The Imaginary Invalid

By Molière
Adapted by Constance Congdon
Based on a new translation by Dan White

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Synopsis

Act 1 – Argan believes he is afflicted with a variety of diseases and illnesses. In order to procure constant medical attention, he decides he is going to marry his daughter Angelique to his doctor’s nephew — who is also a doctor! However, Angelique has already fallen madly in love with a young man, Cleante, and when she hears the news of her father’s marriage proposal she is devastated. Argan’s wife, Beline, having only married Argan for his money, is angered at the prospect of having to pay a dowry and plots with her notary lover to scam Argan into willing his entire estate to her. But the quick-witted maid Toinette has always been suspicious of Beline’s intentions. Accordingly, when Cleante tumbles through the window she helps disguise him as a music teacher. The lovers face their situation in despair as Argan rejoices in his plan to secure his medical future.

Act 2 – Argan’s doctor, Purgeon, brings his nephew, the awkward, chicken-like Claude De Aria, to meet Angelique. Supposedly for the entertainment of the guests, Cleante and Angelique improvise an “opera”, using the opportunity to declare their love to each other. Purgeon has Claude show off his proficiency at doctoring by performing a diagnosis on Argan, during which Beline provokes Claude by telling him Angelique will never marry him. The guests leave in a huff. Toinette comes up with a plan to stop Angelique’s marriage and whatever Beline is planning. She sends Angelique to bed with a migraine and calls for “another” doctor, while Beline dances around with Argan, proclaiming him well enough not to receive any more enemas, infuriating the apothecary, Monsieur Bonnefoi. Purgeon learns of the different doctor attending to Argan and leaves him to his inevitable death. Argan demands to see the “new doctor” (Toinette in disguise) who pretends to cure him by recommending dismemberment, shaking Argan’s faith in the medical world. However, Argan still believes that only Beline cares about him, so Toinette convinces him to lie down on the floor, pretending to be dead. When Beline learns of his “death,” she dances for joy, revealing her nature to Argan. He plays dead again, and when Angelique discovers him she is heartbroken, to the point of not wanting to marry Cleante out of sorrow for her father. Realizing his follies, Argan wakes up and reconciles with his daughter, granting her permission to marry Cleante, on one condition: that he become a doctor. Toinette suggests that Argan become a doctor himself, and he takes to the idea and is initiated into the medical world.
My Life:  
Constance Congdon

The following interview with Constance Congdon was done by a student at Amherst College, Katherine Duke ’05. Congdon is a playwright-in-residence at the Massachusetts college.

Pulitzer Prize winner Tony Kushner has called Constance Congdon “one of the best playwrights this language has produced.” Congdon received her M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1982. Highlights of her 30-year career include her original play Tales of the Lost Formicans (produced more than 200 times worldwide, most recently in Cairo and Helsinki) and an adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s A Mother with Olympia Dukakis in the lead role. Over the summer, she premiered So Far: The Children of the Elvi and adaptations of Molière’s The Imaginary Invalid and Carlo Goldoni’s The Servant of Two Masters. Her new verse version of Molière’s Tartuffe will be published in 2008 in a single-volume critical edition by W.W. Norton, as well as in the upcoming Norton Anthology of Drama. Congdon has won grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the W. Alton Jones Foundation and the Guggenheim Foundation. A strong believer in America’s academic and nonprofit theaters, which she says play a crucial role in “keeping new work alive,” Congdon has taught playwriting at Amherst since 1993.

On Early Theatrics
My father was a beautiful singer and could do some dancing. He was on a small circuit in western Kansas; he always danced and sang with me. I made a little puppet theater between my bed and my parents’ bed. Snap, Crackle and Pop were three of the puppets, and they had many adventures. When I was 8, I wrote a play called Peter Pan Meets God.

Flash forward: In junior high school, I played a toothless old hillbilly woman in a play called A-Feudin’ Over Yonder. The first real play I saw was Cyrano de Bergerac, and I’ll never forget it, because Cyrano entered from behind me in the audience in that opening scene. Of course, I loved musicals; I hadn’t seen any, but I would stand on my bed and perform entire albums. I wrote comedy sketches in high school. I remember the first time one of those was performed: I was too nervous to sit in the auditorium; I went up in the balcony and sat and listened to people laugh. Oh, my God, that was such a high!

On Brand-New Adults
I feel so connected to the world through my students. I like being part of the brand-new-adult transition into what they sometimes call “the real world” (though that’s just stupid, because this world we’re in is just as real as can be). I was up for the head of playwriting at Yale, which would be teaching graduate students, and I panicked. As soon as the dean from Yale called
me and said, “Well, we’ve made a decision, and it’s not you.” I just started to laugh—I was so relieved. At that point I’d decided I wanted to stay at Amherst, to teach undergraduates.

**On Molière and McMansions**

I did a new verse version of *The Misanthrope* for American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. Opening night went well. I knew something was up when the board members, who could tell who I was because I was the shortest person in the room, would come up and just pat me. My new verse version of *Tartuffe* premiered recently at the Two River Theater Company in New Jersey. The director set it in a McMansion in Texas. She didn’t change a word, and it was fantastic. It sounded so Texan! Just put an accent on it!

**On Controversy**

My play *Casanova* was produced in 1989 at the Joseph Papp Public Theater with an amazing cast—La Tanya Richardson (Mrs. Samuel L. Jackson) and actor Ethan Hawke making his stage debut. But it didn’t get a single good review. That play was involved in the whole National Endowment for the Arts controversy. It contained each of the things Sen. Jesse Helms said art cannot have, and more: homosexuality, the sex act, a rape, bad language (a lot of that), a lot of naming of people’s private parts. I got criticism from the right wing, but I certainly also got it from the other side—the feminist movement. They said, “How can you put rape in a play?” and “How can you portray child abuse?” Well, because there’s a story in Casanova’s life about that. But people only see what they want to see. The critics said I was bashing men. For a woman writer, it’s really hard to get the universal; it’s always seen as “from a female point-of-view.” I hate that. If a man had written Casanova, I think it would have been dealt with in a different way. A couple of years later, my play *Dog Opera* premiered at that theater to good reviews.

**On Current Favorites**

Right now, I’m all about [British humorists] Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. I also love Simon Peg and Nick Frost—their most recent film was *Hot Fuzz.* As long as I’m on the Brits: Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders—absolute genius! Absolutely fabulous! I saw some fantastic plays last year in New York. [Playwright] John Guare saw me and said, “Go immediately and see *The Pillowman* [by Martin McDonagh],” which I did, and it’s absolutely brilliant.

**On the Computer**

I think I’m the oldest person on Facebook. But after some of my friends find out, more of us oldies are going to join, because it’s so much fun. The site asks, “What are your aspirations and interests?” I said, “World peace and role-playing games.” Jon Wemette ’05 warned me off playing *World of Warcraft* because he saw how addicted another student was. I have an addictive nature, so I took Jon’s advice: I stayed away. I love *Age of Empires* and *Age of Mythology.* In some RPG realms, my warrior, Fluffy, is not to be messed with. I’d rather be an orc or a dwarf than a wizard any day.

**On New Life**

When I got the news that my son’s girlfriend was pregnant, I was working with Rene Auberjonois, who was on *Star Trek* and is a theater guy. He said, “You will be goony. There’s a kind of love that you have for your grandchild that just makes you nuts.” And that is what happened. I can’t get enough of Corabella [born Feb. 15, 2007]. People say she looks like me; I think that’s because I have a fat, round face, but I’m thrilled that they think that. She and her parents are living with me. Eventually they’re going to have to go and have their own lives or something ridiculous like that.

I get a big infusion of hope from Corabella (and from my students). A bunch of old people will sit around and go, “Aw, the world’s going to hell.” I never say that; I feel like the world’s going to be in good hands. I look at this child who will outlive me, and I go, “Boy, the things you’re going to see.” I mean, there may be some horrific things, but there are going to be some fantastic things as well.
The Characters

ARGAN – Argan is an older, wealthy gentleman and also the head of the household. However, most of his money goes into the treatments for his imaginary ailments. He is a serious hypochondriac and wants his daughter, Angelique to marry a doctor, so that he may always have one around the house.

BELINE – Beline is Argan’s second wife and the stepmother to Argan’s daughter, Angelique. She desperately wants to send Angelique to a nunnery and is secretly waiting for Argan to die so she can inherit his fortune.

ANGELIQUE – Angelique is Argan’s daughter. She is in love with Cleante and cannot stop talking about him. She is young and impetuous.

TOINETTE – Toinette is Argan’s maid. She practically runs the household and has no problem with telling Argan or any of the characters when he is acting foolish.

CLEANTE – Cleante is a handsome young gentleman who is in love with Angelique. While very romantic and full of good intentions, he is not the sharpest tool in the shed. He is willing to do anything to marry Angelique.

DOCTOR PURGEON – Doctor Purgeon is the physician to Argan.

CLAUDE de Aria – Claude de Aria is Doctor Purgeon’s nephew. He will soon become a doctor himself and wants to marry Argan’s daughter, Angelique.

MONSIEUR FLEURANT – Monsieur Fleurant is the apothecary for Argan.

MONSIEUR de BONNEFOI – Monsieur de Bonnefoi is the notary for Argan.
Who is Jean-Baptiste Poquelin?

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, under his assumed name Molière (for which no certain source has ever been discovered) achieved, in an astonishingly brief career—he was to die when just 51—recognition by his contemporaries as an outstanding man of the theatre, and was soon acknowledged by posterity as the greatest comic writer of all time.

Brought up in comfortable bourgeois circumstances, Molière studied law, and would, in the normal course of things, have succeeded his father in his hereditary office as Court upholsterer. But the theatre captured his imagination from an early age: we are told that his maternal grandfather used to take him as a youngster to see the celebrated trio of farce players at the Hôtel de Bourgogne theatre; and in 1643 he scandalized his respectable family by joining the Illustre Théâtre, a company whose nucleus was the Béjart family. He became the lover of Madeleine Béjart, a talented actress with whom he was to have a long professional association, and had soon taken over the direction of the company which, beset by debts, left Paris in 1645 for the itinerant life of a provincial troupe.

Intermittent traces of Molière’s journeying can be seen, especially in the south and west of France, during the next 13 years; but in 1658 he and his colleagues felt sufficiently confident to try their fortunes in Paris once more. They brought with them the customary repertory of tragedies, full-length comedies, and short comic curtain-raisers; and it was with one of Molière’s own one-act comedies, Les Précieuses ridicules, that the company first attracted enthusiastic acclaim: although this was a farce in plot and structure, it made a sharp satirical comment on a topical subject—the social and literary phenomenon of preciosity—and this struck a novel note.

As an actor, Molière had ambitions to shine in tragedy as well as in comedy, but contemporary comment is unanimous in indicating that this was not where his talent lay: not only was he lampooned by spokesmen for the rival company, established at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, but it is clear from more objective sources that his manner as a tragic actor was not sufficiently stylized and declamatory to suit the prevailing taste.

In comedy, it was a different matter. Molière began by sharing a theatre with the Italian players, and it is often suggested that he developed his gifts as a comic actor by modeling himself on Scaramouche (Tiberio Fiorillo), with whom he enjoyed an excellent relationship. The registers kept by Molière’s colleague La Grange, from soon after the company’s return to Paris through to Molière’s death and beyond, show a progressive reduction in the proportion of tragedies performed, as well as of comedies by other authors; and towards the end of his career Molière’s company had become primarily a vehicle for his own plays, written to cater for the talents of his colleagues, and in particular for his own comic skills.

Molière’s success was not achieved without making enemies among rival actors and playwrights (a particularly scurrilous campaign alleged that his wife, Armande, whom he married in 1662, was not the younger sister of Madeleine Béjart but her—and therefore probably Molière’s—daughter); and several of his plays, especially Tartuffe and Dom Juan, were subjected to fierce opposition from the Church authorities, the former play being banned from 1664 until public performance was finally authorized in 1669. Throughout these years, however, Molière was able to count on
the King’s protection; and his company was in regular
demand for performances at court or at one of the great
princely houses.

As a result of the King’s patronage, Molière developed
quite early, alongside the series of plays written for
his town theatre (the Palais-Royal, which his company
occupied from 1660 onwards), a genre specifically
conceived in response to the requirements of court
entertainment. This new art-form, the comédie-ballet,
bore some relation to the court ballet (and the English
court masque) popular in previous reigns, but its
originality was the integration of the interludes of music
and dance into the narrative framework of comic drama.
The Italian musician Lully collaborated with Molière
in a number of such works, of which Le Bourgeois
Gentilhomme is the undoubted masterpiece, while
Molière’s last play, Le Malade imaginaire, was a comédie-
ballet created in collaboration with Charpentier.

If the development of this mixed genre shows Molière’s
ability to exploit the tastes of Louis XIV and his
courtiers to positive artistic effect, he was no less
able, at the same time, to exert a decisive influence on
the evolution of mainstream comic drama to mould
the taste of Paris audiences, and to impose on them
an equally original conception of comedy—and all
this in spite of the active opposition of jealous rivals,
and of the pedants, the précieuses, and the prudes
whom he satirized in his brilliant conversation-piece
La Critique de l’École des femmes.

Temperamentally, Molière is known to have been
thoughtful and introspective rather than extrovert. His
marriage was not a happy one, but he inspired loyalty
and affection in his colleagues, and friendship in a
wide range of men with a similar taste for independent
thought and a dislike for the pedantry and affectation
that he lampoons in a number of plays, particularly
in Les Femmes savantes (The Learned Ladies). Several
plays ridicule representatives of the medical profession,
notably L’Amour médecin (Love is the Best Remedy) and
Le Malade imaginaire. It is sadly ironic that, after years
of ill-health, he should have been struck down, dying
almost on stage, while playing the hypochondriac, Argan,
in the latter play.

French Theater in the 1600’s

Under the reign of Louis XIV, France became the most
powerful and influential country in Europe. To give
theater a certain nobility, the neoclassicists formulated
guidelines that would reflect the order, logic, and
refined emotion of the ancient classical models: verse
was to be used in tragedy and comedy; plays were to
exhibit “decorum” (no violence or battle scenes or mix
of registers); the three unities of time, place and action
were to be observed (i.e. 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 History of Commedia dell’Arte

The title, Commedia dell’arte (“Comedy of Art” or
“Comedy of the profession”), means unwritten or
improvised drama, and implies rather to the manner
of performance than to the subject matter of the play.
This peculiar species had a long life in Italy, probably
of about four hundred years (from the fourteenth to the
eighteenth century); but it flourished especially in the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Of course in actual
practice the play was not, in any sense, the result of
The World of the Play

Understanding Commedia dell’Arte in The Imaginary Invalid

The characters in Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid* are inspired by—stolen from even—the stock characters of *Commedia dell’arte* (stock characters are characters in literature, theatre or film of a type that are quickly recognized and accepted by the reader or viewer and require no development by the writer). These stereotypical characters allowed Molière (and later Constance Congdon) to focus on creating funny situations instead of wasting time developing characters. Here’s a quick list of the characters and their origins:

**Pantalone** – The typical miser: a wealthy old man who plans to stay that way. He is greedy and only concerned with how to make more money. In *The Imaginary Invalid*, Argan is the pantalone.

**The Innamorati** – The lovers. They are young, virtuous and helplessly in love with one another. These characters often wear the most fashionable dress of the period, never wear masks and often sing and dance, like Angelique and Cleante.

**Dottore** – The doctor seems to be an intellectual, but he’s faking it. He is older, wealthy and hopelessly unsuccessful with women, similar to Doctor Purgeon.

**Columbina** – A servant who is clever, crafty and untamed. Like most servants in Commedia dell’arte, Toinette is the one to get the action started because she’s the one who knows what is really going on.

**Brighella** – An untrustworthy rogue (a man of few morals). Although in Commedia this character is a man, his traits can be seen in Molière’s depiction of Argan’s second wife, Beline.
The World of the Play (continued)

**Low Humor vs. High Humor**

Since the dawn of comedy, humor has been defined in two broad categories: “low humor” and “high humor.”

Low humor is earthy, concerned with bodily functions, secretions and the differences between us, such as ethnicity, hair color, gender or even class. Low comedy is often derided as childish, sophomoric or sometimes “politically incorrect.”

High humor on the other hand is often defined as satire, political parody or witty and clever. Romantic comedies, the plays of Oscar Wilde and the witticisms of Mark Twain are examples of high humor. High humor and low humor are by no means mutually exclusive and most popular comedies of our era use a potent mixture of both styles to make us laugh. Think “The Simpsons,” the movie Enchanted or the television show “30 Rock.” William Shakespeare is revered for his ability to mix high and low humor in his plays.

**The State of Medical Knowledge in Molière’s Time**

by Martin Sorrell

It is a truism to say that medical knowledge and beliefs in Molière’s France were light years away from their present state. The thermometer, for example, had not been invented at the time of The Imaginary Invalid, and the microscope was hardly in use. Dissection was comparatively rare: the law allowed that only executed criminals be dissected. Medicine in 17th-century France was controlled by the Faculty of Medicine, and was rigidly hierarchical. There were three divisions in the profession: médecin (doctor); apothicaire (apothecary), whose job was to prepare and administer medicines according to the doctor’s prescription, to administer the famous clystère (enema), and send out patients’ bills; and chirurgien-barbier (surgeon-barber), who did such menial tasks as bleeding patients, setting fractured bones, performing dissections, etc. The education (training hardly seems the word) of the médecin lasted for years. As in all French education, Latin was the language used. Emphasis was placed on theory, and the doctor had to learn how to argue and pronounce in fine language and high style. But none of this was underpinned by any practical knowledge, any first-hand observation. The “first grade” would be attained when the student had reached the minimum age of 25. Then, the candidate would become bachelier (bachelor, as in B.A.) and go on to prepare a thesis, a short Latin dissertation on a subject chosen by the candidate. Some titles, at random: “From which part of Christ’s body did water originate when, after His death, a spear was plunged into His side?” “Should the moon’s phases be taken into account when cutting hair?” “Is woman more lascivious than man?” “Is it the pressure of blood which causes the heart to beat?”

The candidate had to undergo an oral exam of his thesis, which could last six or seven hours. If successful, he would proceed to the next phase of his studies, which in turn would be followed by more exams. On condition that he passed, the candidate would obtain his license to practice medicine. He would now be a doctor, and his success would be crowned with elaborate ceremonial. In the 1670s, the English philosopher John Locke witnessed one such occasion in Montpellier. In his Journal for 18 March 1676, Locke writes about the recipe for making a doctor: the grand procession of doctors dressed in red, with black bonnets on their heads, the orchestra playing Lully, the president who takes his seat and indicates that
The music should stop so that he may speak, his eulogy of his colleagues and diatribe against newfangled ideas and theories such as the circulation of the blood, the speech the doctor-elect makes in reply, complimenting those at the top of the medical Establishment, the professors, the academy, then more music, and the crowning moment when the president puts the bonnet on the new doctor's head. In the closing interlude of *The Imaginary Invalid*, Argan becomes both *bachelier* and *licencié*, that is, he becomes a fully fledged doctor in a single operation. Dr. Purgeon is clearly a doctor of long standing. His nephew Claude de Aria is a new *bachelier*. This is indicated by the fact that he has brought his thesis, the object of Toinette's derision. Claude also wants Angélique to witness the dissection of a woman, as a special treat. In 1667, just such a dissection had caused a widespread scandal—and Molière would have known of this event when he came to write *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Doctors knew nothing of inner organs of the living body. Surgery in the modern sense was a marginal activity. Incisions would be made on visible tumors, for example, and limbs would be amputated, wounds closed, broken bones set. On the other hand, it was not the practice to open up the rib cage or the abdomen. Thus, theories were propounded on the basis of superficial observation only, and by examining what the body expelled. Sputum, urine, excrement, all were closely scrutinized in the hope that they would indicate what was happening to the lungs, kidneys, and intestines. Medicine at all times is vulnerable to the abuse of charlatans, and in Molière's time there were considerable numbers of itinerant quacks who managed to escape the control of the Faculty of Medicine and of the police. This is one of the reasons Toinette is able to get away with her outrageous impersonation in the final act. Established doctors' "played the system" in a legitimate way. In several plays, Molière makes the medical profession the main target of his comedy. There were large numbers of gullible people around who were too readily taken in by quackery. Even the normally lucid Mme de Sévigné made great claims for the virtues of a viper broth, and she recommended it with enthusiasm to her daughter in 1685. French moralist Jean de La Bruyère had a couple of aphorisms which seem exactly relevant: "Those who are in good health become ill; they need people whose job it is to reassure them that they are not going to die," and, "So long as human beings go on dying, and want to go on living, the doctor will be mocked and well paid."

**Molière’s Last Act**

by Jean-Marie Apostolidès

*The Imaginary Invalid* is Molière's last play and, as such, should be considered his final testament. It came after *Élomire Hypocondre*, a play published in 1670 by a certain Le Boulanger de Chalussay, in which Molière is lampooned. We believe that Molière had recently written an autobiographical comedy in which he staged himself under his own name and took the opportunity to answer the calumnies he had been subjected to since becoming the most famous author of his time. In *Élomire Hypocondre*, Molière is depicted as not only arrogant and authoritarian, but also as obsessed with his health and yet refusing to submit to the best-known medical authorities of his time (which was, of course, understandable, considering the laughable state of medical knowledge in 17th-century France). More importantly, the anonymous author accuses him of having committed incest, upon marrying Armande Béjart. It was well known that Molière had been the lover of Madeleine...
Béjart, Armande's mother, at the time she gave birth to Armande, and Molière certainly took an important part in the child's upbringing. The accusation of incest, often leveled at Molière during that period, was extremely serious, since his own safety and life would have been at stake if any tribunal or the king had taken it seriously.

For reasons unknown to us, Molière's autobiographical play was never produced, and in fact we have no solid evidence it ever existed. But Le Boulanger de Chalussey (the pen name for the anonymous author of Élomire) is well informed about Molière's personal life and projects. This sycophant was probably an actor or an author from a rival troupe, likely the Hôtel de Bourgogne. In such a context, I believe we are entitled to read The Imaginary Invalid as Molière's ultimate words and final vision of the world.

**Argan Meets His Match**

Scholars usually compare The Imaginary Invalid, first performed February 10, 1673 (Molière was to die one week later), to The Would-Be Gentleman, produced in 1670. The two texts indeed possess many similarities. The plot is basically the same: an abusive and stubborn father wants to give his daughter to a man whose abilities and social peculiarities correspond to his own fantasies, an aristocrat in the earlier play, a medical doctor in the later. The father's stubbornness makes the daughter miserable, all the more because she herself has someone else in mind. The saner members of the family (servants as well as relatives) conspire to force the father to make a wiser choice. They achieve their goal not in confronting him directly, but rather in imprisoning him in his own foolishness. Therefore, in The Would-Be Gentleman Monsieur Jourdain becomes a “Mamamuchi” (a pseudo-Turkish title of nobility), whereas at the end of The Imaginary Invalid, after a grotesque initiation ceremony, Argan is made a medical doctor. Such a solution saves the father’s pride and official status at a time when Louis XIV had legally reinforced the authority of fathers over their children. By the same strategy, this outcome permits the daughter to marry her young and attractive fiancé, instead of the very odd, potentially insane suitor selected by her father.

When reading The Imaginary Invalid, one is also struck by the many similarities between this work and Tartuffe, one of Molière’s most famous plays. Both texts deal again with psychological peculiarities of wealthy Parisian bourgeois—Orgon in Tartuffe, Argan in The Imaginary Invalid. The two names are so phonetically connected to each other that I think we can consider these two characters as twin brothers. They are both confronted by their imminent deaths, or so they imagine. The first, Orgon, is obsessed with his salvation and frightened of going to hell. He has previously committed a mortal sin that is never explained in the play; he needs to cleanse his soul before confronting his Almighty God and Judge. In order to do so, he constantly looks to confess this unnamable sin to a priest who will give him absolution, the most important Catholic sacrament after baptism. Instead of a “real” priest, Orgon finds Tartuffe, a priest-in-disguise and an experienced confidence man, whose purpose is to steal not only Orgon’s money, but also Elmire, Orgon’s young wife. Argan’s problem is similar. He thinks he is about to die. He claims to suffer many physical symptoms that we can read as a profound psychosomatic disorder; after all, he is a hypochondriac, like so many of Molière’s characters. One important theme in this comedy is that Argan needs to cleanse his interior, to evacuate his bowels, in order to be “clean inside” in the same way Orgon must have his soul spotless before God’s last judgment—hence, the numerous doctors and apothecaries around him duping him out of his money. They provide Argan with numerous prescriptions—quack remedies, needless to say, particularly enemas—whose goal is to liberate his intestines as well as his pockets. In other words, what to Orgon is a problem of the soul, to Argan is a problem of the body. Could these men be obsessed by “cleanliness”
because they have committed the same mortal sin? Could this sin be related to a suspiciously strong attachment to their daughters, a sin whose echo may be found in Molière's personal life?

The parallel between Orgon and Argan produces other similar situations. Orgon is trapped by a flock of priests in the same way that Argan is held by a hierarchy of doctors. Fleurant stands at the lowest level, being only an apothecary; then comes the soon-to-be-doctor, Thomas Diafoirus (renamed Claude de Aria by Constance Congdon [chosen for its comic sound in an effort to render the name “de Aria” as close to “diarrhea”]), then comes his father, changed here into an uncle. Last, but not least, M. Purgeon, the only person capable of assuring Argan's physical salvation, makes a great entry onstage, condemning Argan to the hell of physical decline. If Molière, for reasons one can immediately guess, could not criticize the Catholic Church of 17th-century France, he did have the freedom to make fun of the medical profession, which had been the butt of satire and farce since antiquity. Might we not then associate priests with doctors? In other words, is it possible Molière was using Argan's quacks to (indirectly) criticize the Catholic hierarchy of his own time? I tend to believe so and to analyze The Imaginary Invalid through this lens. Were it the case, we would interpret the solution adopted by the twin brothers Orgon and Argan in a new light. Each of them opts at the end of the play to dispense with intermediaries and take charge of his own salvation. Orgon will directly confess his sins to God, without a confessor; Argan will become a doctor and take care of his own health. I read such a solution as a step toward Christian Reformation.

**Faithful to Molière’s Spirit**

Constance Congdon had to make some practical decisions in order to render this play accessible to a contemporary audience. To remain faithful to Molière's spirit, she had to be unfaithful to the letter of the text. In other words, she chose to adapt the play instead of translating it literally. By doing so, she gives us an equivalent of what the first spectators probably experienced. She does it with dedication, intelligence, wit, and enormous talent. Eliminating from the original play some secondary characters, such as Argan's brother Béralde and Louison, his youngest daughter, she focuses the plot on the main problem: Angélique's marriage to Cléante.

Molière's original text starts with an almost obligatory celebration of Louis XIV's grandeur. A group of shepherds sings onstage:

> Let us sing, with one accord  
> Until the welkin rings,  
> With praise of Louis, mightiest of kings!  
> Happy all who can contrive  
> In his service so to live.

Congdon is right to spare us this indigestible political propaganda and to give us a fresh flavor of Molière's talent. Grounded in many puns, innuendos, and double-entendres, her adaptation sheds new light on some important aspects of Molière's dark zones. Reading her text, I for one have been struck by the secret ties between Argan and Harpagon, another famous Molière character, from The Miser. Both men want to be clean, i.e., to respect Catholic prescriptions on the one hand, and on the other hand they want to retain the source of their terrestrial hell and damnation: money for the miser, excrement for the imaginary invalid. Could excrement be for Argan what money is for Harpagon? But that's another story . . .

Ultimately, the main quality of this new adaptation is the hilarious, almost farcical, atmosphere it creates from beginning to end. In so doing, Constance Congdon reminds us that The Imaginary Invalid belongs to the still-popular genre of farce, illustrated by Molière two years previously in Scapin and The Countess Escarbagnas.
Discussion Questions & Exploration Activities

1. Do you think Argan truly believes that he is sick? Why does he create these medical problems for himself? What does Argan really want that causes him to act sick?

2. Argan is fooled over and over again in this play. Who is he fooled by? How much blame does Argan bear for the way he is fooled and used? Is he blame free because of his gullibility?

3. At the end of the play Argan believes he has been made a doctor. Will this cure him? What effect do you think this ceremony will have on Argan in the future? How will this affect his daughter and Cleante? How will it affect his brother and Toinette?

4. Molière exposes backward thinking and greed through comedy and satire. Others condemn these faults through serious modes of expression, such as sermons or didactic essays. Which approach do you believe is more effective? Explain your answer.

Original Sources & Links to Further Research

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