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Jean-Baptiste Poquelin: Dom Juan, ou le festin de Pierre [Don Juan]

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The figure of Dom Juan and his rebellious exploits has attracted the interest of many writers across the centuries and much of this enduring fascination arises from his potential both to entertain and disturb. The Dom Juan character is viewed as ‘exuberant, promiscuous, amoral’, with ‘a youthful sexuality that knows no boundaries and will dare the abyss’ (Mitchell, p. 259). Molière’s version of the story with the Dom Juan figure as crafty protagonist was presented for the first time at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal on February 15 1665 and immediately ran into opposition, arousing a storm of protest. The fact that by the second performance, on the 17 February, a number of controversial lines were omitted would suggest that Molière did attempt to placate those who objected to the play. Nonetheless, vociferous objection continued to rage (the *Observations sur une Comédie de Molière intitulée «Le Festin de Pierre»* by Le Sieur de Rochemont is perhaps the most famous printed example of this). On 20 March the theatre closed for Lent and when it reopened Molière’s play had been removed from the repertoire. As David Whitton underlines, ‘no one has succeeded in explaining its abrupt disappearance. It is commonly thought to have been withdrawn as a result of pressure brought to bear on Molière by the devout set close to the king, though no documentary evidence survives to prove the theory’ (Whitton, p. 11). Although the exact details are unknown, it seems clear that religious opposition somehow forced the play, after just fifteen performances, to be withdrawn. Molière never performed it again nor was published in his lifetime. For many years, the verse adaptation by Thomas Corneille (which had been commissioned by Molière’s widow in 1673) was the better known play. This was an adulcorated version with a different ending and the beggar scene and discussion of Dom Juan’s beliefs removed.

Although Molière's play is often referred to by critics as *Dom Juan*, the five-act prose comedy was, in fact, entitled *Le Festin de Pierre*. This play has a complicated literary genealogy. Although the Dom Juan legend received its initial impetus from Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de Piedra*, a play believed to have been first performed in 1620 and published in 1630 (although a variant play, *Tan largo me lo fiáis*, is believed by some scholars to predate the *burlador*), it has long been suggested that Molière was unlikely to have known either of these plays in their original form, and instead came by the story through Italian re-workings that found their way to France along with French versions that borrowed from this Italian tradition and captured the Parisian public's attention between 1658 and 1664 (Bourqui).

The Spanish play, even as an indirect source, furnishes the story with the main characters and the general pattern of dramatic events. These include Don Juan de Tenorio's unscrupulous seduction of different women, his valet voicing his own indignation and encouraging the master to repent, his invitation to dine with the stone statue of the Commander he had murdered, and his final damnation, which ends the play as he is dragged off to Hell. Unlike subsequent versions, the work is, at its core, religious and Don Juan asks for a confessor at the last moment. There is a clear moral lesson on the brevity of life and the need to repent. There are also moments of comedy as Don Juan reveals himself to be a trickster and revels in toying with others.

The precise trajectory from the Italian sources to the French plays is a complex and contested one (Lancaster, pp. 634-47). The basic outline moves from a legend on the subject to the Spanish comedy; Italian adaptations including *commedia dell'arte* versions; two French versions followed by Molière's play. It is believed that the Spanish work was translated into Italian in the 1620s, giving rise to plays which include Onofrio Giliberto's *Il convitato di pietra* (1653), a lost play, and another play of the same name, attributed to Jacinto Andrea

Cicognini (1650?), which is more comic than the original Spanish model and includes more farcical elements. Italian performers of the *commedia dell'arte*, who incorporated the subject into their repertoire brought their shows to France. Two French plays, both sharing the same name of *Le Festin de Pierre ou Le Fils Criminel*, also emerged at this time, one by Dorimond (Lyon, 1658) and the other by Villiers (1659), thought to have been imitations of Giliberto's *commedia sostenuta* (Bourqui, pp. 374-415). Both are tragicomedies in verse, and do not present the protagonist in a comic manner. With these plays and works by the Italian players, Molière was not short of material for his own version.

Molière's Dom Juan is a curious blend of previous characters with some definitive and bold changes. No doubt piqued by the criticism and banning of *Le Tartuffe*, Molière was keen to underline the hypocritical potential and subversive quality of a character who manages to convince others of his false stance (on how Dom Juan fits into the *Tartuffe* controversy see Prest, particularly chapter 3, and Leclerc). Less barbaric and violent than his predecessors (who brutally rape and murder), he is nonetheless capable of causing chaos, but here the monolithic fiend of Dorimond's and Villiers's versions becomes a character who is more difficult to interpret.

Molière changed the name of most of the characters. He imported the name 'Sganarelle' for the valet, a character from his own farces and a part that he played himself. In Molière's version, the Commander is not the father of one of Dom Juan's lovers and his death is not depicted on stage, nor does Dom Juan's own father die. The speeches of the statue are radically reduced in length. Molière can be seen to have amplified the discussions between master and servant emphasising this comic dimension, and to have added new scenes, including that with Monsieur Dimanche (4. 3) and the return of Elvire who he presents as a nun (4. 4). Molière also creates the spectre at the end of the play. Amidst these many changes, a new Dom Juan figure is born (Wilton-Godberfforde, particularly chapter 3).

In previous versions, the Don's father appears right at the beginning of the play and castigates Dom Juan, warning him of the dangerous life he is leading. Molière changes this. A scene of condemnation of Dom Juan at the start of the play is articulated around the angry remonstrations of an abandoned wife, while the scene of conflict between father and son is placed much later in the play, in Act 4. Consequently, the relationships Dom Juan has with women are given more importance. The play begins in a way that it is less about 'le fils criminel' (*the criminal son*) of the sub-title of Dorimond's and Villiers's plays, and more about the women Dom Juan has wronged. Furthermore, the act of pleading and begging that is assigned to the father (in 1.5 in Dorimond and 1.4 in Villiers), is attributed instead to Elvire in 4.6 of Molière's version. With this change, Molière provides us with a mirroring of the seduction process that Dom Juan had undertaken to persuade Elvire to follow a certain path. Now, instead of having him crying and lamenting, it is Elvire who begs with tears. Molière presents the inversion, which echoes Dom Juan's own methods, as deeply ironic since here the persuasive tactics are used to encourage the interlocutor to a path of virtue. These role reversals that Molière exploits are also presented as active strategies of the Don. He is shown to be cunning in the stance he adopts and can invert the role of male corruptor and female victim. In 1.3, we see how he apes the voice of the contrite sinner who wants to live a virtuous life.

The ability of Molière's Dom Juan to take advantage of, and control, others is not solely in relation to women. The episode with Monsieur Dimanche in 4.3 reveals Dom Juan as having a quality that his predecessors do not possess. He discombobulates the creditor with his effusiveness, with a barrage of polite enquiries about all the members of Monsieur Dimanche's family (including his dog, his declarations of friendship and an invitation to dinner). We see Dom Juan's ability to entrap others through his speech. In the scene, the civilities and the compliments he heaps upon Monsieur Dimanche leave the creditor unable to

ask for his money, despite this being the purpose of his visit. In wriggling out of paying his debts, Dom Juan is presented as a character who not only escapes from his romantic escapades but finds a way to abscond from other bonds or promises he has made.

Dom Juan is in many ways an unscrupulous egoist and his rescue of Dom Carlos in 3.3 is perplexing, particularly as it lacks a counterpart in previous versions. Dom Juan displays a certain courage in responding to a sense of duty and coming to a man's aid when he is attacked by three brigands. For once, in accordance with his status as a *gentilhomme*, he seems to provide gallant assistance. He voices a sense of comradeship with Dom Carlos telling him that one's honour is at stake on such occasions. Dom Juan is thus made a more ambiguous character, since he is not posited as an entirely odious creature, cut off from societal and moral codes. This episode may well temper our antipathy towards the protagonist.

Molière's Dom Juan has often been interpreted as a fierce atheist. Whereas Dorimond's and Villiers's villains incited no condemnation, Molière's creation generated a hostile response from the outset. In Dorimond and Villiers, although the Dom Juan figure is rebellious and irreverent, he is shown to acknowledge a higher power. For Molière's Dom Juan, on the other hand, belief is only ever expressed in a hypocritical pose. Sganarelle asserts that his master believes in nothing (1.1) but we never hear as direct a statement from the character himself other than the much discussed famous line that two and two make four. Indeed, the latter can be read not as summing up his personal credo but as a pithy statement designed to avoid disclosing further details. When questioned in 3.1 he is evasive and dismissive, replying 'Laissons cela' (*Leave it be*) and 'Eh!'. Sganarelle and the audience may indeed want to probe the philosophy and motives behind the character, but Molière's Dom Juan is resistant to such scrutiny and is all too careful not to give much away. If Molière's Dom Juan is shown not to voice his feelings on his relationship with God, the audience is

tempted to draw conclusions on the subject based on his behaviour. The famous scene with the pauper, in 3.2, is illuminating in this respect. The scene is a significant change from previous models where Dom Juan meets a pilgrim and, wanting his clothes for a disguise, forces him to hand them over. In Dorimond's version he offers to pay him for this and in Villiers's the valet insists that the master will reward him. The scene shows that Dom Juan has a total disregard for others and is unscrupulous in getting what he wants from them. In Molière's work, however, it is given an added dimension in that Dom Juan is not interested in procuring a disguise from the man but rather attempts to unmask the corruptible spirit of the professed pious individual by getting him to blaspheme for a coin, 'un louis d'or'. Dom Juan is eager to point out how the evidence seems to suggest that God is not providing for him, contrary to the pauper's claim of humble devotion to the Lord. Is this Dom Juan, therefore, suggesting that God is deaf to prayers because He does not exist? Dom Juan could be seen as expressing an atheistic vision when he hands over the coin and offers it 'pour l'amour de l'humanité', (*for the love of humanity*) a variation on the more usual formula 'pour l'amour de Dieu' (*for the love of God*). Molière offers this as a possibility but never makes it unequivocal. The change underlines the more subversive direction in which Molière takes his character, whilst still rendering him ambiguous.

Dom Juan's confrontation with the statue reveals an important variation in the conception of his relationship to God. Whereas in Dorimond and Villiers the statue is given long moral diatribes to which Dom Juan responds, Molière cuts these out. His Dom Juan is not given a forum in which to voice his combative relationship with higher supernatural powers (Rex, pp. 59-61) Thus, Molière's Dom Juan can perhaps be seen to adopt an amoral stance rather than an immoral one. His refusal to believe that the statue even came alive illustrates his detachment from such matters. When the statue comes to his house, he accepts a dinner invitation but says nothing more and seems so little affected by the encounter as to

proceed in his adoption of religious hypocrisy afterwards. When faced with the spectre, he is sceptical and seems to want to test the reality of the being by striking at it with his sword (5.5). This Dom Juan remains unconvinced of the powers that may wreak vengeance on him. He is less courageous and brash than in Dorimond or Villiers and more dismissive. The ending, with Sganarelle's final cries for his wages, which subvert the tragic potential of Dom Juan's demise, can be seen as a parodic version of his predecessors' finales (Peacock, 2012, p. 200). It underscores Molière's attempt to present a character that elicits a very different response from the previous moralising ones.

Molière also has his Dom Juan focus much more on the opponents he can quash on a personal level. It is societal deceptions and his manipulations on this front that preoccupy him, as is made clear by his speech on hypocrisy (5.2). He is, in a way, less of a hypocrite than Tartuffe as he does at least admit his hypocrisy. Indeed, in this speech he contemplates how adopting a hypocritical stance enables him to negotiate his position with others to his advantage. Unconcerned with the spiritual implications of protecting oneself with 'a cloak of religion', he relegates hypocrisy to a fashionable vice which, like all such vices, ends up passing as a virtue. It is, he argues, an art that commands respect. Being hypocritical is, in his view, the true means of doing whatever he wants and avoiding any punishment. Such a blatant disregard for anything above the *mondain* seems to suggest a distinct move away from a defiant figure — who believes in God but recklessly chooses to live as he pleases, irrespective of the consequences — to a figure that locates his battleground on purely human territory.

Dom Juan has often been labelled a *libertin*, and indeed contemporary critics such as Rochemont and the Prince de Conti stressed this point, no doubt to emphasise what they viewed as the subversive and even diabolical element of Molière's work. Furthermore, Molière seems to be inviting such an assessment, given the pointed references to *libertinage*

with which the text abounds. Sganarelle attributes this title to him when talking to Gusman (1.1). In addition to this, several readings (see for example, Lawrence, p. 88 and Weinstein) have loosely used the term *libertin* to describe him, employing this word in the sense of a debauched and pleasure-seeking person rather than an intellectual free-thinker who challenged the teaching of the Church. Perhaps it is more accurate to describe Dom Juan as a *faux libertin* (see Dandrey and especially Mckenna). The *faux libertin* refused to take philosophical *libertinage* seriously and viewed it as a posturing in itself, a spurious pretext used to disguise the more base and egotistical passions of the individual (Mckenna, pp. 48-54). Dom Juan is only interested in a philosophy that allows him to satisfy his own desires.

There are other ways we can interpret Dom Juan, depending on any production's particular emphasis (Whitton). Less a successful schemer, he can be interpreted more fully as an *imaginaire*, that is to say, a deluded character who creates a persona for himself, akin to other monomaniacs in Molière's comedies, or a matamore figure who believes in his own myth-making (Peacock, 1988). Like the Matamore, Dom Juan's statements of triumph become comically incongruous when set against his more bungled encounters. Contrary to his claim to fly from one victory to the next, we see him having to face an angry and abandoned wife. His plans to kidnap a woman by boat are unsuccessful; he ends up stripped of his clothes and washed ashore, as Pierrot narrates in 2.1. Similarly, his wooing of the peasant Charlotte is rendered farcical. Contrary to his professed artful technique, he resorts to punches in order to eliminate his rival. When another lover Mathurine arrives, he does momentarily negotiate his position in the love triangle but ultimately has to give up his pursuit of both women and make a swift exit. We learn that the Don's exploits are not the spectacular deeds that he himself claims. Furthermore, the statue, which triumphantly remains on stage after Dom Juan has disappeared, can be seen as a visual reminder of precisely what Dom Juan is not. He is not a colossal warrior, he does not have supernatural strength, nor can he defy

death. He, unlike the Commander, will not be remembered with a lavish mausoleum and, in the closing moments of the play, he is comically usurped by Sganarelle's lament over his own pecuniary misfortune. The valet's self-indulgent and exaggerated complaint that 'il n'y a que moi seul de malheureux' (*I alone am wretched*) echoes the cries of his master, and this strips the former of any tragic resonance.

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