The Cambridge Companion to Molière

A broad and detailed introduction to Molière and his plays, this Companion evokes his own theatrical career, his theatres and patrons, the performers and theatre staff with whom he worked and the various publics he and his troupes entertained with such success. It looks at his particular brands of comedy and satire. L’École des femmes, Le Tartuffe, Dom Juan, Le Misanthrope, L’Avare and Les Femmes savantes are examined from a variety of different viewpoints, and through the eyes of different ages and cultures. The comédies-ballets, a genre invented by Molière and his collaborators, are reinstated to the central position which they held in his œuvre in Molière’s own lifetime; his two masterpieces in this genre, Le Bourgeois gentilhomme and Le Malade imaginaire, have chapters to themselves. Finally, the Companion looks at modern directors’ theatre, exploring the central role played by productions of his work in successive ‘revolutions’ in the dramatic arts in France.
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Molière is the most companionable of writers. His plays are filled with warmth, generosity, exuberance. In them, the sympathetic, if excessively trusting, young lovers always win out in the end despite the worst efforts of their self-centred and mendacious elders. There is wit and vitality in his dialogue, and a refreshing recognition in the mirror he holds before us that we are all ridiculous enough to be fit material for satire. For all their joyful qualities, however, Molière’s plays also demonstrate the darker sides of human relationships. Beyond the happy endings, often contrived to the point of being quite unbelievable, a world of tyrannical power-relationships is revealed. Also, his satire of some aspects of polite society in mid-seventeenth-century France is so accurate that his contemporaries made strenuous efforts to keep some of his plays off the stage altogether.

This Companion is offered in the hope that it will assist readers and performers of his plays in exploring for themselves the life-enhancing qualities of this outstanding comic writer. The opening chapters contain a sketch of Molière’s life in the theatre, a description of his actual theatres and their day-to-day workings, and a discussion of the acting of his plays – both by Molière himself and by modern troupes; the closing chapters reflect on some of the exciting rebrandings of Molière by modern directors who have found in him and his plays inspiration for their own perpetual reinventions of the theatre for their own generations. In the middle of the book, a variety of scholars, using a variety of approaches, look at comedy and satire, at the comédies-ballets and at individual comic masterpieces. Of course this is a Companion, not a sarcophagus in which we have sought to lodge a complete and embalmed Molière. Many more Molières await rewriting, and both editors and contributors will be pleased if these glimpses of his genius stir others to perform and write new versions of their own.
CHRONOLOGY

1622 Birth of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, baptised 15 January. His family, who live in the Halles district of Paris, are *tapissiers* [tapestry-makers], on both sides and for several generations. He studies humanities (according to La Grange in the *Préface* to the 1682 edition of his plays) at the celebrated Jesuit Collège de Clermont, where the curriculum is grounded on the study of Latin language and literature; the Roman comedies of Terence and the writings of the orator and moralist Cicero are central to the curriculum; the performance of ballets and plays in Latin is part of a Jesuit education.

1631 His father, Jean Poquelin, purchases the office of *tapissier et valet de chambre ordinaire du roi* and, in 1637, obtains the reversion of the office to his fifteen-year-old son.

1632 His mother dies. The inventory of her effects suggests that the family is comfortably off, but not wealthy.

1643–5 After graduating in law and practising for no more than a few months, he receives part of his succession from his father, cedes his right to the office of *tapissier* to his brother and joins with Madeleine Béjart and eight others to found the Illustre Théâtre in the faubourg Saint-Germain. The new troupe spends lavishly on the theatre’s furnishings; they appoint four musicians and a dancer. Financial difficulties drive them to move from Saint-Germain to premises in the theatre district on the Right Bank. Jean-Baptiste chooses the stage name of Molière and emerges first as co-leader, with Madeleine Béjart, then as leader of the troupe. Their repertoire is
dominated by tragedies and tragi-comedies written by fashionable playwrights.

1645–58
Increasing debts lead to Molière’s brief imprisonment (not until 1666 does he finish paying them off). He leaves Paris and, soon to be followed by the Béjarts, joins the troupe of Charles Dufresne (belonging to the duc d’Épernon) which, from a base in the Languedoc, performs mainly in the southern provinces, both to elite audiences and (less often) to mixed urban audiences. Molière is leader of the troupe by around 1650. Surviving documents show him at various points in Nantes, Toulouse, Albi, Poitiers, Narbonne, Agen, Pézenas, Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lyon, Montpellier, Béziers, Dijon and Rouen. The company becomes ‘the troupe of Monseigneur le Prince de Conti’ in 1653 (until Conti withdraws permission to use his name in 1657). Around 1653–4, Molière gives the first performance, in Lyon, of L’Étourdi (in five acts and in verse), the earliest of his published plays. This play and another early five-act play in verse, Le Dépit amoureux (1656?), will be revived frequently after the troupe’s move to Paris. Titles of farces from this period survive, but most are undated, unpublished, and perhaps only ever existed as rough outlines to be fleshed out by the actors; texts of two of these, La Jalousie du Barbouillé and Le Médecin volant, survive. Fragmentary evidence of the troupe’s repertoire in these years shows that, in addition to short farces, it includes literary comedy, tragedy, tragi-comedy and ballet.

1658
Molière’s troupe arrives in Paris under the protection of Monsieur, the King’s brother (who does not pay his promised pension) and performs Corneille’s Nicomède and a one-act farce, Le Docteur amoureux (now lost), before Louis XIV and the court. The performance is well received and the troupe is allotted a share of the Petit-Bourbon, where the Italian Comedians – including the celebrated Scaramouche (Tiberio Fiorilli) – are already installed. His repertoire, while continuing throughout the Paris years to include tragedies and comedies by other authors, is increasingly dominated by comedies written by Molière himself.
1659  *Les Précieuses ridicules*, a one-act farce and a pointed satire on aspects of contemporary salon life, attracts notoriety, enhancing Molière’s reputation while inspiring hostility and jealousy among his rivals and victims.

1660  *Sganarelle ou le Cocu imaginaire* is the most frequently performed of Molière’s plays during his lifetime. The Petit-Bourbon is demolished without warning, and the troupe, after three months without a home, moves, in January 1661, to the salle built originally by Richelieu in the Palais-Royal.

1661  *Dom Garcie de Navarre*, Molière’s only play written in the higher register of tragedy and tragi-comedy, flops. *L’École des maris* is a consistent success. *Les Fâcheux*, his first comédie-ballet, is performed at Vaux-le-Vicomte for Fouquet before the King; music and choreography are by Pierre Beauchamp, who will choreograph all of Molière’s comédies-ballets.

1662  Molière at forty marries the twenty-year-old actress Armande Béjart. *L’École des femmes*, the first of his grandes comédies, stirs a major literary quarrel, but establishes Molière’s reputation as the leading comic poet of his generation.

1663  *La Critique de l’École des femmes* and *L’Impromptu de Versailles*: two lively one-act plays which discuss the nature of comedy, the theatre and acting.

1664  Molière’s son Louis is born (he survives ten months; only his daughter Esprit-Madeleine, born 1665, will outlive him); the King is godfather and Henriette d’Angleterre godmother. Molière turns more and more to the new genre of comédie-ballet as his troupe performs with increasing frequency before the King and at court festivals. *Le Mariage forcé*, a comédie-ballet, with music by Lully, is performed at the Louvre for the Queen Mother; the King and a number of courtiers take dancing roles. (Lully will compose the music for all of Molière’s comédies-ballets until 1672.) *La Princesse d’Elide*, a five-act comédie-ballet, is performed in the gardens at Versailles, formerly a royal hunting-lodge, as part of *Les Plaisirs de l’Île enchantée*, a festival based on a theme from
Ariosto’s Orlando furioso. An early version of Le Tartuffe (in three acts), the most controversial of all Molière’s satires, is performed as part of the same festival. While giving Molière his personal assurance that he sees nothing to censure in this biting satire on religious hypocrisy, the King bans further performances. But private readings in great houses continue.

1665

Dom Juan, another controversial play portraying an aristocratic libertin and echoing some of the themes from Le Tartuffe, is withdrawn by Molière after a brief and successful run. Molière’s company becomes ‘la Troupe du Roi’, and he receives a pension of 6,000 livres. L’Amour médecin, a comédie-ballet in three acts.

1666

The early months of the year are dominated by Molière’s almost fatal illness; he will suffer increasingly frequent ill health for the remaining seven years of his life. Le Misanthrope, Molière’s fullest portrait of court society and salon life, is performed for the town, but not at court. Le Médecin malgré lui, a three-act farce.

1666–7

He collaborates with Benserade, Lully, the Italian Comedians and the troupe of the Hôtel de Bourgogne to create the spectacular Ballet des Muses; Molière contributes Mélicerte, La Pastorale comique and Le Sicilien; the ballet is performed for (and by) the King at Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Molière puts on one performance of L’Imposteur (a five-act revised version of Le Tartuffe) before it is again banned.

1668

Molière presents his version of Plautus’ Amphitryon as a machine-play. George Dandin is performed at Versailles as part of a pastoral entertainment. L’Avare: Molière’s rewriting of Plautus’ Aulularia (Pot of Gold).

1669

The King gives permission for public performances of Le Tartuffe. In terms of gross box-office takings, it is Molière’s third most successful play (after Psyché and L’École des femmes). Monsieur de Pourceaugnac, a comédie-ballet in three acts, is first performed at Chambord. Molière’s father dies.
Appearance of Élomire hypocondre (by Le Boulanger de Chalussay), a hostile – but informative – attack on Molière. Les Amants magnifiques, a comédie-ballet. The King ceases to appear himself in court ballets. Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, a comédie-ballet, is first performed at Chambord.

1671

Psyché, written in collaboration with Corneille and Quinault, a tragi-comédie et ballet, and machine-play. Les Fourberies de Scapin, a comedy in three acts adapted from Terence’s Phormio. La Comtesse d’Escarbagnas, a one-act play incorporated within a ballet.

1672

Les Femmes savantes, a full and polished satire on the world of letters.

1673

Le Malade imaginaire, a comédie-ballet with music by Marc-Antoine Charpentier. Molière, playing the role of the hypochondriac, falls ill at the fourth performance and dies later that evening. Within a week his troupe, driven no doubt by the need to earn a living, returns to the stage. Four of his actors leave to join the Troupe royale at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Those that remain, retaining the title of Troupe du Roi, merge with the actors of the Marais theatre and move to the Hôtel Guénégaud on the Left Bank, where they continue to perform Molière’s plays.

1680

The Troupe du Roi merges again, at the King’s command, with the Troupe royale of the Hôtel de Bourgogne to form the Comédie-Française, also known as La Maison de Molière.