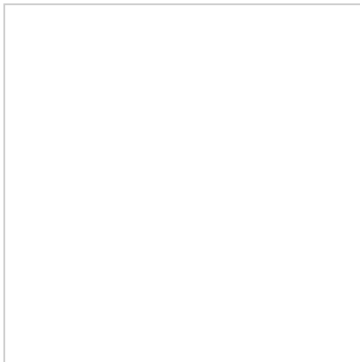


Alain-René Lesage

From Wikipedia, the free
encyclopedia



Lesage

Alain-René Lesage (May 8, 1668, Sarzeau – November 17, 1747, Boulogne), also spelled **Le Sage** was a French novelist and playwright born at Sarzeau, in the peninsula of Rhuy, between the Morbihan and the sea, Brittany.

French literature

By category

French literary history

Medieval

16th century -

17th century

18th century -

19th century

20th century -

Contemporary

French Writers

Chronological
list

Writers by
category

Novelists -

Playwrights

Poets -

Essayists

Short story
writers

France

Portal

Literature

Portal

- Turcaret
- 4 Novels
 - 4.1 Gil Blas
 - 4.2 Lesage's style
 - 4.3 Quotations
- 5 Works
- 6 External links

Life

Youth and education

Claude Lesage, the father of the novelist, held the united positions of advocate, notary and registrar of

the royal court in Rhuys. His wife's name was Jeanne Brenugat. Both father and mother died when Lesage was very young, and his property was wasted or embezzled by his guardians. Little is known of his youth except that he went to school with the Jesuits at Vannes until he was eighteen. Conjecture has it that he continued his studies at Paris, and he was called to the bar at the capital in 1692. In August 1694 he married the daughter of a joiner, Marie Elizabeth Huyard. She was beautiful but had no fortune, and Lesage had little practice. About this time he encountered an old schoolfellow, the dramatist

Antoine Danchet, who is said to have advised him to take up literature. He began as a translator, and published in 1695 a French version of the *Epistles* of Aristaenetus, which was not successful. Shortly afterwards he found a valuable patron and adviser in the abbe de Lyonne, who bestowed on him an annuity of 600 livres, and recommended him to exchange the classics for Spanish literature, of which he was himself a student and collector.

First literary efforts

Lesage began by translating plays chiefly from Francisco de Rojas

Zorrilla and Lope de Vega. *Le Traître puni* and *Le Point d'honneur* from the former and *Don Felix de Mendoza* from the latter were acted or published in the first two or three years of the 18th century. In 1704 he translated the continuation of *Don Quixote* by Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda, and soon afterwards adapted a play from Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Don Cesar Ursin*, which was successful at court and damned in the city. Lesage was, however, nearly forty before he obtained decided success. In 1707 his farce, *Crispin rival de son maitre*, was acted with great applause, and *Le Diable*

boiteux was published and ran to several editions. Lesage altered and improved this play in 1725, giving it its present form.

Notwithstanding the success of *Crispin*, the actors did not like Lesage, and refused a small piece of his called *Les Etrennes* (1707). He thereupon altered it into *Turcaret*, his theatrical masterpiece, and one of the best comedies in French literature. This appeared in 1709.

Prose writings

Some years passed before he again attempted romance writing, and then the first two parts of *Gil Blas*

de Santillane were published in 1715, without the popularity of *Le Diable boiteux*. Lesage worked at it for a long time, and did not bring out the third part till 1724, nor the fourth till 1735. During these twenty years he was, however, continually busy. Notwithstanding the great merit and success of *Turcaret* and *Crispin*, the Theatre Francais did not welcome him, and in 1715 he began to write for the Théâtre de la Foire, the comic opera held in booths at festival time. According to one computation he produced, either alone or with others, about a hundred pieces, varying from strings of songs with no regular

dialogues, to comediettas only distinguished from regular plays by the introduction of music. He was also industrious in prose fiction. Besides finishing *Gil Blas* he translated the *Orlando innamorato* (1721), rearranged *Guzman d'Alfarache* (1732), published two more or less original novels, *Le Bachelier de Salamanque* and *Estevanitte Gonzales*, and in 1733 produced the *Vie et aventures de M. de Beauchesne*, which resembles certain works of Daniel Defoe. Besides all this, Lesage was also the author of *La Valise trouvee*, a collection of imaginary letters, and of some minor pieces, of which

Une journee des parques is the most remarkable. He did not retire until 1740, when he was more than seventy years of age; he and his wife went to live with his second son, who was a canon at Boulogne-sur-Mer. (Lesage's eldest son had become an actor, and Lesage had disowned him.) Lesage's last work, 'Melange amusant de saitties d'esprit et de traits historiques les plus frappants, appeared in 1743. He died on the 17th of November 1747.

Lesage's character and importance

Very little is known of Lesage's life and personality. The few anecdotes which we have of him represent him as a man of very independent temper, declining to accept the condescending patronage which in the earlier part of the century was still the portion of men of letters. Thus it is said that, when someone rudely reprimanded him for an unavoidable delay in appearing at the Duchess of Bouillon's house to read *Turcaret*, he put the play in his pocket and left, refusing absolutely to return. It may be said that as in time so in position he occupies a place apart from most

of the great writers of the 17th and 18th centuries. He was not the object of royal patronage like the first, nor the pet of salons and coteries like the second. Indeed, he seems all his life to have been purely domestic in his habits, and purely literary in his interests.

The importance of Lesage in French and in European literature is not entirely the same, and he has the rare distinction of being more important in the latter than in the former. His literary work may be divided into three parts. The first contains his *Theatre de la Foire* and his few miscellaneous writings, the second his two

remarkable plays *Crispin* and *Turcaret*, the third his prose fictions. In the first two he swims within the general literary current in France; he can and must be compared with others of his own nation. But in the third he emerges altogether from merely national comparison. It is not with Frenchmen that he is to be measured. He formed no school in France; he followed no French models. His work, admirable as it is from the mere point of view of style and form, is a parenthesis in the general development of the French novel. That product works its way from Madame de la Fayette through Pierre de Marivaux and

Prévost, not through Lesage. His literary ancestors are Spaniards, his literary contemporaries and successors are Englishmen.

Works for the stage

Lesage's miscellaneous work, including his numerous farce-operettas, are the very best kind of literary hack-work. His original style, his abundant wit, his cool, humoristic attitude towards human life, are discernible throughout. But this portion of his work is practically forgotten. *Crispin* and *Turcaret* show a stronger and more deeply marked genius, which, but

for the ill-will of the actors, might have gone far in this direction. But Lesage's peculiar unwillingness to attempt anything absolutely new discovered itself here. Even when he had devoted himself to the Foire theatre, it seems that he was unwilling to attempt a piece with only one actor, a crux which Alexis Piron, a lesser but a bolder genius, accepted and carried through. *Crispin* and *Turcaret* are unquestionably Molièresque, though they are perhaps more original in their following of Molière than any other plays that can be named. For this also was part of Lesage's idiosyncrasy that, while he was apparently unable or

unwilling to strike out an entirely novel line for himself, he had no sooner entered upon the beaten path than he left it to follow his own devices.

Crispin

Crispin rival de son maitre (*Crispin, his master's rival*) is a farce in one act and many scenes. Its plot concerns the effort of a knavish valet, not as usual to further his masters interests, but to supplant that master in love and gain. The charm of the piece consists first in the lively bustling action of the short scenes which take each other up so promptly and

smartly that the spectator has not time to cavil at the improbability of the action, and secondly in the abundant wit of the dialogue.

Turcaret

Turcaret is a far more important piece of work and ranks high among comedies dealing with the actual society of their time. The only thing which prevents it from holding the very highest place is a certain want of unity in the plot. This want, however, is compensated in *Turcaret* by the most masterly profusion of character-drawing in the separate parts. *Turcaret*, the ruthless,

dishonest and dissolute financier, his vulgar wife as dissolute as himself, the harebrained marquis, the knavish chevalier, the baroness (a coquette with the finer edge taken off her fineladyhood, yet by no means unlovable), are each and all finished portraits of the best comic type, while almost as much may be said of the minor characters. The style and dialogue are also worthy of the highest praise; the wit never degenerates into mere wit-combats.

Novels

It is, however, as a novelist that the

world remembers Lesage. A great deal of unnecessary labor has been spent on the discussion of his claims to originality. What has been already said will give a sufficient clue through this thorny ground. In mere form Lesage is not original: he does little more than adopt that of the Spanish picaresque romance of the 16th and 17th century. Often, too, he prefers merely to rearrange and adapt existing work, and still oftener to give himself a kind of start by adopting the work of a preceding writer as a basis. But he never, in any work that pretends to originality at all, is guilty of anything that can fairly be called

plagiarism. Indeed he is very fond of asserting or suggesting his indebtedness when he is really dealing with his own funds. Thus the *Diable boiteux* borrows the title, and for a chapter or two the plan and almost the words, of the *Diablo Cojuelo* of Luis Velez de Guevara. But after a few pages Lesage leaves his predecessor alone. Even the plan of the Spanish original is entirely discarded, and the incidents, the episodes, the style, are as independent as if such a book as the *Diablo Cojuelo* had never existed.

Gil Blas

The case of *Gil Blas* is still more remarkable. It was at first alleged that Lesage had borrowed it from the *Vida del escudero Marcos de Obregón* of Vicente Espinel, a curiously rash assertion, inasmuch as that work exists and is easily accessible, and as a consultation of it proves that, though it furnished Lesage with separate incidents and hints for more than one of his books, *Gil Blas* as a whole is not in the least indebted to it. Afterwards Father Isla asserted that *Gil Blas* was a translation from an actual Spanish book, an unprovable assertion, since there is no trace whatever of any such book. A third

hypothesis is that Lesage may have worked up some manuscript original in his usual way, in the same way, such as he said he did for the *Bachelor of Salamanca*. This also is incapable of refutation, though the argument from the Bachelor is strong against it, for why should Lesage acknowledge his source in the one case but not the other? Except, however, for historical reasons, the controversy may be safely neglected, nor is there very much importance in the more impartial indication of sources (chiefly works on the history of Olivares) which has sometimes been attempted. Of course Lesage knew Spanish

literature well, but there is as little doubt (with the limitations already laid down) of his real originality as of that of any great writer in the world. *Gil Blas* remains his property, and is the capital example of its own style.

In the score of his Violin Concerto, Sir Edward Elgar wrote the Spanish inscription, "*Aquí está encerrada el alma de*" ("*Herein is enshrined the soul of*"), a quotation from *Gil Blas*.

Lesage's style

For Lesage has not only the

characteristic, which Homer and Shakespeare have, of absolute truth to human nature as distinguished from truth to this or that national character, but he has what has been called the quality of detachment, which they also have. He never takes sides with his characters as Henry Fielding sometimes does (though Lesage and Cervantes are certainly Fielding's greatest influences). He describes *Asmodeus* and *Don Cleofas*, *Gil Blas* and the Archbishop and *Doctor Sangrado* with exactly the same impartiality of attitude. Except that he brought into novel writing this highest quality of artistic truth, it perhaps

cannot be said that he did much to advance prose fiction in itself. He invented no new genre; he did not, as Pierre de Marivaux and Antoine François Prévost did, help on the novel as distinguished from the romance. In form his books are undistinguishable, not merely from the Spanish romances which are their direct originals, but from the medieval Romans adventures and the Greek prose romances. But in individual excellence they have few rivals. Nor should it be forgotten, as it sometimes is, that Lesage was a great master of French style, the greatest unquestionably between the classics of the 17th century and the

classics of the 18th. He is perhaps the last great writer before the decadent style of the *philosophe's*. *His style is perfectly easy at the same time that it is often admirably epigrammatic. It has plenty of color, plenty of flexibility, and may be said to be exceptionally well fitted for general literary work.*

Quotations

- "Pride and conceit were the original sins of man."
- "Facts are stubborn things."

Works

Translations and adaptations

- *Le Traître puni*
- *Point d'honneur* (French version)
- *Don Felix de Mendoce*
- *Second Book of the Ingenious Knight Don Quixote of La Mancha*
- *Orlando innamorato*, 1721
- *Guzman d'Alfarache*, 1732 (French version)

Plays

- *Don Cesar Ursin* (French version)
- *Les Etrennes*, 1707
- *Crispin rival de son maitre*,

- 1707 (French version)
- *Turcaret*, 1709

Novels

- *Le Diable boiteux*, 1707.
(French version)
- *Gil Blas* (English version,
French)
 - *Histoire de Gil Blas
de Santillane, (Livres
I-VI), 1715.* (French
version)
 - *Histoire de Gil Blas
de Santillane, (Livres
VII-IX), 1724.* (French
version)
 - *Histoire de Gil Blas
de Santillane, (Livres
X-XII), 1735.* (French

- version)
- *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, 1747. -
- *Vie et aventures de M. de Beauchesne*, 1733 (French version)
- *Le Bachelier de Salamanque*, 1736. (French version)
- *Estevanitte Gonzales*, 1732
- *La Valise trouvee* (French version)
- *Melange amusant de saitties d'esprit et de traits historiques les plus frappants*, 1743

External links

- Works by Alain-René Lesage at Project Gutenberg

This article incorporates text from the Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition, a publication now in the public domain.

Retrieved from
"http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alain-Ren%C3%A9_Lesage"

Categories: Wikipedia articles
needing clarification | 1668 births |
1747 deaths | French dramatists
and playwrights | French novelists

- This page was last modified 17:36, 11 July 2007.
- All text is available under

the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License.
(See **Copyrights** for details.)
Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a US-registered 501(c)(3) tax-deductible nonprofit charity.