

Study Guide for
THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES

by
Molière

translated by Richard Wilbur

"In the literature of France, Molière occupies the same kind of position as Cervantes in that of Spain, Dante in that of Italy, and Shakespeare in that of England. His glory is more than national--it is universal. Gathering within the plenitude of his race, he has risen above the boundaries of place and language and tradition into a large dominion over the hearts of all mankind. To the world outside France he alone, in undisputed eminence, speaks with the authentic voice of France herself."

Lytton Strachey

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SYNOPSIS - THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES (L'ECOLE DES FEMMES), MOLIERE, 1662

Although THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES takes place in the square of a provincial city in France, we are immediately aware, upon entering the auditorium, that the play really takes place in a theatre, that the scenery is scenery and not meant to be suggestive of reality. THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES is as much an experience in learning what 17th century French theatre was like as it is an exposure to a specific plot and characters. It is primarily an experience in satiric comedy and Baroque Art.

Molière was a master of comedy and in this capacity he considered it his duty to poke fun at the foibles and affectations of life around him. In THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES he pokes fun at narrow-minded, middle class morality: specifically at the notion of an older, clever man who attempts to marry a young girl who knows nothing of the world, and is therefore too stupid ever to betray him. The lesson Molière teaches is that the heart is rarely ruled by the head, and that love upsets the most well-laid plans. Arnolphe, the obsessive egotist, tries to impose an artificial model of behavior on Agnes in order to obtain his selfish goal of having a wife who is guaranteed to be faithful. Instead we learn that human nature must be accepted with all its accompanying imperfections even when that nature leads Agnes to fall in love with a puppyish youth rather than the more respectable Arnolphe. Arnolphe's conceited cleverness is the source of the comedy, and as is the case in many Molière comedies, he is brought to ruin because he lacks the ability to adapt himself, and he lacks insight into the nature of the rules by which the game of life is played.

The play begins as Arnolphe returns to the city from a brief excursion to his country estate. He meets first his old friend Chrysalde and in their conversation we learn that Arnolphe, who prizes his reputation above all else, has vainly taken the name "de la Souche" which he now insists his friend use in addressing him. We also learn that Arnolphe delights in the downfall of others: specifically, he revels in tales of infidelity and in the embarrassment caused to his acquaintances by their wives' philanderings. The reason Arnolphe enjoys these tales of public humiliation so thoroughly is that he believes that he has come up with a plan to safe-guard himself forever from similar accusations. He has remained unmarried much longer than his peers because he has spent years having a girl trained to be his wife: he chose a girl, a child of a peasant, took her as his ward, and had her educated in a convent, far from worldly matters, so that she might learn only religious lessons and sewing. He even objected to her learning to read and write for he is thoroughly convinced that a stupid

Horace a ribbon. Arnolphe, greatly relieved that it was such a trifle, vows to Agnes that she will be married that very night. Agnes rejoices, believing that Arnolphe is consenting to her marriage to Horace, when in reality he is assuming to marry her himself. When Arnolphe sees the mistake, in rage he forces Agnes to agree to greet Horace's next visit by pelting him on the head with a brick.

In the next scene she does as she is bidden, and Arnolphe again seems sure of her obedience to him sending the servants to fetch a notary to draw up the marriage contracts. He gives Agnes some maxims to learn as lessons to the dutiful wife and sends her off. Shortly Horace enters, triumphant, to tell Arnolphe that his beloved Agnes has outwitted her tyrannical ward, and wrapped a letter around the brick with which she hit him. The letter confides that she has been led to believe, by her guardian, that all young men are deceivers, and she begs Horace to make good on his promises of sincere love. To this end, Horace asks Arnolphe if he knows any way to gain access to Agnes's house. Arnolphe can't seem to help him out, and when left alone, confides in the audience that his disciplinary reaction is further complicated by the fact that he discovers he loves the girl he had wished only to possess!

After the intermission, Arnolphe regales us with his frustrated situation. The more he becomes angry at Agnes, the prettier she seems and the more innocent. He has just returned from her room where she sat perfectly still and endured all his angry protestations. He is determined that she should not be stolen by Horace, and that society must have no reason to laugh at him, a fate which he fears more than unhappiness. The Notary appears at this point and determines that Arnolphe is mad, so loudly he rails about the correct way to treat Agnes. As the Notary exits, Arnolphe calls Alain and Georgette to his aid, and, sure that all around him are conspiring toward his downfall, he drills them on resisting Horace's every request for assistance in seeing Agnes. Horace returns to fill Arnolphe (who he believes to be a trustworthy confidante) in on his newest escapade. He has just come from Agnes's room where, while hidden in a closet, he heard her guardian rant and rave and kick her little dog. Horace has laid a plan to climb up a ladder into Agnes's room that very night and gleefully confides his cleverness to Arnolphe, who can barely contain himself.

Arnolphe sets Alain and Georgette the task of foiling Horace's plan to see Agnes, chiding them to hit him with clubs if he tries to get in through her window. They do so, and seem to do the job so thoroughly that Horace has been left for dead. Now Arnolphe must worry about how to tell Horace's father about the incident. But miraculously, Horace himself appears and scoffs at the foiled plan of Agnes's jealous guardian. He laid very still after the servants' assault, until they left him for dead and Agnes herself came down at which time Horace easily spirited her away.

Chronology: List of Significant Events During the Age of Louis XIV and Molière

Politics and Society

1562 Religious liberty to the Huguenots (French Protestants); Outbreaks of religious wars begin, which continue for 40 years.

1589 House of Bourbon begins with Henry IV (a Protestant converted to Catholicism).

1598 Henry IV proclaims Edict of Nantes, which legally protects Protestants' (Huguenots') right to religious liberty without persecution; peace is finally restored, public works are promoted to aid war recovery.

1610 Henry IV assassinated by religious fanatic; Henry's son Louis XIII succeeds to the French throne at age 9, his mother Marie de Medicis is appointed regent.

1617 Louis, at age 16, removes his mother as regent and assumes power himself.

1618 Thirty Years' War begins as civil/religious war in Bohemia, eventually involving all of Europe.

1624 Cardinal Richelieu is made chief minister to Louis XIII; during the next 20 years, he creates the French Navy, firmly establishes military reputation of France, destroys feudal rights for private warfare between nobles, establishes nobles' subservience to monarchy, secures frontiers of France, forces Huguenots to relinquish military and civic privileges, and encourages growth of Paris outside medieval walls.

1638 Louis XIV born to Louis XIII and Anne of Austria.

1642 Richelieu dies.

1643 Louis XIII dies, leaving Louis XIV, age 5, under regency of his mother; Cardinal Mazarin succeeds Richelieu as chief minister; arts continue to thrive and Paris begins to ascend to its position as chief capital of Europe.

1648 War of the Frondes in Paris, lead by a group of noblemen, protests growing power of King and attempts to take advantage of King's minority to protest royal authority; Louis and mother leave Paris to avoid assassination attempts; eventually, factionalism destroys war effort.

1652 Louis returns triumphantly to Paris, age 14, welcomed by the populace with relief; intervention of Spain in Frondes War continues military aggression between France and Spain.

1660 Louis XIV marries Marie Thérèse of Spain.

1661 Mazarin dies and Louis XIV assumes complete control, abolishing the customary position of chief minister; Louis begins construction on Versailles; Louis' son, known as the Dauphin, is born, and the great age of the rule of the Sun King begins.

1663 Louis commissions Molière to write a play for him, which results in *The Versailles Impromptu*; Louis rewards Molière with an annuity of 1000 livres.

1664 Louis commissions a great 6-day festival performance, *The Pleasures of the Enchanted Isle*, to be performed at Versailles with plays, ballets, fireworks, and water shows; Louis raises Molière's annuity to 6000 livres.

1667 Louis begins War of Resolution against the Spanish Netherlands to seize them for France; Triple Alliance (English, Spanish, Swedes) forms to stop Louis' aggression; Louis begins construction on new wing and renovation of Louvre.

1668 Colbert (financial minister) stimulates French economy by establishing factories, thus reducing imports; Gobelin Tapestry Factory creates the great Louis XIV tapestry series.

1671 Versailles becomes the seat of government, and in a 10-year process, Louis moves the court to his remodelled grand chateau.

1671 Louis XIV falls under the influence of the Marquise de Montespan, an intriguing woman suspected of dabbling in black magic, by whom Louis has five children who prove to be his favorites. Their nanny, Madame de Maintenon, a pious and rigid woman, gains increasing control over Louis as the children grow up, and he begins to contemplate the damage his adulterous life might cause to his everlasting soul. When the Queen dies in 1683, Louis is thought to have secretly married Maintenon and led a considerably more sober, pious life.

1678 Louis declares peace with Holland and Spain, returning Europe to tranquility.

1680 France considered most formidable power in Europe.

1685 Louis revokes his grandfather's (Henry IV) Edict of Nantes, thus allowing full-out persecution of Protestants to recommence legally; this drives the Huguenots into exile, robs France of much of its mercantile class, and begins outbreaks of wars that last for another 100 years.

1564 Shakespeare and Galileo born.

1573 Titian at height of fame as painter.

1586 Tobacco introduced into Europe.

1588 First newspaper in England.

1590 Telescope invented by Jansen.

1604 Shakespeare writes *Measure for Measure*.

1606 Rembrandt born in Leiden.

1610 Galileo publishes *The Starry Messenger*.

1616 Catholic Inquisition condemns notion of sun-centered planetary system.

1618 Harvey discovers circulation of the blood.

1622 Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, later renowned as playwright Molière, born in Paris into a middle-class family.

1631 Molière's father buys the office of Upholsterer to the King, thus obtaining an honorary title and annuity.

1632 Galileo recants to the Inquisition.

1632 Molière attends famous Jesuit school, the College of Clermont.

1635 Richelieu founds French Academy to purify French language and literature.

1636 Corneille becomes famous as playwright through controversy over *Le Cid*.

1638 Philosopher Descartes publishes *Discourse on Method*.

1641 Molière is confirmed as notary (low level law degree) and travels in entourage of Louis XIII (in father's position as Upholsterer) to Narbonne.

1643 Molière decides to go into the theatre and officially takes the name Molière, gives up the succession to his father's court appointment; he, along with nine other actors (of whom the principal actors were a family named Béjart), sign a contract forming the Illustre Théâtre.

1645 Failure of the Illustre Théâtre under management of Molière; he is imprisoned for debts and his father pays bail; Molière, Madeline and Joseph Béjart join touring theatre company; the troupe performs throughout France for 15 years, a period best known as Molière's apprenticeship to his craft.

1652 Italian composer Lully enters service of Louis XIV.

1654 Molière begins to write farces and scenarios to accompany the troupe's stock of classical tragedies.

1658 Molière's troupe returns to Paris and performs before the Royal Family at the Louvre; the King's brother, known as "Monsieur," takes over the patronage of the troupe and establishes them in the Théâtre du Petit-Bourbon (in the Louvre) where they play alternate days with the Italian Comedians; Molière continues to write comedies of manners and farces which the king enjoys.

1661 Louis XIV attends a lavish entertainment (which includes Molière's farce, *The Facheux*) at chateau of financial minister Fouquet. Considering the entertainment and chateau excessive, Louis has Fouquet imprisoned for life for embezzling government funds and takes Molière as his own court playwright.

1662 Molière (age 40) marries Armande Béjart (age 20) who was Madeline Béjart's younger sister (or perhaps daughter); Molière writes and performs *The School for Wives*, which is met with great controversy; attempts are made to have the play suppressed.

1664 Birth, baptism (with King as godfather) and death of Molière's first child, Louis; Molière contributes a three-act version of *Tartuffe* to the *Pleasures of the Enchanted Isle* – even before it is performed, an interdiction is sought by the Society of the Holy Sacrament to ban the performance; despite the King's enjoyment of the play, he is persuaded to ban it but makes Molière's troupe "The King's Troupe."

1665 Molière writes *Don Juan*; Bernini comes to Paris and carves bust of Louis XIV.

1666 Molière writes *The Misanthrope*; Colbert establishes French Academy of Science.

1667 Racine writes *Andromaque*, heralded as equal of Corneille; Molière attempts to produce *Tartuffe* and again is thwarted because the King is on a war campaign and cannot defend the play.

1667 Milton writes *Paradise Lost*.

1668 Molière writes *The Miser*; separates from his wife, falls gravely ill and cannot act for 3 months.

1670 *Tartuffe* is finally allowed to be publicly performed after 3 formal petitions to the King; Molière publishes *Tartuffe* and defends it amid great controversy; Molière writes *The Would-Be Gentleman*.

1672 Molière quarrels bitterly with court composer Lully, whose operatic ballets Louis begins to prefer over Molière's comedies of manners.

1673 Molière writes *the Imaginary Invalid* and dies following the 4th performance; perhaps because he was an actor and therefore not in the favor of the Church, perhaps because he died unconfessed, perhaps because he had recently fallen out of favor with the King, Molière was buried unofficially in unconsecrated ground at night; Lully takes over Molière's theatre in the Palais Royale and converts it to an opera house.

1674 Boileau publishes *The Art of Poetry*, codifying French literary style.

1680 Louis XIV combines the remainder of Molière's troupe with two others to establish the ancestor troupe of today's Comedie Française.

MOLIÈRE: PLAYWRIGHT IN THE COURT OF LOUIS XIV

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was born in Paris in 1622, the first son of a well-to-do bourgeois dealer in tapestry and upholstery. In 1631, just as Richelieu was coming to the height of his power, the senior Poquelin bought the position of valet de chambre tapissier ordinaire de roi, thus becoming one of eight upholsterers who resided with the King in quarterly shifts throughout the year. While little is known of young Poquelin's early life, it is known that he attended the Jesuit school, College de Clermont, where he was well educated in rhetoric and language, and numbered among his classmates some of the most famous youths of his time. He grew up in a Paris which was expanding and flourishing under the management of Richelieu, whose generous promotion of the arts must also have influenced young Poquelin's life, who is thought to have often attended the theatre, accompanied by his grandfather.

Some evidence suggests that Poquelin attended Law school in Orleans, and another story suggests that Poquelin actually took over his father's court position for a brief time in 1642 when he is thought to have gone on campaign with King Louis XIII and experienced the intrigues of court life first-hand. Suddenly, as it would appear to us, he resigned his survival rights to his father's court position, perhaps after this brief experience on campaign, and with this resignation, he forsook an entire future that his father had secured for him. With money left to him by his mother, who had died when he was twelve, Poquelin bought a partnership in a forming acting troupe, run by a family of actors named Bèjart. This was in 1642, the same year that both Richelieu and King Louis XIII died and a five-year old Louis XIV succeeded to the French throne.

This action on Poquelin's part, who, in 1644, first signs himself "Molière," was to set the course for his future, which began without distinction with performances in a converted tennis-court in Paris in a company which soon went bankrupt. Molière's decision to become an actor was extraordinary, especially given his opportunity to inherit a position of esteem in the court. Quite apart from the financial hazards, his new profession stood little above pimping or stealing in the public eye and automatically involved minor excommunication from the Church which was all-powerful in seventeenth century France. Yet obviously young Molière was in love with the theatre and as soon as his father bailed him out of debtor's prison, he signed on with a travelling troupe of actors with the Bèjarts, and left Paris for twelve years of touring in the provinces. These were to be Molière's years of apprenticeship where his company (soon, through natural talent, he became its leader) played in country fairs in summer and in nobleman's chateaus in winter in years when they were lucky enough to gain patronage. But even with a noble patron, the life was nomadic and precarious, and engagements were hard to get. No doubt Molière's troupe played the great

Molière's last seven years were dogged by pulmonary illness, separation from his wife, and the disfavor of many who felt that the topics that Molière treated in his plays were best left to the priests and philosophers. Louis himself turned away from Molière as his tastes became increasingly lavish and turned to ballet and opera. Molière died, hours after playing the main role in his IMAGINARY INVALID, on February 17, 1673. Since he had not been able, while dying, to get a priest to come to receive his formal renunciation of his profession, a regular religious burial was denied at first, and later begrudgingly granted by the King for whom Molière had written so many fine plays. Some years after Molière's death, Louis XIV asked Boileau, the great linguist of the age, "Who do you think, has been the greatest writer of my reign?" "Molière, Sir," answered the loyal Boileau. "I had not thought so myself," said the King pensively. "But of course," he added, "you know more about these things than I do."



The horned cuckold, his unfaithful wife and the seducer.
Woodcut from the *Roxburghe Ballads*, 17th century



A cuckold. From a seventeenth-century ballad.



A cuckold and his wife.
From a seventeenth-century ballad.

On Dr. Cuckold,
Who so famous was of late,
He was with finger pointed at;
What cannot learning do, and single state?
Being married, he so famous grew,
As he was pointed at with two:
What cannot learning and a wife now do?

Flecknoe, *Diarium*, 1656.

To present the index and little finger, with the thumb applied unto the temples is used, in our nimble-fingered times, to call one cuckold, and to present the Badge of Cuckoldry, those mental and imaginary horns.

Bulwer, *Chironomia*, 1560.

ON TRANSLATION OF SCHOOL FOR WIVES

The French of Moliere's plays has proved elusive to generations of translators. In part this is caused not by the content and sense of the words themselves, but by the form of the language: Moliere wrote his plays mostly in alexandrines, or six-foot iambic lines, which rhyme in sets of two. These rhymed couplets, as they are most often called, are occasionally referred to as heroic verse when used in French, and are thought to have derived this name from the fact that it was much used in Old French romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries describing the adventures of Alexander the Great.

In English, heroic verse is rarely used; Alexander Pope mocks its ponderous effect in these lines:

A needless Alexandrine ends the song,
That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.

Iambic pentameter is the normal verse form in English rather than hexameter, and translators are immediately faced with the decision to retain something of Moliere's style by converting the heroic verse into iambic pentameter rhymed couplets, or dedicate themselves entirely to content and translate Moliere's lines into prose. Most eighteenth and nineteenth century translators opted for this second alternative, translating SCHOOL FOR WIVES into prose that proves difficult to make work well onstage because it ignores the very musicality and sparkle of Moliere's rhymed couplets which is much of the reason why the plays have remained classics in French.

Not until the twentieth century have good acting versions of Moliere been translated into rhymed couplets, most notably, by Richard Wilbur (1971). Mr. Wilbur, whose translation of SCHOOL FOR WIVES is being used in the IRT production, is himself a poet, and his translation of the play rings with a clarity and simplicity that accurately reflects Moliere's own plain, correct, functional, conversational verse style. In his introduction he explains: "...rhyme and verse are required here for good reasons: to play out the long speeches with clarifying emphasis, to couple farcical sequences to passages of greater weight and resonance; and to give a purely formal pleasure. My convictions being what they are, I am happy to report...that contemporary audiences are quite willing to put up with rhymed verse on the stage."

Although men of all ages wore wigs, it wasn't typical to find women wearing them. "Usually it was older women who wore wigs," Bowman says, "in order to make themselves more attractive."

Many of the wigs being used in the show are a combination of several wigs. "In order to build Arnolphe's wig," Bowman says, "I took four other wigs apart and combined them in order to obtain the proper style for the character."

The most difficult part of the wig master's job for THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES will be taking care of the wigs. "Between detangling and re-setting the wigs each night," he says, "I'll have my job cut out for me."

But Bowman says he'd rather have that type of work on a wig than what was done to style them in the 17th century. "Animal fat, such as bear, was used as the styling medium," he states, "which would be baked into the wig to hold the style."

"A person in the 17th century never knew what they would find in their wigs," Bowman says. "Our actors know what's in theirs -- their heads."