

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES
2022



LINTON AND DISTRICT HISTORY SOCIETY

Where History Comes To Life

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Last month I promised you that from January, 2022 the theme of these historical articles would change and that for 2022 and possibly 2023 the subject each month will be a short biography of someone famous. I will not be writing about those perceived as famous by some television programme makers today, but those truly famous historically, although often overlooked by the present day media driven desire for repetition.

If you have ever wondered what the Christian name or names are of the great seventeenth century French playwright Moliere are you will search in vain. He is my subject for this month and his name is Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, not a name that immediately presents itself as someone you have heard of which is because he is better known by his stage name Molière. Baptised on the 15th January, 1622 he is probably best known today for his plays of which "The Miser" is likely to be one of the best known today.

He was born into a prosperous family but his mother died when he was eleven years of age and he does not seem to have been particularly close to his father. After his mother's death, he lived with his father above the Pavillon des Singes on the rue Saint-Honoré, an affluent area of Paris. It is likely that his education commenced with studies at a Parisian elementary school, followed by his enrolment in the prestigious Jesuit Collège de Clermont, (now Lycée Louis-le-Grand), where he completed his studies in a strict academic environment and received a first taste of life on the stage.

His father Jean Poquelin purchased from the court of King Louis XIII the posts of valet de chambre ordinaire et tapissier du Roi (valet of the King's chamber and keeper of carpets and upholstery) in 1631. His son assumed the same posts in 1641 which required only three months' work per year for an initial outlay of only 1,200 livres but provided an annual income of 300 livres plus a number of lucrative contracts. Molière also studied as a provincial lawyer about 1642, probably in Orléans, but there is no record of him qualifying. Up to this time he had adopted his father's plans which served him well as he had mingled with nobility at the Collège de Clermont and seemed destined for a career in Royal office.



Molière by Nicolas Mignard

In June 1643 at the age of twenty one he decided to abandon his social class and pursue a career on the stage. Taking leave of his father, he joined the actress Madeleine Béjart, who was already known to him, and founded the Illustre Théâtre with 630 livres. They were later joined by Madeleine's brother and sister.

It seems the Illustre Théâtre was not a success as it filed for bankruptcy two years later. However Molière had become head of the troupe, due in part, perhaps, to his acting prowess and his legal training. The troupe had acquired large debts, mostly for the rent of the theatre for which they owed 2,000 livres. It seems either his father or the lover of a member of his troupe settled the debts and within a day he was released from the debtor's prison and he returned to acting. This was the time that he began to use the pseudonym Molière, possibly inspired by a small village of the same name in the Midi near Le Vigan. It is quite possible that the change of name was to spare his father the disgrace of having an actor in the family, as actors, although no longer vilified by the state under Louis XIV, were still not allowed to be buried in sacred ground. As here in Great Britain actors were not regarded with any esteem and actresses considered little better than other girls of easy virtue.

Thirteen years as an itinerant actor helped him polish his comedic abilities while he began writing, combining Commedia dell'arte elements with the more refined French comedy. He became sufficiently successful to obtain the patronage of Philippe, Duke of Orléans and of the few plays which survive from this period



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probably the most noteworthy are “L’Étourdi ou les Contretemps” (The Bungler) and “Le Docteur Amoureux” (The Doctor in Love). With these two plays Molière moved away from the heavy influence of the Italian improvisational Commedia dell’arte, and displayed his talent for mockery. In the course of his travels he met Armand, Prince of Conti, the governor of Languedoc, who became his patron, and named his company after him. However the friendship ended when Armand contracted syphilis from a courtesan and turned to church where he joined Molière’s enemies in the Parti des Dévots and the Compagnie de Saint Sacrement.

Despite the adulation of the court and Parisians, Molière’s satires attracted ecclesiastical criticism for the impiety of “Tartuffe” which the Catholic Church denounced as religious hypocrisy. The Parlement banned its production whilst “Don Juan” was withdrawn and never re-staged by Molière.

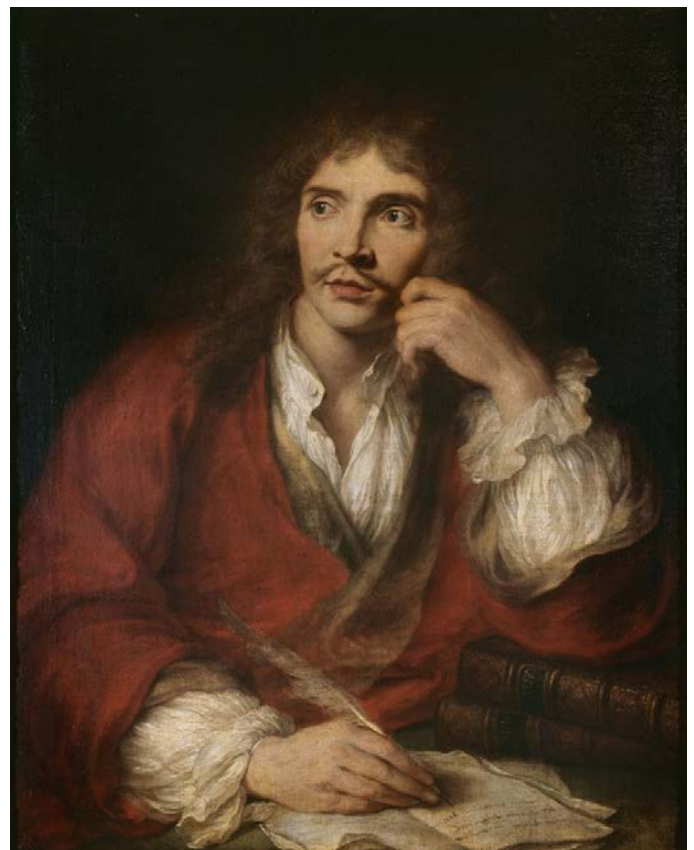
It was possible the relentless work that caused Mollie’s illness which was later to prove fatal, nevertheless although he wrote less he still found the energy to write “Le Sicilien

ou L’Amour peintre” for festivities at the castle of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. This was followed in 1668 by “Amphitryon”, inspired both by Plautus’ work of the same name and Jean Rotrou’s successful reconfiguration of the drama. With some conjecture, Molière’s play can be seen to allude to the love affairs of King Louis XIV. “George Dandin, ou Le mari confondu” (The Confounded Husband) was little appreciated at the time, but success returned with “L’Avaro” (The Miser or School for Lies), now very well known which was first performed on the 9th September, 1668. This is the play which centres on Harpagon, the Miser, his daughter Elise Mlle de Brie and Valere who has rescued Elise from drowning and wishes to marry her. The Miser believes that Valere is a penniless scoundrel who is only after his money, and it is during an exchange between Harpagon and Valere that Valere asks if one should live to work or work to live. The play ends when it is revealed that Valere is actually the wealthy Don Thomas d’Alburcy and marries Elise.

It was during a production of “The Imaginary Invalid” that Molière, who suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis, was seized by a fit of coughing and a haemorrhage while playing the hypochondriac Argan. He finished the performance but collapsed again and died a few hours later on the 17th February, 1673, he was fifty one years of age. In his 14 years in Paris, Molière singlehandedly wrote 31 of the 85 plays performed on his stage.

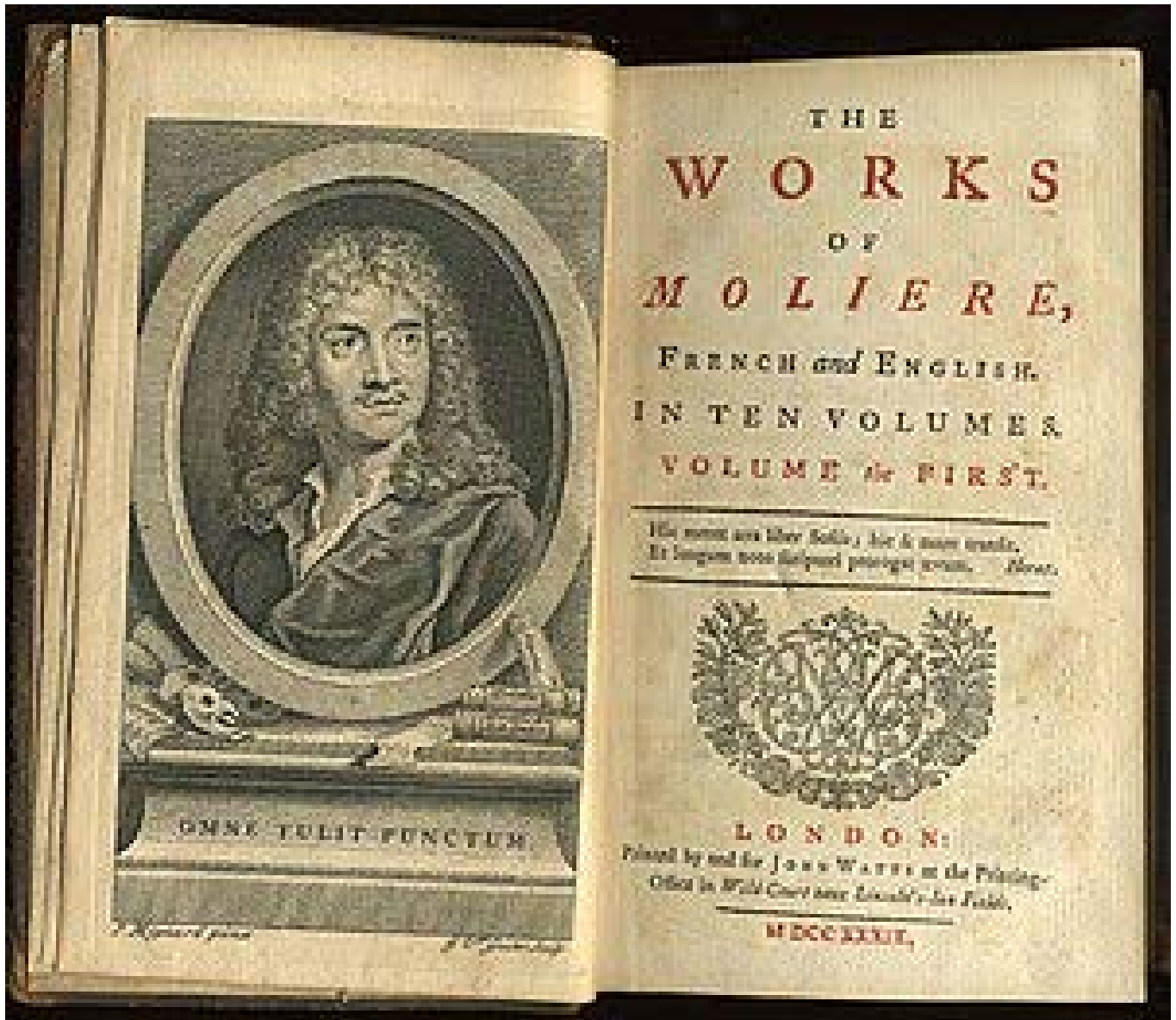


King Louis XIV invites Molière to share his supper—an unfounded Romantic anecdote, illustrated in this 1863 painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme



Portrait of Molière by Charles Antoine Coypel, 1730





The first volume of an 1739 English translation of Molière's plays, painted by John Watts

