

"Ballet en comédie" or "comédie en ballet"?
La Princesse d'Elide and Les Amants magnifiques

by
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In his article on "Ballet: A Neglected Key to Molière's Theatre," (*Dance Research*, Vol. II, Spring, 1984), Robert McBride states that the "subject of ballet in Molière's theatre has been accorded much less prominent treatment in comparison with other aspects of the plays," and that "comedies involving ballet may appear at first sight to be distinctly flimsy and unimportant in dramaturgical terms" by comparison with the "great and enigmatic character-comedies such as *Le Tartuffe*, *Don Juan*, and *Le Misanthrope*". But "such a view," McBride maintains "owes more to critical tradition than to primary evidence".

There is a consensus among the critics that Molière took the different currents and traditions of comedy existing in his time and gave the genre a new direction, but what seems to have been neglected--and what McBride also fails to stress--is the fact that Molière also brought together different types of ballet, in what is a new way. Molière is sometimes less successful in his innovations with ballet than he is with comedy, none the less his concepts will later be taken up by others, leading eventually to Jean Georges Noverre, to result in the *ballet d'action* more or less as we know it today.

In Molière's time, there were two main types of ballet, the Italian and the French. Italian ballet emphasized the décor, which was imposing, fabulous, grandiose, just like that of opera. In French ballet, however, the choreographer played a more important role, and greater emphasis was placed on the characters, who were slightly more individualized, and on the costumes. The *ballet de cour*, a specifically French phenomenon, brought various elements together with the most tenuous of links. French ballet often presented "grotesque" or "exotic" characters, such as Moors, Eunuchs, Egyptians, or even cats, monkeys, roosters, and so on. There was no sharp dichotomy between the French and the Italian ballet traditions, or perhaps, more precisely, no "querelle" between them, as was the case between comedy, music and ballet, or

between French and Italian opera a century later, and choreographers newly-arrived from Italy worked more or less harmoniously in the French setting. However, it is clear that Molière works for preference with the elements of the French ballet tradition, not Italian. For example, it is by exploiting the element of the exotic and the grotesque that Molière creates the finales to his greatest *comédies-ballets*. The classic comic dilemma of how to defeat the character who is the "obstacle" to the young lovers' happiness but who is also, often, the main focus of interest in the comedy, finds in Molière a new solution: the characters become transposed into a different world, that of fantasy and dance and carnival. Thus, dance becomes an essential part of the comedy, insofar as it is the means to resolve the plot. Ballet and comedy become integrated at the most basic level.

In his role in the development of ballet, it is especially interesting to see his use of Pantomime. This was an evolving genre, originating in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, but rapidly Frenchifying itself, and in Molière we see it growing in sophistication, pointing directly ahead to Noverre's use of it in his ballets.

Even among what we now categorize as Molière's *comédies-ballets*, some are considered better than others, and those which belong to the tradition of the *ballet de cour* are not normally ranked very high. *Les Amants magnifiques*, of 1670, which, in chronological sequence, falls between *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* and *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, has been seen as a step backward for Molière to a more hybrid, possibly less sophisticated genre, such as he had produced in *La Princesse d'Elide*, which occupies the second day of *Les Plaisirs de l'île enchantée*, in 1664. Both *Les Amants magnifiques* and *La Princesse d'Elide* are "divertissements," or "ballets de cour," in which various genres are brought together, juxtaposed or alternated, the controversial point here being to what extent these genres,--and more specifically ballet, music, and comedy--are fused together into a coherent whole. Against the view that here Molière's comic genius is "thwarted in his wish to provide comic masterpieces" by the specific demands of his royal patron (p. 3), McBride argues a successful, perfect integration of ballet and action. I would like to argue that the truth lies half-way between the two extremes--rather than integrating the genres, *La Princesse d'Elide* and *Les*

Amants magnifiques seem to balance the diverse genres against each other, so that they complement each other, without becoming totally amalgamated in the same way as comedy, ballet and music become fused into one perfect whole in *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* or in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. Both those former works are described as a "comédie ... mêlée de musique et d'entrées de Ballet," thus indicating an admixture rather than a fusion: they are presented as a play, in five acts, with spoken dialogue, the "comédie," interspersed with musical (ballet or singing) "intermèdes," which complement the play, or retell the story or emphasize a mood.

On the first day of the Royal 'Divertissement' *Les Plaisirs de l'île enchantée*, in a totally traditional *ballet de cour*, the King and other nobles file past as heroic cavaliers, speak, or sing verses. The machinery which by tradition plays an important role in such spectacles, offers to the awed spectators an enormous gilded chariot with Apollo and his suite at the beginning, and at the end "une petite montagne ou roche ombragée de plusieurs arbres," with Pan and Diana. This ballet, then, was not dramatic in the common modern sense of this term, and had little relevance to the 'plot'. The second day was taken up by *La Princesse d'Elide*. The *argument* of this second *fête* was that the knights were giving a divertissement to the queen. The third day related by a series of ballets the efforts of the knights to break Alcina's enchantment, and their success. Thus we might argue that we have here an attempt to use ballet to tell a story: a dramatic ballet, although as such somewhat primitive. It is still above all a series of individual dances, more or less linked to the main 'plot'--we have Giants and Dwarves, Moors, Demons, and so on.

The subject of *La Princesse d'Elide* is very simple, and is clearly announced in the First Interlude, in the *Récit de l'Aurore*: there is no virtue in being "cruelle" to a deserving lover, and love should be indulged in and enjoyed while a girl is young and beautiful. The plot of the play traces the change in the Princesse d'Elide: cold and indifferent towards her suitors at the outset, at the end she loves and accepts in marriage one of them, Euryale, prince d'Ithaque. The tone of the text is stylised, formal; these genuinely aristocratic characters behave with elegance and *bienséance*, there are predictable references to mythical

figures: the *Princesse*, for example, is compared to Diana. In this stylized world, one of the characters, Moron, plays the formal role of go-between and confidant, helping the eventual happy resolution of the love affair of the hero and heroine. Moron originally played by Molière himself, however, is also the main character in the *Intermèdes*, where he became the unrequited lover of Philis, a Shepherdess, or milk-maid, in Arcadia. However this is not the stylized, mythical Arcadia, but a comic world in which values are turned topsy-turvy. Moron as a lover is a buffoon, in the style of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, whose actions are moderated by his cowardice--or possibly his commonsense. The dances, which take place in the *intermèdes* are either comic, or simply joyous: they are in the tradition of *entrées*, that is, unrelated dances, but as used by Molière, they express the mood or atmosphere on which the previous act of the play ends.

In the play there is a recurring *leitmotif* of les "courses," the contests in which the rival princes, and especially the hero, Euryale, can display their prowess, as well as of "la chasse" which it is stressed, the Princess loves. In the *Premier Intermède* the hunt theme is taken up by "six valets de chiens" who dance "avec beaucoup de justesse et disposition"; obviously, then, it was a question of professional dancers, going through their paces and exhibiting their physical skill, not of mime or establishing character. The hunt theme is then repeated in the *Deuxième Intermède*, where Moron, with great panache and many comic antics, displays his lack of heroism: pursued by a bear, he is rescued by some hunters who kill the animal, whereupon, Moron, "devenu brave par l'éloignement du péril, voulut aller donner mille coups à la bête qui n'était plus en état de se défendre, et fit tout ce qu'un fanfaron, qui n'aurait pas été trop hardi, eût pu faire en cette occasion; et les chasseurs, pour témoigner leur joie, dansèrent une fort belle entrée". This is a lengthy stage direction, indicating a part of the action which the playwright obviously wanted to convey precisely, but without words. Moron also fails to distinguish himself in the *Troisième Intermède*, when, hoping to please Philis, he takes a singing lesson from a Satyr. Here again we find some very precise, very complicated stage directions: "Moron ne fut pas satisfait de cette chanson, quoiqu'il la trouvât jolie, il en demanda

une plus passionnée, et priant le Satyre de lui dire celle qu'il lui avait ouï chanter quelque jours auparavant" ... We know that Molière was a great comic actor, but stage directions such as these betray a highly sophisticated use of mime to develop character, above all to express abstractions, and they are usually connected to the musical interludes rather than to the play, where presumably the words are considered sufficient to convey both abstractions and character. Here we find mime used not merely in the traditional way which has become associated with classical ballet, but in a more personal and more complex way similar to that developed by great practitioners such as Robert Helpmann at the beginning of his career. The third *Intermède*, like the others, ends with a dance--Moron and the Satyr quarrel, but "les violons reprirent un air sur lequel ils dansèrent une plaisante Entrée".

While the play offers stylisation of tone and manners, in the *Intermèdes* there is stylisation of movement, through ballet, superimposing order in a comic world where values have gone haywire, where lovers refuse to die for their cruel mistress, or where surviving is more important than appearing heroic. Moron is the character who links the two worlds: albeit comic, he fits into the general order in the one, but then shifts role and turns it upside down in the other. He is the central element which links the play and the *Intermèdes* so that they are more than just simply two different genres set side by side. Both play and music share this character who represents the comic element. In the world of the Prince and Princesse this comic element is limited and controlled, but it explodes in the *Intermèdes*, with the shepherds and shepherdesses and hunters, only to be brought back under control by music, as with Moron and the Satyr in the third *Intermède*. If it is in the musical Arcadia that the comic element temporarily breaks out of its bounds, however, this musical Arcadia is only a representation, an echo of the formal world of the Prince and Princesse. Basically, these Arcadian shepherds and shepherdesses are not much less stylized than the nobility. The comic element of Moron is an intrusion into each of those worlds. He belongs as little to one as to the other, unlike Monsieur Jourdain, who, six years after the *Princesse d'Elide*, will belong both to the formal world and to the comic one, joining all the elements together into a perfect fusion. Moron brings the different elements

together, links them and balances them against each other. Ballet serves to recall the chaos of buffoonery to order, announcing the cosmic order which will prevail at the end. As Philis announces at the end of the play, the dances bear witness to "l'allégresse publique" and include "quatre bergers et deux bergères héroïques," and fauns in this "fête si complète" which closes the day's "divertissements". The inherent tensions between the order of ballet and the disorder of farce, between the stylised world of princes, kings and gods and the commonplaceness of "valets de chiens" and buffoons, is not totally resolved in *La Princesse d'Elide* but is reduced to a harmonious coexistence between the different elements.

Six years later, in 1670, *Les Amants magnifiques* marks an important point in Molière's career, since for the first time he is assigned control of the ballets as well as of the play. In the history of constant rivalry between Molière and Benserade, this was a great triumph for the playwright. It also marks a revolution in attitude, insofar as the choice implies a new importance accorded to the dramatic piece, as opposed to the old *ballet de cour* where the text counted for so little. Under Molière's control, the ballets appear more carefully chosen and more neatly organized, but the genres are still separated. *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* which precedes it by a few months, and *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* which follows it the same year, both fuse in a highly successful and sophisticated way all the different genres, unifying them into a central character who functions equally at the various levels of the play. In this context, *Les Amants magnifiques* seems almost like a deliberate exercise in deconstruction. Ballet, grand spectacle, musical Arcadia, aesthetic patterns, and pantomime, all work together, yet remain independent in the six *Intermèdes* which complement the five acts of the play.

Both integrated into the action of the play and reflecting it, are the two ballets involving pantomime. In Act I, Scene v, the Princesse Eriphile is broody, melancholy, and wants to be left alone. Her confidante, Cléonice, proposes a divertissement: "Ce sont des personnes qui, par leurs pas, leurs gestes et leurs mouvements, expriment aux yeux toutes choses, et on appelle cela Pantomimes," but the Princesse refuses. Far from trying to persuade her, Cléonice offers to send them

away, until ultimately the *Princesse* has to insist to be allowed to see them. It is an interesting psychological trick, which highlights the character of each of the two women as well as their relationship. We are not told the content of the Mimes' performance, but it is worth noting that all three are male, and that the means which they employ to distract the *Princesse* from her woeful thoughts would seem to be poetic rather than farcical.

At the end of Act IV, Scene 5, Cléonice is again trying to distract the *Princesse*: "Madame, je vous vois l'esprit tout chagrin: vous plaît-il que vos danseurs, qui expriment si bien toutes les passions, vous donnent maintenant quelque épreuve de leur adresse?". This time the Princess agrees, without enthusiasm. "Qu'ils fassent tout ce qu'ils voudront, pourvu qu'ils me laissent à mes pensées". According to the stage directions, in the fifth *Intermède*, "Quatre Pantomimes, pour épreuve de leur adresse, ajustent leurs gestes et leurs pas aux inquiétudes de la jeune Princesse." In the second *Intermède* the stage directions simply indicated that "trois danseurs, sous le nom de Pantomimes [...] expriment par leurs gestes toutes sortes de choses," but here it is clear that it is not a question of clownish antics, but of a serious dance, which is integrated into the play at a deep level inasmuch as it exteriorises, and expresses concretely and visually the thoughts and feelings of the *Princesse*. It is worth observing that here, where the mood is serious, the terms "danseurs" and "pantomimes" are used interchangeably, whereas we noted earlier that in the comic scenes a careful distinction was made between the two. As is clear from the dialogue in Act I, Scene v, the status of the Pantomimes in Molière's time was uncertain, and tended to be associated rather with "mauvais divertissements"; it would appear to be one of Molière's contributions to the genre to have used these Pantomimes in a serious role.

The third *Intermède* is also deeply integrated into the play, on different levels. As part of the *peripeteia*, it comes to interrupt a scene between Eriphile and Sostrate in which the Princess is trying to elicit, without open success, a declaration of love from the latter. Her reaction to the boy who summons her to a divertissement in the woods is an "Hélas?," but she doesn't try to refuse as she did in the second *Intermède*, perhaps because the invitation is in the manner of a royal command from her mother, but also

patly because Eriphile is no longer melancholy since she has strong grounds for suspecting that Sostrate is in love with her; on top of that, he will also be present at this *divertissement*. Once again, a *divertissement* is completely in tune with the heroine's feelings, betraying, this time, her satisfaction and happiness. However, more than that, what gives the third *Intermède* its importance is that, strategically placed at the centre of the play, it resumes the plot in musical terms. We are back again with shepherds and shepherdesses: a "cruel" lady is loved by a shepherd and by two satyrs; at first she rejects all three, but finally she accepts the shepherd, and the satyrs go away. As an interesting effect of "emboîtement," in this musical *Intermède* which reproduces in a stylised and dignified way the story of the play transposed into operatic Arcadia, there appear three "petites Dryades" and three "petits Faunes" who "font paraître, dans l'enfoncement du théâtre, tout ce qui se passe sur le devant". In the Arcadia of *Les Amants magnifiques*, by contrast to that of *La Princesse d'Elide*, the comic element is always totally controlled, at best relegated to a small corner of the stage.

The play and the *intermèdes* are linked together by the fact that the *intermèdes* are amusements offered to Eriphile and to the Princess her mother. Some of the *intermèdes*, we have already argued, have a more profound significance in the work as whole, but the fourth *Intermède* has only the slightest of connections. Aristione, Eriphile's mother, simply announces that she and her daughter will walk in the grotto. In this *intermède* there is neither development of plot nor of characters. The ballet itself has no relevance to the play, since it presents eight statues, each with a torch, "qui font une danse variée de plusieurs belles attitudes où elles demeurent par intervalles". In 1670, Molière reaches the apex of that hybrid genre, the *comédie-ballet*, but here, briefly, he goes back to the purely balletic element, that is to the 'suite de danses' without a story or a theme, and without characterization.

At the beginning and at the end of the work, in the first and sixth *Intermèdes*, we have a *ballet de cour* in its purest form. The roles first of Neptune and then of Apollo were written for the King, who, as things turned out, did not dance them. Both *Intermèdes* are "spectacles" for the nobles of the court at Versailles, justified within

the play as being 'spectacles' given in that mythical Thessalie where live Eriphile and her mother. The spectator is informed at the beginning of Act I that the first *intermède* which he has just seen is a *fête* offered by the prince Iphicrate with "des cadeaux merveilleux de musique et de danse," to celebrate the beauty of the two princesses. At the end of the play, the *Sixième Intermède* presents the celebration of the "jeux pythiens" to bring to a glorious conclusion "par ce pompeux spectacle cette merveilleuse journée," an ambiguous description, referring equally to both the imaginary world within the play, and to the real world of the court at Versailles. The role of Apollo should have been played by the King himself: as so often in the *ballets de cour*, the King was to appear as a symbolically-costumed representation of himself. The series of individual dances repeated the theme of heroic pagan games.

Although the *Intermèdes* and the *peripeteia* of Eriphile's love life are linked together to a greater or lesser extent, one can also see them as alternating. And if one considers the "Divertissement Royal" in its entirety, one can describe *La Princesse d'Elide* itself as an *intermède* within the theme of the *chevaliers* enchanted by Alcina, since it is a "divertissement" she has provided.

The form of the *ballet de cour*, such as we find it in the two works we have been examining, has come a long way from its inception a century earlier, but it has also come to a dead end. The different genres comprising it can be brought together, balanced carefully against each other, or fused successfully, but the tension between them is never totally resolved.

Historically, one of the sources of tension had its root in the very real world, with the furious rivalry for royal patronage between Molière and Lulli, or between Molière and Benserade. In the Prologue to *L'Amour médecin*, "la Comédie, la Musique et le Ballet" appear together, and Comedy begins with an exhortation:

Quittons, quittons notre vaine querelle,
Ne nous disputons pas nos talents tour à tour.

What is interesting here is the implication of the extent of these quarrels between the three genres. Comedy ends:

Unissons-nous tous trois d'une ardeur sans seconde,
 Pour donner du plaisir au plus grand roi du monde.

The *ballet de cour* had always brought together various genres in order to amuse and give pleasure to the King. In Molière's time, each of the genres has reached a point in its development where it is testing out its own boundaries, or perhaps the extent to which it can encroach upon another's territory. What is happening historically in the 1660's in relation to the evolution of the genres is that the *divertissement* no longer calls itself a "ballet" but a "comédie," and even in this *Prologue*, Comedy is assigned the major role. When Molière rejects the description "Comédie mêlée de danse et de musique" in favor of "Comédie-ballet," however, he is allowing ballet once again an importance which it had lost. This newly-defined union was not without its difficulties. Frequently cited is the description of *Les Amants magnifiques* given by Robinet in a verse-letter to Madame, dated 15 February 1670:

Le Divertissement royal
 Dont la cour fait son carnaval,
 Est un ballet en comédie,
 Je ne crains pas qu'on m'en dédie,
 Ou bien comédie en ballet [...]¹

The witticism might indicate either the rivalry still rampant between the genres, or perhaps more simply the uncertainty regarding the definition of the genres themselves. "La musique est accoutumée à ne point faire ce qu'on veut," complains Polichinelle, tormented by the violins, in the first *Intermède* of the *Malade imaginaire*. Tension between the genres frequently manifests itself in tiffs like this; but the contrary can also be true, and there are instances of the genres not only coexisting peacefully but aiding each other. We have already mentioned how, when Moron and the Satyr quarrel, music intervenes, as an independent element, to appease them.

As well as rivalry between the genres, there is a deeper source of tension, basic to each genre. In 1664, three months before *la Princesse d'Elide*, in the *Argument* to the *Mariage forcé*, there is a reference to "ballets, qui sont des comédies muettes," stating that they portray the same subjects: this is the new development, one which precisely we do not find in the *ballet de cour*, but which is the

result of bringing together all those different elements. In 1681, scarcely a generation later, the Jesuit P. Menestrier, writes *Des représentations en musique anciennes et modernes*, followed in 1682 by *Des ballets anciens et modernes*, indicating a clear conception of a new, a "modern" ballet. He states that "Le ballet exprime les mouvements que la peinture et la sculpture ne pourraient exprimer et, par ces mouvements, il va exprimer jusqu'à la nature des choses et les habitudes de l'âme qui ne peuvent tomber sous les sens que par ses mouvements".² Polichinelle, in the first Intermède of the *Malade imaginaire*, complains "Est-ce que c'est la mode de parler en musique?"--a complaint expressed by other characters in other Molière plays. Each genre, then, has inherent within it the qualities of the others. Music can speak, and ballet can express comedy. There is "correspondance" between the genres, and it is this correspondence, explored and developed by Molière and his contemporaries, which will evolve into ballet as we now know it.

"Ballet en comédie or "comédie en ballet"? Robinet could not decide, the balance between them having been so carefully achieved. And it was a question of balance, rather than fusion. With a truly balletic movement we see the genres come close together, interlink, move apart only to move together again. After Molière, the genres will definitely separate and develop independently in different directions.

Les Amants magnifiques marks a turning point, not in the history of comedy but in that of ballet. The King, who was to dance in it, does not, perhaps because he is getting older, or perhaps because he is becoming conscious of a new, more dignified role he can play: and without royal participation, the *ballet de cour* will gradually disappear. The purely aesthetic ballet, consisting simply of attractive poses and patterns, is already a century old, going back to Beaujoyeux, when the spectators were seated high up, looking down, and therefore better able to appreciate the patterns drawn by the dancers. With the spectators now seated on a level with the dancers, the patterns have become less visible and therefore less easily appreciated, but at the same time, perhaps, ballet is becoming tentatively more complex, and the beautiful statues, freezing into attractive poses, appear one of the less satisfying ballets Molière offers.

What ballet has now acquired is a new custom of being associated with a story, or of telling a story, involving not knights or Moors or giants, but foolish, social-climbing tradesmen, or cowardly minor courtiers who have no intention of dying for love of an Arcadian shepherdess, that is, realistic, far from idealized characters. This is a true indication of ballet's future. During the course of the following century, the ballet created as a simple series of dances will be replaced by the "ballet d'action": a ballet which, quite as much as a 'comédie', will present on stage clearly defined and individualized characters, and will develop in movement, not speech, a coherent dramatic intrigue. In this context it is relevant to quote Noverre's reference to Molière:

...[m]ettre des Tragédies & des Comédies en Danse? quelle folie! Y a-t-il de la possibilité? Oui, sans doute: resserrez l'action de *L'Avare*, retranchez de cette Pièce tout dialogue tranquille; rapprochez les incidents; réunissez tous les Tableaux épars dans ces drames, & vous réussirez

[*Lettres sur la Danse*, No. VI, 1760]

Molière's role in the historical development of comedy has been well documented and justly valued; his role in the historical development of ballet has not yet been accorded full credit.

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Notes

¹Quoted in Molière, *OEuvres complètes*, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris, 1971, Vol. II, p. 642.

²Quoted in *Les Spectacles à travers les âges*, p. 151.

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Noverre, Jean-Georges, *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets*, [1760], facsimile reproduction (New York: Broude Brothers, 1967).