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LESAGE

Turcaret

COMÉDIE

EDITED BY

A. HAMILTON THOMPSON

M.A., F.S.A.

OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE

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PREFACE

IN commenting upon *Turcaret*, the editor has endeavoured to emphasise the importance of the play as a comedy of manners and as a social satire. The *traitant* who is the chief object of Lesage's wit is a type of character unfamiliar to English readers, and the part played by him in the French society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be appreciated only by collecting allusions and anecdotes from the works of his contemporaries. Some results of such a task may be found in the introduction to the present volume which, if its length is increased thereby, may, it is hoped, be of some assistance to the student of the history and literature of the period.

Lesage's life and the principal characteristics of his work have been described in the famous articles by Sir Walter Scott in his *Lives of the Novelists* and by Sainte-Beuve in the second volume of *Causeries du Lundi*, as well as in the monograph by M. Eugène Lintilhac, included in the series of *Les*

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PREFACE

Grands Écrivains français. The editor returns grateful thanks to Mr Arthur Tilley of King's College for much advice and help and for undertaking the work of reading his proofs.

A. H. T.

GRETTON, NORTHANTS.

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INTRODUCTION

I.

ALAIN-RENÉ LESAGE was the son of a notary at Sarzeau (Morbihan), the chief place of the peninsula of Rhuis, which forms the southern boundary of the land-locked gulf of Morbihan. In this small and still remote town, some thirteen to fourteen miles from Vannes, he was born on 8 May, 1668. His mother died when he was nearly nine years old, his father five years later, and the two uncles who acted as his guardian and trustee neglected him and mismanaged his small property. He was educated, however, by the Jesuits at the college of Vannes and came to Paris about 1690 to study philosophy and law. While he earned his right to the title of *avocat*, he was distracted from his nominal profession by the ordinary pursuits of a young man about town and by his literary inclinations.

About four years after his arrival in Paris he married Marie-Élisabeth Huyard, described as the daughter of a *bourgeois* of Paris. He was now twenty-six and without regular work. It is said that for a short time he obtained a clerkship under one of the provincial farmers-general of taxes, and that his experiences in this post pointed the satire with which he subsequently assailed financiers. He soon returned to Paris, however, and engaged industriously in literary work. Without patronage, of which he remained singularly independent all through life, he had no

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great chance of success, and a translation of the letters of Aristaenetus, published in 1695, was a venture in an unprofitable field. Fortunately for his future line of work, he came under the notice of the abbé de Lyon, a son of Hugues de Lyon, minister of foreign affairs 1661–71, and was introduced by him to Spanish literature. From this source, neglected by contemporary French writers, he drew the material of his early plays, adaptations from dramas by Francisco de Rojas, Lope de Vega and Calderon. The moment was well chosen, as the accession of a French prince to the disputed throne of Spain naturally reawakened an interest in Spanish life and art. But, as Asmodée remarks in *Le Diable boiteux*, the dramatic tastes of the two nations were quite different. The complicated intrigues on which the Spaniard could concentrate his attention were followed less readily by the more volatile Frenchman, who preferred the comedy of character with its slight use of plot and its satiric insistence upon ridiculous traits. Lesage found little success in these experiments (1700–7) and turned from them to a type of comedy more in accordance with national tradition.

On 15 March, 1706–7, the short piece, *Crispin rival de son maître*, was represented. With this play and with the satiric narrative *Le Diable boiteux*, published in the same year, Lesage achieved his first literary distinction. *Le Diable boiteux* is a satire upon Parisian society under the thin disguise of a story with Spanish characters and with Madrid as its ostensible scene. Lesage's Spanish studies enabled him to give a novel setting to his powers of social observation. So far as plot is concerned, *Le Diable boiteux* has none. All the story that is necessary is the means by which Asmodée, the demon of the book, and

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Don Cléofas, the young grandee to whom he acts as *cicerone*, are brought together and enabled to pursue their researches. Asmodée's business is to describe a number of social types, showing them in their true colours and unmasking the folly, pretentiousness and vice which are their motives of action. The book has been compared to the *Caractères* of La Bruyère: it is, in fact, a series of similar observations, conceived in a lighter mood and connected by a narrative. The style has all the fluency and ease of the conversation of a man to whom wit is a second nature. Lesage's conciseness of expression is equal to that of La Bruyère; but it is instinctive and no careful chiselling was necessary to reduce it to its final and perfect form.

Of the type of comedy represented by *Crispin* and *Turcaret*, which followed it in 1708–9, more will be said in the sequel. The two plays were produced at the Comédie-Française, in the historic house in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain-des-Prés, now called Rue de l'Ancienne-Comédie, where, for eighty years, from 1689 to 1770, a succession of famous pieces was acted by the company subsidised by the Crown. Lesage, however, with all his gifts for legitimate comedy, did not follow up the vein in which he made a more than promising first essay. The leading trait of his character was independence: in an age when authors depended upon patronage for success, he deliberately preferred the career of a free-lance. The Comédie-Française existed under a royal monopoly granted by Louis XIV in 1680. Its productions were necessarily subject to state control, and Lesage's keenest satire was directed against a type of character which was intimately connected with affairs of state. *Turcaret* was not represented without some difficulty and a special order

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from the Dauphin. Lesage also seems to have had a personal grudge against the theatre, which in 1708 had refused a short piece called *La Tontine*. After *Turcaret*, at any rate, he confined his dramatic work to light farces for the companies which acted in rivalry with the Comédie-Française and the Comédie-Italienne. These independent companies played amusing trifles, composed equally of farce and comic opera, in temporary theatres at the fairs of Saint-Germain and Saint-Laurent. Their type of play, known under the general title of *théâtre de la Foire*, and dealing with topics of purely passing interest included harlequinades and marionette-shows and thus combined the national *vaudeville* with features taken from Italian farce. Although constant attempts were made by the authorised companies to suppress it, its popularity survived and it is the direct ancestor of the pantomime and *revue* as we know them to-day.

Lesage made his living chiefly by composing pieces for this casual kind of representation, by himself and in collaboration with others. He had a share in more than a hundred such trifles, for which his pleasure in contemplating the passing show and noticing its constant variation gave him a special aptitude, aided and fortified by a genial malice which enlivened his natural gift of terse and pointed dialogue. One of those spirits which are always in opposition, he took a prominent part in the schism consequent upon the temporary suppression of the *théâtre de la Foire* in 1721. The manager of the theatre at the Foire Saint-Germain evaded the edict by presenting pieces in monologue, while Lesage and his chief partner, Fuselier, supplied a rival company with puppet-plays. This led to some recrimination; but the dispute was healed when

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the prohibition was withdrawn and Lesage continued to work for the Foire Saint-Germain until 1738.

Meanwhile, he produced more famous work which has taken a peculiar place in French literature and has overshadowed the merits of *Crispin* and *Turcaret*. The first two volumes of *Gil Blas de Santillane* were published in 1715. The composition of the novel was broken by his more profitable labours for the Foire: the third volume did not appear till 1724 and the fourth was delayed until 1735. As in *Le Diable boiteux*, he used his knowledge of Spanish literature and customs for the setting of a romance which is devoted to the analysis of human nature through the medium of chosen types. The narrative is closely modelled upon the Spanish picaresque novel, which was founded upon the adventures of a *picaro* or knave on his passage through life. Gil Blas is a hero whose philosophy of life is his own advantage. In a succession of experiences, related with the utmost vivacity and power of rapid invention, he surveys mankind from a detached point of view which finds profit in human weakness and regards it without a trace of moral indignation. The fact that Lesage's satire is prompted almost entirely by the amusement which he finds in life gives a singular proportion and truth to his picture. Such amusement, if it does not lend itself readily to sympathy, on the other hand precludes that contrast between virtue and vice which, in the hands of a professed moralist, exaggerates the high lights and deepens the shadows. Edification was no part of Lesage's object: it was not in his nature to be shocked by anything. Accordingly, he painted society just as it appeared to him, a diverting compound of familiar types under the influence of ruling passions, of which vanity and self-seeking are not

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the least. His method of portraiture has no underlying purpose. It is the natural expression of pleasure in his art; and, if the world through which Gil Blas moves is peopled by knaves and rascals and its motives for action are uniformly low, it is described with too much relish and humour to admit of the charge of mere cynicism against its author. Lesage had not the savage contempt for human nature, characteristic of the cynic, which distorted the view of his English translator and closest imitator, Smollett. If, on the other hand, he had no high respect for it and could say nothing better of it than that 'the best people are those who have the fewest vices,' he treated it without assuming a superior attitude. While Gil Blas's object in life is to avoid becoming the dupe of others, he belongs to a society governed by the same principle; and the perpetual evasion to which this leads, with the consequence that the wiliest are often caught in their own snares, constitutes the comedy of the narrative.

Gil Blas, the work of many years, was accompanied and followed by other romances of a similar kind. *Guzman d'Alfarache* (1732) was freely adapted from a Spanish novel of the same name, while *Le Bachelier de Salamanque* (1738) professed to be translated from a Spanish original. As a matter of fact, Lesage, while borrowing from various sources, loved the form of mystification which consists in references to spurious documents; and his *Vie et Aventures de M. le Chevalier de Beauchêne* (1732), the autobiography of a privateer who really existed, said to be derived from information given by his widow, was probably as purely fictitious as *Gil Blas*. In borrowing and imitating episodes and traits of character, he combined them with a natural inventiveness and powers of rapid narrative and

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ironic insight which gave them life and made them his own.

Lesage's active literary work ceased in 1738. It had brought him some fame, although he had chosen to work outside the limits most favourable to a classic reputation. He had definitely broken with legitimate comedy long before and had never sought a place among the immortals of the Academy. His literary earnings had been sufficient to enable him to live in modest comfort. In 1738 he was growing old and for many years had suffered from deafness. Five years later, his eldest son, Montménil, who had achieved celebrity as an actor at the Comédie-Française, died. It is said that Lesage was so gratified by his son's admirable acting in a performance of *Turcaret* that he forgave him his adherence to the theatre with which he himself was at war. Soon after Montménil's death he left Paris to live with his second son, a canon of the cathedral church at Boulogne, who seems to have had his share of the comic talent of the family. He died at Boulogne on 17 November, 1747. Sainte-Beuve, who, fifty-seven years later, was born at the same place, says of him in a famous *Causerie du Lundi*, 'Death soon gave him his true place, and he who in his life-time had been nothing, of whom no one ever spoke without mingling with his praise some little word of condolence and regret, now finds himself ranked without an effort in the memory of men as the successor of Lucian and Terence, the equal of Fielding and Goldsmith, the inferior of Cervantes and Molière.'

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II.

Turcaret was acted for the first time on 14 February, 1708–9. While incidentally it satirises more than one aspect of contemporary life, it is directed mainly against one type of character, the financial agent of the government who spent his life in enriching himself upon profits derived from the taxes and public contracts and in squandering his gains on luxury and doubtful pleasures. Turcaret is a man of the humblest origin, who has begun life as a nobleman's lackey. He has been able, through his master's influence, to obtain a small post in a provincial town, with the emoluments of which he has gradually obtained admission to the world of finance and has taken his place among the *traitants* or contractors under government. He is in league with others of similar character and occupation, who unite their capital in buying contracts, making advances to the government and prominent officials and lending money on a large scale. In Paris he poses, in the intervals of business, as a man of fashion, associating with modish idlers who flatter and make profit out of his vanity and making uncouth love to a worthless woman of rather doubtful quality, who uses him as a source of revenue for the spendthrift on whom she has set her affection. The intrigue of the piece is primarily devoted to unmasking his real character, and its climax is his downfall, which brings disconcertion to those who are at once his deceivers and his dupes. The gainers in this *ricochet de fourberies* are the adroit lackey Frontin, in whom we foresee a repetition of the fortunes of Turcaret himself, and his fellow-conspirator, the waiting-maid Lisette.

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This type, which Lesage pilloried with a satire more merciless than the good-humoured irony which he ordinarily used, was no caricature, but a literal transcript from contemporary life. The complicated financial system of France, from the fifteenth century onwards, had burdened the state with a host of minor officials who acted as middlemen between the officers of the Crown and the tax-payers. The country was divided for purposes of taxation into *généralités*, each with its own *intendant*, who was ultimately responsible to the *chambre des comptes* in Paris and to the chief financial minister, the *surintendant des finances* or, as he became known after Colbert's advent to power in 1661, the controller-general. The *généralités* again, with their central bureaux in provincial capitals, were subdivided into local districts or *élections*. These had charge of the collection of the poll-tax or *taille*, which was originally levied on all below the rank of nobles, and the numerous indirect taxes or *aides*. The taxes produced enormous sums; and, while the *intendants* were responsible for the financial administration of their *généralités*, the collection of the *aides* was farmed out to capitalists, who bought their charges and repaid themselves handsomely with a percentage on the profits. The farmers-general let out their contracts to *sous-fermiers* or sub-contractors; and each of these had his train of *commis* for whose advancement he provided by allotting to them profitable posts that came within his sphere of influence. As has been pointed out in the case of Turcaret, the individual holder of a contract (*traité*) was known as a *traitant* or, from his habit of working in a *parti* or company with others, as a *partisan*. The operations in which this class indulged were commonly called *les affaires*, and *homme d'affaires*

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was the synonym for a member of the body to which Saint-Simon scornfully refers as *Messieurs des finances* and whose members acquired the generic name of *maltôtiers* or extortioners.

The career and methods of a *traitant* are fully illustrated by the *Mémoires* of the able and unscrupulous Jean Hérauld de Gourville, who, born in 1625, began his career as a *valet de chambre* in the service of the family of La Rochefoucauld. His abilities as a confidential servant between his master and the chiefs of the Fronde brought him into personal relations with the *grand* Condé and his brother, the prince de Conti. He made the acquaintance of Mazarin and soon recommended himself to Fouquet, then financial minister and *procureur-général* to the Parlement of Paris. In his double capacity, Fouquet found difficulty in persuading the Parlement to give its assent to financial edicts: on Gourville's suggestion, he overcame opposition by bribing some of the leading spirits. Gourville appears to have become somewhat elated by his various manœuvres between the leading statesmen of the day and paid the penalty by a short imprisonment in the Bastille. Mazarin, however, recognised his usefulness and advised him to enter the finances, offering him the receivership of the poll-tax in the two *généralités* of Guienne. Gourville liked the idea, but thought that he was not sufficiently master of the 'hocus-pocus' (*grimoire*) of finance. Fouquet opposed it on the same grounds and objected that Gourville had neither the credit nor the money necessary. His unwillingness was over-ruled by Mazarin, to whom 2,700,000 *livres* were due for advances made to the treasury. Mazarin arranged that this debt should be charged on the Guienne receipts, and Gourville

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found no difficulty in obtaining the cooperation of the previous tax-farmers to raise the money and undertake to refund it in fifteen monthly payments. The profits of the taxes to the collector were reckoned at four *sols* in the *livre*, i.e. 20 per cent., and came to at least 30,000 *livres* a year.

From 1657 to 1661 Gourville was engaged in numerous contracts and made a large fortune, which he increased by his successes at play. His position, though regular in itself, naturally gave him the opportunity of getting rich by dubious methods, and sharp practice brought about his downfall. The farmers-general, whom he had attempted to intimidate into paying him for his protection, lodged a formal protest against him, the effect of which he began to feel after Mazarin's death in 1661. At this date the disorder in the finances was appalling. Fouquet, in September, 1661, was taken to the Bastille, convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to death, which was afterwards commuted to perpetual imprisonment. Gourville, under the protection of Condé and La Rochefoucauld, was more fortunate. He was indeed condemned in 1663 to be hanged for peculation and malversation, and, in his absence, his portrait was suspended on the gallows in the court of the Palais de Justice. While it was hanging there, he came to Paris *incognito* and sent a man to unhook it by night: 'I found,' he says, 'that they had not troubled themselves much about the likeness.' He spent the next few years in exile in the Low countries, where he proved useful as a secret agent in negotiations between the Crown and the court of Hanover. In 1668 he returned secretly to France and the service of Condé and procured a reversal of his sentence in 1671. The *traitants*, however, did not give

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up their pursuit of him and it was not until 1693–4 that he was eventually freed from his financial obligations. He died in 1703, having spent the last year of his life in writing his *Mémoires*. His amiable qualities and his devotion to his patrons provide some compensation for the less worthy features of his career. Sainte-Beuve likens him to Gil Blas and Figaro, and his general adroitness, intelligence and naïve pride in his exploits set him upon a higher level than the ignorant and merely rapacious *traitants* of the next generation.

The fall of Fouquet and the administration of Colbert effected a total change in the finances. The period from 1661 to 1683, the year of Colbert's death, was one of continued prosperity. France was the leading power in Europe, and Louis XIV achieved a glory which was justified by his own capacities as a sovereign, the genius of Colbert, not only as a financier, but as a general administrator, the ability of the unscrupulous Louvois as war minister, and the military talents of Condé, Turenne and Vauban. The *traitant* did not, of course, cease to exist: he was a necessary part of the machinery of state, but, under the eye of Colbert, he was subject to effective control. Colbert's death, however, deprived France of her greatest minister. No single person was able to undertake his task of centralising the highest offices of state in the hands of one man. General decline was not apparent at first. For some years after 1683, France contended successfully with her military rivals. Turenne was dead and Condé had retired, but Louvois lived till 1691, and their successes were continued by Luxembourg, who died in 1694–5. But, as soon as Colbert left the finances, the old system of disorder and corruption was revived, and the

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extravagance of a king and court whose magnificence was maintained upon past memories combined with the disasters of the war of the Spanish succession to exhaust the national resources.

Financial decline began under Colbert's successor as controller-general, Claude Le Pelletier (1683–9). How the *traitants* prospered under this *régime* may be estimated from La Bruyère's *Caractères*, published in 1687. His character of Sosie reproduces the leading traits of Gourville's career. 'Sosie, from a livery, has passed, by way of a petty receivership, to a sub-contractorship. By malversation, violence and the abuse which he has made of his delegacy, he has at last risen to some elevation upon the ruins of several families. A public office made a nobleman of him. He needed no more than to be an honest man: a churchwardenship has worked this marvel.' When, in 1689, Le Pelletier gave place to Louis Phélypeaux, comte de Pontchartrain, the successful lackey flourished. Madame Dunoyer (1663–1720) blamed Pontchartrain for the favour which he showed to *partisans* and accused him of his special protection of the notorious Bourvillais, *l'horreur du genre humain*. Later, as chancellor, Pontchartrain appears to have scorned his former associates and refused a legacy in 1708 from the childless *partisan* Jean Thévenin, who, like Sosie, had risen from a livery to a position which enabled him to buy the title of marquis de Tanlay. His own legacy to the finances, however, was a bewildering maze of contracts among which his unfortunate successor, Michel Chamillart, had to grope his way to meet the enormous expenses of the Crown and army.

Chamillart, who became controller-general in 1699,

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owed his position at court to his skill at billiards and the favour of madame de Maintenon. Popular opinion summed him up in the lines,

Il fut le héros du billard,
 Et le zéro du ministère.

In 1701 he united the ministry of war with that of finance, the task which had been Louvois' with the chief activity of Colbert. Saint-Simon, whose wife's niece he married, lamented the weakness of a character which was at once amiable and obstinate, and the folly and pretentiousness of the brothers and family who shared his fortunes. The war of the Spanish succession began in the first year of his controllership, and, in the disastrous campaigns which followed, he was at his wits' end for means of supplying the army and raising money. Taxation was increased enormously and the state was plunged in debt to the *traitants*, whose greed and fraudulence threatened the nation with ruin. Chamillart's incapacity was jeered at in popular lampoons. He was accused of ruining the public credit, oppressing the populace beyond endurance and conniving at the peculations of the *traitants*. The disastrous bargains which he concluded became proverbial as *marchés de Chamillart*. As minister of war, he lacked firmness and power of decision and was above all without the capacity for keeping his own counsel which Louvois had possessed. Under his guidance the armies met with ill-success. The regiments were badly distributed and maintained: the defeats of Blenheim (1704), Ramillies (1706) and Oudenarde (1708) and continued disasters in Spain are landmarks of his ministry.

In 1708, overwhelmed by financial pressure and with

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injured health, he gave up the controllership, but retained the ministry of war till two years later, when, having incurred the displeasure of madame de Maintenon, he was dismissed. Before his dismissal, however, France had reached the turning-point of her military fortunes at Malplaquet (Sept. 1709). Although her best general, Villars, was defeated there, the loss of men was far more serious in the victorious than in the losing army, and the battle marks the beginning of a recovery which partially redeemed the reverses of previous years.

Chamillart retired from the finances early in 1708, the year before the production of *Turcaret*, in favour of Nicolas Desmarests, the nephew of Colbert. The collapse was beyond repair: the fortunes of the year's campaign, which ended with the capitulation of Lille, had been all against France; but Desmarests was at any rate an honest man, if no great financier, who regarded the readiness with which the courtiers shared in the frauds of the *partisans* as responsible for the disasters of his office. The *traitants*, on their part, were ready to pay court to the new minister: one of them, Miotte, wrote him a letter of congratulation, offering him a loan of 50,000 crowns with the prospect of more, thanking him for his past protection and for anticipated favours and asking him for a house in his park, where he would be able to pay him his respects. Another financier, Poullétier, who had 'spent his life in *partis*,' was appointed *intendant* of finances under Desmarests. Pontchartrain expressed to Saint-Simon his disgust at this elevation of a *partisan* to a high post, 'which was a dishonour to the whole of an illustrious body.' Saint-Simon, whose main enthusiasm was the purity of his own rank from plebeian contagion and who disliked *intendants* as a

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class, replied by asking him whether intendancies were hereditary like dukedoms and reminded him of an hereditary duke who had begun life in a lawyer's office.

Such events as the elevation of Poullétier would be remembered by the audience of *Turcaret*. The play, indeed, appeared at a moment when the *traitant* had fixed his grip most firmly on the state and was more hated than ever by the public. The tasteless display of riches by these upstarts, their parade of bought titles, the insecure foundation of their wealth and the sudden bankruptcies, like that of La Noue in 1705, in which more than one *partisan* was involved, were objects of a derision that feared while it scorned; and Turcarets were too general to make any positive suggestion as to any individual model whom Lesage may have had in mind. The man, however, who was regarded at this very time as the 'perfect pattern of a *traitant*,' was Paul Poisson, originally a lackey, then one of Thévenin's clerks and a *protégé* of Pontchartrain. He had married a waiting-maid of the marquise de Sourches and had taken the additional surname of Bourvallais and the arms of the noble family of Poisson with which he had no connexion. His reputation was known throughout Europe: he narrowly escaped sharing in La Noue's bankruptcy and, in a popular rhyme, the pillory to which La Noue was condemned was made to say:

De financiers jadis laquais
 Ainsi la fortune se joue:
 Je vous montre aujourd'hui La Noue,
 Vous verrez bientôt Bourvallais.

He was supposed to be worth 15,000,000 *livres*, the fruit of innumerable appointments and contracts, was lord of fifteen *seigneuries* in Brie, had a *château* at Champs on the

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Marne, and filled his handsome house and stables in the place de Vendôme with costly furniture and horses and a library which it was said he bought by long measure. In 1710 he paid Desmarets 600,000 *livres* for the charge of secretary in ordinary to the council of state and keeper of its archives and minutes, in face of the objections of the other secretaries, who were scandalised by the admission of 'the worst of the *maltôtiers*.' His retribution arrived under the regency, when, in spite of powerful protection, he was imprisoned and fined and his property was forfeited. Nevertheless, he contrived to recover a substantial portion of his goods and died in 1719 a rich man. Here we have, at any rate, a notoriety whose name was in everybody's mouth and would occur at once to the spectator of the fall of Turcaret and the fortunes of Frontin and Lisette.

A more respectable character in the financial world was the banker Samuel Bernard (1651–1739), whose sensational bankruptcy was impending at the time of the play. Bernard, the son of an engraver at Charenton, had bought an estate in Languedoc as early as 1681, and was ennobled in 1699 for his services in various capacities to the Crown. 'He was,' says Saint-Simon, 'the richest man in Europe, with the largest and best established financial business: he knew his power and required to be courted accordingly. The controllers general, who had need of him much more often than he of them, paid him the greatest distinction and respect.' His weakness was a love of proper attention, and Desmarets, early in his controllership, when he already was heavily in Bernard's debt and did not know where to turn for money, contrived to play upon it by persuading the king to flatter Bernard. The banker was

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invited to discuss business with Desmarests in the pavilion which the minister occupied at Marly. As the king was taking the ceremonial morning promenade which was one of the regular diversions of Marly, Desmarests and Bernard met him at the door of the pavilion. Louis welcomed Bernard graciously, invited him to accompany him and showed him the gardens, with the result that Bernard consented to make a large advance to Desmarests, saying that he would rather risk ruin than embarrass the king who had done him so much honour.

In January 1708–9 Bernard was unable to meet his liabilities, and on 4 February the king's council granted him a further suspension of payment. Later in the year, Desmarests supported him against a powerful coalition of rivals by giving him three years in which to convert his bills and various assignations into cash, paying interest meanwhile to holders of bills who should put in a claim. Bernard's bankruptcy, therefore, although it had serious consequences for his associates and customers, was not exactly disadvantageous to himself. He never recovered his credit in the commercial district of which Lyon, previously his financial head-quarters, was the centre, but he passed his old age at Paris in high esteem. His house, says Hénault, who visited it in his youth, was a centre of gaming and good cheer and the *rendez-vous* of the best society. His personal character was a strange mass of contradictions; and, while essentially a *nouveau riche*, he was superior alike to the pretentious *bourgeois* and to the insolent *partisan*. Hénault's judgment is interesting in the present context. 'Not M. Jourdain, not Turcaret, unlike any character of the comic stage, for there has never been an absurdity of his type. He had an extrava-

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gant arrogance which was in some degree an ennobling quality; his insolence was sincere; all that was finest in his character contributed to his ruling passion; and half of it was due merely to his wealth. The most ridiculous praise was but a shadow of his own pretensions: he had served the king in the army; another Phorbas, he remembered having been at the siege of Troyes; he had fought duels; he had made love to the most beautiful princesses of Germany (where he had never been); he would tell stories of the *fêtes* which he had given them, etc., etc. But he kept great state; he gambled and the finest company was to be found at his house. I should add that, whatever his motive may have been, he was generous; that he gave valuable services; and that, especially among the military class, he lent his help to great pieces of fortune and prevented serious catastrophes.' It is obvious that, with all his vanity, Bernard was no mere amusing dupe like M. Jourdain, whose head was turned by any person of fashion who came his way; while his kindly qualities placed him on a different level from the mercenary Turcaret, whose selfish folly is unredeemed by any good trait. It might have been said of him, as the servile M. de Marsan said of Bourvallais, that he was the mainstay of the state; but, in his case, the retort that the cord is the mainstay of the hanged criminal would have been too unkind to be applicable.

The suspension of Bernard's payments and the consternation of his creditors were hardly a fortnight old when *Turcaret* was acted. On 5 January a severe frost had set in and for the next two months the cold was phenomenal. Even the sea was frozen near the coast and, after a short thaw, a second frost destroyed the prospect of harvest and killed all the fruit-trees. At no time could an

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attack upon *Messieurs des finances* have been more opportune. As the year went on, their unpopularity was heightened by a general famine. It was believed that they had seized the opportunity to buy up the food-supplies in the markets through their agents and sell them at their own price for the king's profit, not forgetting themselves. Taxes rose and were mercilessly exacted; the soundest government investments were suspended or delayed payment. Saint-Simon says that money seemed to have vanished from the kingdom, everyone was insolvent, commerce was at an end, credit a thing of the past. Meanwhile, the Crown and the financiers suffered no loss. The king quashed the protests made by the Parlements: d'Argenson, the lieutenant of police in Paris, controlled the markets in the royal interest and suppressed the bread-riot which took place in August. A new tax was levied with the ostensible purpose of relieving the poor; and this, while it curbed voluntary charity, was actually made perpetual, appropriated to the Crown and farmed out, like the rest of the royal revenue, to the financiers.

Heroic means were taken to relieve the crushing weight of debt by which the revenues were burdened. The rich were invited, not for the first time, to send their gold and silver plate to be melted down into coinage, a request to which they made a cold response. Coin was scarce and paper money was discredited. Early in 1709 the *louis d'or* was worth only 12½ *livres*, the silver *écu* less than 3½ *livres*. In April the existing coinage was called in and a new coinage was proclaimed. The intrinsic value of the *louis* issued under this edict was 16½ *livres*, of the *écu* about 4½ *livres*, but they were given a nominal currency of 20 and 5 *livres* respectively. It was found impossible to cope with

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the press of applicants who wished to exchange their old coin and paper money for the new specie, which, as soon as it was manufactured, found its way to the army or to the *protégés* of ministers; and promissory notes for an indefinite period took the place of payment. Thus, while the Crown and its officials made their profits, individuals and commerce generally suffered. The fictitious currency was lowered with the coming of peace in 1714, when the *louis* was valued at 14, the *écu* at 3½ *livres*. Subsequently, under the regency, new *louis* and *écus* were coined with an intrinsic value of 20 and 5 *livres*.

It will thus be seen that *Turcaret* is a satire upon a long existing abuse which had reached a climax when the play was produced.

The type, in the prominence given to it by Lesage, was new to the stage. It had not been neglected, however; and Chamfort, who has been followed by other French critics, is not altogether correct in his statement that Molière 'who spared nothing, had not launched a single dart against the financiers.' M. Harpin, the receiver of taxes in *La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas* (1671), although the sketch is slight, plays a part very similar to that played by *Turcaret* as the milch-cow of a silly woman of fashion and her lovers. The name Harpin implies the estimation in which Molière held the *maltôtier*, whose exactions Colbert had been able to check, but not to repress, and his violent rudeness is thoroughly in keeping with the brutal age of the more easily duped *Turcaret*. Harpin takes a place, if not a very prominent one, among the portraits of aspiring *bourgeois* whose pretensions to fashion Molière satirised inimitably: he has a companion in misfortune in the person of the lawyer Tibaudier, who addressed the *com-*

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tesse in strains as halting, if not quite so prosaic, as those of Turcaret's tribute to the *baronne*. Both Harpin and Turcaret have thus something in common with the famous type caricatured in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670). They are as ready to be flattered by men and women of fashion for the sake of their money and entertainments, and it is conceivable that Turcaret might have been victimised by the ludicrous deceptions to which M. Jourdain lent himself. But there is an essential difference, as Hénault implies, in the passage already quoted, between the tradesman who neglects his father's business to learn social accomplishments and play the gentleman and the financier whose extravagances are a calculated, if excessive, item upon the debit side of his balance-sheet.

The financier begins to take a recognised place in comedy with the successors of Molière. The career of Gourville proves that he was by no means a social novelty; but his invasion of society and his powerfulness as a factor in the decline of manners were certainly not so apparent then as they became later. The passage, already mentioned, from La Bruyère's *Caractères*, printed in 1687, is an early indication of the prominence which the *homme d'affaires* acquired in a social atmosphere in which vice was losing its disguise. La Bruyère concealed the *partisans* under the easily read initials P.T.S. While he was severe enough upon their luxury, he judged them with some charity, regarding their existence as a source of profit to the moralist. They 'make us experience all the passions in succession: we begin by despising them for their obscurity; then we envy and hate them. Sometimes we esteem and respect them; we live long enough to feel compassion at last for