MOLIÈRE

A Theatrical Life

VIRGINIA SCOTT

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Monotype Baskerville 11/12.5 pt. *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 78281 3 hardback

Contents

Illustrations

CHAPTER ONE

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin

The young man was only twenty-five. He had just reached his majority in the year of our Lord 1620 and was already a master of his trade: Jean Poquelin the younger, master merchant *tapissier*.[1] It was time for him to leave his parents' establishment on the rue de la Lingerie, under the pillars of the market, and set up his own business in a more elegant quarter of Paris, closer to the Louvre. The old house he leased on July 20 from a family connection had stood for four centuries on the corner of the rue St-Honoré and the rue des Vieilles-Étuves and was known to all as the Pavillon des Singes, the Monkey House. The rent was 850 *livres* a year, a very substantial sum, and the lease was for four years. Jean Poquelin had no small ambitions. He also had a father and mother willing to provide security for the lease.

Along with a shop, workrooms, and handsome living quarters, Jean Poquelin acquired, for the sum of 1,516 *livres*, the merchandise of his deceased predecessor, Jean Coustart, a *tapissier* who had rented the Pavillon des Singes after the death of its longtime owner, another *tapissier* Martin Morot. Tradition was a matter of importance in early seventeenth-century France, and by tradition the house on the corner was a place where one went to buy tapestries and furnishings and magnificent matrimonial beds.

The matrimonial bed to which Jean Poquelin would soon bring his young wife, Marie Cressé, was made of walnut, furnished with its straw foundation, its feather bed and bolster, its blankets, and its handsome spread. The curtains that could be pulled around it were of good warm wool, olive green, but decorated with silk fringe and lace.[2] This was the bed in which Marie Cressé gave birth to her first son, Jean-Baptiste, later the self-styled sieur de Molière, and five more children.

Both Jean Poquelin the younger and Marie Cressé came from families of *tapissiers*. The Poquelins were from Beauvais. Jean the elder was born there around 1555. His father was a weaver, but Jean was orphaned

at the age of sixteen and adopted by his mother's half-brother, Nicolas Payen, who was a *tapissier* in Paris. Payen brought his nephew to the capital, taught him the trade, and saw to it that he was received as a master.[3]

The Poquelins (more frequently spelled Pocquelin)[4] were an old bourgeois family of Beauvais, and perhaps originally of Scottish origin. Supposedly 4,000 Scots soldiers had – out of hatred of the English – helped Charles VII liberate France. And supposedly the survivors of this band included a Pocquelin who settled in Beauvais. In any case, a tombstone of the fifteenth-century memorializes one Martin Pocquelin, "an honest merchant and good bourgeois, loved, valued and esteemed by all."[5]

His descendent, Jean Poquelin the elder, was a master *tapissier* who seems not to have initially practiced his trade. Allied in 1586 with his first father-in-law, Guillaume Tournemine, a furrier who supplied the court, Poquelin married – after the death of his first wife – Agnès Mazuel, who was herself a *maîtresse toilière-lingère*, a dealer in linens. And a good thing, too. For when Jean Poquelin ended his association with his former father-in-law, he found himself without merchandise and without clients. Agnès's dowry went to reestablish her husband in his trade, and between them, Agnès and Jean eventually became prosperous enough to buy a building lot on the rue de la Lingerie in Les Halles, near the entrance to the leather market. The lot was not large, but large enough for the four-story house at the Image Sainte-Véronique "where Agnès Mazuel was to reign for forty-two years."[6]

Although Agnès herself was a tradeswoman with her own shop in the market, her family was an odd mixture of artisans and musicians. Her paternal grandfather was a cook, but both of his sons were instrumentalists. Ten of the cook's grandchildren and great-grandchildren were court musicians, although in Agnès's immediate family only one half-brother followed his father's profession. By the time of her marriage to the orphaned Jean Poquelin, Agnès Mazuel was also an orphan, her mother dead for many years, her father a victim of the siege of Paris in 1590. She had taken the oath of her corps or guild at Châtelet on December 13, 1591, two and a half years before her marriage, and she continued to practice her trade for many years after it.

Jean Poquelin and Agnès Mazuel raised eight children in the house on the rue de la Lingerie; Jean the younger was the eldest son and heir to the paternal profession. He was apprenticed for three years at the age of thirteen to a *tapissier* married to one of his mother's cousins. Of his

brothers, Nicolas also became a *tapissier* while Guillaume learned the mercer's trade and Martin was apprenticed to an iron merchant. Three daughters, well dowered, married masters of various guilds; the fourth daughter became a nun. This was a successful and well-to-do bourgeois family, if not perhaps exactly exemplary, since Agnès was clearly its mainstay.

Marie Cressé, who was twenty when she married Jean Poquelin in 1621, was a more docile daughter of the bourgeoisie than her prospective mother-in-law, and perhaps the issue of a family slightly higher in the social order. Although her father Louis, like her betrothed's father, was a *marchand tapissier*, the family – long qualified as "*bourgeois de Paris*" – included goldsmiths as well as *tapissiers*, and goldsmiths were part of Les Six-Corps, the six guilds that by statute and custom took precedence over all the others. Louis, who as time went on increasingly signed himself Louis *de* Cressé (the particule implying that he was a gentleman), married well. His wife was Marie Asselin, the young widow of *tapissier* Guillaume de Launay, and she brought to her second marriage, along with a young son, nearly 3,000 *livres* in furniture, clothes, jewels, and her first husband's merchandise. The couple lived in the Asselin family house, a vast dwelling of eight rooms, at the Image Sainte-Catherine in the Marché aux Poirées, and raised their five children there. Marie was the oldest.

A contract of marriage was signed on February 22, 1621, uniting the son and daughter of the families Poquelin and Cressé in a community of marriage, according to the customary law of Paris. The bride's prosperous father and mother, seconded by a bevy of uncles and aunts, donated 2,200 *livres* to the new Poquelin-Cressé community, 1,800 in cash, 400 in furnishings, clothes, and linen for the use of their daughter. The groom's parents, backed by their own flock of relations, countered with another 2,200 *livres*, though not in cash. In this case, the groom's family offered to the new community the merchandise they had purchased from Jean Coustart's estate to set their son up in business.[7] In both instances only half of the value of the parental gift was to become community property; the other half was to remain the personal property of the son or daughter and pass by inheritance to his or her children.[8]

There is no way to know if this was a marriage of commerce or of affection. The young spouses were from the same milieu and lived in the same neighborhood. Their fathers practiced the same trade. Possibly they met and fell in love, possibly their fathers and mothers thought the match was a suitable one. Possibly both things were true. In any case, this

new household began under a benevolent star, well-endowed with measured good wishes and the necessaries of daily life.

Whether they loved each other or not, their community prospered. When their property was inventoried after Marie Cressé's death in 1632, they had accumulated assets of 13,333 *livres* and owed less than 1,000 *livres*.[9] Jean Poquelin, who at the time of his marriage had identified himself simply as "*marchand tapissier*," now claimed in addition the qualities of "*honorable homme*", *"bourgeois de Paris*," and "*tapissier ordinaire de la maison du roi,"* thus an honorable man, a citizen of Paris, and the holder of a royal office.

The qualification "*bourgeois de Paris*" was a legal one, conferred by the Bureau de Ville on someone who could give evidence of having achieved a certain economic and social stability. The candidate had to have lived in the capital for a number of years and be established as the owner or principal lessee of his dwelling. Most of his property, real or personal, had to be physically in Paris. He had to produce, from the *curé* of his parish, a letter confirming that he practiced the Catholic religion. And he had to have paid his city taxes and to have armed himself, at his own expense, so that he could be called on to defend the city in time of need. Once approved, the candidate received his *lettres de bourgeoisie*. Only about one-sixth of the artisans and merchants of seventeenth-century Paris achieved this status.[10]

As to the qualification "*honorable homme*," the term was used primarily by men who can be described as entrepreneurs and heads of businesses. Roland Mousnier, who has used data derived from the legal documents of the Minutier Central to define nine levels of Parisian society, places the *honorable homme* in Level V, below advocates and notaries, above ordinary merchants. Mousnier reconstructs the style of life of the honorable men of Level V, based on inventories after death. They possessed little land. Their estates consisted largely of personal property, interest-bearing investments, and debts owed to them. About half of them lived in houses, a third in rooms, the rest in apartments. The houses and apartments averaged two to three rooms, but only a third had kitchens. Most of the families owned silver utensils and some jewels, up to 600 *livres* worth. More than half had a servant, but none had carriages and horses.[11]

Jean Poquelin was clearly a member of this class, not a high official or a *rentier*, living off his income, passing for noble, but not an average bourgeois either. The bulk of his assets were personal and professional property and debts owed to him. He and his family lived in a house; the

family occupied four rooms, including a kitchen. They had a servant. They had silver utensils worth 864 *livres* and jewelry worth 1,516 *livres*, substantially more than the average. Furthermore, unlike all but six percent of his peers, Jean Poquelin owned a royal office. At the beginning of April 1631 this Paris *tapissier* commenced his first quarter's service as *tapissier ordinaire du roi.*

The number of royal offices multiplied exponentially during the reign of Richelieu, avid for *livres* for the royal and the ministerial purses. Poquelin's office had been originally purchased for his brother Nicolas for 1,200 *livres* in 1629. In April 1631 Nicolas resigned the office in favor of his older brother, who immediately embarked on his first quarter *en exercise.* Like all offices of the royal household, this one was divided among several men who served for three months each. According to *L'État de France,* a sort of yearly almanac of the state bureaucracy, the job of a *tapissier ordinaire du roi* was to take care of the king's furniture and make the royal bed at the foot while the *valet de chambre ordinaire* made it at the head. Every day, then, during his quarter of service, Jean Poquelin would leave his family and business and, accompanied by two royal valets, make his way to the Louvre to perform his important duties. In recompense, he received 300 *livres* a year – a more than reasonable return on an investment of 1,200 – and the opportunity to profit from state contracts.

Jean Poquelin's specialty seems to have been selling bedding. During his first term as an officer of the court, he received a lucrative contract from the minister of war to provide the furnishings for 300 beds, presumably camp beds: that is, 300 straw foundations, 300 mattresses, 300 bolsters, 300 blankets, and 600 pairs of sheets.[12] What is more, the inventory of 1,633 includes pounds of feathers, wool, and horsehair, all used for stuffing mattresses and bolsters, while on display in the shop were bed furnishings of all kinds, a large inventory of fabrics, and a number of beds. The only other furniture noted are two benches, a dozen wooden chairs, and three *chaises percées*, that is, chairs with open seats into which one could slide a chamber pot.

The building that sheltered both professional activity and family, the celebrated Pavillon des Singes, occupied the eastern corner of the rue St-Honoré and the rue des Vieilles-Étuves. The corner of the building itself was occupied by a vertical beam carved in the likeness of an orange tree. Perched in the tree, six monkeys each handed an orange to the monkey below, while a seventh monkey waited on the ground to collect the fruit.[13] As to the house itself, it had a ground floor with a shop and a

room behind the shop used as the family kitchen. Below were cellars, above were three floors, each with a main room and a smaller room or *garde-robe* with a fireplace.[14] The Poquelin family lived for the most part on the first floor in the room above the shop. The kitchen was the domain of the servant, Marie la Roche, who probably occupied the *soupente*, a little room tucked between the floors, just large enough for a bed, a table and a trunk with a lock where she could keep her clothes and other property. In the kitchen itself, besides the armoires full of pots and plates and copper cauldrons, were a bench and six little armchairs meant for having a chat, perhaps also providing a place near the fire for some tired, muddy little boys with a mother resting upstairs. What were not in the kitchen were the table and chairs for family meals; those shared the first-floor chamber with the great bed and two more of those invaluable armchairs, these somewhat worn and valued by the appraiser at fifty *sous* the pair. The room was hung with tapestries, appropriate for a *tapissier*, but not of especially high quality. These were only tapestries of Rouen, tapestries for the poor according to Furetière's *Dictionnaire universal,* and valued at a mere thirty-two *livres*. The impression given by the inventory is that with the exception of the family table, the great bed, and a set of tapestry-covered coffers, the Poquelins did not own very much valuable furniture. Their assets were rather in silver and jewelry.

The parents, of course, occupied the matrimonial bed; the children seem to have slept in the *garde-robe* next door, near the fire. Two beds were there, one with high posts, one with low, neither furnished with curtains since the fire provided warmth and children had no need of privacy.

There were six children in all. The oldest, baptized on January 15, 1622, simply as Jean, was known as Jean-Baptiste. He was followed in less than a year by Louis and in less than two years after that by a second Jean. A first daughter, Marie, arrived barely ten months later, in early August of 1625. The Poquelins now had four children; the oldest was barely three-and-a-half. Two more years passed before the birth of Nicolas, followed by Madeleine eleven months later in June 1628. And then there were no more babies. This rather astonishing rate of procreation – six children in six and one half years – suggests that the Poquelins were following the custom of their class and putting their babies out to nurse, probably in the Paris suburbs. The result, of course, was that Marie Cressé, though relieved of the burden of nourishing her infants, also denied herself the contraceptive effect which nursing often has. Still, the children were well cared for, whoever cared for them, since at least five survived infancy, a most unusual achievement in seventeenth-

century Paris where half of all children died, most of them before the age of five.[15]

In the 1630s the family's luck changed. Little Marie died in 1630 and Marie Cressé, her mother, in 1632. Nor were the fates finished with the Poquelins. Jean Poquelin's second wife Catherine Fleurette and their daughter Marguerite died in November 1636 and both of Marie Cressé's parents in 1638.

The death of a child was not surprising, nor were the deaths of the grandparents, who were in their sixties at least. But the death of Marie Cressé is somewhat puzzling. Her last child was born in 1628, and although she may have died in childbirth, the usual cause of death of young women in the 1630s, no record of a hurried baptism confirms a dead or dying infant, nor did another child survive her. Because her son Jean-Baptiste was to die many years later of tuberculosis, it has become part of the lore of the Moliéristes that his mother died of the same disease. The four childless years before her death do suggest a long-term illness. Whatever its cause, however, this death and the deaths of the others must have been very hard on the boy left behind.

To be ten years old in Paris in 1632 was to be half-way between infancy, which ended when the milk teeth began to fall out, and adolescence, marked by the signs of sexual maturity. Until a boy was five, he wore exactly the same clothes as his infant sister, bodice, skirt, and apron; from five to perhaps seven or eight, he continued to be dressed in a skirt, but with a doublet and without the apron. At eight he began to wear culottes and was ready for life outside his home and even for school.[16]

One of the few things known with reasonable certainty about the childhood and adolescence of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, aside from his date of baptism, is that he attended the Collège de Clermont, a Jesuit secondary school located across the river in the Latin Quarter. The *Préface* to the first edition of his collected works, published in 1682 by his friend and long-time colleague La Grange, includes the following: "He did his humanities at the Collège de Clermont . . . The success of his studies was what would be expected of someone with a predisposition as happy as his. If he was a fine humanist he became a still greater philosopher."[17] Nothing here tells us when Jean-Baptiste began his humanities at Clermont, nor when he finished them.[18] Vast forests have died in vain as scholars have tried to prove that he entered the 5th class in 1637 or the 6th class in 1631. But, in fact, this is one of the hundreds of thousands of things about the life of Molière we cannot know. What matters, surely,

is not when he went to Clermont but that he went to Clermont, since the experience of the school left deep and abiding marks.

The logical thing to assume is that Jean-Baptiste Poquelin received the education due the eldest son of an ambitious and successful "*bourgeois de Paris*" and "*honorable homme*." At his *petite école* he learned to read and write French and may have begun Latin. Some bourgeois children were taught to read at home by their mothers, and there were books in the Poquelin household – a Bible, Plutarch's *Lives* and several "little books" – but more probably the Poquelin children went to neighborhood petty schools.

An ordinance of 1560 backed up by an act of Henri IV in 1598 ordered parents to send their children, boys and girls, to school. Of course, these laws were not enforced, but Parisian children were well-supplied with petty schools, at least seventy (including twenty for girls) early in the century and 167 toward the end. Petty schools were a counter-reformation device meant to make sure that small children were not lured into private schools run by Protestants and contaminated by pernicious doctrines. In Paris the petty schools were under the jurisdiction of the Precentor of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, who annually licensed the masters and mistresses and enjoined them to "take care that the children do not bring evil, heretical or immoral books to school." Even worse was the idea that children of the same sex might attend the same school. That was absolutely forbidden.

Once licensed, a petty school teacher put up a sign: "Here one keeps a petty school where Master (or Mistress) N. teaches young people the church service, how to read, write and form letters, grammar, arithmetic, and calculating, both by pen and by counters. Boarders welcome."[19] Parents were expected to pay the masters and mistresses who were, however, also supposed to teach the children of the poor for free.

Exactly how long children spent in these schools is not known, but it seems likely that by nine or ten a bright child would have learned to read and write French, to do basic arithmetic, and to parrot the rudiments of Latin grammar. He would be ready for a *collège*.

The Collège de Clermont was the most fashionable school in Paris in the 1630s; Jean Poquelin chose it for his son. He may have done so because Clermont was free, unlike the colleges that made up the Faculty of Arts of the University of Paris. On the other hand, attendance at Clermont could put a child in touch with young nobles and the sons of officers of the court and the Parlement. A father ambitious for his son might well believe that Clermont could pave the way to a career high in

the state bureaucracy: Clermont, then the law, then an office, perhaps in the royal secretariat or in the Parlement.[20]

In fact, the Jesuits were well aware that their school, more than any other, met the objectives for secondary education laid down by Henri IV in new statutes for the University of Paris published in September 18, 1600. Before that time, the purpose of the colleges was to prepare students for careers in the Church; after, their mission was to prepare students for legal and administrative careers as well. The University paid lip service to the statute; the Jesuits acted on it.

What also distinguished the Collège de Clermont, and the other Jesuit schools in the kingdom, was good teaching by young and highly qualified teachers combined with an idea of how education should be conducted, a pedagogy "founded on realism, good sense, and tenacity."[21] Jesuit pupils, like their peers, attended school for up to eight hours a day, five days a week, and on Saturday mornings. The goal was "a perfect knowledge of Greek and Latin" followed by "intimate contact with the great writers of antiquity and the study in depth of their works."[22] The Jesuits had a bag of ingenious tricks to help their students achieve mastery. Besides translating and writing essays and epigrams and inscriptions, the boys engaged in oral discourse and disputes. They sustained theses. They acted in comedies and tragedies, in prose and verse, all in Latin. They spoke nothing but Latin to their masters and to their fellow students, although they were grudgingly permitted a little French right after lunch.

The Jesuits also specialized in the teaching of rhetoric. Père Richeome explains how this study, above all others, gave men power over others:

> It is a thing humanly divine and divinely human to know how to treat a subject with the marriage of mind and tongue, to conceive it in the soul with beautiful and judicious thoughts, to arrange these thoughts wisely, to dress them in rich language and convey them to the ear of the listener by means of a firm memory, a lively voice that rings forth but penetrates softly, and such an action of the body that makes them effectively understood; to plant new opinions and new desires in men's hearts and snatch out the old ones; to get the rigid wills to fold, submit; to address and straighten the crooked and corrupt; and victoriously persuade and dissuade as one will.[23]

Clermont was a large school; in 1627, a few years before Jean-Baptiste Poquelin entered it, it had 1,829 students, 299 in the superior classes (theology and philosophy) and 1,530 in the inferior classes. Beginners learned the rudiments of Latin and Greek in the sixth, continued classical languages and literature in the fifth, fourth and third, advanced to

Humanities in the second and Rhetoric in the first. The offerings in philosophy and theology were not so well-attended. Many students aiming for the professions left Clermont to do their philosophy elsewhere and take the degree of Master of Arts that Clermont was not permitted to give. But so did many others leave because they had essentially completed their general education.

The scholars of Clermont were not only divided by classes, they were also divided into *internes* or *pensionnaires*, students who lived in the college, and *externes* who lived elsewhere. In general, the *pensionnaires* – usually numbering about 300 – were sons of the nobility, although some were poor boys serving as domestics to their noble classmates. Most of the *externes* were, like Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, sons of officers, merchants, and businessmen. *Externes* did not necessarily live at home. Many were not Parisians, but even the Parisians were often housed with *maîtres de pension* who oversaw homework and sometimes added courses in mathematics or handwriting.

Very likely Jean-Baptiste also lodged with a *maître de pension*.[24] We may even know his name. A certain Georges Pinel, who qualified himself as a writing master, borrowed money from Jean Poquelin in 1641 and again in 1643. This same Georges Pinel joined with Jean-Baptiste Poquelin and eight others to form the Illustre Théâtre in 1643. According to a tale passed on by Charles Perrault, Jean Poquelin, desperate to persuade his son to give up the foolish notion of becoming an actor, sent him to a former teacher who – the father believed – still had some authority over the boy. Instead of the master persuading the pupil, the opposite happened and the master became an actor, too. Georges Mongrédien thinks that Pinel may be the teacher referred to by Perrault, "the master in whose home [Molière] had lived during the first years of his studies."[25]

Maîtres de pension were often members of the corps of writing masters and empowered to teach children who had completed petty school arithmetic, spelling, and the seven varieties of handwriting known and used by literate Frenchmen.[26] If Jean-Baptiste did a stint with a writing master that would further suggest that he was being prepared for the law and an eventual place somewhere in the state bureaucracy.

Still, learning to write a correct and elegant hand was of middling importance. What mattered were the forty-four hours a week spent in class at Clermont. The secret of the Jesuits' success, what enabled them to overcome suspicion and angry opposition from the University, the Gallican clergy, and the Jansenists, was the effectiveness of their pedagogical system. A traveler wrote about Clermont in 1687: "One notices

nothing special in the buildings of the college; however there are many things to be observed here that one will not find elsewhere." The most remarkable was that a great number of *pensionnaires*, most of the "quality," and "a multitude of *externes* sometimes two or three thousand, study all together in the most regular order and discipline in the world."[27]

How did the Jesuits manage this, with as many as 320 students in a class? The Jesuit system was based on what they called "emulation," what we would call cut-throat competition. Within each class, students were constantly compared on the basis of their work. "Son banc disait son rang": his bench proclaimed his rank.[28] This was a moral issue according to Jesuit theory. It was important to awaken in the boy the desire to surpass his comrades; this was the means to avoid laziness and to plant in his soul a passion for work. The masters were advised, however, to use the carrot rather than the stick, to avoid threats and blame. Discouragement was the great enemy of progress; confidence gave a boy the strength to overcome his defects.

In practice, what "emulation" meant was that school was a constant series of contests: boy against boy, class against class. The best homework went into the notebook of honor or was displayed on the walls of the classroom or even in the courtyard for other classes to admire; the very best work was selected for an annual public exhibition held every year on July 22. The best students in each section – Philosophy, Humanities, or Grammar – were chosen for "academies" that formed an "aristocracy of talent."[29]

Finally, Clermont held its annual Public Exercises that attracted a large audience from the court and the town. Students in the superior classes defended their theses on such subjects as cosmography, astronomy, and military architecture while the audience judged them on keenness of wit, speed of riposte, and elegance of delivery. The younger scholars explicated enigmas. The boys were presented with a painting or a word picture taken from history or myth; each boy then proposed and defended a key word or enigma that he thought best expressed the picture's essential moral meaning. The audience picked the winner. Near the end of the school year, in August, Clermont held its Prize Day. The prizes, provided by the king, were books, magnificently bound and gilded, with the royal arms and the seal of the college. On Prize Day the cream of the cream rose to the top; only thirty-three prizes were offered to nearly 2,000 boys. It was also on Prize Day that the boys of Clermont performed in Latin comedies and tragedies, some classical, some written

by their Jesuit teachers. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing if Jean-Baptiste ever acted at Clermont.

But let us take a leap of faith. Let us conclude that he did and was noticed and praised. Let us further proclaim that Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was victorious at Clermont, surely an "academician," possibly a prize winner.[30] To his natural talents for language and invention he joined habits of industry – a passion for work – that served him all his life. The Jansenists accused the Jesuits of cultivating pride, and the Jansenists were clearly on the mark. The Jesuits did encourage pride in one's self and one's work as necessary and moral, while lack of pride was considered dishonorable. The hierarchy of the school was not like the hierarchy of the greater society; birth counted in the *pension*, but not in the classroom. A boy from the rue St-Honoré could triumph here, and could carry the memory of that triumph into his adult life – along with the anxieties, the self-doubts, and even the vanity that can also be the consequences of intense competition.

The man Molière was, above all, a chronicler of obsessions, although he never wrote about his own principle obsession which was work. Actor, playwright, director, manager, orator, officer, courtier, his life was unimaginably busy. Convention would have it that the Molières of the world are dreamy backbenchers in their youth, but the image seems unconvincing here. What seems more likely is the triumphal march of young Jean-Baptiste across Paris every Saturday afternoon, bearing the week's trophies home to his father.

Giving up a scenario so dear to the hearts of so many is hard: the boy traverses Paris twice daily between his house on the western edge of Les Halles and his school half-way up the rue St-Jacques. He crosses the Pont-Neuf, stops to listen to a ballad, stops again to laugh at a flour-faced clown, stops a third time to take in the spiel of a quack. Dreams of Pantalone and Zanni fill his head. What does the boy who is going to be the greatest actor of his generation care about Pliny? That Jean-Baptiste would not have been a star student at Clermont. Hence our Jean-Baptiste who, like most of his fellows, lived in a pension near the school so he wasted no time in comings and goings. But on Saturday afternoons and Sundays and on feast days and their eves, and during the long vacation in early fall, he was free. The Pont-Neuf with all its attractions was a block away from his father's house, but it was only one of the many delights Paris had to offer.

After virtual stagnation in the sixteenth century, Paris began to grow and prosper. In the 1630s, when Jean-Baptiste was old enough to explore

it, it was the largest city in Europe with a population of just over 400,000. Les Halles, where the Poquelins and their relations lived, was old; an open-air market had been established there first in the reign of Louis VI. The first two market buildings were constructed in 1183 and were rapidly encircled by small shops. A third building for the mercers was added in 1263, soon joined by a salt-fish market and a fresh-fish market, while Saint Louis permitted the linen sellers to set up along the wall of the Cemetery of the Innocents. Rebuilt in the sixteenth century, the vast market grew, and the district around it, with its huge somber parish church of St-Eustache, its pillory and its killing grounds, its cemetery and charnel-houses, and, especially on its west side where Jean Poquelin had set up shop, its great aristocratic mansions.

St-Eustache, the last of many chapels and churches on its site, the church where Jean Poquelin, son of Jean Poquelin, was baptized without the Baptiste, was begun in 1532 and was not yet finished when the master *tapissier* brought his first son to the font. Fifty-one years later, when Molière was residing once again in the parish of his birth and the magnificent church was more or less complete, its priests would refuse to attend his deathbed and its *curé* would try to deny him burial in consecrated ground. During much of his childhood the church – one short block to the east and one long block to the north – was under construction and when the building was finally consecrated on April 26, 1637, surely Jean-Baptiste sat with his family in the superb nave admiring the new painting, *The Martyrdom of Saint Eustache*, commissioned by Cardinal Richelieu himself in honor of the occasion and executed by Simon Vouet.[31]

The market to the south and east of the church was a vast bazaar. Foodstuffs of all sorts were sold there, of course, but so were shoes and hats and combs and mirrors, pots and pans, furs and jewels. Beyond the market buildings rose the merchants' dwellings, high narrow houses, each with its shop facing the street. Around the main market buildings, the ground floors were recessed, the upper stories supported by pillars. These formed galleries where shoppers could walk, safe from rain and muddy streets. "Under the pillars of the market" was an address everyone in Paris knew how to find. The Poquelin children certainly knew the area "*sous les pilliers*"; their Cressé grandparents lived there, at the Marché aux Poirées, the vegetable market, as did their grandmother Agnès Mazuel on the rue de la Lingerie.

This street, the name of which memorializes the rights granted the linen dealers by Saint Louis, separated the market from the Cemetery of

the Innocents, the largest in Paris. It had been there long before the market, perhaps since the time of Roman Lutece. Buried there were those whose parish churches had no cemeteries, along with paupers from the hospital and unknown persons found dead in the public streets. Although the Innocents had a few private tombs, most corpses, sewn into their shrouds, were placed in common graves. Two or three of these graves were always in use, covered with planks until they were full. Some years later, when the space was needed again, these same graves would be reopened, the bones removed and placed in the charnel house along the wall of the cemetery. This was where the Poquelins brought their wife and mother Marie in 1632.

All Paris knew the famous fresco of the *danse macabre* on view behind the charnel house. It had been there since 1424, each of its thirty panels portraying a living man and his dead twin representing one of the various states and conditions of life: pope, emperor, cardinal, king, squire, knight, soldier, abbot. Perhaps because the *danse macabre* displayed a social order not representative of seventeenth-century Paris, or perhaps simply from a desire to cock a snook at death, the Innocents was not a lugubrious spot shunned by all. In spite of the famous fresco, in spite of the smell from the open graves, in spite of the skulls and bones displayed in the charnal house, Parisians used their cemetery as an adjunct to the market, and as a meeting place and promenade.

The Poquelin children visiting their grandmother Agnès might well have avoided the cemetery with its sad memories, but around the corner where the Cressé grandparents lived, there was often a lively opportunity for amusement. At the crossroads of Les Halles, between St-Eustache and the Marché aux Poirées and during the Wednesday and Saturday street markets, was meted out the punishment of the pillory. The pillory was a raised structure with a revolving platform upon which several minor malefactors could stand with their heads and hands clamped into a wheel above. Periodically, the platform and wheel revolved, displaying the delinquents to the contempt of all. The crime most likely to deserve the pillory was fraud of one sort or another, including the use of bad weights, never popular with market-goers. Onlookers were encouraged to augment the punishment by throwing mud – the famous Paris *crotte* – or the leavings of the market, but rock throwing was frowned on. An engraving from a somewhat later period shows a gang of fraudulent bankrupts undergoing the pillory watched by a band of children, boys and girls, armed and ready to do their duty.[32]

More important punishments – executions even – took place closer to

home at the Croix de Trahoir, a great cross that surmounted a fountain just opposite the Poquelin house on the rue St-Honoré. Down that main street of the Right Bank passed "justices, triumphs and funeral processions," or so said the aged owner of the Pavillon des Singes, Gillette Danès, who was living with her daughter but who reserved in the lease the right to the windows of the first-floor chamber whenever anything magnificent was happening.[33]

Magnificence was an everyday matter only a few blocks away to the west. After all, Louis XIV took his first communion in the Poquelins' parish church. The Louvre was, as it had been for more than a century, under construction. So was its near neighbor, Richelieu's Palais-Cardinal with its superb garden. Even closer to home, one short block north along the rue des Vieilles-Étuves, rose the enormous Hôtel de Soissons, the former Palais de la Reine, built fifty years earlier for Catherine de Médicis. Everyone knew the story of the dowager queen's Italian astrologer who had warned her that she would die under the sign of Saint Germain. Since St-Germain L'Auxerrois was the parish church of both the Louvre and the Tuileries, Catherine refused to live in either and moved east to Les Halles. There she forcibly disestablished an order of nuns, had several blocks of houses demolished, and erected a sumptuous mansion on the model of the Pitti Palace in the midst of vast gardens. By the time Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was old enough to explore his neighborhood, Catherine was long gone, dead at Blois in the arms of a priest named Saint Germain. Her mansion had been sold to pay her debts and eventually acquired by a son of the prince de Condé, the comte de Soissons. He got rid of this white elephant by making it part of the dowry of his daughter when she married a prince of Savoy. The Savoys lived in a bit of it and rented out the rest. The queen's elegant townhouse became an elegant rooming house where Madeleine de Scudéry wrote novels to be published in her brother's name and – maybe – neighborhood children played in the garden and developed a taste for grandeur.

Finally, to the south there was the bridge. The Pont-Neuf was begun in 1578. Work on it was abandoned during the wars of religion and begun again in 1598. It was opened to the public in 1607. The Pont-Neuf was, of course, the first bridge in Paris built without houses. It was wide, made wider still by its half-moons or bays. One could stand on it and admire the view or watch the construction of the Grand Galerie linking the Louvre and the Tuileries; one could promenade across it, on pavement, safe from the Paris mud. Another attraction, at the north end of

the bridge, was La Samaritaine, a great pump that brought water up from the river for the royal domaines. The pump was housed in an elaborate little castle topped by a campanile and an "industrious clock" that marked the hours, the courses of the sun and moon, and the signs of the zodiac. When it was time for the clock to sound, the bells of the campanile rang out with one of several tunes, a concert that was "long and very recreational."[34] In the center of the bridge was the equestrian statue of Paris's favorite king, Henri IV, opposite the brick-trimmed houses of the new Place Dauphine. The Pont-Neuf represented growth and hope to the war-weary Parisians of the early seventeenth century. It was the first of the great public works projects of the Bourbons to be completed and a symbol of what was promised: a capital reborn, its streets clean and well-lit at night, its beggars and thieves and whores rousted from their courts of miracles and housed in hospitals and almshouses, its river lined with magnificent public buildings.

What drew Jean-Baptiste Poquelin to the bridge was probably not the view, but the street life that grew up there. The Samaritaine end was the precinct of the song peddlers who offered ballads describing the latest scandals of the court and the town. Along the parapets of the bridge were the *bouquinistes*, then as now specialists in old books, but also a source for the subversive pamphlets that reached their peak during the anti-Mazarin campaign of the 1640s. Temporary stages in the Place Dauphine exhibited the charlatans and their troupes of entertainers who sold cures for "everything from baldness to warts."[35] An engraving of the 1630s shows the trestle stage of Christophe Contugi, from Orvieto. He was known as l'Orviétan, as was his remedy (which was actually made on the rue Dauphine). The legend next to the engraving reads:

> Orviétan is the best
> Against all sorts of pest.
> Against the venom of asp.
> Against the poison of wasp.
> Against the plagues that defeat us.
> Against the worms that eat us.
> Against the mad dog that bites us
> Against the smallpox that frights us.[36]

The most successful, at least theatrically, of the early charlatans on the bridge was Antoine Girard, known as Tabarin, head of a little troupe of *farceurs* including his brother who played Mondor, a *vecchio* or Pantalone, and a Rodomont, or *capitain*. Tabarin had a wife who played

the *servante*. Although Rodomont died in 1626, before Jean-Baptiste was out of leading strings, the little troupe continued until the deaths of Tabarin and several others in 1633, and even then Mondor continued to perform on the bridge. The material attributed to Tabarin was so popular that it was collected and published, beginning in 1622. According to Charles Sorel in *L'Histoire comique de Francion*, the "works of Tabarin" sold more than 20,000 copies in the 1620s.[37] Even if Jean-Baptiste saw the troupe only in its late years when it was no longer as popular, he might well have gotten his hands on a copy of a collection of Tabarinesque materials made up of dialogues, salacious sayings, and prophecies of all sorts. The troupe of Tabarin also played farces, though apparently only on Friday.

Boileau later accused Molière of shamelessly linking Tabarin and Terence, not wanting to recognize the author of *Le Misanthrope* in the ridiculous Scapin and his sack. Tabarin was best known for his lazzi of the sack based on the "tabar" or cloak he wore that could be converted into a sack at first sight of a pigeon. Although there is no proof that Jean-Baptiste watched enchanted as the old clown lured his even older master into the enveloping folds of the tabar, there is at least a more than reasonable likelihood he did. But not on Fridays during the school year.

Farce was also still being played at the Hôtel de Bourgogne during the early adolescence of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin. According to Molière's first biographer Grimarest – who has been believed on this point by many who disbelieve him in general, because it seemed to them necessary to explain why this nice bourgeois boy should have become enamored of the stage – it was Grandfather Cressé who had a passion for the theatre and took his young grandson with him to share the free box provided by a brother *tapissier* who was Dean of the Masters of the Confrérie de la Passion, owners of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, Paris's oldest theatre.[38]

What might the two of them have seen, from the box or standing with the other bourgeois in the parterre? Until 1633 they would have seen the three great *farceurs* of the Hôtel de Bourgogne: Gaultier-Garguille, the old man, Gros-Guillaume, the flour-faced fat man, and Turlupin, the braggart. All three appeared together, probably for the last time, in Gougenot's *Comédie des Comédiens* in 1633. Gaultier-Garguille died that same year, Gros-Guillaume a year later, and Turlupin in 1637. They represented a tradition that almost died with them, until first Scarron writing for Jodelet and later Molière himself brought it back to life. Farce in the theatre was no more refined than farce on the trestle stages of the Pont-Neuf. Its subject matter was betrayed husbands and old men in love

with young girls; its language was not the language of the salon. What had seemed wonderfully funny in the time of Henri IV, himself no model of polished manners, was now deemed gross, unsuitable, and unlikely to attract society women to the theatre.

The theatre changed radically in the decade of the 1630s. Paris, unlike the capitals of England and Spain, had no established theatre companies until 1630. Its only theatre, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, designed for the amateur production of religious plays, had been a road-house for eighty years, and was totally unsuited to the Italianate style of theatre production coming into vogue. Although both supported theatre to some extent, Henri IV and Louis XIII preferred the Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupes to the itinerant French ones, and were more likely to support them. Only after the ascension to power of Richelieu, with his passion for all things French, did the Paris theatre begin to develop both established companies and a repertory.

After a certain amount of prompting from the king, the Confrérie de la Passion accepted the act of the king's council of December 29, 1629, installing the Comédiens du Roi for three years in the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The troupe was led by Robert Guérin, already met in his *farceur* guise of Gros-Guillaume. In the same year a troupe led by Montdory took the first of several leases on one or another of the Marais tennis courts; in 1634 the troupe settled into its final tennis court on the rue Vieille-du-Temple. Paris now had two established theatres, and Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was thirteen years old.

The repertory was changing as well. Throughout the 1620s and until 1635, most troupes played – in addition to farces – pastorals and tragi-comedies in the Italian mode. Suddenly there was a whole troop of young French writers: Rotrou, Mairet, Scudéry, Tristan, the elder Corneille. New kinds of plays were being written and new audiences filled the theatres. More women attended the plays and more men and women from the well-to-do classes. The various literary circles and salons began to take plays seriously and promote them. Another sign of the times: a group of plays about the theatre – Corneille's *L'Illusion comique* is the best known – that shows the life of the actor in a positive light.

The cardinal transformed a room in his palace into a small theatre seating 600, then set his architect, Mercier, to planning a large, splendid theatre that would open in 1641 and would eventually become Molière's theatre at the Palais-Royal. In that same year the king issued a formal statement declaring that the theatre was good and proper recreation for

his people and that actors ran no risk of blame or infamy so long as they led decent lives and performed decent plays.

To a youngster just discovering the power of the enacted word, the Parisian theatre of the 1630s was a wonderland of action and character. Too young perhaps for the first group of Corneille's comedies, he could have been there wide-eyed at the rebirth of French tragedy, Mairet's *Sophonisbe* in December 1634, and at Corneille's *Illusion comique* the next year. Surely he saw Montdory play the Cid in January 1637; perhaps he was even in the house the day later that year when that same actor, determined to "out-Herod Herod" in Tristan's new play, suffered the paralytic stroke that ended his career. The Hôtel de Bourgogne was only a five-minute walk from the Pavillon des Singes, the Théâtre du Marais fifteen. According to Grimarest, Grandfather Cressé had one wish for his grandson: that he be as good an actor as Bellerose. Had the thought occurred to the boy? Possibly. But in the meantime, there were those humanities and maybe the law and the looming prospect of adulthood.

When Jean-Baptiste left Clermont, it would appear that one decision about his future had already been taken. The office of *tapissier du roi* that Jean Poquelin had assumed in 1631 enjoyed the right of *survivance*, that is, Jean Poquelin could assign it to one of his heirs. On December 14, 1637, that is exactly what he did. The office was transferred to his eldest son, who took the oath on December 18. The *État général* of the royal household for 1637 reads: "Jean Poquelin succeeded Jean Poquelin his father."[39]

The boy was not quite sixteen but – so it has been assumed – already trained in the skills of his father's craft, ready to practice the trade of master *tapissier*. The problem is to discover how he could have been. There is no record of any kind suggesting that he was ever apprenticed to his father or to any one else. As the son of a master, his term of apprenticeship could have been reduced from six to three years, but in order to complete his training by the age of fifteen, he would have had to have begun it at twelve, when we assume he was learning to parse Latin. In any case, even if he had been apprenticed, no boy of fifteen was ever received as a master, in the *tapissiers* or in any other *corps de métier*. The minimum age for the mastership was twenty-one.[40] So, the question is how could Jean-Baptiste Poquelin at fifteen be prepared to follow in the footsteps of his father?

The answer is that the transfer of the *survivance* to Jean-Baptiste had nothing to do with being a *tapissier* and everything to do with being an officer of the royal household. Special training was no longer a

qualification for an office such as *tapissier du roi*. The sale of royal offices to anyone with the cash to buy one became a matter of such great concern to the masters of the Paris *corps de métier* after 1635 – when the French declared open war on the Hapsburgs and the gaping maw of the royal purse became insatiable – that the masters found it necessary to accumulate funds to purchase certain offices when they came on the market and prevent their sale to unqualified buyers.[41] It was thus of no importance to the keepers of the purse that a *tapissier du roi* be a *tapissier*. Anyway, one could always assume that the fifteen-year-old son of a *tapissier* would, in the normal course of events, become one himself. And if not, well, the functions of a *tapissier du roi* were largely ceremonial and administrative. He was not expected to whip out a needle and thread and sew up a rip in the king's featherbed.

Still, none of this really explains why Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, a schoolboy, took the oath of his office in December 1637 and apparently began to exercise its functions the following spring.[42] A possible reason might be the war with the Hapsburgs that was declared officially in 1635. With the country at war, the king – although never in robust health – felt it was his duty to go on campaign, to stimulate the patriotism of the troops and assure the loyalty of the generals.[43] One of the duties of a *tapissier du roi* was to accompany the king when he went on a military campaign and oversee his accommodations. The king had two identical tents and sets of furnishings, each in the care of a *tapissier*. While the king was using one, the other was taken ahead to the next stopping place and arranged. Much more demanding than merely making the foot of the king's bed, this service meant being away from Paris for long periods of time, not something a busy man like Jean Poquelin would have found worth his while. According to Grimarest, Jean-Baptiste was definitely with the king in the summer of 1642 at Narbonne; perhaps he spent earlier summers the same way, fulfilling the functions of his office and learning the ways of the court as well. When not *en exercise*, he could have served his three years of apprenticeship or – like many other young men – he could have read philosophy with a private tutor and begun his study of the law. If Jean Poquelin had great ambitions for his son, Jean-Baptiste's assuming the office of *tapissier du roi* would not have interfered with them and might even have forwarded them.

Some think that after Clermont Jean-Baptiste Poquelin studied with the philosopher Gassendi. The connection was Chapelle, a close friend in later years, who had also attended the Jesuit college. Chapelle, whose real name was Claude-Emmanuel Luillier, was the legitimized son of