

they have left behind them. Leaving therefore Pocquelin* to the minutiae-seeing mind of the biographer we shall contemplate in Molière the poet, the satirist, the moralist.

Before the advent of Molière the French stage was a mere imitation of contemporary foreign dramatic literature. Spanish and Italian comedies were the constant sources whence Parisian actors drew their plays. These were characterized by quaintness of sentiment, insipidity of wit, and intricacy of plot. Happily for the redemption of the histrionic art, two men endowed with a true conception of the essential qualities of poetry made their appearance in France. They conceived the ideal of the drama and felt that

"A play ought to be a just image of human nature"

These two were Corneille and Molière. The regeneration of the stage was a heavy task. They divided, as it were, the labor between them, Corneille taking human nature in its noble aspect, Molière treating it in its humors, foibles and pleasures. Corneille scrutinized the human heart in all its great emotions; he was the poet of virtue carried to heroism. Magnanimity, patriotism, unflinching obedience, martyrdom for the faith, were the noble themes of his poetic efforts. Molière, on the contrary, devoted the vast powers of his intellect to presenting the other side. Yet while dealing with a subject in which there was danger of moral degeneration he never, even to ridicule it, paused in the slime, nor presented a scene which, in the words of Blair, could "offend a modest ear or throw contempt on sobriety and virtue."

Molière began his career by complying with the spirit of the times, and imitating what later on he was to reform. His first plays written while wandering through the country towns of France with a company of actors, are of little or no merit. But at last the sun of his genius, approaching its meridian, dispelled the clouds that obscured its rising and shone forth in the full splendor of its glory. *Les Précieuses Ridicules* opens that long series of masterpieces which identify French comedy with the name of Molière. *Le Misanthrope*, *Le Tartuffe*, *L'Avare*, are so

* Jean Pocquelin adopted the name Molière to please his father who did not wish his son to disgrace the family by becoming an actor on the comic stage.