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978-0-521-54665-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Molière

Edited by David Bradby and Andrew Calder

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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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THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
MOLIERE

EDITED BY

DAVID BRADBY

Royal Holloway, University of London

ANDREW CALDER

University College London



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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

RALPH ALBANESE, JR, is a Duvivant Professor of French at the University of Memphis. He is the author of *La Fontaine à l'École républicaine* (2003), *Molière à l'École républicaine* (1992), *Initiation aux problèmes socio-culturels de la France au XVIIème siècle* (1977), *Le Dynamisme de la peur chez Molière* (1976) and of numerous articles on concepts of anomie, criminality, gambling, money, death, critical reception, classical discourse and ideological codes as reflected in the works of seventeenth-century French dramatists, novelists, and poets.

DAVID BRADBY is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is author of *Modern French Drama 1940-1990* (1991), *The Theater of Michel Vinaver* (1993), *Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (2001) and (with Annie Sparks) *Mise en Scène: French Theatre Now* (1997). With Maria M. Delgado, he edits the *Contemporary Theatre Review* and he is general editor of 'Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre'.

ANDREW CALDER was formerly Reader in French at University College London. He is author of *Molière: The Theory and Practice of Comedy* (1993), *The Fables of La Fontaine: Wisdom Brought Down to Earth* (2001) and of articles on the history of ideas in writing and painting in the seventeenth century.

MARIE-CLAUDE CANOVA-GREEN is Reader in French at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is author of *La Politique-spectacle au grand siècle* (1993), *La Comédie* (1993), *Benserade. Ballets pour Louis XIV* (1997), and co-author of *Le Théâtre en France des origines à nos jours* (1997), *Spectaculum Europaeum* (1999) and *Europa triumphans* (2004). She has just completed a monograph on *Les Comédies-ballets de Molière et les débats du temps*.

JIM CARMODY is Associate Professor of Theatre and Dance at the University of California-San Diego, where he was the founding head of the department's doctoral program in theatre. He is the author of *Rereading Molière* (1993), articles on French and American theatre and translations of plays by Molière and Marivaux. He also serves as one of the editors of *TheatreForum*.

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JAN CLARKE is Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Durham and has written extensively on all aspects of seventeenth-century French theatre, including architecture, company organisation, the lives of women theatre professionals, and spectacle. She is currently completing the third volume of a series on the Hôtel Guénégaud (1673–80) in which she looks at all aspects of the company's activity, including its establishment, theatre design, financial organisation and production policy, focusing particularly on its spectacular productions.

STEPHEN KNAPPER is Lecturer in Drama at Kingston University. He is author of three articles on the work of the British company Theatre de Complicite and has published three chapters from his doctoral thesis on the mask of Scaramouche. He is now working on a collaborative project with Royal Holloway, University of London exploring the relationships between carnival, mask and *commedia*.

ROXANNE LALANDE is Professor of French at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania. Her research interests lie in the fields of French literature of the *Ancien Régime*, comic and dramatic theory, pre-revolutionary women writers, and the epistolary novel. She is author of *Intruders in the Play World: The Dynamics of Gender in Molière's Comedies* (1996) and editor of *A Labor of Love: Critical Reflections on the Writings of Marie-Catherine Desjardins* (2000); she has also translated Villedieu's *Love Notes and Letters* and *The Letter Case*.

ROBERT MCBRIDE is Professor of French at the University of Ulster, author of *The Sceptical Vision of Molière: A Study in Paradox* (1977), *Aspects of Seventeenth-Century French Drama and Thought* (1979), *The Triumph of Ballet in Molière's Theatre* (1992), *Molière et son premier Tartuffe: genèse d'une pièce à scandale* (2005), editor of *La Mothe Le Vayer: Lettre sur la comédie de L'Imposteur* (1994), *L'Imposteur de 1667 prédécesseur du Tartuffe*, and co-founder and co-editor with Noël Peacock of *Le Nouveau Moliériste*.

CHARLES MAZOUER is Professor of French Literature at the Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux III; his theatre history publications, some dozen studies and critical editions of texts, cover French theatre from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. They include *Molière et ses comédies-ballets* (1993), *Trois comédies de Molière. Étude sur «Le Misanthrope», «George Dandin», «Le Bourgeois gentilhomme»* (1999) and *Le Théâtre d'Arlequin: Comédies et comédiens italiens en France au XVIIe siècle* (2002). He is currently engaged on a major history of theatre in France.

LARRY F. NORMAN is Associate Professor in Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *The Public Mirror: Molière and the Social Commerce of Depiction* (1999) and has edited three volumes on the relation between theatre, book history and the visual arts: *The Theatrical*

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Baroque (2001), *The Book in the Age of Theater* (2001) and *Du spectateur au lecteur: imprimer la scène aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (2002).

RICHARD PARISH is a Professor of French in the University of Oxford and a Fellow of St Catherine's College. He has written extensively on Pascal, as well as on seventeenth-century French theatre, in which area his writing includes a book on Racine and editions of both Racine and Molière (*Le Tartuffe*).

NOËL PEACOCK holds the Marshall Chair of French, and is Associate Dean (Research) at the University of Glasgow. His publications on Molière include *Molière in Scotland* (1993), *L'École des femmes* (1988), *Les Femmes savantes* (1990) and critical editions of *La Jalousie du Barbouillé et George Dandin* (1984) and *Dépit amoureux* (1989) and many articles. He is co-founder and co-editor with Charles Mazouer of *Le Nouveau Moliériste*.

JOHN S. POWELL is Professor of Musicology at the University of Tulsa and the author of *Music and Theatre in France, 1600–1680* (2000). He has published numerous articles on the Molière-Lully-Charpentier *comédies-ballets* and other works of seventeenth-century musical theatre, as well as a website of musical editions with full-text facsimiles of plays ('Music and Theater in France in the Seventeenth Century': <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~john-powell/theater/>).

JULIA PREST is Assistant Professor of French at Yale University. She wrote her Ph.D. on Molière's *comédie-ballets* and her critical edition of *Le Mariage forcé* was published by Exeter University Press in 1999. She has published articles on *comédies-ballets*, *ballet de cour*, school drama and the court of Louis XIV. Her book on cross-casting and women's roles in seventeenth-century French theatre will be published by Palgrave-Macmillan in 2006.

DAVID WHITTON is Professor of French Theatre at Lancaster University. His publications include *Stage Directors in Modern France* (1987) and *Molière: Don Juan* ('Plays in Performance', 1995). He is currently co-writing with Jan Clarke a history of theatre in France.

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PREFACE

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

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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.

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- 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'Élide*, 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

CHRONOLOGY

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.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1670 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.