1

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The career strategy of an actor turned playwright: 'de l'audace, encore de l'audace, toujours de l'audace'

> On ignore ce grand Homme; & les foibles crayons, qu'on nous en a donnez, sont tous manquez; ou si peu recherchez, qu'ils ne suffisent pas pour le faire connoître tel qu'il étoit. Le Public est rempli d'une infinité de fausses Histoires à son occasion. Il y a peu de personnes de son temps qui, pour se faire honneur d'avoir figuré avec lui, n'inventent des avantures qu'ils prétendent avoir eues ensemble.[1]
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> [We do not know this great Man, and the feeble sketches we have of him are all wide of the mark, or so lacking in depth that they are not enough to allow us to know him as he was. The general public has heard untold numbers of inaccurate stories about him. There are few among his contemporaries who, in order to enjoy the reflected glory of being associated with him, have not invented adventures that they claim to have shared with him.]

Thus wrote Grimarest in 1705. Three centuries later, we hardly know Molière's life, or his career, any better. We have only a few verifiable facts about his childhood and training. His thirteen years of life in the provinces have left few clues. Even in his last years in Paris, when his career as dramatist is well documented, his private life remains unknown. Moreover, Molière did not talk about himself. Few are the texts where he writes in the first person: a couple of prefaces, petitions and acknowledgements, generally linked to the debates arising from his work, and in the work itself a few passages where he acts out his own role as actor-director-author. Thus we can only get a feel of the man through what his contemporaries said; and their accounts generally take the form of unreliable anecdotes through which either his enemies sought to ridicule him, or else his friends aimed to make him the hero of a golden legend.

Paradoxically, his little-known life continues to fascinate. The time-honoured image of a Molière who lived a life of travail is in fact at odds with his remarkable and obvious success as a dramatist. The death of his mother when he was ten, the conflict with his father, who opposed

his choice of career, his marital problems, attacks from enemies, betrayals by friends, sickness, in short everything, even his burial done hastily and by night, seems to point to the difficulties faced by a man who, while inspiring laughter, knew great personal unhappiness. Critics have often imposed a double personality on Molière as playwright too, seeking to distinguish a 'real' Molière, author of *Le Misanthrope* or *Tartuffe*, from a more trivial Molière who, driven by the need for money, sought to please the unenlightened taste of people and court by performing slapstick comedies and *comédies-ballets*. Such critics echo Boileau:

> Dans ce sac ridicule où Scapin s'enveloppe,
> Je ne reconnais plus l'Auteur du Misanthrope.[2]

[In Scapin's clowning with his sack, I do not recognise the author of *Le Misanthrope*.]

It is as if only the serious Molière were worthy of featuring in the myth built up around this poet actor, lauded as a seventeenth-century Terence by his supporters and condemned for the supposed vulgarity and immorality of his work by his enemies. Over the centuries, spreading admiration for this 'universal genius' has made him a symbol of France and a key figure in the history of world drama.

The Early Years

Molière was born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, and only the 'invincible penchant qu'il se sentoit pour la Comedie' ['overwhelming desire that he felt for the theatre'][3] could make this son of a rich Parisian merchant-class family leave his father's trade of master *tapissier*. However, from these decisive early years, we know only that he was born in January 1622, that his mother died when he was a boy of ten and that in all likelihood he studied until 1639 in the Jesuit Collège de Clermont, the most fashionable school in Paris. While there, according to his first biographers, he met Chapelle, Bernier, future author of the *Abrégé de la vie d'Épicure*, and Cyrano de Bergerac, with whom he attended classes given by the Epicurean philosopher Gassendi. Molière's translation of Lucretius's *De Natura Rerum* possibly dated from this time too. His humanist education, then, was allied to a philosophical training with a libertine flavour.

Evidence on his education, of course, may be flawed: our sources, Donneau de Visé and La Grange, might well have overstated both Molière's philosophical training and his classical learning in order to enhance his theatrical reputation and combat the caricatural image of him as a *farceur*

spread by his enemies. For the latter was precisely the image painted by those who evoked a youthful Molière acting on Parisian street corners as assistant to the charlatans Orviétan and Bary, or playing apprentice to the slapstick comic Guillot-Gorju. An interesting implication of these calumnious tales, however, is that they show contemporaries linking Molière with the French comic tradition, calling into question the current view of him as exclusively the pupil of Italian actors: after all, he was not in a position to observe the latter until his return to Paris in 1658, when he shared a theatre with them for several years.

Molière's family, the Poquelins, had connections with court entertainment through their relatives, the Mazuels, a famous family of musicians who undoubtedly helped the playwright gain access to the court. Early biographers also told the story that the child 'avoit un grand-pere, qui l'aimoit éperduëment; & comme ce bon homme avoit de la passion pour la Comédie, il y menoit souvent le petit Pocquelin, à l'Hôtel de Bourgogne' ['had a grandfather, who adored him; and as this man had a great love for the theatre, he often took the little Poquelin to the Hôtel de Bourgogne'].[4] It seems that Molière took up acting no later than January 1643, when he ceded to his brother the rights to the office of *tapissier* to the King, acquired by his father in 1631, and assigned to Molière himself in 1637. On 30 June 1643 Molière entered a contractual partnership with Madeleine Béjart, her brothers and a few friends, to found what was to be the Illustre Théâtre. We cannot be sure whether this was a new company or merely the formal establishment of an already existing group that gave private performances in makeshift settings. Either way, these young people displayed great intrepidity – or rashness – launching such a venture at a time when Richelieu's death threatened the theatre's (if not yet the actors') recent acquisition of respectability.

The Adventure of the Illustre Théâtre

The document drawn up by the solicitor to create the Illustre Théâtre is presented as a '*contrat de solidarité*' between ten signatories (six men and four women). Decisions were to be taken collectively, though three of them were responsible for casting, and Madeleine Béjart was free to choose her own roles. Though a casting director, Molière seems not to have become head of the company until a year later, in June 1644.

The ten-member company had to compete with rivals at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Marais, on the Right Bank of the Seine. It was logical for them to seek to avoid direct competition: hence their choice of premises in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, attractive both for its distance from the other

theatres and because of the area's growing population, due to the sale in separate lots of Queen Marguerite's private residence and the arrival at the Luxembourg Palace of Gaston, duc d'Orléans, with whom the new company wished to find favour. In autumn 1643, they rented the jeu de paume des Mestayers, which had to be adapted to create a stage, gallery and boxes. Molière and his friends had high ambitions. They had to borrow: to cover the costs of alterations and of recruiting four musicians, followed, in June 1644, by a dancer. Molière's interest in drama combined with music goes back to the very earliest days of the Illustre Théâtre. Indeed, it was with 'deux ou trois entrées de ballet' ['two or three ballet entries'] that the company put on Claude de l'Estoile's *La Belle Esclave* in November 1644. However, financial insecurity was a problem from the start.

The new theatre opened in January 1644. The Marais theatre had just been destroyed by fire, which doubtless made the company's initial successes easier; at least until September 1644 everything went well. This is borne out by the actors' readiness to borrow money, and the ease with which they found lenders. Moreover, the company threw itself into an aggressive commercial policy, playing the latest works of the well-known authors of the time such as du Ryer or Tristan, rather than works already in the public domain. Responding to fashion and taste, they put on several tragedies which showcased Madeleine's talents. Again with an eye to fashion, they adopted a luxurious stage design with sumptuous backdrops and costumes. It is probable that, as part of a broader social strategy, the company performed in the homes of private individuals with the aim of developing a 'special relationship' with members of the Parisian elite. Indeed, by September 1644, the actors could present themselves as 'comédiens associés sous le titre de l'Illustre Théâtre entretenu par son Altesse Royale' ['actors working in a company known as the Illustre Théâtre under the patronage of His Royal Highness'], namely Gaston d'Orléans, the late King's brother.

However, the Marais reopened and competition became more fierce. With rising debts, the company incurred yet more by leaving their premises to settle closer to the other theatres, in the jeu de paume de La Croix-Noire in the Saint-Paul district. Were they fleeing failure or capitalising on early success? We cannot know, but delay opening the redecorated premises at the end of January 1645 and the early closure for Easter, resulting in fewer performances and lower takings, worsened the precarious finances of the Illustre Théâtre. The bailiffs took possession of settings and fittings, and Molière was twice imprisoned for debt in August 1645. In September, the actors were forced to leave and joined various provincial companies. The venture was over. But its collapse was not a result of failure to attract

the public, of choosing the wrong plays, or of poor acting. They had held their own professionally against the other companies. Their problems were purely financial. In fact, Molière was not to succeed in getting a foothold in Paris until he could once again take advantage of the fact that the Marais theatre was provisionally closed, and he was only to make a lasting impact once the novelty success of his own plays had made a fashionable playwright of him.

Thirteen Years of Life in the Provinces

Once the Illustre Théâtre had gone and the company had disbanded, Molière, shortly followed by the Béjarts, was welcomed by the duc d'Épernon's company, which was touring in the west of France. Molière would take charge of it only towards 1650. Having become the virtual leader of a Parisian company at the young age of twenty-two, Molière was now to serve a long apprenticeship in the provinces. The sheer daring of this son of a wealthy bourgeois who, as a total novice, had wanted to give Paris a new company, had not paid off. The company started in Guyenne, then went to the Languedoc on the invitation of the comte d'Aubijoux, the King's *lieutenant général*, who procured invitations for them to attend each of the meetings of the province's États Généraux. It was thanks to him that the actors were introduced into the private circle of a privileged class: the social elite of the Languedoc and the whole network of followers of Gaston d'Orléans, the governor of the province. In 1653, they moved over to the service of the prince de Conti, who became patron of the company and allowed them to use his name. The picture painted by Molière's detractors of an assortment of 'caimans vagabonds, morts-de-fain [sic], demi-nuds' ['half-naked, starving lazy beggars and vagabonds'],[5] acting to crowds of illiterate peasants with vulgar tastes, is therefore misleading. On the contrary, the playwright was part of a company enjoying the patronage of a social elite, remunerated by the États Généraux and acting before distinguished gatherings.[6]

Until 1657, the company hardly left the Languedoc except for a few visits to Lyon, where doubtless they had to deal with an audience which consisted of paying commoners, very different from the elite social circle for whom they performed in Montpellier, Pézenas or Béziers. Molière and his fellow actors thus initiated a strategy of playing to different audiences, which they were to stick to later in Paris. There were two main strands to this 'success strategy': gaining the approval of aristocratic, princely circles, and guaranteeing a steadier income from the paying public.[7] It was thanks to their princely contacts in the Languedoc that Molière and his company were

immediately presented to the court on their return to Paris in October 1658, under the protection of Monsieur, Louis XIV's only brother.

Not much is known of their provincial repertory, other than that it included 'ces petits divertissemens qui luy avoient acquis quelque reputation, & dont il regaloit les Provinces' ['those little plays which had earned him a good reputation, and which gave great pleasure in the provinces'][8], namely old farces from the medieval tradition which Molière would rework on his return to the capital. We can assume that the company also put on tragedies, pastoral plays and comedies in five acts, particularly for the États Généraux. It was then that Molière's *L'Étourdi* was first staged, in Lyon from around 1653, and *Le Dépit amoureux*, in Béziers, 1656, both following the Italian model of the *commedia sostenuta*. Again in Lyon in 1653, the company staged *Andromède*, a machine-play by Corneille with music and dancing, displaying once again Molière's taste for spectacle and experiment, a taste no doubt encouraged by the presence of the musician d'Assoucy working with him during those years. It is possible that Molière was the author of the *Ballet des Incompatibles* staged in Montpellier for the Carnival of 1654–5 and in which he performed himself.

The actors' highly successful time in the Languedoc came to an abrupt close at the end of 1656 with the death of the comte d'Aubijoux and the sudden conversion of the prince de Conti, who withdrew his support from his actors. They had to leave a province now hostile to them and seek refuge in Lyon, where the prince 'leur [a] fait dire de quitter [son] nom' ['sent a message to tell them to stop using his name'].[9] After touring there for a few months, they went to Rouen in the spring of 1658 and prepared for what was to be their permanent return to Paris in the autumn of that year. They returned under the aegis of Philippe, the King's brother, for experience had taught Molière that success was not possible without a patron. On 24 October, the actors performed a Corneille tragedy, followed by a short comedy by Molière, *Le Docteur amoureux*, before the King, in the Louvre.

A Dazzling Rise to Fame

This performance, of which no account survives, was a key event in Molière's career: it allowed him to arrange the loan of the huge *salle* in the Petit-Bourbon from the King, which he was to share with the Italian actors, before being rehoused in the Palais-Royal in 1660. Madeleine Béjart was really the star of this new company. From now on, Molière combined the roles of actor, *orateur* and, above all else, author. He initially sought to win success as much with tragedies as with his own comedies, such as *Les Précieuses ridicules* (1659) or *Sganarelle ou Le Cocu imaginaire* (1660),

because he wished to compete with the Hôtel de Bourgogne on its own ground, and not as a company specialising in comedy. But he soon found that the public was more numerous when he put on one of his short plays after a tragedy, or when the programme included *L'Étourdi* or *Le Dépit amoureux*. He responded from 1663 by considerably reducing the number of tragedies performed, though he did not stop altogether until the last seasons at the end of his life. Molière was ambitious, too, to compose tragedies, the highest literary genre after the epic, and certainly the shortest route to attaining the glorious status of true poet and playwright. Thus in 1661 he staged his own *Dom Garcie de Navarre*, his first and last attempt to escape specialisation. Faced with the play's mediocre success, he had to decide to follow the path marked out for him by fashion and by the tastes of the theatre-going public.

Molière's strategy was to recycle the ingredients of his first comedies, turning them into longer plays such as the three-act *L'École des maris* (1661); to ensure the success of these, and so maintain reasonably steady box-office takings, he would put them on with established full-length pieces. Gradually, he moved on to comedies in five acts such as *L'École des femmes* (1662). At the same time, with *Les Fâcheux* (1661), he launched into *comédie-ballet*, a genre combining music, dance and text which, if not completely new, is still associated with his name. Created for the court, these works were afterwards performed in town with just as much success. It was the *comédie-ballet* that especially brought Molière to the King's attention.

This success strategy explains the diversity of Molière's output, in which farces, social satires, character plays and *comédies-ballets* provided a rich array of styles. It also explains the variety within individual plays, where different theatrical genres mingled: he introduced farcical elements into five-act plays in verse (for example in *L'École des femmes* and *Tartuffe*) or blended text, music and dance in multiple configurations. Such aesthetic innovation was possible because the audacity necessary to bring success was matched by the audacity of the playwright's invention. Molière aimed to be at the cutting edge of innovation, raising originality to the level of a literary value. More flexible than tragedy, and still very much in the process of being codified, comedy lent itself to innovation. His inclusion of such a variety of elements, reflecting the 'galant' aesthetics developing in the salons, allowed him to satisfy the expectations of a diverse public, whether at court or in town, whether well-heeled aristocrats in the private boxes or the lower orders standing in the *parterre*. And, for the most part, audiences poured in – and box-office takings. Only the literary establishment and the purists, keen on enforcing compliance with the rules of genre, found fault with his work.

Sure of his talent, Molière used every means to promote the image of actors. He had understood from early in his career the need for a good public-relations network. Hence his private performances in the capital, which became increasingly frequent and ended only when the King took over the company in August 1665. Such performances enhanced Molière's reputation. The status he achieved of 'writer without equal' was converted into social status for, though not ennobled like Corneille, he had the right to come into the presence of the King and his name was on the list of royal *pensions* drawn up by Chapelain in 1662. Recognition, fame and material well-being, Molière knew all of these.

Six Years of Fighting

But all this came at a price. His troubles may often have been exaggerated, but troubles there were: Molière as company director and playwright had to contend continually with the jealousy of rival actors and playwrights, criticisms from purists and above all the hostility of those who clung to a narrow religious and moral conformism, some of whom opposed the very survival of the theatre. In seeking to gain recognition as an author and as an author with ideas, Molière had to take on a society with many entrenched opinions. *L'École des femmes* in December 1662, although a triumph, and an unfinished *Tartuffe* in May 1664 were to plunge him into a period of controversy from which he was to emerge only six years later.

L'École des femmes, a neo-classical comedy in verse in five acts, based upon new aesthetic principles, stirred jealousy among the dramatic poets of his time and was greeted by a barrage of criticisms and libels. Molière responded with two short plays, *La Critique de L'École des femmes* and *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, in which he defended his comedy and caricatured his enemies, especially the Hôtel de Bourgogne actors. He affirmed the paramount importance of remaining faithful to nature, describing his plays as 'miroirs publics' ['public mirrors'] and 'peintures ridicules qu'on expose sur les théâtres' ['ridiculous portraits that are exposed on the stage'].[10] Such mirror-like fidelity was essential if the theatre was to fulfil its pedagogic role; however ridiculous, then, his gallery of portraits was to be seen and enjoyed as part of human nature. Molière also set out his principles as an actor and contrasted his direct style with the turgidity and caricatural affectation with which the Hôtel de Bourgogne actors declaimed their lines. In his desire to imitate natural diction, to search for harmony between subject, style and speech, he chose to move away from the practices of traditional oratory. This went hand in hand with his rejection of the stilted acting style of his rivals, and a preference for the variety and fluidity

of movement and gesture which characterised the acting of the Italians. Lastly, by making the plot of *L'Impromptu de Versailles* the representation of the rehearsal of a play by his own company, Molière depicted himself in his own role as director-producer, taking care not to distribute 'ses rolles à des Acteurs qui ne seussent pas les executer' ['his roles to actors who did not know how to play them'], 'ne les pla[cer] point à l'avanture' ['miscast them badly'][11] and showing that he directed them with 'honnêteté' and in 'une manière engageante' ['an engaging fashion'].[12]

The *Querelle* of *L'École des femmes* barely over, Molière stirred new controversy with *Tartuffe*, a play in which he mocked sanctimonious hypocrites and argued for open, tolerant morals. He now encountered far more dangerous adversaries. The play was banned following pressure from the devout members of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, who doubtless also saw to it that *Dom Juan*, first performed in February 1665, was swiftly withdrawn. Although the latter, where the provocative element was hidden behind expensive stage sets and machinery, was never staged again in his lifetime, Molière did all he could to get the ban on *Tartuffe* lifted. After the failure to get it performed in 1667 in a rewritten version as *L'Imposteur*, it was only in 1669 that it appeared at the Palais-Royal in its final version. It was a huge success, the more so because of the wait.

Despite everything, the period 1663–9 had been an extremely prosperous one for Molière and his company. In addition to the plays that had provoked – or contributed to – literary battles, Molière had been successfully writing different kinds of plays. The neo-classical character comedies, such as *Le Misanthrope* (1666) and *L'Avare* (1668), alternated with revamped farces, *George Dandin* (1668) and *Le Médecin malgré lui* (1666), and the mythological comedy of *Amphitryon* (1668). In the latter, borrowed from Plautus, Molière had a subtle revenge on those who accused him of flouting the classical tradition. No less important were the *comédies-ballets* written for the court, combining burlesque, 'galant' and mythological elements, and showing the full range of the playwright's creative palette: *Le Mariage forcé* (1664), *La Princesse d'Élide* (1664), *Le Sicilien* (1667) and *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* (1669). If such range and variety are proofs of his talent and strategic skills, they also reveal a Molière writing under the many and varied pressures coming from King and court, from his Parisian public and from the running of his company. Attracting audiences is the aim of every theatre company, and Molière had to renew his repertory rapidly in order to fill his theatre; while satisfying the tastes of the day, he had to take into account his own and his actors' talents, characters and physical appearance, as well as the need to create a role for everybody. As La Grange noted with regret, Molière had also to respond swiftly to the King's wishes

and sometimes work on topics not of his own choosing.[13] However, nowhere does one find Molière complaining of this. Was not the King's favour, shown in such commands, the true mark of success? To make life easier, we can be sure Molière reused work from his time in the provinces as well as borrowing freely from classical authors and his own contemporaries.[14]

The company certainly had difficult moments in Paris, especially when, in 1667, *Tartuffe* was banned twice. That year was particularly difficult, the more so because Molière fell ill in the spring and the actress Du Parc defected to the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The season of 1665–6 had had its troubles too: Molière's first illness and then the period of mourning for the Queen Mother, which closed the theatres, brought real hardship. The actors could never be guaranteed a stable income. No longer able to use the wide range of established works originally in their repertoire, the company found itself precariously dependent on new plays and on Molière's own creations. Any flop or ban resulted in serious difficulties.

In the King's Service

Powerful patrons helped Molière to overcome these difficulties. Firstly there was Monsieur, under whose wing the company returned to Paris; then Madame and the prince de Condé, who supported Molière during the *Querelle* of *Tartuffe*, and above all Louis XIV himself, who allocated him a theatre in the Louvre as soon as he returned in 1658, rehoused him in the Palais-Royal after the demolition of the Petit-Bourbon in 1660, took his side during the *Querelle* of *L'École des femmes* by agreeing to act as his son's godfather and by commissioning *L'Impromptu de Versailles* for the court in 1663 and lastly giving him and his company a leading role in the *Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée* in spring 1664. It was the King again who, soon after the ban on *Dom Juan*, adopted the company in August 1665, giving them a *pension* of 6,000 *livres* a year; the King also who, whilst maintaining the ban on *Tartuffe*, let it be known that this was for the sake of keeping peace in the kingdom and then lifted the ban at the first sign of calm. This protection amounted almost to a monopoly: once Louis XIV had become the company's patron, Molière became the named – if not sole – provider of the monarch's entertainment, from light after-dinner distractions during the hunting season to grand festivals in the palace gardens. The company's visits to the court became longer and more frequent, risking loss of support and consequent loss of income from the Parisian public. From 1664 to 1672, out of twenty-one plays written by Molière, fifteen were for the King. This proportion increased: between 1667 and 1672 Molière