THE COMPOSITION OF PSYCHÉ
by Philip A. Wadsworth

Psycné, written in collaboration by Molière and Corneille (and also with Quinault and Lully sharing partially in the task), poses many problems for the modern reader. This comédie-ballet, or more specifically this combination of tragicomedy and ballet,¹ was heralded as one of the greatest theatrical events of the seventeenth century. Louis XIV commissioned the work and members of his court witnessed the first performances at the Tuileries palace in January of 1671. It was produced on an extremely lavish scale with several hundred musicians and dancers taking part in the ballet scenes. First presented as a dazzling royal entertainment, it was then trimmed to somewhat lesser magnitude and achieved great popularity during two seasons at Molière’s Théâtre du Palais-Royal. Its early success approximated that of two of Molière’s other ballet plays of this period—Le Bourgeois gentilhomme and Le Malade imaginaire—which are still accepted as masterpieces. But Psycné has lost some of its magic. We respond to it today with mixed and hesitant reactions. The play (or an abridgment of it) is revived nostalgically, on rather rare occasions, without arousing wholehearted applause.² Critics frequently express their fondness for certain passages or scenes and a few pages appear regularly in anthologies,³ but the play as a whole tends to be neglected. It is clear that Psycné does not rank among the best works of either Corneille or Molière. Yet it has unusual importance in the careers of both dramatists and in the history of the French theater.

Scholars have seldom looked closely at Psycné and most of their commentaries on it are remarkably inexact and irrelevant. The text appears everywhere in the complete works of either dramatist but it has never been carefully edited.⁴ Henry Poulaille has used Psycné to support his thesis, which few people take seriously, that Corneille was a ghost writer for Molière and the actual author of the latter’s best comedies.⁵ The most detailed study is by Henri Lemaître, who shows unrestrained admiration for what he calls a “chef d’œuvre brilliant, quasi parfait.”⁶ Lemaître provides much

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useful information but he keeps straying from the point into wishful explorations of sources, of character portrayal, even of a nonexistent inspirational or Christian message. On the other hand, the pages by H. Carring-
ton Lancaster are succinct and severe; he finds fault with the inobservance of the unities and of other rules for orthodox dramatic structure, reaching the conclusion that "the authors seem to have been little concerned over their play, except to furnish opportunity for spectacle, dancing, and singing." This statement goes much too far but it contains an element of truth: Molière and Corneille disregarded many of the rules for comedy and tragedy because their work belonged to another established genre, the comédie-ballet, which had its own conventions and in which spectacular features normally prevailed. Our purpose here is to place Psyché in its aesthetic and historical perspective, bringing together the facts about its conception and composition so as to provide the background for a better understanding of the play.

Psyché was an outgrowth of many "unclassical" theatrical forms which flourished in France, such as the court ballet in the reign of Henri IV, the dramatic pastoral of a slightly later period, and the operas imported from Italy around the middle of the century. Tragicomedy appealed to audiences as strongly as tragedy, and for almost opposite reasons: the inclusion of characters from various social classes, the wide-ranging levels of emotion, the adventurous complications in plot, and the happy ending. There was a lively demand for sensational dramatic effects. In the 1650's and 1660's the Parisian theatergoer paid a double admission fee to see machine plays which offered luxurious stage settings, many changes of scenery, mythological subjects, gods and goddesses in aerial flights, and sometimes music and dancing. Verse in mixed meters was finding its way into prologues, lyrical scenes, and occasionally whole plays such as Corneille's Agésilas (1666). The same author's Toison d'or and Molière's Amphitryon, both highly successful, are notable for their freedom in versification and their elaborate use of stage machinery.

Meanwhile, Molière had done much to develop the comédie-ballet. In his first effort, Les Fâcheux, performed before the King in 1661, he made an important innovation: the creation of ballet scenes (intermèdes) which, instead of being miscellaneous showpieces, were based on themes presented in the play itself. This harmonious fusion of acting and dancing remained an important concern of Molière's through the long series of ballet plays which constitute about one-third of his dramatic works. Louis XIV expressed a growing taste for opulence in his court entertainments, drawing upon the combined efforts of Molière as playwright and librettist and of Lully as composer. La Princesse d'Elide was prepared for the "Plaisirs de l'Ile enchantée," a festival at Versailles in 1664. In the winter of 1666-67, for the series of events organized by Benserade at the Saint-Germain pal-
ace under the title "Ballet des Muses," Molière again worked in collaboration with Lully, writing Mélicerte, La Pastorale comique, and Le Sici- lien. Monsieur de Pourceaugnac was first performed for the King at Chambord in 1669, Les Amants magnifiques at Saint-Germain in the course of the "Divertissement royal" in 1670. On the latter occasion Louis XIV selected the subject of the play and set the tone of the stage performance when he asked for "un divertissement qui fût de tous ceux que le théâtre peut fournir."8 A similar spirit of magnificence presided over the conception and production of Psyché, just as it would over the operas entrusted to Lully and Quinault a few years later. It is important to note how close Molière came to participating in the birth of French opera. Lully obtained his monopoly for musical performances in 1672. If Molière had not quarreled with him, and had not died the following year, would he have written the libretti for some of Lully's operas? And would the first French operas have taken a comic turn?

In order to discuss the composition of Psyché we need to sketch very briefly how the action unfolds. Prologue: seaside setting, then a city. Vénus, a goddess spurned because of Psyché's overwhelming beauty, demands that her son seek vengeance. Act I: Psyché, her two jealous sisters, and two princes who are in love with her. An oracle announces that Psyché must marry a monster. First intermède: lamentations and mournful dancing among cliffs and rocks. Act II: Psyché's farewell to her father, her sisters, and the princes. She is wafted away and Cupid (L'Amour) prepares to receive her. Second intermède: ballet of fairies and artisans, decorating a beautiful palace. Act III: L'Amour, disguised as a young man; he is in love with Psyché and plans to defy his mother. Ardent love scene. Third intermède: flower garden, with zephyrs and baby cupids dancing and singing. Act IV: the jealous sisters visit Psyché and arouse her curiosity concerning her nameless lover. Beguiled by Psyché, L'Amour reveals his identity, then leaves her to her destiny. The garden is replaced by a wilderness. Vénus curses Psyché and threatens dire revenge. Fourth intermède: demons and furies in a fiery ballet in Hades. Act V: Psyché meets the two princes, now dead but still in love with her, and learns that her sisters have been punished. She opens Proserpina's box and succumbs to escaping fumes. Angry encounter between Vénus and L'Amour. Jupiter settles the strife by restoring Psyché's beauty and making her a goddess. She and L'Amour will be married. Fifth intermède (or finale): apotheosis and wedding festival celebrated by a multitude of gods and goddesses; much dancing, singing, and flying through the air.

Partially concealed in this kaleidoscopic display can be seen the famous legendary story—or rather a few salient features of the story—handed down by Apuleius. How was Molière led to the myth of Cupid and Psyche? No one knows whether he chose the subject himself (for Corneille was
not yet involved in the project), or whether it was imposed upon him, perhaps by the King. We do know that he was given the task of preparing a royal entertainment expressly for the salle des machines at the Tuileries, and he obviously needed a tale from mythology. There is no reason to accept the persistent legend, which sprang up in the eighteenth century, that he was required to find a theme with some scenes in Hades, to make use of an existing backdrop stored away at the palace. (Such an economy measure seems most unlikely.) The story of Psyche was a natural and appropriate choice. It was well known, it had colorful possibilities, it had not been exploited in ballet form for sixteen years, and it had attracted attention quite recently in La Fontaine's novel, Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon (1669). In an intangible way the novel may be considered a source for some of the courtly elegance of certain situations and settings in the play. Palaces and gardens figure prominently in both works as a background for refined, poetic conversation.

But neither La Fontaine nor Apuleius served as a textual source. Indeed, Molière's borrowings are extremely unimportant. They have been studied in detail by Lancaster, then again by Lemaitre, but both these scholars tend to treat Psyché as a purely literary text. The truth is that Molière was involved in the performing arts and was guided mainly by the theatrical necessities of the task at hand. He was expected to provide not only a play in five acts but also a prologue and a series of intermèdes, all with impressive settings and abundant opportunities for singing and dancing.

Molière added to the number of important characters in the story, notably the two princes who adore the heroine and who form an interesting dramatic foil to the two sisters. He also simplified the plot and, among Psyché's many punishments, retained only the most striking one, her horrifying visit to the underworld. He devised an entirely new approach to the relations between Psyché and L'Amour. It was theatrically almost impossible, at least undesirable, to have an invisible hero; thus he sacrificed the famous scene in which Psyché lights a lamp to catch a glimpse of her lover while he sleeps, spilling a drop of oil which wakes him up. Instead he presented Cupid disguised as a most attractive young mortal, thus providing a suitable part for his handsome protégé, Baron. Casting was important. He naturally planned to give the leading role to Armande, his beautiful and very talented wife. He could himself act as a minor and somewhat humorous character—why not an attendant zephyr?

Such considerations undoubtedly weighed on Molière's mind as he set about the writing of Psyché. His aim was grandiose but within his capabilities: to combine the techniques of ballet and of machine plays such as Amphitryon. From the outset he counted on the collaboration of Lully (and presumably Quinault) to provide music and some verses for singing.
But the project was exceedingly complex and other activities demanded much of his time. *Psyche* was wanted for the carnival season in 1671 and had its first performance at the royal court on January 17th. This same winter Molière's company was involved in giving Corneille's *Tite et Bérénice*. Starting on November 25, 1670, and lasting into February, this play was staged alternately with a new one, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (three times in succession for each). But in the latter case Molière was not only the author and director; he also acted the leading role as Monsieur Jourdain. Thus harassed, he was forced to call upon another dramatist to help him finish *Psyche*, and he somehow arrived at an arrangement with Pierre Corneille.

When *Psyche* was published some months later, with Molière named as sole author on the title page and as owner of the *privilège*, the book contained an important notice, “Le libraire au lecteur,” which tells almost all that is known about the conception and authorship of the work, and also the division of labor involved in its composition:

*Cet ouvrage n'est pas tout d'une main. M. Quinault a fait les paroles qui s'y chantent en musique, à la réserve de la plainte italienne. M. de Molière a dressé le plan de la pièce, et réglé la disposition, où il s'est plus attaché aux beaux et à la pompe du spectacle qu’à l'exacte régularité. Quant à la versification, il n'a pas eu le loisir de la faire entière. Le carnaval approchait, et les ordres pressants du Roi, qui se vouloit donner ce magnifique divertissement plusieurs fois avant le carême, l'ont mis dans la nécessité de souffrir un peu de secours. Ainsi il n'y a que le Prologue, le premier acte, la première scène du second, et la première du troisième dont les vers soient de lui. M. Corneille a employé une quinzaine au reste; et par ce moyen Sa Majesté s'est trouvée servie dans le temps qu'elle l'avait ordonné."

It should be explained that Lully, who composed the musical score, also furnished the words of the lamentations in Italian which are sung in the *intermède* between Acts I and II. The other vocal pieces, prepared by Quinault, are believed to comprise the first 56 lines of the Prologue and another 173 lines (according to the usual numbering scheme, not counting refrains) presented in connection with the ballet scenes after Acts II, III, and V. Thus Quinault and Lully worked as a team on the operatic elements of *Psyche*. But Molière (no doubt in consultation with a ballet master and a stage designer) sketched the concept of the Prologue and each *intermède*, providing a general plan for the choreography, the use of machines, and the interplay of visual and musical effects.

As for the dramatic text, Molière wrote the speeches in the latter part of the Prologue, carried the play to the end of the first scene in Act II, then added one more scene (III, i) containing the small part of Zéphire which he himself was to act. This amounted to 721 lines of verse—the rhymed *vers libres* in which all of *Psyche* is presented. The balance of the play, or 1,151 lines, flowed swiftly from the pen of Corneille and must
have been based on some sort of outline or prose text supplied by Molière. But there is no way to determine how much latitude Corneille was given, e.g. in the distribution of scenes, in the delineation of character, and in various matters of emphasis. One cannot justifiably give him full credit, or all the blame either—as Lemaître and some other scholars have done—for various merits and faults and inconsistencies which Psyché possesses.

As we approach the work itself and the way it was staged there is one more source of confusion to eliminate. Although editors of Molière and Corneille do not point this out, or merely allude to the fact in a misleading way, the play exists in two different versions. One was employed for the first performances at the royal court and is summarized in the program or libretto which was distributed to the audience. The other, used in performances six months later at Molière's Palais-Royal theater, appears in published editions of the play. Economic considerations accounted for some of the differences in the two texts. Although Molière and his troupe went to great expense and had their theater partially rebuilt to accommodate Psyché, they were obliged to reduce the number of participants and simplify the scenic effects. Molière eliminated one stage setting (a graveyard), made minor changes in the intermèdes, and revised the order of entries and songs in the finale (leaving out a discordant "récit de Mars"). It is more important to note that the court version, prepared in great haste, was sometimes lacking in clarity and continuity. For his Paris public Molière, perhaps with Corneille providing the verse, added two scenes to the text of the play (II, iii and v), short soliloquies spoken by Psyché and L'Amour respectively. One scene gives the heroine a plausible explanation for her punishment; the other marks the first appearance of Cupid, after the Prologue, and provides helpful information to clarify the events which follow. Thus the second version is better, and standard in all editions, but one must go back to the original program to appreciate the production of Psyché at the Tuileries palace.

There is a wealth of documentation on the first performances of the play, both official publicity and comments made by spectators. The show began in the late afternoon and lasted five hours. The "salle des machines" at the Tuileries, which had not been used for some years, was in itself an important attraction and it is rather fully described in the first pages of the program. Before the curtain was raised thirty candelabra were set up to light the proscenium and the auditorium. The audience was also part of the spectacle, with the King and his family seated on a magnificent dais. No expense was spared for the costumes of the performers. Psyché appeared in four different gowns, each one a masterpiece of embroidery and lace. Machinery enabled gods and goddesses to rise or descend in the air, or to travel across the heavens. As an innovation the singers and instrumentalists, instead of being placed offstage or concealed in grilled boxes,
were exposed to view and moved about in the ballet scenes. There must have been about four hundred participants, if all the musicians, dancers, and actors are counted; the libretto mentions the presence of three hundred divinities, floating on clouds, as part of the grand finale. Reporters and letter-writers gave enthusiastic accounts of the carnival season performances, with their praise going first of all to the sumptuous operatic and mechanical features, then to the brilliant acting of "Mlle Molière" as Psyché. Little was said about the literary qualities of the tragicomedy; the play by Molière and Corneille tended to fade from sight in the surrounding brilliance.

Thus the two great dramatists, in their unique collaborative effort, were brought together in a luxurious courtly entertainment, a little like script writers for a Hollywood production. In order to read the play sympathetically one must appreciate the special circumstances attending its composition and try to imagine the fairyland atmosphere which it helped to convey: a world of magic and legend, of dancing and music and color. One will be surprised less by the obvious weaknesses of Psyché than by the enduring beauty of certain pages. One will find that Molière possessed unusual abilities for blending literature and pageantry, that Corneille as an old man composed many lines of ardently youthful love poetry, and that both authors created some rewarding dramatic scenes.

NOTES

1. The widely accepted term comédie-ballet is normally applied to Psyché, although the first edition called it a tragédie-ballet and the program of the first performance used the words "tragi-comédie et ballet."

2. There are many journalistic reports on the production by Antoine at the Odéon (1914) and the one by Jean Négroni at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées (1953).


8. See the avant-propos of Les Amants magnifiques.


10. The music has not survived in its original form, but Lully used the songs again in his opera of 1678, also entitled Psyché, in which Thomas Corneille and Fontenelle collaborated.

11. Molière, ed. cit., VIII, 363. The mention of "quelques vers, tant italiens que
français, ajoutés dans le Livret" misses the main differences in the texts and reverses their chronological order.

12. See Lancaster and Lemaître. The latter also includes (pp. 365-367) a useful bibliography of critical and scholarly studies dealing with Psyché.