nothing more, of real life. That is to say that the comedies have such momentum and are written with such a light touch that there is neither time nor need for detailed psychological development of characters — what traditional criticism has referred to as Molière's "observation" of life.

First of all, there is no waiting in these plays. Something happens all the time; the mind of the spectator is occupied, if he will only take what is offered and not ask for something else. Secondly, the kaleidoscope has a theme; as they (the sequence of action and plot episodes) flit past, like the shots of a film, the gestures make up an impression and an attitude.

34 Discussion of chapter eight, "Stage," has been omitted for the sake of brevity; it reiterates concepts touched upon previously.

35 Ibid., p. 129.

36 Ibid., p. 130.

37 Ibid., p. 131.
So that if one tries to analyse what quality animates Molière's theatre, observation will not do as the answer. Instead, we are led to suppose that his dramatic invention is poetic in its suggestion and intensity. Energy and liberty, the freedom to change the tone from nonsensical to reasonable at whim, are the characteristics of that evanescent quality witnessed in a Molière comedy.\(^{38}\)

The often employed phrase "Molière, the dramatic poet" takes on new meaning for us after reading Moore's thoughtful criticism. It will have been noticed that the nature of the new criticism is such that a concise statement of its tenets is very difficult. The criticism is tailored to each individual play, and demonstrates the same variety of technique witnessed in the comedies under scrutiny. The reason for this approach is thus explained by Moore:

> It is the function of criticism to explain the general reference of particular works of art. In the case of comedy this has resulted in the (surely comic) situation of generalizing a theory of the comic and applying it with drastic results to the masters of comedy. (…) Another procedure hardly more legitimate is to see in Molière...the norm of comedy by which other writers may be judged. The present inquiry is concerned to elucidate what in the case of a single artist are the particular forms of that general attitude which corresponds to the word 'comic'. It rests upon the assumption that comedy for Molière was an end and not a means.\(^{39}\)

Moore, in dealing with the "particular forms" of the comic as they appear in Molière's work has had to become flexible in his critical approach and receptive to the mood of each comedy he discusses. Unlike many traditional critics, he has entered into the spirit of the jeu de scène, seeing Molière's comedy as comedy and not as a vehicle for bourgeois philosophy.

We, too, hope to maintain such flexibility and receptivity to the plays themselves as we begin our investigation of the comic in the theatre of

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 132. 

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 98.
Molière and Ionesco. It is our goal to demonstrate via an analysis of the quality of comic content in their theatre that both dramatists have remarkably similar comic vision.
PART II

COMPARISONS
CHAPTER I
MOLIERE AND IONESCO

In an article published in the February, 1960, issue of Perspectives du Théâtre Philippe Bonzon asked the following questions:

Molière-Ionesco, Ionesco-Molière. Pourquoi ce sujet? Pourquoi toujours établir ces parallèles, mettre en corrélation ce qui ne se lie d'aucune sorte, opposer l'un à l'autre, expliquer l'un par l'autre? Pourquoi?

These questions and especially the article which seeks to answer them betray an all too common fault to be found in much literary criticism of comedy, namely that the comic element is virtually ignored. Bonzon, for example, fails to take note of the obvious fact that Molière and Ionesco have written a number of hilarious plays and, consequently, do indeed have something in common: the gift of comic vision. Bonzon also falls into the trap, as do many of the critics of dramatic comedy, of speaking not only for himself, but of also stating as a matter of fact the comic author's intent ("Molière et Ionesco partent en guerre contre la raison et les faits,"\(^2\)) as well as presupposing even the spectator's appreciation of the plays:

Nous sortons (from the performance of a Ionesco comedy) émerveillés par tant de finesse, par tant d'objectivité. Nous avons pris une leçon de modestie. Quand nous sortons d'une pièce de Molière, nous

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\(^2\)Ibid., p. 9.
avons pris une leçon d'humilité.\textsuperscript{3}

Certainly the critic is entitled to his opinion, but it would be unwise as well as naive to deny that all criticism, descriptive, normative, and interpretative alike, is essentially subjective. It is Bonzon's opinion that Ionesco has a complex, "...le complexe de Molière,"\textsuperscript{4} that he wants to be the Molière of the twentieth century, which may or may not be accurate, but which is rather pointless. We do not agree with this point of view, nor do we feel that the critical approach employed is entirely valid. It is our feeling that comic criticism is, in general, not satisfactory because it is largely beside the point. For example, Will G. Moore states that if one wishes to make a comprehensive study of the theatre of France's greatest comedian, Molière, one is disappointed to learn that whereas much has been written about his life (about which very little can be stated with certainty) and about the satiric or moral intent of his work, very little criticism can be found which is primarily concerned with the comic elements which abound in that work.\textsuperscript{5} Comedy seems simply not to be treated as comedy, perhaps because to do so might imply lack of scholarly comportment, perhaps because to do so is no easy task.

Good criticism needs to be something more than subjective or scholarly; it should strive to attain a sensitive appreciation -- which may, of course, be negative or positive -- of the work of art in which it takes genesis.

Si le critique a tout de même bien le droit de juger, il ne doit juger que selon les lois même de l'expression artistique, selon la propre mythologie de l'oeuvre, en pénétrant dans son univers...\textsuperscript{6}

Therefore, it may be said that in order for the critic to do justice to

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{5}Will G. Moore, "The French Notion of the Comic," Yale French Studies, No. 23 (Summer, 1959), p. 47.
dramatic comedy he should not fail to take into account its essence, or as Ionesco would have it, its mythology. The question that immediately arises is, what is the essence of dramatic comedy? The answer is all too apparent. Molière wrote in La Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes that the first rule of comedy was to be comic, to be entertaining, to please: "Je voudrais bien savoir si la grande règle de toutes les règles n'est pas de plaire..." (Scene 7). It would seem quite logical, then, that the guiding principle of comic criticism should be to give an appreciation of the comic. When this is done, as it will be conscientiously attempted in subsequent chapters of the present study, it should become apparent that there is a valid reason for comparing the theatre of an Ionesco to that of a Molière. That reason is not that the former has made an effort to emulate the latter, but simply that both writers possess comic genius which has manifested itself in essentially similar pieces of stagecraft.

A comparative study such as the present one cannot hope to be exhaustive due to the rather large number of short and long plays, as well as the various divertissements, ballets, operatic and film scenarios produced by Molière and Ionesco. Even if the total dramatic output of these authors were considerably less extensive, it would be vain to attempt an all-inclusive description and discussion of the many instances of the comic in their works. Density is a key factor in the style of both men being considered; Richard Coe states that perhaps no French writer since Molière has achieved such a consistently high degree of dramatic density in each scene. Now it must be remembered


that above all else, Molière and Ionesco are comedians; that their plays are densely constructed implies that the possibility for the occurrence of comic effects is indeed great. Often their plays are totally comic, and we found it impossible to locate a dramatic work by either author -- with the exception of Psyché, a tragédie-ballet co-authored by Molière, Corneille, and Quinault, and one or two languid pastoral pieces -- that was not rich in comic import. Given the wide range of fertile material from which to choose, it was decided that the most effective comparisons to be made should be carried out on a restricted basis, with the idea in mind that it would be more suitable to our purposes to make a detailed investigation of a limited number of works than to treat superficially a larger selection. Needless to say, the decision as to which plays with which to work was not an easy one, not because of any difficulty in finding works which would afford propitious comparisons, but rather because it was disheartening to have to lay aside many a splendid comic piece due to exigencies of brevity and of organization.

A brief explanation of the specific reasons motivating the choices made, as well as a statement of the ultimate goals envisioned in the discussions, together with a description of the methods employed, is in order. A detailed structural analysis of Molière's Les Précieuses ridicules and Ionesco's La Cantatrice chauve will be made according to the Bergsonian notion that comic situations can be referred to three basic patterns, or children's games. The comedy of language in these one-act plays will also be investigated in some detail because it is our belief that the dialogue in both instances is representative of verbal techniques rather consistently employed by each author. Likewise, the basic character interactions and relationships will be studied in the light of Moore's contention that many
of Molière's characters bear resemblance to the rogue and the fool of traditional French farce. In short, *Les Précieuses ridicules* and *La Cantatrice chauve* were selected for discussion in order to demonstrate the talent of both Molière and Ionesco for creating total comedy.

In our study of the comedies of both authors we became increasingly more aware of the theatricality of their plays; that is, the comic import of their theatre is greatly enhanced by the simple fact that these dramatists write brilliantly for the stage. Although such a statement comes dangerously close to being trite, it is of such consequence to an appreciation of Molière and of Ionesco that it cannot be left unsaid, nor can it be adequately expressed elsewhere than in an auditorium peopled by actors and an audience. Many of Molière's comedies have had more than a thousand representations on the stage of the comédie française alone, not to mention the now inestimable number of representations elsewhere both in French and in translation; and Ionesco's plays, although written very recently, have already been successfully performed with great frequency throughout the world, simply because these dramatic authors have what the French are wont to call a sens du théâtre. It is our contention that this theatrical instinct, as it were, is responsible for the fact that Molière and Ionesco can turn even the most potentially pathetic or sinister subjects to the purposes of comedy. In an effort to demonstrate this point, a discussion will be made of two deluded characters (M. Jourdain of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and the old man of *Les Chaises*) and of two purposefully disguised characters (Tartuffe and the professor of *La Leçon*). Attention will be given to those dramatic techniques which assure each play of being comic rather than pathetic and quite theatrical. In the instance of the deluded characters we will observe that Molière and Ionesco achieve unfailing comic effect by making them totally unaware of their de-
lusion and subsequent deceit by others. In the instance of the purposefully disguised characters, the dramatists are careful to render them ultimately comic instead of sinister by causing them to be foiled by uncontrollable human appetites. And in all cases the theatricality of these comedies is enhanced by the adroit presentation of dramatic personages who are consciously or otherwise effecting an identity other than their own. More simply stated, we shall demonstrate that these characters make the plays more dynamic by playing an additional role to the one assigned them in the list of *dramatis personae*.

It was further decided that an effective means of gaining insight into the analogous comic vision of the authors under scrutiny would be to review their personal opinions on the subject of dramatic comedy, the nature of the comic, and the role of the comic critic, be he a formal one or merely a spectator -- who, when all is said and done, is the ultimate critic of any dramatic work. Luckily, as least for our purposes, both Molière and Ionesco have been attacked by critics and have couched their retorts and defense in dramatic comedies, the former writing *La Critique de l'École des femmes* and *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, the latter writing *L'Impromptu de l'Alma*. A discussion of these plays will reveal quite similar points of view held by Molière and by Ionesco on the art of writing and appreciating comedy. Such an investigation will throw light upon a consideration which should be kept in mind by the reader of the present study: that comedy and the comic are evasive as far as concrete explanations are concerned. For even Molière and Ionesco are not up to their usual excellence in these plays which are consciously concerned with the very art that they as dramatic authors practice with sublime proficiency. While *La Critique de L'École des femmes* and the two "impromptu" pieces are not as purely
comic as many other plays that might have been selected for a study concerned primarily with the comic, we feel that they could not be left untouched because of their factual value. For it is only in these three plays among the more than fifty dramatic works which comprise the repertories of Molière and Ionesco that we can be completely certain that the authors themselves are speaking directly to us about their art. We shall see that they speak the same message.

Molière and Ionesco -- why indeed the comparison? We feel the need for an utterly direct, simple answer to that question: Molière and Ionesco have written plays that send audiences into gales of laughter. Our primary concern in this study will be to furnish insight into the similar fashion in which these comic dramatists achieve that end.
CHAPTER II

TOTALITY OF COMIC TENSION: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

OF LES PRECIEUSES RIDICULES AND LA CANTATRICE CHAUVE

The comedies of Molière and of Ionesco often sustain a totality of comic tension by producing an abundance of comic effects on several levels. The goal of the present discussion is to demonstrate that Les Précieuses ridicules by Molière and La Cantatrice chauve by Ionesco are plays which are rich in comic of situation, language, and character. In these one-act prose comedies Molière and Ionesco employ many of the same dramatic techniques in the structuring of comic situations. The dialogue in both of these plays is remarkably endowed with comic potential that reveals a similarity of the dramatists' esthetic perception of the gap that exists between words and the thoughts they often fail to express adequately. Also, the personages of Les Précieuses ridicules and those of La Cantatrice chauve bear marked resemblances to the fool and the rogue, two repertory characters of the traditional farce. In short, the plays to be discussed are intensely comic and structurally similar; the following detailed analysis is offered as proof of this contention.

For purposes of clarity and economy of exposition, and in order to maintain a continuity of discussion, each play will be treated separately. Following a narrative resume of each comedy, an analysis and interpretation of the comic of situation, language, and character will be presented. The
critical discussion of Les Précieuses ridicules will be made and then La Cantatrice chauve will be treated in like manner. In conclusion, the points of similarity of dramatic construction and of comic perception seen in the analyses of the two plays will be enumerated.

Les Précieuses ridicules

DuCroisy and LaGrange express their indignation upon leaving the home of Gorgibus, a bourgeois who is desirous of contracting marriages for his daughter and niece, Magdelon and Cathos. LaGrange has been especially offended by these young ladies whose efforts at being gracious hostesses consisted largely of yawning, asking what time it was, whispering to one another, and making no effort to sustain the conversation; he decides to seek revenge on the provincials who have taken on affected manners since their recent arrival in Paris. LaGrange tells DuCroisy of his servant, Mascarille, who is reputed to be somewhat of a wit; Mascarille's ambition is to be esteemed as a person of quality: he fancies himself a poète galant and holds his fellow lackeys in contempt. Gorgibus appears just as DuCroisy is asking LaGrange how he intends to use Mascarille to play a trick on Magdelon and Cathos; therefore, LaGrange is not able to disclose his plan. In response to Gorgibus' inquiry as to the success of their visit with his daughter and niece, the two young men courteously bid him farewell and suggest he make the same inquiry of Magdelon and Cathos.

Gorgibus sends the maidservant, Marotte, to call her mistresses, who are in their rooms making lip rouge and face creams; he then complains that these young ladies have wasted a fortune on beauty preparations. Asked the

1Molière, Oeuvres de Molière, edited by Eugène Despois (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1921). All subsequent quotations from Molière's plays shall be taken from this edition of his complete works. Rather than cite specific page numbers, however, quotations will be identified by scene number or by act and scene numbers when appropriate.
reason why they have discouraged DuCroisy and LaGrange who had come to ask
their hand in marriage, Magdelon and Cathos reply that they are not interest-
ed in such socially inept persons who would, in their ignorance of ultra-
refined manners, begin their courtship with a marriage proposal. It is
Magdelon’s opinion that a young man who failed to woo her according to the
formula of the Carte du Tendre, that guide to gallant courtship found in
Madeleine de Scudéry’s Clélie, would not be worthy of her hand. Cathos adds
that LaGrange and DuCroisy are not suitable lovers because their wardrobe
is not fashionable, lacking as it does plumed hats, knee ruffles, and deco-
rative ribbons. Gorgibus deplores these judgments and is even afraid that
his daughter and niece have become demented when they insist that they be
addressed as Polixène and Aminte, names popularized in novels of pastoral
romance. Above all else a practical and sensible man, Gorgibus insists that
Magdelon and Cathos encourage the advances of LaGrange and DuCroisy in the
future, and that they give up their pretentious ideas.

Magdelon and Cathos express their sympathy for Gorgibus’ limitations,
that is, his practicality and good sense. Magdelon cannot understand how
such a man could be her father, and Cathos is certain that some day Magdelon
will learn, as if by some romanesque turn of events, that she is indeed the
lost child of a noble family and not at all related to Gorgibus. Marotte
announces the arrival of the lackey of a certain Marquis de Mascarille who
has come in advance of his master to request for him the pleasure of an
audience with Magdelon and Cathos. The Marquis de Mascarille is, of course,
the servant of LaGrange, and has come disguised as a nobleman to visit
Magdelon and Cathos; he arrives in a sedan-chair. Both his extreme costume
and overly affected speech clearly indicate that he is not a person of quality,
but Magdelon and Cathos are completely oblivious to this evidence. His con-
versation with them is a broad parody of those conversations held in the salons précieux; his speech is heavily populated by metaphor, compliments, sentimentality, gossip, and art criticism. Mascarille promises to introduce Magdelon and Cathos into high society, and as the scene progresses he seems to forget that he is acting a role, and gradually begins to believe that he is a member of high society. The Vicomte de Jodelet, actually DuCroisy's valet, comes to visit, and in so doing, reinforces the young ladies' belief that they have finally begun to make a place for themselves in Parisian social circles. Jodelet is praised by Mascarille as a fearless warrior and begins exposing his battle scars to the ladies, who, although filled with admiration for his bravery, would prefer not to have him disrobe in their presence.

Magdelon sends for some neighbors, for her visitors have decided to hire some violinists and to give an impromptu ball. No sooner have the neighbors and violinists arrived to commence the festivities than do LaGrange and DuCroisy appear. They begin to beat and disrobe Mascarille and Jodelet, and in so doing, humiliate Magdelon and Cathos for having favored the attentions of two lackeys. LaGrange and DuCroisy leave, Magdelon and Cathos chase Mascarille and Jodelet from their home, and Gorgibus scolds his daughter and niece for their extravagant behavior. The play ends as Gorgibus publicly curses the corruptive influences of those vain amusements of the idle: novels, verse, and love songs.

Although not primarily a situation comedy, a play which achieves comedy largely through an extremely complex ordering of plot incidents, Les Précieuses ridicules is rich in comic effects which are produced by or inherent in the structuring of situation. It will be remembered that Henri Bergson demonstrated the relationship between three children's games, the jack-in-
the-box, the dancing jack, and the rolling snowball, and most theatrical comic situations. Those comic situations which involve a struggle between two stubborn elements are equated with the jack-in-the-box, a toy which delights the child because the conflict is never totally resolved; the jack-in-the-box always manages to pop out only to be pushed back into the box, the procedure being all the more amusing if repeated a number of times. There are also certain dramatic comic situations which bear resemblance to the child's dancing-jack, or marionette; in such comic situations a character thinks he is acting freely or of his own volition, while in reality he is being manipulated by another character, just as a puppet is controlled by the puppeteer.

A rolling snowball delights the child by virtue of its rapidly increasing speed and size; likewise, there are certain comic situations which amuse by virtue of their precipitous forward motion, and in which cause and effect become laughably disproportionate. Let us now consider the manifestations of comic in situation in *Les Précieuses ridicules* in the light of their relationship to the jack-in-the-box, the dancing-jack, and the rolling snowball. Basic to the comic tension of the play is the struggle between two forces: the pretentious, or affected, and the practical. Gorgibus' relationship with his daughter, Magdelon, and his niece, Cathos, is structurally quite similar to the action of the jack-in-the-box; for, try as he may, he cannot suppress them. Gorgibus would have these young ladies behave in a more sensible manner: let them divert their attention from face creams, romantic novels, and niceties of speech, to the more immediate and essential problem of finding husbands to support them. He tells them that they must favorably receive LaGrange and DuCroisy's attentions, but Magdelon and Cathos, affected though they may be, have a mind of their own, and persist in their pretentious preoccupations; they refuse to consider for a husband any man
who would dare propose marriage without having first painstakingly pursued them according to the rules and regulations set forth in the Carte du Tendre. Gorgibus is in conflict with Magdelon and Cathos throughout the play, trying unsuccessfully to make them give up their extravagant ways, and there is no reason to believe that this conflict will not continue indefinitely.

The young ladies disobeyed orders given them before the action of the play actually began, for they were quite rude to LaGrange and DuCroisy:

Gorgibus: ...Dites-moi un peu ce que vous avez fait à ces messieurs, que je les vois sortir avec tant de froideur? Vous avais-je pas commandé de les recevoir comme des personnes que je voulais vous donner pour maris? (Scene 4)

His previous command having been ignored, Gorgibus once again orders his daughter and niece to apply themselves to the practical business of finding a husband:

...je veux être maître absolu; et, pour trancher toutes sortes de discours, ou vous serez mariées toutes deux avant qu'il soit peu, ou, ma foi vous serez religieuses, j'en fais un bon serment. (Scene 4)

However, once again irrepressible Magdelon and Cathos ignore Gorgibus' admonitions and warmly receive Mascarille's visit, for they believe him to be a marquis. They confide in Mascarille that their goal in life is to be accepted into the proper circles. They become so carried away by the false assumption that they have finally broken into high society, an assumption occasioned by the visit of Mascarille and of Jodelet, that they forget momentarily where they are and allow preparations to be made for an impromptu ball to be given in Gorgibus' home. Gorgibus is, of course, outraged; he chases the violinists and the neighbors who have come to enjoy themselves from the premises and severely scolds Magdelon and Cathos:

Et vous, pendardes, je ne sais qui me tient que je ne vous en fasse autant: nous allons servir de fable et de risée à tout le monde, et voilà ce que vous vous êtes attaché par vos extravagances. Allez vous cacher, vilaines; allez vous cacher pour jamais. (Scene 17)
Gorgibus has the last word only because he speaks the last line of dialogue.

Earlier in the play Cathos said this of her uncle:

Mon Dieu! ma chère, que ton père a la forme enfoncé dans la matière! que son intelligence est épaisse, et qu'il fait sombre dans son âme! (Scene 5)

His own daughter, Magdelon, agrees with Cathos wholeheartedly, and so it is logical to assume that Gorgibus will never quite be able to subdue these two précieuses ridicules, and that the comic conflict will continue indefinitely.

Of a less durable nature, but equally comic is the jack-in-the-box-like conflict between LaGrange and DuCroisy on the one hand, and Magdelon and Cathos on the other. LaGrange and DuCroisy's proposals of marriage are rejected because they are looked down upon as socially unworthy suitors. Reacting almost as immediately as does a spring which has been depressed and then suddenly released, LaGrange and his friend begin to seek revenge upon Gorgibus' daughter and niece. Mascarille, LaGrange's valet, and Jodelet, DuCroisy's valet, are sent to dupe Magdelon and Cathos. The object of this pièce sanglante is twofold: not only are the young ladies to be fooled, they are to be humiliated for having injured the masculine pride of their rejected suitors. When Mascarille and Jodelet have had sufficient time to complete their mission, their masters appear and, in a display of mock anger, aided by three or four ruffians, they begin to beat and to rip the clothes from the would-be gentleman. LaGrange, to make his revenge sweeter still, scolds the précieuses for turning servants from their duties:

...cela n'est ni beau ni honnête de nous les débaucher comme vous faites. (Scene 15)

And having stripped the valets of all finery, LaGrange gives his and DuCroisy's permission for Magdelon and Cathos to continue their blossoming love
affair with Maccarille and Jodelet:

Maintenant, mesdames, en l'état qu'ils sont, vous pouvez continuer vos amours avec eux tant qu'il vous plaira; nous vous laissons toute sorte de liberté pour cela, et nous protestons, monsieur et moi, que nous n'en serons aucunement jaloux. (Scene 15)

LaGrange and DuCroisy have had their revenge, but Magdelon is quick to add that she will not rest until she and Cathos have been avenged:

Ah! Je jure que nous en serons vengées, ou que je mourrai en la peine. (Scene 16)

If we are to believe these words spoken in anger, we can assume that a veritable war of wits might ensue. In the conflict between the young ladies and their suitors can be seen the jack-in-the-box-like struggle of two opposing forces, neither one of which can totally subdue the other.

Now let us consider those comic situations in *Les Précieuses ridicules* which may be referred to the dancing-jack, or marionette pattern, the second children's game to which Bergson compares dramatic comic situations. In such situations one character controls another as if the former were a puppeteer and the latter his puppet. Perhaps the most comic scenes of the play are those in which Mascarille is posing as a précieux. Because Magde-lon and Cathos believe him to be a man of quality who will be able to introduce them into high society, they become as gracious as possible. It is interesting to note that the only persons with whom Magdelon and Cathos are civil are Mascarille and Jodelet, at least until they learn that they have been duped by such lowly servants. In Scenes 9-11 Mascarille sets the tone: the précieuses hang on his every word and are quick to agree with him completely on any subject he chooses for discussion. These scenes are primarily comic due to the extravagant language employed, but they also contain a strong comic of situation. It is delightful to the audience to see a mere lackey charming and controlling the pretentious Magdelon and Cathos. The
dancing-jack effect is heightened by the fact that even Mascarille is being
trolled by his master, LaGrange; as LaGrange's servant, he is carrying
orders to act the role of a fop. It is true that Mascarille has a
strong natural inclination for such a role, for LaGrange says of him:

\begin{quote}
C'est un extravagant qui s'est mis dans la tête de vouloir faire l'homme de condition. Il se pique ordinairement de galanterie et de vers, et dédaigne les autres valets, jusqu'à les appeler brutaux. (Scene 1)
\end{quote}

However, it is upon LaGrange's command that he is fooling Magdelon and
Cathos, and can therefore be seen as a dancing-jack.

Certain other comic situations in \textit{Les Précieuses ridicules} correspond
to the rolling snowball game cited by Bergson. It is his belief that a
rolling snowball excites a child to laughter by dint of its ever increasing
size and forward motion. This effect is very vividly captured by Molière in
those scenes played by Mascarille, Jodelet, Magdelon, and Cathos. With the
exception of Jodelet, who arrives at a point where the "snowball" has
gathered almost maximum momentum, and who is on stage only briefly, each of
these characters becomes increasingly more convinced of his social worth as
the play progresses. When the maidservant, Marotte, announces to her mistress
that a certain Marquis de Mascarille has sent his lackey ahead to announce
his visit, Magdelon says with delight to Cathos:

\begin{quote}
Ah! ma chère! un marquis!...C'est sans doute un bel esprit qui aura ouï parler de nous. (Scene 6)
\end{quote}

As the comedy progresses toward the scene in which LaGrange and DuCroisy
make their second entrance (Scene 17) to unmask Mascarille and Jodelet, Mag-
delon and Cathos reach a near paroxysm of affectation in speech and manner-
ism. Even Mascarille seems to have been carried away by his role as an
\textit{homme de condition}, for when his master begins whipping him with a stick, he
cries out:
Mon Dieu! je n'ai pas voulu faire semblant de rien; car je suis violent, et je me serais emporté. (Scene 14)

So just as a rolling snowball gathering speed and increasing in size delights the child, Molière's treatment of the central scenes of *Les Précieuses ridicules* delights the audience by its precipitous forward motion and growing distortion of affected speech and manners.

We have seen that certain scenes in *Les Précieuses ridicules* are comic partly due to the structuring of situation, and that these scenes bear resemblance to certain children's games. Now let us consider which dramatic techniques employed by Molière on a purely structural level contribute to the comic impact of these scenes. The first and most obvious technique to be cited is the almost pendulum-like repetition of a basic conflict: the affected and extravagant versus the practical and sensible:

1. Magdelon and Cathos disobey Gorgibus' order to favor LaGrange and DuCroisy as suitors. (Action occurs before play begins).

2. LaGrange and DuCroisy, having been rejected, decide to seek revenge on Magdelon and Cathos. (Scene 1).

3. Gorgibus reprimands Magdelon and Cathos; he threatens to send them to a convent if they fail to divest themselves of their extravagant manners. He again tells them that they must encourage LaGrange and DuCroisy's attentions. (Scene 4).

4. Magdelon and Cathos express their disdain for Gorgibus, who they feel is far too limited to appreciate their social aspirations and merit. (Scene 5).

5. Magdelon and Cathos are in conflict with their servants, Marotte and Almanzor, who are not able to understand orders given in pseudo-refined language. Marotte requests that her mistress speak French, that is, assume an unaffected speech mode that will come directly to the point. (Scene 6).
6. DuCroisy and LaGrange wreak vengeance on Magdelon and Cathos by exposing the identity of Mascarille and Jodelet. (Scene 15).

7. Magdelon vows that she will not rest until she has been avenged of this affront. (Scene 16).

8. Gorgibus again scolds Magdelon and Cathos; he curses the corruptive influences of précieux novels, verse, and song, those occupations of the idle which turn minds from sensibility to extravagance. (Scene 17).

Each of these comic situations centers around the same conflict: there are two stubborn elements, almost equally forceful, neither of which can be totally subdued by the other, and both of which look upon its own point of view as unfailingly correct. That there should be conflicting viewpoints is not in itself comic, and could indeed be quite unpleasant if Molière had not been careful to establish an almost equal balance of power between the opposing forces of extravagance and practicality. What is comic about this conflict is that it is repeated several times in rapid succession with only a slight variation of external trappings. The repetition of the basic conflict is a clearly mechanical arrangement of situations, and, being mechanical, is also rigid, and in direct conflict with life-like situations which rarely repeat themselves with such frequency and invariability. We are reminded of Henri Bergson's basic definition of the comic which maintains that it is always a result of the mechanical encrusted upon the living. We can see in Les Précieuses ridicules that not only are the situations mechanically arranged, but the characters themselves are mechanical in their rigid, unbending points of view. Nothing that any other character might say or do could change Magdelon, Gorgibus, or any of the characters' minds. It is precisely this mask-like or invariable quality in the characters that contributes to the mechanical repetition of the central conflict of the play.
Another technique employed by Molière in the dramatic structure of *Les Précieuses ridicules* is that of inversion. Bergson defined inversion as having to do with the reversal of roles, or of things being turned topsy-turvy. The arch-type of comic situation resulting from inversion is the one in which a culprit is caught in his own trap, as in *La Farce du Maître Patelin*, in which Pathelin is fooled by his own ruse. The most comic scenes in *Les Précieuses ridicules* are the ones in which Molière has made use of the technique of inversion. There is an implication of inversion in the very personalities of Magdelon and Cathos, middle-class provincials who have assumed the attitudes and postures of upper-class Parisians. Too, the nucleus of the play is structurally dependent on inversion: Mascarille is ordered by his master to misrepresent himself, to assume the posture — one which he can assume with a modicum of effort — of a précieux. In so doing, he completely fools Magdelon and Cathos, who are, besides being pretentious, quite gullible. Here we see inversion at work: Magdelon and Cathos are fooled at their own game. However, Molière has greatly intensified the comic of inversion in this instance by having Mascarille, the rogue whose goal is to dupe two fools, also be a pseudo-sophisticate; he is a fool who will be duped by still another rogue, his master, LaGrange. When LaGrange and DuCroisy make their re-entrance in Scene 13, not only do they embarrass Magdelon and Cathos, but also Mascarille and Jodelet, who have been carried away by their roles. Having so structured the sequence of situations, Molière has created a double inversion:

1. Magdelon and Cathos are fooled by Mascarille because they are too concerned with arriving socially to be able to see the obvious: that Mascarille is clearly not a person of rank.

2. Mascarille is taken in by his own penchant for the précieux and slips past the thin line of acting a role to living it.
This same situation can also be viewed from a different vantage point from which still another technique of comic dramatic structuring becomes apparent. It will be remembered that Bergson cited three basic comic techniques, namely, repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series. We have just seen how Molière employs the first two of these techniques; let us now consider his use of reciprocal interference of series. Bergson defines this comic device as an ordering of events in which one action can be simultaneously interpreted in two entirely different ways. In more general terms, he is making reference to the stage misunderstanding, a repertory comic device. The most obvious example of reciprocal interference of series in Les Précieuses ridicules is also the situation in which Molière has employed a double inversion: it is the scene in which Mascarille fools Magdelon and Cathos, and is himself trapped by his ruse. From one point of view this situation is comic because it is based on misunderstanding; the same action is interpreted one way by the characters and still another way by the audience. In this instance, however, what might have been merely an equivocal situation is intensified by Mascarille's total self-ignorance: he fails to realize that his conviction that he is a person of quality has caused him to misinterpret the reality that he is only supposed to be acting a part. The audience sees through the sham, Mascarille and his hostesses fail to recognize that it exists.

We have seen that Les Précieuses ridicules, a relatively short one-act play, is very rich in situations which are so structured as to produce a number of comic effects. Yet it must be insisted that this play is not a situation comedy, for its most intense comic effects are derived not from situation, but from language. It will have been noted that the preceding discussion was concerned with single situations or series of situations; the
discussion of plot as an entity was avoided, the reason being that the plot taken as a whole is of little consequence either esthetically or comically. Having discussed the comic in situation of Molière's play, remarks may be made concerning the comic dialogue.

Generally speaking, the comic of language falls into two categories: the comic expressed by language, and the comic created by language. In our discussion of the comic of situation in Les Précieuses ridicules several speeches were cited; in these instances the language was used as an accessory to the comic effect, as a means toward the end of verbally conveying the comic situations. Now we shall consider those comic effects which are created by language, that is, those instances in which language is both the means and the end of the comic effect. The most intense and by far the greatest number of comic effects in Les Précieuses ridicules are produced on a purely verbal plane. Bergson states that language can become comic if it displays absentmindedness of purpose, that is, if language fails to communicate ideas or if it does so inefficiently. We may say that in general, the comic language in the play being discussed results from the speakers' concern being directed primarily to form and only incidentally to content. Certainly, a degree of attention to form is implied in any speech which intends to communicate ideas, but over-attention to form can defeat the purpose of language, which is to communicate. What happens in Molière's play is that the audience's attention is called to the characters' emphasis on form and negligence of content in their conversation. Therefore, just as we would laugh to see persons dancing if we were not able to hear the music to which they were dancing, so do we laugh at the speech of the précieuses. For in both instances, we remain virtually ignorant of the raison d'être, or content, and we are exposed only to the ritual, or form.
A person who speaks in stereotyped phrases is comic because his speech is automatic rather than being flexible in order to adjust to the demands of ever-changing thought processes. Magdelon and Cathos speak almost exclusively in phrases which have been stereotyped by the exigencies of ultra-refined manners. Cathos makes the following remarks to Gorgibus, attempting to justify Magdelon's rejection of a suitor chosen by her father:

En effet, mon oncle, ma cousine donne dans le vrai de la chose. Le moyen de bien recevoir des gens qui sont tout à fait incongrus en galanterie! Je m'en vais gager qu'ils n'ont jamais vu la carte de Tendre, et que Billets-doux, Petits-soins, Billets-galants et Jolis-vers, sont des terres inconnues pour eux. Ne voyez-vous pas que toute leur personne marque cela, et qu'ils n'ont point cet air qui donne d'abord une bonne opinion des gens? Venir en visite amoureuse avec une jambe toute unie, un chapeau désarmé de plumes, une tête irrégulière en cheveux, et un habit qui souffre une indigence de rubans...! mon Dieu! quels amants sont-ce là? Quelle frugalité d'ajustement et quelle sécheresse de conversation! On n'y dure point, on n'y tient pas. J'ai remarqué encore que leurs rabats ne sont pas de la bonne faiseuse, et qu'il s'en faut plus d'un grand demi-pied que leurs hauts-de-chausses ne soient assez larges. (Scene 4)

This speech should serve as a representative example of the many such speeches throughout the play in which comic effects are created by the characters' abuse of language and vice versa. Affectation is the keynote of Cathos' remarks: she says nothing directly, but cloaks her every idea in a strained turn of phrase. Molière has very skillfully burlesqued précieux speech modes in Les Précieuses ridicules by multiplying the frequency of refined paraphrasings and by placing this abundance of ultra-refined clichés in the mouths of pretentious fools. Each sentence of Cathos' speech cited above contains at least one turn of phrase that was sure to delight the parterre and continues to amuse audiences by dint of its excessive and unwarranted refinement. Cathos' speech is comic because it never comes directly to the point, and it must be remembered that she is speaking argumentatively, trying to justify her cousin Magdeon's actions as well as her own. It is also
comic because it is entirely misdirected: she is trying to convince Gorgibus that LaGrange and DuCroisy are not the men that she and Magdelon want to or should marry, but she fails to speak to him in terms he can understand. Communication has broken down, and her language, instead of conveying her thoughts, cloaks them in comic metaphor. As far as Gorgibus is concerned, Cathos might just as well be speaking a foreign language, for he says, "...je ne puis rien comprendre à ce baragouin." (Scene 4) Let us briefly consider why he cannot understand this babbling, refined parlance that it pretends to be. Cathos says, "En effet, mon oncle, ma cousine donne dans le vrai de la chose," but what she means is, "En effect, mon oncle, ma cousine a raison." She says further, "Le moyen de bien recevoir des gens qui sont tout à fait incongrus en galanterie! Je m'en vais gager qu'ils n'ont jamais vu la carte de Tendre, etc...." meaning, "Nous n'aimons que les galants." The meaning of most of Cathos' remarks remains totally obscure for Gorgibus: what is this down-to-earth man to make of expressions such as "Une jambe toute unie, un chapeau désarmé de plumes, une tête irrégulière en cheveux, et un habit qui souffre une indigence de rubans...!"? Even if Cathos had said "des pantalons sans canons, un chapeau simple, pas de perruque, et un habit sans beaucoup de rubans," she would not have made her point, because it would not occur to Gorgibus to judge his daughter and niece's suitors solely on the basis of their taste in clothes. Cathos' remarks are comic because they are unnatural, misdirected, and belie sound judgment. But above all else, such remarks are comic because they completely fail to communicate.

Some of the super-refined absurdly artificial phrases of Magdelon, Cathos, and Mascarille do achieve their goal; that is, these characters can communicate with each other in spite of the manner in which they couch their
thoughts:

Mascarille: Mesdames, vous serez surprises, sans doute, de l'audace de ma visite; mais votre réputation vous attirer cette méchante affaire, et le mérite a pour moi des charmes si puissants que je cours partout après lui.

Magdelon: Si vous poursuivez le mérite, ce n'est pas sur nos terres que vous devez chasser.

Cathos: Pour voir chez vous le mérite, il a fallu que vous l'y ayez amené.

Mascarille: Ah! je m'inscris en faux contre vos paroles. La renommé accuse juste, en contant ce que vous valez; et vous allez faire pic, repic et capot tout ce qu'il y a de galant dans Paris.

Magdelon: Votre complaisance pousse un peu trop avant la libéralité de ses louanges; et nous n'avons garde, ma cousine et moi, de donner de notre sérieux dans le doux de votre flatterie.

(Scene 9)

Not only do these words communicate, they say more than the speakers intend, for they make apparent the characters' inability to use refined language to advantage. There is no need to dwell on the fact that every speech in the above cited sequence of dialogue is a parody of ultra-refined salutation and compliment. Magdelon, Cathos, and Mascarille are flattering themselves and each other by assuming a social pose that they cannot sustain. They fool one another, but not without making fools of themselves as far as the audience is concerned. The phraseology to which they resort is so strained that it shows them up as anything but persons of quality; consequently, they become victims of their own words. Magdelon, Cathos, and Mascarille unwittingly say things about themselves that are truly comic because they are completely accidental and go unperceived by the other parties involved in this conversation à la préciosité extravagante. For instance, Mascarille, in trying to attain the ultimate in gallantry says, "le mérite a pour moi des charmes si puissants que je cours partout après lui." He is, in effect, describing his comic flaw, for it will be remembered that his master, LaGrange, des-
cribed him in the first scene of the play as "un extravagant, qui s'est mis
dans la tête de vouloir faire l'homme de condition." Magdelon and Cathos
also make an unconscious remark about themselves in saying that if Mascarille
has come to their modest home in search of merit, he will have had to bring
it with him, for there is certainly no merit to be found there ordinarily!
Another delightful instance of Magdelon and Cathos' speech betraying an
unintentional meaning is seen later in Scene 9 when, intending to praise
Mascarille's florid speech they say:

Cathos: Il faut avouer qu'il dit les choses d'une manière
particulière.

Magdelon: Il a un tour admirable dans l'esprit.

Instead of flattering, the speakers are unveiling a blunt truth: Mascarille
says things in a queer way, and there must be something wrong with his mind!
We have in all of these instances a comic that is created by language, that is
inherent in the words themselves.

Molière achieves many comic effects on a purely verbal plane in Les
Précieuses ridicules by transposing a familiar or commonplace idea into
pseudo-refined expression. It will be remembered that Bergson feels that a
comic effect results when an expression is transposed from its natural key
to another that does not accord with the thought being expressed. To cite
an illustrative example, Magdelon tells her servant, Almanzor, to bring
some chairs, saying: "Vite, voirez-vous ici les commodités de la con-
versation." (Scene 9) Such a remark is comic because the form is unsuitable
to the content. One of the most amusing comic effects achieved by trans-
position is seen in the recitation and explication of Mascarille's impromptu.
He recites the following "impromptu" written one day earlier:

Oh! Oh! je n'y prenais pas garde:
Tandis que, sans songer à mal, je vous regarde,
Votre oeil en tapinois me dérobe mon coeur.
Au voleur! Au voleur! Au voleur! Au voleur! (Scene 9)

Needless to say, Mascarille has a spurious, or at best, distorted knowledge of poetic language. (He had earlier said that his desire was to write the history of Rome in madrigals!) The above impromptu is clearly not poetic, but merely the forging of quotidian speech into a poorly conceived and executed alexandrline quatrain, the first verse of which falls short of the meter by some two feet, the third verse of which is one foot too long, and the last verse of which contains three caesuras separating the fourfold repetition of a frankly banal interjection. The poem is comic because Molière has transposed popular speech forms into the cadre of poetry, and he has done it as awkwardly as possible to make it seem worthy of Mascarille's muse. Following the recitation of the poem is a parody of a scholarly explication de poésie in which Mascarille recites each phrase of the poem and then explains the hidden beauties or symbolism of the phrase:

Avez-vous remarqué ce commencement, Oh! oh! Voilà qui est extraordinaire, oh! oh! Comme un homme qui s'abuse tout d'un coup, oh! oh! La surprise, oh! oh!

The entire impromptu is explicated in a similar vein, the last quatrain being thus interpreted:

Au voleur! Au voleur! Au voleur! Au voleur! Ne diriez-vous pas que c'est un homme qui crie et court après un voleur pour le faire arrêter? Au voleur! Au voleur! Au voleur! Au voleur! (Scene 9)

Mascarille's comments are as ludicrous as his poetry: he is explaining the obvious in terms of the obvious. At best, he is repeating himself with truly comic unawareness; his speech is both ineffective, for it does not say what he wants it to say, and automatic in its repetition.

The speech patterns of the would-be ladies and gentlemen make abusive use of figurative meanings, for their paraphrasings often lead them a great
distance from the literal sense of the thoughts being expressed. Molière
has achieved many comic effects by juxtaposing the figurative speech of the
précieuses with the literal-mindedness of Gorgibus and the servants. Gorgi­
bus is trying to convince Magdelon and Cathos that they should marry LaGrange
and DuCroisy in the following scene:

Magdelon: Ah! mon père, ce que vous dites là est du dernier bour­
geois! Cela me fait honte de vous ouir parler de la sorte, et
vous devriez un peu vous faire apprendre le bel air des choses.

Gorgibus: Je n'ai que faire ni d'air ni de chanson. Je te dis que
le mariage est une chose sainte et sacrée, et que c'est faire
en honnestes gens que de débuter par là.

Magdelon: Mon Dieu! que, si tout le monde vous ressemblait, un
roman serait bientôt fini! La belle chose que ce serait si
d'abord Cyrus épousait Mandane et qu'Aronce de plain-pied fut
marié à Clélie.

Gorgibus: Que me vient conter celle-ci? (Scene 4)

We see by Gorgibus' first response that he has literally interpreted what
Magdelon said figuratively. Gorgibus equates "le bel air des choses" with
music rather than with refinement of manners, and doggedly restates his opin­
ion that marriage is a must for well-reared young ladies. Magdelon continues
her protestation by saying that if Cyrus had married Mandane or Aronce had
married Clélie without first having had a lengthy and adventurous sentimental
courtship, the pastoral novels, Le Grand Cyrus and Clélie, would not have
been possible. She has said figuratively that she does not want to be
married to a man who would propose to her at their first meeting, but she has
failed to communicate with Gorgibus. He cannot understand her because her
speech, besides being figurative, alludes to things completely out of the
range of his experience; Gorgibus has evidently never read either Le Grand
Cyrus or Clélie. Another comic instance of Magdelon failing to communicate
because she speaks figuratively to a literal-minded character is seen when
she instructs her servant, Marotte, to bring a mirror:
Magdelon: Vite, venez nous tendre ici dedans le conseiller des graces.

Marotte: Par ma foi! je ne sais point quelle bête c'est là; il faut parler chrétien, si vous voulez que je vous entende.

(Scene 4)

Figurative speech is self-defeating when it falls on deaf ears.

Les Précieuses ridicules is extremely rich in comic speech. Molière shows himself a master technician of ludicrous language: throughout the play he is concerned with exposing the comic lack of communication inherent in affected speech. His most often employed dramatic technique is repetition; again and again Magdelon, Cathos, Mascarille, and Jodelet, abuse speech. It is in the constant repetition of such abuse of language that Molière underlines the comic implication that words become the masters of the speaker. As the play progresses we witness characters being carried away by their words; Mascarille is especially caught up by what he has to say and we have the definite impression that he stops acting the role of a gentleman and begins believing he is one. This constitutes a truly comic contrast effected on a purely verbal plane: words dominate the speaker instead of serving his purposes.

Molière also makes adroit use of contrast to create a comic of language by juxtaposing the affected speech of his four précieux personages with that of Gorgibus, LaGrange, DuCroisy, and the servants. These characters speak "normally," that is, without undue attention to form. Gorgibus' speech is often comic for a different reason, however; he employs speech patterns that mirror his provincial background: "Il est bien nécessaire, vraiment, de faire tant de dépense pour vous graisser le museau? (Scene 4) Such is the question Gorgibus asks of his daughter and niece, who are spending too much money on beauty preparations. Gorgibus is guilty of Magdelon and Cathos' linguistic sin; he, too, fails to adjust the form of his language to its
thought content. It is quite comic, if certainly less than proper, to speak of applying makeup in terms of "'greasing up' one's snout."

An additional remark must be made about the comic of language in Les Précieuses ridicules: it is omnipresent. The dialogue is explosive, there is never a dull moment, one comic effect is heaped upon another. Molière has effectively used language as a double threat comic weapon: it creates comedy as well as expressing verbally the comic inherent in both situation and character.

We can now turn our attention to the comic of character in Les Précieuses ridicules. Bergson states that a dramatic personage is comic if he is rigid or unable to adapt to the ever-changing demands of life; he is one who acts automatically. He states further that in order to be comic a personage needs to have some eccentricity which renders him unsociable, or removed from the norm. The comic character is comic because of some lack of attention to himself or to others:

Rigidity, automatism, absentmindedness, and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and all serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in character.²

It is easy to see that the major characters of Les Précieuses ridicules fit Bergson's definition of comic characters; they are so automatic and unchanging as to be more mask-like than life-like. It is for this very reason that we can laugh at them. It would be difficult to identify with and, consequently, pity such personages, for we know nothing about them but their persistently comic quirks to which we are repeatedly exposed. Our attention is constantly being called to their inadaptability and rigidity: the characters are merely puppets.

²Bergson, op. cit., p. 147.
Magdelon is a sublimely comic character; a précieuse ridicule at the opening of the play, she remains one at the comedy's close. She has not really learned a lesson from LaGrange and DuCroisy's mean trick, nor has she benefited from Gorgibus' scolding. There is no indication in the play that she will not continue to be deluded about herself. Magdelon is comic for these reasons:

1. She is suffering under the delusion that her affected speech, dress, and manners, have changed her into a lady.

2. She is ignorant and displays her ignorance by making inane remarks such as commenting that Mascarille's music is chromatic.

3. She is completely unaware of the fact that she cuts a ridiculous figure.

4. She makes faulty value judgments, equating life as she does with a pastoral romance.

5. She is consistent, unchangeable, a mask.

It will have been noted that although it is impossible for the spectator to identify with Magdelon as an individual, it is most certainly possible to recognize in her some of the faults of all pretentious persons. This is what makes Molière's comedies universal: he is able to get through to the essence of human nature and to reproduce it dramatically without confining this essence to an individualized personage. In short, Molière, in creating Magdelon, tended toward caricature rather than to portraiture. The proof is in the other characters of the play; for all practical purposes there is no difference between Magdelon and Cathos as far as character conception and construction are concerned. And the transition from Magdelon and Cathos to Mascarille is only one of gender. Jodelet is only briefly onstage but we can see that he is just another version of Mascarille. All four of these
characters wear the mask of pretense; they are the fools of the play.

We also find another group of characters in *Les Précieuses ridicules* which collectively create the mask of sensibility, common sense, or practicality. It was seen in the discussion of the comic of situation, that the play centers largely around the unresolved conflict of pretentiousness and practicality. LaGrange, DuCroisy, Gorgibus, and the servants, representatives that they are of sensibility and practicality, are nonetheless comic characters. This is due to the fact that they are as rigid and as automatic in their gestures, value judgments, and language habits as are Magdelon and her friends. It is true that they are not as comic as Magdelon, but this is because they are placed in the antagonist's or rogue's position by the demands of plot structuring.

To imply that there are essentially only two characters in *Les Précieuses ridicules* is not to throw unfavorable light on Molière's conception of the comic in character. On the contrary, by limiting himself to creating only two characters, he has greatly increased the comic potential of the play. That is, the characters representing the mask of pretence are fools; fools are comic characters, and repetition is an unfailing comic technique. Molière seems to have known this instinctively, for he has taken the same basic fool, Magdelon, and repeated her four times in the same play. In so doing, he has broadened the scope of comic of character by thematic repetition; all four of the fools are pretentious, deluded, and doubly victimized by language and by the rogues of the play. It will be remembered that Moore demonstrated that Molière's comedies often bear structural resemblances to the farce in that they center around the conflicts of fools and rogues; in the farce, the rogue dupes the fool. Now in *Les Précieuses ridicules* those characters representing the mask of sensibility and practicality are also the
rogues. LaGrange and DuCroisy, in the true farcical rogue tradition, play a dirty trick on Magdelon, Cathos, Mascarille, and Jodelet. Gorgibus has nothing to do with the machinations of this plot to trick the fools, but when he learns of it after the fact, he does not disapprove, for his daughter and niece are, he thinks, deserving of such treatment. He says to Magdelon and Cathos: "Oui, c'est une pièce sanglante, mais qui est un effet de votre impertinence, infâmes!" (Scene 16) Molière has multiplied the possibilities of the comic in character by creating a number of fools and a number of rogues whom he engages in a basic conflict that is, for all practical purposes unresolvable.

There is also a very important aspect of comedy of character that is inherent in the play, but which comes to the fore only when the play is performed. Molière writes in the preface of Les Précieuses ridicules that a great deal of the charm of his play is dependent upon acting style, and indeed, the play is almost unlimited in possibilities for the comic actor. To cite only one example, the scene in which Jodelet makes the précieuses feel his battle scars (Scene 11) is rich in comic possibilities that are only suggested in the text. The comic of character seen in only one dimension when the play is read, is quite rich; but with the added effects of delivery of lines, timing, stage movement, and gesticulation, the characters of Les Précieuses ridicules attain the essence of pure comedy.

LA CANTATRICE CHAUVE

Mr. and Mrs. Smith, an English couple, are spending a quiet English evening in their suburban English home. Mr. Smith, reading the newspaper,

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3Eugène Ionesco, Théâtre I (Paris: Gallimard, 1954). All subsequent quotations from Ionesco's plays shall be taken from the Gallimard editions.
has little other than an occasional clack of the tongue to contribute to his wife's monologue-like conversation in which she speaks of shopping, the preparation and eating of dinner, her children, the efficacy of yogurt for an upset stomach. Mr. Smith assumes a more active role in the conversation when his wife mentions a certain Dr. Mackenzie-King, who never recommends to his patients any remedy that he himself has not taken; before performing a liver operation on Mr. Parker, for example, the doctor himself underwent surgery. Dr. Mackenzie-King recovered from the operation, but Mr. Parker died in surgery; it is for this reason that Mr. Smith feels that Mackenzie-King is a poor doctor. For had he been a good one, he would have died of the operation just as a captain goes down with his ship. Mrs. Smith feels that her husband has drawn an unlikely parallel, but he justifies his comparison by saying that ships, like patients, have their weaknesses. It is, therefore, possible to compare a doctor to a ship's captain. The Smiths conclude that all doctors and their patients are charlatans and that only the British navy is honorable and praiseworthy, even if British sailors are not. Mr. Smith then reads in the paper that Bobby Watson has died one and a half, two, three, and four years ago, and he reminisces that Bobby was the best looking cadavre in all of Great Britain. Mrs. Smith then laments the fate of Bobby's widow, Bobby, a rather difficult woman to describe because she is both old and young, ugly and pretty, fat and slender, besides looking like the identical twin of her deceased husband. The Smiths' conversation reaches a pinnacle of confusion as they try to decide which Bobby Watson is being discussed: it seems that the entire Watson family, men, women, and children, the deceased as well as the living, are named Bobby. The Smiths become mutually exasperated and have a non-violent argument which is quickly resolved.
Then their maid, Mary, appears and announces that she is the maid, that on her afternoon off she went to the movies with a man and saw a film with some women; she also tells the Smiths that their dinner guests, the Martins, are at the door. Mrs. Smith recalls having invited the Martins, but as she was hungry and they were late, she and Mr. Smith have already dined. The Smiths tell the maid to show the Martins in while they go to change their clothes. Mary reprimands the Martins for being late and curtly tells them to sit down and to wait for the Smiths. Left alone, the Martins begin their conversation by remarking that they look familiar to one another and they try to divine where and when they may have previously met. After learning that they both come from the same city, live on the same street in the same house, sleep in the same bed, have a two-year-old daughter named Alice who has one white eye and one red eye, they conclude that they are Donald and Elisabeth Martin, husband and wife! They embrace and fall sound asleep; Mary, the maid, enters and informs the audience that the Martins are mistaken about their identities: Donald's daughter, Alice, has a white right eye and a red left eye, whereas the opposite is true of Elisabeth's daughter, Alice.

The Smiths reappear without having changed their clothes, and the two couples sit stiffly facing one another. Not without difficulty, the Martins and the Smiths are able to strike up a conversation of the most banal sort. The doorbell rings, Mrs. Smith goes to the door, but no one is there. The conversation is resumed only to be again interrupted by the ringing doorbell; once again Mrs. Smith answers the door to find an empty doorstep. The doorbell rings a third time, but Mrs. Smith refuses to go to the door; Mr. Smith insists that when the doorbell rings there is always someone waiting to be let in. Recent experience has proved to Mrs. Smith that there is never anyone at the door when the bell rings, but because her husband insists
that he is right, she answers the door for a third time to prove her point: no one is there. When once again the doorbell rings, Mrs. Smith becomes adamant: she refuses to be made a fool of four times in succession; she will not go to the door. So Mr. Smith answers it to find the Firechief there; Mr. Smith is victorious, for having found the Firechief on the doorstep proves his contention that a ringing doorbell must always be rung by someone. Mrs. Smith, however, is not satisfied and insists that there was no one at the door until the fourth time it was answered, and since only the first three times count, she is right in saying that there is never anyone at the door when the doorbell rings. The Firechief settles the dispute by saying that he did not ring the bell the first two times, but that he did ring it the third and fourth times, having hid the third time as a practical joke. He concludes that both Mr. Smith and Mrs. Smith are right to a degree, for sometimes when the doorbell rings there is someone present and other times there is no one there.

The Firechief is disappointed to learn that there is no fire in the Smith household, for he has come expressly to put out a fire; business is bad everywhere for the fire department, for there is a paucity of fires in the outskirts of London. The Martins and the Smiths are able to persuade the Firechief to tell them some anecdotes, all of which are composed of non sequiturs. Then the Smiths each tell an anecdote which is followed by the Firechief's rambling and complex true story entitled "Le Rhume," the object of which is to state that people catch colds in winter. The maid, Mary, enters the salon and refuses to leave until she has recited a poem, "Le Feu," dedicated to her boyfriend, the Firechief. Because he is expected soon as a fire across town, the Firechief excuses himself and leaves after having asked news of the bald soprano. Mrs. Smith assures him that said soprano
always wears her hair in the same style. Once the Firechief has gone the
conversation degenerates into a series of non sequiturs and is conducted at
a rapidly increasing rate of speed, until it reaches such a pitch that the
words spoken are used only for their phonetic qualities. Finally, as the
Martins and Smiths are shouting nonsensical sounds at one another, there is
a blackout onstage; when the lights come back on, the Martins are alone in
the Smiths' living room and begin to recite the lines uttered by the Smiths
at the beginning of the play.

La Cantatrice chauve, like Les Précieuses ridicules, is rich in comic
situations without being essentially a situation comedy. Following the
Bergsonian method of showing the relationships between dramatic comic situ­
ations and children's games, numerous examples can be cited. The jack-in-
the-box situation, or struggle between two stubborn elements, neither of
which can completely overpower the other, is seen in the domestic quarrels
of Mr. and Mrs. Smith. The opening lines of the play are all spoken by Mrs.
Smith; Mr. Smith is able only to get in an occasional clack of the tongue.
After a few moments he stops clacking and begins to take an active part in
the conversation by disagreeing with his wife. He contends that Dr. Macken­
zie-King is a charlatan, while she insists that he is a fine doctor. Mr.
Smith is able to make his point in this argument, and wins his wife momen­tarily over to his point of view. However, no sooner has this argument been
quelled than another one is commenced; this time the Smiths quarrel about
the Bobby Watson family, all the members of which are named Bobby Watson.
There is a great deal of confusion because Mr. Smith cannot decide to which
Bobby Watson his wife is making reference, and vice versa. He finally in­sults her by saying that he is not able to answer all her idiotic questions
about the Watsons. She refuses to be insulted by her husband, a mere man,
saying to him:

Les hommes sont tous pareils! Vous restez là, toute la journée, la cigarette à la bouche ou bien vous vous mettez de la poudre et vous fardez vos lèvres, cinquante fois par jour, si vous n'êtes pas en train de boire sans arrêt! (Scene 1)

Mr. Smith retorts with:

Mais qu'est-ce que tu dirais si tu voyais les hommes faire comme les femmes, fumer toute la journée, se poudrer, se mettre du rouge au lèvres, boire du whisky? (Scene 1)

This quarrel, like the earlier one discussed, is quickly resolved, but only temporarily so. It is interesting to note that the Smiths' insults are nearly identical, as are most of their points of disagreement; this would imply that, like the jack-in-the-box which is suppressed only to spring back again and again, the Smiths thrive on conflict for conflict's sake. They seize every available opportunity for an argument which always ends peacefully resolved, at least for a short time. Another example of this jack-in-the-box type of conflict is seen in the argument about the doorbell (Scene 7) in which Mrs. Smith maintains that there is never anyone at the door when the bell rings, whereas Mr. Smith insists that there has to be someone present to ring a doorbell when one is rung. This dispute is somewhat unsatisfactorily settled by the Firechief who says that Mr. and Mrs. Smith are both right and both wrong. It is easy to see that the Smiths follow a mechanically arranged pattern of existence: they fight, they make up, they fight again, they make up again, ad infinitum.

Not only do the Smiths fight among themselves, they are also in conflict with their maid, Mary. When Mary makes her first entrance and announces that the Smiths' dinner guests, the Martins, have arrived, Mr. and Mrs. Smith scold her for not having remained in the kitchen on her afternoon off to prepare dinner:
Mme Smith: Ah oui, Nous les attendions. Et on avait faim. Comme on ne les voyait plus venir, on allait dîner sans eux. On n'a rien mangé, de toute la journée. Vous n'auriez pas dû vous absenter!

Mary: C'est vous qui m'avez donné la permission.

M. Smith: On ne l'a pas fait exprès! (Scene 2)

Mary, like a jack-in-the-box, springs back immediately, ready to fight; the Smiths have gone to dress for dinner, although they have already dined and have no intention of changing clothes, while Mary shows the Martins into the living room:


Mary could not be rude to her employers, the Smiths, who had reprimanded her, so she vents her anger on the Martins. Later in the play when the Firechief has come to visit, Mary engages in a more open conflict with the Smiths. She wants to recite a poem for the guests, but Mr. and Mrs. Smith feel that this would not be socially acceptable. At first, Mary asks politely if she might be allowed to recite her poem, but being refused permission, she becomes insistent, and says forcefully:

Je vais vous réciter un poème, alors, c'est entendu? C'est un poème qui s'intitule "Le feu" en l'honneur du Capitaine. (Scene 9)

Mary begins reciting her poem, but as she comes to the last lines, she is again victimized by the Smiths, who cannot allow their maid to recite poems to their guests. At this point, the jack-in-the-box situation takes on a physical character, for the Smiths bodily remove Mary from the stage as she continues her recitation. Ionesco has also made use of the jack-in-the-box type of comic situation in structuring the last scene of the play in such a way as to recommence the comedy with the Martins and Smiths in reversed roles. That is, as the play ends -- or begins again -- the Martins are
seated alone in the living room reciting the lines spoken by the Smiths at the beginning of the play. So we may see the action of the comedy taken as a whole as a sort of jack-in-the-box that will continue to spring back up no matter how many times it might be depressed.

Let us now investigate which situations of La Cantatrice chauve bear resemblance to the dancing-jack, or marionette, the second children's game to which Bergson draws analogies with the structure of certain comic scenes. It is difficult to select any one scene or situation which is most like the dancing-jack, for the entire play is quite similar to puppet theatre. All of the characters act mechanically, as if they were being controlled by an outside force. As will be demonstrated later in detail, the personages of La Cantatrice chauve are controlled by speech patterns to such an extent that we may see speech as a puppeteer pulling on strings which manipulate the Martins, the Smiths, Mary, and the Firechief. There is also a certain puppet-like control implicit in the relationship of the Smiths and the Martins. The Smiths seem to control the Martins, who have come to dinner, a dinner which has already been served and eaten. The Martins are to wait in vain, for instead of being served dinner, they are insulted by Mrs. Smith:

_Bonsoir, chers amis! excusez-nous de vous avoir fait attendre si longtemps. Nous avons pensé qu'on devait vous rendre les honneurs auxquels vous avez droit et, dès que nous avons appris que vous vouliez bien nous faire le plaisir de venir nous voir sans annoncer votre visite, nous nous sommes dépêchés d'aller revêtir nos habits de gala._ (Scene 7)

Not only have the Martins been insulted, but they have been unjustly insulted, for everything Mrs. Smith says is either untrue or sarcastic: it was the Smiths who had to wait for the Martins; the Martins did not come to visit uninvited; the Smiths have not changed into their dinner clothes. Yet the Martins are guests in the Smith home and must bear such an affront, just as a puppet must dance when the puppeteer pulls the strings.
We can also see a puppet-like effect in the structuring of comic situations in the doorbell scene and the scene in which the Firechief is called upon to entertain the gathering with some true stories. In the doorbell scene (Scene 7) the action of the characters is controlled by the ringing doorbell, which acts as a stimulus for an extended argument that is not resolved until the following scene. Not only do Mr. and Mrs. Smith argue about the probability of someone being present at the door when the bell rings, but the Martins, too, take an active part in the argument. Then the Firechief, who was at the door the fourth time it was opened, assumes the role of arbitrator and puts an abrupt end to the argument:

Je vais vous mettre d'accord. Vous avez un peu raison tous les deux. Lorsqu'on sonne à la porte, des fois il y a quelqu'un, d'autres fois il n'y a personne. (Scene 8)

With this rather unsatisfactory explanation the Firechief is able to restore tranquility; he has gained control of the other characters by outwitting them. Later in the same scene the Firechief again manages to dominate the actions of the other characters via a ruse. He has already told three anecdotes to the Smiths and the Martins when Mrs. Smith, out of politeness, requests that he tell another. The Firechief, of course, wants to tell another anecdote, and the Smiths and Martins would rather forego this dubious pleasure. The Firechief refuses to tell a fourth anecdote, saying:

Le Pompier: Oh non, il est trop tard.
M. Martin: Dites quand même.
Le Pompier: Je suis trop fatigué.
M. Smith: Rendez-nous ce service.
M. Martin: Je vous en prie.
Le Pompier: Non.
Mme Martin: Vous avez un cœur de glace, Nous sommes sur des charbons ardents.
Mme Smith: Je vous en supplie.

Le Pompier: Soit. (Scene 8)

Having maneuvered all four parties present into begging him to do exactly what he wanted to do to begin with, namely to tell an anecdote that the four persons begging him would prefer not to hear, the Firechief magnanimously consents. Then the audience learns the true feelings of the Smiths and the Martins:

M. Smith: Il accepte! Il va encore nous embêter.

Mme Martin: Zut.

Mme Smith: Pas de chance. J'ai été trop polie. (Scene 8)

The Firechief then begins his interminable anecdote entitled "Le Rhume."

Let us now consider those comic situations in La Cantatrice chauve which can be referred to the rolling-snowball, an effect or game which, it will be remembered, Bergson says is comic due to its precipitous forward motion and rapidly increasing size. One of the most delightful scenes in the play is the Martins' recognition scene (Scene 4) in which Mr. and Mrs. Martin "find" each other after a non-existent long absence. The Martins are sitting alone in the Smiths' living room, when, after a pause, Mr. Martin says:

Mes excuses, Madame, mais il me semble, si je ne me trompe, que je vous ai déjà rencontrée quelque part.

To which Mrs. Martin replies:

A moi aussi, Monsieur, il me semble que je vous ai déjà rencontré quelque part. (Scene 4)

Like a snowball rolling downhill and gradually increasing in size and momentum, this conversation continues. The Martins learn that they come from the same town, from which they both left approximately five weeks earlier on the 8:30 train which arrives in London at 4:45. They learn further that they
both travelled second class (even though they were both aware that there is no second class in English trains), that they both were in car number eight, compartiment six, and that they were seated facing one another. All of these parallel events seem fantastic to the Martins, for they constantly punctuate their remarks with: "Comme c'est curieux, comme c'est bizarre, quelle coïncidence!" Yet Mrs. Martin cannot remember ever having seen Mr. Martin. As the conversation continues, Mr. Martin learns that he lives on the same street as Mrs. Martin, at the same address, in the same apartment on the same floor. Not only that, they sleep in the same bed in the same room:

Mme Martin: Quelle coïncidence, ah mon Dieu, quelle coïncidence! Ma chambre à coucher a, elle aussi, un lit avec un édredon vert et se trouve au fond du corridor entre les waters, cher Monsieur, et la bibliothèque!

M. Martin: Comme c'est bizarre, curieux, étrange! Alors, Madame, nous habitons dans la même chambre et nous dormons dans le même lit, chère Madame. C'est peut-être là que nous nous sommes rencontrés!

Mme Martin: Comme c'est curieux et quelle coïncidence! C'est bien possible que nous y soyons rencontrés, et peut-être même la nuit dernière. Mais je ne m'en souviens pas, cher Monsieur! (Scene 4)

Hoping to find something more definite by which he and the lady to whom he is speaking may conclude that they have indeed met somewhere before their present encounter, Mr. Martin says that he has a two-year-old daughter named Alice who has one red eye and one white eye. Mrs. Martin, too, has such a daughter; the Martins are now convinced that they have met previously:

M. Martin: Alors, chère Madame, je crois qu'il n'y a pas de doute, nous nous sommes déjà vus et vous êtes ma propre épouse... Elisabeth, je t'ai retrouvée!

Mme Martin: Donald, c'est toi, darling! (Scene 4)

Ionesco has thus traced the comic progression of a conversation which leads a husband and wife who have never been separated to find one another again.
It is easy to see the rapport that exists between this scene and a rolling snowball.

Another instance of comic situation being structured on the same pattern is found in the anecdote scene (Scene 7). The Firechief having taken it upon himself to ask if the Smiths and Martins would like to hear some anecdotes, relates three in succession. Then Mr. Smith treats the company to one of his favorite stories, followed by his wife, who also has a tale to tell. Finally, the Firechief tells his remarkably involved and singularly insignificant true story, "Le Rhume." The anecdotes multiply, becoming progressively lengthier and more absurd as the scene progresses, creating a truly comic situation. Still another instance of a rolling snowball-type of structuring can be seen in the tempo of the dialogue exchanged by the Martins and the Smiths that begins in Scene 7 and continues to the end of the play. Such is the awkward beginning of the conversation:

M. Smith: Hm.
Mme Smith: Hm, hm.
Mme Martin: Hm, hm, hm.
M. Martin: Hm, hm, hm, hm.
Mme Martin: Oh, décidément. (Scene 7)

From these humble origins the conversation eventually reaches a near paroxysm of nonsense, words being employed on a frankly sub-rational level and in a frenzied tempo.

Having noted that certain scenes of La Cantatrice chauve derive at least part of their comic impact from the skillful structuring of comic situations, and that many of these situations have a striking rapport with certain children's games, we can now investigate the dramatic techniques employed by Ionesco. Our remarks will be confined to those techniques which are employ-
ed on a purely structural level in creating a comic of situation. Ionesco has relied heavily upon repetition; he has achieved a number of comic effects by repeating several variations of a basic conflict which is never satisfactorily resolved:

1. The Smiths quarrel about Dr. Mackenzie-King's merit as a physician only to conclude that all doctors and all patients are charlatans, and that, even if British sailors are dishonorable, the British navy is honorable. (Scene 1).

2. The Smiths quarrel about which Bobby Watson is Bobby Watson's widow, and without deciding exactly which Bobby Watson is the one in question, stop fighting and make up. (Scene 1).

3. The Smiths quarrel with the maid, Mary, who should have remained home to prepare dinner, because even if they did give her permission to take the afternoon off, they had not done so purposely. (Scene 2).

4. Mary insults the Martins, who seem to ignore completely her insult. (Scene 3).

5. The Smiths insult the Martins, who likewise ignore the insult. (Scene 7).

6. The Smiths' quarrel about the doorbell is settled by the Firechief, who feels they are both right and wrong in their convictions. (Scene 7).

7. Mary recites her poem even though the Smiths have refused to allow her to do so; she is bodily removed from the stage while reciting it. Therefore, neither opposing force has completely won out in this conflict. (Scene 9).

8. The Martins take the roles of the Smiths when the play ends only to begin again. We may assume that the Smiths will come to visit, and that all of the comic conflict situations witnessed in the play will be repeated, ad infinitum.
In all of these examples, each of which is comic in itself, but all of which are more comic because of their collective grouping in the same short play, there is an unresolved conflict. Once again we are reminded of Bergson's belief that the comic in situation is closely related to and dependent upon mechanical or rigid arrangement of sequences of events. By so structuring his play as to repeat several times a comic conflict which is always left dangling, Ionesco has created a mechanical arrangement of situations. We can see that repetition is a prime technique in creating the comic of situation in *La Cantatrice chauve*.

Another important dramatic technique employed by Ionesco is that of inversion. The most significant example of this technique is seen in the reversal of roles of the Smiths and the Martins. This reversal of roles is extremely rich in comic connotations: it may be seen as a rolling snowball effect, the entire play moving forward to a climax, which once reached, begins to move forward again to the same climax; it may be seen as a jack-in-the-box effect, the Martins and Smiths continuing to change roles indefinitely; it may be seen as an example of reciprocal interference of series. If viewed as an example of reciprocal interference of series, it must be allowed that Ionesco has broken through a barrier of character identity: the Smiths are the Martins are the Smiths, they are all the same person, they are all no one at all. This is, of course, impossible to admit on a logical basis, but we are reminded of Bergson's statement that the comic has a logic all its own, that logic being more akin to free association of ideas than to deduction or induction. There are other examples of a comic of situation created through inversion in *La Cantatrice chauve*. Analogous to the robber-robbed situation seen in *La Farce du Maître Pathelin* is the scene in which the Mar-

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4Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
tins and the Smiths dupe themselves into hearing another anecdote by the Firechief. Not at all desirous of having to listen to another of his anecdotes, they insist he tell them another anyway, for they know he must leave on official business. However, their calculation turns out to be a miscalculation, and their pleas for another anecdote fall on willing ears: the Firechief neglects his mission of seeking new fires to extinguish and stays to tell another tale. The Smiths and the Martins, like Maître Pathelin, are outwitted at their own game.

Ionesco also employs the technique which Bergson calls reciprocal interference of series, or the phenomenon which permits the same situation to be interpreted in two or more entirely different ways. A most intensely comic use of this device is seen in the maid's monologue in Scene 5. In the preceding scene Ionesco traced the comic trajectory of the Martins' recognition; the Martins have managed to convince themselves via a number of evidences that they are Donald and Elisabeth Martin, man and wife. Then the maid, Mary, appears and says:

Elisabeth et Donald sont, maintenant, trop heureux pour pouvoir m'entendre. Je puis donc vous révéler un secret. Elisabeth n'est pas Elisabeth, Donald n'est pas Donald. En voici la preuve: l'enfant dont parle Donald n'est pas la fille d'Elisabeth, ce n'est pas la même personne. La fillette de Donald a un œil blanc et un autre rouge comme la fillette d'Elisabeth. Mais tandis que l'enfant de Donald a l'œil blanc à droite et l'œil rouge à gauche, l'enfant d'Elisabeth, lui, a l'œil rouge à droite et le blanc à gauche! Ainsi tout le système d'argumentation de Donald s'écroule en se heurtant à ce dernier obstacle qui anéantit toute sa théorie. Malgré les coïncidences extraordinaires qui semblent être des preuves définitives, Donald et Elisabeth n'étant pas les parents du même enfant ne sont pas Donald et Elisabeth. Il a beau croire qu'il est Donald, elle a beau se croire Elisabeth. Il a beau croire qu'elle est Elisabeth. Elle a beau croire qu'il est Donald: ils se trompent amèrement. (Scene 5)

This monologue is in itself comic due to the number of absurdities and repetitions it embodies. But viewed in relation to the preceding scene of the play it becomes more intensely comic in an anti-climactic sense, for in a few
words (plus much repetition) it disproves what the Martins spent so much time and so many words to prove: that they were themselves. Mary's monologue throws an entirely different light on the Martins' judgment, a judgment which they based upon faulty, highly circumstantial evidences. With a master comedian's touch Ionesco has subjected his characters to a reciprocal interference of series which causes them to make mistakes about their own identities. Ionesco wisely leaves the problem of the Martins' identity unsolved, for if he clarified the situation for the audience, much of the comic impact might be lost.

We can conclude that La Cantatrice chauve comprises numerous situations structured in such a way as to create a variety of comic effects. Like Les Précieuses ridicules, however, this play cannot be termed a situation comedy, for to do so is to ignore the fact that Ionesco has created his most comic effects on a purely verbal plane. It must be remarked that La Cantatrice chauve has no plot per se, but that it is constructed as a series of comic situations which highlight a theme of the ludicrous lack of communication inherent in quotidian speech habits.

Ionesco's play is saturated with comic effects created by language; the dialogue is so intensely comic that it is not far removed from becoming overbearing. In discussing the comic of situation many excerpts of dialogue were cited. Generally speaking, these excerpts were comic primarily because they expressed the comedy inherent in the situations; we shall now direct our attention to those instances in which the comedy is an outgrowth of the language alone. In Les Précieuses ridicules many of the comic effects created by language are due to the fact that the pretentious characters speak a highly colorful, distorted language that is comic because of its over attention to form. In La Cantatrice chauve most of the comedy inherent in the language is an outgrowth of the characters' inattention to both form
and content. The Smiths and Martins speak almost exclusively in terms of platitudes and clichés which no longer communicate ideas because no one really listens to them. For example, the exposition scene of the play is nothing more than a listing of platitudes by Mrs. Smith:

**Mme Smith:** Tiens, il est neuf heures. Nous avons mangé de la soupe, du poisson, des pommes de terre au lard, de la salade anglaise. Les enfants ont bu de l'eau anglaise. Nous avons bien mangé, ce soir. C'est parce que nous habitons dans les environs de Londres et que notre nom est Smith.

**M. Smith,** **continuant sa lecture,** **fait claquer sa langue.**

**Mme Smith:** Les pommes de terre sont très bonnes avec le lard, l'huile de la salade n'était pas rance. L'huile de l'épicier du coin est de bien meilleure qualité que l'huile de l'épicier d'en face, elle est même meilleure que l'huile de l'épicier du bas de la côte. Mas je ne veux pas dire que leur huile à eux soit mauvaise.

**M. Smith,** **continuant sa lecture,** **fait claquer sa langue.**

**Mme Smith:** Pourtant, c'est toujours l'huile de l'épicier du coin qui est la meilleure...

**M. Smith,** **continuant sa lecture,** **fait claquer sa langue.**

**Mme Smith:** Mary a bien cuit les pommes de terre cette fois-ci. La dernière fois elle ne les avait pas bien fait cuire. Je ne les aime que lorsqu'elles sont bien cuites.

**M. Smith,** **continuant sa lecture,** **fait claquer sa langue.**

**Mme Smith:** Le poisson était frais. Je m'en suis léché les babines. J'en ai pris deux fois. Non, trois fois. Ça me fait aller aux cabinets. Toi aussi tu en as pris trois fois. Cependant la troisième fois, tu en as pris moins que les deux premières fois, tandis que moi j'en ai pris beaucoup plus. J'ai mieux mangé que toi, ce soir. Comment ça se fait? D'habitude, c'est toi qui manges le plus. Ce n'est pas l'appétit qui te manque.

**M. Smith,** **continuant sa lecture,** **fait claquer sa langue.** (Scene 1)

Banality is the keynote of this "dialogue" of exposition and repetition is the structural device it employs to create comic effect. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are doing exactly the same thing: clacking their tongues. Mrs. Smith has nothing to say, and yet she talks incessantly out of habit: her speech is mechanically uttered and devoid of thought. Her words reveal a flaw in her personality
which renders her a comic character; when she speaks, she has no interest in communicating, she just wants to hear herself talk. Mrs. Smith is completely unaware that what she is saying is insignificant, uninteresting, and repetitious.

Ionesco achieves a number of comic effects on a verbal plane by having his characters state the obvious, the uninteresting, or the frankly banal.

The maid has this to say when she makes her first entrance:

Je suis la bonne. J'ai passé un après-midi très agréable. J'ai été au cinéma avec un homme et j'ai vu un film avec des femmes. À la sortie du cinéma, nous sommes allées boire de l'eau-de-vie et du lait et puis on a lu le journal. (Scene 2)

Mary, like her mistress, Mrs. Smith, is speaking out of habit; she, too, has nothing to say. Just as Ionesco underlined the comic quality of Mrs. Smith's speech in the exposition of the play by having Mr. Smith clack his tongue, a stylized comic repetition, he employs a similar technique to show up the comic quality of Mary's speech:

Mme Smith: J'espère que vous avez passé un après-midi très agréable, que vous êtes allée au cinéma avec un homme et que vous avez bu de l'eau-de-vie et du lait.

M. Smith: Et le journal! (Scene 2)

If it was comic for Mary to say nothing, it is doubly so for Mrs. Smith to repeat her words almost verbatim in reply, and for Mr. Smith to notice that his wife has neglected to repeat that Mary read the newspaper. We see in this short excerpt of dialogue that Ionesco has inserted and repeated absurdities and non sequiturs; this is a comic technique that he employs extensively throughout the play. It is especially evident in Scene 4, the scene in which the Martins deduce via a number of startling coincidences, that they are indeed man and wife. The dialogue in this scene reaches a pinnacle of absurdity without becoming incoherent. Ionesco achieves this effect through hammering repetition: everything that Mr. Martin says Mrs. Martin repeats. This repe-
titious dialogue is punctuated by still another repetition, for the Martins again and again make the remark that it is certainly curious that they should have so much in common and yet never have met before. The phrase "Comme c'est curieux!" -- a beloved cliché of the French -- is repeated no less than thirty times during the course of this conversation, together with two other stereotyped and banal locutions, "C'est bizarre!" and "Quelle coïncidence!"

In this instance Ionesco has taken a cliché and vividly shown its lack of communicative power: "Comme c'est curieux!" is said so often and so automatically that it means nothing.

In certain other instances Ionesco adopts an expression that is overused in quotidian speech and uses it in such a way as to give it a startlingly new connotation. It is not infrequently that one hears the expression "Le coeur n'a pas d'âge," one which is used by persons wishing to escape verbally the truth than everyone gets old. Ionesco employs this expression in an unusual context:

M. Smith: Ah, la la la la. Silence.


Mme Smith: Non. Il s'ennuie. Silence.

Mme Martin: Oh, Monsieur, à votre âge, vous ne devriez pas. Silence.

M. Smith: Le coeur n'a pas d'âge. (Scene 7)

The comic effect in this instance is produced through an uncommon association of ideas which might be traced as follows: if it is true that one is only as old as one feels, then one who chooses to feel young, should act accordingly; if one of the privileges of the very young to eliminate where and when they choose without fear of reprimand, Mr. Smith should avail himself of this privilege. Be that as it may, Ionesco has achieved a sure comic effect by situating a cliché in a context that creates a new body of connotations for it.
It will be remembered that in the opening lines of the play Mrs. Smith displayed her ability to speak continuously and automatically without communicating with her husband because she was giving a resume of virtually nothing. Mrs. Martin, on the other hand, is able to communicate with her husband and with the Smiths, although she, too, has really nothing to say. The difference is that her audience thinks she is saying something. They are starved for meaningful words, for communication with another person, and so they pay rapt attention to her as she relates an amazing adventure.

Mme Martin: Eh bien, j'ai assisté aujourd'hui à une chose extraordinaire. Une chose incroyable.

M. Martin: Dis vite, chérie.

M. Smith: Ah, on va s'amuser.

Mme Smith: Enfin.

Mme Martin: Eh bien, aujourd'hui, en allant au marché pour acheter des légumes qui sont de plus en plus chers...

Mme Smith: Qu'est-ce que ça va devenir!

M. Smith: Il ne faut pas interrompre, chérie vilaine.

Mme Martin: J'ai vu, dans la rue, à côté d'un café, un Monsieur, convenablement vêtu, âgé d'une cinquantaine d'années, même pas, qui...

M. Smith: Qui, quoi?

Mme Smith: Qui, quoi?

M. Smith, à sa femme: Faut pas interrompre, chérie, tu es dégoutante.

Mme Smith: Chérie, c'est toi qui as interrompu le premier, mufle.

M. Martin: Chut. (À sa femme.) Qu'est-ce qu'il faisait, le Monsieur?

Mme Martin: Eh bien vous allez dire que j'invente, il avait mis un genou par terre et se tenait penché.

M. Martin, M. Smith, Mme Smith: Oh!

Mme Martin: Cui, penché.
M. Smith: Pas possible.

Mme Martin: Si, penché. Je me suis approchée de lui pour voir ce qu'il faisait...

M. Smith: Eh bien?

Mme Martin: Il nouait les lacets de sa chaussure qui s'étaient défaits.

Les Trois Autres: Fantastique! (Scene 7).

We are reminded of Kant's definition of laughter in considering the comic nature of this sequence of dialogue. Kant writes that laughter is occasioned by a strained expectation that is suddenly changed into nothing, or is defeated. Mrs. Martin's true story is comic as far as the audience is concerned because it defeats our expectation of hearing something extraordinary. It becomes even more intensely comic when we realize that the characters onstage are not the least bit amused; they are so intent on listening to the words of the speaker that the ultimate meaning of those words escapes them. The characters have become so acclimated to clichés that have lost communicative power, that a truly insignificant event takes on mammoth proportions when it is related in words which actually express the idea: Mrs. Martin has communicated. Also at work in this dialogue is a verbal jack-in-the-box conflict between Mr. and Mrs. Smith who do not want each other to interrupt Mrs. Martin's narration; they reprimand each other with comically juxtaposed appellations of endearment and injurious names.

Ionesco frequently calls attention to the disparity that exists between what is said and what is meant. The characters of La Cantatrice chauve do not always purposely lie, they just cannot find the right words with which to express themselves or to describe their actions. Consequently, their

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5 Kant, op. cit., p. 223.
words and actions are often in complete disaccord. For example, Mrs. Smith excuses her husband and herself for having kept their dinner guests, the Martins, waiting; she says that she and her husband had gone to change into their dinner clothes. Yet the stage directions clearly state: "*Mme et M. Smith entrent à droite, sans aucun changement dans leurs vêtements.*" (Scene 7) When the Firechief arrives, he announces that he has come to the Smith residence on business and that he cannot stay to visit:

Excusez-moi, mais je ne peux pas rester longtemps. Je veux bien enlever mon casque, mais je n'ai pas le temps de m'asseoir. (*Il s'assoit, sans enlever son casque.*) (Scene 3)

We see that the characters' words and actions are out of step with one another, the comic implication being that words uttered mechanically fail to describe effectively even the most simple actions.

Not only are the personages of *La Cantatrice chauve* unable to describe their actions because they are victims of language which no longer communicates; they are unable to converse coherently. They appear to be talking machines equipped with a number of ready responses which are triggered more by the need to talk than the need to communicate. The Martins, the Smiths, and the Firechief are engaged in a discussion of the paucity of fires in and around London:

M. Martin: au pompier: Les affaires vont plutôt mal en ce moment.

Le Pompier: Très mal. Il n'y a presque rien, quelques bricoles, une cheminée, une grange. Rien de sérieux. Ça ne rapporte pas. ...

M. Smith: Rien ne va. C'est partout pareil. Le commerce, l'agriculture, cette année c'est comme pour le feu, ça ne marche pas.

M. Martin: Pas de blé, pas de feu.

Le Pompier: Pas d'inondation non plus.

Mme Smith: Mais il y a du sucre.
This amusing series of non sequiturs is the product of a number of ready responses uttered automatically. As is the case in most of the verbal exchanges of the play, there is no real thought being expressed in this conversation: words are being babbled to fill the void of silence. We might react as does Gorgibus to the high-flown speech of his daughter and niece in Les Précieuses ridicules when he says in Scene 4, "...je ne puis rien comprendre à ce baragouin."

Ionesco not only underlines the absurdity of most daily speech, he pushes this absurdity to an extreme limit. For example, the Firechief relates a seemingly interminable anecdote in which we see the comic disproportion of the volume of words expressing an idea of negligible import; his anecdote is as follows:

"Le Rhume." Mon beau-frère avait du côté paternel, un cousin germain dont un oncle maternel avait un beau-père dont le grand-père paternel avait épousé en secondes noces une jeune indigène dont le frère avait rencontré, dans un de ses voyages, une fille dont il s'était épris et avec laquelle il eut un fils qui se maria avec une pharmaciennne intrépide qui n'était autre que la nièce d'un quartier-maître inconnu de la Marine britannique et dont le père adoptif avait une tante parlant couramment l'espagnol et qui était, peut-être, une des petites-filles d'un ingénieur, mort jeune, petit-fils lui-même d'un propriétaire de vignes dont on tirait un vin médiocre, mais qui avait un petit-cousin, casanier, adjudant, dont le fils avait épousé une bien jolie jeune femme, divorcée, dont le premier mari était le fils d'un sincère patriote qui avait su élever dans le désir de faire fortune une de ses filles qui put se marier avec un chasseur qui avait connu Rothschild et dont le frère, après avoir changé plusieurs fois de métier, se maria et eut une fille dont le bisaïeul, chétif, portait des lunettes que lui avait données un sien cousin, beau-frère d'un Portugais, fils naturel d'un meunier, pas trop pauvre, dont le frère de lait avait pris pour femme la fille d'un ancien médecin de campagne, lui-même frère de lait du fils d'un laitier, lui-même fils naturel d'un autre médecin de campagne, marié trois fois de suite, dont la troisième femme... était la fille de la meilleure sage-femme de la région, et qui, veuve de bonne heure... s'était remariée avec un vitrier, plein d'entrain, qui avait fait, à la fille d'un chef de gare, un enfant qui avait su faire son chemin dans la vie... et avait
The Firechief’s anecdote is comic because it is composed almost entirely of introductory remarks that are "unrelated" to the point he is trying to make. The speaker has gone to great lengths to say nearly nothing, having recited mechanically the genealogy of a woman who occasionally caught a cold in winter.

The most extreme verbal comedy of the play is seen in Scene 11 in which the characters become so carried away by their words that their conversation reaches a literal frenzy of sounds. The dialogue becomes completely dependent upon association of phonemes, one speaker taking his cue from the sounds uttered by another speaker:

Mme Martin: Touche pas ma babouche!
M. Martin: Bouge pas la babouche!
M. Smith: Touche la mouche, mouche pas la touche.
Mme Martin: La mouche bouge.
Mme Smith: Mouche ta bouche.
M. Martin: Mouche le chasse-mouche, mouche le chasse-mouche.
M. Smith: Escarmoucheur escarmouché!
Mme Martin: Scaramouche!
Mme Smith: Sainte-Nitouche! (Scene 11)

In this scene speech has reached a paroxysm of nonsense, and it has attained complete control of the speakers. The characters have become so totally dominated by the mechanical nature of their automatically uttered sounds, that Mr. Smith begins to sense that he is a machine and begins to imitate the chugging of a train. The conversation has reached a point of no return;
words have degenerated into meaningless sounds.

We have seen that *La Cantatrice chauve* comprises an extremely rich comic of language. Besides employing the traditional comic devices of repetition and contrast by having his characters repeatedly say very little in a maximum of words, he also highlights the comic nature of pure sound by juxtaposing words so as to erase their connotative powers. It would be naive to assume that *La Cantatrice chauve* is anything other than a masterpiece of comic theatre: there are no lulls in the verbal comic sequences. The dialogue is laughable from the first line of the play until the last; verbal comic effects are so numerous and in such rapid succession that we are almost overwhelmed by them. In fact, we would be justified in terming this play a *comédie de verbe*.

Let us now briefly discuss the comic of character in *La Cantatrice chauve*, keeping in mind Bergson's definition of the comic persona as being one who acts automatically, who is rigid, unaware, and somewhat eccentric, or removed from the norm. We can see that all of the characters in this play can be equated with automaticity, rigidity, unawareness, and eccentricity. Stylistically, all of the personages of *La Cantatrice chauve* have a great deal in common with one another: they are very sketchily drawn; they act more like puppets than like people; their speech is largely ineffective; they are mask-like and undergo no developmental changes in the course of the play. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine any characteristics of their personalities which might distinguish them as individuals; therefore, the audience can neither become involved with these characters nor identify with them. Yet it is easy to see in them something of a universal quality; they remind us of ourselves and of all the persons in our range of experience who have some difficulty manipulating words in such a way as to cause them to
serve consistently the purposes of communication.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith are truly comic characters who remain unchanged throughout the play. They both love the taste of words in their mouths, they have nothing to say, and they talk a great deal. This couple thrives on conflict, seizing every available opportunity to contradict one another. An argument begins because they are of different opinions (which are sometimes identical) and is only settled if one of the parties involved can clarify the issue according to logic (which usually takes the form of a disconnected series of ideas that are unrelated to the point of dispute). Not only are the Smiths in conflict with one another; they are also in conflict with themselves; that is, they have trouble saying what they mean, and it is often difficult to decide if they mean to say anything at all. At any rate, they appear to be talking machines who utter words over which they exert very little control. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the Smiths is that they change into the Martins at the end of the play. Assuming a philosophical point of view, we might say that this is possible because neither the Smiths nor the Martins have a clearly defined concept of their own identities. It is our contention that such a viewpoint is not as valid as to regard the metamorphoses as being merely a stylistic device used to point up the fact that the Smiths and the Martins are essentially the same dramatic personage; they represent the mask of ineffective speech, they are the fools of the comedy.

Mary and the Firechief are also the victims of ineffective speech, yet they have something of the rogue in them. For instance, the Firechief dupes the Martins and the Smiths into hearing his anecdote, "Le Rhume," in Scene 8 by cleverly causing them to beg him to do what he wants to do in the first place and what they in reality do not want at all. We also see his devilish nature in the doorbell sequence; although he did not ring the bell the first
two times, he did ring it the third and fourth times. When the door was answered the third time, however, he was not there, for as he says, "C'est que je me suis caché...pour rire." (Scene 2) Like the rogue in the traditional farce, he has played a trick on the fools of the play. Mary, too, is involved in a trick played on the Martins, a trick which she perpetuates even if she did not initiate it. Once the Martins have convinced themselves that they are themselves, Mary appears and says that they are mistaken: they have based their discovery on faulty evidence. She does nothing to clarify the confusion and allows the Martins to continue thinking that they are correct in assuming that they are truly husband and wife, saying roguishly, "Laissons les choses comme elles sont." (Scene 5) Tricksters that they are, Mary and the Firechief also fall prey to ineffective speech, which is the true rogue of this delightful comedy. Words have become master of the man, they have taken on an almost autonomous existence. The characters cannot communicate because they no longer have control of the words they speak; they appear to be automatons who utter pre-set speech patterns which are stimulated by the sound of still other clichés.

Ionesco has greatly intensified the comedy inherent in the fogue-fool relationship of the farce by thematic repetition of the rogue's trick on the fool. That is, each character serves as an illumination of a central comic theme, for they all fall into the same trap: they cannot handle words. We have said that the true rogue of the play is inefficient speech, which, of course, implies that a most important personage of the comic stage, the rogue, is deprived of a physical presence onstage. Yet this rogue, paradoxically, is omnipresent in the play; he is part of the characters' make up and we sense his presence each time one of the personages opens his mouth to speak. Every phrase uttered highlights the fact that the speaker is a fool, which
fact explains the raison d'être for such a pregnant comic dialogue. Since the characters remain almost totally undeveloped by the dramatist — although it must be admitted that he suggests that they lead humdrum lives — and since we know literally nothing about them other than their comic speech patterns to which we are exposed, we are forced to equate these personages with their own utterances. Ionesco's characters are as comic as their words; their words are comedy itself.

Having made detailed structural analyses of Les Précieuses ridicules and La Cantatrice chauve, we may now briefly review our observations in order to demonstrate the similarities of the two plays. Our discussion will concern essential rather than superficial similarities; it will indicate that on a structural plane both plays have much in common, and that the dramatists have employed many of the same techniques in creating an unusually intense comic in situation, language, and character.

The first and most obvious remark to make is that Les Précieuses ridicules and La Cantatrice chauve are comic in every respect. Although neither play is primarily a situation comedy, both contain an abundance of comic effects resultant from the manner in which situations are structured. In both instances much of the comic of situation is produced by a jack-in-the-box-like conflict that is thematically repeated several times. The conflict situations of Les Précieuses ridicules center around the struggle between two rather equally matched forces; the précieux element combats the common sense element. Neither force is sufficiently powerful to dominate the other except on a temporary basis, and so the conflict is seemingly unending; neither side will win, nor will it give up the fight. In La Cantatrice chauve there are also a number of comic situations which are structured along the same lines; that is, each comic conflict is only temporarily resolved because most of the
arguments are quelled by faulty logic. Molière and Ionesco also construct some of their comic situations after the dancing-jack scheme; in such situations characters who think they are acting freely are actually being manipulated by either another character or by some outside force. For example, Cnthos and Magdelon are duped into believing that Mascarille is a marquis, and so they put on airs to impress him; the Smiths and the Martins, believing that the Firechief must leave immediately, are tricked into hearing his in­terminable anecdote, "Le Rhume." Too, both dramatists pattern certain of their comic situations after the rolling snowball effect: the pretentious characters of Molière's comedy are as carried away by their delusions about their social status and charm as are the characters in Ionesco's play by the sounds of the words they speak. Generally speaking, we may say that both dramatists have mechanically arranged their comic situations; that is, they employ the techniques of repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series.

Basing our judgment on the dialogue of the plays we can see that Molière and Ionesco's esthetic perception of the gap that exists between the spoken word and the thoughts it intends to express leads these dramatists to point up the comedy inherent in ineffective speech. The characters of both plays are victimized by their words: in Les Précieuses ridicules it is because the personages pay too much attention to form and not enough attention to content; in La Cantatrice chauve it is because the personages pay no attention to either form or to content. In these plays Molière and Ionesco achieve their most numerous and most intense comic effects on a purely verbal plane. The dialogue is literally saturated with comic import; there is never a dull moment in the language of the script. Language is used both to express the comic inherent in situation and in character and to create comic effects.
in its own right. Both dramatists paint a highly amusing picture of the breakdown of communication in social discourse by a stylized use of stereotyped locutions. They employ words in such a way as to endow them with an almost autonomous existence: words become masters of the speakers and say things over which the speakers have very little control. It is clear that Molière and Ionesco are sensitive to language and that they enjoy playing with words.

In *Les Précieuses ridicules* and *La Cantatrice chauve* the personages are patterned after the rogue and the fool of the traditional farce. In the farce it is the rogue's comic duty to play a trick on a gullible fool. We have demonstrated that the characters in Molière's play can be readily equated with the rogue and fool, and that Ionesco's characters all closely resemble a fool duped by a stylized rogue, their ineffective speech habits. Not only are the personages of both plays created in the image of the rogue and the fool, they are artistically executed in much the same manner. That is, both dramatists have tended toward the general rather than the particular in creating their characters. None of them is developed in depth: we have no occasion to identify with these personages as individuals. Our attention is drawn only to their persistently comic gestures which reveal specific personality quirks and yet give no indication as to the characters' total personality. They are drawn more in the style of a caricature than that of a portrait. It is for this reason that they have a universal, or generalized connotation: knowing only their comic flaws, we can recognize these flaws in other contexts. We may say of an ultra-sophisticated young man that he acts like a Magdelon, just as we may equate a boring lecturer with the Fire-chief.

*Les Précieuses ridicules* and *La Cantatrice chauve* have a similar texture;
neither play revolves around an all-important plot. In fact, in both cases the plot is of relatively little consequence, for the various situations of each play serve to elucidate a central theme rather than to contribute to a closely knit series of events dependent upon a cause and effect relationship. Structurally, these comedies are similar to music in that they tend toward thematic development. The proof that both Molière and Ionesco's plays are not plot-centered is seen in the fact that neither comedy ends -- if by "ending" we are to understand that the action of the play has come to some terminal point or has at least evoked a strong feeling of finality. This is clearly not the case in La Cantatrice chauve: rather than ending, the play recommences with the Martins metamorphosed into the Smiths. Likewise, the conflict between the précieuses ridicules and their foe has not come to a definitive conclusion when the curtain falls on the last act; Magdelon has cried out that she will avenge herself and her cousin or die trying. So in both cases we can see that not much emphasis has been placed on plot resolution and that plot is secondary in importance to theme. It would appear that the themes developed in each play (the pretentious versus the practical; verbose speakers versus elusive speech) are congruous when reduced to their essence: they point up the comic nature of characters who fail to perceive accurately the reality of their situation. If the pretentious characters of Molière's play realized that they were cutting a ridiculous figure, or if the personages of Ionesco's play were aware of the fact that they could not communicate, they would make some effort to remedy the situation and would cease being comic. But the fool is like the child; both are essentially unaware of their apparent image.

Finally, Les Précieuses ridicules and La Cantatrice chauve are kindred for a still more significant reason. They are both dynamic pieces of stage-
craft written in such a way as to achieve a maximum number of comic effects. In fact, the plays are so rich in comedy of situation, language, and character, that they sustain what we want to call for lack of an appropriate superlative, a totality of comic tension.
CHAPTER III
DELUSION AND DISGUISE AS COMIC TECHNIQUES

Deluded characters and disguised ones are involved with the essence of theatricality, for they both assume identities other than their own. Unconsciously or consciously they play a part which renders them comic; their delusion or disguise constitutes some artificiality superimposed upon their personality. Some striking similarities may be noted in the manner in which Molière and Ionesco present such personages. The present discussion of the central character of Molière's Le Bourgeois gentilhomme and Les Chaises by Ionesco will demonstrate that both dramatists have created deluded characters who motivate comic action because they are in some way self-ignorant; being deluded, they make false appraisals of themselves around which they create their own private worlds. The deluded characters of these plays might be more pathetic than comic if the dramatist did not present them in such a way as to call constant attention to the fact that they are mechanically controlled by a fixed idea, false though it may be, of their personal worth. We shall see that M. Jourdain (Le Bourgeois gentilhomme) and the old man (Les Chaises) fall prey to analogous self-misconceptions which render them comic: both are unaware that they are inflexible and are assuming roles dictated by delusion. Then, too, there are disguised characters who are comic because the disguise they have assumed is difficult for them to
sustain effectively. In Le Tartuffe and La Leçon Molière and Ionesco have created personages who attempt a total personality disguise in an effort to conceal their true identity. Unlike deluded characters, such willfully disguised characters are quite aware that they are playing a role, and are comic rather than offensive because the dramatist causes their mask to fall so that we may see that they are not in complete command of themselves, nor consequently of others. When the nature of the disguises assumed by Tartuffe and the professor (La Leçon) are analyzed, it becomes apparent that these characters have a great deal in common. Our discussion of delusion in Le Bourgeois gentilhomme and Les Chaises and of disguise in Le Tartuffe and La Leçon will prove that although the plays are apparently polar in external trappings, they are centered around comic characters who are essentially quite alike. Such a discussion will also give insight into the nature of the comic vision of Molière and Ionesco, dramatists who are able to turn things serious to the purposes of comedy.

Before beginning a discussion of deluded and disguised personages, we must clarify our usage of the terms, delusion and disguise. Deluded characters pose no substantial threat to others because although fundamentally unaware of their delusion, they are not powerful; they may be ambitious, but are rarely offensive because they can always be controlled by flattery. In short, deluded characters are of a non-sinister cast; they are merely confused about their worth as individuals. Thinking themselves to be more endowed in some respect than they are in reality, their actions stemming from such a misconception become truly ludicrous. Such is our understanding of the term delusion, which is accepted in its broadest and most usual sense. Usage of the term disguise, however, is more specialized and restricted. Rather than treating all levels of disguise — one of which would be delusion,
or unconscious dissimulation -- we shall confine the discussion to total
disguise willfully assumed with some selfish intent. We shall not, for in-
stance, enumerate the many instances in Molière's comedies in which a per-
sonage dons a different costume or modulates his voice in order to dupe the
fool of the play, a phenomenon which is almost totally absent from Ionesco's
theatre. Such a superficial or external disguise does little to demonstrate
the comic insight of the playwright. Personages who have tried to effect a
totally different personality in order to gain some selfish advantage over
other characters are, on the other hand, at least partial indices of the
artist's perception of human nature: we are given a comic expression of
basic human conflicts. By their presentation of such potentially dark per-
sonages, Molière and Ionesco demonstrate, as indicated above, that comedy
can be affected even when treating a fundamentally serious topic.

Our method will be first to discuss briefly those elements of plot of
Le Bourgeois gentilhomme which relate to M. Jourdan's delusion and then to
treat similarly Les Chaises, signaling the nature of the misconception of
the old man (le Vieux in the original French); following will be a comparative
analysis of these two deluded characters. We shall then proceed to a plot
summary and consideration of the central character of Le Tartuffe as a dis-
guised personage or villainous masqué, proceeding to a parallel discussion of
the professor of Ionesco's La Leçon. Then a structural analysis will serve
as evidence that these characters are similarly conceived and executed. It
will be noted from our treatment of the central figures of the four plays
presently to be discussed that Molière and Ionesco display an analogous talent
for presenting potentially pathetic or sinister characters in a purely comic
format by ingenious use of the dramatic techniques of delusion and disguise.

Although quite different in every immediately apparent respect M. Jour-
dain and the old man show much in common when carefully scrutinized: they are motivated by a glorified, decidedly faulty self-image which is based upon fancy and stems from dissatisfaction. M. Jourdain, the son of a successful merchant, is laboring under the delusion that he will be recognized as a gentleman merely by aping gentlemanly dress and manners; the old man, a concierge of an unoccupied building on a deserted island, calls himself a Maréchal des logis, and fancies that he is a leader of men who has a valuable message to convey to humanity.

Inasmuch as our concern is primarily with M. Jourdain's delusion, we may confine our plot resume of Molière's five-act comédie-ballet specifically to those incidents which have direct bearing upon our discussion. The conversation of M. Jourdain's music and dancing teachers includes some frank opinions of their pupil.

Maitre de Musique: Nous avons trouvé ici un homme comme il nous le faut à tous deux. Ce nous est une douce rente que ce Monsieur Jourdain, avec les visions de noblesse et de galanterie qu'il est allé se mettre en tête. Et votre danse et ma musique auraient à souhaiter que tout le monde lui ressemblât.

Maitre à danser: Non pas entièrement; et je voudrais pour lui qu'il se connût mieux qu'il ne fait aux choses que nous lui donnons.

Maitre de Musique: Il est vrai qu'il les connaît mal, mais il les paie bien... (Act I, scene 1)

He has "visions de noblesse et de galanterie," which are indeed illusions, for we become aware as the play progresses that M. Jourdain's tastes and actions are anything but noble or gallant. Not only is he a poor student of music and the dance, his ability with the foil and his intellectual prowess are equally inadequate: he cuts a ridiculous figure while fencing with his Maître d'armes, and marvels at the wonders of orthography revealed to him by his Maître de philosophie. Besides believing that he can become a gentleman by taking finishing lessons, he also thinks that emulation of gentlemanly
dress will further his cause; yet all is in vain, for the clothing he orders makes him look so ridiculous that even his maid, Nicole, cannot help but to laugh at him: "Monsieur, je vous demande pardon; mais vous êtes si plaisant que je ne saurais me tenir de rire. Hi, hi, hi!" (Act III, scene 2) Mme Jourdain, too, tells her husband that he is making a fool of himself by trying to ape the gentry, and encourages him to be more sensible. She also reprimands him for having foolishly lent money on several occasions to a certain Dorante, a member of la haute sociéte who is borrowing from M. Jourdain under the pretense of laying the groundwork for an entrée into the proper circles. Unknown to Mme Jourdain, however, her husband believes that Dorante is performing another service for him; namely, acting as a go-between to establish an amorous relationship with the beautiful young marquise, Dorimène. In reality, Dorante has been bestowing gifts on Dorimène in his own name, delighted that the gullible M. Jourdain feels that,

Il n'y a point de dépenses que je ne fisse, si par là je pouvais trouver le chemin de son coeur. Une femme de qualité a pour moi des charmes ravissants, et c'est un honneur que j'achèterais au prix de toute chose. (Act III, scene 6)

Dorante, knowing that M. Jourdain is infinitely gullible, has invited Dorimène to a dinner in the Jourdain home, telling her that he has selected that place to entertain her in order to avoid the scandal which might result if he used his own home for the occasion. Dorante is able to court Dorimène in M. Jourdain's presence without the latter even suspecting that something is awry.

The would-be gentleman is also duped by Cléonte and his servant, Covicelle; Cléonte was refused Lucile's hand in marriage by her father, M. Jourdain, on the sole grounds that he was not of a noble souche. Covicelle, sent by his master, arrives in the Jourdain home disguised as a Turk; he tells M. Jourdain first of all that he knew his father a long time ago, and that the latter was a gentleman. M. Jourdain says that most people have led him to
believe that his father was a cloth merchant, but Covielle (habillé en turc) says:

Covielle: Lui, marchand! C'est pure médiasance, il ne l'a jamais été. Tout ce qu'il faisait, c'est qu'il était fort obligéant, fort officieux, et, comme il se connaissait fort bien en étoffes, il en allait choisir de tous les côtés, les faisait apporter chez lui, et en donnait à ses amis pour de l'argent.

M. Jourdain: Je suis ravi de vous connaître, afin que vous rendiez ce témoignage-là que mon père était gentilhomme. (Act IV, scene 3)

It is clear that M. Jourdain will go to any extreme to become a gentleman: he can even turn the truth about his father's social class into fancy, accepting the word of a Turk whom he has never before seen. Covielle also tells him that the son of the Grand Turc, actually Cléonte, has seen and fallen in love with his daughter, Lucile, and that he wishes to marry her. Further, M. Jourdain is to receive a title of nobility from his future son-in-law. In a burlesque procession and ceremony he is made a Mamamouchi and is duped into signing a marriage contract authorizing his daughter to wed Cléonte. Once Lucile and Mme Jourdain are made aware of the plot to dupe M. Jourdain, they also consent to the marriage. M. Jourdain is at this point in the play completely fooled, and unwittingly puts his gullibility and delusion in startling relief by remarking, "Ah! voilà tout le monde raisonnable!" (Act V, scene 6) Indeed, almost everything has been set straight: Lucile is betrothed to Cléonte, Nic le will wed Covielle, Dorimène has finally consented to give her hand to Dorante. Only M. Jourdain remains as he was when the play began -- deluded; he thinks that he is now a member of Turkish royalty into which his daughter will marry. Before making any additional remarks about the nature of M. Jourdain's delusion, let us consider the character to whom he will be later compared, namely, the old man in Ionesco's *Les Chaises*. 
Les Chaises is a one-act prose comedy with a cast of three visible characters and a vast number of invisible ones. The dialogue is spoken almost entirely by two of the visible characters, a very old couple -- the husband is ninety-five years old and his wife is one year younger -- who live in a deserted tower-like structure surrounded by water; their dwelling is probably a lighthouse, although that point is never clarified in the play. The old woman is occasionally called Sémiramis by her husband; his name, however, remains unknown to us, for he is addressed by Sémiramis only in terms of endearment such as "mon chou," and is referred to in the script simply as Le Vieux. A lowly concierge in a deserted building, he feels that he has not lived up to his capabilities; his wife, however, consoles him.

Le Vieux: J'ai un message, tu dis vrai, je lutte, une mission, j'ai quelque chose dans le ventre, un message à communiquer à l'humanité, à l'humanité....Je ne suis pas comme les autres, j'ai un idéal dans la vie.²

If this nameless old man is merely a concierge, he does have a dream, a goal; there is a purpose to his life which gives him pride and makes his miserable existence meaningful.

He tells his wife that that very night a number of important people are coming to hear his message, and that he has hired a professional orator to deliver the message for him, as he has little confidence in his own speaking abilities.

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¹Ionesco, Théâtre I (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 132. Because Les Chaises, like Le Lacçon which is to be discussed later in the present chapter of this work has not been divided into scenes by Ionesco, quotations taken from these plays will be footnoted according to the pagination of the first volume of the Gallimard edition of Ionesco's theatre.
The orator is the only other visible character in the play, and he arrives only moments before the end. No sooner has the old man announced to his wife that he has planned an important gathering for that evening than the guests start to arrive. The first one is a woman; she is invisible to the audience but apparently quite real to Sémiramis and her husband, for they both engage her in conversation. Sémiramis informs the lady that the message she has come to hear has been carefully prepared by her husband, for "deux heures par jour, il travaille à son message." Then the bell rings, and an invisible colonel is admitted; shortly thereafter arrive an unseen beautiful woman and a photographer. The old man reminisces that the beautiful old woman was once a young beauty and laments, "Où sont les neiges d'antan?" while his wife momentarily tries to seduce the photographer. Soon an additional three or four invisible guests arrive; the old man answers the door and Sémiramis goes to get a chair for each guest as he or she arrives; the stage soon becomes crowded by chairs upon which are seated persons visible only to the old couple. There are so many chairs that the old man has been pushed back against the stage left wall and his wife against the opposite one; from there they speak both to guests and across the room to one another. The assembly is awaiting the arrival of the orator, for the old man has said:

...Je ne dirai rien pour le moment!...C'est l'Orateur, celui que nous attendons, c'est lui qui vous dira, qui répondra pour moi, tout ce qui nous tient à coeur...Il vous expliquera tout...quand?...lorsque le moment sera venu...le moment viendra bientôt...

After a great clamor in the wings, there is a fanfare, the lights are brightened, and the upstage center door flies open to accommodate the entrance of the emperor. He, too, is invisible, but the old man's joy at his arrival is

\[^2\text{Ibid.}, p. 137.\]
\[^3\text{Ibid.}, p. 165.\]
more than apparent.

Le Vieux: Je suis au comble de la joie... je n'ai pas de parole pour exprimer la dêmesure de ma gratitude... dans mon modeste logis, oh! Majesté! oh! soleil! ... ici... ici... dans ce logis où je suis, il est vrai, le Maréchal... mais dans la hiérarchie de votre armée, je ne suis qu'un simple Maréchal des logis... (...) hélas! certes, je suis Maréchal, j'aurais pu être à la cour... Majesté... je... Majesté, j'ai du mal à m'exprimer... j'aurais pu avoir... beaucoup de choses, pas mal de biens si j'avais su, si j'avais voulu, si je... si nous... Majesté, excusez mon émotion... 

La Vieille: A la troisième personne!

Le Vieux, pleurnichant: Que votre Majesté daigne m'excusez (sic). 4

The emperor's presence in the old man's humble dwelling is the highlight of the latter's long life. When the orator, the third visible personage of the play, arrives, he is presented first to the emperor, and then to the crowd which rushes toward him for autographs. The old man makes a speech to the assembly, thanking everyone present for his kindness in coming to hear his message. Confident that his life will take on universal significance and that he will be immortalized, he says: "Ma mission est accomplie. Je n'aurai pas vécu en vain, puisque mon message sera révélé au monde..." 5 He may now end his long life by jumping into the sea; his wife will commit suicide with him:

La Vieille, sanglotant: Oui, oui, mourons en pleine gloire... mourons pour entrer dans la légende... au moins, nous aurons notre rue... 6

With that being said, the old couple, separated by a non-existent crowd of people, jump out of separate windows to their death in the sea below. The long-awaited message is then delivered by the orator, who is, we learn, a deaf mute. He groans and gurgles a series of unintelligible sounds, then feeling that he has not been able to communicate the old man's message orally,

4Ibid., pp. 169-70.
5Ibid., p. 176.
6Ibid., p. 177.
begins to write on a blackboard. Amidst a number of scribbled capital letters can be distinguished: "AADIEU ADIEU APA"? Thus the old man's message, like his life, seems to be something less than satisfactory; having lived deluded, he dies deceived. The play might seem more tragic than comic as it is discussed here, but when presented before an audience, its effect is primarily comic: the accumulation of chairs, the reactions to and interactions of the old couple with the invisible crowd, the audience's defeated expectation of the old man's message which turns out to be nothing more than the babbling of a deaf mute orator, all stimulate laughter. The old man of Les Chaises is a comic character who has a great deal in common with M. Jourdain of Le Bourgeois gentilhomme; the following comparative analysis will seek to demonstrate the validity of this contention.

M. Jourdain and the old man might be used as illustrative examples of Plato's concept of the comic character; he maintains that such a character needs to be in some way self-ignorant and must not be powerful enough to control the lives of others. The would-be gentleman and the would-be leader of men are not only mistaken in their evaluations of self, their ignorance has taken the form of obsession. All their actions are regulated by a fixed idea, and their delusion has so colored their personalities that they, instead of posing a threat to others, are easily controlled. Dorante needs only to flatter M. Jourdain in order to borrow money from him; when the former congratulates the latter upon dressing like a stylish gentleman, Mme Jourdain says in an aside, "Il le gratte par où il se démange." (Act III, scene 4) Because he wants more than anything else to be regarded as a gentleman, M. Jourdain's actions immediately reveal his weakness to the other characters, all of whom are quick to perceive that he is an easy mark. Perhaps nowhere

?Ibid., p. 179.
in the play is this more evident than in the scene in which the tailor's assistants manage to get a more than generous tip from him:

Garçon Tailleur: Mon gentilhomme, donnez, s'il vous plaît, aux garçons quelque chose pour boire.

M. Jourdain: Comment vous m'appellez-vous?

Garçon Tailleur: Mon gentilhomme.

M. Jourdain: "Mon gentilhomme"! Voilà ce que c'est de se mettre en personne de qualité! Allez-vous-en demeurer toujours habillé en bourgeois, on ne dira point: "Mon gentilhomme". Tenez, voilà pour "Mon gentilhomme".

Garçon Tailleur: Monseigneur, nous vous sommes bien obligés.

M. Jourdain: "Monseigneur" oh! oh! "Monseigneur"! Attendez, mon ami. "Monseigneur" mérite quelque chose, et ce n'est pas une petite parole que "Monseigneur". Tenez, voilà ce que monseigneur vous donne.

Garçon Tailleur: Monseigneur, nous allons boire tous à la santé de Votre Grandeur.


Garçon Tailleur: Monseigneur, nous la remercions très humblement de ses libéralités. (Act II, scene 5)

Like a puppet on a string, M. Jourdain is manipulated by words designed to flatter his delusion. Likewise, the old man in Les Chaises can be controlled by flattery. For instance, his wife bolsters him merely by telling him, "Tu aurais pu être Président chef, Roi chef, ou même Docteur chef, si tu avais voulu..." The old man is disappointed with his material success, but he feels that on a spiritual plane he is a superior being: he has a message to convey to the world. He mistakenly feels that he is a prophet, and his life has been patterned around this delusion. Having prepared his message to mankind after years of labor, he has hired an orator to deliver it to a crowd of invisible celebrities. Like M. Jourdain, the old man has an almost obsessive need to feel important. As the invisible guests arrive, he, feeling flatter-
ed by their presence, begins to display by his actions and words that he
senses himself in a position of leadership. He orders Sémiramis to bring
in chairs, he tells the guests where to sit, and otherwise controls the
crowd by calling for silence, introducing the new arrivals, assuming the
role of a director. Yet he obviously is in control of his imagination alone,
for no one is there: he has imagined the whole situation. Just as M. Jour­
dain gives extravagant tips to the tailor's assistants because he imagines
that they esteem him a gentleman, the old man assumes the posture of leader­
ship when he fancies there are persons present to be led.

These two characters are comic largely because they are unable to per­
ceive accurately the reality of their situation. Both realize that they are
rather unsuccessful socially: M. Jourdain takes lessons, spending a great
deal of money on self-improvement because he is dissatisfied with himself;
the old man, too, is unhappy and complains, "Je suis orphelin dans la vie..."9
Being aware that they are not successes does not render them comic, whereas
what they do to remedy their dissatisfaction does: they each create a world
which shuts out the reality of their situation, allowing themselves to be­
come blinded by their ambitions to become something better. M. Jourdain is
quick to accept Covielle's statement that the former's father was not a mer­
chant, but a gentleman who bought cloth to distribute to his friends for a
price. That he should accept this statement as truth is highly revealing;
we see here a vivid example of his inability to grasp certain aspects of
reality. Anything that will reinforce his desire to be a gentleman is openly
welcomed; he is ludicrous because he twists truth and reality to suit his
purposes. The old man, too, has a singular way of coping with the world; he
creates his own, peopled by phantoms, or at any rate by a crowd that is in­

9Ibid., p. 136.
visible to us, yet very real to him because it fulfills his need to be a leader. We can see that these two characters are comic in the sense of Schopenhauer's appreciation of things comic; they are not able to make correct rational judgments. In short, their mentality is out of step with reality.

M. Jourdain and the old man are comic for yet another reason; we laugh at them because all their efforts result in naught. That is, M. Jourdain has made an energetic attempt to become a gentleman, trying to make social contacts and educating himself in the gentlemanly arts. Finally, he is "rewarded" by being accorded the mock title of "Mamamouchi" and is delighted to have become a member of the Turkish nobility. The old man, after years of preparing the message by virtue of which he will become a leader of all men, hires an orator to deliver it to a group of influential -- if invisible -- people. Content that he will be immortalized, the old man leaps to his death; then the orator, who is a deaf mute, says to the crowd which has been held waiting in suspense: "Ju, gou, hou, hou. Heu, heu, gu, gou, gueue." Actually, both M. Jourdain and the old man have been dreadfully deceived, for nothing at all has changed for them for the better. Quite the contrary, for M. Jourdain remains a pretentious bourgeois who has been duped into letting his daughter marry someone he does not want for a son-in-law, and the old man is only a dead concierge whose message to humanity has died with him. We are reminded of Kant's contention that a strained expectation resulting in nothing is comic. It must be noted that both Molière and Ionesco were careful to prevent such potentially pathetic characters from becoming tragic figures in the face of what would appear to be bitter disappointment. M. Jourdain and the old man are comic in spite of their unfulfillment because they remain completely oblivious to the fact that things have not turned out

10Ibid., p. 179.
well for them. When *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* ends, the central character is convinced that he is indeed a "Mamamouchi," and the old man having ended his life before the orator opened his mouth to speak, has no way of knowing that he has both lived and died in vain. M. Jourdain and the old man lend credence to the proverbial belief that ignorance is bliss.

To recapitulate briefly, the characters presently under discussion are primarily comic because they are deluded. What they think about themselves is not in accord with the reality of their situation. Obsessed as it were by the need for improvement or betterment, they become rigid in their actions and in their outlook: all that they say and do is colored by a fixed idea. Finally, both men are unaware of their defeated expectations at the end of the play. *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and *Les Chaises* are comedies in which the central characters are similarly conceived and structured; much of the comic import of these plays is dependent upon the skilfull creation of deluded men, persons who play a self-created role. For that reason, M. Jourdain and the old man are not only comic, but involved with the essence of theatricality; the actor who assumes one of these roles must play a character who is playing at being someone he considers himself to be. Having considered delusion as a comic technique, we can now proceed to a discussion of the disguised characters of *Le Tartuffe* and *La Leçon*.

The story of Molière's difficulties with the censors in trying to produce *Le Tartuffe* is one too well-known to merit retelling here; suffice it to say that his play was allowed to be presented to Paris audiences only after having been twice banned and twice rewritten, and finally having gained the support of the king himself. The difficulties arose because the central character, Tartuffe, a bigger-than-life spoof of the religious hypocrite, was confused by certain too-devout -- perhaps hypocritical -- contemporaries of the playwright
who saw in the play a libertine's stab at all devoted christians and an insult to the church. It is our opinion that Molière must be taken at his word; he writes in the preface to his play that he has directed his satire against religious hypocrites and not against true believers or the faith itself.

In fact, Molière was forced to take almost too much care in making his point, and certain of the speeches, especially those of Cléante, might be considered edifying to the point of being out of place in a comedy were they not carefully directed to Orgon, upon whom they amusingly make little or no impression.

The definitive version of Le Tartuffe is a five-act comedy in verse in which the character Tartuffe does not make an appearance until the beginning of the third act, although he is often the center of discussion for the first two acts. In a brilliantly written exposition scene Mme Pernelle, Orgon's bigoted mother, storms out of Orgon's household in his absence, accusing her daughter-in-law, Elmire, and the latter's two grown step children, Mariane and Damis, of being too worldly. Not only do these people like the ways of the world, namely receiving occasional friendly callers, but they have the consummate bad taste to disapprove of Tartuffe, Orgon's recently acquired spiritual director who has become boorish about forcing his puritanical views upon the entire family. Only Orgon's mother has anything positive to say about Tartuffe: "C'est un homme de bien qu'il faut que l'on écoute." (Act I, scene 1) However, Dorine, the servant of the household, has a different opinion of Tartuffe, whom she feels is a "critique zélé," a man who sees evil
in the most innocent things. Dorine also has the feeling that Tartuffe has expressed his dislike for social callers to Orgon's residence because he is infatuated with Orgon's wife; she says:

Veut-on que là-dessus je m'explique entre nous?
Je crois que de madame il est, ma foi, jaloux. (Act I, scene 1)

Besides having his heart set on the lady of the house, Tartuffe has gained complete control of Orgon. This is clearly evident when Orgon returns home after a two day absence and, ignoring Dorine's detailed report of his wife's illness, asks repeatedly for news of Tartuffe, who according to Dorine is in the best of health. Cléante, Orgon's brother-in-law, tries to convince him that Tartuffe is a hypocrite and a dangerous character, but Orgon remains indifferent to his argument, saying:

Ah! si vous aviez vu comme j'en fis rencontre
Vous auriez pris pour lui l'amitié que je montre.
Chaque jour à l'église il venait, d'un air doux,
Tout vis-à-vis de moi se mettre à deux genoux,
Il attirait les yeux de l'assemblée entière
Par l'ardeur dont au ciel il poussait sa prière,
Il faisait des soupirs, de grands éclancements,
Et baisait humblement la terre à tous moments
Et, lorsque je sortais, il me devançait vite
Pour m'aller à la porte offrir de l'eau bénite.
Instruit par son garçon, qui dans tout l'imitait,
Et de son indigence et de ce qu'il était,
Je lui faisais des dons; mais, avec modestie,
Il me voulait toujours en rendre une partie.
"C'est trop, me disait-il, c'est trop de la moitié.
Je ne mérite pas de vous faire pitié."
Et, quand je refusais de le vouloir reprendre,
Aux pauvres, à mes yeux, il allait le répandre.
Enfin le ciel chez moi me le fit retirer,
Et, depuis ce temps-là, tout semble y prospérer.
Je vois qu'il reprend tout, et qu'à ma femme même
Il prend, pour mon honneur, un intérêt extrême;
Il m'avertit des gens qui lui font les yeux doux,
Et plus que moi six fois il s'en montre jaloux. (Act I, scene 5)

Orgon has been completely taken in by Tartuffe's display of piety and fails to wonder why such a religious man should be so jealous of those who pay attention to Elmire. Not being able to convince Orgon that Tartuffe is a
fraud, Cléante changes the subject of conversation and asks why he has delayed the marriage of Mariane to Valère. Orgon gives no satisfactory answers, and Cléante fears that his brother-in-law intends to betray his promise given earlier to allow the two young people to wed.

Orgon informs his daughter, Mariane, that she is to wed Tartuffe; she is dumbfounded, but offers no strenuous objections even though she is very much in love with Valère and finds Tartuffe odious. Dorine comes to her defense, engaging Orgon in a heated dispute about the proposed marriage, warning him that in forcing his daughter into an undesirable marriage, he is sewing the seeds for her to become an adulteress. Once Orgon has left the room, Dorine scolds Mariane for saying nothing in her own defense; Mariane states that she must obey her father in all things and that she intends to commit suicide immediately following the wedding ceremony. Mariane is afraid to object to her father's wishes because in so doing she might appear to be too much in love with Valère, that being in bad taste for a timid, well-reared young lady. So Dorine cleverly takes the other side of the argument and says that Mariane should marry Tartuffe, finally making her realize that such a marriage would be disastrous. Valère has heard it rumored that Mariane is to wed Tartuffe; the two young lovers have a quarrel, he thinking she is in love with the faux-dévot, she thinking herself no longer loved by Valère. Dorine sets the matter straight, and the three decide to engage the help of Elmire.

Tartuffe, after having been discussed as a hypocrite, a tyrant, a lecher, and a threat to the happiness of young lovers, makes his first entrance; seeing Dorine present, he says to his servant, Laurent:

Laurent, serrez ma hâtre avec ma discipline,  
Et priez que toujours le ciel vous illumine.  
Si l'on vient pour me voir, je vais aux prisonniers  
Des aumônes que j'ai partager les deniers.  (Act III, scene 2)
Then almost before Dorine has a chance to speak he bides her cover her bosom with a handkerchief to prevent him from being tempted; his request causes her to remark that he must be exceptionally prone to the call of the flesh. Dorine's comment is somewhat prophetic, for in the following scene Tartuffe makes advances to Elmire, who has summoned him to try to dissuade him from marrying her step-daughter. His sensuous nature gets the better of his pious facade, and he begins squeezing Elmire's hand, fingering the fabric of her skirts, and speaking in a curious mixture of religious references and seductive overtones: he propositions Elmire. She, of course, remains aloof and promises not to tell her husband of Tartuffe's advances provided he will not marry Mariane. Damis, Mariane's impetuous brother who detests Tartuffe, has overheard the attempted seduction, and in spite of Elmire's urging that he be prudent, exposes the truth to Orgon. In a rage, and totally disbelieving his own son, Orgon chases Damis from his home, disinherits him, apologizes to Tartuffe, and announces that the latter will become his son-in-law and legatee that very day.

Cléante tries unsuccessfully to persuade Tartuffe to effect a reconciliation between Orgon and his son. Out of desperation, Elmire makes Orgon hide under a table so that he can witness Tartuffe in action; she summons the faux-dévot and leads him to believe that she is willing to give in to him. Finally convinced of his villany, Orgon confronts him and orders him out of the household, but Tartuffe retorts with:

*C'est à vous d'en sortir, vous qui parlez en maître.  
La maison m'appartient, je le feraï connaître,  
Et vous montrerai bien qu'en vain on a recours,  
Pour me chercher querelle, à ces laches détours,  
Qu'on n'est pas où l'on pense en me faisant injure,  
Que j'ai de quoi confondre et punir l'imposture,  
Venger le ciel qu'on blesse, et faire repentir  
Ceux qui parlent ici de me faire sortir. (Act IV, scene 7)*

The act ends as Tartuffe leaves the house and Orgon worriedly goes to see if
a certain casket is still upstairs.

It is learned in the last act that Argas, a friend who had fled the country after having fallen into trouble during the Fronde, had entrusted a number of papers to Orgon's care. Tartuffe had persuaded Orgon to give him these compromising documents so that if the latter were questioned by the authorities, he would be able to say in good conscience that the papers were not in his possession. Orgon discovers the casket is missing and rightly suspects Tartuffe of having gone to the king with them. M. Loyal, a bailiff, notifies Orgon that he is being evicted from Tartuffe's -- formerly his own -- home. Valère comes to warn Orgon that he is in grave danger and that he must flee, offering him the use of his carriage, giving him some money, and planning to escort him to safety. Before Orgon can escape, Tartuffe appears, accompanied by a police officer; however, instead of Orgon being arrested, it is Tartuffe who must go to jail, for the king had recognized him as a treacherous man already sought after by the authorities for previous offenses. All ends well, Orgon giving his daughter, Mariane, in marriage to Valère.

The story of the play presented as it is above might suggest that Le Tartuffe is more a drama than a comedy, and that the character Tartuffe is a seriously drawn antagonist. Yet the nature of Molière's dialogue, the manner in which he has structured many of the conflict situations (especially those involving Dorine and another character), and his presentation of Tartuffe, are such that the play viewed as a totality is decidedly comic. An investigation of the manner in which the central character is conceived and executed gives us an insight into Molière's genius as a comedian; he takes a potentially dark personage and subjects him to the demands of the comic muse. Tartuffe is hypocritical, criminal, sensuous, unkind, lecherous, and for all that, comic because he has assumed a disguise that he cannot successfully maintain
at all times. Let us consider the techniques employed by Molière in creating Tartuffe.

Long before Tartuffe appears onstage he is introduced to the audience as both a saintly and a sanctimonious man. His good points are enumerated by Mme Pernelle, who sweeps on to the stage and delivers a barrage of insults directed at everyone but Tartuffe: the defense of Tartuffe the saint is confided to a suspiciously negative, puritanical, and rude woman. He is also supported by Orgon, who, from his first appearance late in the first act until he catches Tartuffe attempting to seduce Elmire late in the fourth act, is consistently presented as an incredibly stubborn and gullible man. Therefore, the case for Tartuffe's piety is upheld by characters who are comic and somewhat offensive by dint of their excessive behavior. On the other hand, Tartuffe is denounced as being sanctimonious and even undesirable by Dorine, Cléante, and Elmire, all of whom are presented by Molière as likeable, sensible characters. So before Tartuffe makes his entrance in the third act, we are given to believe that he is a man of paradox; we may suspect that his professions of piety and outward appearances are in conflict with his true nature, that he is a rogue trying to conceal his true identity.

He lives up to our suspicions, for as Tartuffe enters in Act III, scene 2, he makes a deliberate display of his piety; he tells his servant to lock up his hairshirt and whip, both instruments employed in self-inflicted mortification of the flesh. Then immediately following this statement he admonishes Dorine to cover her chest, for he is afraid that the sight of her flesh will lead him into temptation. Like Dorine, we remark that Tartuffe must be easily given over to such temptations, and conclude that he must be acting the part of a devout man instead of actually being one. We may say that Tartuffe is comic simply because he is disguised, remembering that Bergson has
demonstrated that all disguise is comic because it causes us to be suspicious that something mechanical has been encrusted upon the living. Yet Tartuffe is comic for still another reason; posing as a saintly man, he is wearing a mask of exemplary devotion, a mask which he accidently and quite uncontrollably lets slip so that we can see his true face, so to speak. Tartuffe becomes victimized by the very flesh he would have us believe that he recently mortified, when Elmire summons him to request that he dissuade Orgon from forcing his marriage to Mariane. Before Elmire can make her point, Tartuffe finds himself complimenting her, touching her hand, her dress, and finally propositioning her. Molière has masterfully handled a very delicate scene; had he made Tartuffe deliberately try to seduce Elmire, the scene could easily have degenerated into vulgarity. Instead, he shows Tartuffe victimized by himself, or at least by his sensuous appetites; he becomes gradually carried away almost without his being aware of it, and before he knows it, he has begun making overtures to Elmire. Astonished, she discretely discourages his advances by reminding him that propositioning an honest woman is incompatible with piety, thus forcing him to make a remark about his own character; he says:

Ah! pour être dévot, je n'en suis pas moins homme:  
Et lorsqu'on vient à voir vos célestes appas,  
Un cœur se laisse prendre et ne raisonne pas.  
Je sais qu'un tel discours de moi parait étrange;  
Mais, madame, après tout, je ne suis pas un ange. (Act III, scene 4)

Throughout the scene his mask of piety has been slipping, but with these remarks it virtually falls from his face: his words have a double significance. Having allowed himself to be compromised by his sensuality, he decides to go all the way, to convince Elmire that she is so attractive that his reason is powerless in face of her beauty, that he must have her. What his words imply, however, is far more telling. It would be difficult to conceive of a more potent understatement than the phrase "je ne suis pas un ange" uttered by a Tartuffe!
He who makes a concerted effort to appear super-humanly pious announces that his animal appetites are uncontrollable; Tartuffe is comic here because he has accidentally exposed his true nature.

When Damis confronts Orgon with the fact that Tartuffe has just tried to seduce Elmire, the imposter quickly resumes his role as a saintly man. He completely fools Orgon by telling the truth.

Oui, mon frère, je suis un méchant, un coupable, un malheureux pécheur tout plein d'iniquités; Le plus grand scélérat qui jamais ait été. Chaque instant de ma vie est chargé de souillures; Elle n'est qu'un amas de crimes et d'ordures, Et je vois que le ciel, pour ma punition, Ne veut mortifier en cette occasion. (Act III, scene 6)

Here again Tartuffe's mask has fallen, but not accidentally; he has deliberately told the truth about himself because he knows Orgon will certainly not believe it. This confession scene is a tour de force, for it performs a dual function: Orgon's credulity and gullibility are made more apparent to the audience, and Tartuffe's rascality and shrewdness are also intensified. Molière knows how to make the most of a comic situation; in this instance he employs repetition, stretching the rogue-fool interplay of Tartuffe and Orgon to its utmost limits. As if it were not enough for Tartuffe to have called himself "un méchant, un coupable, un malheureux pécheur tout plein d'iniquités," his next speech is in defense of Damis, his accuser.

Ahl laissez-le parler; vous l'accusez à tort, Et vous ferez bien mieux de croire à son rapport. Pourquoi sur un tel fait m'être si favorable? Savez-vous, après tout, de quoi je suis capable? Vous fiez-vous, mon frère, à mon extérieur? Et, pour tout ce qu'on voit, me croyez-vous meilleur? Non, non, vous vous laissez tromper à l'apparence, Et je ne suis rien moins, hélas! que ce qu'on pense. Tout le monde me prend pour un homme de bien; Mais la vérité pure est que je ne vaut rien. (Act III, scene 6)

It would be difficult to imagine a better placed insult than Tartuffe's statement to Orgon, "...vous vous laissez tromper à l'apparence..." In this scene
we see what a willful and shrewd character is our imposter, Tartuffe, who can even turn the truth to his advantage. He is not so successful in saving face in the fourth act when Elmire hides Orgon under a table so that he can witness Tartuffe in the act of trying to seduce his wife. Tartuffe's mask is ripped from his face this time in the presence of the person who was most taken in by his imposture throughout the play; Orgon has at last learned the truth about Tartuffe. Orgon says:

   Ah! Ah! l'homme de bien, vous m'en voulz donner!  
   Comme aux tentations s'abandonne votre amé!  
   Vous épousiez ma fille et convoitez ma femme! (Act IV, scene 7)

At last Orgon has been able to see through Tartuffe's disguise, but too late, for he has already made the donation of all his worldly possessions to this villainous faux-dévot. In a rage, and after having slightly adjusted the expression on his mask so that it now bears the look of a devoted subject of the king, he goes to the latter to denounce Orgon for having certain papers in his possession. Following the demands of comedy, the play ends on a happy note as it is Tartuffe who is imprisoned and not Orgon, for the king was able to see through the former's fraud, recognizing him as a wanted criminal. We can see that Tartuffe falls into his own trap, that like Maitre Pathelin, he has become a trompeur trompé. He had assumed a disguise with evil intent, hoping to gain complete control of Orgon's household, marry his daughter, seduce his wife, and in general be well-provided for at Orgon's expense. His disguise, comic in itself due its rigid and unbending demands for a constant show of piety, becomes more intensely comic because it has been superimposed on a sensuous, evil personality. Tartuffe is finally defeated in his schemes because he cannot successfully sustain his role, his mask keeps falling, exposing him for what he is. In short, Tartuffe is comic because he is a disguised character; we can see that his sinister qualities are all subjected
to the lash of laughter.

Before making any additional remarks about *Le Tartuffe*, let us briefly consider the plot of Ionesco's *La Leçon* and investigate the nature of its central character, the professor. Then, after having discussed the play and the personage, a comparative analysis of the two disguised comic characters, Tartuffe and the professor, may be made. The plot of *La Leçon*, Ionesco's second play, written in 1950 and first performed in 1951, is quite simple, pure in linear development, and can be briefly dealt with in the present discussion. The play came as quite a surprise to those spectators who had seen performances of *La Cantatrice chauve* in 1950, a comedy in which there was no soprano, bald or otherwise, for *La Leçon* is "an hour's reproduction of a lesson, an unusual one, no doubt, but a lesson nevertheless: an aged professor giving private instruction to an eager but obtuse girl pupil..."\(^{11}\)

A one-act prose play subtitled *Drame-comique, La Leçon*, as was earlier mentioned, was not divided by its author into scenes according to traditional French theatre practice; therefore, excerpts cited in our discussion will be identified as to page number in the Gallimard edition of Ionesco's *Théâtre I*.

The curtain rises on the empty study-dining room of the professor's appartment. After a few moments, the doorbell is heard ringing, and the maid shows in a young girl, the student, telling her to wait for the professor. Shortly thereafter he arrives to begin the lesson; he seems so nervous that he has trouble finding things to say to his new pupil, and after a brief exchange of social amenities he gets down to the business at hand. The young lady has said that she wants to be tutored in order to prepare herself for the *doctorat total*, examinations for which are only three weeks hence. Since this is the first lesson and the professor knows nothing of his new student's

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\(^{11}\) Esslin, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
capacities, he begins by giving her an oral examination to determine in which areas she will need the most help. He announces that he will begin with arithmetic, but the maid enters and the following ominous conversation ensues:

La Bonne: Excusez-moi, Monsieur, faites attention, je vous recommande le calme.

Le Professeur: Vous êtes ridicule, Marie, voyons. Ne vous inquiétez pas.

La Bonne: On dit toujours ça.

Le Professeur: Je n'admet pas vos insinuations. Je sais parfaitement comment me conduire. Je suis assez vieux pour cela.

La Bonne: Justement, Monsieur. Vous feriez mieux de ne pas commencer par l'arithmétique avec Mademoiselle. L'arithmétique, ça fatigue, ça énervé. 12

The maid's warnings are ignored and the professor and his pupil begin to work mathematical problems. He is delighted to learn that his new student is proficient in addition: she can add one to any number he chooses. When he commences testing her ability to subtract, however, he is not so pleased; not only can she not subtract, she cannot understand a single one of his explanations; the professor has this remark to make:

Vous avez toujours tendance à additionner. Mais il faut aussi soustraire. Il ne faut pas uniquement intégrer. Il faut aussi désintégrer. C'est ça la vie. C'est ça la philosophie. C'est ça la science. C'est ça le progrès, la civilisation. 13

In vain the professor tries repeatedly to explain the principles of subtraction to the student, limiting his illustrations to the numbers one through five. He tries to encourage her to make an effort to learn to subtract by saying that if she fails to do so she can never hope to become proficient in

12 Ionesco, op. cit., p. 65.
13 Ibid., pp. 69-70.
Le Professeur: ...comment pourriez-vous arriver, avant d'avoir bien approfondi les éléments premiers, à calculer mentalement combien font, et ceci est la moindre des choses pour un ingénieur moyen -- combien font, par exemple, trois milliards sept cent cinquante-cinq millions neuf cent quatre-vingt-dix-huit mille deux cent cinquante et un, multipliés par cinq milliards cent soixante-deux millions trois cent trois mille cinq cent huit?

L'Élève, très vite: Ça fait dix-neuf quintillions trois cent quatre-vingt-dix quadrillions deux trillions huit cent quarante-quatre milliards deux cent dix-neuf millions cent soixante-quatre mille cinq cent huit...¹⁴

Not being able to understand the basic principles of mathematics, the student is able to make this involved calculation mentally, she explains, because she has memorized all possible answers to all possible problems. This approach to the science of mathematics is unacceptable: the student cannot hope to receive her doctorat total, and will need to prepare instead for a doctorat partiel. Her program of study will be inaugurated by a careful consideration of linguistics and comparative philology, even though the maid has once again entered and cautioned the professor against his choice of subjects to present to the young girl.

La Bonne: Non, Monsieur, non!...Il ne faut pas!...

Le Professeur: Marie: vous exagérez!

La Bonne: Monsieur, surtout pas de philologie, la philologie mène au pire...

L'Élève, étonnée: Au pire? (Souriant, un peu bête.) En voilà une histoire!

Le Professeur, à la Bonne: C'est trop fort! Sortez!

La Bonne: Bien, Monsieur, bien. Mais vous ne direz pas que je ne vous ai pas averti! La philologie mène au pire!¹⁵

As the professor's remarks about linguistics and comparative philology of the

¹⁴Ibid., p. 73.
¹⁵Ibid., p. 74.
"Neo-Spanish" tongues become progressively more specific he evolves from the timid figure he was earlier in the play to an authoritarian, demanding instructor. The student's teeth start to pain her, but the professor insists upon continuing his lecture; the girl complains again and again that she has a toothache, but the lesson continues. Finally, the professor resorts to physical violence, twisting her arm in order to make her pay attention. That being unsuccessful, he proceeds from lecturing about the great similarities to be noted in the "Neo-Spanish" tongues ("attention, car les ressemblances sont grandes. Ce sont des ressemblances identiques!"\textsuperscript{16}) to having his student make a practical application of comparative linguistics by repeating all the translations possible, for the word "couteau" -- all of which are, of course, the same. The professor is once again warned by the maid when he calls for a knife.

La Bonne: Ne vous mettez pas dans cet état, Monsieur, gare à la fin! Ça vous mènera loin, ça vous mènera loin tout ça.

Le Professeur: Je saurai m'arrêter à temps.

La Bonne: On le dit toujours. Je voudrais bien voir ça.

L'Elève: J'ai mal aux dents.

La Bonne: Vous voyez, ça commence, c'est le symptôme!

Le Professeur: Quel symptôme? Expliquez-vous! Que voulez-vous dire?

L'Elève, d'une voix molle: Oui, que voulez-vous dire? J'ai mal aux dents.

La Bonne: Le symptôme final! Le grand symptôme!

Le Professeur: Sottises! Sottises! Sottises!\textsuperscript{17}

The maid refuses to give the professor a knife and leaves the room, but he

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 82.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 87.
remembers that there is one in the buffet and rushes to get it. Complain-
ing that not only do her teeth hurt, but also that her head, her stomach, her arms, her entire body are paining her, the student is forced to repeat rhythmically the word "couteau," until the professor fatally stabs her, the scene being a stylized rape.

The maid reappears to find the dead girl and the professor who has re-
verted to the meek man that he was at the beginning of the play. Having scolded him for being naughty, the maid helps him carry out the body which is to be buried with the thirty-nine other students he had "taught" that day. The stage is empty for a brief moment, the doorbell rings, and the maid rushes to show in the forty-first pupil of the day.

La Leçon, like Ionesco's first play, La Cantatrice chauve, is structured on a circular pattern: the last scene of the play is the same as the first. Yet there is an important difference to be noted in the import of this tech-
nique in these two plays; whereas La Cantatrice chauve has no chronological or logical plot sequence, La Leçon is built around a clearly linear plot which incorporates exposition, development, climax, and denouement. If this play begins again instead of ending, it is because the dramatic action is dependent upon repetition to achieve its maximum effect, to underline the undesirable yet comic nature of the central character. The professor is a power-crazed lecherous murderer who lures young girls into his home under the pretext of giving them private lessons, but repeatedly rapes and kills them. Yet the play itself is a comedy and the central character is comic. Why?

First of all, we must realize that the rape and murder are written to be performed in a highly stylized manner: they symbolize something else, perhaps the overpowering of the meek by some sort of brain-washing, perhaps the grim reality that any human relationship can be reduced to a master-slave situation.
At any rate, the rape and murder are a visual dramatic representation of a basic human struggle. The dialogue of the play assures us that the author's intent was to write a comedy; suffice it to say here that it is equally as comic as that of *La Cantatrice chauve*, if somewhat more coherent. We must realize, too, that the professor is a comic character and not a seriously drawn antagonist, for he is disguised, but incapable of sustaining his disguise.

Let us trace the evolution of the character of the professor throughout the course of the play to determine in which ways he is comic. There is a very important stage direction that appears early in the playscript, immediately preceding the professor's entrance, which clarifies Ionesco's concept of this personage:

Le Professeur entre. C'est un petit vieux à barbiche blanche; il a des lorgnons, une calotte noire, il porte une longue blouse noire de maître d'école, pantalons et souliers noirs, faux col blanc, cravate noire. Excessivement poli, très timide, voix assourdie par la timidité, très correct, très professeur. Il se frotte tout le temps les mains; de temps à autre, une lueur lubrique dans les yeux, vite réprimée.

Au cours du drame, sa timidité disparaîtra progressivement, insensiblement; les lueurs lubriques de ses yeux finiront par devenir une flamme dévorante, ininterrompue; d'apparence plus qu'inoffensive au début de l'action, le Professeur deviendra de plus en plus sur de lui, nerveux, agressif, dominateur, jusqu'à se jouer comme il lui plaira de son élève, devenue, entre ses mains, une pauvre chose. Evidemment la voix du Professeur devra elle aussi devenir, de maigre et fluette, de plus en plus forte, et, à la fin, extrêmement puissant, éclatante, clairon sonore...

The actor playing the role of the professor must make an effort to appear quite professorial (*très professeur*), very timid, exceptionally polite, yet this appearance is nothing more than a disguise, a cover-up for a dangerous personality: there is a recurrent lubricous look in this man's eye that needs to be subdued if he is to maintain a dignified facade. In a word, the professor has to appear to be something that he is not. He is basically comic because there is an artificial coating on his true nature; something
mechanical -- the professorial, timid pose -- has been placed upon the liv­
ing, upon the lecherous, power-hungry man. When he first enters, the
student remarks that she has come on time, that she did not want to be late
for her first lesson, to which the professor replies:

C'est bien, Mademoiselle. Merci, mais il ne fallait pas vous
presser. Je ne sais comment m'excuser de vous avoir fait atten-
dre...Je finissais justement...n'est-ce pas, de...Je m'excuse...
Vous m'excuserez...19

These words, besides indicating nervousness and excessive politeness, also
make the attentive audience suspicious of this man: what did he just finish
doing? And soon afterward, when the pupil admits that she has some diffi-
culty learning geographical facts, the following bit of dialogue is ex-
changed:

Le Professeur: Oh, ça viendra...Du courage...Mademoiselle...Je
m'excuse...de la patience...doucement, doucement...Vous verrez,
ça viendra...Il fait beau aujourd'hui...ou plutôt pas telle-
ment...Oh! si quand même. Enfin, il ne fait pas trop mauvais,
c'est le principal...Euh...euh...Il ne pleut pas, il ne neige
pas non plus.

L'Eleve: Ce serait bien étonnant, car nous sommes en été.

Le Professeur: Je m'excuse, Mademoiselle, j'allais vous le dire...
mais vous apprendrez que l'on peut s'attendre à tout.20

In the first speech cited above, the professor is not only talking to the
girl, he is also warning himself to be patient, that "ça viendra." When the
student has the impudence to correct the mistake he has made about the weath­
er, his true character begins to come to the fore: he warns her that she
should be ready to accept the fact that everything is possible, again leading
us perhaps to suspect that this is no ordinary meek professor speaking. From
suggestions such as these, Ionesco proceeds to more revealing insinuations

18 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
19 Ibid., p. 61.
20 Ibid., p. 62.
about the professor's personality. The lesson is to begin; the teacher asks his student if she is ready, and she answers that she is:

L'Elève: Mais oui, Monsieur, je suis à votre disposition, Monsieur.

Le Professeur: A ma disposition?...(Lueur dans les yeux vite éteinte, un geste, qu'il réprime.) Oh, Mademoiselle, c'est moi qui suis à votre disposition. Je ne suis que votre serviteur.21

The professor's mask has almost fallen, for his sensuality has been stirred by the girl's innocent remark. His eyes gleam, he begins to reach for her, but quickly catches himself, and resumes his pose of dignity and timidity. He is successful in quelling his impulses at this point in the play, but the maid knows that he will not always be so fortunate, for three times during the course of the lesson she warns him that his mask is about to fall. First she cautions him about arithmetic ("Ça fatigue, ça énervex."22); then she tells him that he should not teach philology ("Monsieur, surtout pas de philologie, la philologie mène au pire..."23). Finally, when she learns that the student is suffering from a toothache, the maid refuses to bring the professor the knife he has requested, saying that things have gone entirely too far ("Vous voyez, ça commence, c'est le symptôme!"24). In each of these instances the professor ignores the maid's admonitions: he cannot help himself. Here is a basic paradox in his personality that renders him a comic personage; he can control others, but he cannot control himself. He has to give in to his sensual penchant, at first gradually and unconsciously, for he

21 Ibid., p. 62.
22 Ibid., p. 65.
23 Ibid., p. 75.
24 Ibid., p. 87.
tells the maid that she is foolish to warn him about teaching arithmetic and philology, that he is in control of himself, that he is "assez vieux pour cela;" then he gives in totally and consciously, rapine and killing the student.

Ionesco's talent as a comedian is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his treatment of such an odious act as is the professor's. He structures the sequence and situates it in the framework of the play in such a way as to render it comic. There is the intensely comic dialogue that snowballs to a climax in the rhythmic repetition of the word "couteau" and there is the professor's metamorphosis from a meek little man to a raging madman, both culminating in a stylized rape and murder. Then when Ionesco has built the comic and dramatic tension of the play to a peak, he has the professor revert immediately to his former meek self: he once more assumes the dis­guise, saying to Marie who has entered and begun to scold him:

Le Professeur, tremblotant: Ce n'est pas moi...Ce n'est pas moi... Marie...Non...Je vous assure...ce n'est pas moi, ma petite Marie...

La Bonne: Mais qui donc? Qui donc alors? Moi?

Le Professeur: Je ne sais pas...peut-être...

La Bonne: Ou le chat?

Le Professeur: C'est possible...Je ne sais pas...

La Bonne: Et c'est la quarantième fois, aujourd'hui!...Et tous les jours c'est la même chose! Tous les jours! Vous n'avez pas honte, à votre âge...mais vous allez vous rendre malade! Ça sera bien fait.

Le Professeur, irrité: Ce n'est pas ma faute! Elle ne voulait pas apprendre! Elle était désobéissante! C'était une mauvaise élève! Elle ne voulait pas apprendre!

La Bonne: Menteur! 26

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25 Ibid., p. 65.
However, he cannot convince the maid of his innocence, for she knows him too well; she is aware that his meekness is a facade and can see behind his mask. As the scene continues, she finally dominates him completely, slapping him in the face and causing him to take a prat fall. Only moments before in complete power, the professor now sits on the floor, weeping, "Je n'ai pas fait exprès de la tuer!" Such a reversal is truly ludicrous and similar in mood to the trompeur trompé comic pattern. The maid takes pity on him, discusses funeral arrangements for the forty victims thus far that day, and helps him to carry out the body. The doorbell rings and the play is to begin again with a new student-victim, the implication being that the professor will carry out his imposture for the forty-first time that very day. He will go through the same cycle: disguised as a meek professor, he will allow his sensuousness to get the better of him, he will completely drop his mask to rape and kill, he will be discovered and disgraced by the maid, he will assume the disguise once again, knowing that he will not be able to sustain it, ad infinitum. Repetition has been skilfully pushed to an absurd limit by the author, thereby assuring that his play will have decidedly comic import: even if the rape and murder were to be construed as realities, the play would remain comic under the complete improbability of forty-one plus repetitions in the same twenty-four hour interval.

A comparative structural analysis of *Le Tartuffe* and *La Leçon* may now be made which will demonstrate that Tartuffe and the professor are similarly conceived and executed comic personages. First of all, both characters are consciously disguised with evil intent, being similar to the wolf in sheep's

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26 Ibid., pp. 90-91.

27 Ibid., p. 91.
clothing. They try to appear to be something that they are not, imposing a decorous facade upon a sensuous personality. Each play can be reduced structurally to a triangle: there is (1) a disguised character with selfish motives, (2) a gullible victim, and (3) a perceptive character(s) who recognizes the true colors of the masqué. Stylistically, each of these three elements is presented in much the same manner:

1. The disguised character is forced during the course of the play to drop his disguise, and is comic because he brings about his own downfall by an inability to control his sensuous appetites. In both instances this personage is only sketched: we know very little about him except that he has trouble keeping his mask on. that if he were able to sustain his pose, he might become something of a monster - if such were the case, he would be a non-comic character by dint of wielding too much power. It is interesting to note that Tartuffe and the professor have assumed educator's roles; the former gives lessons on how to get to heaven (Orgon says of him, "Qui suit bien ses leçons goûte une paix profonde..."in Act I, scene 5), the latter on how to distinguish the non-existent differences between the neo-Spanish tongues. At any rate, both are in a position of leadership as far as the gullible characters, their pupils, are concerned. Also to be noted is the fact that both of these men who assume meek attitudes are not only lusty, but have volcanic tempers: Tartuffe, in a rage because Elmire has compromised him, goes to the king to inform on Orgon, and in so doing, gives himself away; the professor warns his student, who has begun constantly to complain about her toothache, "N'interrompez pas! Ne me mettez pas en colère! Je ne répondrai plus de moi!" \(^{28}\) Indeed, both characters lose their tempers as well as their masks and both have recourse to violence: Tartuffe would,

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\(^{28}\)Ibid., p. 83.
if not foiled by a fanciful bit of deus ex machina, evict an entire family; the professor has raped and killed forty students. The most startling similarity to be noted in the conception and execution of these characters is that they are both potentially very dark or heavy and yet presented in such a way as to be unfailingly comic. Fundamentally this is possible because Molière and Ionesco have enabled the audience to see through the disguises assumed by Tartuffe and the professor, that procedure being all the more comic because it is motivated from within the characters themselves. Tartuffe and the professor are rogues who are fooled by themselves: they literally tear their own masks off, for they are too human to be total monsters. Their plans fail to work out because their sensuality gets in the way.

2. The victims of both plays perform a double function: they are comic in their own right due to their excessive gullibility, and they highlight the disguised character by giving him an outlet for a display of his powers of deception. In Le Tartuffe, the victim’s role is assumed by Mme Pernelle and her son, Orgon, who are gullible to a fault; they want to believe in Tartuffe, and that being the case, nothing short of Elmire’s near seduction will turn them from their idol. The student in La Leçon is also more than willing to "learn" from the professor; she is described in the stage directions as "...volontaire...jusqu’à en paraître presque agressive ..." and the maid’s warnings to the professor make no apparent impression upon her. There is a charming childlike simplicity about the duped characters; they are not able to reason. Orgon cannot correlate warnings given him with evidences of Tartuffe’s fraudulent behavior; the student has had to memorize all the possible answers to all possible multiplication problems

\[29\] Ibid., p. 60.
because she cannot understand mathematical principles. A significant similarity to be noted in the structuring of the victim's role in each play is the total personality transition made by the time the climax arrives: credulous Orgon becomes completely aware of Tartuffe's true nature; the avid student becomes "...de plus en plus passive, jusqu'à ne plus être qu'un objet mou et inerte, semblant inanimée, entre les mains du Professeur..."

The rhythm of these personality changes is admittedly different; whereas Orgon's transition is made abruptly, the pupil evolves gradually from being active to inert. Yet the dramatic value of both transitions is the same: a reaction to the unmasking of the disguised character, they are the indication that reality has set in.

3. The perceptive characters, that is to say those who recognize throughout the entire play that the central character is a masqué, have a very important structural function. They act as a buffer zone between the audience and the disguised personage, preventing the former from dreading or even perhaps empathizing with the latter. If, for example, Molière had not carefully prepared the audience by having his perceptive characters talk about Tartuffe as a fraud, our reaction to him would be quite different. Instead of laughing at his obvious facade of excessive piety, we might pity him as a man with a deep psychological problem. Likewise, if the maid in La Leçon were not on hand to warn the professor that philology leads to calamity, we would be unprepared to accept the rape and murder as a comic action, which of course, it is intended to be. We may say that the perceptive character is a key to the comedy, in that he prevents the play from being melodramatic or tragic. In Molière's play the perceptive characters, namely Elmire, Cléante, Damis, relate to the victim; they try to make Orgon

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Ibid.

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and his mother realize that Tartuffe is an imposter. However, in Ionesco's play the perceptive character, the maid, relates to the masqué, the professor, and not to his victim; the maid warns him against himself, for she knows what to expect after thirty-nine similar occurrences that same day.

But the dramatic function of the perceptive character is the same: he is an additional indication that the central character is disguised, that his disguise is not totally effective (it has been perceived), that, in short, the masqué is not to be taken too seriously by the audience.

We might reduce the proofs to be drawn from the comparative analyses that we have made in this chapter into a simple mathematical ratio, namely M. Jourdain is to the old man as Tartuffe is to the professor, and conclude therefrom that Molière and Ionesco present certain types of comic personages in similar fashion. Yet the most significant affinities of comic style to be noted in the foregoing discussions are implicit rather than explicit. The most obvious thing to say about the four characters that we have explored is that they are dynamic examples of the playwrights' feeling for and understanding of comic theatre. M. Jourdain, the old man, Tartuffe, and the professor are inextricably linked with the essence of theatricality; they have each assumed another role either unconsciously (the deluded personages create their own self-image and pattern a world around it) or consciously (the disguised personages try to take advantage of others by pretending to appear to be what they are not). Molière and Ionesco have more than doubled the theatrical impact of these characters by having them assume still other roles, for in so doing, the playwrights have drawn the audience into a creative hall of mirrors, as it were: we see an actor playing a character who is either wittingly or otherwise trying to be someone else. When we laugh, our laughter is as though projected through a prism, for the object
of our mirth is diversified. That is, we cannot be sure if we are laugh-
ing at the actor playing a part, the character trying to be someone dif-
ferent, or both. Of course, there is no time to analyze our reaction, for
we are drawn into the magic of a spontaneous and comic theatrical experience:
although we recognize that what we are witnessing has some basis in reality,
we become detached from that reality and simply laugh. This is, of course,
an indication of the comic vision of the playwrights; they cause us to see
something basically pathetic (self-delusion) or sinister (wilfull deception)
in a comic vein. Significantly, Ionesco has said, "Quand j'arrive à me
détacher du monde, et à pouvoir le regarder, il me paraît comique dans son
invraisemblance." Both Molière and Ionesco have the ability to put some
distance between themselves and the world, to see the humour in it, and
to represent what they see in their comedies. What they see and the manner
in which they express it are often remarkably similar. Again we turn to
Ionesco for an a propos statement; when asked in an interview by Edith
Mora if he could define his concept of comedy, he said, "Oui...je crois que
c'est une autre face du tragique."
In an interview with Cahiers libres de la jeunesse in 1960, Ionesco was asked what he meant by saying that reality alone, contrary to dreams, was capable of disintegrating into a nightmare. His response to that question is significant:

Mes personnages plaisentent, de temps à autre, ou bien ils s'expriment d'une façon humoristique; ils disent aussi des sottises; ou encore ils s'expriment avec gaucherie, ils ne se connaissent pas très bien eux-mêmes, ils se cherchent à travers leur propre maladresse; ils sont des hommes comme la plupart des hommes; ils ne pontifient pas chaque fois qu'ils ouvrent la bouche; ils disent aussi le contraire de ce que je pense ou de ce que pense le héros opposé. Je n'ai pas dit, moi, que "la réalité, contrairement au rêve tourna au cauchemar"; c'est un de mes personnages qui a prononcé cette phrase. Il faut donc voir ce qu'est ce personnage; s'il a parlé sérieusement, s'il s'est moqué; dans quelle situation il a dit ce qu'il a dit? pourquoi? qu'entend-il par là?...etc.... Et surtout sait-il bien dire ce qu'il veut dire? C'est à mes personnages que l'on doit poser ces questions, pas à moi.\(^1\)

This is a wise warning to the critic of comedy. The exponents of the new wave of moliéristes have, in general, made an effort not to read into lines spoken in a comedy the ideas of the author of that comedy. Moore aptly demonstrated the danger of so doing, making the observation that even so astute a critic as Emile Faguet -- and not a small number of his successors -- could believe simultaneously that Molière was a genius as well as a man of the most ordinary ideas whose guiding principle was moderation in all

\(^1\) Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 91.
things, simply by accepting as Molière's own the ideas expressed by his raisonneurs. And a few years before Moore made the preceding statement, Henry Carrington Lancaster in discussing the co-existing critical viewpoints that Molière was both a moralist and a libertine said with an a propos touch of wit that "...to pick out a line regardless of the context and argue from it about a dramatist's general ideas is a method worthy of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement...".

In short, it is not sound critical practice to read too much into comedy. However, in at least three instances in the theatre of Molière and of Ionesco we may justifiably and with certainty select lines of dialogue which convey general attitudes of the authors. For, in the case of Molière's La Critique de l'école des femmes and L'Impromptu de Versailles as well as that of Ionesco's L'Impromptu de l'Alma, we are not dealing with disinterested art, but rather with admittedly polemic pieces of stagecraft in which the playwrights are argumentatively presenting their personal point of view. As is well known by the student of Molière, La Critique de l'école des femmes and L'Impromptu de Versailles were written as a defense in counter-attack to contemporary critics who were blinded by professional jealousy, militant piety, and the then fashionable taste for ultra-refinement. Likewise, Ionesco wrote L'Impromptu de l'Alma as a treatise against scholarly criticism, the insanity of which he holds up to ridicule; in fact, this play is so pointed in its attack that its author considers it "une mauvaise plaisanterie." An investigation of the views expressed in these plays will demonstrate that

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2Moore, Molière, A New Criticism, p. 12.


4Ionesco, op. cit., p. 108.
Molière and Ionesco harbor similar ideas on comic dramatic art and its criticism.

First produced late in 1662, L'Ecole des femmes proved to be an immediate success with Parisian audiences; so many people were anxious to see it that the play had a four-month run — a considerably long engagement indeed in the seventeenth century. It not only augmented its author's finances and added to his fame, it also brought him a certain notoriety:

Les comédiens de L'Hôtel de Bourgogne se déplacèrent. Ils vinrent au Palais-Royal et témoignèrent hautement leur réprobation dédaigneuse. Des gens du monde, acharnés contre L'Ecole des femmes, payaient leur place pour avoir le droit de faire des mines, de hausser les épaules, de simuler l'indignation. Robinet célèbre le zèle d'un de nos plus sage magistrats pour la suppression de la pièce. Le bruit courait qu'on allait jouer à L'Hôtel de Bourgogne une œuvre de Donneau de Visé où Molière ne serait pas épargné. Au cours d'une représentation privée, le scandale fut tel qu'on dut l'interrompre. Le commandeur de Souvre voulait la scène plus exacte, et Du Broussin quittait la salle au second acte de la pièce en protestant tout haut contre cette comédie qui faisait fi des règles. Au cours du mois de février paraissaient les Nouvelles de Donneau de Visé, et le IIIe volume contenait une critique acide et faussement modérée de L'Ecole des femmes comme de son auteur. Molière avait annoncé qu'il répondrait.  

There resulted a guerre comique in which Molière at first willingly engaged, writing La Critique de l'École des femmes, and then, weary of the whole affair, chose to ignore his critics after having written L'Impromptu de Versailles.

La Critique de l'École des femmes is a one-act prose play which may best be described as a drawing room debate of the merits and faults of L'Ecole des femmes, and ultimately of Molière's talent as a dramatist. Needless to say, Molière saw to it that in this play all his critics were properly put in their place; that is, the most "popular" faults found with the play by rival authors,

actors, précieux, and prudes are shown to be unfounded critical judgments. One character in particular, Dorante, an urbanite, sensible, and forceful (if not in the least dogmatic) young man, gives a brilliant defense of Molière's art. It would be difficult to dispute Dorante's role as porte-parole; at one point in scene 6, for example, another character remarks to Dorante that, "Molière est bien heureux, Monsieur, d'avoir un protecteur aussi chaud que vous." Nor is Dorante the only personage in the play to speak in Molière's defense, for the cast is divided into two proups, one pro and the other con, which engage in the discussion of the merits of L'Ecole des femmes. In agreement with Dorante's opinions are two sensible, tasteful ladies, Elise and Uranie, the latter's drawing room serving as the setting for the play. Their adversaries include Climène, a précieuse whose offended modesty stems less from puritanical morality than from the desire to be fashionable; the Marquis, a fop whose critical judgments are devoid of all logic; and Lysidias, a pedant and mundane author who views Molière's play through the green eyes of jealousy rather than with objective impartiality.

The dramatic structure of La Critique de l'école des femmes is clearly defined; one by one, all the criticisms proffered by Climène, the Marquis, and Lysidias are refuted. In each instance, of course, Molière pits his own opinions against those which he refutes. A consideration of those opinions is in order.

Scene 3 sees the arrival of Climène, who has been so offended by the vulgarity of L'Ecole des femmes, a performance of which she has just attended, that she fears she will not be the same for quite some time. Climène says:

Je viens de voir, pour mes péchés, cette méchante rapsodie de L'Ecole des femmes. Je suis encore en défaillance du mal de cœur que cela m'a donné, et je pense que je n'en reviendrai de plus de quinze jours.
According to Climène, the play that she has just seen is blatantly obscene; suffice it for our purposes to say here that *L'Ecole des femmes* is not in the least obscene and that in all cases save one Climène's criticisms are totally unfounded. We must agree with Uranie, who in this scene takes up Molière's defense by telling Climène that any "ordures" she may have found in the play were necessarily of her own invention. Molière employs a stylistic device which both heightens the comedy of the situation and makes it clear as well that he feels that Climène's comments -- actually those being made by many of his contemporaries -- are inane: Climène is pitted against two characters who disagree with her. Uranie's opinions are shared by Elise, who sardonically pretends to be in complete agreement with Climène. The closing lines of the scene exchanged by Elise and Climène are worthy to rank with Climène's ultra-sarcastic remarks to Arsinoé in *Le Misanthrope* (Act III, scene 0).

When the Marquis arrives (scene 4) he has to force his way past Galopin, Uranie's valet, who has been instructed by his mistress that she is to be considered not at home when certain persons come to call. Once he has gained entry, he, like Climène, begins to attack *L'Ecole des femmes*, but for different reasons:

*C'est la plus méchante chose du monde. Comment diable! à peine ai-je pu trouver place; j'ai pensé être étouffé à la porte, et jamais on ne m'a tant marché sur les pieds. Voyez comme mes canons et mes rubans en sont ajustés, de grace.*

The inanity of such criticism is immediately made apparent by Elise, who continues her tongue-in-cheek practice of siding with the opposition: "Il est vrai que cela crie vengeance contre *L'Ecole des femmes*, et que vous la condamnez avec justice." Then Dorante, the author's porte-parole, arrives and

6It would be difficult to deny that the famous "le" of Act II, scene 5 is somewhat suggestive. However, to take offense at it betrays a rather limited sense of humor.
continues to devastate the Marquis, who remains totally unaware that he is being ridiculed. The latter expresses the belief that the most obvious indication of the worthlessness of *L'Ecole des femmes* is that it was so well received by the spectators in the *parterre*. Molière then has Dorante come to the defense of the judgment of the common man:

Apprends, Marquis, je te prie, et les autres aussi, que le bon sens n'a point de place déterminée à la comédie; que la différence du demi-louis d'or et de la pièce de quinze sols ne fait rien du tout au bon goût; que, debout et assis, on peut donner un mauvais jugement; et qu'enfin, à le prendre en général, je me ferais assez à l'approbation de parterre, par la raison qu'entre ceux qui le composent il y en a plusieurs qui sont capables de juger d'une pièce selon les règles, et que les autres en jugent par la bonne façon d'en juger, qui est de se laisser prendre aux choses, et de n'avoir ni prévention aveugle, ni complaisance affectée, ni délicatesse ridicule. (Scene 5)

Nor does Dorante stop at that; he goes on to say that he admires a display of good sense in people of all social ranks, and that he deplores the misleading popular image of persons at the court created by certain fops who "parlent hardiment de toutes choses, sans s'y connaître." Such pretentious and ignorant persons are the worst possible of critics, for they are the ones who "voyant un tableau, ou écoutant un concert de musique, blament de même et louent tout à contre-sens, prennent par où ils peuvent les termes de l'art qu'ils attrapent, et ne manquent jamais de les estrophier, et de les mettre hors de place." On the other hand, certain persons who are too-well informed (scholars), possess a wealth of knowledge which causes them to make pedantic judgments: "Eh, mon Dieu! il y en a beaucoup que le trop d'esprit gâte, qui voient mal les choses à force de lumière..." Dorante goes on to deride the false prude whose critical judgments are colored by an excess of piety which is often only a facade concealing a mentality given over to ready perception of the scabrous: "Celle-ci pousse l'affaire plus avant qu'aucune; et l'habilité de son scrupule découvre des saletés où jamais
personne n'en avait vu."

In short, Dorant in one brief scene has discredited all of Molière's then most rabid critics except one, the rival author whose professional jealousy causes him to make unkind criticisms. With the arrival of Lysidias, a dramatic author, Molière sets the stage for a counter-attack on the unfair judgments being proffered by his fellow playwrights. Scene 6 is the longest and most important one in the play, for in it are expressed Molière's ideas on the art of comedy, the nature of the classical rules, and the role of the critic. Despite the effort made by Lysidias to withhold any negative personal opinions of Molière's comedy -- this effort being dictated by honneteté and professional etiquette -- he is nonetheless cajoled into admitting, "Il est vrai qu'elle (L'Ecole des femmes) n'est pas approuvée par les connaisseurs." Needless to say, Lysidias himself falls within that classification, and before the scene ends he will have listed quite a number of flaws to be found in the play being discussed in Uranie's drawing room. He maintains that it should not be termed a comédie, the implication being that it is a mere farce, and adds that popular preference for such plays instead of a more serious drama marks a lamentable decline in taste. Climène is quick to agree, saying, "Il est vrai...que le siècle s'encanaille furieusement." It is at this point that Molière has Dorante present the first more or less formal support of comedy as an art form; comedy, he maintains, is even more difficult to write than is tragedy. Whereas the author of tragedy can take much liberty in idealizing the noble sentiments of heros, often being permitted to take recourse to the merveilleux, the author of comedy enjoys no such liberties. Quite the contrary, the comic playwright needs to maintain a strong semblance of realism in order to penetrate into "le ridicule des hommes," plus the fact that his
task is made even more difficult by the need to entertain people by making fun of their faults: "...c'est une étrange entreprise que celle de faire rire les honnêtes gens."

Molière's polemic alibity is clearly evident when he has Dorante reply to Lysidias' remark that L'Ecole des femmes was not even entertaining: the court found the play delightful, says he, and who is in a better position to judge? That bit of well-placed flattery accomplished, Molière can now have Dorante disprove Lysidias' contention that the play has sinned against the Aristotelian rules. The classical rules governing the composition of drama become the center of a discussion from which it may be inferred that Molière adhered to these venerable rules more out of theatrical know-how than out of deference to scholarly demands. The rules are, according to Dorante, primarily a question of sound common sense; that is, like all worth while rules, they produce a beneficial effect and have been evolved because they further the cause of the thing they are purported to regulate:

Il semble, à vous ouïr parler, que ces règles de l'art soient les plus grands mystères du monde; et cependant ce ne sont que quelques observations aisées, que le bon sens a faites sur ce qui peut ôter le plaisir que l'on prend à ces sortes de poèmes; et le même bon sens qui a fait autrefois ces observations les fait aisément tous les jours, sans le secours d'Horace et d'Aristote. (Scene 6)

In fact, the first rule of comic theatre should be to entertain, and all other rules should be so designed as to help the comedian achieve that end; Dorante asks, "Je voudrais bien savoir si la grande règle de toutes les règles n'est pas de plaire..."

Some significant considerations concerning the role of the comic critic are also expressed in this discussion. The prime criterion for critical judgments of a comedy should stem from the enjoyment it affords. It is maintained that the theatre-going public is the ultimate critic of a play;
pedantic concern for rules is beside the point, for to judge a play solely according to preconceived scholarly notions is an undesirable practice. Dorante says: "Laissons-nous aller de bonne foi aux choses qui nous prennent par les entrailles, et ne cherchons point de raisonnements pour nous empecher d'avoir du plaisir." More simply stated, criticism does not presuppose scholarship; it is merely a question of spontaneous and empathetic reaction.

Lysidias is a shrewd debater who tries to weaken Dorante's entire argument by remarking that it rests solely upon the premise that L'Ecole des femmes was a success with the theatre-goer, but that he has avoided the issue as to whether or not that play conforms to the classical rules. Dorante then demonstrates that the play is exemplary as far as attention to the Aristotelian unities is concerned, the defense being admirable conducted in the language of the average honnéte homme. (Dorante had previously reprimanded Lysidias for the use to no great advantage of highly specialized nomenclature as protasis, epitasis, and peripeteia.) La Critique de l'école des femmes comes to a close as the personages engaged in the debate decide that their conversation might easily be made into a play be Molière, provided he were able to invent a suitable dénouement. Such a dénouement is supplied by Uranie's valet, Galopin, who announces that dinner is served; Uranie remarks, "La comédie ne peut pas mieux finir, et nous ferons bien d'en demeurer là."

This, the last line of the play is significant, for it signals that the debate has drawn to a close without really having been resolved. It is much to Molière's credit as a dramatic artist that he was able to win the debate in the audience's eyes without causing Climène, the Marquis, or Lysidias to recapitulate, and that he never allowed the argument to become unpleasantly heated. The tone of the play is one of great refinement and civility; Molière
unlike certain other authors engaged in the guerre comique, was able to acquitted himself like a gentleman.

We may now turn out attention to L'Impromptu de Versailles, the play which constitutes, as far as Molière was concerned, the end of the guerre comique. Performed before Parisian audiences late in 1663, almost one year after the first performance of L'Ecole des femmes, this play like the previous one discussed is unusual in that it is a play about a play. Whereas the characters of La Critique de l'école des femmes concentrate their energies in a discussion of a previously performed dramatic work, those of L'Impromptu de Versailles are actors rehearsing a play to be presented later that day. The names listed in the dramatis personae are those of Molière, his wife, and the other members of his troupe, and the action takes place onstage where the actors are having a last minute dress rehearsal. Molière makes a number of interesting comments throughout the course of this play that give insight into the difficulties he encountered because of having to prepare divertissements for the royalty on extremely short notice. We also learn some of his techniques as a director and the style of acting which he advocated; it is interesting to note that many of the directions he gives to his players are quite similar in nature to the tenets of modern method acting as advocated by Stanislowsky. In a scene which must have been a delight for his contemporaries (scene 1) Molière parodies the acting style of the leading thespians of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. However, our primary concern here is with the fourth and fifth scenes of the play in which Molière interrupts the rehearsal in order to speak publicly in his own behalf.

Molière and La Orange, taking the parts of two ridiculous marquis, are engaged in a dispute as to which one of them was parodied by Molière in La Critique de l'école des femmes; they are happy to note the arrival of a
Chevalier (actually the actor Brécourt who created the role of Dorante in La Critique) who will serve as arbitrator. Brécourt as the Chevalier expresses many of the same ideas expressed by Uranie and Dorante in the play previously discussed; but the tone is different in this play. Brécourt's chevalier has assumed an almost pontifical tone:

Comme l'affaire de la comédie est de représenter en général tous les défauts des hommes, et principalement des hommes de notre siècle, il est impossible à Molière de faire aucun caractère qui ne rencontre quelqu'un dans le monde; et s'il faut qu'on l'accuse d'avoir songé toutes les personnes où l'on peut trouver les défauts qu'il peint, il faut sans doute qu'il ne fasse plus de comédies. (Scene *)

It is interesting that in this scene Molière interrupts the rehearsal and assumes Brécourt's role in order to demonstrate how he wants the lines to be delivered. Actually, he seizes upon the occasion to tell his audience, speaking in the first person, that there are a number of possible comic subjects in the court alone -- hypocrites, social climbers, boors -- which would serve as excellent models. We feel that it is open to interpretation as to why Molière makes such a pronouncement; it may be that he was merely advising persons who recognized themselves in his comedies that he was creating generalized characters and not mocking specific individuals. Or, it would not be totally unreasonable to assume that these words are spoken as a threat to those courtiers who may have been trying to bring pressure to bear upon Molière. It is well to remember that this particular play was written only because Louis XIV urged him to reply to his enemies, and consequently, Molière may have felt that he was in a position to brandish a few threats. The civility of La Critique de l'école des femmes had, after all, failed to call a halt to his critics' unkind tactics.

In the following scene the rehearsal is resumed with Mlle Du Parc and Mlle Molière playing respectively the roles of an affected marquise and a sensible, but quite sardonic honnête femme, roles similar to the ones created
by these actresses as Climène and Elise. Brécourt resumes Molière's defense and states that the most sensible stand the author could take in the guerre comique would be to ignore his critics and to concentrate on producing a new successful play:

Voilà le vrai moyen de se venger comme il faut; et de l'humeur dont je les connais, je suis fort assuré qu'une pièce nouvelle qui leur enlèvera le monde, les fachera bien plus que toutes les satires qu'on pourrait faire de leurs personnes. (Scene 5)

Mlle Béjart interrupts the rehearsal at this point to tell Molière that he would be wrong to ignore the offensive plays that had been written about him by his ennemies, and that he would best reply with a "réponse vigoureuse."

But Molière does not accept this advice; instead, he informs her that in so doing he would only be putting money into the pockets of his adversaries. That is, a Boursault might answer his "réponse vigoureuse" with another unkind satire, such as had been that author's Le Portrait du peintre, which would draw large crowds of theatre-goers and bring profit and notoriety to its author.

Molière then makes the following statement:

Le plus grand mal que je leur aie fait, c'est que j'ai eu le bonheur de plaire un peu plus qu'ils n'auraient voulu; et tout leur procédé depuis que nous sommes venus à Paris, a trop marqué ce qui les touche. Ils critiquent mes pièces: tant mieux; et Dieu me garde d'en faire jamais qui leur plaisent Ce serait une mauvaise affaire pour moi. (Scene 5)

Yet Mlle de Brie is not satisfied; she, like Mlle Béjart, would have Molière be more forceful and vituperous. Again, and with a great degree of finality Molière says that as far as he is concerned, the guerre comique has seen its last battle:

Mais enfin j'en ferai ma déclaration publiquement. Je ne prétends faire aucune réponse à toutes leurs critiques et contre-critiques. Qu'ils disent tous les maux du monde de mes pièces, j'en suis d'accord. Qu'ils s'en saisissent après nous, qu'ils les retournent comme un habit pour les mettre sur leur théâtre, et tachent à profiter de quelque agrément qu'on y trouve, et d'un peu de bonheur que j'ai, j'y consens: ils en ont besoin, et je serai bien aise de
contribuer à les faire subsister, pourvu qu'ils se contentent de ce que je puis leur accorder avec bienséance. La courtoisie doit avoir des bornes; et il y a des choses qui ne font rire ni les spectateurs, ni celui dont on parle. Je leur abandonne de bon coeur mes ouvrages, ma figure, mes gestes, mes paroles, mon ton de voix, et ma façon de réciter, pour en faire et dire tout ce qu'il leur plaira, s'ils en peuvent tirer quelque avantage: je ne m'oppose point à tout à ces choses, et je serai ravi que cela puisse réjouir le monde. Mais, en leur abandonnant tout cela, ils me doivent faire la grâce de me laisser le reste et de ne point toucher à des matières de la nature de celles sur lesquelles on m'a dit qu'ils m'attaquaient dans leurs comédies. C'est de quoi je prierai civilement cet honnête Monsieur qui se mêle d'écrire pour eux, et voilà toute la réponse qu'ils auront de moi. (Scene 5)

There remains nothing more to be said, and so Molière effects a dénouement by having four nécessaires enter in rapid succession, each announcing that the play is to begin immediately. The tension is great because the troupe has not had time to sufficiently rehearse the piece, but all ends well as Béjart arrives bringing word that the king upon learning that his players had not had enough time to prepare the divertissement, has postponed the performance.

We may now proceed from our discussion of Molière's L'Impromptu de Versailles to a consideration of Ionesco's L'Impromptu de l'Alma, about which Martin Esslin writes:

Ionesco's most openly polemical play, his most direct attack against his critics, is L'Impromptu de l'Alma, ou Le Caméléon du Berger... dated Paris, 1955, and first performed at the Studio des Champs-Elysées in February, 1956. By its title alone, Ionesco proclaims his faith that the avant-garde is merely the renewer of tradition — Molière's L'Impromptu de Versailles... (is) clearly alluded to. And like Molière, Ionesco puts himself on stage...

As the curtain rises Ionesco is seen slumped over a table covered with books and papers; he has fallen asleep writing a play, for he is still holding a ballpoint pen. He is awakened by Bartholoméus I, the first of three learned critics dressed in doctoral robes who will come to pay him a visit. Bar-

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Esslin, op. cit., p. 115.
tholoméus I has come to tell Ionesco that his public is impatiently awaiting a new play, and begins to ask the author questions about his soon-to-be-completed piece. Ionesco says that it is not ready and has difficulty giving direct answers to questions posed by his visitor as to the subject and title of the play:

Euh...le sujet?...Vous me demandez le sujet?...Le titre?...Euh...vous savez, je ne sais jamais raconter mes pièces... Tout est dans les répliques, dans le jeu, dans les images, scéniques, c'est très visuel, comme toujours...C'est une image...8

Finally Bartholoméus I succeeds in wheedling the title out of Ionesco; the play is to be called Le Caméléon du berger. The author explains that he first got the idea for his new creation one summer afternoon when he saw a young shepherd embrace a chameleon in the middle of the street of a quiet country town. This, he explains, is merely the pretext or point de départ for the play, for his real goal is to publicly express his views on the art of playwriting: "Je parlerai donc du théâtre, de la critique dramatique, du public...J'exposerai mes propres points de vue."9 Ionesco is hesitant about reading his unfinished manuscript to Bartholoméus I, for he says that he is always embarrassed when asked to read his own work. The visitor urges him to give a reading anyway, and in so doing, lances the play's first attack on drama critics; Bartholoméus I says encouragingly, "L'autocritique honore l'écrivain. L'autocritique déshonore le critique."10 Such is a technique employed by Ionesco throughout L'Impromptu de l'Alma: he causes the characters representing critics to make telling statements about themselves, the resulting

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8Ionesco, Théâtre II, p. 13.
9Ibid., p. 15.
10Ibid.
irony being one of the highlights of the play.

Ionesco begins to read his unfinished manuscript; what he reads is exactly what has happened up to that point in *L'Impromptu de l'Alma*. When in his reading he arrives at the point where Bartholoméus I made his entrance, there is another knock at the door, and Bartholoméus II enters. The play begins again, the second Bartholoméus speaking the same lines spoken earlier by the first Bartholoméus. Then Bartholoméus III arrives and it seems that the play has entered into an endless hall of mirrors, for there is yet another knock at the door. The three learned doctors refuse to allow Ionesco to answer the door because they fear that if he does so, the play will never get beyond the opening scene. The three sage critics then become engaged in a discussion of such "depth" as to stultify Ionesco almost completely. He cannot understand, for example, their initial statement that opposites are identical, nor could he or anyone else appire to an understanding of the doctoral explanation of that statement given by Bartholoméus I:

> Vous ne savez donc pas que les contraires sont identiques? Un exemple. Lorsque je dis: une chose est vraiment vraie, cela veut dire qu'elle est faussement fausse...Mais, par contre, on peut dire que plus une chose est vraiment fausse, moins elle est faussement vraie. Pour résumer: le faux vrai, c'est le vrai faux, ou le vrai vrai, c'est le faux faux. Ainsi, les contraires se rejoignent, quod erat demonstrandum.\(^\text{11}\)

Ionesco is termed insolent because he questions this line of reasoning, and the three critics continue their discussion, during the course of which they agree that it is the critic's mission to find fault with everything. Bartholoméus II says to his colleagues who subsequently pick up the phrase and virtually chant it to one another, "C'est votre droit, mon cher maître Bartholoméus, de reprocher, car vous êtes critique...Vous devez tout reprocher,

\(^{11}\text{Ibid.}, p. 20.\)
Ionesco is questioned about his intellectual formation; among the authors that he says he has read is Molière. The three Bartholoméuses are appalled, for Molière is an inexcusably bad writer, a reactionary, a dangerous type who had the nerve to take inspiration from outsiders — the Italians! Timidly, and in an effort to defend himself and Molière, Ionesco says, "Je croyais que Molière était universellement, éternellement valable, puisqu'il plait encore." His three visitors then accuse him of blasphemy, but when they learn that he has also read and enjoyed Shakespeare — a dangerous foreigner thought to be Russian or Polish until a quick look into the Petit Larousse confirms that he is instead "poétique" — it is decided that Ionesco is in dire need of enlightenment.

The following sequence of the play is devoted to Ionesco's education. Before beginning a formal course of instruction, it is decided that he must first be tested in order to determine the areas in which he will require the most intensive tutelage. To the first question, "D'abord, savez-vous ce que c'est que le théâtre?" Ionesco answers, "Euh, c'est du théâtre." The answer is clearly not satisfactory to the examining committee; theatre, they insist, is the manifestation of theatricality. A second question is then posed to determine if Ionesco understands the nature of theatricality; theatricality, he maintains, is that which is theatrical. Once again he has failed to give a correct answer, for Bartholoméus I chides him thus, "Insensé, la théâtralité c'est ce qui est antithéâtral." Ionesco asks for an example that might clarify such a statement; his learned friends are not able to comply

12 Ibid., p. 22.
13 Ibid., p. 23.
with this request. Bartholoméus III simply says, "Je n'ai pas d'exemple à portée de la main, mais j'ai raison...C'est ce qui compte, j'ai toujours raison." The three savants then become engaged in a quarrel as to the exact nature of anti-theatrical theatricality, a quarrel which is terminated by Bartholoméus II's warning to his fellows that it is unwise to argue in the presence of a mere playwright, for to do so jeopardizes their doctoral authority. Ionesco tries to clarify the issue by suggesting that the theatre is simply the representation of an action in a given time and place. The doctors will not hear of it -- such an Aristotelian concept is not only inapplicable, it was not even an original idea with Aristotle, that Levantine who filched the concept from Adamov! And, of course, even Adamov had long since admitted his error in the first place. Ionesco is given the only "valid" definition of the theatre:

Bartholoméus I: Le théâtre, Monsieur, est une leçon sur un évènement instructif, un évènement plein d'enseignement...Il faut élever le niveau du public...

Bartholoméus III: Il faut le baisser.

Bartholoméus I: Non, le maintenir!

Bartholoméus II: On doit venir au théâtre pour apprendre!

Bartholoméus I: Non pas pour rire!

(...)

Bartholoméus III: Un auteur doit être instituteur...

Bartholoméus II: Nous, critiques et docteurs, nous formons les instituteurs.16

14 Ibid., pp. 25-26. This delightful double talk is best explained as Ionesco's reply to critics who accuse him of not using the stage primarily as a vehicle for the propagation of ideologies. In 1958 he wrote in a journalistic debate with the British critic, Kenneth Tynan, that he felt the theatre was something else before it was a pulpit, and that an ideological play was necessarily inferior to the ideology it might try to vulgarize.


16 Ibid., p. 28.
It is concluded that theatre should be a night school with compulsory attendance, the mission of which would be exclusively didactic.

Ionesco is forced to confess that he has sinned against the theatre by neglecting to be a formal didactician; sardonically striking his breast, he cries out, "Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!" The doctors continue to proffer their learned observations (all of which are mutually contradictory) while Ionesco tries unsuccessfully to sneak out of the room. Caught in the act, he is prevailed upon to justify such an inexcusable act; he acquits himself by employing double talk not unlike that of the three Bartholoméuses:

Je ne m'en allais que pour mieux rester, je m'en fuyais, justement, c'est à dire injustement, je m'enfuyais pour ne pas partir... Oui, je m'en allais pour rester...

Ionesco's education is to be resumed; intermittently his maid, Marie, is heard knocking at the door, asking to be let in to clean the room, but the doctors refuse to allow Ionesco to interrupt the lesson. His major fault as a dramatist, as they see it, is that he has hitherto written plays without concern for the essence of theatre: costumology, theatrology, spectato-psychology, spectatatology, decorology, and a host of other "exact sciences," a thorough knowledge of which is indispensable to the creative artist. Before the lesson can actually recommence, the doctors again begin to quarrel among themselves about which of these sciences should inaugurate Ionesco's course of study. Soon the three visitors are virtually bombarding Ionesco with learned observations, none of which seem to make any sense. Ionesco becomes so overwhelmed that he begins to sob; the doctors have hung two sign cards around his neck, one bearing the word, "Poète," the other, "Savant." They

17Ibid., p. 32.
18Ibid., p. 35.
place a dunce cap on his head, and they themselves don similar headpieces; then, all four of the characters on stage begin braying like asses. Suddenly, Marie, the maid, breaks the door down and rushes into the room armed with a broom. Bartholoméus I cries out to his colleagues and to Ionesco, "Arrêtez... c'est le public!" Marie is outraged; her friend Ionesco has allowed himself to be brain washed by a group of braying asses. She scolds her friend:

On s’est payé votre tête! Et vous vous êtes laissé faire... (Marie va vers Ionesco, le retourne en tous sens.) Un bonnet d’âne!... Poète... Savant... Vous trouvez que c’est intelligent? On se moque de vous!  

She slaps Ionesco’s face twice to bring him back to his senses, then chases the three doctor-critics out of the room beating them with her broom.

The play Ionesco has written ends at this point; he calls back the actors who were playing the roles of the maid and the three doctors, instructs them to be seated, and then addresses the audience as did Molière at the end of L’Impromptu de Versailles. He informs us that the play he has just written is not an original artistic creation, that the dialogue has been in large part copied from criticism written about his theatre. He admonishes critics for trying to tyrannize the creative artist and expresses his views on the roles of the critic as well as on the nature of criticism:

La critique doit être descriptive, non pas normative. Les docteurs, comme Marie vient de vous le dire, ont tout à apprendre, rien à enseigner, car le créateur est lui-même le seul témoin valable de son temps, il le découvre en lui-même, c’est lui seul qui, mystérieusement, librement, l’exprime. (...) Si le critique a tout de même bien le droit de juger, il ne doit juger que selon les lois mêmes de l’expression artistique, selon la propre mythologie de l’œuvre, en pénétrant dans son univers...

He then explains that the theatre is for him a source of expression, that

19 Ibid., p. 51.
20 Ibid., p. 52.
his plays are merely an artistic representation of his reactions to and per­
ceptions of the world in which he lives.

Ionesco, however, begins to take himself too seriously, and his address
to the audience becomes progressively more dogmatic and pedantic. The actress
who assumed the role of the maid takes a robe worn by one of the three Bartholoméuses and places it on Ionesco's shoulders; this is her way of saying
that Ionesco has begun to do exactly what he would not permit his critics to
do. The play ends, this time once and for all, as Ionesco says apologeti­
cally, "Excusez-moi, je ne le ferai plus, car ceci est l'exception..." to
which the actress adds, "Et non pas la règle!"

The ideas expressed by Molière in La Critique de l'école des femmes and
L'Impromptu de Versailles like those expressed by Ionesco in L'Impromptu de
l'Alma may be readily grouped into two categories, namely, considerations of:
1) criticism and the role of the critic, and 2) the nature of theatre and
the rules governing the composition of plays. In order to facilitate the fol­
lowing discussion, the goal of which is to demonstrate the analogous views of
Molière and Ionesco, we shall treat their ideas collectively as they relate
to the above named categories.
1. Criticism and the Role of the Critic:

The three plays under consideration, by dint of their decidedly polemic
nature fall more within the realm of dialectic than that of pure theatre.
That is, in each instance the playwright's primary concern is not with esthetic
creation, but rather with the refutation of criticism which he deems both un­
just and invalid. Molière, speaking in the first person, states in the

\[^{21}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 57.\]
\[^{22}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 58.\]
fifth scene of L'Impromptu de Versailles that he cares to make no further contributions to the guerre comique, for to continue to participate in that "sotte guerre" would be to waste time that he might better devote to purely artistic creation. Ionesco also takes a dim view of the esthetic value of his "impromptu" piece, the closing lines of which state that it is an exception and not the rule that he should write such a play. Consequently, these plays in themselves are not as pleasing artistically as many of the other pieces in each author's repertory, yet they afford a wealth of insight into their creators' esthetic sense. Both Molière and Ionesco do more than merely counter-attack critics in these polemic plays: they give a lesson in the art of appreciation of the theatre, addressing their remarks to the theatre-goer and the professional critic alike. The lesson they give is at once elemental in its directness and profound in its implications.

In order to judge a play one must enter into the magic of the theatrical mood it creates, and react with honesty and immediacy. Molière is most explicit on this issue: "Laissons-nous aller de bonne foi aux choses qui nous prennent par les entrailles." (La Critique de l'école des femmes, Scene 6) This statement is perhaps not as sophisticated as Ionesco's request that his critics strive to enter into "la propre mythologie de l'oeuvre," but it implies the same thing; good theatre seeks to evoke reaction, and criticism should grow out of that reaction, neither precede it nor preclude it. More simply stated, both playwrights are primarily concerned with the entertainment value of the plays that they write and are indignant with critics who bypass that factor in order to proceed directly to considerations of a secondary nature, such as style, compliance with preconceived academic rules which may

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23 Ibid., p. 57.
on occasion inhibit artistic creativity, or overconcern with notions of morality and ideology.

Molière in ridiculing the inanity of the criticisms proffered by rival authors, prudes, fops, and précieux simply demonstrates that those criticisms are beside the point, or misdirected, and consequently of no import. Ionesco in mocking the academic double talk manifested in some modern scholarly criticism does likewise. It would seem that both playwrights maintain an essentially similar stand on the subject of dramatic criticism; they feel that it should be first concerned with the enjoyment afforded by any given play, and only secondarily interested in matters of style, form, and rational appeal. Such a viewpoint does not cry out for artistic anarchy, express disregard for established theatre traditions, nor deprive the critic of his prerogatives. Rather, it must be viewed as the artist's explanation of the essence of his art to the critic, whose task, he feels, is to create appreciation for that art. Ionesco writes in L'Impromptu de l'Alma that criticism should be descriptive, not normative, that the critic should judge a play not according to preconceived notions (what Molière referred to as "prévention aveugle" in La Critique de l'École des femmes) but by "pénétrant dans son univers." Molière with great wisdom and simplicity had this to say to his critics on the art of evaluating a play: "...la bonne façon d'en juger...est de se laisser prendre aux choses..." (La Critique de l'École des femmes, Scene 6) All other concerns of the critic are relegated to a position of negligible import and are ridiculed by the playwrights. Molière's Dorante reprimands Lysidias' pedantic penchant for terms such as "protase, l'épitase, peripétie" and Ionesco goes so far as to place dunce caps on the heads of

Ibid.
the three doctors who advocate the study of "costumologie, théâtrologie, spectato-psychologie, spectatologie," et caetera, ad absurdum.

2. The Nature of Theatre and the Rules Governing the Composition of Plays:

With characteristic insight and humour Ionesco, in explaining to Bartholoméus I the symbolism of the title Le Caméléon du berger (the play he is writing in L'Impromptu de l'Alma), gives the following definition of the theatre:

Si vous voulez, je suis... le berger, le théâtre étant le caméléon, puisque j'ai embrassé la carrière théâtrale, et le théâtre change, bien sûr (as does the chameleon), car le théâtre c'est la vie. Il est changeant comme la vie...

And later in the play he states more simply that theatre is merely the representation of an action which takes place in a given time and place, implying that his theatre, despite appellations such as "absurd" and "vanguard" given it by contemporary critics, is not any different from the theatre advocated by Aristotle. Molière, too, expresses a similar concept of the nature of the theatre in La Critique de l'école des femmes when in the sixth scene he has Dorante state that the comedian's task is "peindre d'après nature."

For both of these playwrights then, theatre is essentially representational. A question might arise in the reader's mind as to why the theatre of a Molière and an Ionesco would assume such apparently different form, the former writing a large number of plays which are quite consciously concerned

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25Ibid., p. 15.

26In response to questions posed by the editors of Bref soon after the first production of L'Impromptu de l'Alma Ionesco wrote a number of answers collectively entitled "Finalement, je suis pour le classicisme" (issue of February, 1956) in which he expresses the view that his theatre, like that of Shakespeare, Molière, Racine, and others is in the classical tradition of giving artistic expression to universal themes. The article is difficult to
with the classical unities, the latter writing plays which often appear to have no concern whatever with such unities. Such a question is best answered by saying that the apparent form of a play is largely an external aspect of dramatic style, and that externally, all truly original art— even within a given school—varies significantly. When, however, one carefully analyzes the theatre of Molière and of Ionesco, it becomes apparent that these two men are essentially representational dramatists who give artistic expression to what they witness or perceive or imagine, and that fundamentally, their theatre is quite similar. For, if Molière paints according to nature and Ionesco likewise seeks to represent life, they both view the world with comic vision. It is their comic vision, their ability to perceive the ridiculous in all its multiplicity that causes one to sense a fundamental or essential similarity in their plays.

When we proceed from the theory of theatre expressed by these authors in the three polemic plays under consideration—plays which are clearly not considered by the playwrights as disinterested art—to the actual practice of theatre as an art form by Molière and by Ionesco, we are immediately struck by the variety and intensity of comic effects almost everywhere present. It becomes clear to us why two dramatic artists so concerned with representing life insist, as it was earlier demonstrated, upon entertainment as a prime consideration in theatre. Their concern with entertainment is quite compatible with their intense comic perception of the world they seek to represent on the stage; the often quoted line of Molière, "La grande règle de toutes les règles est de plaire" takes on a wealth of new connotations for us. The notions of entertainment, representational drama, and

obtain since Bref has now ceased publication. However, the manuscript from which the Bref article was adapted has been published in Notes et contre-notes (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 107-112.
comic vision are all inextricably entwined in the theatre of Molière and of Ionesco, yet these notions viewed collectively help to give us insight into why Molière and Ionesco vary the tone of their plays from the slapstick to the most sublime irony, how they can cause us to recognize certain aspects of our personality in the most outrageous of fools, and why quite frequently they cause us to sit back and simply laugh.

It should not be inferred from the present discussion that Molière and Ionesco are so determined to give artistic expression to their observations of life and to entertain their audiences in so doing that they ignore the generally accepted rules governing the composition of plays, for such is not the case. Both Molière and Ionesco express their faith in such rules and agree upon their validity. However, it may be inferred from statements made in the three polemic plays that these playwrights feel that rules do not precede dramatic art, but spring from it. Molière’s Dorante in La Critique de l’école des femmes explains that there is nothing mysterious about the rules, which are merely "quelques observations aisées, que le bon sens a faites..." (Scene 6) Likewise, Ionesco states in his public address at the end of L’Impromptu de l’Alma that he reproaches modern critics not for having arrived at primordial truths (the rules) concerning the theatre, but for having abused those truths by cloaking them with an excess of pedantic verbiage. He says furthermore:

Elles (the basic truths which have come to be regarded as rules) deviennent dangereuses lorsqu’elles prennent l’allure de dogmes infaillibles et lorsque, en leur nom, les docteurs et critiques prétendent exclure d’autres vérités et diriger, voire tyranniser, la création artistique.27

Molière expresses a similar reservation to the dubious practice of slavishly

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27Ionesco, Théâtre II, pp. 56-57.
following rules:

Car enfin, si les pièces qui sont selon les règles ne plaisent pas et que celles qui plaisent ne soient selon les règles, il faudrait de nécessité que les règles eussent été mal faites. (La Critique de l'école des femmes, Scene 6)

It may therefore be concluded that Molière and Ionesco acknowledge the validity of basic rules governing the composition of plays, but that they as gifted artists and sensible men reserve the right to remain flexible in their use or possible willful oversight of such rules, as the occasion demands.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The concluding remarks of this study purport to be something more than merely a restatement of conclusions arrived at in earlier chapters. The nature of our subject is such as to warrant a consideration of the implications of the conclusions made, for those implications are at once more interesting and farther reaching than the conclusions from which they spring. A survey of selected theories of laughter and the comic disclosed that neither laughter nor the comic has as yet been definitively analyzed. Noted in the many theories considered ranging from that of Plato to those of twentieth-century philosophers and social scientists were certain frequently appearing notions such as contrast, surprise, and utility, laughter being viewed as a mild social purgative. Of all the theories reviewed, only one incorporated the all too fallacious notion that it was a panacea to the problem of the unsolved riddle of the comic. That theory expounded by Schopenhauer did not satisfy subsequent theorists as much as it did its creator, for many a new theory has since been proffered. It is our opinion that Bergson's appreciation of the comic, both widely accepted and attacked, is one of the most useful to the student of dramatic comedy. It is for this reason that his fundamental notion that the mechanical encrusted upon the living constitutes the comic was applied with great care in our study of
the dramatic structure of Molière's *Les Précieuses ridicules* and Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*. However, it would be risky to suppose that Bergson's notion of the comic is what Schopenhauer would have desired his own theory to be: conclusive. There is simply no all-inclusive definition or explanation of the comic. This implies not so much that the comic is impossible to define -- it would be illogical to assume that the most average mentality can appreciate humour when a mind of genius cannot define it -- but rather that the term "the comic" is misleading by dint of being uncompromisingly generic. For it is our opinion, an opinion that finds ready support in the various plays discussed in the present study, that the comic is not a unity, but rather a multiplicity. Therefore, all attempts to define the comic as a specific, limited phenomenon need necessarily fall short of being comprehensive, for whatever else the comic may be said to be, it is certainly multifarious in its manifestations.

Let us consider the quality or mood of the comic in *Les Précieuses ridicules* of Molière and *La Cantatrice chauve* of Ionesco. It will be remembered that a detailed structural analysis of these two one-act prose plays was made which disclosed that their authors employed similar techniques of dramatic structure, manipulation of language, and highly generalized character presentation to effect what we called a totality of comic tension. These plays are funny in every respect. Now "funny" is a key word to an understanding of the quality of the comic manifested in these plays, for in each one the majority of the laughter evoked is the product of broad, farcical stage effects. There is a marked gaiety of mood about each of them which so skillfully presents a gallery of harmless, inoffensive characters who react and interact with undeniable ludicrousness. The effects are exaggerated for the most part, and the audience is more likely to guffaw than to
snicker at a performance of these plays. Les Précieuses ridicules and La Cantatrice chauve are representative of a quality of the comic that is often encountered in the theatre of Molière and of Ionesco. To cite some other examples of such comedy of gaiety, Molière's last play, and in our opinion, his comic masterpiece, Le Malade imaginaire, is crowded from start to finish with the most delightful comic effects. Argan, a hypochondriac whose strong physical constitution alone saves him from extinction by the too frequent administration of enemas and imbibition of harsh purgatives, is a comic character in a comic play par excellence. His fights with his maid servant, his gullible faith in the most obviously incompetent medical men, his distress when his younger daughter plays dead to escape a thrashing, his ultimate acceptance into the medical profession in one of the zaniest scenes of Molière's repertory -- to mention only a few highlights of this comédie-ballet -- are of a sublimely funny nature. Then, too, the numerous boors in a divertissement entitled Les Facheux who importune Eraste, a young man anxious to visit his beloved, provide a rich source of light-hearted comedy. Suffice it to say here that many of Molière's plays, especially his farces and comédies-ballet are predominantly in a gay, effervescent mood, and many of his plays in a less farcical mood (Le Tartuffe, Le Misanthrope) are comedies which are "farcies" with light effects. Ionesco, too, has written some plays other than La Cantatrice chauve which are predominantly gay in tone, such as, for example, Jacques ou La Soumission. Written immediately following La Cantatrice chauve, Ionesco subtitled this delightful piece a Comédie naturaliste and described it as a burlesque.¹ In it, Jacques, a non-conformist, is lovingly persecuted by the members of his family, Jacques, père; Jacques, mère; Jacques, grand-père; Jacques, grand'mère; and Jacqueline, his

¹Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 172.
sister, who all feel that he must be made to admit that he likes hash-browned potatoes. Furthermore, the Jacques family would have its son and brother wed an ordinary two-nosed bride, Roberte I, but Jacques prefers three-nosed beauties. Whereas Jacques is cajoled into admitting that he likes the potatoes -- a lie, according to lines spoken by him later in the play -- he categorically refuses to marry a two-nosed maiden and holds his ground until Roberte II, a lass who meets with his nasal preferences, is brought onstage. The two young lovers fall into an animal-like embrace as this burlesque comedy comes to a close. Much in the same light vein is L'Avenir est dans les œufs, written three years later as "une sorte de suite à Jacques ou La Soumission," a play which opens on M. and Mme Jacques, who for three years have not broken the amorous pose assumed at the end of the previous play. Both families of the young couple are appalled at such behaviour, for love is merely a point of departure, whereas reproduction is the thing. Mme Jacques, née Roberte II, is pushed off stage where she is ordered to produce her share of the world's eggs, and both families dance and cheer, "Vive la production! ... Vive la race blanche!" The above cited examples of the theatre of Molière and Ionesco constitute what we call comedy in its most elemental form, the comic of gaiety.

However, both playwrights are able to go beyond this mood or quality of the comic to another of its many possible forms in plays like Le Bourgeois gentilhomme and Les Chaises. For here, if we limit our statements to apply only to the central characters of each play, M. Jourdain and Le Vieux, the comedy runs a little deeper than surface gaiety. It will be remembered that it was demonstrated that these characters are comic rather than pathetic

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Ionesco, Théâtre II, p. 206.
because they are spared the inconvenience of complete self-awareness.
That is, these characters are deluded about their ability to rise above
their social condition: both are unhappy with themselves but are confident
that they can rise above their actual position. However, both are frustra-
ted in their attempt to achieve that end, significantly, without being aware
of their ultimate failure. As it was demonstrated, M. Jourdain and Le Vieux
are comic characters because Molière and Ionesco have taken great care to
spare them the realization of their unsuccessful attempt to be something
better. However, the comic quality of these characters is tinged by the
possibility -- for it remains a possibility and not a presence -- of pathos.
There is, upon reflection, a chance that we as spectators who laughed during
a performance will feel a fleeting moment of guilt for our laughter, in much
the same way that we would be apt to feel remorse for spontaneous
laughter occasioned by the sight of a radiant bride falling face first into
her wedding cake. Such a comic mood growing out of a potentially pathetic
subject can be seen also in Ionesco's Le Nouveau locataire in which the new
tenant is literally buried alive in his material possessions, as well as in
Molière's Le Misanthrope in which we laugh at a man whose fault is that he
is an idealist. Upon analysis such plays may be felt to be clearly not
funny, but it is well to remember that comic theatre is more concerned with
primary, spontaneous reaction (a point of view expressed by Molière and
Ionesco in their polemic plays) than with subsequent reaction and interpre-
tation. That we laugh at characters such as M. Jourdain, Le Vieux, the new
tenant, and Alceste is a tribute to the comic technique and insight of Mo-
lière and of Ionesco, playwrights who are able to cause us to see the humour
inherent in things pathetic.

Another mood or quality of the comic to be found in the theatre of
Molière and of Ionesco is witnessed in plays such as *Le Tartuffe* and *La Leçon*. Again confining our remarks to the central characters of these plays, we are in the presence of a comic mood that is clearly not gay, and somewhat darker even than the comic growing out of pathos, for we are in the presence of the sinister. Tartuffe and the Professor were earlier shown to be comic characters, rather than odious or oppressive ones because of their inability to sustain disguises assumed with evil intent. Molière and Ionesco have rendered these characters comic instead of sinister or monstrous by causing us to see their human weaknesses; both Tartuffe and the Professor fall prey to the most basic of human impulses, the sex drive. Tartuffe and the Professor aim for complete control of others, but comically lack self-control. Certainly we laugh at these men, but we sense the impending danger of their power over others. In *Le Rhinocéros*, a play in which Ionesco with frightening intensity portrays characters who allow themselves to be indoctrinated by a sinister ideology, we are in the presence of a comedy of terror. The play is comic, but its humour is indeed dark. Consider the plight of Molière's Harpagon, a man who has allowed himself to become completely overpowered by avarice to the detriment of his entire family. Such a play as *L'Avare* is comic, but the comedy is likewise somewhat sinister.

We have stated our belief that the comic has many possible moods. It may also be considered as an all-pervasive point of view or manner of perception of the human condition when we stop to consider that dramatists such as Molière and Ionesco are able to turn virtually anything -- be it gay, pathetic, sinister -- to the purposes of comedy. In a discussion of the analogous views of these playwrights as expressed in *La Critique de l'École des femmes*, *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, and *L'Impromptu de l'Alma*, it was demonstrated that both Molière and Ionesco view the drama as a representa-
tional art and insist on the entertainment value or audience reaction as a prime criterion in the critical appraisal of their art. Both playwrights seek to represent on the stage what they see or sense or imagine in their environment, and it is evidenced by the abundance of comic effects seen almost everywhere in their theatre that these men view their environment with comic vision. They are able to see comic essence in instances where a less gifted eye might perceive nothing more than grim reality. Molière and Ionesco, it would appear, often see the world in the same light, and their comedies -- their sublimely comic plays -- are essentially similar.

A final remark is in order. Philosophically and psychologically oriented interpretations of the plays discussed in the body of this work have been purposely avoided. Our primary concern has been to draw analogies of comic style in the two authors treated. That more traditional interpretations have not been pursued does not imply that we are unaware of the rich source of material these plays afford the interpretative critic. It is a tribute to the high level of artistry of Molière and of Ionesco that their work may be approached profitably from greatly varying critical points of view. For in the instance of a piece by Molière as well as in the case of one by Ionesco, we find delight in a play of sensitive showmanship, skillful stagecraft, deep insight, intense comedy. Such theatre is created only by playwrights of great stature.
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PERIODICALS


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Sidney Louis Pellissier was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on September 1, 1938, the third son and fifth child of Edward and Elise Marie Théard Pellissier. He was educated in the public schools of New Orleans, graduating from John McDonogh Senior High School in June, 1956. He matriculated in the College of Arts and Sciences of Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he received the Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Journalism in June, 1960. Entering the Graduate School of the same University in September of 1960, he majored in French literature in the Department of Foreign Languages. Having received the France-Amérique Scholarship for study at the University of Paris for the 1961-62 school year, he received the Diplôme d'études supérieures from the Sorbonne in June, 1962. He re-entered the Graduate School of Louisiana State University and was granted the Lewis Gottlieb Honorary Fellowship in the fall of 1962. A Graduate Teaching Assistant in French in the Department of Foreign Languages, he received the Master of Arts degree in June, 1963, from Louisiana State University where he is presently a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
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