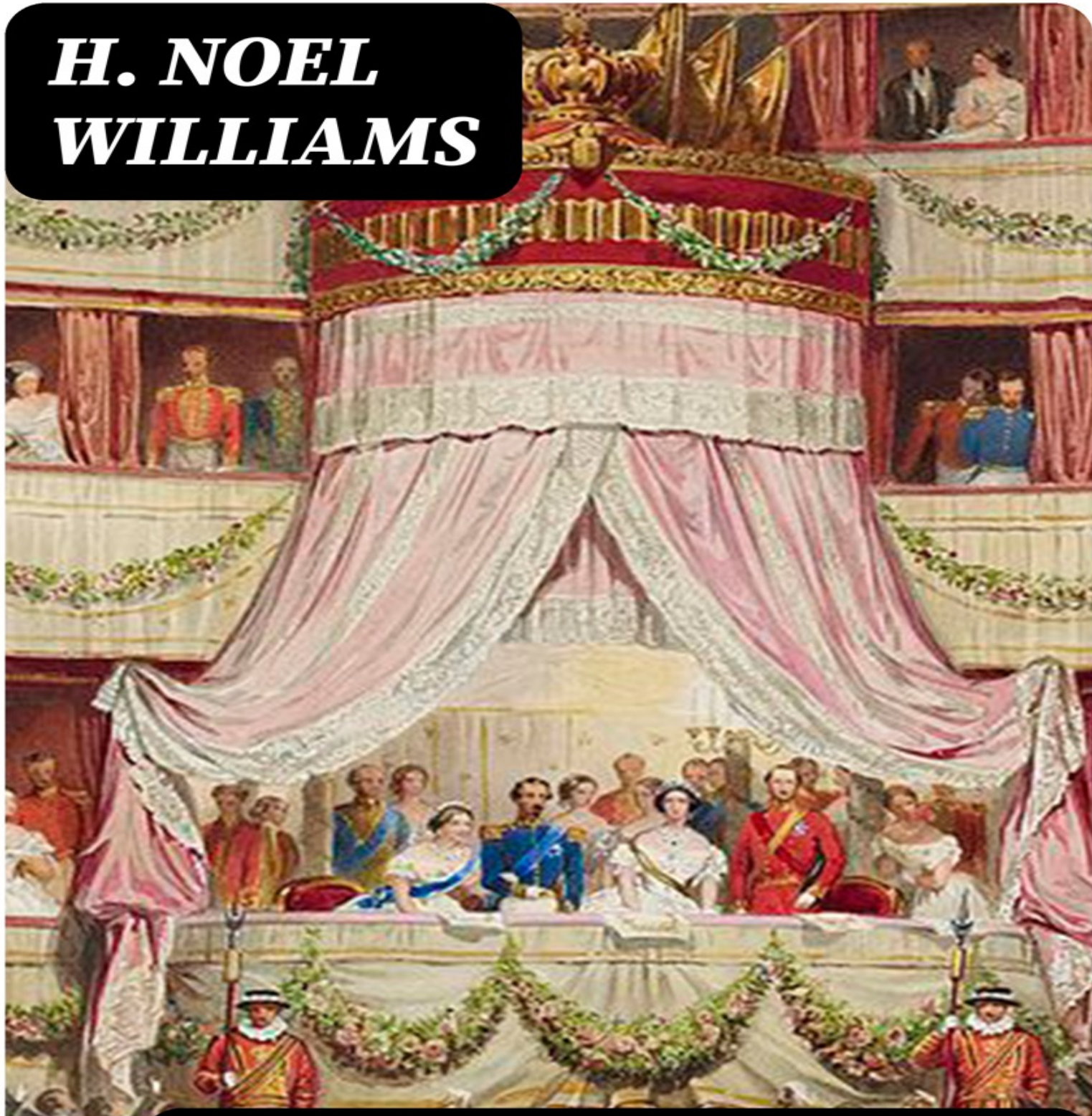


***H. NOEL
WILLIAMS***



***QUEENS
OF THE FRENCH
STAGE***

H. Noel Williams

Queens of the French Stage

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*After the drawing by Sir
Joshua Reynolds*

QUEENS OF THE FRENCH STAGE

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I

THE WIFE OF MOLIÈRE

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FEW women in French history have been the subject of more discussion than the young girl whom Molière married, at the church of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, on February 20, 1662.

Armande Grésinde Claire Elisabeth Béjart, for that was the bride's name, is described in the marriage deed as the daughter of the late Joseph Béjart, *écuyer*, sieur de Belleville, and of his widow, Marie Hervé. Joseph Béjart, it should be stated, had died shortly before, or shortly after, Armande's birth.

The Béjarts were very poor, for the only means which Joseph seems to have possessed wherewith to maintain his pretensions to nobility were derived from a small government appointment (*huissier ordinaire du roy ès eaux et forêts de France*), and his wife had presented him with "at least eleven children." They lived in the Marais, then the theatrical quarter of Paris. On its northern outskirts, near the Halles, in the Rue Mauconseil, stood the old Hôtel de Bourgogne, the first home of the regular drama; in the

centre, in the Rue Vieille-du-Temple, was the theatre which took its name from the quarter, the Théâtre du Marais, where Corneille's *Cid* was first performed; while nearer the Seine, the playgoer could make choice between the Italian troupes, the *Trois Farceurs*, Gaultier-Garguille, Gros-Guillaume, and Turlupin,^[1] and open-air entertainments on the Pont-au-Change, the Pont-Neuf, and the Place Dauphine. It is, therefore, not surprising that the little Bédjarts should have been in the habit of varying the monotony of their poverty-stricken lives by occasional visits to one or other of these spectacles, or that, dazzled by those well-known attractions, which were doubtless as potent in the seventeenth century as they are to-day, the two eldest, Joseph and Madeleine, should have decided, while still very young, to make the stage their profession.

What theatre witnessed their *débuts* we do not know. The majority of authors are of opinion that they joined a company of strolling players which was at this time exploiting Languedoc; M. Larroumet hesitates between one of the unlicensed playhouses of the fairs in the neighbourhood of Paris and a troupe of amateurs, several of which were to be found in the capital; while another of Madeleine's biographers, M. Henri Chardon, thinks that she obtained admission to the Théâtre du Marais, though it appears very improbable that a young and inexperienced actress could have met with such good fortune.

However that may be, Madeleine seems to have prospered in her profession from the very outset, as on January 10, 1636, supported by her *curateur*, one Simon Courtin, her father, a paternal uncle, a "*chef du gobelet du roi*," and divers other relatives and friends, she appears before the Civil Lieutenant of Paris^[2] to request permission to contract a loan of 2000 livres, wherewith to supplement a like sum of her own and enable her to acquire a little house and garden situated in the Cul-de-Sac Thorigny.

Two and a half years later (July 11, 1638), we hear of her again, under circumstances which perhaps explain her desire to secure a residence of her own—a desire, it must be admitted, not a little singular in a young lady of eighteen—for on that day is baptized at Saint-Eustache "Françoise, daughter of Esprit Raymond, chevalier, seigneur de Modène and other places, chamberlain of the affairs of Monseigneur, only brother of the King, and of the demoiselle Madeleine Béjart."

M. de Modène and Madeleine were not married; indeed, there was already a Madame de Modène, residing at Le Mans, who did not die until 1649. But this trifling accident, as it was regarded in those days, did not prevent the son of the former (by proxy)^[3] and the mother of the latter (in person) standing as sponsors to the little Françoise, whose birth was fated to be the cause of much trouble, not to her guilty parents, but to two perfectly innocent persons, one of whom was as yet unborn.

A few words must here be said of the father of Madeleine Béjart's child.

Esprit Raymond de Mormoiron, Comte de Modène, who was then about thirty years of age, came of an old family in the Venaissin. His father, François Raymond de Mormoiron, had at one time held the office of Grand Provost of France and had also been employed on several diplomatic missions. Appointed page to Gaston d'Orléans, brother of Louis XIII., he became later one of the chamberlains of that prince, and seems to have done his best to imitate him in his dissipated and turbulent conduct. He early ranged himself among the enemies of Richelieu, joined the famous league "for the universal peace of Christendom," and fought on its behalf at the battle of La Marfée, at the head of a body of cavalry which he had raised at his own expense. In consequence of this, he was condemned to death, by a decree of the Parliament of Paris (September 6,

1641), but took refuge in Flanders, with the Duc de Guise, against whom a similar sentence had been pronounced, and remained there until the death of Richelieu, followed by that of Louis XIII., left him at liberty to return to France. When, in 1647, Guise went to Naples, to endeavour to exploit the revolt of Masaniello to his own advantage, Modène accompanied him and greatly distinguished himself. He was eventually, however, taken prisoner by the Spaniards and held captive until 1650. On his return to France, he meddled no more with public affairs, but occupied himself with the care of his neglected estates and in the compilation of a valuable history of the revolution in Naples, reprinted, in 1826, under the title of *Mémoires du Comte de Modène*. It is to be noted here that from the early autumn of 1641 until the summer of 1643 the Comte de Modène was absent from France.

Some time in the early weeks of the year 1643, probably either in the last week in February or the first in March, Madeleine's father, Joseph Bédart the elder, died; and on March 10, Marie Hervé, his widow, presented herself before the Civil Lieutenant of Paris, where, in the name, and as guardian, of Joseph, Madeleine, Geneviève, Louis, and "*a little girl not yet baptized,*" children under age (*i.e.* under twenty-five) of the said deceased and herself, she represented that "the inheritance of her deceased husband being charged with heavy debts without any property wherewith to acquit them, she feared that it would be more burdensome than profitable," and, accordingly, declared her intention of renouncing it. Her request was supported by her brother-in-law, Pierre Bédart, *procureur* to the Châtelet, and other relatives, and on June 10 of the same year she was permitted to make the renunciation she desired.

Now who was this "little unbaptized girl"? Without a shadow of doubt, Armande Bédart, the future wife of

Molière; on this point all the poet's biographers are unanimous. Was she, as represented, the daughter of Marie Hervé? That is the question which has afforded material for a controversy which has already lasted for nearly two hundred and fifty years and seems not unlikely to continue till the end of all things, for the most fantastic theories, for a small library of books and pamphlets, and for review and newspaper articles without number. For some see in this little girl a sister, others a *daughter* of Madeleine Béjart, and the truth is of the most vital importance to the honour of the great man whose wife Armande became.

That the latter impression was almost universal amongst Molière's contemporaries is beyond question, nor is the fact one that need occasion any surprise. Every one, that is to say, every one connected with, or interested in, the theatrical world, was aware that, early in life, Madeleine Béjart had had a little girl; while, on the other hand, the birth of Marie Hervé's child, which was of no public interest, and which, moreover, probably took place not in Paris, but in one of the adjacent villages,^[4] was known to very few. A young girl grew up with Madeleine, who was tenderly attached to her; it was Armande; but gossip confounded her with the child Francoise, of whom all trace seems to have been lost, and the wiseacres smiled the smile begotten of superior knowledge when any stranger to Paris chanced to refer to the girl as Madeleine's sister.

For over a century and a half this belief remained unchallenged. Hostile or sympathetic, all who wrote of Molière—La Grange, Grimarest, Breuze de la Martinière, Bayle, Donneau de Visé—shared the common opinion in regard to the origin of Armande Béjart. In 1821, however, there was quite a flutter of excitement in literary circles, for in that year Beffara discovered Molière's *acte de mariage*, in which Armande is spoken of as the daughter of Joseph Béjart and his widow, Marie Hervé. Forty-two years

later, the old scandal, which in the interim had been partly revived by M. Fournier (*Études sur la vie et les œuvres de Molière*) and M. Bazin (*Notes historiques sur Molière*), received another severe blow by Eudore Soulié's discovery of the deed of March 10, 1643, already mentioned, wherein Marie Hervé requested permission to renounce the succession to her husband's property, and which confirmed the statement made in the *acte de mariage*. Such evidence, one would naturally suppose, would have been accepted as conclusive, and the matter set at rest once and for all. But tradition dies hard; not a few *Moliéristes* refused to renounce an opinion sanctioned by so many generations, and M. Jules Loiseleur, a writer who enjoyed a considerable, and not undeserved, reputation as an unraveller of historical mysteries, propounded, on behalf of his fellow-sceptics, the following theory.

The declarations made by Marie Hervé, in the deed of March 10, 1643, and again in the *acte de mariage*, that Armande was her child, were, he maintains, deliberate falsehoods, conceived in the interests of her daughter, Madeleine. At the beginning of the year 1643, Madeleine was about to become a mother, for the second time, not, of course, by the Comte de Modène, who had been in exile for nearly two years, but by some new lover. Fearing that if Modène returned and learned the fact, he would refuse to resume the *liaison*, which she hoped might one day be regularised (M. Loiseleur was under the impression that Madame de Modène was dead, whereas she lived until 1649), she begged her mother to recognise the child as her own; a request to which that complacent old lady, whose husband was just dead, or on the point of death, readily consented.

Now this ingenious theory is based on the advanced age of Marie Hervé—she was then about fifty-three—and the belief that she had not had a child since the birth of Louis

Béjart, afterwards a prominent member of Molière's troupe, who was born on November 14 or 15, 1630, that is to say, more than twelve years earlier, which facts rendered it highly improbable that she could have been the mother of Armande; and M. Loiseleur supports his contention by pointing out that the two eldest children, Joseph and Madeleine, described in the deed of March 10, 1643, as minors, were over twenty-five, and that their age was purposely understated to make their mother appear younger than she was, and so facilitate the fraud. This point has been contested by Mr. Andrew Lang, in his admirable article on Molière in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, but is really of no importance, as if M. Loiseleur had exercised a little more care, he would have found that so far from more than twelve years having elapsed between the birth of the last of Marie Hervé's children and that of Armande, she had had a little girl *less than three and a half years before* (November 30, 1639), baptized, in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, by the name of Bénigne Madeleine, the second name being doubtless intended as a compliment to Madeleine Béjart, who acted as *marraine*.^[5] Whereby M. Loiseleur's argument disappears, and his theory with it.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Armande's contemporaries saw in her not a sister, but a daughter of Madeleine Béjart, and, with this belief, they held another, to wit, that Molière had been, previous to his marriage with the younger sister, the lover of the elder. From which two suppositions sprang one of the most hideous accusations that has ever sullied the reputation of a great man.

Molière, like most successful men, had a good many enemies, and was accustomed to give and receive very hard knocks. With the company of the Théâtre du Marais he appears to have been on tolerably amicable terms; but with the actors of the third great theatre, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, his relations were decidedly strained, and

whenever an opportunity arose of turning one or other of them into ridicule, he seldom failed to avail himself of it, though he made an exception in the case of Floridor, who was too great a favourite with the public for them to tolerate any attacks upon him. In his *Impromptu de Versailles*, played before the Court in October 1663, Molière satirised several actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and, among them, one named Montfleury,^[6] whose ponderous style of declamation he imitated with great success. To this, Montfleury's son, Antoine Montfleury, who was a prolific and successful dramatist, replied with another play, called *l'Impromptu de l'hôtel de Condé*, in which he endeavoured to turn the tables on Molière; but the vengeance of the father took a very different form.

In December 1663, Racine wrote to the Abbé Le Vasseur: "Montfleury has drawn up a memorial and presented it to the King. He accuses him [Molière] of having married the daughter [Armande], and of having formerly lived with the mother [Madeleine]. But Montfleury is not listened to at Court."^[7] From this passage it is evident that Montfleury intended Louis XIV. to believe that Molière had married his own daughter; which is the starting-point of the abominable calumny which so long weighed, and which still weighs, on the memory of the great dramatist.

Beyond what Racine tells us, we have no information about this memorial of Montfleury. That he advanced any proofs in support of his accusation is extremely improbable; although it is quite possible that he would have endeavoured to substantiate it had he received any encouragement from the King. Any way, Louis XIV. appears to have satisfied himself that the charge was merely the outcome of jealousy and spite, and when, in the following February, Molière's first child was baptized at Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, he and his sister-in-law, the ill-fated

Henrietta of England, stood sponsors. Than which the poet could have desired no more complete reparation.

Thirteen years later, in 1676, that is to say, three years after Molière's death, Montfleury's accusation was repeated. A man of the name of Guichard, a sort of *entrepreneur* for fêtes and plays, coveted Lulli's post as director of the recently-established Opera, and, seeing no likelihood of realising his ambition by any legitimate means, had recourse to poison, the fashionable expedient for ridding oneself of professional rivals and other inconvenient persons at this period. One Sebastian Aubry, a connection of the Bézarts, was entrusted with the commission; but, instead of executing it, he informed Lulli, who promptly invoked the protection of the law. An inquiry was held and numerous witnesses called for the prosecution, among whom was the widow of Molière. In order to discredit the testimony of these witnesses, Guichard drew up a memorial, in which, besides making the most infamous charges against Armande's moral character, of which we shall speak later, he alluded to her as "the orphan of her husband" and "the widow of her father." Unlike Montfleury, however, who was an old and respected member of his profession, Guichard appears to have been a consummate scoundrel, capable of any villainy to serve his ends; and we can hardly believe that a charge made by such a person could have excited any feelings, save those of indignation and disgust.

However, unhappily, other pens were not wanting to keep alive this hideous calumny. It is true that there are no further direct accusations; but there are allusions, which, as they appear in works that enjoyed, in their day, a considerable circulation, must have answered much the same purpose. In 1770, seven years after Montfleury had set the ball rolling, a certain Le Boulanger de Chalussay, of whom little or nothing seems to be known, attacked

Molière in a play called *Élomire hypocondre, ou les Médecins vengés*—Élomire being, of course, an anagram of Molière. This play, intended as a reply to the great dramatist's repeated attacks on the medical profession, was a fatuous production, dull, confused, and encumbered with an absurd number of characters; and the company of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, to whom it was submitted, very prudently declined to accept it, notwithstanding which the author caused it to be printed and circulated. In one scene, Élomire speaks of the care he is taking to train up his wife in the way he would have her go, in order to avoid all risk of finding himself numbered among deceived husbands. Thereupon, his confidant reminds him of the fate which befell Arnolphe in the *École des femmes*, in spite of all his precautions.^[8] But Élomire replies that he is better advised than Arnolphe:—

"Arnolphe commença trop tard à la forger;
C'est avant le berceau qu'il y devoit songer,
Comme quelqu'un l'a fait."

Molière demanded and obtained the suppression of *Élomire hypocondre*; but this only had the effect of stimulating its circulation, as, in the following year, a new edition was clandestinely printed in the provinces, and, in 1672, a third was produced by the Elzevirs, in Holland.

Another allusion occurs in a scandalous work entitled *La Fameuse Comédienne*, published anonymously in 1688, of which we shall have a good deal to say hereafter: "She [Armande] was the daughter of the deceased Béjart, a provincial actress, who was making the *bonne fortune* of numbers of young gentlemen in Languedoc at the time of the auspicious birth of her daughter. That is why it is very difficult, in the face of such promiscuous gallantry, to say who was the father." And the writer concludes: "She is believed to be the daughter of Molière, notwithstanding the

fact that he afterwards became her husband; however, one does not really know the truth."

It appears to be the tendency among modern writers, while indignantly repudiating the accusation of Montfleury, to accept with complacency the opinion of Molière's contemporaries that his relations with Madeleine Béjart had been, at one time, on a closer footing than that of friendship. In this they show a singular want of consistency, for, as M. Gustave Larroumet, than whom Molière has no more ardent admirer, very justly observes, the two suppositions are inseparable, and those who admit the probability of the second cannot well deny the possibility of the first, provided, of course, that they hold, with M. Loiseleur, that Marie Hervé had been guilty of fraud in the documents discovered by Beffara and Eudore Soulié, and that Armande was the daughter of Madeleine.^[9]

Let us, however, look at the facts as briefly as may be, since the subject is not one upon which it profits greatly to dwell.

Molière's connection with the Béjart family is commonly believed to have begun some time in 1641 or 1642. In June 1643, Madeleine Béjart, with her younger sister Gèneviève, and her brothers, Joseph and Louis, joined Molière and several others in founding the Illustre Théâtre. She remained faithful to Molière's fortunes during those disastrous two years, when the receipts of the new theatre did not suffice to discharge the ordinary working expenses, and its chief was, on one occasion, imprisoned in the Châtelet, until the bill of an importunate candle-merchant had been settled. When the company left Paris, in the spring of 1646, on its twelve years' wanderings through the provinces, she accompanied it, and, in addition to playing in nearly every piece, appears to have superintended the costumes and scenery, and regulated the expenses, at least so far as concerned Molière and the three other Béjarts.

Finally, when Molière returned to Paris, in 1658, and the company was installed, first, at the Petit-Bourbon and, afterwards, at the Palais-Royal, she retained her place and continued to play regularly down to the time of her death on February 17, 1678, exactly a year before that of Molière himself.

An admirable actress, one of the best of her time, according to Tallemant des Réaux, ready to undertake almost any rôle in either tragedy or comedy, she excelled in depicting smartly-attired maids, who ridicule the follies of their employers with equal wit, impudence, and good sense, and, but for her, Molière might never have created his inimitable *soubrettes*.^[10] She was, moreover, remarkably handsome, tall and graceful, with hair of a peculiarly beautiful blonde hue, and La Fontaine, Loret, and other contemporaries speak of her in terms of unfeigned admiration; while she seems to have possessed some literary ability, having, when a girl of eighteen, addressed a quatrain to Rotrou, who had just produced his *Hercule mourant* at the Hôtel de Bourgogne—which so delighted the dramatist that he published it in an edition of his work—and also adapted an old comedy, which was performed by the Illustre Théâtre in the provinces.

That a very warm friendship and regard existed between Madeleine and Molière is certain, nor does what we know of the latter's relations with other ladies of his troupe render a closer connection improbable. In 1653, at Lyons, the Illustre Théâtre was strengthened by the accession of two actresses, Mlle. du Parc and Mlle. de Brie,^[11] both destined to rise to eminence in their profession. Molière promptly fell in love with the former, who, however, rejected his addresses, as she subsequently did those of Pierre Corneille and La Fontaine, upon which the mortified dramatist transferred his attentions to the less attractive, but more sympathetic, Mlle. de Brie, and formed with her a

liaison which appears to have lasted until his marriage, and was resumed at a later date.

Under these circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that contemporary gossip should have coupled the names of Molière and Madeleine together—"M. Despréaux [Boileau] told me," writes Brossette, "that Molière had been in love with the actress Béjart, whose daughter he espoused,"—or that many modern writers should have taken the same view. M. Larroumet, we may observe, is of the contrary opinion, but, though generally so correct, he appears in this instance to be arguing from a false premise. He assumes that the Comte de Modène returned to Paris in the summer of 1643 and resumed his former relations with Madeleine, which fact, he says, makes a *liaison* between her and Molière altogether improbable. But the count's biographer, M. Chardon, asserts that at the time when M. Larroumet believes Modène to have been in Paris, he was residing on his estates in the Venaissin, and that he did not visit the capital until the autumn of 1646, that is to say, after the Illustre Théâtre had left for the provinces. Shortly after this, the count set out with the Duc de Guise for Italy, where, as we have mentioned, he remained until 1650.^[12]

But, after all, the nature of Molière's relations with Madeleine Béjart subsequent to the birth of Armande is of very secondary importance; it is on the degree of intimacy existing between them *prior* to that event that the whole question hinges. That they were at that time anything more than friends—possibly only acquaintances—there is not a shred of evidence to prove; for the rumours we have spoken of relate mainly to the early years of the Illustre Théâtre. Indeed, so little is known about their movements previous to the establishment of that institution that it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty whether their paths in life lay together or far apart at a particular

date, much less to hazard an opinion upon so very delicate a matter as the one under discussion.

M. Larroumet says that from July 1638, when her little daughter, Françoise, was born, until June 1643, when the Illustre Théâtre was founded, we lose all trace of Madeleine. This is not quite correct, as on November 30, 1639, she appears as *marraine* at the baptism of her little sister, Bénigne Madeleine, in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, and, six months later (June 5, 1640), we find her discharging the same duty to a child of one Robert de la Voypièrre, described as a *valet-de-chambre* at the Church of Saint-Sulpice.^[13] After that, it is true, nothing more is heard of her for three years. Now, where was she during these three years? M. Chardon thinks that she was in Paris until the early summer of 1641, and during the remainder of the time—that is to say, for the eighteen months or more preceding Armande's birth—in the provinces, with a company of strolling players; and this is the reason he gives for his supposition.

In May 1641, a friend of the Comte de Modène, Jean Baptiste de l'Hermite, brother of Tristan de l'Hermite, author of the tragedy of *Mariamne*, together with his wife and a servant of the count, were arrested and imprisoned in the Château of Vincennes, apparently on a charge of treasonable correspondence with Modène. Thereupon, Madeleine, apprehensive of sharing their fate, her connection with Modène being well known, leaves Paris and joins a company in the provinces, and does not show her face in the capital again until Richelieu and Louis XIII. are both dead, and all danger for the Count and his friends removed.^[14]

As for Molière, he is commonly believed to have spent the year 1642 in Paris, with the exception of the months of May, June, and July, when M. Loiseleur is of opinion that he replaced his father as *tapissier valet-de-chambre* to the

King, who was then returning by easy stages from the conquest of Roussillon.

Now, if these two theories are correct, as they probably are, it is obvious that, whoever was the father of Madeleine Béjart's child, supposing her to have been the mother of Armande, which few now will be found to maintain, it could not have been Molière, unless Madeleine was a member of a troupe of strolling players, which performed several times before the Court at Montfrin, during its stay there in the latter part of June, a contingency so remote as to be hardly worth taking into account. With which observations, we hasten to take leave of this most unpleasant subject, and begin our history of Armande Béjart.

When the Illustre Théâtre quitted Paris, in the spring of 1646, Marie Hervé and her little daughter accompanied it. It does not appear probable, however, as some writers have supposed, that Armande's early years were passed on the high roads. From what we know of her accomplishments, she must have received a far superior education to that which a little Bohemian could have obtained. According to one account, she lived for some years in Languedoc, "with a lady of distinguished rank in that province," and did not return to her family until 1653, when the company, relatively more stable, had made Lyons its headquarters. Thenceforward Armande's education was carried on under the immediate supervision of Molière himself, who, as time went on, began to take something more than a friendly interest in the progress of his pupil, and ended by falling passionately in love with her.

Nearly all the biographers of Molière and Armande agree that Madeleine Béjart was much occupied by this marriage, though they differ widely in the part they assign to her, some asserting that she laboured strenuously to prevent it, others that she did her utmost to bring it about. According

to Grimarest, one of the oldest of the poet's biographers—who believed Madeleine to have been Molière's mistress, and that she was, moreover, the mother of Armande, though he does not go so far as to attribute the girl's paternity to Molière—Madeleine behaved *en femme furieuse*, threatened to ruin him, her daughter, and herself, if he persisted in his intention, and that in consequence the lovers were compelled to contract a secret marriage.

On the other hand, the anonymous author of *La Fameuse Comédienne*, who wrote nearer the event, gives a wholly different version of the affair. According to him—or more probably her—it is Madeleine who prepared and concluded the marriage, by a series of patient and tortuous intrigues, her object being to recover, through Armande, the influence over Molière of which Mlle. de Brie had deprived her. "She did not fail to exaggerate to Molière the satisfaction he would derive from educating for himself a child whose heart he was sure of possessing, and whose disposition was known to him, and assured him that it was only at that innocent age that one could hope to meet with that sincerity which was found but rarely among persons who had seen the great world. These arguments she often repeated to Molière, at the same time, adroitly calling his attention to that natural delight which her daughter showed whenever she observed him enter the room, and her blind obedience to his wishes. In a word, she conducted the affair so skilfully that he decided that he could not do better than marry the girl."

These two accounts, remarks M. Larroumet, would appear, at first sight, to be equally unworthy of belief, since they are in direct contradiction to one another. But when we come to examine them more closely, we shall find that, though the worthlessness of Grimarest's version is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Molière's marriage had nothing secret about it, being indeed celebrated publicly in

the presence of his family and Armande's, that of the author of *La Fameuse Comédienne* has a basis of truth. Madeleine did, no doubt, play an important part in bringing about the marriage, but the reason which prompted her to do so was very different from that stated by the author. Sincerely attached to both her sister and Molière, she honestly believed that a marriage between them would be to their common advantage, securing to the one an excellent settlement in life, and to the other a means of escape from the gallantries which served but to add fresh annoyances to the cares imposed upon him by his triple rôle of playwright, actor, and manager. She committed a grievous mistake, it is true; but that she was animated by perfectly disinterested motives, and did everything in her power to make the marriage a happy one, there can be no question.^[15]

With the exception of the drawing reproduced in this volume, there does not appear to be any portrait of Armande, painted or engraved, the authenticity of which is beyond dispute. But, as some atonement for this, several excellent pen-portraits have come down to us. The most interesting of these is, of course, the one traced by Molière's own hand in that exquisite little scene between Cléonte and Covielle in the third act of the *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, where Armande plays the part of the charming Lucile. Cléonte, incensed by Lucile's seeming indifference, determines to break with her, and calls upon the valet to "assist him in his resentment and sustain his resolution against every remnant of affection that may yet plead for her. 'Say, I entreat you, all the harm that you can do of her. Make of her person a picture that shall render her contemptible in my sight, and, to disgust me with her, point out all the faults that you can see in her.'"

Smarting under the rebuff just administered to him by Lucile's waiting-woman, Nicole, who follows the example of

her mistress, Covielle readily obeys, and proceeds to draw a most unflattering portrait of the young lady. But no sooner does the valet point out some fault in Lucile than his love-lorn master straightway transforms it into a trait of beauty, with an ever-increasing anger and impatience.

Covielle.—"To begin with, her eyes are small."

Cléonte.—"That is true; her eyes are small, but then they are full of fire—the most brilliant, the most piercing in the world, the tenderest that one can possibly see."

Covielle.—"She has a large mouth."

Cléonte.—"Yes; but one finds there charms which one does not find in other mouths; and that mouth, when one beholds it, inspires desire; it is the most attractive, the most adorable in the world."

Covielle.—"As for her figure, she is not tall."

Cléonte.—"No; but she is supple and well-proportioned."

Covielle.—"She affects a carelessness in her speech and deportment."

Cléonte.—"It is true, but there is grace in all; and her manners are engaging and have a nameless charm which insinuates itself into our hearts."

Covielle.—"As to her wit——"

Cléonte.—"Ah! she has that, Covielle; the finest and most delicate kind."

Covielle.—"Her conversation——"

Cléonte.—"Her conversation is charming."

Covielle.—"It is always serious."

Cléonte.—"Would you have unrestrained liveliness and boisterous gaiety? Is there anything more annoying than women who laugh at every word that is spoken?"

Covielle.—"But, after all, she is as capricious as any person you can find."

Cléonte.—"Yes, she is capricious; there I agree with you; but everything is becoming to, and must be borne with from, the fair."



ARMANDE BÉJART

From an etching by J. HANRIOT, after a contemporary drawing in the collection of M. HENRY HOUSSAYE, of the Académie Française

The fidelity of the foregoing portrait is confirmed by other contemporary evidence. Examined in detail, it would appear that Armande's features were far from perfect, but that the *ensemble* was fascinating to a very remarkable degree. Mlle. Poisson, in a *Lettre sur la vie et les œuvres de Molière et les comédiens de son temps*, which she

contributed to the *Mercur*e of 1740, describes her as "of middle height," with "very small eyes," and "a large flat mouth"; but adds that she had "an engaging air," and "performed every action with grace." The elder Grandval is in accord with Mlle. Poisson: "Without being beautiful, she was piquant and capable of inspiring a *grande passion*." While a bitter enemy of Armande, the anonymous author of *La Fameuse Comédienne*, while denying her "*aucun trait de beauté*" is fain to admit that her appearance and manners rendered her very amiable in the opinion of many people, and that she was "very affecting when she wished to please."

That Armande should have triumphed so completely over physical deficiencies was probably due, to some extent, to the perfection of her toilettes. "No one," the brothers Parfaict tell us, in their *Histoire du Théâtre Français*, "knew better than she how to enhance the beauty of her face by the arrangement of her coiffure, or of her figure by the fashion of her costume." And Mlle. Poisson records that she "showed most remarkable taste and invariably opposed to the mode of the time." She seems indeed to have had some claim to be considered the arbitrix of feminine taste in dress, for the *Mercur*e *galant* of 1673 ascribes to her the credit of a radical reform in ladies' toilettes, nothing less than the substitution of gowns, "*tout unis sur le corps, de la manière que la taille parait plus belle*," for the majestic but somewhat heavy costume hitherto in vogue, which concealed beneath its too ample folds the graceful lines of the figure.

If Armande, as a woman, was an object of admiration to her contemporaries, as an actress, she aroused in them something very like enthusiasm. It would indeed have been a matter for surprise had it been otherwise, since she enjoyed advantages which fall to the lot of very few. She

came of a family which had already contributed several finished performers to the French stage, and "had in her blood the passion and instinct of the theatre." With her charm of manner and exquisite taste in dress, she combined many accomplishments: "she had a very pretty voice, sang with great taste in both French and Italian, and danced ravishingly." She had received a long and careful training from one who was perhaps an even better teacher than he was an actor, and who was as ambitious for her success as for his own. And, finally, nearly all her parts—certainly all her more important parts—were written by Molière with the express object of enabling her to display her abilities to the best advantage.

Lacking the dignity and strength required to give adequate expression to the greater passions, she wisely refrained from attempting any important rôles in tragedy, and in Racine's *Alexandre* and the *Attila* of Corneille we find her allotted only minor parts. But at the Palais-Royal comedy was, of course, the staple fare, and in "*la rôles de femmes coquettes et satiriques*," which accorded so well with her own temperament, and also in those of *ingénues*, Armande had no superior in her day and probably very few since. Her acting is said to have been characterised by great judgment, while her by-play was remarkably effective. "If she but retouches her hair, or rearranges her ribbons or her jewellery, these little fashions conceal a satire judicious and natural, and throw ridicule upon the women she wishes to represent." Moreover, she had the rare gift of being able to change at will the character of her voice, and "had a different tone for every part she undertook."

Molière's wise reluctance to allow his young wife to challenge the verdict of the public until he had done everything in his power to ensure her success, delayed Armande's first appearance on the stage for fifteen months

after her marriage, when she made her *début* as Élise in the *Critique de l'École des femmes* (June 1, 1663), a reply to the attacks of Donneau de Visé and other critics upon the play produced at the Palais-Royal the previous December. The part allotted to her, which is that of a self-possessed young woman, with a good deal of shrewd common-sense, a turn for irony of a rather caustic brand, and not too much consideration for the feelings of others, suited her admirably—perhaps rather more so than poor Molière at that time imagined—and secured her a somewhat similar rôle in the delightful *Impromptu de Versailles*, played before the Court in the following October, where she figures in the cast as a "satirical wit." She did not play in the *Mariage forcé* (January 29, 1664), as, ten days earlier, she had borne Molière a son, to whom, as we have mentioned, Louis XIV. and Henrietta of England stood sponsors; but in the following spring we find her in the first of her long list of important rôles.

At the beginning of May 1664, Louis XIV. entertained the Queen-mother, Anne of Austria, and his own consort, Maria Theresa, with a brilliant and sumptuous fête, or rather succession of fêtes, at Versailles, which was then, of course, still only the little country-house built by Louis XIII., occupying to-day the bottom of the Cour de Marbre. The fêtes, which were denominated *Les Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée*, as the plan adopted was suggested by the sixth and seventh cantos of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which describe the sojourn of Rogero (impersonated by the King) in the isle and palace of the enchantress Alcena, began on the 7th of the month and lasted a week; stately processions, tilting, displays of fireworks, balls, and magnificent banquets alternating with theatrical performances. On the 8th, Molière's troupe gave a comedy ballet, called the *Princesse d'Élide*, composed for the occasion, by their chief, at the special request of the King,

and the rôle of the princess was taken by Armande. The play, the subject of which was borrowed from the Spanish dramatist Moreto's *El Desden con el Desden* (Scorn for Scorn), is the story of a fair princess, who until then had professed to despise love and had driven her innumerable suitors to despair, but who suddenly finds herself wounded to the heart by the skilfully feigned indifference to her charms shown by Euryale, Prince of Ithaca, who ultimately succeeds in winning her hand. Though far from being one of Molière's happiest efforts, as it was hastily strung together—the first act and the commencement of the first scene of the second are in verse, and the rest in prose—while the author's natural flow of wit and humour was checked by the necessity of accommodating himself to courtly conventions, it met with a very favourable reception, and, moreover, served to establish Armande's reputation as an actress. This was, no doubt, Molière's intention, as the whole play appears to have been conceived expressly to bring into relief the young lady's various accomplishments—her taste in dress, her charming voice, and her graceful dancing—and the enamoured Euryale declaims in her honour a portrait of the most flattering description: "She is, in truth, adorable at all times; but at that moment she was more so than ever, and new charms redoubled the splendour of her beauty. Never was her face adorned with more lovely colours; never were her eyes armed with swifter or more piercing shafts. The sweetness of her voice showed itself in the perfectly charming air which she deigned to sing; and the marvellous tones she uttered penetrated to the very depth of my soul and held all my senses in a rapture from which they were powerless to escape. She next showed a disposition altogether divine; her lovely feet on the enamel of the soft turf danced delightful steps, which carried me quite beyond myself and bound me by irresistible bonds to the easy and

accurate movements with which her whole body followed those harmonious motions."

On the three concluding days of the fêtes, the *Fâcheux*, the first three acts of *Tartuffe*, and the *Mariage forcé* were in turn represented. It is uncertain what parts were allotted Armande in the first and third of these plays, but in the much discussed *Tartuffe*, now played for the first time, she again filled the leading feminine rôle. How she fared on this occasion we have unfortunately no information; but when, in February 1669, the interdict under which *Tartuffe* had so long lain was at length withdrawn and the piece produced at the Palais-Royal, the rhyming chronicle of Robinet speaks in eulogistic terms of her performance of Elmire.

In the meanwhile, she had successfully created other important parts: Lucinde in the *Medecin malgré lui*, Angélique in *George Dandin*, and Elise in *l'Avare*, and, on June 4, 1666, the greatest of all her triumphs—the rôle of Célimène in the famous comedy of the *Misanthrope*.

"Célimène," says M. Larroumet, "is the type of woman the most original and the most complete which the genius of Molière has evolved. Eternal temptation of actresses, those who have attempted it may be called legion, those who have succeeded in making themselves mistresses of it form a select group, admired, envied. Such an actress of genius as Rachel failed here miserably, and a true Célimène, like Mlle. Mars, is sure of transmitting her name to posterity. One has noted, however, the tones and gestures of the great interpreters of the part; tradition preserves them, and they point out the way. But an intelligent pupil will readily make herself acquainted with all that can be learned; if she does not evolve from her own resources the sentiment of the character, she will only swell the alarming number of vain attempts which theatrical history records. Célimène is twenty years of age, and her experience is that of a woman of forty. Coquettish and feline with Alceste,

frivolous and back-biting with the little marquises, cruelly ironical with Arsinoé, in each act, in each scene, she shows herself under a different aspect. Contemporary, or very nearly so, of Mesdames de Châtillon, de Luynes, de Monaco, de Soubise, and the nieces of Mazarin, she ought to awaken a vague memory of these great names; she is the exquisite and rare product of an aristocratic civilisation in the full splendour of its development, and often she speaks a language of almost plebeian candour and acerbity. In the salon where she reigns, she ought to convey the idea of perfect ease and supreme distinction; and in the *dénouement* she submits to a cruel humiliation without the possibility of revenge; she makes her exit vanquished at all points, and, even then, she ought to lose nothing of her haughty bearing and her tranquil smile."^[16]

It will thus be readily understood that an actress who could be trusted to create such a part must have truly been a great artist, and Armande secured a brilliant triumph. Her performance was "a charm" and "an ecstasy," Robinet tells us; and though Robinet was in the habit of dealing somewhat freely in such expressions, we have no reason to doubt that on this occasion he faithfully reflects the opinion of the audience.

But, after all, we can hardly wonder at the young actress's success, since she had only to be perfectly natural to realise the author's whole idea of his heroine. For what is Célimène but a finished portrait of Armande herself? Célimène is "*la grande coquette par excellence*," surrounded by a crowd of admirers wherever she goes. Armande, unhappily for Molière's peace of mind, seems to have enjoyed very much the same reputation. Célimène depends for her fascination not so much on beauty of face or form as on her expression, her smile, her manners, her conversation; "*elle a l'art de me plaire*," says the infatuated Alceste. Armande possessed the same kind of attractions,

and was "very affecting when she wished to please." Célimène is haughty and imperious. "It is my wish; it is my wish," she cries when Alceste hesitates to comply with her demands. "Armande," says a contemporary, "could not brook contradiction, and pretended that a lover ought to be as submissive as a slave." In fact, so perfect is the resemblance that even if the circumstances, of which we shall presently speak, did not preclude all reasonable doubt about the matter, few would be found to deny that the heroine of the *Misanthrope* was drawn from life.

Among Armande's other rôles may be mentioned the capricious and charming Lucile of the *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, in which Molière drew the well-known portrait of his wife which we have already cited; the title-part in the famous "tragedy-ballet" of *Psyché*, one of the most remarkable instances of collaboration in dramatic history,^[17] in which she appeared in a different costume in each of its five acts—a very unusual extravagance in those days—and is described by the enthusiastic Robinet as "marvellous" and "playing divinely"; Henriette in the *Femmes savantes*, "the model of an honest, sensible, and well-brought-up young lady;" and finally, Angélique in Molière's swan-song, the *Malade imaginaire*, perhaps, next to Célimène, her most finished impersonation.

But great as were the dramatic talents of Armande Béjart, they count for comparatively little in the curiosity which her name arouses. It is her moral character, her private life, her relations with her famous husband, which have exercised the minds of the biographers of Molière for upwards of two centuries. On these matters even more ink has been expended than on the vexed question of her birth, and with far less satisfactory results. To the great majority of writers Armande was an unworthy wife, who repaid the kindness and affection lavished upon her by the great man