
Tartuffe As Molière's Most Recognizable Work

Molière, considered to be the most influential writer of French comedy to ever exist, was born in Paris, France in 1622 by the name Jean-Baptiste Poquelin. When he was ten years old, his mother passed away, but his father, one of the furnishers for the royal family, worked hard to give the young man whom would become Molière a valuable education at the acclaimed Collège de Clermont. While his father strongly encouraged young Jean-Baptiste Poquelin to follow in his footsteps by succeeding him in his royal appointment, his son had other things in mind.

Like so many other legendary figures, Jean-Baptiste knew from a young age where his destiny lie: in the theatre. In 1643, he and nine other hopefuls joined forces to form a comedy company by the title of Illustre-Théâtre. The first document containing the stage name "Molière" was dated June 28, 1644. The beginnings of this production company were wrought with hardships, and Molière was sent to prison two times for debts that he was unable to repay. In 1645, the struggling company sought out another route, and decided to go on tour. Various records reveal that the company emerged in locations such as Toulouse, Lyon, and Montpellier. The tour continued for at least thirteen years, and this time proved to be formative for Molière as an artist and professional. During this time, Molière wrote his first two plays: *L'Étourdi; ou, les contretemps* (The Blunderer; or, The Mishaps), and *Le Dépit amoureux* (The Amorous Quarrel).

Armed with invaluable experience that he incurred over these years, Molière finally returned to Paris to make another attempt at success in the city. The first production that gained Molière's company substantial recognition was Pierre Corneille's *Nicomède*, followed by an early form of *Le Docteur amoureux* (The Amorous Doctor), both presented before King Louis XIV. The king's brother, Philippe, duc d'Orléans, was quite pleased by the production, and become a generous patron (for roughly seven years). After this period, the company was seized by the king himself, therefore finally acquiring the high status that the members had longed for. The company's early Paris plays were likely performed in the Théâtre du Petit-Bourbon, but in 1661 the company moved to the Palais Royale following the demolishment of the former theater. In 1662, Molière married nineteen-year-old actress Armande Béjart, a young woman who was more than twenty years his junior, and who was the much younger sister of Madeleine Béjart, a previous mistress of Molière. Molière and his wife had three children, but only one survived to adulthood. Molière passed away at the age of 51 in the same city in which he was born, and in the midst of the art he was so passionate about. During a performance of *Le Malade Imaginaire* (The Imaginary Invalid), Molière, playing the title character, fell ill, but miraculously finished the performance. He died soon after the play ended from tuberculosis.

Molière's plays are considered to be marked by his urgency in writing them. Because of the constant competition with other Parisian companies, Molière was consistently compressed to continue to create. *Les Précieuses ridicules* (The Affected Young Ladies) was Molière's premier Parisian play. The farcical, physically fascinating nature of Molière's plays captivated crowds, simultaneously shocking and thrilling them with humor that pushed societal standards. Molière is one of the most famous authors of "Restoration Comedy," also known as the "Comedy of Manners." This genre thrived during the Restoration Period (roughly 1660-1710). While the plots are certainly entertaining, Restoration Comedies are more significantly marked

by their witty dialogues and tendencies to reveal the absurdity of the standards of modern society. In addition, they utilize stock characters and heightened, comical domestic situations involving topics such as misunderstandings and deception.

Molière was the first to notably endow stock characters with depth; a psychological life that was more human and complex. Premiering in 1659, *Les Précieuses ridicules* (The Affected Young Ladies), introduced Molière's clever poking of fun at the battle between aspirations for propriety and basic human nature, especially in those of high status. This one-act play centers around two young women who turn their noses up to two valets whom they consider to be "undignified," but later fall for the same men when they masquerade as sophisticated gentlemen. This play spotlights the uncomfortable fact that pretensions are merely constructs, and rarely based in reality.

In 1661 came *L'École des Maris* (The School for Husbands), Molière's first full-length play. This three act play tells the story of brothers Ariste and Sganarelle who each care for a young ward with the hopes of one day having them for their wives. Ariste is kind to his ward, Léonor, allowing her the freedom to marry whomever she wishes. This causes her to feel warm towards him, and she chooses him to join in matrimony. In contrast, Sganarelle is domineering over his ward, Isabella, causing her to look elsewhere for love. Through a series of secret meetings, disguises and discreet messages, Isabella escapes Sganarelle and marries the young man whom she has fallen for. In 1662, this play was followed by *L'École des femmes* (The School for Wives) a five-act play of a similar theme that is considered to be the closest Molière ever came to pure comedy. It is the tale of a middle-aged man who severely shelters his ward from the world and from men so that he may have her undying wifely devotion when she is of age. The young ward falls in love with a young gentleman and is thereafter locked away, until her father returns and allows her to marry the man of her choosing. *L'École des femmes* premiered the same year as Molière's own marriage to Armande, and it is theorized that these two plays, both revolving around older men marrying much younger girls, were created to mirror their author's own criticized relationship.

Molière's plays were criticized for being too irreverent to modern society and were seen as offensive to many. The production of *Tartuffe* in 1664 became Molière's most recognizable work, but even this play, which would come to be considered a product of genius evoked great controversy. The story centers around "imposter" Tartuffe's parasitic invasion of a well-off family. Everyone in the household easily spots Tartuffe's deception other than Madame Pernelle and her son Orgon, who sees Tartuffe as a dear and most trusted friend. Orgon goes so far as to promise his daughter's hand to Tartuffe and does not see his deception until Tartuffe nearly violates Orgon's wife, unaware that that Orgon is under the table spying.

Tartuffe was under scrutiny even before its premier. The king banned this original version of *Tartuffe*. Three years later, Molière brought back a revised version of the play under the new title of *The Imposter*, and this too was censored. In 1669, *Tartuffe* was revived once more, and was at last well received, becoming the most successful play of Molière's career. Molière claimed that the purpose of his works was to promote moral reform in an accessible and entertaining manner, but they were argued to be far too vulgar in their irreverence, leaving nothing sacred.

Molière's works continue to have a great impact on society today. While his plays probably do not represent society today as literally or offensively as they did in the time they were first

performed, the basics of human nature can still be spotted, and audiences easily engage in the cleverly conceived language, physically demanding blocking, and farcical trickery exhibited by colorful characters.