

## Médecine à la Molière

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### Summary

*Of Moliere's thirty six plays, seven deal, to a greater or lesser extent, with medicine; the medicine as practised in Paris during the reign of Louis XIV. In these plays, Moliere satirises the recalcitrant conservatism of the Paris medical faculty. It is, however, an informed satirisation. This paper explores Moliere's motives and attempts to place Moliere's medical plays against a broad canvas of his other works. The ultimate purpose is to assess to what extent Moliere's work can be used as a resource for the historian of medicine. To do this, I shall examine Moliere's philosophical persuasions and how he balanced them against the needs of contemporary, commercial theatre.*

### Résumé

*Parmi les trente-six pièces qui constituent l'oeuvre de Molière, il n'y a que sept qui traitent, jusqu'à un certain point, de la médecine; voire la médecine exercée à Paris pendant le règne de Louis XIV. Dans ces sept comédies, Molière satirise le conservatisme récalcitrant de la Faculté de médecine à Paris; c'est pourtant de la satire bien informée.*

*Cette communication examinera les buts de Molière; elle va essayer de situer les pièces 'médicales' dans la vaste toile de ses autres comédies. Le but final sera d'estimer jusqu'à quel point l'oeuvre de Molière peut servir comme source de compréhension pour l'historien de la médecine. Mon intention est de considérer les convictions philosophiques de Molière et sa façon de les peser contre les besoins financiers du théâtre contemporain.*

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, who was to adopt the name Moliere, was born in Paris in 1623. His mature works included seven comedies in which he satirised medicine and its practitioners. These comedies impiously reflect the medicine and the medics who surrounded the court of Louis XIV in the 'Grand siècle'.

If Moliere's comedies are to serve as a useful resource for medical historians, it is important to reach some understanding of what Moliere believed himself to be doing and at the same time to remember the attitudes and background of his audiences. We should also bear in mind that Moliere was not writing for the benefit of late twentieth century historians of medicine.

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In fact, Moliere makes it very clear what he is attempting to do by making Beralde, one of his characters, ask:

*'What could he [Moliere] do better than put on stage men of all professions ? Princes and Kings are put on the stage every day and they are not of less consequence than doctors'*

*(Le Malade Imaginaire, Act III).*

This speech has a layered meaning, to which I shall return later.

Like all successful playwrights, Moliere knew the art of capturing the attention of his audiences by holding up a mirror to the conventions and the behaviour of contemporary society. He asks people not to take themselves too seriously and, in particular he plucks the feathers of the pompous members of corporate societies. He

attempts to demystify the professionals such as doctors and lawyers; a strategy which landed him in trouble when, in *'Tartuffe'*, he seemingly accused the clergy of hypocrisy. The play was, in fact, banned.

The mirror which some playwrights have offered their audiences has been a passive reflector of human foible and weakness. It has been commented (Whitfield 1960) that the eighteenth century Italian playwright, Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) was 'Moliere without a cutting edge'. This is, perhaps, a little harsh on Goldoni, but it does underline Moliere's talent for presenting to his audiences a penetrating analysis of the human condition. Moliere's mirror is a magic one and his use of it worth further investigation, in particular with regard to medicine.

Medicine is, of course, different from all other professions in that it consists of humans who practise on other humans. In consequence, doctors are supposed to have a greater concern for the well-being of humanity than for their own. Beralde, however, that *raisonneur* and cynic, distinguishes two sorts of doctors : those ...

*'Who share the popular errors from which they profit and others who don't share them and still make a profit'*

*(Le Malade Imaginaire, Act III)*

Beralde clearly has little time for either sort of doctor and, it transpires, even less for medicine itself. Common sense and Mother Nature will, he believes, take care of most human ills, without the intervention of medical professionals with their cant, bigotry and, above all, their vested interests. Beralde plays Luther to the Church of Medicine and, as the *raisonneur*, he can be assumed to be Moliere's mouthpiece, who, it appears, had more in common with Thomas Sydenham than with Galen.

How did Moliere come to hold these opinions, how valid were they and why did he

believe (rightly) that Parisian society would pay to hear and see them dramatically presented ? In asking such questions, specifically applied to medicine, we must keep things in perspective by remembering that, of the thirty six plays whose texts have come down to us, only seven actually deal with medicine.

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin received a classical education at the Jesuit College de Clermont in Paris. During his time there he was drawn into a circle of *savants* who gathered around the cleric, mathematician and philosopher, Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655). Gassendi was a champion of *La Nouvelle Philosophie*, aware of anti-aristotelianism whose clarion call had been sounded by Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* of 1620. Despite its formally heretical status, Gassendi was an ardent supporter of the Copernican heliocentric theory, and also of its controversial advocate, Galileo Galilei, who was nearing the end of his days, under house arrest in Florence. He also flirted with heresy in his support of the Epicurean anatomic theory. A theory which called into question the doctrine of the Transubstantiation (Redondi 1983, 1987) and, ultimately Galenic physiology. Indeed Gassendi was instrumental in popularising Epicurus not only in France but throughout Europe. So it was that the years of Moliere's youth were marked by a ferment of new and controversial ideas in Natural Philosophy on both sides of the Channel (See Spink, 1953 and Hall, 1977). In mathematics and physics, Fermat, Pascal and Descartes were busy applying the 'Spirit of Geometry' to all things. Borelli, Pecquet, Harvey and the 'Oxford Physiologists', who were in close touch with Gassendi, were revolutionising ideas about animal physiology. Gassendi's resurrection of Epicurus' atomism had brought the plenist/vacuum controversy to the boil (Webster, 1965) while the Copernican cosmology and Galileo's physics had all but destroyed the old Aristotelian world picture. The same process is happening today, with classical linear and equilibrium dynamics, but few, even

educated laymen, would appreciate the importance of these developments. Not so seventeenth century Paris; all educated classes had a profound interest in these ideas and they were discussed and hotly debated in court circles and in the fashionable salons of Paris. The Paris medical faculty of the Sorbonne, however, remained aloof and cleaved doggedly to its Aristotelian beliefs.

Moliere, on leaving the College, tried to break into the Paris theatrical scene. It was, however, something of a 'closed shop' and he left Paris in 1645 with a travelling theatrical company. With them he spent the next thirteen years, mainly in south west France, where he made a name as a director, actor and playwright. The troupe went from town to town, as well as performing at the court of the Prince de Conti. During this period, he is reputed to have worked, part time, as a cashier in the establishment of a barber-surgeon (Bulgakov 1970) in order to collect material for his plays. Thus it was that Moliere came into contact with both the academic physicians of the Prince de Conti's court and the quacks and 'empiricks' who ministered to the peasantry.

The town of Montpellier is situated in south west France, and the medical faculty of its university is one of the largest, oldest and most prestigious outside Paris. It was also a stronghold of Paracelsian and Arabic medicine and its teachings, therefore, were diametrically opposed to the staunchly Galenic - Aristotelian medicine of the Paris faculty. Of all this, Moliere must, of course, have been aware. After his wanderings, his reputation made, Moliere returned to Paris in 1658. By this time his old friend and mentor had been dead for three years, his demise hastened, according to Moliere, by the over zealous use of the lancet by Parisian physicians.

On his return, Moliere's company first attracted the patronage of the King's brother M. Le Due d'Orleans and subsequently that of

Louis XIV himself. For the next fifteen years, until his death in 1673, Moliere successfully entertained both the Royal Court at Versailles and 'La Ville' at the Palais Royal. Moliere's income at this latter venue depended on his ability to 'pack-'em-in', so it behoved him to know the tastes of his audiences. These audiences were largely composed of those very same people who thronged the court, who discussed Natural Philosophy in the salons and employed the medical fraternity of Paris to attend to, if not cure, their ills. In short, Moliere's audiences were informed, receptive, up to the minute with gossip and more than ready to laugh at the fun being poked at the stodgy conservatism of the Sorbonne.

This fun was given extra spice by the long-standing dispute between Paris and Montpellier, a dispute with which Moliere and his audience were very familiar. Officially, medical practice in Paris came under the jurisdiction of the Paris faculty. The King, however, and consequently, the nobility, preferred Montpellier-trained physicians to their Parisian counterparts. The Paris faculty was powerless to oppose the wishes of "*Le Roi Soleil*", who ruled by Heaven's command and not, to the chagrin of its members, that of the Sorbonne. Thus, the faculty members could only view impotently as the hated Paracelsian and Arabic medicine was practised openly on their very doorstep by physicians who, moreover, stole their most lucrative clientele. To add insult to injury, these Montpellier men also courted that inferior race of beings, the apothecaries. Dean of faculty Guy Patin called them 'Arabesque cooks.' They even had the audacity to write a D.I.Y. medical manual, called '*Le medecin charitable*' so that the common people could "prescribe for themselves". It was a medical 'Reformation' in which doctors were marginalised in the same way that Luther had marginalised priests. The faculty reacted in the same manner as the Catholic Church had done to Luther. This perpetual feud was constantly generating some new and dramatically exploita-

ble scandal - so, Moliere dramatically exploited them !

In his early provincial plays, such as '*Le Medecin Volant*', Moliere's medical parodies were little more than slap-stick, lavatorial humour inherited from the "*Commedia dell'Arte*". This, no doubt, reflected the tastes of his rural audiences. While the 'Paris' plays are more subtle and sophisticated, the audiences of the Palais Royal were not above a good belly laugh at the sight of an apothecary, in '*Le Malade Imaginaire*' chasing Argan around the stage brandishing a gigantesque 'clyster'. The sharpening of 'that cutting edge', however, is to be heard in his mention of the famous emetic wine in "*Don Juan*" (Act III). This was one of the very points at issue between Paris and Montpellier. In "*TAmour Medecin*" Moliere is even more specific in his presentation of thinly disguised caricatures of five court doctors themselves. All are presented as being callous, dull-witted and pompous. 'A cap and gown', says Beralde, 'confer wisdom on all nonsense' { "*Le Malade Imaginaire*", Act III). Fine Latin phrases are, however, quite useless when it comes to curing anybody.

Perhaps the most incisive and waspish picture of a faculty physician is to be found in Dr Diafoirus' speech in '*Le Malade Imaginaire*' (Act II). In this speech Diafoirus commends his son, Thomas, a young and ambitious physician, as a prospective husband for Argan's (*Le Malade*) daughter, Angelique.

**DIAFOIRUS.**

*Sir, it's not because I'm his father, but I can say I have good reason to be proud of him. All who know him speak of him as a most blameless young man. He has never shown the lively imagination or the sparkling wit one observes in some young men but that I have always taken to augur well for his judgement, a quality necessary for the practice of our art. In childhood he was*

*never what one could call lively or pert but gentle and mild, never speaking a word or indulging in childish games. We had the greatest difficulty in teaching him to read: he was nine before he even knew his letters. 'Never mind', I used to say to myself, 'the tardy tree oft yields the better fruit. One writes less easily on marble than on sand, but what is written there endures and this slowness of understanding, this sluggishness of imagination is the mark of sound judgement yet to come'. When I sent him to college he made hard going of it but he bore up against all difficulties and his tutors always commended him for his assiduity and hard work. At length, by dint of sheer persistence he succeeded in qualifying and I can say without boasting that in the two years since taking his bachelor's degree no candidate has made more noise than he in the disputations of our faculty. He has gained for himself quite a formidable reputation and there's no proposition put forward but he'll argue in the last ditch to the contrary. Firm in dispute, a very Turk in defence of a principle, he never changes his opinion and pursues his argument to the logical limit. But what pleases me most of all about him, and herein he follows my own example, is his unswerving attachment to the opinions of the ancient authorities and his refusal ever to attempt to understand or even listen to the arguments in favour of such alleged discoveries of our own times as the circulation of the blood and other ideas of a like nature.*

The humour here lies in the fact that the meaning of the speech is entirely the reverse of that of the words themselves. It is more than mere irony and such devices have a long history, often used in order to avoid persecution. Moliere, with the *Tartuffe* debacle in mind, may have used it to circumvent a repetition, of these events. Whatever Moliere's motives might have been, it is certainly very clever, extremely funny and good theatre.

Thomas is, in fact, portrayed as a complete idiot, whose idea of wooing and winning Angélique is to invite her to a public dissection at which he is giving a lecture (Act II). Toinette, the servant, comments sarcastically that...

*'... Some young men take their young ladies to a play but a dissection is so much more entertaining !'*

Thomas, of course, takes it as a compliment!

Despite the Galen versus Paracelsus disputes, or whether any given physician was a disciple of iatromechanism, rationalism, empiricism or any other medical sect, all seemed to agree that effective therapies relied on evacuation. All the polemics centred around the nature of the evacuants and the regimen of treatment. So, despite Harvey, Descartes and later, Newton, the bleeding and purging went on; it was simply its theoretical justification that changed. Beralde (*Le Malade Imaginaire*, Act III) remarks that a man's constitution must be strong indeed in order to withstand the cavalier use of lancet and senna. Toinette cynically comments, on hearing of Dr Diafoirus' enormous wealth, that he must have killed a lot of patients in order to make that sort of money.

*Le Malade Imaginaire* culminates in an hilariously burlesque ceremony in which the degree of Doctor, the highest of the three possible degrees, is conferred on Argan, *le Malade*. The stage directions call for six apothecaries, twenty two doctors and eight surgeons all dancing and chanting dog-Latin verses punctuated by the famous chorus :

*Bene, bene, bene, bene, respondere  
Dignus, dignus est intrare  
In nostro docto corpore  
Bene, bene, respondere'.*

Finally Argan receives the degree of '*Grades doctores doctorinae, of rhubarb and of senna*'. He is thereby qualified to '*bleedat and mar*'.

Thus, since the therapies, whatever their underlying theories, remained the same, it is entirely understandable that the Paris faculty stuck resolutely to its Aristotelian guns. In 1649, Jean Riolan, Dean of the medical faculty at the Sorbonne, criticised Harvey's theory of blood circulation, rightly fearing, despite Harvey's admittedly naive, arguments to the contrary, that it would undermine the foundations of traditional medicine on which careers and institutions had been built. Riolan's critique is, in fact, in the same spirit as a recent remark made by a cosmologist viz :

*'7 we don't accept some picture of the universe, however unsupported by the facts, there would be nothing to bind us together as a scientific community'*

(Bak1997)

All this is perhaps, as Beralde put it, a case of 'sharing in the popular errors from which to make a profit'.

The physicians, despite technical disagreements among themselves, were at pains to present a united front to the ignorant laity. Moliere uses this to great effect in *Le Malade Imaginaire* in the scene (Act II) in which Thomas diagnoses Argan's illness as a 'disturbed splenic parenchyma'. Argan hesitantly, and very apologetically, points out that his own physician says that the problem lies in the liver. Diafoirus, in lofty condescending tones, steps in with :

*'Oh yes! they are connected by way of the vas breve of the pylorus and the meatus cholodici of the duodenum'.*

Argan is suitably overawed and the edifice of medical wisdom, or 'headlong prejudice' as Beralde prefers to call it, remains intact.

Moliere made his audience laugh by lampooning the pompous and vacuous Latin jargon and the affectations of the black-robed physicians who attracted no censure and continued to collect fat fees, as long as they killed

their patients by the approved rules.

This satirical treatment makes good theatre, yet it is but icing on a rich, heavy cake and makes light of Moliere's erudition and philosophical persuasions, persuasions which have, hitherto, remained under-explored. In order to begin such an exploration and to understand Moliere's 'cutting edge' we must allow the actual text of the plays to slip out of focus and concentrate more on their overall shape and structure, a shape and structure common to all of Moliere's works and not unique to the medical plays alone. I perceive an underlying unity, rooted in an anti-aristotelian epicureanism almost certainly inherited, at least in part, from Gassendi. Moliere himself would probably not have approved of such a categorisation because, for him, his philosophy, as put into the mouth of Beralde, is nothing more than common sense plus a total rejection of sectarian cant and dogma. There are three ways in which Moliere uses this approach to structure his plays. First is his use of the disputation. In his *Dialogo* (1632), about which Moliere is certain to have known through Gassendi, Galileo presents his anti-aristotelianism in the form of a debate or disputation between three interlocutors; one Aristotelian, one Copernican and, the third, a referee. The Aristotelian, whose name is, significantly, Simplicio, is always set up to look a fool. Moliere places Thomas, the young physician, in precisely this position, and the audience is invited to laugh at his intransigent stupidity. Just as Galileo, through Simplicio, savagely attacked the whole Aristotelian world picture and its supporters, so Moliere does the same to Galenic-Aristotelian medicine, using poor Thomas as his conduit.

Moliere's second device is even more subtle. French theatre from about the 1630's, had three specific rules foisted upon it, which playwrights were supposed to observe and with which, the audiences were very familiar; the details of these rules need not concern us but they are proscriptive of place, time and action and impose severe limitations on the playwright's

freedom of imagination.

The *savants* who formulated them claimed their ultimate derivation from none other than Aristotle. Moliere joined his contemporary playwrights, Corneille and Racine, more in the breach than in the observance of these rules, if, by so flouting them, the work would better appeal to their audiences, the ultimate judge. Moliere reveals his opinion of the rules in *La Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* when Dorante comments that any playwright knows from commonsense experience that which gives pleasure to an audience without the need for *savants* pontificating on the rules of 'art' as if they were the 'greatest mysteries'. A good playwright learns his trade without the help of Horace or Aristotle; Racine agrees. (Lough 1979).

Lastly, and I admit more speculatively, I perceive a social dimension. During the boyhood of Louis XIV the aristocracy rebelled against the crown in a protracted and near civil war which came to be known as the Fronde. This instilled in young Louis a life-long distrust of the nobility; thus, when he came to power he did all he could to clip their wings. Part of his strategy was to enforce the rule of law, even-handedly, on the highest and the lowest in the land, himself included. This Apollo King, however, had no compunction about suspending any given law 'by reason of state', if he felt it to be for the public good. So, perhaps Moliere had a sympathetic member of his audience when he broke the rules of theatre 'by reason of audience pleasure' - and epicurean sentiment.

Moliere saw no reason to obey slavishly rules laid down by bureaucrats, who had never set foot in a theatre, any more than he took seriously the Latin rhetoric of physicians who never 'lowered' themselves to lay hands on a patient. Maybe Moliere had more respect for the craft of the barber-surgeons whom he had come to know in his provincial years and who learned their trade through an apprenticeship comprising commonsense and experience. Moliere was, in

fact, following the lead of Galileo, who wrote in Italian rather than Latin, and called for the common man to use his God-given intelligence and to ignore the high-flown language of the philosophers. Galileo's own 'role model' was the poet Ruzzante who trusted in the horse-sense of the common man. All three, in their own ways, partake of the spirit of Martin Luther.

In the Aristotelian universe there was one set of rules governing sublunary matter and another set governing celestial matter, constituting a terrestrial and celestial physics respectively. This difference had been turned, by medieval society into the basis of cosmological correspondences, which, in social terms meant 'one law for the rich and one for the poor'. Galileo conclusively demonstrated that cannon ball and planets obey but a single law. Moliere was aware of this unification and, as Beralde tells us, he was happy to place 'all professions on the stage along with princes and kings', - cannon balls and planets. King Louis would surely have applauded this.

Despite his sharp satirisation of the medical profession, Moliere's personal relationships with physicians seem to have been amicable enough, in the same way as a modern cartoonist might have a friendly pint with a politician whom he had savagely caricatured in the previous day's papers. The physicians may or may not have understood Moliere's need to exaggerate for theatrical purposes, but it is a need which the historian should bear in mind when trying to reconstruct seventeenth century Parisian medicine using Moliereian spectacles.

In the end, of course, medicine could offer Moliere very little succour. He died of tuberculosis some two centuries before Robert Koch isolated *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and nearly three before the discovery of Streptomycin. Moliere's life was; however, spent doing not only that which he loved but, moreover, getting paid for it. In Epicurean terms this surely constitutes

the 'highest good'.

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### **Biography**

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