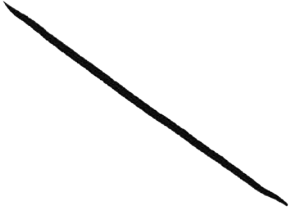


**MOLIÈRE,  
HOMME DE THÉÂTRE:  
ACTOR, MANAGER,  
ACTING TEACHER,  
AND THE FIRST THEATRE  
DIRECTOR**

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to document and analyse Molière's complex activity as actor, troupe manager, acting teacher, and the first theatre director. In the introductory section, we trace the path of young Jean-Baptiste Poquelin in an era when the first two professional theatres emerged in Paris, alongside the theatre of French *farceurs* and Italian *commedia dell'arte* actors. We follow the stages of his artistic evolution, we analyse the influences on his acting thinking and style, his relationship with the Sun King, and the collaboration with the artists that surrounded him. We further discuss the charismatic figure of Molière, his acting characteristics and those of the great actors with whom he formed "L'Illustre Théâtre", followed by "La Troupe". An important section is dedicated to Molière's interest in revolutionizing the acting methods. His special attention to his actors' acting—from the concept of the characters to their psychological and behavioural construction, natural pronunciation, and attention to the smallest details related to interpretation—emphasize the importance of his pedagogy and establish Molière as the first professional theatre director. In the Conclusions, we discuss Molière's rebellion against rules (his defiance of the rules of the French Academy, social conventions, and the harmful customs of society), his major contribution to the history of stage professions and to the modernization of professional acting. The strength of his artistic options defines him as a brave innovator: Molière shaped modern comedy writing and raised the status of stage professions.

**Keywords:** Jean-Baptiste Poquelin de Molière, seventeenth-century French theatre, Madeleine Béjart, "L'Illustre Théâtre", Sun King, Molière's troupe, actor, manager, pedagogue, the first theatre director, playwright, Molière's rebellion.

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### ***Molière in the context of the seventeenth-century Parisian theatre***

When Jean-Baptiste Poquelin<sup>1</sup> turned 18 in 1640 and inherited the title of Tapissier du Roi from his father, Paris had two established professional theatres—the troupe at the Hôtel de Bourgogne (founded in 1548) and the Théâtre du Marais (founded in 1634). The comparison with other contemporary European cities was less than flattering to the French and the delay in the emergence of great dramaturgy throughout the previous century, accompanied perhaps by the rigidity of the creative norms set out by the French Academy (established in 1635 by Louis XIII at the initiative of Cardinal de Richelieu), may be the reasons why, by the middle of the 17th century, Paris had only two professional theatres. At a time when Madrid had 40 theatres (in 1600), London 8, and Venice 10.

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1 Jean-Baptiste Poquelin is the original name of Molière (baptized January 15, 1622, Paris, France—died February 17, 1673, Paris), the greatest French comedy author and a great comedy actor.

However, Parisian artistic life was intense. Outside the two official theatres, popular theatre continued to exist and was just as successful as in the previous century. Of course, popular artists did not use written scripts and probably only the echo of the clashes triggered by the non-compliance with the rules of the Academy reached them. Gifted popular artists created according to their own rules—those of improvisation. The repertoire of the Italian troupes playing in Paris included not only commedia dell'arte performances with traditional masks, but also complex productions, with musical elements and highly refined sets. Later, when Molière will have the opportunity to share the performance hall at Petit-Bourbon with the Italian artists, they will become close friends, and he will carefully study their method of acting, admiring their bold style, with well-supported comic exaggerations. Along with the obvious impact of Ancient Greek Comedy, commedia dell'arte will constitute one of the most important influences on Molière as playwright and actor. There are sources (Larané, 2023) that argue that, at the age of 18, one of his best friends was Scaramouche himself, i.e. Tiberio Fiorilli, star of the commedia dell'arte. 14 years older than Molière, Scaramouche would have been his first theatre teacher.



Tiberio Fiorilli as *Scaramouche*  
 © Château de Versailles, Dist. RMN / ©  
 Christophe Fouin  
 Source: <https://en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/history/great-characters/Molière>

The fairground theatre/théâtre de la foire performed by French actors was also very successful: performances with marionettes, acrobats, street entertainers, tumblers, dancers delighted the audience. Unlike the Italians, French artists did solo performances or in teams of 2 to 3 actors. The great farce actors shined due to the spontaneity of verbal improvisation, inventive use of the body, and mimicry. Among the “jokers”/“les farceurs”, history remembers the great Tabarin who gave performances full of fun and fantasy at Pont-Neuf and Gautier-Garguille who would form a famous comedic trio on the stage of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, alongside Gros-Guillaume and Turlupin. The three launched legendary stock characters and were highly valued for their intelligence, welcomed in salons and even at the Louvre. Together they will bring glory to the theatre of a Hôtel de Bourgogne skilfully managed by Gautier-Garguille.

Irremediably attracted by the intensity of Parisian theatrical life, Molière would have been able to equally see the memorable performances of the great tragedians of the era. Influenced by the preciousness of the aristocracy, the actors of the era sang their lines, with a powerful declamation on the last verse of the tirade to rouse applause. Bellerose and Montfleury shined on the stage of the Hôtel. Montfleury is said to have delivered his lines with such pathos that the audience was left breathless and Molière would later remark that his long, thunderous tirades, delivered in a “diabolical tone”, were very much to the public’s taste. On the other hand, Montdory, the majestic Floridor, and Bruscambille sought to nuance their speech as naturally as possible.

Montdory had a style of exceptional and sincere emotional intensity. Acknowledged as “the most powerful tragedian of his day” (Roy, 1995, pp. 758-759), Montdory remained in everyone’s memory for his impressive creation—Corneille’s *Cid*. As manager, Montdory founded and ran the Théâtre du Marais in 1634, benefiting from the direct support of Cardinal Richelieu. *The Cid Controversy*—started at the premiere in 1636 of the performance with the greatest success in the history of France up to that moment—will last two years. “Les immortels”—Mairet, Scudéry, Jean Chapelain—themselves lacking in the impetus of talent, asked Pierre Corneille to submit to the judgment of the French Academy. Urged on by Richelieu as well, he obeyed, although the verdict—*Les Sentiments de l’Académie française sur la tragi-comédie du Cid* (*The Opinions of the Academy toward Le Cid*)—will displease everyone. Regarding the submission to *The Rule of the Three Unities*, imposed by the Academy to playwrights, Pierre Corneille (1606-1684) was “at fault”. Concerned with rendering the dramatic force of his characters, Corneille created freely, taking the rules into account only when they served his personal aesthetic. Corneille’s heroes themselves exceed the norms because they did not aim to provoke pity, but the admiration of spectators (Bejiu, 2020, p. 75).

Although his father, Jean Poquelin<sup>2</sup>, did not encourage his passion for theatre, young Jean-Baptiste continued to attend it. He was fascinated by acting in particular, which at the time was not the most honourable professional option. He also had an ally in the family—his paternal grandfather<sup>3</sup> had a great passion for comedy (Thoorens, 1977, pp. 16-22). He had lost his mother, Marie Cressé (exhausted by six pregnancies), the daughter of a prosperous bourgeois family, when he was only 10 years old (Gaines, 2002). His father ensured him a good education at the “Collège des jésuites” de Clermont (the current “Lycée Louis-le-Grand”, that was to educate many brilliant young

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2 Jean Poquelin (1595–1669)

3 Jean Poquelin, Molière’s paternal grandfather and his baptize godfather.

people, including Voltaire). A hardworking student, Jean-Baptiste studied for his law degree in Orléans, but his heart had been stolen by theatre since his childhood. Grimarest, the one who wrote the first complete biography of Molière (*La Vie de Mr de Molière*<sup>4</sup>, 1705), was the first to write down this anecdote that became famous:

Molière had a grandfather whom he loved immensely; and this good man had a passion for comedy, he often took little Poquelin to the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The father, who was afraid that this pleasure would lead his son astray, and will divert his attention, which he owed entirely to his profession, asked the old man one day why he so often took his nephew to the theatre? Do you wish, he asked him with some indignation, to make a comedian out of him? God grant, answered the grandfather that he too become as great a comedian as Bellerose! (in Thoorens, 1977, p. 16)

In 1643 the young man decided to give up bourgeois comfort and respectability and wanted to follow his dream. Therefore, at the age of 21 he claimed 5000 livres of his mother's inheritance from his father and invested his entire fortune in establishing a theatre (June 30, 1643) together with the Béjart brothers and sisters, which he called "L'Illustre Théâtre". It was the year in which King Louis XIII died and a 5-year-old future Sun King ascended the throne of France. A year later, perhaps to protect his father's statute and reputation, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin adopted, by notarial deed, the stage name "de Molière". In any case, the pseudonym he used as official name—and which seems to have belonged to a libertine poet who had died 20 years earlier (Larané, 2023), to a novelist, according to other sources (Manière, 2022), or is simply the name of a French countryside—is first found in a document dated 28 June 1644 (Moore & Ronald, 2023).

The new theatrical enterprise, an independent troupe by all accounts, could not cope, largely the same as now, with the fierce competition in the market, accumulated serious debts, mostly for the rent of the space in which they played, and, in August 1645, Molière will be sent for a few weeks in the debtors' prison—Châtelet. His father will pay his bail, but Molière will have to repay his debts by 1666 (Larané, 2023).

4 *La Vie de Mr de Molière* by Jean Léonor Le Gallois, sieur de Grimarest, "has remained the foundational document of all Molière studies, even after critics have called into question almost everything it says" (Thoorens, 1977, p. 15).



Young Molière, © AFP

Source: <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/talieu-rhone-alpes/2014/04/07/lyon-visite-guidee-sur-les-pas-de-Moliere-454845.html>

Undeterred after his release from imprisonment, he founded, together with gifted actress and author Madeleine Béjart (Chisholm, 1911, pp. 659-660), her older brother Joseph Béjart (who made his debut at Théâtre du Marais), with Geneviève Béjart—soon joined by their mother, Marie-Hervé Béjart who brings little Louis, aged 16<sup>5</sup>—, and with others who remained faithful to him, a private company with which he would tour the provinces for 14 years. Only now, with the departure to the provinces, more precisely to the south of France, the troupe becomes truly professional. For Molière, these were the most important years of training and development. He was actor, manager, director, and gradually became the playwright of the troupe. He consciously deviated from the interpretation style of the era, avoiding pompous declamation, and asked his actors to be as close as possible to a natural speech. Supported by a diverse and gifted company, with each performance, he gained experience, tested, and consolidated his artistic options, trained his actors, ending up with a perfect ensemble, the most renowned outside of Paris. At the time, theatre was the main secular entertainment available to the wealthy classes (Larané, 2023) and the quality of the performances was a guaranteed way for aristocratic families to impress both their admirers and their rivals. In the provinces, Molière, together with his lover and partner Madeleine Béjart, managed to secure the protection of some high-ranked individuals. They lead an itinerant life, traveling by carriage, from city to city, from castle to castle, in Normandy, Brittany, Limousin, Bordeaux, Languedoc... There they joined forces with the company of actor Charles Dufresne. Even during the Fronde (1648-1653), the new Dufresne-Molière troupe traversed the country, from Languedoc to Burgundy, passing through Lyon and Dauphiné (Larané, 2023).

In 1658, aged 37, Molière made several secret trips to Paris and gained the favour of the Duke d'Orleans who would further facilitate the appearance of

<sup>5</sup> See "Béjart Tribe" in Thoorens, 1977, pp. 31-34.

Molière's troupe at Court, in front of Louis XIV and the Queen Mother. The sources are contradictory in this regard. Some claim that it was Gaston, Duke of Orléans, known as "Le Grand Monsieur", the brother of the late king and Lieutenant-General of the Kingdom (Larané, 2023). Others, most of them, talk about Philippe I, Duke of Orléans (chateauversailles.fr, n.d.), "le frère cadet de Louis XIV", also called "Monsieur" after the death of his uncle (in 1660). In any case, on 24 October, Molière and some of his colleagues acted out *Nicomède* by Pierre Corneille, on an improvised stage in front of Louis XIV. Philippe I, Duke of Orléans loved their performance and from that moment on, always invited Molière and his theatre ensemble to perform in front of important audiences. The support of the only brother of the Sun King is also apparent from the name change of the company to "Duke of Orléans' Troupe" in 1658, followed by the "King's Troupe" in 1665 (chateauversailles.fr, n.d.).

Appearing before the royal court was perhaps the most important moment in Molière's career. He will give a memorable speech and prove himself a great actor. In front of the distinguished gathering, his troupe presented a tragedy by the great Corneille. However, after the play was over, Molière came on stage and, thanking the greatest king in the world for allowing him to see some feeble copies of the great actors in his service, he respectfully asked the approval to present one of those little entertainments with which the provinces had been delighted. This compliment was said with such delicacy that it drew the applause of the entire Court, which very well received the comedy *L'Amour médecin* (*Doctor Cupid*) (Thoorens, 1977, pp. 75-76).



*Molière received by Louis XIV* by Jean Hégésippe Vetter,  
 painted circa 1864, Huile sur bois 63 cm x 89 cm. Musée d'Orsay.  
 Source: <https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q3172589>

Molière's role as the doctor delighted so much that His Majesty gave orders for the troupe to be relocated to Paris. He was granted the hall at Petit-Bourbon, which he would share with the Italian actors whom he knew and admired. Later, in 1661, he will receive, also through the care of the Sun King, the hall at the Palais-Royal; from 1663 to 1673 we find him in the annals of the Palace of Versailles as a resident and, as we previously noted, in 1665 the Molière troupe will start using the name of the King. The protection of this enlightened monarch extended throughout his entire life and career. The friendship of the two is illustrated by several contemporary or later paintings and lithographs and it seems that Molière was one of the very first actors to whom the king granted protection and pension. Without the constant protection of the king, he would probably have fallen victim to the envy of the courtiers, or competing companies, and suffer at the hatred of those who saw themselves mirrored in his plays. The sympathy and trust of the royal court had to be rewarded and Molière will work accordingly.

At the age of 37, when he restaged his first great success in front of Louis XIV, Molière was an excellent actor and a charismatic troupe director. But he hadn't written any of his major plays yet.

At the time, Molière only wrote farces that are now mostly lost, in fact only two have been preserved, *Le Médecin volant* (*The Flying Doctor*) and *La Jalousie du barbouillé* (*The Jealousy of le Barbouillé*), as well as two comedies, *L'Étourdi ou les Contretemps* (*The Blunderer, or the Counterplots*; performed in Lyon in 1655) and *Le Dépit amoureux* (*The Love-Tiff*, performed in Béziers in 1656). His first important play is *Les Précieuses ridicules* (*The Pretentious Young Ladies*, 1659), which follows the farce tradition but is focused on the satire of contemporary fashion. He continued to assert himself with *Sganarelle ou le Cocu imaginaire* (*Sganarelle, or The Imaginary Cuckold*; 1660), *L'École des maris* (*The School for Husbands*, 1661), *Les Fâcheux* (*The Bores*, 1661). He tried to escape the reputation of "farceur"/"joker" that his first detractors gave him, by writing tragedy, but without success, and in 1662 he had his first "coup de maître" with *L'École des femmes* (*The School for Wives*). His interpretation of Arnolphe—the first from a long line of obsessed characters from his dramaturgy—had a touch of genius. As mentioned, the play was the first from a long line of masterpieces. He tirelessly got involved in playwriting, able to finish a commissioned play in a few days. He also became known for his ability to create joyful royal entertainments and the king himself, experienced music lover and a gifted dancer, proposed Molière's association with Jean-Baptiste Lully. Together they created the first "comédies-ballets". In 1664 Molière had an important role in organizing *Les Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée* (*The Pleasures of the Enchanted Island*) ([chateauversailles.fr](http://chateauversailles.fr), n.d.), a multi-day performance presented from 7 to 13 May, to celebrate the beginning of the building campaigns for the

Château de Versailles. At the king's request, the event was coordinated by the Duke of Saint-Aignan, Molière himself organised the staged elements, presenting three new plays (including a first reading of *Tartuffe*), working closely with Lully on the musical interludes.

Working without interruption and constantly fighting his detractors, Molière wrote about thirty plays in just fourteen years (Larané, 2023).

He will completely immerse himself in the hard work that the profession of actor entails, he will write plays that will revolutionize theatrical thinking, and he will be an increasingly skilful manager for his troupe, he will delight the audience and the Sun King himself, the most important spectator and his admirer, he will suffer in measure, he will carry his illness on his feet, and he will die on stage, physically but nowhere near creatively exhausted at only 51 years of age. A life entirely dedicated to theatre—acting, writing, staging, artistic management, directing and theatrical pedagogy.

***“Avant tout, homme de theatre”*** (René Bray, 1954)

***The charismatic figure of Molière and the great actors with whom he formed La Troupe***

The reaction of one of Jean Poquelin's maids to the birth of his son Jean-Baptiste, in January 1622, remained famous. She exclaimed, “Le nez! Le nez!” a reference to the infant's large nose. So, Jean-Baptiste was nicknamed “The Nose” by his family (Brockett, 2008, p. 199). His expressive face seemed to predict a career in comedy. Phillippe van Tieghem argues he had “amazing gifts in mimicry, both in attitudes and in physiognomy. He knew, like no one else, how to dismantle his face” (1969, p. 36). Therefore, from his first roles, he was excellent in comedy and farce and the sources that quote his contemporaries are unanimous: Molière always provoked the laughter of his audiences.

The effect was enhanced by his physique. With his head almost directly on his torso, he was much more suited to comedy than tragedy. “Nature had not favoured him at all; he had a hoarse voice and spoke too quickly; an embarrassing hiccup too often interrupted his flow” (Tieghem, 1969, p. 36). A possible pneumonia tormented him when he was young (by the way, Molière probably died of pneumonia or tuberculosis, immediately after playing *Le Malade imaginaire*):

For most of his life, Molière suffered a condition that caused him to start coughing uncontrollably and unexpectedly. Whenever he had one of his cough attacks in the middle of a play, he used the opportunity to exaggerate it even more, humoring his conduction and causing the

audience to laugh. This is just one example of how Molière knew how to perfectly turn a serious or embarrassing situation into a comic and humoristic scene for people to enjoy. (Casadesus, 2021)

He even created a comic type, with thick, black eyebrows, with long, black moustache, a unique figure that Antoine Adam, French literary historian, compares to that of Charles Chaplin. Aware of his transition to the public, he multiplied the effect tirades of the characters he played, wrote himself savoury scenes for two characters. He improvised with much ease and had the gift of imitation. He will shine in *Les Fâcheux* (*The Bores*), playing seven compositional roles. In his plays, he did not reserve the main roles, but the comic ones: Sganarelle (*Dom Juan*), Orgon (*Tartuffe*), Arnolphe (*L'Ecole des femmes*).

*Il était tout comédien depuis les pieds jusqu'à la tête; il semblait qu'il eût plusieurs voix ; tout parlait en lui et d'un pas, d'un sourire, d'un clin d'œil et d'un remuement de tête, il faisait concevoir plus de choses qu'un grand parleur n'aurait pu dire en une heure.* (He was all actor from head to toe; he seemed to have several voices; everything spoke in him and with a step, a smile, a wink and a shake of the head, he made conceive more things than a great speaker could have said in an hour.) [Jean Donneau de Visé writes in Molière's funeral oration] (in Université de Lausanne, n.d.)

An actor first and foremost, Molière wrote to enhance and value his actors. Aware of the importance of teamwork, he took care not only of his roles, but also of his partners. He outlined strong plots, offering the actors deeply conflicted scenes designed to highlight their qualities and enhance the dramatic effect.

He creates characters that will not only be variations on the theme of human nature, but in which each actor will be able to highlight his talents. Do not think that the published text by Molière reproduces the performance exactly; reliable testimonies prove to us that numerous *lazzi*<sup>6</sup>, which the printed text does not mention, enriched the performance, and accentuated the comic, leaving plenty of room for the actor's buffoonish inventions. It is the tradition of the Italian mask. (Tieghem, 1969, p. 37)

Molière seems to have had very personal conceptions on the interpretation of tragedy roles which, with a sincere and realistic acting approach, deviated from the type established at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Moreover, another aspect on which

6 Moments of comic pantomime specific to commedia dell'arte. The French took them over and they entered, thanks to Molière above all, into cultured comedy and theatrical slang as antics, funny or spicy jokes.

all contemporaries agree and have left us testimony is his natural speech and his insistence to stop the actors whenever they started to play declamatory, requesting them, both in tragedy and comedy, natural utterance. Attentive to the communication with the audience, Molière approached a direct style, rather spoken than uttered, and strongly detached himself from declamation (Tieghem, 1969, p. 37).

Personally, he was always drawn to tragedy. Maybe because comedy roles came naturally and with ease to him. He wanted to be a tragedian, but the public constantly redirected him to his nature as a comedy actor. It was only around 1665 that he gave up moving towards tragedy characters and completely accepted his natural inclinations.



Nicholas Mignard,  
*Portrait of Molière as Julius Caesar.*  
*Mort de Pompée*, tragedy by Corneille.  
Paris, Musée Carnavalet, 1656.  
(Public domain)

Source: <https://johnpwalshblog.com/tag/drama-literature-actor-madeleine-bejart/>

**Madeleine Béjart** (1618-1672) is among the actresses of Molière's troupe of overwhelming importance to his training. 4 years older than Molière, with already 7 years of stage experience when she met him, she became his stage and life companion (although without a "serious" commitment; it seems that he was not unreservedly faithful to her, in time). They will travel like all the itinerant actors of the era by carriages, through the South of France, until they will have the opportunity to return to Paris. They will face poverty together, but they will also enjoy prosperity and glory. She completely shared Molière's passion for theatre, she easily moved from roles in tragedy to comic soubrette, withdrawing in the foreground with advancing age to make way for the younger Marquise du Parc and Armande Béjart.

A contemporary, Georges de Scudery, described her:

She was beautiful, she was gallant, she was very intelligent, she sang, she danced well, she played all kinds of instruments, she wrote very nicely in verse and prose and her conversation was very entertaining. She was over all one of the best actresses of her age and her acting had so much charm, that it really inspired all the feigned passion of the plays one saw her represent at the Theatre. (in Chisholm, 1911, pp. 659-660)

Appreciating her managerial qualities and support—it seems she also had the ability to calm the troupe’s internal conflicts—, Molière gave her the freedom to choose her roles. (As an interesting coincidence: she also died a February 17, but a year before Molière—1672).



Madeleine Béjart in *Les Precieuses Ridicules*  
(Public domain)  
oil paint on stone, French School, 17th century  
(after 1659). Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.  
Source: <https://johnpwalshblog.com/tag/drama-literature-actor-madeleine-bejart/>

A special place is reserved to the very beautiful actress and talented dancer<sup>7</sup> **Marquise du Parc** (1633-1668) who showed a special inclination for tragedy. Her finesse, sensitivity, inner strength, and subtle transitions from one state to another made her one of the figures that foreshadowed the superstars of the modern stage; on stage, she used all the means to please the audience and to outshine her partners, she showed off her body without becoming indecent, she had a beautiful voice, beautiful eyes, a passionate look. With a turbulent private life, she will move in 1667 with her husband from Molière’s troupe to the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where she enjoyed a short-lived triumph, dying, unfortunately, at only 35 years of age.

<sup>7</sup> Tieghem attributes her talent as a great dancer to her father, who was apparently a fairground theatre entertainer and who taught her acrobatics as a child (Tieghem, 1969, p. 39).

**Armande Béjart** (1645-1700), who brought the pathos of love in the roles of tragedy and the intelligent grace of the young lover in comedy, is the one Molière fell in love with and whom he married despite the great age difference (he was 40 and she 17). Some sources credit her as the younger sister of Madeleine Béjart, others as her daughter with the aristocrat Count of Modène. Anyway, she became the reason for Molière's rivals to accuse him of incest, since they claimed that Armande was the fruit of the intimate connection from youth between Molière and Madeleine herself<sup>8</sup>. However, their marriage was not happy because "it is said that Molière was passionately jealous while Armande was a great flirt" (Chisholm, 1911, pp. 659-660). In addition, neither of their two boys had the chance to survive: the first born (1664) was baptized by the Sun King himself, but he lived only one month. A second son, born in 1672, also did not survive. The girl, born in 1666, survived. Named Esprit Madeleine Poquelin or Esprit Madeleine de Molière, baptized by Madeleine Béjart, the little girl was affected by the separation of her parents which only saw each other at performances until their reconciliation in 1671. A child actress, she left the theatre after her father's death. Said to be an amazingly charming actress and the best interpreter of Molière's plays, her mother, Armande Béjart was at her finest as Celimène in *Le Misanthrope* (*The Misanthrope*) and was deemed outstanding as Angélique in *The Imaginary Invalid* (*Le Malade imaginaire*) (Chisholm, 1911, pp. 659-660).



Pierre Mignard, *Portrait of Armande de Molière*, c. 1660  
(Public domain)

Source: <https://artvee.com/dl/portrait-presumed-armande-bejart-vers-1640-1700-comedienne/>

<sup>8</sup> History even recalls that Molière had to go before Louis XIV to present Armande's baptism certificate and prove that they were not related by blood (Le Parisien, carnet de jour, 2023)

Among the actors of Molière's troupe, we must mention popular farce performers such as **Gros-René**<sup>9</sup> and the famous **Jodelet**<sup>10</sup>.

But the pedagogue Molière himself raised and trained two excellent, cultured, intelligent, distinguished actors, protagonists of his comedies of morals and character: La Grange and Michel Baron.

**La Grange** (1635-1692) "entirely trained by Molière, elegant, cultured, intelligent, well-spoken, kind and courteous [...] played young lovers, so suited to his nature, with a charm full of grace" (Tieghem, 1969, p. 40). He was the interpreter of Don Juan, the one Molière will give a public eulogy, in *The Versailles Impromptu*: "As for you, I have nothing to say to you". He owned the great roles and built under Molière's guidance the great figures that "were completely outside of Molière's possibilities" (Tieghem, p. 40). He eventually became Molière's advisor and had an exceptionally important role in documenting and archiving his work because he kept a strict daily "Register" of the troupe's activities.

**Michel Baron** (1653-1729) surpassed all his troupe colleagues through his extraordinary fame, due to his great talent, but also to the direct inheritance of Molière's roles. Son of actors, orphaned since the age of 9, gifted and intelligent, Baron will be spiritually adopted by Molière (given the early death of both his sons and the relationship with Armande that seemed lost). Michel Baron is also entirely a product of Molière's school; he will receive, starting in 1670, large roles in the troupe and will replace Molière in *Alceste*. He will dominate the French stage in the first decades of the 18th century.

### ***Molière: theatrical pedagogue and the first professional theatre director***

Molière is one of the first practitioners concerned with the theoretical foundation of the actor's art, emphasizing the study, the careful analysis of the character, stating that the character is the result of a creative process and is not to be confused with the performer. Much of the basic principles of the actor's art promoted by Molière and his troupe were formulated in *La Critique de L'École des femmes* (*The Critique of The School for Wives*, 1663) and, above all, in *L'Impromptu du Versailles* (*The Versailles Impromptu*<sup>11</sup>, 1664).

Defender of the Aristotelian principle of imitating human nature in its most essential aspects and therefore of the principle of verisimilitude, Molière

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9 *Gros-René* played in Molière's troupe between 1643 and 1664; "he is a farce actor, a pomade, a fatty, whose peaceful bonhomie was in contrast to Molière's nervousness." (Tieghem, 1969, p. 40)

10 *Julien Bedeau* (1600–1660) continued the art of the famous comic trio from the Hôtel de Bourgogne, Guerim–Legrain–Guéru. Paul Scarron wrote famous farces especially for him, as: *Jodelet or the master valet*, *The three Dorothéa or Jodelet duelist*, *The ridiculous heir or the interesting farce*.

11 Also translated as *The Versailles Improvisation*. (n.n.)

wanted to communicate living, true things through his performances. Here is what he asks of playwrights in *The Critique of The School for Wives*:

When you paint hero figures, you do what you want. They are portraits left at your mercy in which no one looks for any likeness. But when you paint people, you have to paint them according to nature. You are required to make the portraits resemble their living models, and you have done nothing if you have not painted your contemporaries in such a way that they can be recognized. (Molière, 1955, p. 145)

Therefore, verisimilitude is the first rule of creation, and his own work is an example of the combination of theatricality and verisimilitude stemming from his extraordinary capacity for observation.

In *The Versailles Impromptu* the author chooses, like Shakespeare, the technique of theatre within theatre to clearer express his ideas about theatre and the actor's art. The subject is related to an unforeseen situation: the company must present to the king, in just two hours, a text just received. The obstacles of the moment trigger work discussions edifying for us.

Here are some instructions that Molière the director gives to the actors:

You play the role of the poet and you have to get into the skin of the character, to highlight the pedantic air that those who are in touch with the good world have; ... You play an honest man, a man of the world ... Take a calm look, a natural voice and gesticulate as little as possible. ... representing a character that is so contrary to your nature, you prove all the more that you are an unsurpassed actress. Therefore, try to acquire the character of your roles as best as possible and imagine that you are what you represent. (Molière, 1955, p. 175)

Here are some basic principles: putting oneself in the character's situation, studying the character, which can be *emploi* or *contre-emploi*, discovering its defining data and rendering him through attitude, behaviour, gestures, manner of speaking.

Here is Molière's recommendation to Miss Bèjart, who had to play the role of a woman who thinks that everything belongs to her: "You! You must always have that character in front of your eyes to be able to reproduce his quirks better" (Molière, 1955, p. 176); or the suggestion of an *emploi* that comes handy to Mrs. Du Croisy: "You are playing the role of one of those beings who snort sweetly to the right and left, but who, in passing, stings with their tongue. I think this role grabs you." (Molière, 1955, p. 176) The director's eye does not miss the lack of

coherence or even the confusion in relation to the means used by an actor: “Here he is, speaking like a marquis! Didn’t I tell you that you have to play a natural part?” (Molière, 1955, p. 183)

*The pedagogy of the model* had certainly appeared long before Molière; Plato speaks in the *Sophist* about this human capacity for imitation defined as the exact reproduction of someone’s demeanour or voice, and which, whether the depth of the model or what is superficial about it is imitated, still remains a copy of an original and, therefore, loss of self, of one’s own personality (Platon, n.d.). In the arts, imitation must be treated with extreme care, the model must be studied and surpassed. Reference to the model is useful only in the early stages of the study, as inspiration, as impetus.

In the *The Versailles Impromptu*, we observe this pedagogy of the model that was practiced in theatre until the appearance of the Stanislavskian pedagogy, although it was never totally dethroned, but strongly rejected in the Romanian school, for example, by the efforts of Professor Ion Cojar. The recommendations of Molière towards his actors have the profile of this pedagogy of the model because there was still no method of the actor’s art, there was no other method of working than that of personal example: “Do like me!”, “Look carefully and remember”, says Molière (Popovici, 2000, p. 100).

Adriana Popovici<sup>12</sup> observes:

Molière’s entire way of expressing acting problems characterizes what we might call the “classical”, “traditional” school... “Being natural” is as technical as being “marquis” or other “character”—that is, the actor has two possibilities of approach: naturally or composed. (2000, p. 100)

But, regardless of the approach, the result expected by Molière is one characterized by naturalness, sincerity, normality. Driven by the desire of all great actors to “play everything”, when Molière exemplifies, he gets to say an entire monologue by himself, to create, in fact, a moment of virtuosity in the performance—further proof that the audience demanded him.

The special attention he pays to the art of his actors, from the concept of the character to his psychological and behavioural construction, to the natural pronunciation and to the smallest details related to interpretation, establish Molière as the first professional theatre director.

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12 Adriana Marina Popovici is a university professor of great relevance for the theatre school in Bucharest. She was the direct assistant of master Ion Cojar and his collaborator for many years and head of the Acting Department at UNATC “I.L. Caragiale” Bucharest.



Charles Le Brun, *Portrait of Molière*, 1660  
(oil on canvas), Puschkin Museum, Moscow  
Source: <https://www.myartprints.com/a/le-brun-charles/portrait-of-Molière-1622.html>

### ***Molière`s Rebellion: Breaking the Rules***

In response to bigoted accusations regarding the *violation of moral and religious norms*—priest Pierre Roullé considered him “the devil’s incarnation” because he offended the Church in *Tartuffe*, and “the rudest and most libertine that ever lived in past centuries” who deserved “an exemplary and public capital punishment ...” (Rigal, 1908, p. 223). Molière always emphasizes *the moral finality of his art* and writes in the famous preface of the play:

If the mission of comedy is to correct men’s vices, I fail to see why some should be privileged. ... and we have seen that theatre is a great force for correction. The finest points of a serious morality are usually less powerful than those belonging to satire; and most men are scolded by nothing quite so well as by the portrayal of their faults. It is a great blow to vice to expose it to everyone’s laughter. We can easily stand being reprehended, but we cannot stand being mocked. We are willing to be wicked, but we will not be ridiculous. (Molière, 1955, p. 261)

While *La Cabale des dévots* blamed him for “dishonouring the church”, the scholars, the academics, found him guilty of matters of construction, of “completely unusual things on stage”! In order to skip the long and boring indictment made against him, we exemplify with one of Robinet’s tirades:

... this *School* is against all the rules of the dramatic, but also against those of the comedy, the hero always shows a love that goes up to anger, and pushes him to ask Agnes if she wants him to kill himself, which is only appropriate in tragedy, for which mourning, tears and groans are reserved... I will remark, with good reason, that there is hardly any action, or, exactly this is the very character of comedy and distinguishes it from expositions in prose, and that [Molière] resumes the tradition of the old comedians whose performances consisted only of tableaux, skits and gestures. I shouldn't even speak of the fact that the play is nothing more than a mixture of sleights made by the author from all sides... Rabelais... Don Quixote... I shouldn't also speak of the fact that his play and its costumes are also nothing but imitations of different comedians, who would leave him naked, like Horace's crow, if each asked him back what he took from them. I shouldn't mention verses that, for the most part, have no more rhythm or harmony than the arias on Pont-Neuf, being nothing more than broken prose, in some places poorly rhymed. ... this *School* ... would at least deserve to be taken lightly, if we were less indulgent in France... (in Thoorens, 1977, pp. 165-166)

He is therefore blamed of everything imaginable related to the norms of creation imposed by the French Academy: the mixture of genres, the lack of unity of action, the use of prose, the lack of originality, the lack of poet's talent, the bad language of the general tone to the point of obscenity (he often used popular language). Moreover, the answer that Molière gives in the *Critique of The School of Wives* breaks every rule: it is the first time when a playwright does not answer through a preface, but through a new play which, by provoking laughter, has more chances of winning his case. The technique is brilliant: Molière fights on the field and with the weapons he knows best.

However, by deviating from some classical principles Molière managed to get closer to their essence. This is the secret of his artistic strength: he widened Procrustes' bed according to his needs, he only respected those laws that were in line with his creative instinct. Adriana Popovici notes: "Poor Molière! How can a rationalist like him reconcile the fault of the times (the rules!) with what his heart desired, his huge talent and good common sense!" (Popovici, 2000, p. 90)

Of course, it is true—Molière represents a brilliant synthesis, assimilating everything that had been written and acted up to him. From Tirso de Molina he took over Don Juan and enriched it with the charm and unconsciousness of the commedia dell'arte characters, with the irony and independence of the first rationalists; from the Italian actors he took the masks that he transformed by

enriching them with psychology; he used the *lazzi* of the Italians to better define his characters because, in theatre, the message is transmitted not only through text, but especially through subtext, through the actor's non-verbal language; from the popular French farce he took the picturesqueness of speech, the humour, the spirit, and the naivety of simple people—Sganarelle, but also Argan or Toinette, Orgon and Dorina, descendants of the famous comic trio from the Hôtel de Bourgogne, or of Tabarin; he took from the popular theatre the technique of the opposition of characters and situations that lead to conflict; he also brilliantly continued the pantomime tradition, inherited by popular theatre from Ancient mime, the tradition of the significant gesture, the word play, the *aparté*, the *qui pro quo*, even the nuance of facial and vocal expression. What must the academicians have thought of the credo that Molière had expressed since his first Parisian play—*L'Amour médecin* (*Doctor Cupid*)—when Comedy, Music and Ballet propose the union of different forms of performance in a synthesis that will give the future “total actor”?

As for the rules, it's true that he hated them—Dorante's plea is clear:

You know you're funny with your rules, which are only good to confuse the ignorant and piss us off all day! If we were to follow what you say, it would be said that these rules of art would be the secret of secrets! And yet, there are only a few observations available to anyone, made by a healthy mind on the reasons that could reduce the price of enjoying these poems. And the same sound judgment that once made these observations, can easily make them every day, without the help of Horace and Aristotle. I would very much like to know if the main rule, the rule of rules, is not the rule to like? Or do you want everyone to foul themselves by playing by the rules instead of each being the judge of the pleasure the work gives them? (Molière, 1955, p. 148)

In conclusion, what are the norms that Molière is willing to accept?

The “rule of rules” is to please and, in order for this artistic finality to be achieved, a path must be taken: first, a work must be believable. Then, only if all the artists participating in the creation of a performance create according to this compass of verisimilitude, the human-spectator has the chance to look at himself as in a mirror. Hence the disturbance of the precious, or the bigots—they recognize themselves!

Only if man recognizes himself, can he learn something about himself. And if he is saddened by what he sees, he should do well to remember the morality that suits a true Christian and to correct himself. Because it is true that,

... if we are to blame all the things that do not directly concern God and our salvation ... I admit that there are better places to frequent than the theatre ... [and, Molière continues in the *Preface to Tartuffe*] I find no fault at it being condemned with the rest; but if we allow, as is true, that the exercises of piety suffer intervals and that men need diversion, I maintain that they cannot find a more innocent one than comedy. (Molière, 1955, p. 264)

### **Conclusions**

As a dramatic author, Molière was in constant evolution, he reinvented himself with each masterpiece. His rebellion manifested itself on several fronts. The rebellion against the rules of the Academy which, like Corneille, he only used if they did not obstruct the verisimilitude of the stage events; the rebellion against conventions and social forces that, like the popular theatre of the French farceurs and the Italian comedy, he defied for the benefit of individual human value; the rebellion against an extremely socially relevant class—the clergy, with the intention of exposing its less than Christian ways... All these, and other such courageous attitudes towards society at the time in which he lived, gave him, during his life, but especially immediately after his death the well-deserved halo of a renovating genius.

The strength of his character, combined with the strength of his artistic options, make him a brave innovator: Molière shaped modern comedy writing.

His sources are, on the one hand, the creations of the ancients Plautus and Terence, on the other hand the “théâtre de la foire”, popular farce, Italian comedy. Molière’s creativity melts in his own crucible all the dramatic techniques used up to him in comedy and, following his direct attempts on stage, his own experimentation as an actor, the inspiration offered by the talented actors around him, and even discussions with friends like Scaramouche, Lully and the Sun King himself, Molière completely reinvents the comedy genre. The strength, vitality and variety of his dramaturgical structures are still unsurpassed.

He gave comedy a mission: to be the mirror of the world. He believed that comedy must serve as a reflection of human nature and reality.

He gave the actors a mission: to bring the man as he is on stage. His well-defined thoughts related to acting, the extra naturalness he imposed on the actors in their play and their stage speech, the naturalness with which he incorporated everything he lived, felt and thought in his own acting, outlined requirements for the modern actor’s art.

Corneille, Molière, and Lully are of great importance in the history of stage professions: Corneille offered actors a valuable dramaturgy and constantly brought the status of the acting profession back into discussion. Molière—actor, director, dramatist, manager, impresario, often performing set designer duties—raised the actor’s art to the highest professional heights. King Louis XIV himself granted him not only his protection but also a constant pension. Also, choreographer, composer, and dancer Jean-Baptiste Lully, helped bring ballet and opera into the sphere of professional arts at the Paris Opera.

Moreover, the fabulous relationship he had with this enlightened monarch, Le Roi Soleil, and with some of his close associates, shows us how important the protection and patronage of the arts has been in the history of culture. The entire English Elizabethan theatre developed thanks to the vision that Queen Elizabeth I had in the artistic field as well in the other domains. Louis XIV constantly encouraged Molière, who, from his first appearance at court, raised a healthy laugh, criticized with a desire to correct and heal the morals of the aristocracy and clergy, supported the artistic vision of his King, a great talent himself, by working with passion and without interruption. At the beginning of Molière’s career at court, Louis XIV, advised by others, decided that Molière’s work should be reviewed by Jean-Baptiste Lully. But Molière’s genius impressed Lully and they became good friends, often collaborating on stage or in the organization of court celebrations. Le Roi Soleil himself advised Molière not to play *Tartuffe*—lectured at the party of *The Delights of the Enchanted Island* from Versailles; he even delayed the premiere of the play as much as he could, given also the pressure of his confessor, the Archbishop of Paris. A perfect courtier in other respects, Molière sometimes took the liberty of not listening to his king. He will play the performance, causing a cabal of bigots that will pursue him literally to his grave. The King will once again express his support by baptizing his first born with Armande de Molière. Although many claimed Louis XIV favoured Molière in many aspects and their close relationship caused a lot of envy, Molière’s artistic options have proven their unbeatable vitality over time. In 1680, three years after Molière’s death, Louis XIV, aware of the value of his protégé’s legacy, ordered Molière’s troupe to merge with its rival from the Hôtel de Bourgogne, establishing La Comédie-Française—“Molière’s House”.

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