

Molière's Life



Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (Molière) by Coypel.

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (later known as Molière) was baptized on January 15, 1622; his parents, Jean Poquelin and Marie Cressé, were stolid French middle-class. His father was a master *tapissier*, what today might be known as an interior decorator; he supplied tapestries, furnishings, and magnificent matrimonial beds to rich families. Jean-Baptiste attended the

Collège de Clermont, a fashionable Jesuit school in the Latin Quarter, and he was clearly intended for a career in the family business. After studying civil law at the University of Orléans, Jean-Baptiste began a life in the theatre, much to the displeasure of his parents.

In June 1643, Jean-Baptiste formed the Illustre Théâtre with his girlfriend and actress Madeleine Béjart, an independent, redheaded woman several years older than him. Although a young company, the Illustre Théâtre took on the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Théâtre du Marais, the two established professional troupes in Paris. Jean-Baptiste assumed the stage name of Molière, a common practice for French actors. The Illustre Théâtre survived for 18 months, eventually overcome by debt, rivalry and a lack of leading men. The Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, a fundamentalist religious organization, also contributed to its demise, attacking the actors and discouraging parishioners from attending performances.

In 1645, Madeleine and Molière fled debt in Paris by joining a touring troupe of actors. By 1653, the pair had assumed management of the troupe. Molière began to write and star in full-length plays inspired by *commedia dell'arte* scenarios, finding that his true talent lay in comedy. In 1658, Madeleine and Molière returned to Paris. Madeleine had saved funds to sublease the Théâtre du Marais and Molière had acquired a patron, the brother of Louis XIV. On October 24, 1658, the troupe performed a tragedy by Corneille for the court, but Louis preferred the farcical one-act that followed. Parisian audiences also preferred the troupe's comedies to tragedies.

Molière wrote his first great comedy after settling back in Paris. *Affected Young Ladies* (1659) mocks the pretensions of upper-class Parisian women. The play angered several important people, a pattern that would be repeated over the next 14 years, as

Molière acquired a long roster of enemies both political and artistic. Molière then embarked on several plays about obsessive jealousy, including *The School for Husbands* (1661), his first huge hit. These plays, which feature grasping older men attempting to attain young women, would prove strangely prophetic. Around this time, Molière and Madeleine began to live apart; in 1662, he married her beautiful daughter Armande (passed off as Madeleine's "sister"). Molière's enemies whispered that Armande, some 20 years younger than the playwright, was his own daughter. If the one-act autobiographical comedy *The Versailles Impromptu* (1663) is any indication, it was not a happy marriage.

During the final decade of Molière's life he achieved great success; he wrote entertainments for the court, garnering patronage from the king and further provoking his rivals. Molière's later works were mature satires tinged with sadness. *The School for Wives* (1663), *The Misanthrope* (1666), *Tartuffe* (1664-9), *Don Juan* (1665), *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1670), and *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673) all explore obsessive male behavior. They also attack hypocrites in society, from the simpering courtiers flattering Louis XIV to the religious fanatics preaching salvation while lining their pockets. Outraged by the attack on religious hypocrisy in *Tartuffe*, the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement used their court connections to have it banned. In this instance, even Molière's close relationship with the king could not save him. After countless rounds of censorship, the play was finally performed five years after it was written.

Molière's final years were filled with bad health and personal troubles. He and Armande had separated several times, and only one of his children survived infancy. Theatrical myth has it that Molière died onstage during *The Imaginary Invalid*. Molière actually made it through the performance; afterwards he began hemorrhaging from tuberculosis contracted years earlier and died several hours later on February 17, 1673. Another myth is that Molière was denied burial in sacred ground. Armande petitioned the archbishop of Paris and the king, and was granted the right to bury her husband at the parish cemetery of St-Eustache.



Portrait of Madeleine Béjart, Molière's love and business partner, by Nicolas Mignard. (Detail of "Mars and Venus.")

Molière's Theatre



Molière's company performing at Louis XIV's palace at Versailles.

Molière's theatre was a theatre of artificiality. Like the literature, art and social customs of the time, the 17th-century French theatre was based on a formal set of rules and customs. While there were touring troupes who would travel through the country, often performing in makeshift theatres and on the streets, attending the theatre in Paris or at the court was a formal social event.

Performances in Paris were held either in public theatres or by special invitation only at the palace court. The theatres had a proscenium arch or a border framing the stage. Behind the arch, the scenery was composed of lavish painted sets, and the actors' costumes were ornate. The lights remained on over both the audience and the stage, allowing the members of the audience to see and be seen at the event. When performing at court, the king would sit in an enormous throne in the center of the room with the rest of the audience positioned around him. Like any event at court, strict rules of social behavior were expected to be followed.

The creation of theatre was also subject to rigorous guidelines. The Académie Française, created by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635, was a group of intellectuals charged with regulating French language and culture. Their taste in theatre was firmly Neo-classicist: "Neo" meaning new, and "classicist" referring to the classics, the great works of Greek and Roman drama. The Académie created guidelines for "good" theatre, based on the writing of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle

wrote that a tragedy contains three unities: time, place and action. Unity of time dictated that the action of the play take place in a single day, and unity of place that the play take place at a single location. Unity of action determined that the action of the play contribute to the main story—there are no distracting subplots. French tragedies were criticized by academics based on how well they adhered to these unities. While these rules might seem limiting, there were several playwrights, including Pierre Corneille (1606-1684) the father of French tragedy, who flourished within them. In Corneille's heroic epic *Le Cid* (1637), as well as many of his other plays, the main character makes a moral choice to do what is right, regardless of personal cost. Jean Racine (1639-1699) was another highly respected writer of tragedy. His plays, including *Phèdre* (1677), are very passionate and poetic and often focus on doomed love.

The language of tragedy was also expected to conform to strict rules. French plays were written in Alexandrine couplets—a verse form that consists of two rhyming lines of twelve syllables each. Each rhyming couplet was to contain a complete thought. As the verse form developed, so did rules about when pauses could occur (between the sixth and seventh syllable of each line.)



Portrait of Molière portraying Sganarelle in *Don Juan*. Molière often played major roles in his own plays.

Molière began his career in the theatre as an actor but found French tragedy too difficult. Delivering the Alexandrine lines was very demanding on an actor's voice. As a performer, Molière found he did not have the breath to perform the Alexandrine verse of tragedy, but he instead excelled as both an actor and writer of comedy. An evening at the theatre would often include a comedy as a companion piece to the more serious tragedy that was considered the main event. Louis XIV and the courtiers would often prefer the lighter fare of the comedies, especially Molière's. While French tragedies were considered great literature by the academics, comedies were not taken as seriously and therefore not as subject to criticism of form and language. Molière had the freedom to write in both verse and prose, and he was considered the greatest comic writer of his time.

Molière's comedies were influenced heavily by Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupes touring Europe. *Commedia dell'arte* was based in improvisation and included stock characters in a variety of pre-determined scenarios. The actors wore masks to define their character type and performed slapstick gags called *lazzi*. Molière's early comedies were based on *commedia* scenarios with scripted dialogue, instead of improvised. They included stock characters and stunts, many of which Molière performed himself. Acting companies at the time were strong ensembles founded together, in the face of social prejudice. Molière wrote comedies for his company, knowing who would play each part, and generally he would play the lead role.

Molière also incorporated masks into his work, but instead of simply using them to define character types, Molière used the masks as a metaphor for the masks people wear to hide their true selves. Molière's comedies were sharp social commentaries, satirizing the behavior and hypocrisies of the nobility. Though Molière's company had the support of the court, and were frequently asked to perform there, his plays were often censored or banned because they would insult the nobility and the religious clergy.

In a society of artifice, Molière used the theatre to mock the affectations of his audience of socialites. While occasionally getting him into trouble, his satires earned him the reputation of one of the greatest comedians of all time. 

Chronological List of Molière's Works

- *The Jealous Husband* (c. 1645)
- *The Flying Doctor* (c. 1648)
- *The Scatterbrain* (1653)
- *A Lovers' Quarrel* (1656)
- *Affected Young Ladies* (1659)
- *The Imaginary Cuckold* (1660)
- *The Jealous Prince* (1661)
- *The School for Husbands* (1661)
- *The Nuisances* (1661)
- *The School for Wives* (1662)
- *The School for Wives Criticized* (1663)
- *A Versailles Improvisation* (1663)
- *The Forced Wedding* (1664)
- *The Princess of Elida* (1664)
- *Tartuffe* (1664, 1667, 1669)
- *Don Juan* (1665)
- *Love's Cure-All* (1665)
- *The Misanthrope* (1666)
- *A Doctor Despite Himself* (1666)
- *Mélicerte* (1666)
- *A Comic Pastoral* (1667)
- *The Sicilian* (1667)
- *Amphitryon* (1668)
- *The Confounded Husband* (1668)
- *The Miser* (1668)
- *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* (1669)
- *The Magnificent Suitors* (1670)
- *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1670)
- *Psyche* (1671)
- *Scapin's Schemings* (1671)
- *A Pretentious Countess* (1671)
- *Learned Ladies* (1672)
- *The Hypochondriac, or The Imaginary Invalid* (1673)

17th-Century France



Cardinal Richelieu, who founded the Académie Française, in a portrait painted by Philippe de Champaigne, 1637.

The 17th century is perhaps one of the most important centuries in the shaping of the modern world. It was during the 17th century that major discoveries were made by Galileo and Newton that would become the foundation for modern science; that modern philosophy and the concept of international law were introduced; and that European countries such as France, Spain, England and Portugal were competing with one another for wealth and power in the colonization of America and Asia. It was also a time that France began to rise as one of the greatest powers in Europe.

The century began under the leadership of King Louis XIII, who took the throne after his father's assassination in 1610. At age nine, Louis was too young to rule so his mother, Marie de Medici, along with her advisor Cardinal Richelieu, acted as regent until Louis turned 16. In 1615, Louis XIII married the Spanish Infanta, Anne of Austria. The union, which was an arranged marriage that had been settled by the Treaty of Fontainbleau, was an unhappy one and they spent many years apart. Although declared of age to rule in 1614, Louis XIII was barred from affairs of the state by his mother. In 1617 he, along with one of his favorites, was accused of

bringing about the assassination of his mother's minister Concino Concini, thereby forcing Marie de Medici into exile. He eventually reconciled with his mother and entrusted the government to Cardinal Richelieu. Marie de Medici, noting the influence that Cardinal Richelieu had over her son, urged him to get rid of him. Instead, Louis XIII sent his mother yet again into exile, from which she would not return.

Louis XIII relied heavily upon Cardinal Richelieu during his reign, and, as a result, Louis became one of the first examples of an absolute monarch. Richelieu strengthened the power of the royal authority and kept the nobility in check by limiting the power of the sovereign courts: "noble courts around the country with so many rights they were nearly independent of the crown" (Richard Cohen, *By the Sword*).

Richelieu's control extended to media and the arts. He was one of the first to use the media to further the government's agenda. *The Gazette*, a weekly periodical sponsored by the government, often contained articles written by the king and got its news stories directly from Cardinal Richelieu. In 1635, Cardinal Richelieu founded the Académie Française with the primary goal of establishing a French dictionary. The Académie Française not only created the official French language but also approved literature, art and architecture.

Anne of Austria gave birth to the royal couple's first child after 23 years of marriage. Louis XIV, christened Louis-Dieudonné—meaning "Gift of God"—was born on September 5, 1638. Louis XIII died shortly thereafter and the great Sun King, Louis XIV, assumed the throne of

Infanta:
Daughter of a Spanish or Portuguese monarch who is not heir to the throne.

Absolute Monarch:
A king who has complete authority over his citizens and country, with little or no legal restrictions on his power.



Portrait of Louis XIV, the Sun King.

France in 1643 at the age of five. The longest reigning monarch in European history, Louis XIV ruled as King of France and King of Navarre, a small country situated between France and Spain, for the next 72 years. Because of Louis' young age, his mother, Anne of Austria, ruled as regent along with

her advisor Cardinal Mazarin for 18 years. It was during the years of Mazarin's rule that the French civil war, known as the Fronde, began. Mazarin, continuing where Richelieu left off, attempted to increase the power of the crown at the expense of the nobility through taxation and other financial edicts. When Cardinal Mazarin arrested members of Parliament for not paying taxes in 1648, Paris broke out into rioting, and Louis XIV fled Paris along with his court. The rioting was led first by the nobility and then by commoners.

Anne's regency ended when Louis XIV turned 13, but Louis continued to allow Cardinal Mazarin to control the affairs of state until his death. When Louis finally took over full control of the throne in 1661, he chose to rule without a chief minister—intending to rule as an absolute monarch. Louis XIV believed that his power came from God and therefore took the sun as his emblem. Many pieces of art from that time depict Louis as the Greek sun god, Apollo.

Louis XIV continued to reduce the influence of the nobility. He began by appointing only commoners to high executive offices, believing that he could more easily dismiss a commoner than a nobleman. He also moved his court outside of Paris to his new, lavish palace in Versailles, which became the official residence of the king. Louis XIV housed courtiers in the chateau and its outbuildings, thereby keeping the nobility close and unable to plot against him.

At the palace of Versailles, life centered on grandeur. Courtiers were expected to be dressed marvelously and display expensive and luxurious items. Life at Versailles was filled with balls, dinners, performances and celebrations, which kept the nobility endlessly busy.

"Having gathered a deliberately underemployed higher aristocracy under his watchful eye at Versailles, Louis XIV elaborated endless rules of behavior and extremes of formality. Every move was

prescribed by a court convention, dress was determined by social standing, and *l'étiquette* was strictly maintained. Unlike the English aristocracy, who oversaw their lands or attended Parliament, the French nobility stewed in a pressure cooker of egos and intrigue—literally thousands of courtiers all fighting for favor" (Cohen, *By the Sword*).

Louis loved the flattery and adulation of the court. In a letter, the Duc de Saint-Simon said of the king, "There was nothing he liked so much as flattery, or, to put it more plainly, adulation; the coarser and clumsier it was, the more he relished it. ... His vanity, which was perpetually nourished—for even preachers used to praise him to his face from the pulpit—was the cause of the aggrandizement of his Ministers."

Louis XIV was a great supporter of the arts, and under him France became the cultural center of Europe. During his reign, the five basic steps of classical ballet were established, the architecture of Versailles influenced numerous buildings, and the French Academy dictionary was completed, ensuring that French "became the European tongue, the medium of diplomacy, the language of aristocracy, even of fine cooking" (Cohen, *By the Sword*). Theatre was an important form of entertainment and the plays of Racine and Molière were extremely popular. In fact, Molière was a favorite of the king's, and, in 1664, Louis XIV became the godfather of Molière's son. Molière, like Shakespeare, drew much of his inspiration from the world around him, and, even though his plays were social satires mocking commoners and nobility alike, he was careful not to directly attack the king or the Church.

While Louis XIV placed France at the forefront of the European powers, amassing land and wealth, toward the end of the 17th century, the nation was quickly becoming bankrupt. Louis' constant wars, extravagant palaces and high taxes took their toll on the people of France. While the royal court lived in lavish excess, the common people suffered extreme hardships; many suffered starvation, fled France, or lived in fear of religious persecution. The peasantry also opposed the royal absolutism established by Louis, something that would greatly influence the French Revolution in 1789. 



The extravagant palace of Versailles, built by Louis XIV.

Synopsis of *Don Juan*

In a prologue delivered by the senior actor of the company, the audience is assured that no one will leave the theatre offended. While a previous work of Molière's, *Tartuffe*, was seen as an attack on the French clergy, *Don Juan* is a work portraying a scoundrel so devious, no man will be able to identify with him.

Don Juan has fled his latest conquest and wife, Donna Elvira, without warning. Gusman, Donna Elvira's servant, chases Don Juan's man Sganarelle through the streets of Sicily demanding to know why Don Juan has fled. Sganarelle confesses he knows nothing of Don Juan's motives and informs Gusman that his master regularly treats marriage as his sport and will marry any woman after whom he lusts. While Sganarelle is disgusted by his master's actions, he admits to being too cowardly to stand up to Don Juan. His fear even keeps him from asking for the wages owed him. Don Juan arrives and reveals that he has returned to Sicily to pursue another of his "loves," a gentlewoman he has never met, whom he intends to kidnap and marry. He has rented a boat, hired a crew and will carry out his plan when her lover takes her for a pleasant sail.

Don Juan and Sganarelle almost drown in the river while attempting the kidnapping. As they return from their near-death experience, still soaked to the bone, Sganarelle attempts to persuade Don Juan that this second chance at life might be the perfect opportunity to change his ways. Rather than heeding his advice, Don Juan spies a beautiful young peasant girl named Charlotte and immediately begins to seduce her. She agrees to marry him, just in time for her suitor, Pierrot, to arrive and confront Don Juan. As they fight, Mathurine, another local woman who helped to rescue Don Juan from the river, arrives. It seems that Don Juan has promised to marry her as well, and the two "fiancées" fight while Don Juan whispers false promises to both. Pierrot runs away completely frustrated, and both women are satisfied that they are Don Juan's betrothed. A messenger enters and informs Don Juan that Donna Elvira's twelve brothers are hunting for him and know exactly what Don Juan is wearing. Don Juan forces Sganarelle to exchange clothes.

As Don Juan and Sganarelle flee through the woods now disguised as a servant and doctor, they see a gentleman in the woods being attacked by robbers. Don Juan rescues the man, while Sganarelle hides in the bushes. The gentleman turns out to be Don Carlos, one of Donna Elvira's brothers. Don Juan pretends to be a close friend of Don Juan's. Don Alonso, another brother of Donna Elvira, appears, recognizes Don Juan and attacks him. Don Carlos, in debt to Don Juan for saving his life, defends Don Juan against his own brother, offering Don Juan one day to give them satisfaction for their sister's disgrace. Don Juan pulls Sganarelle from his hiding place and they continue on their way through the woods. They come upon the tomb of a Commander killed by Don Juan years before. Don Juan mockingly invites the statue to dinner. The statue comes to life and nods yes to the invitation.



Molière's Company Performing (1670.)

Upon returning home, Don Juan shrugs off the incident at the tomb, claiming that it must have been a trick of the light.

Don Juan is visited by Monsieur Dimanche, the tailor, who has come to collect his fees. Don Juan puts the meeting off as long as he can but when face to face with the tailor, hails the creditor as his only true friend. Unable to utter a word, Monsieur Dimanche leaves no wealthier than when he arrived. When Don Juan and Sganarelle sit down to have dinner, Don Juan's father, Don Luis, and Donna Elvira arrive and plead with Don Juan to repent his wicked ways before being damned forever. Don Juan rejects their advice as the statue of the Commander appears for dinner. The statue asks Don Juan to join him for dinner the next night, if he dare. Don Juan accepts.

Don Juan meets with his father and renounces his sinful ways. After Don Luis departs, however, Don Juan reveals to Sganarelle that he has not truly repented. He has decided to become a hypocrite and pretend to be pious while still leading a wicked life. Don Juan and Sganarelle encounter Don Carlos, who urges Don Juan to honor his sister by reconciling with her. Don Juan, however, claims that his newfound piety and duty to God require him to live without companionship or worldly goods. Don Carlos storms out promising to fight Don Juan when next they meet. Sganarelle warns Don Juan that this final act of impropriety, performed in the name of God, might finally outrage Heaven enough to bring down its wrath upon him. As Don Juan mocks Sganarelle's warning, a veiled spectre appears and demands Don Juan immediately repent or be damned. When Don Juan seems to recognize the spectre and approaches it, the spectre changes into the Grim Reaper. Don Juan defies the figure and tries to attack it as it disappears. The statue from the tomb reappears and, grabbing Don Juan's hand, declares that the "anger of Heaven can no longer be contained." Don Juan burns from the inside out as the earth opens up and swallows him whole. Everyone is satisfied but Sganarelle, who is left with nothing but lost wages. 

Don Juan Timeline



Yuri Yuriev as Don Juan in Vsevolod Meyerhold's production, 1910.

Don Juan is a legendary figure in literature whose story has been told countless times by many different authors. Most agree that the tale originated in 17th-century Spain, and Tirso de Molina is credited with the first published version around 1620. Some believe that the character is based on an actual medieval nobleman named Don Juan Tenorio, who seduced a young woman and murdered her father, a commandant. He then was killed by avengers who claimed that he was carried off to hell by the statue of the commandant.

In the legend, Don Juan is a libertine who seduces women, steals money and murders noblemen. Different authors have had different opinions of the character—some have used him to tell a cautionary tale against bad behavior, while others have viewed him as a rebel and free-thinker who is not bound by society's rules and hypocrisies. Almost always, the Don Juan story ends with the character's descent into hell. Don Juan is usually visited by a statue as a harbinger of his doom.

The Don Juan story has been rewritten in many languages and has inspired poems, plays, operas and ballets. See below for Don Juan incarnations throughout the ages. **S**

1620

***El Burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de piedra*
(*The Prankster of Seville and His Stone Guest*)
by Tirso de Molina**

This is the first-known play on the Don Juan theme.

1650

***Il Convitato di pietra* by Giacinto Andrea Cicognini**

This play was the basis for countless *commedia dell'arte* versions and probably influenced Molière.

1658

***Le Festin de Pierre, ou le Fils criminel*
by Nicholas Drouin**

A spectacle play, featuring multiple settings and borrowing heavily from the *commedia* treatment by Cicognini. The popularity of these plays probably inspired Molière to write *Don Juan* for his company, badly in need of a hit.

1659

***Le Festin de Pierre ou le fils criminel*
by Claude Deschamps Villiers**

Much imitated, this version influenced Molière directly.

1665

***Dom Juan ou le Festin de Pierre*
(*Don Juan, or the Feast of Stone*) by Molière**

One of the three or four most influential of all versions of the Don Juan story.

1750

***Il Cavaliere del buon gusto* by Carlo Goldoni**

This famous author of *commedia dell'arte* scripts was inspired by Molière to pen his own version.

1758-61

***Don Juan, oder das steinerne Gastmahl*
by Christoph Willibald Gluck**

The first of a series of ballets on Don Juan, it was still being danced well into the 19th century.

1787

***Don Giovanni* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

Mozart's opera has inspired countless musical variations, including ones by Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt.

1821

***Don Juan* by Lord Byron**

Byron's long narrative poem based on the legend, considered by critics to be his masterpiece, was never completed.

1880-84

***Our Friend Platonov* by Anton Chekhov**

In Chekhov's take on the Don Juan tale, the amorous hero is shot dead at the end by one of his many conquests.

1901-03

***Don Juan in Hell* by George Bernard Shaw**

The famous third act of *Man and Superman* features the shameless hero crafting a philosophical justification for his endless pursuit of women.

1974

***The Joker of Seville* by Derek Wolcott**

The Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned Wolcott to write this modern musical version of Tirso's *Burlador*; Galt MacDermott composed the musical score.

1986

***The Phantom of the Opera* by Andrew Lloyd Webber**

One of the final scenes includes an operatic rendition of one of Don Juan's seductions.

1995

***Don Juan de Marco*, dir. Jeremy Leven**

Starring Johnny Depp and Marlon Brando, this film presents a modern twist on the legend. Lord Byron is given a writing credit.

Marriage & Family

in 17th-Century France

Photo by Craig Schwartz.



Don Juan (Adam Stein) pursues Charlotte (Mary Bacon) in The Old Globe's 2004 production of *Don Juan* translated, adapted and directed by Stephen Wadsworth.

In Molière's *Don Juan*, the title character disdains traditional courtship and marriage customs in pursuit of his own physical desires. What were the accepted customs in Molière's time? Why did Molière repeatedly satirize marriage in his plays, and how was this different in *Don Juan*?

In all time periods, family and marriage are closely linked, however attitudes toward family in 17th-century France differed greatly from our modern notions of family. During this time there was rarely overt affection in the family unit; rather, family was an important social structure. Wives depended on their husbands for financial support, and husbands counted on their wives for domestic responsibilities. Children were vital to the preservation of the family name, as well as business and fortune, if these existed. The family also served a larger social function as well. Prior to the 17th century, France was plagued by political upheaval and social disorder. The structure of the family—which was unquestionably patriarchal—represented a smaller version of what authorities

hoped for in France. Just as the father ruled over his dutiful wife and children, so did the reigning monarch rule over his loyal subjects.

In keeping with the hierarchical family structure, marriages were arranged by parents as a financial or business transaction. A good match could bring wealth and honor to a family, and a poor match could bring ruin. Marriage “for love” was a rarity, to which some historians attribute high rates of adultery. This is not to say that the institute of marriage was devoid of feeling, the importance of friendship and companionship in marriage was stressed by both public and religious officials. The subjection of women, however, was not deemed inappropriate or unusual and was standard practice for centuries preceding and following the 1600s.

In 17th-century France, all people were thought to be ruled by the humors: blood, phlegm, cholera and melancholy. Women were generally thought to be affected by cold and wet humors (phlegm and melancholy), making them changeable and deceptive. Men, on the other hand, were thought to be ruled by hot and dry humors (blood and cholera), making them level-headed and aggressive. There was a common misconception that a woman's womb was like a hungry animal desiring fertilization; when it was not “fed,” the womb would control the woman's actions, leading to depression or hysteria.

Contrary to what Molière's licentious character may have us believe, the time in which Molière wrote was characterized by intense sexual repression. It wasn't until the 1600s that private bedrooms began appearing in France; previously, entire families would commonly occupy the same bed. This practice was frowned upon, and stricter laws were written and enforced to prevent incest, adultery and other “lewd acts.”

In Molière's plays, we see many social norms satirized and criticized. In *Don Juan*, promiscuity is emphasized in the title character, rather than repressed, and the usual practices involving courtship and marriage are both vilified and ignored. Molière gave his audience what they did not have in their daily lives, and they enjoyed it, although the censors did not: *Don Juan* was banned after only two weeks for angering local religious and public officials. As European society made its way toward the conservative, oppressive Victorian era, Molière portrayed exactly the opposite on stage, contrasting an increasingly rigid social structure with a “hero” who is anything but.



SPLENDID DEFIANCE

A Conversation with Stephen Wadsworth

By Christine Sumption



Stephen Wadsworth—translator, adaptor and director of *Don Juan*.

CS: Don Juan had his beginnings in Spanish legend and, over the centuries, has inspired plays, movies and operas, including Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. What is it about the character of Don Juan that brings him back to life, again and again, in the popular imagination?

SW: In most manifestations, Don Juan is a charismatic rake who lives by his own rules and with absolute singleness of purpose, and as such he excites a variety of erotic and romantic fantasies. But I think that's only the first layer of the onion. He's also an anarchic thinker, an iconoclast, splendidly defiant and true to his vision to the bitter end. He uses his sexual magic to express this anarchic spirit, to defy the society at hand, but he also has other ways of doing this.

CS: What are some of these other ways? How do they emerge in Molière's play?

SW: Well, every important artist who has adapted the Don Juan story has needed to say things about the society at hand, and in Don Juan's fearlessness and lawlessness (so attractive to the public) they've found a formidable mouthpiece. Molière, hard hit by the rejection of *Tartuffe* itself (already a rather shocking commentary on a decadent, hypocritical society) cut even deeper with his Don Juan play. Molière gives his hero a diamond-point intellect and lets him loose on religion, politics and the social contract. Sex is part of it, but by no means all.

CS: What is it about this play that so disturbed the authorities?

SW: Well, precisely that it isn't just a fun romp about a cool rake. I think they could have dealt with Don Juan the womanizer, but Molière was cutting at things much deeper than that. Don Juan is a completely anarchic spirit, a freethinker who stands on none of the ceremony of social life in 17th-century France. He seduces and abandons women, yes, without a qualm, and he also dishonors his father, ignores creditors, lies, and even kills freely when it is convenient to him to do so, but, most disturbing to the authorities, he questions the existence of God with such brutal, gleeful frankness and at such length and with such inexhaustibly rational arguments that he takes the idea of a stage play into a whole new realm, a realm of biting social and political criticism.

CS: Who is Molière's Don Juan in relation to Louis XIV's France?

SW: Well, he is an outsider criticizing the way society works. Throughout the 17th century, France, the most populous and educated of the Western European states, was becoming increasingly aware of rationalism, the philosophy that reason, intellect, was the key to knowledge, rather than the senses or passions or religious doctrine. Rational thinking was very exciting in theory. But the minute you prove that one organism is essentially like another, that organisms within a species are essentially equal in that sense, you might realize that human beings, say, are all essentially equal as well. Take that thought one step further, and you have to question everything about a society that doesn't treat all human beings equally. And if you're running a religion used to determining how men should imagine their world, a religion that has cozied up to a classist, racist government of the privileged few, why then you have a serious dilemma facing you. We know reason finally got the better of *ancien-régime* France in the bloody end of the 18th century, but here's Don Juan in 1665, unnerving censors and audiences with his rational, logical, unapologetic world-view. The biggest surprise to me in working on this play was watching Don Juan's skeptical, prove-it-to-me mind crash through the wall of the 17th century and march into the Age of Enlightenment, full of prescience and anger and awe-inspiring intellectual confidence.

CS: How much of Molière’s social criticism is explicit in the script? Surely his audience didn’t need to have it all spelled out for them.

SW: Well, Don Juan does not mince words *at all*, but of course there are lots of things about day-to-day life in 17th-century France that are implicit in the text. Some of these I’ve explicated in the adaptation – information about dueling, blasphemy, medical issues and so on, and of course I’ve opened up some of the areas that the censors focused on.

CS: Most of us have some familiarity with Molière as a writer of comedy and social satire, having at some point seen or read *Tartuffe* or *The Misanthrope*. But of course he was a leading actor with his own theatre troupe. In your work on *Don Juan*, what evidence did you find of Molière the actor?

SW: Lots, though it isn’t hard evidence; it’s something I hear about from the characters, in the ways they have of using theatricality to make their points. Molière played Sganarelle, as he had done in other plays, and this Sganarelle has at least one Italian *commedia dell’arte* parent. Improvisation, in the form of *lazzi* (a sort of vaudeville routine), is in the air Sganarelle breathes, so I let him dictate several of these to me as I adapted the play. I know *lazzis* were the notable feature of the Italian comedians’ work, and Molière’s troupe alternated nights with them on the same stage. They survive in the script that’s come down to us—Don Juan sweet-talking two women at once, for instance. I’ll bet my bottom dollar that Molière, clearly an awesome *farceur*, interpolated plenty of *lazzis* in his own plays. Remember, this is a

guy who often said that he wrote his comedies to be played, not to be printed in books. That said, Molière is a literary magpie in *Don Juan*: he sends up the super-heroic flights of Corneille’s plays in the speeches of Donna Elvira’s brothers, for example, and Pierrot and Charlotte are written in the style of the peasants in Cyrano de Bergerac’s plays. And the whole play is highly theatrical in an actor-centric way. It’s all about *performance*.

CS: Is there an advantage to being both translator/adaptor and director?

SW: Yes! Writing the play out helps the director absorb the material deeply. Directing it, or preparing to direct it, helps the writer know what will work on the stage, when he’s overwriting, how to cut to the heart of the scene, what it’s really about. Of course, I can’t and don’t do all this alone. I have my editor and dramaturg, Janice Paran, along on the writing journey. And the actors and designers and producers (and Janice again!), when I’m directing the show, have tons of input, direct and indirect. Doing both jobs together, and collaborating closely with all the crafts people on every detail of a work of art, one can strive toward a kind of aesthetic integration that can offer audiences a glimpse of the sublime. And that’s what I want to give them. 

Christine Sumption is Director of Dramaturgy at Seattle Repertory Theatre.

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Photo by Craig Schwartz.

Andrew Weems as Sganarelle and Adam Stein as Don Juan in The Old Globe’s 2004 production of *Don Juan*, adapted and directed by Stephen Wadsworth.