

Imaginary Invalid Dramaturgy Report

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Detroit Mercy Theatre Company

Source Material

The Imaginary Invalid (or *The Hypochondriac*) is a 3-act comedie-ballet, or a comedy combined with song and dance, by French playwright Moliere with dance sequences and musical interludes throughout the work composed by Marc-Antoine Charpentier. Originally published as *Le Malade imaginaire*, the work was written and published entirely in French, and premiered at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal in Paris on February 10, 1673. It was then translated to English in 1674 as *The Hypochondriac*, and many subsequent translations after.

A satire of the medical profession, the play contains a good deal of farce and was written to amuse King Louis XIV. It is also a superb character study of a hypochondriac, or a patient obsessed with being ill, and it contains a brilliant social and political commentary on Paris in the 1670s. In several plays, Molière makes the medical profession the main target of his comedy, and focuses on the ridiculous nature of medicine in a time where doctors had very little knowledge about the human body, relying on harsh treatments like blood-letting, lobotomies, and senseless remedies to treat an illness.

The Imaginary Invalid, the introduction and the three acts are in prose; the eclogue and prologue are in verse; and the interludes are mainly in verse, with some prose. Writing dialogue in prose enabled Molière to break free of the rigid rules of Alexandrine verse, the standard format for plays in seventeenth-century France. To give theater a certain nobility, the neoclassicists of the time created guidelines that would reflect the order, logic, and emotion of the ancient classical models: Verse was used in tragedy and comedy, plays must exhibit “decorum” (no violence or battle scenes), the three unities of time, and all action must unfold within a single day, in the same place, with no subplots. Molière was able to use these limitations to his advantage, focusing on the willpower and self-mastery of his characters to construct a theater of exceptional clarity.

The Imaginary Invalid was Molière's final play both published and performed. In the time of its running in Paris, the work was very successful in the public eye, as many

were gullible to the atmosphere of the medical agenda. Molière himself played the main role of the hypochondriac Argan, and famously coughed up blood during his fourth performance, dying later that evening at age 51 in what came to be known as a bitter irony, given the play's subject of imaginary illness.

First Performance

Date: February 10, 1673

Location: Théâtre du Palais-Royal in Paris

In the composition of *The Imaginary Invalid*, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (under stage name Moliere) wrote the play, Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1634-1704) composed the music, and Pierre Beauchamp (1636-1705) choreographed the dancing. The play had a cast that was mostly comprised of male actors, but included actors of all ages (including a female child actor playing Louison), as well as teenage actors of both sexes, young adults, and older adults. The play premiered in French, and quickly became Molière's most successful work, as Molière himself played the main role of the hypochondriac Argan.

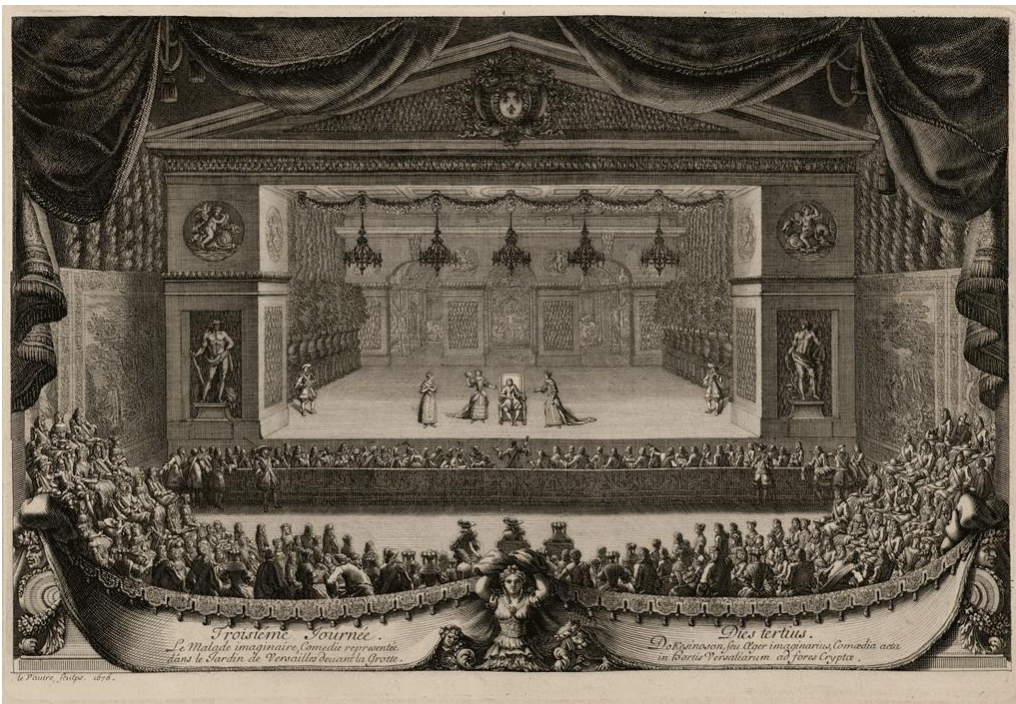
Not much information could be found about the first performance of *Le Malade imaginaire*, and in looking through several databases and sources, little information was found of critic's reviews or audience reactions, other than the fact that this work became highly successful within the 4 days of running the show before Moliere died.

Additional Notes:

- Moliere performed his plays in Paris, where theatres were inside and lit by candles.
- The French theatre in Molière's time customarily employed several people. The *decorateur*, or theatrical painter, decorated the stage and auditorium, working with the machinest to produce all the scenery and machines.
- The image of the chair below is the only surviving prop of Moliere's *Le Malade imaginaire*, and is the chair he died on during the performance. It was used by successive actors playing Argan until 1879.



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- An engraving of a 1674 remount of *The Imaginary Invalid* (the year after Molière's death) shows the stage picture below.



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- At this time in France, it was the actor's responsibility to costume themselves, even at great expense.
- Other information for reconstructing the public performances are found in 4 existing accounting books kept by Molière's company.
- Basic production costs covered include lighting, heat, printing and posting of playbills, and wages to production staff and theatre personnel, such as the concierge, copyist and prompter, orchestra, ticket-seller and ticket-taker, door monitors, the *décorateur*, actors' domestics, ushers, and candle-snuffer. Extraordinary expenses include building and operating stage machines, fabricating costumes and stage properties, wages paid to singers, instrumentalists, and dancers.

Notable Subsequent Productions

Date: March 1917

Location: Liberty Theatre, Times Square, NY

Theatre Company: Liberty Theatre Company

Notes:

- Could not find more notes on critique and audience feedback. More research to come.
- First time *The Imaginary Invalid* was performed on Broadway.
- The Liberty Theatre was lost in 1933, but had many notable productions, one being *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Date: 1958, 1974 1993, and 2016

Location: Stratford, Ontario

Theatre Company: Stratford Festival

Notes:

- Performed in original French version at the Stratford Festival
- Revival of old Moliere works, translated into new French

The World of the Playwright

- Moliere and Politics

Molière served Louis XIV as playwright, actor, and courtier for fifteen years, from his court debut in 1658 to his death in 1673. His plays and his performances were strongly influenced by the popular comic theater traditions of 1) French farce, which had roots in the medieval theater; 2) the commedia dell'arte, which had plots and character types similar to French farce; 3) the kind of street medicine show that Moliere put on stage, where doctors sold potions said to cure anything.

Moliere wanted to depict human nature and contemporary life which often meant satirizing the vices of society. He essentially wanted to please the public, to make them laugh, and when inundated with criticism and protests claimed that the public was the judge. Louis XIV, expressed his solidarity with the author, granting him a pension, and agreed to be the godfather of Molière's first son. Molière continued as the official author of court entertainments.

Because Molière was now an official writer for the court and was protected by the kingdom, he continued to write plays by his own rules. Molière's friendship with Jean Baptiste Lully, the royal court composer, was influential in his writing of musical comedies, in which the drama is interrupted by songs and dance or a combination of both, one of the most famous being *Imaginary Invalid*.

Though he received the adulation of the court and Parisians, Molière's satires attracted more and more criticism from moralists and the Church, especially after publishing famously known *Le Tartuffe (The Imposter)* in 1664. Molière was not a friend of the church, nor was he a friend of science, as he wrote plays mocking their integrity. After his incident on the fourth night of performing as Argan in *Imaginary Invalid*, Molière's death was no concern to many groups, as the church refused to bless him and medical attention was refused. Most say he would have refused services anyway.

- Medical Practices in 17th Century Paris

French physicians in the seventeenth century were well-educated in Latin and rhetoric, but had very little schooling on anatomy or surgery.

French doctors (also called Greek Philosophers) believed that the earth was made up of four elements: air, fire, water, and earth. These elements directly corresponded with four elemental fluids within the human body, and were known as the "humours" of the body. These "humours" gave off vapors which rose through the body to the brain. An individual's personal characteristics (physical, mental, moral) was explained state of that person's "humours". It was thought that an imbalance in these "humours" caused a person to get sick.

There were two main methods used for treating an imbalance in the humours, purging and bleeding. Purging relied on enemas and laxatives to clean out the system and get rid of the "bad humours". Excessive dosing of laxatives and frequent enemas were favorite cures of most respected doctors in seventeenth century France. Bleeding was used when doctors thought that the blood carried toxins. Leeches were frequently placed on a patient and allowed to drink their fill.

The World of the Play

❖ Time Period

The play was published and performed in present-day style to when it was published in 1674. All of the action of the play takes place on the same day and has interludes throughout that are within the time period as well. It is meant to be reflective of life in Paris in 17 century, though the content of the play is ridiculous.

❖ Politics

Though it is not clear to Argan, most of the other characters in the show understand that the medical practice of the time is a farce, and are concerned with how seriously Argan believes himself to be ill. Argan spends a lot of money on doctors to make him better. Money and profession are key in this play, as Argan pushes for his daughter to marry a man of good fortune.

In terms of gender, we can clearly see the patriarchal hierarchy, especially as Argan, Angelique's father, pushes her to try to marry Thomas Diaforious, a medical student, rather than Cleante. This is for Argan's own selfish desire, in the sense that he wants medical attention at all times, and for free, since it would be his son-in-law. Another indication of patriarchal idealism in this production is the various ways in which Argan refers to Toinette, his servant. As a friend, he loves her, and as a servant, he is constantly cursing her, calling her names, and threatening her livelihood.

Argan's wife, as we eventually see, is purely a gold digger out for Argan's money, and admits this when he is "dead" on stage. Angelique, however, when discovering her "dead" father, throws away her entire life in his memorial, telling Toinette she wishes to go into a convent, which pleases Argan and he grants her the right to marry Cleante. There is no "correct" woman, and there is no rights for women in this time.

❖ Mythology/Superstition/Religion

As previously discussed, medicine and religion were often targeted in Molière's plays, meaning the characters had no inclination toward religion, and left the audience of the time to interpret what they may believe. With the increased awareness and questioning of the integrity and effectiveness of medicine, most of these characters do not believe that the doctors surrounding Argan are really helping him, especially since they don't believe he is sick in the first place.

This is also intensely illustrated in the finale of the play when Argan suddenly "becomes" a doctor, with little to no training, and completely wrong ideas about what medicine does. This is a comedic choice to reflect medicine in the modern society, and how anyone can become a doctor if they claim that they are.

Directorial Concept

❖ Time Period

2052 New Orleans, Louisiana. We are living in a futuristic world that is incredibly diverse racially, sexually, and culturally. Class divide is more prevalent than ever, since New Orleans now has a very little sense of middle class. We live in an afro-steam-punk fashion, and the famous culture of New Orleans as the land of the mysterious, voodoo, and music is very true to the story.

❖ Politics

There is most certainly cultural tension in futuristic New Orleans, especially with its vibrant history of corruption and populism. Racial tension is high as a culture where everyone is either rich or poor, and jobs are only given to the select few that have privilege. Most people probably live very minimalistic, also with clothing, due to the absurd climate crisis of hurricanes and global warming.

While we play with the idea of gender-bending characters, it is important to note the historical oppression of women. To have Cleante be sexually ambiguous, and Angelique to be a bisexual woman, the idea of gender-fluidity being normalized is still trying to rest in society, especially in the medical field.

❖ Mythology/Superstition/Religion

In this futuristic world, especially in New Orleans, medicine and religion are constantly in question. We have learned to resort to a more holistic approach to medicine, where most fall on the binary of medical help from pills and doctors, and others question healing from herbs, sage, crystals, and other natural substances.

and religion is ambiguous, especially surrounding the culture of the wicked and voodoo. The New Orleans Spiritualist religion is a blend of Spiritualism, Vodun, Catholicism, and Pentecostalism. The Voodoo-influenced Spiritualist churches that survive in New Orleans are the result of syncretism of these and other spiritual practices.

Text Glossary and Defining Terms

- **Assiduity**: constant or close application or effort; diligence; industry.

Used by Argan when telling Toinette about Thomas, and describing his diligent and hardworking nature, essentially convincing Toinette how he is good for the family and especially for Angelique.

- **Convalescent**: to recover health and strength gradually after sickness or weakness.

Refers to the later stage of an infectious disease or illness when the patient recovers and returns to previous health, but may continue to be a source of infection to others even if feeling better.

- **Chagrin**: a feeling of vexation, marked by disappointment or humiliation.

Used by Punch in the first Interlude when first presenting the entertainment, said that his work was meant to aid your “chagrin” or disappointment of the main characters.

- **Effrontery**: insolent or impertinent behavior.

Similarly used as Audacity; Shameless; Boldness; Insolence. Used frequently by Argan when referring to women in his life, especially Toinette and Angelique.

- **Hangdog**: having a dejected or guilty appearance; shamefaced.

Also used as browbeaten; defeated; intimidated; abject. Used by Punch in Scene IIV before the first interlude ends.

- **Heliotrope**: Any hairy plant belonging to the genus *Heliotropium* cultivated for its small, fragrant purple flowers, more specifically a plant of this nature that turns toward the sun.

Used by Thomas in Act 2 when trying to sway Angelique, referring to the nature of how the plant turns toward the sun, so should his eyes on her beauty.

- **Impudent**: not showing due respect for another person; impertinent

Argan refers to Toinette multiple times as “impudent,” among other things.

- **Inexorable**: not to be persuaded, moved, or stopped.

Also used as Resilient, and again, used in the first interlude. This is one of the last words that punch says before going into the next act.

- **Jointures**: an estate settled on a wife for the period during which she survives her husband, in lieu of a dowry.

Used by Argan in Act 2 with Beline when discussing his wishes for his will and his estate after he dies, which he presumes to be soon.

- **Nego Consequentiam**: denying the consequence or conclusion of something.

French, hardly able to translate to English. Used by Argan when talking about Beline after she had just tried to steal his money for his fake death and she ends up with nothing.

- **Perfidious**: Treacherous; false to trust; guilty of violated faith.

Used by the Old Woman in the first Interlude when mocking Punch and describing the nature of love.

- **Quid Dicis**: Beware what you say, when, and to whom.

Contextually used in multiple fashions, especially as “what, what?, who is, that is, what we, what is it?, what drives, what's next?” and similar questions.

- **Wainscoting**: a fine grade of oak imported for woodwork; a usually paneled wooden lining of an interior wall.

In France, this is an expensive interior work project. In Scene IX, Argan confers with Beline about the “twenty thousand francs in gold which I have in the wainscoting of the recess of my room,” to which she responds extremely at the amount of money used to complement their status.

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