About the Author:
Molière (1622-1673)

Molière (1622-1673) wrote comedies that range from simple farces to sophisticated satires. The master of French comedy, he was both the product and the critic of the French classical period.

As author, director, producer, manager, and actor, Molière lived fully the life of a man of the theater. His adventures can be understood only in this context, for his medium of expression, the theater, was also that which best gives expression to his life. The Paris of his day was alive with theatrical activity. Not only did the public attend his plays, but it also took sides for or against the playwright. His friends and enemies were divided along literary, rather than social, lines. Since he put a little of himself into each character he created, he was not exempt from personal attack when he offended the sensibilities of certain groups. Many of his enemies were powerful members of the court, and only because a number of his friends were also powerful figures was he able to continue writing and presenting his works. His comedies, which often dealt with exaggerated passions, evoked equally passionate responses from his audience. Against such a backdrop, the life of Molière was played out amidst intrigues and financial concerns both on and off the stage.

Molière, born Jean Baptiste Poquelin, was baptized in the church of St-Eustache in Paris on Jan. 15, 1622. His father, a member of the rising bourgeoisie, purchased the post of official furnisher (tapissier ordinaire du Roi) at the court. The young Jean Baptiste grew up in the shadow of the court, the most lively section of Paris. Like many of the great writers of his time, he was educated at the Collège de Clermont, a Jesuit institution. There he received a solid classical background, and he may have known some of the future libertine thinkers, such as Pierre Gassendi and Cyrano de Bergerac. After finishing his secondary education, he studied law briefly and was admitted to the bar in 1641.

At this point Molière was to take over his father's post at the court, but such was not to be the case. Ever since he was a small boy, he had been attracted to the theater. Tradition affords the image of the little boy grasping his grandfather's hand as they both watched the farces and tragedies at the Hôtel de Bourgogne or at the fair at Saint-Germain. When Tiberio Fiorelli, called Scaramouche, came to Paris in 1640, Molière struck up a warm friendship with the Italian actor-mime. He
also met at this time a young actress, Madeleine Béjart, with whom he was to be associated until her death in 1672.

In 1643 Molière renounced the hereditary post his father held and chose instead the theater. Since the life of the theater was not considered very respectable, he assumed the name "Molière" in order to spare embarrassment to his family. That same year he signed on with the family of Madeleine Béjart and nine other actors, who formed a troupe known as the Illustre Théâtre. As the most recent of three Parisian companies, Molière and his friends fared very badly. In 1944, ridden by debts and having served two terms in debtors' prison, Molière was forced to abandon this venture. He and the Béjarts joined another company, whose tours were to take them all over France for the next 13 years. In 1650 Molière became the head of the troupe, and he managed to secure the patronage of the Prince of Conti.

Although little factual evidence of his travels and tribulations is available, it is certain that Molière and his itinerant players learned much in the provinces. Molière was a hard worker. The short, stocky man with a large head and melancholy eyes frequently acted, sometimes under a harlequin mask, with the troupe he managed. Rhythm and mime, learned from the Italians, were an important part of their style. When the company was finally called to give a performance before Louis XIV in 1658, it was Molière's farce, Le Docteur amoureux, that most amused the King. The King's brother became patron of the troupe, and Molière returned to the city of his birth.

In December 1662 Molière presented his latest comedy, L'École des femmes, in five acts and in verse, before the King. It was to be his greatest success. The play centers about Arnolphe, a bourgeois who delights in watching the signs of cuckoldry all around him. In order to spare himself the same shameful fate, he chooses for his bride a child whom he then raises in total ignorance. The principal comic device of the plot rests upon the fact that his young rival, ignorant of Arnolphe's identity, tells him exactly how he plans to steal Agnès from under his nose. The play gave rise to a storm of protest, known as the "Quarrel of L'École des femmes." Molière's enemies, jealous of the King's favor toward the playwright, attacked him on grounds of irreligion, vulgarity, plagiarism, and immorality. Rather than answer his enemies directly, Molière chose to vindicate himself by writing a response in the form of a play. His Critique de l'École des femmes, presented in June 1663, dramatized the controversy by introduction and
discussion on stage of both the critics and the criticisms. The *raison d'être* of the play may be summed up in the celebrated formula pronounced by the character Dorante: "Je voudrais bien savoir si la grande règle de toutes les règles n'est pas de plaire, et si une pièce de théâtre qui a attrapé son but n'a pas suivi un bon chemin (Is it not true that the greatest of all rules is to be pleasing, and if a play has attained that end, has it not followed the right road?)."

The "Quarrel" served a purpose much larger than the comedy on which it was centered. In fact, it served to put comedy on an equal footing with tragedy as a legitimate literary form. Until that time it had been considered a humble stepchild of great French classical tragedy, exemplified by many of the works of Pierre Corneille. Molière proved that the passions and vices ridiculed through comedy were just as deeply rooted and universal as those that lent themselves to the creation of tragedy. In an age firmly committed to the superiority of tragedy and the dictates of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Molière reestablished comedy in a place of honor.

In May 1664 Louis XIV organized at Versailles a splendid celebration called *Les Plaisirs de l'Île Enchantée*. It was here that Molière was invited to perform *Tartuffe ou l'Imposteur*. The play's title has become synonymous in French with hypocrite and, in particular, a hypocrite in matters of religion. The plot centers on the household of Orgon and its plight after the head of the house has taken in a spiritual adviser who is an impostor and a rogue. Only Orgon and his mother are too blind to see through the mask of piety; the other members of the household are aware of Tartuffe's hypocrisy. The latter group must resort to extraordinary means in order to convince Orgon of his error. In the final version of the play, intervention of the King himself, through an emissary, is necessary to dispose of Tartuffe.

It is not surprising that the play incurred the wrath of the powerful Society of the Holy Sacrament. This order of puritan religious devotees advocated restraints and assumed postures not unlike those of Tartuffe. Although the King harbored no love for the puritans, even he was ineffective in lessening their hold over a segment of the aristocracy. For 5 long years Molière struggled for the right to perform his play—even in amended form—but to no avail. Finally, in 1669, the "Peace of the Church" put an end to the powerful group, and *Tartuffe* was revived with great success at the Palais Royal.
The interdiction of *Tartuffe* in 1664 left Molière with a gap in his repertory program. In spite of the fact that *Dom Juan* was composed hastily and in prose, a growing number of critics regard it as one of his greatest plays. Certainly, the popularity of the Don Juan legend attests to the compelling nature of the protagonist.

Molière did not originate the legend and, in fact, borrowed from a variety of sources. Nevertheless, his *Dom Juan* bears the stamp of its creator. Like his predecessors, this Dom Juan is struck down by a statue, but only after he has assumed the mask of the hypocrite. As long as he asserts his liberty from outside the social framework, he remains free and invulnerable. His downfall becomes possible, however, when he seeks to subvert society from within. There is a significant difference between the hypocrisy of Tartuffe and that of Dom Juan. Whereas the former is a servile and often vulgar hypocrite, the latter maintains the aloofness and superiority of the aristocrat.

*Dom Juan* was presented in February 1665 and was favorably received. After Easter, however, the play was mysteriously removed from the boards, and it was not published until after Molière's death. It remained almost unknown until the 20th century.

Molière first presented *Le Misanthrope* in June 1666. Although he had been granted the personal patronage of the King, illness, marital problems, and melancholy had left their mark on the playwright. Yet, during this unhappy period, Molière conceived and presented a work that attests to his mastery and genius.

Alceste, the misanthrope of the title, is at war with the aristocratic society of which he is a member. Like many other characters in the dramatic universe of Molière, he seeks to impose his own imperfect vision upon society. He will settle for nothing less than absolutes in a world governed by relative values. Because of this attitude he is basically a comic figure, and all the more so when he asserts in the final scene that only by leaving aristocratic society will he become the perfect aristocrat.

*Le Misanthrope* pleased a small number of admirers, but it lacked the popular appeal necessary to make it a financial success. *L’Avare*, presented 2 years later, failed miserably, and Molière faced grave monetary problems. It required a
comedy-ballet, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670), to bring in the public once again.

Not the least of Molière's hardships was a hacking cough, which he tried to mask as a comic device. When overcome by a coughing spell onstage, he made it seem voluntary and exaggerated. In his last years, however, his condition worsened greatly. He had little faith in medicine, and one might argue, justifiably—for doctors had been unable to help him. In 1671 he gave *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, a bright comedy reminiscent of his early farces. But the best commentary on his condition was the biting work that was to be his last: *Le Malade imaginaire*. During the fourth performance, on Jan. 17, 1673, Molière was seized by convulsions. He died that same night, attended only by two nuns, having been refused the right to see a priest.

