

CHAPTER 1
'DON JUAN', 1665–1925

MOLIÈRE AND THE LEGEND OF DON JUAN

Tales about statues of the dead coming to life to exact retribution from the living were endemic in medieval folk legend, and in literature stretching back to antiquity. But the fusion of the Stone Guest motif with the story of an unrepentant womaniser first appeared in Spain in 1630. Written by a monk, Tirso de Molina, *The Joker of Seville and the Guest of Stone* recounts the life of Don Juan Tenorio, whose adventures are punished when the statue of a Commander whom he had killed, and whose daughter he has tried to seduce, invites him to supper and drags him down to Hell. This cautionary tale, despite its pious intentions, is actually a much more exciting play than it sounds, as a recent production by the Royal Shakespeare Company proved.¹ In addition to its sensational story, the play broaches two major themes which, at the emergence of the modern world, were starting to take a grip on Western consciousness: the clash between the rationalist mind and phenomena which transcend the material world, and the tension between the individual ego and the moral restraints of society. Unwittingly, Tirso had created a mythical archetype which has inspired innumerable poets, playwrights, novelists and composers.

From Spain, the story quickly passed to Italy, and from there to France. Giliberto's *The Guest of Stone* (1652) is now lost, but another play of the same name, attributed to Cicognini, inspired versions by the French playwrights Dorimon (1658) and Villiers (1659). During the course of its transmission, the story acquired an increasingly comic or tragi-comic complexion. In the process, the figure of

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the servant Catalinón assumed growing importance as a counter-weight to Don Juan. The story was becoming that of a couple, with the servant (Molière's Sganarelle, Mozart's Leporello) having equal dramatic status to the master. In addition, the focus was shifting from the moral lesson to the central character's motivation, thus laying the groundwork for the emergence of *Don Juan* as a modern psychological type rather than Tirso's morality-play Everyman. The story, meanwhile, had also been absorbed into the repertoire of *com-media dell'arte* where it became a subject of farce, and this gave it a second line of transmission to France. One scenario by Biancolelli, a popular Harlequin, was being performed in Paris in the early 1660s. At about the same time the Italian Players, with whom Molière was then sharing the Petit-Bourbon theatre, were performing their own version.

What attracted Molière to the story was doubtless its proven box-office appeal. The latter was always a crucial consideration to the playwright and actor-manager, but especially so in 1664-5 when he wrote *Don Juan*. For three years he had been fighting off attacks from the coalition of churchmen, prudes and theatrical rivals whose enmity had been aroused by the phenomenal success in 1662 of *School for Wives*. In May 1664 he suffered a serious blow at the hands of the Company of Jesus with the suppression of *Tartuffe* after only a single performance at Versailles. The need for a new play to revive the repertoire must have been very pressing. But the loss of *Tartuffe* was clearly more than a financial set-back. The tenacity with which he waged his five-year struggle to get the ban lifted suggests that for Molière it was, above all, a moral issue. What was at stake was his survival as an artist who asserted the right of comedy to be serious, that is to treat the burning social and philosophical issues of his time. In this perspective the full extent of Molière's boldness in writing *Don Juan* becomes apparent. Faced with calls from the highest religious authorities for his elimination, he chose to riposte not with a safe and innocuous comedy but with a work which was, if anything, more audacious than *Tartuffe*.

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Molière's *Don Juan* is not a simple re-telling of the story but an original play adapted to the manners and ideas of his time. Ostensibly the action is set in Sicily but contemporaries would easily recognise in Don Juan the portrait of an emancipated French nobleman of the mid-seventeenth century. Depicting a gallery of contemporary social types, the play functions at one level as a comedy of manners. At another level, in keeping with the classical interest in human nature, it becomes a portrait of an individual. Molière transfers the interest from the Don's sexual exploits, which are reduced to illustrative incidents, to his psychology. He endows him with a powerful intellect and allows him to justify his actions in terms of a systematic programme of rational free-thinking. Don Juan, unlike his real-life counterparts who dabbled in Epicurianism and materialistic scepticism, may simply be using his professed philosophy as a convenient cloak for a selfish way of life. But by treating the subject at the level of philosophical debate, Molière makes the play into a provocative blend of social satire and metaphysical speculation. Another major contribution to the legend was to make Sganarelle Don Juan's close confidant. More than a comic foil, his real dramatic function – which directors ignore at their peril – is to break through the master's monstrous inaccessibility and to reveal Don Juan to the audience.

We may take it for granted that a play should be judged on its own terms, by what it is rather than what it is not. But to understand why *Don Juan* was for so long consigned to neglect, one needs to recognise that in terms of the formal rules of French classical dramaturgy it is a highly unorthodox masterpiece. It is written in prose rather than verse; it defies the three unities of place, time and action; instead of a single plot there are three strands to the intrigue (the pursuit of Don Juan by his wronged wife Elvire and her three brothers; Don Juan's amorous pursuit of the peasant women; the unrelated episode of the Commander who returns from Don Juan's past to inflict retribution). The plot is episodic, with a sequence of sometimes unrelated characters and scenes, the exposition is incomplete,

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and some actions are initiated inconclusively. Disconcertingly, Molière also confounds the classical convention by mixing dramatic genres: neither comedy nor tragedy, the play is a tragi-comedy in which broad farce is juxtaposed with semi-serious discussion of weighty moral and philosophical issues. It is these non-classical qualities (sometimes described as ‘Shakespearean’), that condemned *Don Juan* to its status in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a chaotically incoherent work – and, conversely, have helped to make its appeal irresistible to modern directors and audiences.

Critics have often felt compelled to explain the play’s irregularities in terms of the supposed haste with which it was written. In fact, recent evidence shows that Molière composed it over a rather longer period than was formerly imagined. In any case, rather than seeking explanations for allegedly defective craftsmanship, it seems more profitable to enquire what artistic principles govern its composition.

Beneath an apparently erratic action there lies, in fact, a deep structural unity. Briefly, the action is constructed around a pivotal point between the third and fourth acts. The first three acts depict Don Juan in a series of adventures, eluding Elvire and her brothers while all the time pursuing whatever objects of interest present themselves to him (a passing flirtation with peasant women, an entanglement with brigands, a moral duel with a hermit). All these episodes are introduced as illustrations of the libertine’s way of life, the reasons for which are illuminated, meanwhile, in a series of philosophical discussions with Sganarelle. The fact that each act, contrary to classical convention, has a different setting, is intrinsic to the play’s meaning, as too is the fact that each location is out of doors. At a symbolic level, the discontinuity of the action and the topographical variety express Don Juan’s relationship with the world. The spectator watches the libertine roaming freely, irresponsibly and with seeming impunity, through the world of others. At the very end of the third act the play takes a leap into the supernatural with the first appearance of the Commander, suggesting that there may be more to the world than Don Juan’s materialistic

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philosophy allows. The last two acts, in contrast to the first three, show the net closing in and for that reason are markedly less episodic. The fourth act switches to an interior setting – a significant change since the central character is no longer seen as an unhindered free spirit. A now immobile Don Juan is being visited by a succession of creditors, literal and metaphorical, each of whom delivers a request, which is denied, and a warning, which is tossed aside. They present themselves in a sequence that reflects the increasing gravity of their mission: the tradesman (money), the father (family honour), the wife (Christian duty), the Commander (perdition). Don Juan's refusal to heed their demands invokes a process of retribution, which the final act executes. First, as in all classical tragedies and comedies, there is a scene where the onward rush of events is suspended: in one final escapade Don Juan, assuming the mask of a religious hypocrite, enjoys what the spectators now sense is only an illusion of impunity; from then on, the action accelerates towards its ordained conclusion. Described thus, the play is anything but chaotic. Certainly, directors who have approached it on its own terms have found in it a perfectly coherent, implacable, artistic logic.

What these actions signify in ethical and social terms is, however, altogether more problematic. Of all Molière's plays, *Don Juan* poses the greatest interpretative difficulties. This is partly because the central character himself appears to be a paradoxical mixture of positive and negative qualities. If the abusive treatment of his servant, wife, father and chance acquaintances is reprehensible, there is something admirable, to the modern mind, in his intellectual emancipation and defiance of authority. Is he a progressive thinker ripping off the mask of conventional morality or a ruthless, unscrupulous egoist? When, confronted with the miraculous apparition that will kill him, he refutes the evidence of his eyes and reaffirms his rationalist beliefs, should this be seen as intellectual courage or foolish obduracy? The comedy in the play offers few pointers to how we should evaluate him – indeed, it compounds the ambiguity of Don Juan as a character. In satire, laughter generally serves to direct criticism.

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In *Don Juan*, however, we invariably laugh *with* Don Juan at his victims, producing an unusual and unsettling antithesis between the play's comic structure and its moral structure. While condemning his conduct, we are invited to admire the effortless superiority with which he despatches his opponents' arguments.

Since Don Juan is a professed atheist, the absence of any character who can effectively oppose him is no trivial matter. Molière uses the intimate master-servant relationship as the platform for a religious debate. But the way the debate is conducted is heavily loaded, with only a credulous and superstitious valet to oppose the master's superior intelligence. Ostensibly, the debate is ultimately resolved by a higher agent. The ending, in which the Statue takes Don Juan to Hell, appears finally to give the lie to his rationalism and to satisfy the moralists' desire to see the sinner punished. In practice it does nothing of the sort, as Molière's enemies instantly realised. The recourse to an arbitrary *deus ex machina* robs the ending of its plausibility and the play of any clear moral lesson. Sganarelle's final comments pay lip service to conventional morality:

Now he's dead and everyone's satisfied – the Heaven he offended, the laws he broke, the families he disgraced, the parents he outraged, the wives he perverted, the husbands he destroyed.

But even these platitudes are devalued by the bathetic final cry: 'My wages, what about my wages?'

For the playwright, Don Juan may have been less enigmatic than he appears to us. Molière is known to have associated with genuine free-thinkers, and it is more than possible that he sympathised with their progressive attitudes. But to conclude from this that he sympathised with Don Juan, or intended him as his spokesman in the expression of rationalist ideas, seems very dubious. The most likely explanation (though this can only be a matter for speculation) is that he wished to show an aristocratic egoist who adopts the arguments of a free-thinker to justify his socially irresponsible behaviour. If we strip the play of its obfuscating religious debate, the central idea as

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Molière conceived it may be the demonstration of Sganarelle's famous statement in the opening scene that 'a wicked nobleman is a terrible thing'. The increasingly heroic perceptions of Don Juan as an enlightened thinker, a scourge of petty-minded moralists, or as a God-defying figure like Faust, would then reflect the preoccupations of later generations less involved in the social reality that Molière was dealing with.

This is not in the least to suggest that other interpretations are 'wrong'. Works of the past only live in the present insofar as they are constantly re-interpreted in terms which are relevant to the spectators' own experience. And whatever Molière really felt about Don Juan, he created a disconcertingly ambivalent figure. The action raises questions to which the dénouement supplies a formal solution but no satisfactory answers, because none is realistically possible. Ultimately, what guarantees the play its enduring fascination is precisely that it is not a demonstration of a moral theorem but an exploration of problems to which no simple solutions are forthcoming.

THE PLAY'S PREMIÈRE

One practical consequence of Molière's desire to capitalise on the theatrical vogue of *Don Juan* was the requirement for a more elaborate form of staging than the single stage setting in which most of his comedies, written to conform to the classical unity of place, were performed. *Don Juan* belongs to a different contemporary genre, that of the machine-play. Spectacular stage effects were a feature of productions at the rival Marais theatre and of the court entertainments to which Molière contributed, but they were a new departure for the playwright's Palais-Royal theatre – so new, in fact, that he took the unusual step of commissioning special sets from stage decorators. In the absence of any surviving visual evidence, it is the recently discovered contract for the sets that provides the best information we have about how the play was staged.

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Molière ordered a series of six *trompe-l'œil* perspective sets, one for each of the five acts, plus a transformation effect during the third act. The first act required: 'a palace comprising five wings on each side and a façade at the rear, the first wings being eighteen *pieds* high and the others diminishing in perspective'. To give added depth to the picture, the backcloth had a cut-out which opened on to 'two smaller wings depicting a garden, and a distant perspective'. In the second act, the architectural perspective was replaced by a country scene consisting of five pairs of wings with a backdrop representing a grotto and, again, a cut-out, this time framing a seascape. The third act, where the supernatural makes its first appearance, was fittingly the most spectacular. It began with a shallow stage – three pairs of wings representing a forest – and was enclosed at the rear with a wall painted to represent a temple. Towards the end of the act Don Juan notices the temple and, on being told by Sganarelle that it is the Commander's tomb, decides to enter it. Here the text contains the stage direction: 'the tomb opens to reveal a superb mausoleum and the Commander's statue'. This implies that the back wall was drawn apart to reveal a further scene beyond. In reality, something more elaborate than a revelation scene must have occurred, because the fifth setting was: 'the interior of a temple, comprising five sets of wings, the first eighteen *pieds* high and the others diminishing in perspective, and a closed wall representing the back of the temple'. As this makes clear, there was a full transformation effect, with one complete setting being replaced by an entirely new one. While the upstage wall was drawn apart to reveal the deepest interior of the tomb, the forest simultaneously disappeared into the wings to be replaced by the monumental marble of the tomb, whilst new overhead borders (also specified in the contract) were flown in to replace the sky borders of the previous scene. After a more modest, fully enclosed interior representing Don Juan's apartment in the fourth act, the fifth-act setting gave a grand finale: 'a town, comprising five wings on each side ... and at the back a painted town gate, with two smaller wings and a perspective beyond'. From these specifications

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together with the costume inventory it is clear that great attention (and considerable expense – nine hundred *livres* for the sets) was devoted to making the production visually very impressive.

In this connection, a curious feature of the play is the way the dialogue refers, quite insistently, to the settings in which the characters find themselves. In the first act Sganarelle indicates his master to Gusman with the words: ‘Look, there he is, *walking in this palace*.’ In the second act Don Juan greets Charlotte by saying: ‘Good heavens! Are there really delicious creatures like you to be found in this countryside, *amongst these trees and rocks*?’ From a utilitarian point of view the specific details are superfluous, serving only to draw attention to something that the spectators can already see for themselves. Again, in Act III, when Don Juan and Sganarelle enter the temple, the latter exclaims: ‘Oh, isn’t it beautiful! The statues! Oh, the beautiful marble, and those pillars!’ These repeated references to location clearly must have interacted with the staging to affect the audience’s experience of the play, and have led some critics to speak of a deliberate Brechtian alienation effect. This seems to me, however, to be a misunderstanding of baroque illusion, which never aspired to be a ‘real’ deception; the pleasure came rather from the spectator’s knowing complicity in the illusion. Rather than trying to ‘break’ an illusion which was only ever a deception of the senses, not of the understanding, Molière was offering a comic version of it. Coming from the mouth of the credulous Sganarelle – the only person in the theatre apparently taken in by the illusion – the admiring comments on painted stage props can only have provoked laughter. Molière seems, in fact, to have succeeded in having it both ways: showing that he could produce stage effects to rival those of the Marais company, whilst enhancing the spectators’ enjoyment of them by nudging references to their staginess. This is not to say that the humour is entirely innocent. Its subversive potential becomes clear with Sganarelle’s demonstration of God’s existence by the design argument. ‘I should like to know’, he asks, ‘who made those trees, those rocks, this ground we are standing on, and that sky up there. Did it all create

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itself?' Sganarelle's gestures to painted cardboard and canvas made an obvious mockery of his proof of divine purpose.

The role of Don Juan was played by La Grange, the most dependable and faithful of Molière's actors. The costume he wore is described for us by Sganarelle. With a tightly-curved blond wig, feathered hat, gold threads in his coat and flame-coloured ribbons, he was the last word in elegance and high fashion. No contemporary account of his performance as *Don Juan* has been found, but his qualities as an actor are well known: he was 'good-looking, with an easy manner, natural and relaxed' (Chappuzeau). With such urbane and attractive qualities, he was the ideal interpreter of his habitual role in Molière's comedies: that of the sincere young lover. In entrusting the part to La Grange, Molière was clearly not intent on blackening his hero. He may have been blasé, with the cynicism not uncommon among sophisticated courtiers of the period, but it is impossible to imagine that his Don Juan had any of the mythic dimensions, whether satanic or Promethean, that the role acquired in later centuries. All the evidence points to a more realistic portrayal of a social type – the irresponsible nobleman – whose youth (La Grange was twenty-six at the time) and affable manner must have attenuated the darker side of his conduct. It is certainly notable that even the play's most vociferous critics recorded little in the way of objections to Don Juan. It was Sganarelle that they found scandalous.

Sganarelle, of course, was Molière's role. Although it goes far beyond simple farce, the role is constructed on the lines of a character from farce at which Molière, with his vigorous and highly coloured acting style, was unsurpassable. It can safely be assumed that the many *lazzi* and farce routines that he wrote into the part were played to the hilt, though his costume of cast-offs from his master's wardrobe (gold satin jupon, cotton camisole with gold decorations, and satin doublet with flower motifs) suggests that something more realistic than the conventional valet of farce was aimed at. Again, there is no direct evidence of how Molière performed the