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**Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the  
Association for Theatre in Higher Education**

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**ISSN 1544-8762**

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## **Love And Lovers: Mutuality, Sin, Grace And The Future In Moliere's Vision Of Comedy**

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### **Introduction And Definitions:**

Seemingly following Aristotle's lead many people have thought of comedy as the lesser and ludicrous side of serious drama, that is tragedy, which causes audiences to weep and be purged of pity and fear. Many playwrights who view the world from a comedic perspective however think of their work as significantly dealing with essentially the same issues as "serious drama" but with a different perspective, a different vision of the human experience. Some philosophers and theologians also think of comedy, and the audience's responsive laughter, as meeting human needs as deeply as the purgation by tears. Indeed it is currently being argued that the Biblical point of view, while not lacking seriousness and tears, is comedic rather than tragic (Frye and Buechner). It is from this perspective that I chose to approach and explore some of the relationships between Moliere's dramatic comedy and a theology of mutuality.

### **An Extended Definition Of Dramatic Comedy:**

Dramatic comedy is experienced in the communal setting of the theatre where personal reactions and responses are constantly reinforced, modified or checked by that communal awareness of the setting. The collective response of spontaneous laughter and the inherent approval of applause become significant ways in which the audience affirms and apprehends the play's observations and resolutions regarding the human condition and its "virtual future" (Langer).

While tragedy is seen as individualistic in its implications, dramatic comedy consistently has been understood as a microcosm with broader societal implications (Kronenberger). What happens to the central and secondary characters provides the crucible in which implications for both the individual and society are tested.

The most usual shape the action of dramatic comedy takes is that of the chiasm. Society is seen to be in some state of imbalance that threatens its very continuance. The action of the dramatic comedy traces the movement of society, by way of the characters embroiled in that action, toward imminent disaster, collapse, or failure, only to be rescued by some fortunate twist of the plot. This rescue brings about a rebalancing of society by way of a reaffirmation of the traditional societal norms, or a societal shift that may bring about a new more appropriate power base for society (Frye, Langer, Fry, Sypher, Buechner, Rood).

Dramatic comedy has traditionally seen itself as a corrective to the society in which it has found itself. Comic playwrights have at times pilloried the person who dared to transgress the societal norms of the age, and have also held up to ridicule those societies that transgressed the humanity of the individual. In either case the major dramatic comic playwrights have sought to "correct the vices" of their age by their comedies (Moliere, Kronenberger).

Anything in human actions and responses that is perceived as non-human is fodder for immediate and corrective laughter. Anything mechanical or mechanistic in movement, thought, or reaction in a human is perceived by an audience as laughable and in need of correction. (Bergson) The movement of dramatic comedy traditionally has been from misunderstandings, antagonism, mechanistic non-human responses and lack of mutuality toward understanding, acceptance, and becoming more fully human in response and mutuality.

The positive "virtual future" (Langer) that is suggested by the playwright is for the specific individuals involved in the comic action. It is also inclusive of the society at large implied by the play. The society at the end of the comedy is normally more inclusive in that it is open to everyone who accepts the miraculous twist that brought it about and to everyone who does not violate its inclusive norms of mutuality.

While not wanting to fall into the formalistic trap that suggests that dramatic comedy is only defined by its form or structure I have addressed its spirit as well. The spirit of dramatic comedy celebrates our capacity to survive, to at least, endure (Corrigan). This spirit provides

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happy endings as the natural, inevitable, eschatological result of the comic vision. "Comedy is not just a happy as opposed to an unhappy ending, but a way of surveying life so that happy endings must prevail." (Kronenberger)

The "Ladder of Comedy" moves from the low comedy of obscenity to the high comedy of ideas that attacks the sacred cows of a given society. It includes physical comedy, slapstick, plotting devices, witty dialogue and comedy that grows out of character.<sup>1</sup> Its breadth is wide and the humorous responses of audiences to any specific rung on the ladder will vary significantly. Some dramatic comedies are mildly humorous and kindly in disposition, others are vicious in attack and vitriolic in intention. Each dramatic comedy however will find its own level and intensity of humor to deliver its content and present its comedic vision.

Purposefully or not every dramatic comedy has ramifications that are religious or theological. Even purposefully negative attacks on religious beliefs or established religion have obvious religious ramifications. The implications of dramatic comedy to an eschatological vision of humanity suggest a profound faith, or hope in the future.

The comic vision of the future expects, relies on, or at least tolerates the miracle that is necessary to bring about a "happy ending". That which causes the lack of mutuality, the isolation or imbalance in society is seen as the "problem" or sin, if you will, that needs to be attacked, ridiculed, or rendered impotent by laughter. Through the vision that demands survival and happy endings a miraculous plot twist happens which is "beyond human knowledge and control" (Langer) and insures a positive "virtual future" (Langer) for everyone who accepts the miracle, and is willing to live within the bounds of the resurrected community that is founded on love and mutuality.

### **My Working Definition Of Dramatic Comedy:**

The implications of the above suggested to me the following working definition of dramatic comedy on which I have based the rest of my observations:

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<sup>1</sup>Alan Reynolds Thompson, *The Anatomy of Drama* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1942) 203, rpt. by Philip G. Hill in *The Living Art: and Introduction to Theatre and Drama*, (San Francisco, Rinehart Press) 348.

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*Dramatic comedy is serious in its intentions, communal in its experience, societal in its scope, chiasmic in its structure, corrective in its goal, relational and inclusive in its implications, celebrative and hope-filled in its spirit, humorous in its delivery, and religious/theological in its ramifications.*

To deal with the potential breadth of this topic requires significantly more time and space than allotted in this paper. It beckons me on to a more thorough investigation of the various strands of this multifaceted relationship in the future. In this present paper, however, the more immediate goal was accomplished through; an analysis of several significant historic theories of comedy, analysis and criticism of the dramatic comedies of Moliere, and development and application of a relational theology of mutuality as suggested by John Macmurray, Martin Buber and John Macquarrie. In this process the theological issues of sin, grace, finitude, mutuality and future community were identified as central issues of the dramatic comedy tradition of Moliere as reflected in representative scripts from his oeuvre, and the representative theories of dramatic comedy which suggest themselves as applicable to his work.

### **The Main Body of The Paper:**

L. J. Potts, in "The Subject Matter of Comedy," contends the main concern of the comedy writer is to "discriminate between what is normal and abnormal in human behavior."<sup>2</sup> What is normal does not generally concern the comedy writer except as a yardstick by which s/he measures the abnormalities s/he wishes to criticize. Sex is the one area, he maintains, in which everyone can be said to be eccentric, or abnormal. He elaborates his idea in the following statement:

The mere fact that no other human relationship is so natural as this one; that the survival of the race depends on it; and that it is the commonest disturbing

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<sup>2</sup> L. J. Potts, "The Subject Matter of Comedy," (1950) rpt. in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. with intro. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965) 199.

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influence to which human nature and social life are subject - this ensures that it should be the most persistent theme of comedy.<sup>3</sup>

In the majority of his plays Moliere used the convention of the classical young lovers of Plautus, Seneca and Menander as the norm against which he showed the object of his criticism to be abnormal, and therefore deserving of his criticism. By using this short-cut he identified the stock naive, stupid, or taken-in young lovers as the good element in the world of his plays. Any force that interfered with or opposed their natural progression toward successful mating is immediately characterized as evil, or undesirable, and worthy of his derision. It is "folly to oppose this compulsion to mate, and what opposes properly falls under a derisive light,"<sup>4</sup> according to Lehmann. Moliere then, by keeping his eye on the classical young lovers as the norm, and their prosperous mating and implied procreation as their normal behavior, characterized those forces which opposed them as abnormal, faulty, or maladjusted, and therefore worthy of his derisive laughter.

Moliere further revealed his own ideals concerning love and lovers by his use of non-classical lovers whose relationships were built upon mutual respect, understanding, and altruistic concern for the well being of the other party. These relationships were more mature and open, and did not require those involved to be of similar age, as was true of the classical young lovers. There was no young man to oppose the older man for the hand of the girl in these depictions of more ideal relationships. They were built upon loving mutual relationships rather than similarity in age, vitality, and potential procreative ability.

However, when youth and age did engage in a contest for the hand of a young girl, Moliere, by relying upon the convention of classical young lovers, led the audience to believe that youth should win and age be thwarted in his attempts to win the young girl's hand. The aged (40's) contestant was seen as the disruptive influence who was comic in his attempts to win the girl and therefore worthy of ridicule.

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<sup>3</sup> Potts 202.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Lehmann, "Comedy and Laughter," *University of California Publications: English Studies* (1954) 10, rpt. in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. with intro. Robert Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965) 164.

One form of love contest Moliere used to establish the norm, against which he set his object for criticism, was a direct contest between a father and son for the love of a young girl. Francis M. Cornford has argued convincingly, in *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, that the beginnings of this contest between age and youth as a comic device are found in the traditional patterns of religious ritual. This ritual was based on a Seasonal Pantomime (a Ritual Combat between the Old Year and the New, Summer and Winter, or Life and Death), followed by a Sacred Marriage to ensure the return of fertility to the race and a regeneration of nature.<sup>5</sup> Whether Moliere's comedy followed this ritualistic theory of comedy because it was so deeply ingrained in the very fabric of the comedic tradition he knew, or because the sexual nature of humankind is a significant common denominator in human inter-relationships and therefore very subject to deviation, conflict, joy, and freedom is perhaps a moot point. It is most probably a combination of these theories that made Moliere focus so consistently on love and lovers, their problems and the movement to a final happy union built on mutuality as the norm against which he showed those who caused their problems to be abnormal and therefore worthy of his criticism.

Moliere's comedies are most generally enlightened by Cornford's theory of the fertility ritual pitting the young and old king in a combat. In this form the

good spirit and his antagonist are felt to be, after all, only two successive representations of the same principle. . . . The spirit of the new year and of its fertility is merely the spirit of the old year come back again. The old year is a force of evil and obstruction, only because he is old and has yielded to the decay of winter.<sup>6</sup>

While not attempting to force Moliere to adhere precisely to Cornford's formula, we can see some potential explanations for an often repeated form used by Moliere. In *L'ecole Des Maris*, *L'ecole Des Femmes*, and *L'avare* the old man in each case must be defeated, not only because he is evil and the source of obstruction to the youth's wedded happiness, but because in his age he has "yielded to the decay of winter."<sup>7</sup> These "old" men were Moliere's

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<sup>5</sup> Francis M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961) 3-23.

<sup>6</sup> Cornford 13.

approximate age in the first two plays and only a few years his senior in the third. All three characters were performed by Moliere in their original productions.<sup>8</sup> In the old man the promise of new life through procreation is seen figuratively or factually as less potent than in the youth. He is seen as another aspect of the cycle of life in which the Old must eventually and continually be replaced by the Young so that life and the race can continue. Fertility is insured in the present, and is a promise for the future.

While Cornford's theory satisfactorily explains the probable origin of the battle between the young and old for the hand of a young girl as a comedic device, it does not supply a reason this device is humorous. Martin Grotjahn, in *Beyond Laughter*, notes an interesting insight that supplies a sound psychological reason for considering this device humorous:

The psychodynamics of the comedy can be understood as a kind of reversed Oedipus situation in which the son does not rebel against the father but the son's typical attitudes of childhood longing are projected upon the father. The son plays the role of the victorious father with sexual freedom and achievement, while the father is cast in the role of frustrated onlooker. The reversed Oedipus situation is repeated in every man's life when the younger generation grows up and slowly infiltrates and replaces the older generation in work and life.<sup>9</sup>

The father then becomes the comic figure of the impotent and ridiculed clown.

This observation was noted thirty years earlier and more succinctly in Ludwig Jekels' "On the Psychology of Comedy". After analysis of several classical comedies he found them characterized by a mechanism of inversion: "The feeling of guilt which, in tragedy, rests upon the son, appears in comedy displaced on the father: it is the father who is guilty."<sup>10</sup> For Jekels then the reproach "Father - disturber of love" both establishes the father's guilt and becomes at least the latent content of most comedies.

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<sup>7</sup> Cornford 13.

<sup>8</sup> R. W. Herzog, *The Original Casting of Moliere's Plays* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981) 42-68.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Grotjahn, *Beyond Laughter: Humor and the Subconscious* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1957) 260-61.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Jekels, "On The Psychology of Comedy," *Selected Papers*, trans. I. Jarosy (New York: International Universities Press, 1952) 97.



The sexual rivalry between father and son is not masked in any way in *L'avare* and only slightly masked in *L'ecole Des Maris* and *L'ecole Des Femmes*. In *L'avare* Harpagon steps between his son and the girl his son wishes to marry because he also desires her. Harpagon, however, is interested in her only as object and not as the subject of his love. He sees her as a money saving device without any mutually reciprocating love from her. The father is made ludicrous by this contest with his son for Mariane's hand. His extreme attachment to money is made ludicrous because he is obviously more interested in it than his supposed suit to Mariane. At the final curtain he clutches his money to his bosom as the others clasp their respective loves to theirs. In *L'ecole Des Maris* Sganarelle is the surrogate father/potential husband who is defeated by young Valere for Isabelle's love. Valere, the son-in-law to be, "plays the role of the victorious father with sexual freedom and achievement,"<sup>11</sup> while Sganarelle "is cast in the role of the frustrated onlooker."<sup>12</sup> The situation is similar in *L'ecole Des Femmes* with Arnolphe as surrogate father/potential husband and Horace as the son-in-law usurper of the father's position.

But the same motif also appears in *Tartuffe*, if one regards the hypocrite as a mere derivative of the father Orgon who, thereby, becomes the son's rival for the mother's affection.<sup>13</sup>

In a broader reading of this concept nearly all of the plays of Moliere we are considering fit into this concept for the "Reversed Oedipus situation is repeated in every man's life when the younger generation grows up and slowly infiltrates and replaces the older generation in work and life."<sup>14</sup> This is one of the major actions of Moliere's comedy and serves as a background against which he shows a specific folly to be worthy of ridicule.

Other of Moliere's plays also fit loosely into the original forms Cornford has elucidated, though to a lesser degree. Although the older men (or older women in the case of *Les Femmes*

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<sup>11</sup> Grotjahn 260.

<sup>12</sup> Grotjahn 261.

<sup>13</sup> Jekels 100.

<sup>14</sup> Grotjahn 261.

*Savantes*) in these other plays may not be in direct contention with the young man for the hand of the young woman, the general form is somewhat similar. In *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* Monsieur Jordain is defeated, both in his attempt to enlist Dorimene as a mistress, and to marry his daughter to a "gentleman". Youth and young love triumph in *Les Fourberies De Scapin*, seemingly at the expense of the fathers, but happy coincidence dictates that the wishes of both sons and fathers are accomplished. The uniting of two young couples instead of one, as the fathers had planned, doubles the potential fertility and ensures the continuation of lineage. In *Le Malade Imaginaire* Argan's desire for a doctor son-in-law must be thwarted so the young Cleante could be mated successfully to Angelique, Argan's daughter. Since Argan opposes their marriage, he and the reasons for his opposition are open for criticism, Moliere thus ridicules both Argan's monomania with his imaginary sickness and the doctors who treat him.

In "Laughter" Henri Bergson states that the essence of the comic in situations consists in the mechanization of life. This effect, he believes, can be obtained by the process of inversion, as well as repetition and reciprocal interference of series.<sup>15</sup>

Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation; if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic sense. . . . There is no necessity, however, for both the identical scenes to be played before us. We may be shown only one, provided the other is really in our minds. . . . In modern literature we meet with hundreds of variations on the theme of the robber robbed. In every case the root idea involves an inversion of roles, and a situation which recoils on the head of its author.

Here we apparently find the confirmation of a law, . . . when a comic scene has been reproduced a number of times, it reaches the stage of being a classical type or model. It becomes amusing in itself, quite apart from the causes which render it amusing. . . . In the end it renders comic any mishap that befalls one through one's own fault, no matter what the fault or mishap may be.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed., intro. and append. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1956) 118-127.

<sup>16</sup> Bergson 121-122.

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For Jekels, Grotjhan, et al. this "model scene" is the Oedipus situation of tragedy which, reversed and inverted, makes for much of comedy. The example given by Bergson of the convicted criminal standing at the bar lecturing the magistrate, or of a child presuming to teach his or her parents,<sup>17</sup> is in essence the same as the comic inversion of the Oedipal situation for it too belongs under Bergson's heading of "Topsyturvydom". By displacing the guilt, that has always rested on the son's (Oedipus') shoulders, onto the father, he is divested of his paternal attributes and is degraded into the position of a son. By thus reversing the situation and inverting the roles the tragic situation is rendered comic. This turning-the-father-into-a-son, this world of "topsyturvydom", represents the very heart of Bergson's "inversion" theory of comedy.

This doing away with the father and his dissolution in the son, this withdrawal of the super-ego and its merging in the ego, are all in complete psychological conformity with the phenomena of mania. In each case we find the ego, which has liberated itself from the tyrant, uninhibitedly venting its humor, wit, and every sort of comic manifestation in a very ecstasy of freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Comedy, therefore, to Jekels, "represents an aesthetic correlate of mania."<sup>19</sup> Moliere's lovers, for the most part, fit into this category of aesthetic maniacs who when liberated from their tyrannical parent, or surrogate parent, rejoice with an ecstasy of freedom. There is a "freedom to be,"<sup>20</sup> to create after their own image a new generation who will, in their turns take over from them. And if they in their turns become the crotchety, or miserly Harpagons and Sganarelles, Philamintes and Pernelles, they too will become worthy of the derisive and correcting laughter of another generation of observers. So the continual reenactment of the Oedipal situation can provide either tragedy or comedy for another generation of audiences.

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<sup>17</sup> Bergson 121.

<sup>18</sup> Jekels, 104.

<sup>19</sup> Jekels, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Lehmann 167.

Moliere's comedy of love and lovers has not only comedic implications for those directly involved, but also societal implications. Christopher Fry's observation that "comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith,"<sup>21</sup> enlightens our discussion of the societal aspects of the mutuality of love and lovers in Moliere's comedy. Northrup Frye suggests "The comic ending is generally manipulated by a twist in the plot,"<sup>22</sup> and this end result is as it should be. What happens by this twist in the plot is that the action of comedy moves "from one social center to another."<sup>23</sup> Often this change, and the resulting new society, is "signalized by some kind of party or festive ritual which either appears at the end of the play or is assumed to take place immediately afterward."<sup>24</sup> Weddings are the most common festive ritual in Moliere. At times, as in *L'avare*, *Les Fourberies De Scapin* and especially *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, the wholesale pairing off is suggestive of earlier fertility rituals and insures the success of the new society which is established by that implied future action. This new society "is the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs."<sup>25</sup> The escape Fry talks about when applied to Moliere is generally an escape from the despair of a dying society, and a narrow escape into a faith in the potency, and vibrancy of youth. The young lovers, momentarily frozen in time, now become the heads of the society and will carry the banner until they too must relinquish it to their sons and daughters. It is a triumph of potent youth and love over the wasteland of impotent age.<sup>26</sup>

As ageist as that may seem it is not all aged individuals that Moliere refers to in this assertion. The only older characters (in their 40's-60's) he seeks to displace with young lovers are those individuals who have become humanly distorted and wrong-headedly oppose the successful/necessary mating of the young lovers to ensure the continuation of the race. He is equally harsh in his judgment of inappropriate young interlopers who seek to step between

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<sup>21</sup> Christopher Fry, "Comedy," *Vogue* (January, 1951) rpt. in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. with intro. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965) 15.

<sup>22</sup> Northrup Frye, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1957) 169.

<sup>23</sup> Frye 166.

<sup>24</sup> Frye 164.

<sup>25</sup> Frye 164.

<sup>26</sup> Frye 180-183.

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the mutually contracted lovers. Moliere also provides positive older characters who provide another look at what love can and should be, but that is to be addressed later in this paper.

Susanne K. Langer makes an excellent contribution to understanding the societal aspects of Moliere's comedy of lovers. She states:

An organism tends to keep its equilibrium when it has been disturbed, and to pursue a sequence of actions dictated by the need of keeping all its interdependent parts constantly renewed, their structure intact.<sup>27</sup>

If we consider Moliere's society a living organism we accept the fact that if something happens that throws it out of balance it will then attempt to regain its equilibrium. Balance may be regained by either expelling the irritant or adapting itself to the new situation. Moliere's created society is consistently thrown out of balance when the older generation of parents, or the younger generation of violators, deviate from the acceptable norms in their own lives. When, however, their behavior interferes with the most natural traits known to the society of humankind, and upon which its future depends, society is imbalanced to the point of imminent collapse and must either react to balance itself, or die. Therefore when the parents' behavior interferes with the mutually acceptable, - right - mating of their children, then society seeks its own revenge against the irritant. When the parent or other irritant is dealt with, then the youth takes over as the head of a new, but similar, society. The mantle is passed to the new generation and society again, momentarily at least, regains its balance.

Whenever the natural laws of love and successful mating, as defined by the convention of the classical young lovers are thwarted, society as an organism is put out of balance. Anything that causes this loss of balance in society is seen as evil, or at least an irritant, and is deemed appropriate for ridicule to set it straight and allow society to regain its equilibrium. Sin then, as seen by Moliere, may be anything that distorts the human image into anything less than human, thereby destroying mutuality in relationships among the human family. In *Les Precieuses Ridicules* the ladies deny a natural mating process by using their precocity as a defensive weapon against that process. Being unnatural, their precocity is held up to ridicule

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<sup>27</sup> Susanne K. Langer, "The Comic Rhythm," *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) 328.

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by the two suitors. When the young ladies are sufficiently shamed, the suitors have been vindicated, precocity seen for what it is by the audience, and a potential for balance in society reinstated.

The young lovers in *L'ecole Des Maris* and *L'ecole Des Femmes* are a declaration of Moliere's beliefs that it is impossible to force mutual love through training, and that mutuality in love should rule any relationship between a man and a woman. While the older brother Ariste wins the mutual love of the young Leonor through his consideration and loving kindness to her the major emphasis is on the classical young lovers, as they provide the norm against which Sganarelle and Arnolphe are seen as abnormal, ludicrous and therefore worthy of Moliere's criticism. In their relationships the Oedipus relationship is inverted and the roles reversed as Grotjahn, Jekels, et al., note. And as Jekels further notes, this is the core of Bergson's theory of inversion. The norm, as seen in the classical young lovers' mutual relationships and society itself, is thrown out of balance by the unloving sterile marriages imposed on the girls by their guardian/surrogate fathers. The old men are defeated by the young, the lovers are happily wed, and society regains its equilibrium so the loving propagation of the species can continue.

*Tartuffe* suggests other aspects of Cornford's theory in conjunction with the Young and Old King: the fight between Summer and Winter and the carrying out of death.<sup>28</sup> In these other forms a definite evil antagonist is visible who must be defeated and driven out as a scape-goat so that the fertility of nature can be maintained. *Tartuffe*, and Trissotin in *Les Femmes Savantes*, are more than deluded men who must lose to youth; they are evil forces who manipulate others to their own benefit. To insure the continuation of society and the acceptable propagation of the race these evil forces must be sacrificed for the good of the larger society. This society is in a state of imbalance because of Orgon's decision to marry his daughter to *Tartuffe* rather than the young Valere, her lover. This societal imbalance sets up an effective backdrop against which Moliere ridicules both *Tartuffe's* evil hypocritical scheming and Orgon's gullibility and wrong-headedness. When Orgon is finally freed from *Tartuffe's* spell and his legal clutches, society once again achieves its balance. Grace and forgiveness are provided for the repentant and justice for those who refuse to acknowledge

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<sup>28</sup> Cornford 12-13.

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their guilt. The evil irritant Tartuffe is expelled from society and the fructification of nature is assured by the marriages of Valere to Mariane and Damis to Valere's sister, and the reinstatement of a mutually loving relationship between Orgon and Elmire.

Don Juan is the force that disrupts the natural continuation of society in another of Moliere's observations of humanity. Don Juan brings the wrath of society, and eventually heaven, down upon his head because he distorts the natural flow of love and marriage, thus unbalancing society. He has already married many girls in rapid succession, and left them only to marry another before the play begins. During the action of the play Don Juan sets off via boat in an attempt to seduce a recently married girl. While recovering from a near drowning, he attempts to seduce two country girls, one of whom is the fiancée of one of the men who rescued him.

The constant violation of nature's, or God's, or perhaps more to the point for Moliere, neoclassical society's laws concerning correct behavior toward the opposite sex makes Don Juan disreputable to the audience. Don Juan, by violating Moliere's conventional use of the classical lovers as the norm of society, and perhaps the norm of God, is the irritating force that threatens the equilibrium of that whole society. As such he must be either reconciled with society or cast out for society to regain its balance. When his wrongs transgress even the grave, he is subject to punishment from the "other side" of the grave. When he meets his just punishment society can once again settle into a balanced state.

As *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan* are difficult plays to deal with because Moliere extended the boundaries of comedy in them to include the treatment of real vice, so with *Le Misanthrope* he humorously treats virtue as a fault. Alceste's virtue keeps him apart from the woman he loves. He thus transgresses the natural movement of nature toward marrying the woman he loves, and is therefore held up to comic pummeling. Moliere establishes a mutual love relationship as the norm of society. When Alceste is opposed to that norm because of his virtue he rightly becomes the subject for corrective laughter, and his particular virtue subject to ridicule. When human virtue becomes vice the comedy takes on some of the undertones and colorations of the waste of tragedy. Lives are wasted as Alceste, correctly we feel, bans himself from society. Societal balance, while upset by Alceste's blatant virtue of saying everything he believes, is regained by Alceste's banning himself from society, and thus avoiding the natural conflict involved in his interrelationship with society. That nature, and the societal norm, is again in

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control is obvious by the proposal and acceptance of marriage between Philinte and Eliante. Society is thus assured of its continuance, but not without significant cost, or tragicomic waste.

While Jekels' theory does nothing to enlighten the comedy of *Le Misanthrope*, it applies directly to *L'avare*. Harpagon is doubly wrong according to this theory. He directly opposes his son for the hand of the young woman who is in love with his son, Cleante. Harpagon also opposes the choice of his daughter to marry a young man whom everyone believes is not rich. Moliere again uses the classical young lovers involved in a mutual loving relationship as the norm against which he reveals abnormality. Since the matches Harpagon proposes are against this established norm his actions are considered abnormal, and thus ludicrous, and his attitudes regarding money considered ridiculous. The young men triumph over their father and master/father-in-law-to-be to make possible the fruitful continuance of society and to load the guilt of folly on the father's head. Society again regains its natural balance as classical young love triumphs, and the mantle is passed to the next generation for their wearing until they become the potential imbalances to society because of their crotchets, follies, or vices and start the process all over again.

Somewhat similarly both Langer's and Jekels' theories enlighten the comedy of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, *Les Fourberies De Scapin*, and *Le Malade Imaginaire*. In all three it is the fathers that are the irritating characters who block the natural outworking of love for the classical young lovers, and upset the balance of society. All four fathers involved in these plays are ultimately defeated and removed from their seats of authority in the matters of love so society can regain its balance and accept the fathers back into their natural positions. By placing these fathers against the accepted standard of the classical lovers Moliere ridiculed a man of his own bourgeois background attempting to break into the aristocracy; two stingy fathers attempting to arrange their children's lives according to their own financial benefit or personal wishes; and a father more interested in his own believed sickness than in his daughter's love. When placed against the classical young lovers, serving as the norm, the fathers become fit subjects for Moliere's ridicule. As the fathers are defeated by the youth and their cohorts, the imbalance of society created by the fathers is corrected and we laugh at the situation caused by inverting the roles and reversing the tragic Oedipus situation. The fathers are deemed guilty. They are felt to deserve the derision they receive. The classical young lovers (who may be naive, stupid, silly and petty much of the time) are still committed to a



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mutual relationship, and as such are still the hope and future of society and the norm against which Moliere measures the abnormal transgressors of societal boundaries.

As with most sins those sins that Moliere saw most problematic among his contemporaries were those which violated societal boundaries, destroyed human relationship and interfered with the correct expression of love that was built on a sense of mutuality. In his theatrical shorthand Moliere most usually chose to express this relationship by the presence of the classical young lovers. This however was not always the case. For a better look at Moliere's view of love and lovers we must deal with relationships that go beyond the normal theatrical backdrop of the classical young lovers.

For Moliere youth was not always sufficient to prove one an acceptable mate, nor age reason enough for rendering a match with youth unacceptable. Several instances suggest themselves: Don Juan, though young is an unacceptable mate to anyone because of his self-centered use of women; the Precieuses are unacceptable mates because they reduce the flesh to subservience to the games of the mind and thus totally subvert the physical nature of humankind; Armande and Belise in *Les Femmes Savantes* are similarly self-centered in their love as they reject their physical natures, therefore rendering themselves unfit mates; Thomas Diaforus is incapable of true love by reason of his egocentric obsession and thus is unacceptable as a mate for Angelique. On the other hand, Ariste captures the love of the young Lenor though he is close to forty years her senior; Orgon was an acceptable husband to Elmire though twenty odd years her elder; and Philinte is an exemplary mate to Eliante because of his altruistic love and concern for her welfare. Each of the considered theories of comedy, while very instructive, is not sufficiently inclusive for Moliere's use of love, lovers, and the rites of spring.

At times Moliere departed from his conventional use of the naive, at times not very bright, classical young lovers as the backdrop to his major action and depicted what he seems to have favored as a richer, more ideal relationship between mature men and women. In *L'ecole Des Maris* Moliere provides an ideal mutual relationship between an older man, Ariste, and a young woman, Leonor: an almost paternal relationship if one were to judge only by age, but built upon mutual respect, trust, and love. It is far from the one-sided manipulative attempts at marriage we have considered thus far between older men and younger women. In

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*Tartuffe* Moliere again provides a relationship that is somewhat akin to that between Ariste and Leonor, except Elmire is more obviously intelligent, wise and mature than Leonor. Currently, however, something has upset this otherwise good relationship. While no evidence appears that would in any way suggest other than a wise and loving decision to marry on both Orgon's and Elmire's parts, a cool distance has opened between them by the intrusion of Tartuffe. Moliere suggests that such a marriage can work if the offended spouse (the wife in this case) continues to love her or his mate, and does not yield to anyone else's amorous advances, in spite of the spouses (husband's) own inconsistencies and infatuations, his or her blindness and gullibility. When the obstacle of Tartuffe is removed this formerly mutual relationship once again becomes a loving, acceptable relationship characterized by a sense of mutuality. While in *Le Misanthrope* Moliere provided relationships which were unworthy of his acceptance, he also showed one relationship that was a worthy model. Philinte and Eliante are the two non-extremists in their interactions with society at large, with their close friends, and with each other. Eliante's love of Alceste is non-demanding and self-giving in nature. She is desirous of what pleases him most, even if that pleasure is her cousin in marriage. Philinte, too, is of a kind and generous nature; his love for Eliante takes second place to both his friendship to, and her love of, Alceste. Both are willing to play a secondary role to their love's other love, and both find in each other their true love, best matched to themselves in their altruism and desire for a two-sided relationship characterized by mutuality. Selfish and inconstant love is again defeated and declared by Moliere to be undesirable, while constancy and altruistic mutual caring for the mate is rewarded with its own reward - success in love. An imbalanced world is characterized by relationships that are one-sided, distorted by self-centeredness, blinded by egocentricity. A world that has been rescued from an imbalanced state is characterized by relationships that are caring, self-giving, even self-sacrificing in their sense of mutuality.

Perhaps several reasons exist for Moliere's eye of comedy so consistently to have lingered upon love and lovers. Dr. Jekels suggests that much of comedy turns on the tragic conflict between father and son for a lover. This conflict, however, has been inverted and the roles reversed, thus rendering it humorous as the son defeats the father for the love of the young girl.<sup>29</sup> Langer believes that the rhythm of comedy is similar to any living creature that

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<sup>29</sup> Jekels 97.

strives for balance in its being. Comedy, therefore, shows society out of balance and yet continually regaining its equilibrium.<sup>30</sup> Potts finds that sex is the favorite topic of comedy since it is the most natural human relationship: society's survival depends on it; and it is the most common disturbing influence to humanity.<sup>31</sup>

Moliere's comedy is based on his own experience, reliance on the classics, and observation of humanity. One of the most universal desires Moliere observed in humanity was the desire for love and sex. When his classical version of young loves and lovers is thwarted by some force (particularly a father in Moliere's Patriarchal society) who seeks his own desires over those of the established young lovers, society becomes imbalanced and the blocking force is immediately perceived as wrong and worthy of criticism. The conflict thus established is normally between father and child and usually takes the inverted Oedipus form described by Jekels, Grotjahn,<sup>32</sup> et al. Society remains in a state of imbalance until, maintaining its zest and lust for life, it makes a "narrow escape into faith,"<sup>33</sup> by uniting the conventional classical young lovers in marriage and potential procreation. This "narrow escape" is from the tyranny of old age which has become distorted from the norm of old age and "into faith" - faith, if in nothing else, that humanity will not only survive, but will thrive in spite of problems as long as mutual love, lovers, and their fruitful uniting are at the societal base. Moliere's comedy is an attestation to this cycle, described by the composite group of critics consulted, frozen at the specific points where the new year confronts the old; summer confronts winter; youth confronts deviant age in battle. The former wins over the latter to ensure there will be further confrontations as these in their turns are replaced by the next generation.<sup>34</sup> Moliere also gives excellent examples of love and lovers other than this conventional use of the classical young lovers as a backdrop for his criticism of some human folly. These relationships are built on mature mutual understanding and love. Moliere's comedy is a celebration of the human condition, its foibles as well as its joys.

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<sup>30</sup> Langer 328.

<sup>31</sup> Potts 202.

<sup>32</sup> Grotjahn 261.

<sup>33</sup> Fry 15.

<sup>34</sup> Cornford 3-23.

The vision of comedy, then, keeps its eye on lovers, its foresight upon their prosperous mating and on implied procreation. . . The vision of comedy fixes its eye on separateness, on diversity, even on oppositions, but it insists at last on togetherness for lovers and on the restored social fabric, on solidarity for the group. . . In that world all is tipped toward life, abundance, health, energy, companionship, respect, and admiration. Song, music, dance, feasting belong in it. Whatever within the range of vision is otherwise will be minimized by laughter, though it is understood it cannot be abolished from the world, and that all will end happily for human beings, not merely for human minds.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps one can allege that for Moliere that which destroys such relationship may rightly be called sin and that which returns the world to right relationship may be termed grace. Sin therefore is anything that leads to distorted or broken family or societal relationships. It may come in the form of a deep violation of virtue as in *Don Juan* or *Tartuffe*. It may come in the very guise of virtue and piety itself as in *Le Misanthrope* or *Tartuffe* (Orgon, Madame Pernelle, and Tartuffe). It may be seen in greed, miserliness, and the "love of money" as in *L'avare* that causes broken relationships in the family. It may be found in the pretentiousness of young ladies who deny the attractions of physical love, or the self-concerned consciousness for guaranteed health that destroys familial mutuality. From vice to virtue Moliere looked with keen insight into the human condition and attacked where he saw hypocrisy, pretense, falseness, and a variety of distortions that caused imbalance in human relationships. His is a polemical attack after the fashion of Aristophanes rather than after the more grace-filled approach of Shakespeare or Fry.

In this context grace is seen as that which brings about the miracle, that which makes possible the escape from the potential tragedy of broken relationships in a sterile distorted world void of mutual love. Grace is seen in the miraculous intervention of an all-wise king or the fortuitous/coincidental appearance of long-lost loving parents. At times the "escape" is narrow indeed, is accomplished by a *deus ex machina* manipulation of plot, or just barely finds some small measure of grace in the loving relationship of two of the minor, secondary

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<sup>35</sup> Lehmann 165.

characters while the major characters are left refusing the potential of grace as in *Le Misanthrope*. Even when grace is to be prayed for and presumed offered as in *Tartuffe* the likelihood of its acceptance seems very dim indeed, and the comedy of Moliere takes on the darker shadows of tragi-comedy. Perhaps it is here we can see how narrow the escape can be and still be an escape. Perhaps this comic action is why Wylie Sypher, in "The Meanings of Comedy," contends: "Comedy is sacred and secular."<sup>36</sup> It is certainly here that we can see that "Comedy is essentially a Carrying Away of Death, a triumph over mortality by some absurd faith in rebirth, restoration, and salvation."<sup>37</sup> Perhaps it is at these moments that we can most obviously affirm with Frederick Buechner that the comedy of grace is "what can't possibly happen because it can only impossibly happen, and then it only happens in the dark that only just barely fails to swallow it up."<sup>38</sup>

The grace found in the plays of Moliere may be seen in the "unforeseeable" endings that often seem imposed on the plot to satisfy our best wishes -- or perhaps our deepest needs. On the other hand it may be as Frederick Buechner has observed that . . .

seen from the outside, seen as God sees it and as occasionally by the grace of God man also sees it, I suspect that it is really the other way around. From the divine perspective, I suspect that it is the tragic that is seen as not inevitable whereas it is the comic that is bound to happen. The comedy of God's saving the most unlikely people when they least expect it, the joke in which God laughs with man and man with God -- I believe that this is what is inevitable. . .<sup>39</sup>

When we are confronted by the absurd or the inexplicable in Moliere's plays then comedy "like faith, tolerates the miraculous. . . Precisely because he is face to face with the

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<sup>36</sup> Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy" rpt. in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. with intro. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965) 37.

<sup>37</sup> Sypher 37.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977) 58.

<sup>39</sup> Buechner 72.

Inexplicable the comic hero is eligible for 'rescue'.<sup>40</sup> Northrup Frye notes "Unlikely conversions, miraculous transformations, and providential assistance are inseparable from comedy. Further, whatever emerges is supposed to be there for good."<sup>41</sup> Happy endings are the inevitable - natural - eschatological result of the comic vision, of Moliere as well as other comic playwrights.

The implications of comedy to an eschatological vision of humanity suggest a profound faith, or hope, that is both inclusive and specific in scope. The comic vision of the future expects, relies on, or at least tolerates the miracle that is necessary to bring about a "happy ending." "Comedy is not just a happy as opposed to an unhappy ending, but a way of surveying life so that happy endings must prevail."<sup>42</sup> This positive "virtual future"<sup>43</sup> that is suggested by the playwright is for the specific individuals involved in the comic action. But it is also inclusive of the society at large implied by the play. "This ineluctable future -- ineluctable because its countless factors are beyond human knowledge and control -- is Fortune."<sup>44</sup> May we not see this Fortune Susanne Langer speaks of as Grace, and the "virtual future" which is implied as a "grace-filled" future, which cannot be brought about except by "factors [which] are beyond human knowledge and control,"<sup>45</sup> the miraculous intervention of God on humanity's behalf? If so Moliere's comedy suggests a future that is built on the need for miracle to be brought about. It is a future that is premised on mutuality between persons on an individual relational basis. It is a future that implies an inclusive and balanced society. This society is inclusive in the sense that it is open to everyone who accepts the miracle, to everyone who does not violate its norms of mutuality. In extreme forms, as with *Tartuffe*, the evil that must be banished is to be prayed for in the hope that it will transform even that evil into repentance and acceptance. Perhaps it can be viewed as Moliere's vision of the adumbration of the eventual coming of the community of God.

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<sup>40</sup> Sypher 48.

<sup>41</sup> Frye 148.

<sup>42</sup> Louis Kronenberger, "Some Prefatory Words on Comedy," rpt. in *Comedy: Plays Theory, and Criticism*, ed. with intro. Marvin Felheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962) 194.

<sup>43</sup> Langer 307.

<sup>44</sup> Langer 331.

<sup>45</sup> Langer 331.

Moliere stated that

the purpose of comedy is to correct men's vices, . . . and nothing reforms the majority of men better than the portrayal of their faults. To expose vices to everyone's laughter is to deal them a mighty blow. People easily endure reproofs, but they cannot at all endure being made fun of. People have no objection to being considered wicked, but they are not willing to be considered ridiculous.<sup>46</sup>

Moliere believed, or at least claimed to believe, that he was trying to correct the vices of people in his comic depictions of their vices. He presented these vices before a theatrical backdrop of classical young lovers. In so doing he could readily point out the vice that needed correction before his society could experience that sense of regain, of reestablished equilibrium, of resurrection into a fully mature society based on mutuality. Moliere then, whether he realized it or not, was presenting his vision of the ideal society. This society was premised on a family that operates in a mutual exchange of love and is freed from the control of either barefaced vice or vice masquerading as virtue. This loving society may only just barely escape the darkness of evil and collapse of loving relationships by a miraculous event beyond human control, but it presupposes a hopeful future that includes everyone who wants to be in that future loving family/society/community. Whether on purpose or not Moliere's resurrected society potentially is a significant adumbration of the future beloved community of God.

The plays of Jean Baptiste Poquelin (Moliere) raised the art of comedy in 17th century France to that of tragedy and provided some of the greatest plays in the classic (or perhaps the Neo-Classic) historical theatrical repertory.

Based on the oeuvre of his work I have alleged that for Moliere anything that destroys mutuality of relationship may rightly be called sin and that which returns the world to right relationship may be termed grace. Sin therefore is anything that leads to distorted or broken family or societal relationships.

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<sup>46</sup> Moliere (Jean Baptiste Poquelin), "Preface to *Tartuffe*," trans. Richard Kerr in *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974) 252.

### A Concluding Summary:

In this paper the theological issues of sin, grace, finitude, mutuality and future community were identified as central issues of the dramatic comedy tradition of Moliere as reflected in representative scripts from his oeuvre, and representative theories of dramatic comedy which suggest themselves as applicable to his work. This was accomplished through an analysis of several significant historic theories of comedy, analysis and criticism of the dramatic comedies of Moliere, and developing and applying a relational theology of mutuality as suggested by philosophers and theologians John Macmurray, Martin Buber and John Macquarrie.

From that process I have asserted that dramatic comedy views sin as any human action or attitude that throws society out of balance, and which if allowed to go unchecked, would destroy that society. Sin in Moliere's dramatic comedy is most often seen in relational terms as that which destroys mutuality between characters and does not allow the characters, and therefore society at large, to become more fully human. His version of Dramatic comedy is constantly revealing humans in their finite condition as what we are rather than what we claim to be.<sup>47</sup> Eugene Peterson, in his book of reflections on the life of David, suggests an important understanding regarding characters and storytelling that is applicable to our relationship to the characters of Moliere's comedy.

Throughout my childhood, in my mother's telling of the story, I became David. I was always David. I'm *still* David. It's the intent and skill of this scriptural storyteller to turn everyone who reads or hears the story into realizing something essentially Davidic about him- or herself.<sup>48</sup>

Roger Scruton, in "Laughter," suggests that what causes the laughter of the audience at character's pretensions and actions is a recognition of their own implication in those attitudes

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<sup>47</sup> Kronenberger 194.

<sup>48</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthly Spirituality for Everyday Christians*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997) 17.



and actions. We are in effect laughing at ourselves as we laugh at them.<sup>49</sup> This allows us as audience members to experience the grace that can come with laughter that the particular character in the play may or may not accept or experience. Even Moliere's form of comedy has its graceful qualities and possibilities. After all, beyond its criticism lies the positive desire to cause positive change by correcting the characters' and the audience members' vices. Moliere's comedy thus reveals us in our distorted incompleteness, our "brokenness," our sinful and limited finiteness. Laughter is often the mirror, whip and gift that reveals, castigates and allows for transformation of the characters, and us as we see ourselves revealed in the characters of his dramatic comedy.

### **Comedic Laughter And Grace:**

Laughter thus is one of the means of grace dramatic comedy offers to the characters in the play and to the audience who watches, identifies with, and responds to the characters. By our laughter we join others in a corporate response in which we can acknowledge those sins that alienate us from others. By choosing to accept laughter as a means of grace, we can become more critical of our own sins at the same time we become more tolerant and forgiving of the sins of others. Comedy is thus both criticism and understandingly graceful.

Comedy is always jarring us with the evidence that we are no better than other people, and always comforting us with the knowledge that most other people are no better than we are. It makes us more critical but it leaves us more tolerant.<sup>50</sup>

### **Comedic Structure And Grace:**

Moliere's dramatic comedy also provides for and offers grace in its structure. The chiasmic U-shaped structure<sup>51</sup> most often used in dramatic comedy provides for the offending

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<sup>49</sup> Roger Scruton, "Laughter," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. with intro. John Morreall (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1987) 168.

<sup>50</sup> Kronenberger 196.

<sup>51</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983) 168-198.

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party's transformation and welcome re-entry into the society that has been threatened or offended by that character's attitudes and actions. There is a strong tendency to offer grace and acceptance to everyone who is willing to accept it through the structural statement of dramatic comedy. The only characters who are excluded at the final curtain are those characters who actively reject the final rebalanced or resurrected society, and they are often entreated to a peace in the "virtual future"<sup>52</sup> of the comedy.

### **Comedic Vision And Grace: An Eschatology Of Hope:**

Moliere's version of dramatic comedy is not just a light humorous play that happens to have a happy ending. It is, in the very vision and fabric of the comedy, "a way of surveying life so that happy endings must prevail."<sup>53</sup> This fortunate happy ending, most often brought about by "factors . . . beyond human knowledge and control"<sup>54</sup> may be understood theologically as the miraculous intervention of God on humanity's behalf. The spirit and structure of Moliere's dramatic comedy seem to demand a hope-filled inclusive eschatology in which everyone is invited to the final happy ending. Only those who actively refuse that rebalanced or resurrected community are not present, and hope is often held out for even them.

This final community is seen as a rebalanced society, and even though we know that its "virtual future"<sup>55</sup> will lead to further repetitions of the cycle, for a moment frozen in time we can experience community in microcosm as it ought to be. This final community is often seen as an ideal community in that, however fleetingly, it is based on love and mutuality of persons. In that respect such a community may represent (and in any given production even may be) an adumbration of that community of God that is among us, and not yet among us in its fullness.

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<sup>52</sup> Langer 307.

<sup>53</sup> Kronenberger 194.

<sup>54</sup> Langer 331.

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<sup>55</sup> Langer 307.

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