

Biographical Preface

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(Translated by Sally Wagstaffe)

Writing a biography of Molière is the best way to discover that it is impossible really to know Molière: to know him as a person, his desires, his feelings, his tastes, his reading, his thinking, his good qualities, his faults; to know his friends and all those he loved, the people to whom he was loyal and those he hated; and to know his real opinions about his contemporaries, whether individuals (such as the King or Racine) or social groups. Only authors who have left a substantial correspondence or a personal diary justify the biographical enterprise: with the benefit of an extensive collection of letters it may be possible to distinguish between a pose and a sincerely held position and to access a person's personal and inner life, perhaps even the secrets of their creative process. But not one letter from Molière has survived. And when we consider that Racine's two sons, who were determined to ensure that their father was remembered, only managed to rescue two hundred letters from the destruction of tens of thousands of letters and notes he had sent and received, it is not so surprising that, after the deaths of those who had, it seems, carefully preserved Molière's papers – his widow, Armande, and then her son from her second marriage, Nicolas Guérin – everything was lost. The only surviving descendant of the family, Esprit-Madeleine Poquelin, brought up to be devout and having no contact with the theatre, was not interested, after the death of her mother and half-brother, in recovering anything that had belonged to a father whom she had barely known and whom the church still hated.

What is left then for the biographer, reduced to working on documents and archives that are generally impersonal, and on the works of an author whose personal and inner life are inaccessible? What is left when the author in question lived at a time when it was unthinkable for him to communicate anything about himself in his works of fiction? What is left for the biographer who seeks to clear away all the invented stories and increasingly implausible anecdotes peddled by successive writers of whom Grimarest,

author in 1705 of the first *Vie de Molière*, was the first and the most destructive? What is left for the biographer is to contextualise Molière.

The major works on Molière over the last fifty years have not needed to focus on Molière's social setting: this had already been done by the early 1960s with the publication of the comprehensive work undertaken by Madeleine Jurgens and Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller, *Cent ans de recherches sur Molière (CA)*, which supplemented and completed the work carried out by Molière scholars in the nineteenth century. Their work is a powerful tool for contextualising, within the limits of the documentation available at that time, Molière the man and his family, and also the history of his theatre company and its members ... and its theatres. This allows a welcome change of perspective from the Molière described in all the publications over the previous two centuries.

The nineteenth-century image, manufactured under the Third Republic, of a populist author forced to submit to the yoke of royal authority could no longer be maintained upon reading *Cent ans de recherches sur Molière*, especially once this reading was coupled with a careful examination of the figures on takings and ticket prices preserved in the three account books that have survived (two of them attributed to La Thorillière and the third to Hubert) as well as in the 'Registre de La Grange', which we now know to be a summary of the troupe's business and revenue based on all the account books from the years 1659 to 1685, rather than a register kept on a daily basis. Thanks to this archival and documentary contextualisation, it was no longer possible to see Molière as the son of a shopkeeper destined to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfathers and as someone whose education had come mainly from being apprenticed to the family business and from 'the university of life'. These are images fabricated by Grimarest that ignored earlier biographical sketches mentioning his education at the Collège de Clermont and his making a start on law studies (preface to the posthumous edition of the *Œuvres* of 1682). As for the idea – invented by Molière's opponents, beginning with the attacks of Somaize in 1660 (*Les Véritables Précieuses*) and especially those of Le Boulanger de Chalussay ten years later (*Élomire hypocondre*) – that his education in theatre had come from street quacks and farce performers, this was finally and decisively eliminated. The documents now reveal Jean-Baptiste Poquelin as the son of a wealthy merchant, whose clientele belonged to the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie – the two classes that could afford his luxurious furnishings, upholstered seats and armchairs, cushions, carpets and tapestries, etc. Moreover, Molière's father had climbed an additional step by acquiring, in the early

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1630s, a position as *tapisserie valet de chambre du roi* (Tapestry Maker Valet of the King's Bedchamber), which formally entitled him to stand at the foot of the sovereign's bed. In short, this was a family on an upward trajectory that justified enrolling Jean-Baptiste, the eldest child, in a good school in the Latin Quarter before sending him to study civil law in Orléans (only canon law was studied in Paris). Responsibility for following in their father's footsteps was devolved to the younger son. This trajectory further underlines the deliberate break (whether out of a sense of vocation, out of love or both) represented by Molière's decision to leave Orléans before obtaining his degree, in late 1642 or early 1643, to launch himself into the theatre with Madeleine Béjart and her family.

And the archives reveal that, although Molière had spent some hours in prison on two occasions in 1645 because of the failure of his first troupe, the *Illustre Théâtre*, responsibility for this cannot be attributed to his father, who, despite stories to the contrary, was always a faithful supporter, but rather to the fact that the Paris public was too small to support another company and that the company's nominal patron – Gaston d'Orléans, Lieutenant General of France – failed to provide it with the expected protection and did not lift a finger to help the actors, who performed for him on occasion and whom he had agreed to support. And the archives also show us that barely a year later, Molière had joined the troupe of the duc d'Épernon, the best provincial company in France, playing to affluent audiences in towns and chateaux, enjoying a comfortable lifestyle and touring with relative ease thanks to the use of carriers to transport their equipment. It must be stressed, therefore, that there is nothing here that corresponds, however remotely, to those caricatures of poverty-stricken troupes inspired by Scarron's *Roman comique*. Finally, the same documents show us that this company – of which Molière was soon to take control, thanks, perhaps, to his strong personality, his ability to write short farces and, above all, to the support of the four Béjarts around him – was protected by its patrons, first the duc d'Épernon and then the three most powerful barons in wealthy Languedoc, and they also reveal that Molière himself was a man honoured with the attention of some of the most distinguished lords in the south of France, such as the comte d'Aubijoux and then the prince de Conti. And all this predates his Paris triumphs and the unprecedented income these would ensure for him fifteen years later, making him a rich man, and earning him the protection of a growing number of lords who would soon be replaced by the King himself.

This Molière, recontextualised as a man of the theatre, no longer looks like a 'populist author' at a time when the *peuple* (people), in the sense

generally understood since the nineteenth century, could not afford to pay to enter a theatre or even to stand in the *parterre* (pit). At a time when the price of a ticket in the *parterre* was doubled for the first run of new plays, who, among the manual workers, water carriers and other ‘small trades’ in Paris, could afford to pay 30 *sols* (1.5 *livres*) to go and applaud a new show at the Palais-Royal? For those who earned 60 *livres* a year, or 5 *livres* a month, it was unthinkable to go to the theatre, even paying 15 *sols* for a *parterre* ticket when an old play from the repertoire was on the bill. Apart from a few lackeys who accompanied lords and great ladies, and who did not contribute to a play’s success or failure, the theatre audience in the mid seventeenth century was that of the upper ranks of the aristocracy, who occupied chairs and benches on the stage and the lower row of boxes, the educated bourgeoisie in the tiered seating of the *amphithéâtre*, and the *peuple* of rich merchants who stood in the *parterre* on weekdays and often sat with their wives in the second row of boxes on Sundays. So, who did Molière write for? The answer, as we will see, can partly be explained in terms of sociology.

The renewal in Molière studies made possible by this sociological contextualisation also brings us closer to the revolution that has taken place, from the 1970s onwards, in our understanding of the ethical and aesthetic context of the creation of Molière’s comedies. Thanks to the work of Jean-Michel Pelous, Alain Viala, Delphine Denis and Roger Duchêne, an endogenous notion, *galanterie*, has replaced exogenous notions such as classicism (invented in the eighteenth century) and *préciosité* (invented in the nineteenth century by exponents of the new field of literary history). *Galanterie* (a word that quickly replaced *urbanité*, or urbanity) refers to the ideal of perfect civility as it was practised in the Parisian salons from the 1620s onwards and, above all, from the 1640s. It brought together a number of virtues that were considered uniquely suited to promoting *commerce* (social intercourse) between *honnêtes gens* (decent people, or ‘people of quality’ in the aristocratic understanding of the word). These were: *complaisance* (obligingness) – a superior form of politeness based on the desire to please everyone; *modération d’esprit* (moderation) – maintaining a degree of detachment and not trying to impose one’s own point of view; *le naturel* (naturalness) – understood as an ease of manner and language suited to facilitating social relations; *enjouement* (playfulness) – a delicately teasing humour that made it possible to distance oneself from reality and from personal concerns. This *galant* ethos, as developed by society culture, led naturally to the creation of a new aesthetic that would bequeath its key concepts to what would later

be called classicism: the pursuit of naturalness and elegant simplicity, the pre-eminence of taste, the primacy of the pleasure principle as a criterion for forming judgements and, above all, the emergence of the idea of a certain *je ne sais quoi* as the supreme aesthetic concept. (For further discussion of *galanterie*, see Chapters 12, 18 and 23.)

Based on a playful genre created by members of high society, then developed by men of letters specialising in parody, such as Charles Sorel, and exploited by booksellers and some non-specialist writers, the notion of *galanterie* has transformed our understanding of Molière and his theatre. The encounter between *galanterie* and the most recent reflections on the social composition of Molière's audiences has revealed that, a few months after his return to Paris as the leader of his troupe, Molière had not simply enjoyed success, he had 'encountered' a particular audience – the *galant* audience (of the town and the court) – and dazzled its members by his ability to incorporate into his comedy what was being discussed in the salons, to turn salient social behaviours seen in sophisticated society into a source of laughter, and to create ridiculous characters drawn from the ethical and social categories derided by the salons (such as reactionary bourgeois, religious zealots, pedants); and he also had the talent to unite the majority of theatregoers around this audience, as he explains so clearly in *La Critique de l'École des femmes*. Thanks to the few details that can be gleaned regarding his life at the beginning of his second career in Paris, it is possible to assess the nature of his relationship with this audience. Known as an actor, company director and author of long and short Italian-style comedies, Molière was also recognised as soon as he arrived as a *bel esprit* (intellectual). Having been recommended to the prince de Conti by Sarasin, darling of the Parisian salons until the Fronde took him to the south of France to join his patron, Molière was accorded the privilege, as soon as he arrived in Paris in the autumn of 1658, of reading out passages from his translation of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and excerpts from his new play *Dom Garcie de Navarre* in various homes he visited.

It is precisely this that makes it possible to understand why, at the turn of 1659–60, his first Paris play, *Les Précieuses ridicules* – a burlesque sketch parodying *galant* usage in the salons – immediately made Molière the fashionable comic writer of the day. He had struck the chord of self-deprecation, considered a virtue by sophisticated people in the salons, and had thereby created an effect of complicity with them. He had won over those who loved satirical parody, of whom there were many among the educated, as well as the majority of those in the *parterre*, namely the shopkeepers and artisans, who were delighted to see social codes that were

almost completely foreign to them caricatured. It also helps us understand why, six years later, the ‘salon comedy’ *Le Misanthrope* – contrary to stories invented later – was an instant success. And why, in the same year (1666), Molière was able to alternate *Le Misanthrope* with the short comedy *Le Médecin malgré lui*, which belonged to the vein of ‘galant farce’ that he had invented. The same galant and educated audiences that delighted in the neo-medieval vein offered by La Fontaine in his *Contes* and had applauded the Rabelaisian vein of *Le Mariage forcé* naturally enjoyed the tongue-in-cheek medieval dimension that was the basis for much of *Le Médecin malgré lui*. This is the contextualisation that has allowed us to break away from the tradition of French farce to which some Molière criticism has long wanted to incorrectly link him, as if there were a continuity between the farce of the Middle Ages and Molière via the farces of Tabarin. However, it is clear that there is no direct continuity of tradition from the medieval *fabliaux* (short tales in verse) to the *Contes* of La Fontaine. And, similarly, it is possible to see what Molière’s very modern farces owed to his contemporaries’ taste for new versions of ‘the farces of Tabarin’ – which were actually works by educated authors and far from being authentic transcriptions of the performances of the farce actor Tabarin – and the pleasure they took in the ‘farce effect’ Molière sought to create in some of his *petites pièces* (short plays).

Let us return to *Les Précieuses ridicules*, to *galanterie* and the socio-literary context. At the very moment when Molière was leaving the Rhone Valley with his troupe to try to gain a foothold in the capital and travelling back and forth between Rouen and Paris during the summer of 1658, a little *Recueil de pièces en prose les plus agréables de ce temps, composées par divers auteurs* had just been published, in which almost everything had, in fact, been written by Charles Sorel. Most notably, the collection includes the reissue of a text entitled *Les Lois de la galanterie*, in which, as early as 1644, Sorel had amused himself by presenting in a parodic manner the clothes, behaviours and linguistic tics indispensable to anyone who wanted to be counted among the finest of the Parisian aristocracy that had recently been described as ‘galant’.

These eighteen ‘laws of *galanterie*’, where Molière would later find what he needed to construct his characters of the ridiculous marquis and the reactionary bourgeois, the very antithesis of *galants*, were waiting for an author audacious enough to think of transposing such parodic statements into a theatrical parody. It is to these parodic ‘laws’ that ‘the marquis de Mascarille’ owes the essence of his attitudes and behaviour – exaggerated to the point of caricature – when faced with the two *visionnaires* (young girls

driven mad by an excess of imagination) that Molière borrowed from the famous play by Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin (which was in his company's repertoire). And the same *Recueil* also offered him the means to transform these *visionnaires* into 'précieuses'. Sorel had embarked on this publication to exploit the enthusiasm shown over the previous two years for the publication of the four volumes of *La Précieuse* by the abbé de Pure. He had reproduced, among other allegorical maps, a short text entitled *La Carte du royaume des précieuses*, composed four years earlier by a certain marquis de Maulevrier to parody the famous *Carte de Tendre* – a *galant* game invented by Madeleine de Scudéry and Paul Pellisson in 1653 and later included in the first volume of *La Clélie* (1654). Among the other texts invented by Sorel was a lottery where the prizes were books, among which he had inserted 'précieus' titles of his own, referring in particular to an entirely imaginary 'précieuse institution' and an invented 'jargon' used by the *précieuses*, which it fell to Molière to create. Desmarests's girls, who go mad through their overactive imaginations, have thus become, in *Les Précieuses ridicules*, girls who are mad through contextualisation. And it was the editorial enterprise of Somaize and Donneau de Visé, sponsored by the bookseller Ribou, that would complete the playful enterprise of Sorel and Molière in the months that followed, with no awareness that, in a later age, this would send literary history down a false trail by encouraging belief in the existence of a genuine *préciosité* that Molière was merely depicting in a satirical manner.

By recontextualising the circumstances of the first performances of Molière's plays, it is possible to understand why, at the other end of his career, *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, which was not well received by the public and was quickly abandoned by its author (after only eighteen performances), is no longer really a comedy by Molière, even though Molière the author and Molière the actor were dazzling in it, and even though the play is often the first to be mentioned today to evoke his theatre. It is important to focus on the paradox of *Les Fourberies*, so typical of Molière to our eyes and so untypical of Molière in the light of a contextualisation of his work. Theatre historians have long argued that Molière's intention was to situate this play in the vein of *L'Étourdi*, with the very name of Scapin functioning as an unambiguous marker, since the Italian model for *L'Étourdi* was entitled *L'inavvertito, overo Scappino disturbato, e Mezzettino travagliato* (*The Blunderer, or Scapin Disturbed and Mezzetin Troubled*). But what can a return to an old vein of comedy mean after fifteen years of experimentation? What does it mean to insert stage business that seems to refer to one of the short comedies performed by his troupe in years past, *Gorgibus dans*

le sac? How can we interpret the formidable theatrical machine that was Molière? There has been much commentary on these questions without reference to context, and it is interesting to read again Roger Duchêne's synthesis of this discussion, in his *Molière* published some twenty years ago, which led him to wonder whether the play might not be a 'testament play',¹ as if, finally, the 'real Molière' might be found in it.

But what does the context tell us, in this case the material history of the theatre? That *Les Fourberies* was intended as a stop gap, conceived of at a time when it was necessary to offer the public something new that would require only limited scenery while waiting for everything to be ready at the Palais-Royal for the revival of the lavishly staged *Psyché*. It was, therefore, necessary to settle for a few flats depicting the traditional 'comic crossroads' in the Italian style, quickly put in place and easily moved, while above, below, to the sides and towards the back of the stage, the sumptuous decors and machines for *Psyché* were being prepared and installed. In other words, *Les Fourberies*, as revealed by the play's formidable comic power and the extraordinary figure of the title role played by Molière himself, are, indeed, Molière; but at the same time this is not the Molière of those later years.

Returning to the context allows us to appreciate the reasons why, a year and a half after Molière's death, Boileau was able to play on ideas and words in his all too famous pronouncement: 'In this ridiculous sack where Scapin is enveloped / I no longer recognise the author of *Le Misanthrope*.' Certainly, associating Scapin's bag and Tabarin and presenting them in opposition to *Le Misanthrope* served a specific purpose for Boileau, who had set himself up as a legislator on poetic matters, and who sought to create the illusion of an 'ancient' unity in the best poetic productions of his time, placing Molière and his *Misanthrope* under the aegis of Terence and excluding everything that was 'modern' or 'unconventional' and so did not fit into his scheme. And of course, *Les Fourberies*, in which Molière had staged – on a framework derived from Terence – sequences borrowed from *Cyrano*, stage business and Italian *lazzi* (for more on *lazzi*, see Chapters 10 and 17) combined with 'farce effects', could not be made to fit into Boileau's scheme: it was indeed 'unconventional', which is why it appears to us today to be so entirely 'Molière'. But Molière himself, despite the extraordinary exuberance shown in the writing of this little play, made no secret of the fact that it was *Le Misanthrope* to which he was most attached – this was the play he had his company revive, giving the role of Alceste to the youthful Baron, while he himself was immersed in the preparation of *Le Malade imaginaire* – and that *Les Fourberies*, which had been performed for just a few short weeks, counted for nothing. And did he not discard it

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forever when he took it apart so as to insert the entire dispute between Scapin and Argante into *Le Malade imaginaire* where ‘you won’t disinherit him at all’ (I. 4) becomes the dispute between Toinette and Argan (‘You’ll never put her in a convent’) (I. 5)?

Les Fourberies leads us to consider the context of theatrical practice. What do we learn from the paratexts of *Sganarelle ou le cocu imaginaire*, which were routinely ignored until it was revealed recently that they had formed an integral part of the first (pirated) edition of the play? That a revolution in comic acting had occurred with the invention by Molière of this new character. Sganarelle is not just a French version of an Italian name (created by Molière to refer to ‘someone who deceives himself’). Following on from Mascarille (‘little mask’) – a role Molière played with a half-mask inspired by his Italian friends and colleagues – Sganarelle was not just an unmasked face. Molière had the idea of borrowing another feature of Italian performance and of transforming it. Performing with his face uncovered offered him the opportunity to draw inspiration from the acting style of the most famous performer of the age, Scaramouche. Was Molière simply the pupil of Scaramouche, as his detractors were quick to claim? This seems true to some extent. But Scaramouche performed for the most part in mime and expressed all his emotions via facial movements and grimaces, while Molière had the idea of alternating these grimaces with speech to punctuate exchanges and break up dialogue. This brings us back to Boileau’s future criticism in *L’Art poétique*:

Perhaps his art would have won more prizes;
 If, less a friend to the people in his learned depictions,
 He had not made his characters grimace so often.

It was not important to Boileau that Molière had revolutionised French comic performance by drawing inspiration from Italian performance. But it is important to us, because this ‘context of grimaces’ allows us fully to appreciate the revolution in comic writing. Molière would never have had the idea of proposing a sequence such as the ‘le’ episode in *L’École des femmes* (which refers to *le petit ruban* (the little ribbon) Arnolphe had given Agnès) if he had not had in mind while writing it that each of Arnolphe’s interruptions would be the occasion for an expressive grimace, and that these grimaces would bring out, beyond the comic dimension of the text and the performance, a salacious ‘additional meaning’ that *galant* society could only applaud.

There is also the context of books and plays. Claude Bourqui’s ‘genetic’ reassessment of Molière’s traditional ‘sources’ in 1999 made it possible to

target research towards a new understanding of Molière's creative process, which led to the new edition of Molière's *Œuvres complètes* in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, of which we were joint editors. Looking again at *L'École des femmes* while adopting a genetic approach makes it possible to understand, for example, that the subject of the play is not only the result of a combination of two sources (which fact was revealed as early as February 1663 by Donneau de Visé in his *Nouvelles nouvelles*), namely the Spanish short story of 'la précaution inutile' (pointless caution) and the Italian tale of the inappropriate confidant. *L'École des femmes* is also the product of supreme skill in the art of 'couture dynamique' (dynamic construction). By 'stitching' the Italian tale into the Spanish short story, Molière invented a plot of a radically new type formed of short narrations, where the comedy is created by the reactions of the ridiculous character as he listens to these stories. Similarly, by combining the heroine who is foolish through ignorance, taken from the Spanish short story, and the lively and resourceful heroine, taken from the Italian tale, he created Agnès, who, before our very eyes, makes the journey from touching stupidity to a remarkable awakening of her senses and intellect. And if we begin to compare Agnès to Molière's other heroines, Marianne, Angélique and the rest, who share their characteristics with the young girls in love seen in Italian comedy – submissive, obedient and often lacking in personality – we are able to gauge the extent to which Molière's best creations, like those of any great artist, are the result of artistry working within constraints.

Setting the plays in the context of their sources, thus allows us to deepen our understanding of the secrets of Molière's creative process, as a true 'author *dell'arte*', who was able to transform the genre of comedy by an unconventional approach to dramatic composition. At the same time, it allows us to return to the ethical and aesthetic context. No doubt, the success of *L'École des femmes* with the *beau monde* would not have been the same if salon members had not believed that the play contained a reflection of their own ideas, tastes and aversions: their attachment to gender equality, to education for girls, to discernment in relation to feelings and different forms of love; their conviction, as Horace marvels in the comedy, that 'Love is indeed a wondrous master' (III. 4), and the distaste they felt for the beliefs, opinions and behaviours of the traditional bourgeoisie.

The same double contextualisation, both social and book based, reveals that the presence of jealousy and cuckoldry in the first part of Molière's career is not the result of alleged difficulties in Molière's relationship with his wife, nor of the persistence of a so-called farcical vein dating from the Middle Ages. Before revisiting the biographical details that make it possible