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Molière and his players

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Thesis

MOLIÈRE AND HIS PLAYERS

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At the end of the sixteenth century the French theatre was in a very primitive state in complete contrast to the theatre in other countries. London, for example, had at that time six large and permanent theatres, versatile actors, and a dramatic literature unequalled to this day, while Italy was sending her brilliant and well trained troupes into all civilized countries. Paris had but one wretched "salle de spectacle," actors who were alternately "bateleurs de la Foire" and comèdians, and a dramatic repertoire scarcely recognizable as literature. This situation was a direct result of the fact that since 1402 all theatricals in Paris had been a monopoly of a corporation of artisans, les Confrères de la Passion, who, by a privilege granted them by the king, Charles VI, in 1402, had the right to prevent all productions on which they had no royalties - and this in the faubourgs and environs as well as in Paris. In 1548 they were forbidden to present the Passion - and all other mystery plays - and in general they stopped giving any sort of performance, but they continued to maintain their prerogative until 1677. In the meanwhile, their monopoly
was attacked many times and their only connection with the
dramatic world consisted of a series of lawsuits brought
against various companies of actors.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the
Confrérie was in possession of the only theatre in Paris,
the Hôtel de Bourgogne, outside of which no troupe could
give a theatrical performance in Paris. Here the audience
usually consisted of groups of ne'er-do-wells who came to
the theatre before the beginning of the play to drink,
gamble and quarrel, and whom the play interested not by
its content but by its exterior spectacle. The arrival
in Paris of the Italian troupe, which had been brought
there through Marie de Medicis, with their carefully de-
veloped dramatic technique and varied repertoire soon
made the Confrères, who were in reality merely amateur
actors without particular skill or training, appear ex-
tremely ridiculous. Accordingly, beginning about 1573 the
Confrérie rented their "salle de théâtre" to professional
actors. It was not, however, until near the end of the
sixteenth century that the Confrères were content to with-
draw from the stage and criticize the productions from the
height of the two "loges des maitres" which, in addition
to the enormous rent they exacted, they reserved for
themselves in perpetuum. During the last ten years of
the sixteenth century, the best companies from the provinces
and foreign players of the Spanish and Italian troupes took their turn at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Although the Hôtel de Bourgogne was from this time on a real theatre leased to the various companies by the Confrères de la Passion, they, nevertheless, did not for a moment neglect their monopoly, and exercised their privilege to keep any troupe other than their own tenant from giving performances at Paris.

The Confrérie, however, had not been able to prevent other actors from appearing at the fairs at Saint-Germain and Saint-Laurent, a practice heartily approved by Henri IV who gave these comédiens formal permission to appear there. The numerous small troupes which travelled far and wide through the provinces were always desirous of appearing in Paris where they could be accommodated only at the time of the fairs. There they did the customary circus stunts to attract trade for the quack doctors who went about in state accompanied by a retinue of "batteurs de pavé, bateleurs, comédiens, farceurs et harlequins". Indeed, for the public of that day - and for the actors themselves - there was little difference between the procession at the fair and the art of the theatre. In reality the only difference was that of place, for the repertoire and its interpretation were interchangeable, since serious plays were given at the
fairs and farces presented at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

There was, then, a continued struggle between the Confrérie and the actors, who even appealed to the Parliament to release them from the restrictions imposed by the monopoly, but to no avail. For several years there were fairly peaceable relations between the Confrères, and the troupe playing at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which, under the protection of Louis XIII, rejoiced in the title of "Troupe Royale". Under these circumstances, the Hôtel de Bourgogne prospered, won public favor, and became one of the vital institutions of Paris. The Confrères, unwilling to let slip the financial advantages of their monopoly, authorized, for a consideration, a troupe of actors to establish themselves in the Hôtel d'Argent. This troupe became a formidable rival of that at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, especially when they took possession of a "jeu de paume" in the quartier du Marais under the direction of Mondory who brought from Rouen Corneille's Cid. Richelieu, to gall Louis XIII, took pains to protect them.

Such was the theatrical situation in Paris, when, in June 1643, a small company composed largely of young people who up to this time had played only as amateurs, drew up a contract founding a new troupe which was to bear the high-sounding title of L'Illustre Théâtre. There were to be ten in this company, and in the list of the
members we find three times the name Béjart - Joseph, Geneviève, and Madeleine. It is probable that the initial idea of founding the troupe originated with them; it is certain that the contract was drawn up at their house.*

The Béjarts came from a large family in none too easy circumstances, for there were fifteen of them, the father a laborer in the "Services des Eaux et Forêts". Madeleine Béjart was twenty-five years old when the Théâtre Illustre was founded. A large, robust girl with blond hair, she was not strikingly beautiful but extremely intelligent and vivacious. She was a splendid actress and of a very practical turn of mind. It is not, therefore, surprising to find her one of the leading spirits of the troupe, and, indeed its real organizer. The contract, for instance, stipulates that the authors have the right to distribute the rôles in their plays without consulting the preferences of the actors, but that, "par exception, Madeleine Béjart a la prérogative de choisir le rôle qui lui plaira!"

Madeleine Béjart had a lasting influence on the member of the company most interesting to us whom we find listed as Jean-Baptiste Poquelin. Jean-Baptiste Poquelin who took the name of "Monsieur de Molière when he embarked upon his dramatic career, was born, Rue St. Honoré, near the Pont Neuf, Paris, in January 1622. His father, an upholsterer, had shops in the covered Halle de la Foire,

* Loiseleur: Points Obscurs de la Vie de Molière, p.118.
Saint Germain des Prés, and it may well be that Molière's first interest in things theatrical developed from watching the spectacles offered at the fairs to the holiday throngs. Furthermore, the Poquelins lived and conducted their business in one of the most animated quartiers of Paris, near the Pont Neuf. Here it was that the numerous quack doctors built their sheds and gave the performances which advertised their marvelous drugs. Without a doubt, small Jean-Baptiste lingered often on the Pont Neuf to listen to the rigamaroles of the Italian comedian, l'Orvietan, and of his colleague, Bary, in praise of some incomparable antidote.

When he was fourteen, Jean-Baptiste was sent to the Jesuit College of Clermont, where in addition to serious work in Latin and Greek, the pupils were encouraged to take part in "ballets" given at the "distribution des prix", before the cardinal, or, even, the king. All the roles in these plays, chosen from the works of Terence, Plautus, or Seneca, were taken by the pupils, but since the actors were chosen from the boarders, Molière, who was a day-pupil, an "Externe", must have been content to be in the audience. At Clermont, where he remained until 1641, Molière studied Aristotle's Ethics, Physics, Metaphysics and Logic. When he left Clermont he completed his studies by a year's work in philosophy as a pupil of the
famous Gassendi, who taught him, not according to Aristotle, but according to Epicurus, a brave thing to do in those days of the unquestioned supremacy of Aristotle. Even the most cursory reading of Molière's plays demonstrates the importance of his studies in philosophy, be it of the theories of Aristotle or of Epicurus, but one wonders whether the friendship established with a fellow pupil, one Cyrano de Bergerac, was not more important at this period of Molière's development?

When he was quite small, Molière's maternal grandfather had often taken him to the Hôtel de Bourgogne to see the players led by the famous Bellerose.* So often did he take him, that the child’s father, who intended that his son should enter his profession as tapissier du Roi, asked the grandfather if he wanted to make an actor of Jean-Baptiste. Now, Molière, pupil of Gassendi, companion of Cyrano de Bergerac, was sufficiently sophisticated to go to the théâtres, for there were now two theatres in Paris – l'Hôtel de Bourgogne and le Marais – without his grandfather or any other guardian. It must have been a fascinating adventure for young Poquelin, to go to the theatre with Cyrano; Cyrano who was older, who had already lived, for he had been in the army; Cyrano, who,

1. Donnay: Molière, p. 18. quotation from Grimarest, Vie de Molière, 1705.
marvel indeed, knew personally the actors and actresses! When his strictly cultural education was finished, Molière studied law and even took his "licences" at Orléans, but there is no very trustworthy evidence that he even practiced. Indeed, the biography written by his friend and fellow-actor La Grange, says, "au sortir des écoles de droit, il choisit la profession de comédien." Before this event, however, he had some experience in his father's profession. His father obtained for him in 1634 "la charge de tapissier et valet de chambre de Sa Majeste," — a document mentioned in the inventory made after his death of Molière's effects. This office was not by any means an humble one, for when they were on duty at the court, the valets tapissier had the rank of squire. L'État de la France describes their duties as follows: "Tous les jours ils aident les valets de chambre à faire le lit du Roy. Ils sont obligés de garder les meubles de campagne pendant leur quartier et de faire les meubles de Sa Majesté!"* The holders of this office fulfilled their duties in turn for three months at a time.

We do not know the particular reason for his doing so, but it is certain that in the spring of 1642 during the campaign of Roussillon, J. B. Poquelin took his father's place as valet tapissier in the retinue of Louis XIII. It

1. Loiseleur, p. 22.
may be that his father was too busy to leave his affairs for three months, yet, on the other hand, it is very probable that he took advantage of an opportunity to send his son away from Paris, away from the wings of the theatres and the actors and actresses. It is part of the romance of his history to believe that Molière was the young valet de chambre who concealed Cinq Mars just before his arrest at Narbonne, June 13, 1642.* On his return, or a few months later, Molière told his father that he wished to renounce his rights to the office of valet tapissier, that he intended to be an actor. The good Poquelins were horrified, for an actor was in those days in the class with sorcerers, usurers, prostitutes, and excommunicates, but they were obliged to consent after a fashion.

At this point, I can quote no better description of the situation than a paragraph of Donnay's Molière:**

"A vingt-et-un ans. Jean-Baptiste Poquelin ne songe pas du tout à être auteur, il veut être comédien. Décidément, c'est un Cresse. Trait d'atavisme: ce goût très vif que le grand-père avait pour le théâtre est devenu chez le petit fils une passion, une vocation. Et plus, soit à Monfrin, soit à Paris, avant ou après le voyage du Roussillon, on ne sait pas au juste à quel moment, il a rencontré Madeleine Béjart, il en est tombé amoureux. Alors, malgré Clermont et son Latin, malgré Gassendi et sa philosophie, et les études de droit, et la bonne et sûre maison de son père, et la très

*Loiseleur: Points Obscurs de la Vie de Molière, pp. 95-96.
**Donnay, Molière, pp. 34-35.
honorable charge de tapisser valet-de-chambre de Sa Majesté, oui, malgré tout cela, pour les beaux yeux d'une comédienne, il entre dans le tripot comique. J'aime que la raison d'un tel parti soit une raison sentimentale; et tout reste dans l'ordre véritable et naturel, si, à vingt-et-un ans, une intelligente et jolie fille lui fait faire une sottise.... dont les résultats, d'ailleurs, seront magnifiques."

In the roster of L'Illustre Théâtre we find the name, "George Pinel, maître de pension." As we know, Molière's father did not approve of his son's theatrical ambitions, and he sent his son's old tutor to him to persuade him to give up the idea. This envoy brought an offer from M. Poquelin to his son to buy him some other court function than that of valet tapisser, the extent of the father's fortune only to be the limit of its cost. Neither prayers nor remonstrances were of any avail, and, on the contrary, the young people even cajoled Pinel into returning to M. Poquelin as their envoy. He was more successful on this mission, for, under pretext of paying Molière's debts as a bribe to dissuade him from his new career, he obtained 200 livres from Jean Poquelin. The young people used this money to pay part of the rent of 1900 livres, payable the twelfth of the month, of the jeu de pauvre de Metayer which they had hired as a salle de théâtre. In January 1643 Molière's father settled on him 630 livres, representing his share in his mother's estate
and his future rights in that of his father. While the workmen were repairing the jeu de paume in the vicinity of the porte de Nesle, L'ILLustre Théâtre departed for Rouen. Here they had no great success, for they did not, apparently appreciate what the public wanted.

They returned to Paris early in January, 1644, ready to rival l'Hôtel de Bourgogne and le théâtre du Marais. Unfortunately, however, they were not able to compete with them on equal terms. The Parisians had only to go to the Hôtel de Bourgogne to see Corneille's best works interpreted perfectly, according to the fashion of the times. Molière was playing tragedy also, but not so successfully. The Élomire Hypocondre, ou les Médecins Vengés, product of a contemporaries pent-up hatred and envy of Molière, gives us a description of the first performance at the jeu de paume des Metayers -

"Ce fut un jour de fête, Car jamais le parterre avec tous ses échos Ne fit plus de 'ah! ah! ni plus mal à propos."

This first success was apparently unique for the story continues:

"Les jours suivants n' étant ni fêtes ni dimanches, L'argent de nos goussets ne blessa point nos haunches, Car, alars, Excepté les exempts de payer, Les parents de la troupe et quelques bateleurs, Nul animal volant n'entra dans notre salle."

The situation was probably not as desperate as this picture, but they did not, on the other hand, play to crowded houses.
After a year, during which their debts increased, they decided to move their salle de théâtre, for they attributed their lack of success to their location. Things went no better at the new jeu de paume de la Croix Noire. Molière was arrested because the company owed so much, especially to an usurer and the man who supplied L'ILLustre Théâtre with candles, and his companions were obliged to borrow more money to get him out of prison. For a time, in 1646, the troupe was under the protection of the Duc d'Orléans, but his favors were not very lucrative. Even when the Duc de Guise made Molière a present of his cast-off wardrobe, gorgeous costumes were not sufficient to draw the play-going public to the jeu de paume de la Croix-Noire. Empty houses obliged the troupe to abandon in 1646 any remaining ideas of conquering Paris.

The example of many theatrical companies travelling in the provinces gave them new courage, and they determined to play among the rural towns of the Midi. To quote Gustave Larroumet's opinion on this important step in Molière's career - "les Béjart emmènent avec Molière un déclassé, un fugitif de la maison paternelle qui a scandalisé, presque déshonoré une honnête famille, qui a tâté du Châtelet, et dans douze ans ils le ramèneront formé par l'expérience, riche d'impressions et de souvenirs, maître de lui-même et de son génie, mür pour les chefs-d'
oeuvre." Until the end of 1652 L'Illustre Théâtre led a very nomadic life much the sort of thing depicted in Scarron's Roman Comique. Scarron could not have had Molière's troupe in mind, but he visualizes for us their life, composed of adventure and misadventure. One can easily imagine the difficulty of transport, the queer cavalcade of horses, mules, and lumbering carts which dragged the wardrobes and stage properties, the sudden metamorphosis of a tennis court, where the balls have just been rattling, to a stage, the quarrels with the local squires, the disturbed nights in crowded country inns, in fine, all the loves and wars of a theatrical company on the road. Often the troupe made its way to some large town, attracted by a fête, only to be chased away by the authorities, clerical or civil, and forced to take refuge for the night in some sleepy out-of-the-way-village. Here they might receive a joyous welcome, be given the use of the jeu de paume or the grande salle de la maison commune, in which to present some merry Italian farce or a tragedy of Mairé, Corneille or Scarron. Tapestries were hung about one end of the hall to form a stage. Entrances and exits were made by struggling through these heavy curtains which frequently knocked off the villain's hat or cocked the helmet of a warrior or a god at an absurd angle. The stage was usually lighted by candles stuck in tin sconces at the back and sides; occasionally luxury provided a
chandelier of four candles, let down from the ceiling by a rope. A flute and a tambour or two fiddlers supplied the music. The performance over, all this glory was hastily pulled down, repacked on the "carrosses", and the troupe set out once more on the road, knocking at the doors of Châteaux, seizing the least pretext for giving a performance.

The nucleus of the troupe was, at this time, Molière and the Béjart family. There were three actresses Madeleine and Geneviève Béjart, and Catherine Bourgeois. Molière played the "leads", Joseph Béjart the tragic lovers. An excellent recruit was René Berthelot, whose good humor and enormous size made him the comedian of the troupe. Gros-René it was who took Jodelet's part as Mascarille in Les Précieuses Ridicules, and although Jodelet was a very thin man, Molière did not change a word of the dialogue, thereby making it all the funnier. There were one or two other secondary actors, probably a dozen people in the troupe in all, the usual number to be found in provincial companies. To Madeleine Béjart, the économie of L'Illustre Théâtre, is due whatever comfort of existence they achieved. The proof of her sane judgment and financial ability lies in a fairly large number of documents which show with what vigilance and firmness she established her own affairs and those of Molière and the troupe. One such document, a
"Délégation de l'Amoune Générale de Lyon, dated January 6, 1658, shows us that in spite of her shrewdness, Madeleine Béjart was not hard-hearted or unaware of the misery of others, for it states that 18 livres tournois had been given to a poor widow,"recommandée par la damoyeselle Byarre (sic), comédiennne."*

In March 1653 the first of Molière's plays was presented at Lyons. Once established at Lyons the vagabond days of L'ILLustre Théâtre were over. They did make further excursions into the Rhone valley, unto Languedoc, and Provence, but this with a set itinerary, always departing from and returning to Lyons. This first play of Molière's was L'Etourdi, a frank imitation of Niccolo Barbieri's l'Inavvertito. Days of prosperity began for the troupe. The underlying reason for their success was the unity and loyalty among the members. With such a company Molière soon gained an excellent reputation among theatrical people and his troupe was known as the best in the provinces. They gained the patronage of the Prince of Conti, who had been a pupil at Clermont with Molière, although it is doubtful if they were at all intimate. There was no longer any question of poverty, of miserable little productions in barns along the roadsides in order to get

1. Loiseleur: Points Obscurs de la Vie de Molière, p.381.
enough to eat. The troupe now led a carefree easy life, kept open house for their friends, wore rich costumes, and gave liberally to the poor. Molière's second play, *Le Dépôt Amoureux* repeated in 1656 at Béziers the success of *L'Étourdi*. While Molière was actively engaged by his literary talents, Madeleine Béjart was busy with administrative affairs. Their objective was, as ever, Paris, and in 1658 they left Lyons after a festive farewell performance, proceeding as far as Rouen, the city of the Corneilles. When Monsieur, the king's brother, granted them his "protection et la titre de sa troupe", Madeleine Béjart leased for eighteen months a "jeu de paume" at Paris. Molière made frequent visits from Rouen and was presented at court to the young king, Louis XIV and the Queen Mother.

On October 24, 1658 Molière and his troupe were commanded to perform before Louis XIV and the court at the Louvre. The play, Corneille's *Nicomède* went fairly well; the king and his courtiers were very much impressed by the beauty and talent of the actresses. When *Nicomède* had been applauded, Molière appeared to thank the king, and begged his royal permission to present one of the farces with which he had "régalée les provinces". The audience had listened attentively enough to *Nicomède*, but they were enthusiastic about *Le Docteur Amoureux*, the farce,
in which Molière took the leading rôle. After this performance, the king authorized Molière and his troupe to perform at the théâtre du Petit Bourbon where they were to alternate with the Italian actors of the "Commedia dell'Arte." They were to be known as the "Troupe de Monsieur" and were promised a pension of 300 livres each by Monsieur, le duc d'Orléans, the king's brother. Lagrange, who kept an accurate account of the financial affairs of the troupe, assures us, however, that it was never paid.

Their public début took place November 2 with L'Ætourdi. In contrast to Molière's previous attempts to appear in some of Corneille's tragedies such as Rodogune and Le Mort de Pompée, in which he was greeted with the famous "pommes cuites", this performance was a complete success. He made a more popular appeal however in Le DÉpit Amoureux, so that, on the whole, the Parisian adventure began auspiciously. One of his contemporaries, de Visé, says of Molière, "Il fut trouvé incapable de jouer aucune pièce sérieuse; mais l'estime que l'on commençait à avoir pour lui fut cause qu'on le souffrit." This same critic tells us that "le beau monde" went to hear Molière's plays as much through habit as through desire to hear his comedies, so it must have been fashionable to be seen at the Petit Bourbon. It is probable that Molière could find no dramatic author who dared to write for him for fear of
offending either the Hôtel de Bourgogne, or le Marais, for during the first year the farces, L'Étourdi and Le Dépit Amoureux, comprised the repertoire at the Petit-Bourbon. So great was the jealousy - and the influence - of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Théâtre du Marais, that without the genius of Molière who provided them with dramatic chefs-d'oeuvre, the troupe would doubtless have repeated the lamentable failure of L'Illustre Théâtre.

The next step forward was the appearance of the brief comedy which with one stroke made Molière the most talked of man in Paris, and his theatre the most frequented, - Les Précieuses Ridicules. As is well known, it is a satire on preciosity and its perverted conception of good taste as delineated in the novels of Mademoiselle de Scudéry. This oversensitiveness and overmodesty did not seem sincere to Molière; he considered it to be nothing less than a form of hypocrisy. The play was received with great annoyance and anger by some people, a proof of how near home it struck. Les Précieuses Ridicules brought the desired notoriety to the little troupe, and from then on Paris had another permanent theatre.

At Easter time 1659 a new member entered "Le Troupe de Monsieur." This was Charles Varlet de La Grange who was to be "le jeune premier". He it was who kept the famous "régistre de la troupe" which has always been an
invaluable source of information for scholars of Molière. Intelligent, a flair for the stage, physical attractiveness, industrious—all these qualities so necessary to the performance of varied roles—he possessed. The Impromptu de Versailles gives us a picture of him. Reserved, discreet, out of the clamor set up by the other actors, Molière had no directions for him, saying, "Pour vous, je n'ai rien à vous dire." He played as his own particular roles, Lélie de L'Etourdie, Eraste du Dépit Amoureux, Horace de l'Ecole des Femmes, don Juan, Adraste du Sicilien, Clitandre de George Dandin, et des Femmes Savantes, Alceste du Misanthrope, Tartuffe, Organ du Malade Imaginaire.

Although Molière's troupe owed its position to Louis XIV, it did not gain from him the most material favors. In 1660 there were in Paris four troupes de théâtre; the "troupe des Italiens" which alternated with Molière's troupe at the Petit Bourbon and had a pension of 15,000 francs; the "troupe Royale" at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which received 12,000 francs; the troupe at the Théâtre du Marais which had some sort of a pension; and, finally, Molière's troupe which had no pension whatsoever. The material and administrative organization of these troupes was very similar. They may be compared to republics each with a president chosen by themselves from among the members. They were not private enterprises under the
direction and personal responsibility of a manager; each actor had a share in the profits and losses of the common enterprise. The profits were divided into "parts" and the actors held a different number of "parts" according to their ability and the length of time they had been with the troupe. Thus we find in LaGrange's Registre an entry:

"Avant que de recommencer après Pâques au Palais-Royal, M. de Molière demanda deux parts au lieu d'une qu'il avait. La troupe les lui accorda pour lui et pour sa femme s'il se mariait."

All business was contracted after due deliberation by the troupe or by an individual member to whom the others had delegated power. Beside his right to vote at meetings of the company, each member took his turn in administering the executive offices of the troupe. There were three executive officers; the treasurer, who kept the funds reserved to pay off debts, or to purchase new scenery, or for royalties; the secretary, who kept the register of the company, an account of the circumstances under which each member was engaged and of other important events; the comptroller, who verified the accounts and records of the secretary and treasurer. Every evening the receipts were collected, the expenses of the day deducted, and the "parts" divided immediately. They provided a pension system for retiring actors by which the one who took the
retired man's place paid him a definite sum every year. The company was put to no great expense for stage properties, a "place à volonté" being used for most plays. The most expensive item of upkeep was that of providing costumes. The actors paid for them out of their "parts", and they seem to have found this expense a constant one. The costumes were of necessity very ornate and beautiful, to satisfy a spectacle loving public. Mantzius states that they had to have real gold on the "costumes à la Romain" because the audience sat so near the stage.

The theatrical year closed a week or two before Easter and began again a week or ten days after that day. Easter was the season for the renewal of contracts and the change of actors from one company to another. Molière's troupe performed on Sunday, Tuesday, and Friday. New plays were shown first on Friday, that the "affiches" and press comments might bring a larger audience on Sunday. New plays, and those of the best authors, were given, in the period between All Saint's and Easter Sunday. In general, tragedies were presented in winter and comedies in the summer. The hour of the performance was at first twelve o'clock, but the hour grew later and later, until, at Molière's last performance, Le Malade Imaginaire, we find him insisting that the curtain rise at quarter past five. Although Molière's troupe performed in public only
on Sunday, Tuesday, and Friday, they gave private performances at court and "chez les gens du beau monde" on the other days of the week. Trollope has figured that between October, 1658 and February 1673, they went "en visite" sixty-five times, exclusive of many more performances at court.

The mechanics of the theatre were arranged much as they are today, the loges and galleries around the theatre in an oval, the stage and the parquet facing each other. The seating plan was, however, entirely different from ours, for then the choicest seats were on the stage itself, the young seigneurs being very fond of this location. Next in order of preference were the loges, from which the ladies of the beau monde viewed the performance, and then the pit which was reserved for the rabble who stood or walked about. The performances were anything but orderly from the modern point of view. The actors were continually disturbed by the spectators on the stage, who often crowded so close that they scarcely left room for the action of the play. Efforts were made to do away with this practice, but the seigneurs were obdurate, influential, and, what is doubtless more to the point, they paid good "louis d'or" for the privilege. Brawls in the pit were not infrequent, particularly when the "militaires de la maison du roi" tried to get in for nothing, and cleared a path through all re-
istance with drawn swords. Then there were the young valets and pages who threw stones and "pommes cuites" at the stage, yowled at the actors, or banged their feet against the railing of the enclosure where the musicians sat. Personal enemies of the poet, authors or actors, expressed themselves without restraint, while, according to Gustave Larroumet, "les gens de qualité étalaient des deux côtés du Théâtre leurs grâces insolentes, par fois excités par une ivresse de bon ton."

Another cause of commotion was the custom of having an "orateur" announce the next play, for there was little newspaper publicity and the green "affiches" posted on the street corners did not provide enough advertising. This duty fell most often to La Grange who at the end of each performance made a little speech in which he thanked the audience for their attention, announced the next performance, and stated its virtues to the audience. Sometimes this speech was as carefully prepared as the play itself, as upon occasions when the king honored the troupe with his presence, at the closing of the theatrical season, or "quand il falloit annoncer une pièce nouvelle qu'il étoit besoin de vanter ou pour promettre de loin des pièces nouvelles, ce qui tenoit le monde en haleine et éisoit pour le merite de la troupe pour laquelle on s'efforçait de travailler."* The audience enjoyed these "annonces"

1. Quoted by Gustave Larroumet, La Comédie de Molière, l'anteur et le milieu, from Chappuzeau, La Comédie Francaise, Historie Administrative 1658-1757.
almost as much as they did the performance itself for they felt that it was their duty and privilege to heckle the "orateur".

It was also the duty of the "orateur" to "rédiger l'affiche", the sole form of printed advertising employed. These posters were made as appealing as possible for they "entreténoient le lecteur de la nombreuse assemblée du jour précédent, du mérite de la pièce qui devait suivre et de la nécessité de pourvoir au loges de bonne heure, sur tout quand la pièce étoit nouvelle et que le grand monde y courroit."* I quote an affiche which has survived—though in a very mutilated condition—from about 1660:

"Les Comédiens de Monsieur, Frère Unique du Roi—Nous ne vous donnerons pas une mauvaise nouvelle en vous apprenant que—nous représenterons L'Héritier Ridicule on La Dame Intressé de Monsieur Scarron—, avec Corgibus dans le Sac—Vous aurez sujet d'être satisfaits—C'est au Petit Bourbon à deux heures."

Molière's success in *Les Précieuses Ridicules* aroused the envy of both the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Théâtre du Marais, not only because the popularity of the Petit Bourbon detracted from their own revenues, but because from that time on his favor grew to be more and more firmly established at court. Louis XIV showed marked

*Quoted by Gustave Larroumet, *La Comédie de Molière, l'auteur et le milieu*, from Chappuzeau, *La Comédie Française, Historie Administrative 1658-1757.*
favor to Molière from the time of his arrival in Paris in October, 1658. Naturally the royal favor entailed that of the entire court, especially in the case of so despotic a monarch. In 1660 the Petit Bourbon was demolished in the middle of the season by the superintendent of works without any notice to Molière. When Molière complained to the king, he ordered that the théâtre du Palais-Royal, which Richelieu had had built for the production of Miroir, be put in condition for the players. Much of Molière's theatrical machinery had been maliciously destroyed at the Petit-Bourbon, so the delay meant a period of idleness for the "Troupe de Monsieur". During this period both the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Théâtre du Marais tried to coax Molière's best actors away from him, but, as La Grange writes in his Registre all the company were so devoted to their chief who united an honorable character and a charming manner to extraordinary genius, that they protested that they would never leave him but would always share his fortunes. As a makeshift, the troupe performed at the Louvre and at the great houses of the nobility until the Palais-Royal was ready in January 1661.

Don Garcie de Navarre a heavy tragi-comedy, of which Molière, however, had great hopes, was a complete failure in February 1661. Molière was attacked by the ridicule and malice of his enemies, ever ready to crush
him, in the person of actors in the rival troupes, jealous writers, critics, pedants, as well as the people he satirized. The protection of the king stood him in good stead, especially after the appearance of L'Ecoles des Maris and Les Facheux in which he attacked bitterly certain types of courtiers. The king encouraged Molière, to apply to all these attacks in kind, and even commanded him to write the Impromptu de Versailles, the boldness of which is rather astonishing even today. In their endeavors to destroy Molière's favor with the king his enemies raked up from vague rumors a scandal concerning his marriage with Armande Béjart, sister of Madeleine, in February 1662. Montfleury, of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, accused Molière of having married the daughter of Madeleine Béjart who had been his mistress. The king made his reply to this accusation when he acted as god-father at the baptism of Molière's son. It is not mere supposition to say that Louis XIV imposed Molière on his contemporaries, that it was his influence above all which safeguarded him in spite of continued attack. Boileau and La Fontaine sing his praises, but 'twas ever thus among members of the same literary group. The Gazette de France in its accounts of the royal festivals either avoids naming the poet who wrote the charming comédies-ballets or does it with very bad grace. The royal favor meant to Molière, furthermore,
something beyond protection in his own day. It meant far more in the development of his genius, for it opened to this son of a bourgeois family who grew to maturity as the leader of a troupe de comédiens in the provinces, a world of which he would otherwise have had but the merest glimpse. Consider merely these characters, and consider what his works would have been without this experience at court:—Mascarille des Précieuses, le Chevalier de la Critique, don Juan and Alceste, Dorante du Bourgeois Gentilhomme, and Clitandre des Femmes Savantes!

Molière grew increasingly unpopular and L'Ecole des Femmes, December 1662 provoked a literary war in which Corneille was one of his chief antagonists. Encouraged by the king, Molière rallied to the attacks with the Critique de L'Ecole des Femmes, and L'Impromptu de Versailles. The latter was a manifesto of his backing by the king for we find in it this bit of dialogue:—

"Vous jouez une pièce nouvelle aujourd'hui ?
--Oui, monsieur.
--C'est le roi qui vous la fait faire?
--Oui, monsieur."

In May, 1664 the first three acts of Tartuffe were presented at a festival at Versailles, but its further production was presented by an interdict. A satire against the religious hypocrites, it was opposed by the Cabale des
Dévots and the clerical faction, who, in spite of the king's power, were extremely influential. It was kept before the public by drawingroom performances, and it appeared in a modified form in 1667 as L'Imposteur. It was not until 1669 that it finally appeared in its present form. Molière scandalized the dévots even further with Don Juan the performance of which was also prohibited by the authorities, and which they even refused to allow him to publish. Le Misanthrope was given in 1666, but it was more successful with the critics, the court, and posterity, than with the contemporary public. Le Médecin Malgré Lui was presented to an enthusiastic audience on August 6, 1666. Molière's health began to fail about this time, due to colds and fatigue, but he played in Le Sicilien, Amphitryon, L'Avare, M. de Porceaugnac, all plays within the next few years. Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme was performed in October 1670, Les Fourberies de Scapin in 1671, Les Femmes Savantes in 1672, and Psyche, a magnificent opera written in collaboration with Corneille, came out in the same year.

Madeleine Béjart died in February, 1672, and with her death the happy days began to slip away rapidly. Molière's life had been for sometime immeasurably saddened by my troubles with his wife, Armande. Soon after this time preparations were begun for Le Malade Imaginaire, one of
the gayest and most vigorous of Molière's farces, but in which one sees finally a hint of his mental and physical misery. It was given for the first time on February 10, 1673, before a large and delighted audience. Throughout the performance it was evident that Molière was suffering intensely but he insisted on finishing the play, and, lived in agony for some time after he had been removed to his own home. There was great difficulty in obtaining Christian burial for him, due to the scandal caused by Tartuffe. His wife appealed to the king who, declining to go over the order of the Archbishop of Paris, obtained permission for a simple burial ceremony at Saint Joseph.

When Molière came to Paris, his genius charmed Louis XIV who hastened to give his protection to the poet and his theatre. Molière died, and the royal power continued its guardianship of his troupe which grew by taking over the actors from the Marais and the Hôtel de Bourgogne who did not hesitate to join such a company. By this amalgamation of the three theatres the Comédie Française was established and became a state institution. It is certain that its founders, Molière not less than Louis XIV, Armande Béjart no more than Charles Varlet de La Grange, had no thought of its future importance or permanence. When Molière gave his first performance at Paris, his sole ambition centered on immediate results, and when Louis XIV
offered him a theatre, a pension, and showed him marked favoritism at his court, he was merely employing for his amusement and the splendor of his festivals the most entertaining actor in Paris. In the same way, when, after his death, Molière's widow and La Grange found themselves at the head of the company, we can be sure their thoughts were not for posterity, but were actuated by the necessity of earning a living.

Remembering the rabid attacks made upon Molière by the "grands comédiens", they refused to consider the first project of amalgamating with the Hôtel de Bourgogne. After a week of mourning, the Troupe du Palais Royal continued their performances until the customary annual recess at Eastertide. During the interval before the reopening, four of their best actors proved too weak to resist the blandishments of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. During the same period Lulli obtained permission from the king to use the Salle du Palais Royal for the Opéra. Necessity obliged La Grange and Armande to solicit the despised union with L'Hôtel de Bourgogne. Refused, they bought a "salle de spectacle," rue Guénégand, having forced Lulli to pay over what he owed to Molière's estate. A stroke of good luck came to them when Colbert ordered the Théâtre du Marais, which had been playing to empty houses, to join with them. They soon disposed of the rivalry of L'Hôtel de Bourgogne
by acquiring their best actors, among them Mlle. de Champeslé to whom Armande, with rare humility, ceded the most important rôles. The climax came when the king, aware that the affairs of L'Hôtel de Bourgogne were in a most precarious state, commanded in a "lettre de cachet" of October 21, 1680 that they should unite with the comédiens de l'Hôtel Guénégand. Thus, strengthened by the ruin of its erstwhile rivals, Molière's troupe alone survived, and the Comédie Française was established by royal proclamation.
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