

MADAME MOLIERE (1906) A Comedy in One Act

By Andre Cremieux

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Performed for the first time on the stage of the Theatre Moliere
On the occasion of the anniversary of Moliere
15th of January, 1906

Translated and adapted by
Frank J. Morlock
C 2003

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CHARACTERS:

MOLIERE

THE DUKE D'ESTANGE

CLITANDRE

DAMON

ACASTE

FAT RENE, valet of the Duke D'Estange

LE GRANGE, actor in Moliere's company

ARMANDE BEJART

MARTINE

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MADAME MOLIERE (1906) A Comedy in One Act

The action takes place in 1666 on the stage of the Theatre of the Palais Royale where Moliere had installed his company.

The stage represents the dressing room of Armande Bejart, wife of Moliere. At the back, two double doors opening on the stage of the Theatre Moliere. To the right front a door. To the left front a window with a chimney, psyche mirror. Here and there diverse accessories: wigs, swords, scabbards, chairs, Louis XIII armchairs, etc.

AT RISE, Martine, the chamber maid, is seated before the dressing table, mimicking the gestures of her mistress powdering herself and rouging with outrageous coquetry.

FAT RENE: (appearing at the door in the back, which he half opens prudently) Martine! Hum! hum! Hum! hum!

MARTINE: (starting nervously) May the devil take you! You gave me a fright. I am almost dead of it.

FAT RENE: (on his knees, kissing her hands) You think so?

MARTINE: (simulating great trouble) I feel my heart going

FAT RENE: (continuing to embrace her) It's nothing.

MARTINE: (with an air of correction) Why, it made me very ill.

FAT RENE: (still holding her) As for me, it did me good!

MARTINE: (rising, wrathfully repulsing Fat Rene) Oh! That's too much! Be selfish, be soulless! To see his future wife fall into a faint, exhausted that he pretends to adore and who could die of it. And to kiss her instead of helping her! You are a blockhead! a cad!

FAT RENE: (coming closer) What charm! Allow me to hug you again for those names.

MARTINE: (escaping him) Never!

FAT RENE: (trying to seize her) Forever!

MARTINE: Don't get any closer.

FAT RENE: (grasping her by the waist and hugging her) You will be all right.

MARTINE: (pretending indignation) What, you dared! Watch your eyes if you start over again!

FAT RENE: (continuing) The illness still persists. The dose wasn't strong enough!

MARTINE: (turning and raising her hand) Oh here.

FAT RENE: (on his knees holding her joyous face) There!

MARTINE: (kissing him madly) I adore you.

FAT RENE: (serious) And now let's not play any more. Let's forget for a moment we're twenty-one and resume our functions. Yours is soubrette.

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MARTINE: Of Madame Moliere, agreed and very coquettish And you of valet

FAT RENE: Confident and very stylish, mouth shut, eyes shut! And bearer

MARTINE: (taking a box from his hand) Of a love letter.

FAT RENE: From my enamoured master, the young Duke D'Estange.

MARTINE: For my mistress a faithful spouse, an angel.

(Martine and Fat Rene laugh. An uproar of feet and voices are heard from the wings.)

FAT RENE: I hear an uproar! I'm evaporating!

MARTINE: (simpering) Without anything more? I'm going to find myself unwell again!

(Fat Rene retraces his steps, hugs Martine and leaves.)

MARTINE: Ah! That's better!

(Martine leaves in her turn upon seeing Armande and the three little Marquises coming. Armande enters fanning herself, delighted with the homage with which they are overwhelming her.)

DAMON: Adorable.

ACASTE: Ideal.

CLITANDRE: Such a mouth.

DAMON: What eyes!

ACASTE: And a smile.

CLITANDRE: A glance.

DAMON: Exquisite.

ACASTE: Delicious.

CLITANDRE: A mallow-rose!

DAMON: A passionate peony.

ACASTE: A vision that would have made Saint Anthony forget mortification.

CLITANDRE: An evocation of the cult of Aphrodite.

DAMON: A profane poem set to mystical music.

CLITANDRE: A short ode with a plastic form.

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ACASTE: A totality made of harmony and grandeur wherein nature and art have sewn their splendours.

CLITANDRE: To possess this rare joy I would give all the marbles of Carrara. If they belonged to me!

DAMON: And as for me, my life in glorious heaven, if I were Caesar and Alexander, or both of them together.

ACASTE: Ah! how sweet it would be for me to die at your command.

CLITANDRE: Ah, what does fortune, position and the rest matter to me? If it pleases you, Madame, to live far from the court, on a farm, in the breast of some chicken-coop, you dressed as a shepherdess in very humble homespun and I as a good Meneleaus, recalling the original, your shepherd plucking fragile roses to cradle you with songs like those of birds.

ARMANDE: (transported with delight) Ah! Marquis how lucky I am to hear you. The music of your praise is so tender, it disturbs my heart sensually. As for me, it's the most charming amusement. But what! You are silent! Already!

CLITANDRE: Alas! Madame. The three of us cannot share your soul!

ARMANDE: And why not?

DAMON: The treasure that one desires to acquire against all, for himself alone, he wants to conquer it.

ACASTE: One wishes to possess such a marvel in solitude!

ARMANDE: Why that's very bad. A heart quickly dozes if you cradle it only with one song! It must run the eternal gamut of shivering, from grave to sweet, from joking to severity, with a deep yet light harmony to the murmuring of a spring morning, then the vibrant accents of triumphant beings; autumn's languishing melody, and the very restful nocturnes of winter!

CLITANDRE: Mr. Lully never defined love better.

DAMON: (placing himself at Armande's knees) You make us die a bit each day!

ACASTE: (imitating him) As for me, I've lost my appetite.

CLITANDRE: (doing the same and kissing Armande's hand) As for me, judgement.

DAMON: Mercy for the sole heir of a glorious race.

MARTINE: Your husband.

(Exit Martine. Enter Moliere by the door at the back.)

MOLIERE: Charming.

ARMANDE: (very coy) Gentlemen! Get up!

CLITANDRE: Moliere! The bore!

DAMON: What a scurvy spouse!

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(The three Marquises move away from Armande and group themselves to the side.)

MOLIERE: (approaching Armande) I see you will always make me ridiculous.

ARMANDE: (to Moliere, smiling) What! with folks of quality, the most honest in the world. To make everything out of nothing, you would make an offense like no other?

MOLIERE: (forcing himself to repress his scorn) Chatting on their knees and kissing your hand. What more is needed? To point them the way to the bedroom like a debonair husband? If you wish it, I am ready to do it.

ARMANDE: (standing up) Your humor is in the worst taste. For a man of wit you are much lacking in it.

DAMON: Why look, gentlemen. I think that Sganarelle is seeking a quarrel with our beauty.

CLITANDRE: So much the better. Let's leave them alone, and this jealous husband won't control himself as he is doing in front of us. He will scream out his fury and make many threats. His senile love will show its grimaces.

ACASTE: He'll make our ideal shed tears again. So tomorrow we will come with a kiss to console her.

CLITANDRE: (going to Moliere before leaving) Moliere, your latest farce is droll enough. It makes us laugh and comic is your part of peevish husband, amorous of a tender young slip of a girl. I believe my friends will applaud you tonight.

MOLIERE: (dryly) Gentlemen, that's too much honor for my clever wit. To make fools and imbeciles laugh a bit. And it's you who abase yourselves in the ranks of my ignorant admirers.

DAMON: (jestingly) Then we shall hiss to be agreeable to you.

(They leave bursting with laughter.)

MOLIERE: What, you're laughing, too?

ARMANDE: (ironic) With your agreeable humor, you hurl truths politely with clever care at people's faces.

MOLIERE: It's your affected airs and your beautiful complacency towards all those dancing jacks swollen with conceit that irritate me. What pleasure do you take in making us both laughed at, mocked?

ARMANDE: They are only laughing at your jealousies; and the opportunities are seized each time by those very same ones, who, witnessing your outbursts, intend to draw a profit from the smallest excess. You, who so perfectly mock the vices of others, beware being laughed at for your own; don't spread them in front of the eyes of your enemies while moralizing over things they are not permitted.

MOLIERE: Are you going to give me lessons in behavior?

ARMANDE: Your frankness lacks a bit of discretion; for under your carefully weighed words, your thought bites cruelly.

MOLIERE: Ah! From too much pride you have effrontery. Yes, I am weary of submitting to your flirtatiousness. I intend, without delay, to put an end to it.

ARMANDE: Really! And how will you do it? By locking me up?

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MOLIERE: My ways will be good.

ARMANDE: And will they be tragic? Because you frighten me.

MOLIERE: They will be energetic!

ARMANDE: How you enjoy torturing yourself. I am twenty. Let me intoxicate myself with my first spring. I am pretty. Well, I love to be told so in agreeable words and with exquisite manners. Young or old, I pluck them in my turn. They give me great joy by talking to me of love. Their vows, their oaths, their sighs, their martyrdom make me madly gay. But I only laugh at them. Dorante who was dying for me this morning made a rebellious declaration that would shipwreck the soul of a soubrette. And Damon, who with an inextinguishable flame ignited in his heart, assured me yesterday, with scorn, for not having succeeded, swore to me he was going to extinguish it in the Seine. Just now he was bursting with laughter on stage.

MOLIERE: It was still about you and me, that's certain! We are this handsome libertine's clowns; he spreads gossip at the court and in the town. And as you give yourself to every dirty trick, your manners, your affectations, delight my enemies, and thanks to you I will no longer be permitted to rail at the false virtue of a Marquise, or cause a deceived husband to be laughed at with my honest frankness in some play. In turn, not to spare the townsfolk or the people of the court, from the lowliest little bourgeois to the greatest monarch. For the stupidest of the stupid will have the right to shout: Moliere, why are you waiting to teach your wife virtue first?

ARMANDE: Do you think that a coquette may be less virtuous than a Marquise who goes in for preaching self mortification in an unctuous manner everywhere and perorates with delight over the temptations of the demon of love? From pious labors still wearing a billet-doux, hot with kisses, folded in her corsage, slid into her little hand, with devotion, at church in the morning? What do I care, after all, that they jeer and sneer because I love to laugh and I am a flirt. I know what I am worth, that's my best fault and I can hold my head up high in front of you.

MOLIERE: But it is from dangers that in your youth you cannot conceive. The heart has its weakness, the weakest is the one that thinks itself strong.

ARMANDE: I am no more the little Agnes whose little cat is dead!

MOLIERE: Whatever you think, I want this game to cease!

ARMANDE: Then, sir, try to take my youth from me!

(Noise of voices off.)

MOLIERE: Why then all this uproar? This tumult of voices.

(Moliere heads towards the door at the back which he cracks open.)

ARMANDE: Some altercation between the Marquises.

MOLIERE: I see.

(Moliere leaves. Martine enters by the door on the right, approaching discreetly and offering Armande a box.)

MARTINE: Madame, this is sent from the Duke. He adores you, he knows you love jewels.

ARMANDE: (taking the box and opening it) Why, again!

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MARTINE: This is the bracelet that you praised so much to him yesterday. He wants you to wear it on your arm starting tonight.

ARMANDE: (taking the bracelet, wondering) Ah! Martine, see how the pearls gleam, the rubies, the sapphires, the diamonds scintillate. (putting the bracelet on)

MARTINE: How it sets off the plump wristband, bringing out the brightness, the relief!

ARMANDE: And here, graven in gold, see these tiny lilies. I will wear it in the Learned Ladies that we are performing before the king tomorrow!

MARTINE: But if your husband sees it

ARMANDE: I really have the right to make a good reception for the presents that they offer me. Let's swiftly put this handsome jewel in its box. And let's see the note. It must be charming.

(They tie up the box in a hidden fold sealed with a ribbon that Armande breaks off.)

MOLIERE: (entering, furious) It's the Cabale! It's awaiting my pleasure.

(Armande deftly hides the letter she was reading in her corsage.)

MOLIERE: What are you reading there?

ARMANDE: (rising and going towards the mirror) Nothing to interest you. A household bill.

MOLIERE: A bill. (noticing the envelope) Sealed with this ribbon which contains a seal that you've broken! Really, I am annoyed that you would know such an evil day today that I regretfully catch you twice; I have just surprised you with three Marquises at your knees and now (taking the box which he's just noticed on the dressing table that Martine has not had time to conceal from his glance) With this jewel box. (opening it) It's a royal gift! as rich as strange. (coming closer to Armande) What will you give the sender in exchange? (changing tone, firmly) Give me the letter you've hidden.

ARMANDE: I burned it.

MOLIERE: That's false.

ARMANDE: In that case try to find it!

MOLIERE: (fists raised) Wretch! (thinking better of it) Martine!

MARTINE: (aside and going towards Moliere) Ah! My blood's gone completely.

MOLIERE: (looking her in the eyes in a threatening way) If you lie to me I am going to pull your tongue out.

MARTINE: (in confusion) But you are no longer allowed to do that!

MOLIERE: Who brought this jewel box?

MARTINE: (upset) It's that There!

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MOLIERE: Pearls

MARTINE: (stammering) It's from the Duke the Duke D'Estange!

MOLIERE: D'Estange!

MARTINE: O sweet Jesus! O Saint Michael the Archangel What's going to happen? This is the moment to flee.

(Martine leaves.)

MOLIERE: This letter? It's a rendezvous with your lover! Raise your face! Show that arrogance which must put to sleep the foolish confidence of a husband that you treat like an old foggy because he is naive, because he is very nice! The husband whose alarms you know how to appease by exercising over him the empire of your charms. That I can demolish with my two fists crush Viper! You are laughing!

ARMANDE: (ironically) You don't dare!

MOLIERE: Beware!

ARMANDE: Your look is very ferocious. But the threat expires on your lips. I know the ending of all these fine rages. In a moment you'll be weeping at my knees.

MOLIERE: (grabbing her with both hands) I am forcing myself vainly to persuade you, you want to force me!

ARMANDE: To demonstrate your strength? You are not frightening me, even by raising your voice!

(Noise, uproar, tumult outside, from the audience which is getting impatient.)

LE GRANGE (entering like a blast of wind, seeming agitated) Moliere! are you ready, I've rapped three times! The weary public in the pit is cursing me. In the boxes the impatience is becoming lively. Are you going to compromise such a brilliant success? The cabale is already rejoicing enough.

MOLIERE: (sunk in an armchair, head in his hands) I cannot play.

LE GRANGE: What are you saying?

MOLIERE: (getting hold of himself) And yet it must be done! Yes, to laugh, to make others laugh, and intoxicate them with gayety. When one wants to be able to weep with an open heart! Come on, Moliere, go grimace your pain! Go shriek out your sorrow with an air of indifference in your living role of a laughed at husband and let them applaud you if you've played it well!

(Just at the moment he's going to leave, enter the Duke D'Estange, followed by the three little Marquises, and some Learned Ladies making a great uproar.)

DUKE: Moliere! Go they are demanding you in the room where you seem to have silenced the cabale!

MOLIERE: (very moved) Duke, I have great pleasure in seeing you again. But, despite your wishes, I am not playing tonight.

(Murmurs.) ' **DUKE:** (to Moliere, sunk in his armchair, head in hands) Oh! That's only vain coquetry. (heading towards Armande whose hand he kisses respectfully)

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DAMON: Who could turn the joke so well?

CLITANDRE: (approaching Moliere who is still overwhelmed with grief) Could it be a badly learned part that frightens you? Is it Arnolphe, the jealous husband? Oh, not so. you know it by heart!

(The Learned Ladies laugh.)

ACASTE: Suddenly, I don't know by what malefaction could you have caught jaundice, Moliere.

(The Learned Ladies laugh.)

CLITANDRE: Or is it the Duke, whose presence here intimidates you to the point of being paralyzed?

MOLIERE: (coming to himself, furious) Keep your wit for other pranks. I could serve you with other nonsense which might not be to your taste.

(Exit Moliere. The Learned Ladies laugh.)

DUKE: (to Armande who seems very troubled) Madame, will you be cruel to the very end? My sad and solitary soul searches vainly for the mystery which incarnates all your beauties. Is your heart so firmly locked that no desire alters it, is it still obstinate to silence me, as if from the heavens you came to earth so that all my sins of love should be reproached?

ARMANDE: (with a touch of sadness) How your lips with such a tender accent ought to announce the confession of love that must surprise without leaving anything missing. The confession which troubles and consoles, which contains everything in a word, flying chastely from the lip, but returning only to lie! I love you. (I love you must be said in such a way that it is not clear if Armande is telling the Duke she loves him or means that he is saying " I love you" in a deceitful, frivolous way.)

DUKE: Yes, often my lips, at times of roguish desires, in fevered moments, have made that sweet confession.

ARMANDE: But soon withdrawn.

DUKE: And all give their soul, their beauty, their womanly pride. But none make reproach. They are so quickly forgotten!

ARMANDE: Perhaps, also, in their distress, they have cursed your tenderness.

DUKE: (coming close to Armande, passionately) But the memory caresses.

ARMANDE: Makes them shed many tears.

DUKE: God made you so beautiful to subdue the rebel heart.

ARMANDE: And from a new passion, to revive ardor and to avenge sorrows.

DUKE: If it's thus: I love you. If this is your caprice, go ahead and make me suffer. Without blasphemy I accept the expiation! Yes, make a martyr of a humble creature; I will submit to all without murmur if, after torture, I earn a kiss of redemption. (blowing a kiss onto Armande's neck)

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ARMANDE: (very troubled) I feel my soul is softened by you. You have the secret of gallantry. And you know how to talk with sweet and charming words; to speak to a heart in a language that is your own.

MOLIERE (entering and going to the right of the Duke, in an ironic voice) Pardon, Milord Duke, to disturb your conversation and to so annoyingly suspend its destination. But you must submit to the common constraints. The candles of my theatre are lit. (moves away)

DUKE: Madame, I place my whole heart at your feet. (going to Moliere) That's ill for you to get jealous. I don't like folks of peevish humor. Hold to what you said. As for your theatre, I've come to applaud, and with equal delight (to Armande) to admire beauty; I am doing you a great honor.

MOLIERE: More than I ask and more than I deserve.

DUKE: No, Glory has grown under your roof already. Fortune will follow it. I intend to help you. Being very highly placed, I can guide you towards better fortunes. I will put all my zeal into it. I love your talent in which are revealed the most frank soul and the most upright wit. I will have, to defend you, a weak spot for you. The task will be very sweet and so easy for me.

MOLIERE: (proudly) I will spare you this nearly useless effort.

(Twitterings from the little marquises and the Learned Ladies.)

DUKE: (surprised) What! you disdain my precious credit. Do you want me to forget all that I have said of it. The vainglorious actor who imagines himself already master is unaware that, but for us, he would be nothing.

MOLIERE: Milord, Duke, this actor has yet to add the weight of gold to all the dishonors. For without being of the high and mighty nobility, nobility, he has never used adulterous intrigues from calculation or weakness, not having the ear of your cousin Mr. de Montespan.

(Murmurs.)

DUKE: (drawing his sword) You will be chastised for such impudence!

ARMANDE: (fainting) Martine, I am dying.

(Moliere seizes a sword and strides towards the Duke.)

DAMON: He's got the audacity of his province.

DUKE: (getting ready to cross swords) Come on, sir, defend yourself!

DAMON: (grabbing the Duke's arm at the moment he's ready to cross swords with Moliere) This is a shame! a humiliation for us, Duke, that you would smear your sword with this scoundrel.

DUKE: (replacing his sword in its scabbard) You said it; it's too great an honor. (to Moliere) Your escapade deserves punishment, but no more insults. Tomorrow I will have you beaten by my men.

MOLIERE: (casting away his sword and seizing a scabbard) Beaten by your men? Not before I've broken your Ah!

(Moliere is taken with choking and falls into the arms of Le Grange and some his actors who have run in.)

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DUKE: (shrugging his shoulders with an air of pity and going towards Armande, bowing) Madame you are loved!

ARMANDE: (coming to, very upset) You were forgetting, Milord Duke, in your emotion, this box and this letter were not for me.

(He pretends not to understand and leaves in a dignified way with the Learned Ladies, who twitter uproariously).

DAMON: (to a Learned Lady as they leave) Ah! I've never seen such cowardice. You haven't suffered too much, dear Marquise. (Twitterings)

CLITANDRE: (to another Learned Lady as they leave) The King is going to laugh over his clown wholeheartedly when he learns he fainted from fear.

(They go out.)

MARTINE: (to Armande) My good Master is half dead!

LE GRANGE: (to Moliere, who's come to) Are you better?

MOLIERE: Thanks!

MARTINE: (to Armande) Come help him.

(Armande goes to throw herself at Moliere's feet.)

MOLIERE: What! You here still!

ARMANDE: Henceforth there's nothing I won't do to please you.

MOLIERE: I don't want any more of you. Leave or I'll kick you out.

(Armande leaves, followed by Martine who supports her.)

MOLIERE: (to Le Grange) Oh! The cowardice of a heart that tries to rationalize. You know how many times I've had to pardon her. How many times I've begged and threatened the faithless woman, and without cease, and still more unhappy because of her; I want to flee this evil that tortures me so much. And I always come back to her knowing she will kill me. Love's a strange thing, a pitiless weakness! It's incredible what I am suffering at this moment. Where is she now? Oh, I would like to tear the memory of her out of me.

LE GRANGE: You will forget her.

MOLIERE: (coming to, looking around for Armande, then begging Le Grange) Go find her!

(Moliere falls back into his armchair overwhelmed with sorrow.)

CURTAIN