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# The Imaginary Illness and the Rhetorical Cure

by

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## Abstract

In *Le Malade Imaginaire* (1673), Molière's final play, the French playwright tells the tale of an obsessive hypochondriac. The play served as an important catalyst for discourse on the practice of medicine during the period, and today provides a literary window into 17<sup>th</sup> century French medicine. References to William Harvey's theory of circulation, the use of antimony and medical student graduation ceremonies can be found within the plot. The play places technological and scientific developments within their social context and complements technical historical sources.

Equally importantly, the play provides insight into the social structures that pervade medicine. The topics broached by the play bear a remarkable similarity to challenges faced by current physicians and patients. At the core of the play is an examination of the power disparity between the physician and the patient and, to a lesser extent, the power struggle between physicians among themselves. Molière comments on our blind faith in an often formalistic and ritualistic medicine. Today, "the authoritarian ego" continues to shadow the physician image. Molière also hints of financial abuse of patients by scheming and conniving physicians and pharmacists (apothecaries). The audience is asked to examine the idea of the benevolent physician, and how physicians ought to be compensated for their efforts. This topic continues to be of contentious debate among calls for health care reform in many countries.

While analysis of Molière's ideas and writing proves to be a rich source of insight into medicine of the period, it is important to recognize the perils of treating a literary work as a historical text. Molière's primary intent was to entertain, and historical readers must be wary of artistic license. Furthermore, Molière's experiences at the Court of King Louis XIV poorly reflect the broader experiences of the French public.

## Introduction

In 1673, any academic paper attempting to suggest that the medical profession erred in its philosophy and practices would have been condemned as blasphemy. Yet this is the very theme that forms the basis of Jean Baptiste Molière's (1622-1673) tongue-in-cheek satire, *Le Malade Imaginaire* (1673). The play served as an important catalyst for discourse on the practice of medicine during the period, and today provides a literary window into 17<sup>th</sup> century French medicine. The reign of King Louis the Great (1638-1715) was the beginning of France's rise to the top of the European hegemony and a peak in French literate culture with many prolific intellectual writers, philosophers and artists such as Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), René Descartes (1596-1650), and Jean Racine (1639-1699). Considered today as one of the great masters of comedy in Western literature, Molière was a French playwright and actor, supported by the patronage of the aristocrats of the King's Court. The pension provided by the Courts

allowed him the creative freedom to explore many non-conventional ideas of the time, including atheism, the institution of marriage, and medicine.

### ***Le Malade Imaginaire***

*Le Malade Imaginaire* is the story of a miserly hypochondriac, who spends all his time summoning physicians and settling their resultant bills. He even attempts to marry his daughter to a medical student hoping to get unhindered access to medical advice. Both popular and controversial medical practices of the time make appearances in the play. In this essay, we will explore some of these medical practices, and how literature can be used to complement more technical historical sources.

The British physician William Harvey (1578-1657) first proposed the idea of circulating blood in 1628 in his text, *Exercitationes anatomiae, de motu cordis & sanguinis circulatione* (*An Anatomical Study of the Motion of the Heart and of the Blood in Animals*). Upon publication, it was largely ignored, dismissed, and associated with religious unorthodoxy. The acceptance of the theory was a long drawn out process that lasted over forty years. In the Hypochondriac, a budding new doctor attempts to prove his intellectual prowess by scoffing at the Circulationists”:

I have written a thesis against the Circulationists [...] I venture to offer to  
the young lad as a tribute laid before her of the first fruits of my genius”  
(Molière, II, p. 2).

Molière also refers to the use of antimony in his plays. Antimony was taken as antimony wine to induce vomiting when the patient had a fever. It was given to Louis XIV in 1658 as he went through a near death experience, and made famous by François Guenault (died 1708) and François Vautier (1589-1652), who were physicians of the Court (Brockliss & Jones, 1997).

In March 1676, the British philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704) described in his writings the medical student graduation ceremonies he witnessed (Brockliss & Jones, 1997). A mockery of this ceremony is found at the end of the play where Argan is made his own doctor. He pokes fun at the dogmatic behaviour of the physicians through the use of made-up Latin words. In the ceremony Argan is given the permission to kill, ironic because the medical imperative is to preserve life.

These representations and reflections of historical events in the play complement more technical sources such as Harvey's dissertation on the anatomy of the heart. While other primary texts such as medical documents, essays and teaching materials provide detailed accounts of each new invention and procedure, they provide little information about the people of the time – their perceptions, emotions and ideas. Theatre places technological and scientific developments within their social context.

Molière explores three major medical-social themes in the play: the power disparity between the physician and the patient, the dogmatic culture of medicine, and appropriate physician compensation.

Central to the play is an exploration of the power disparity between the physician and his patient. Argan is placed at the whim of his physicians and apothecaries by his terrible

fear of illness – allowing him to be abused, manipulated and controlled. He eagerly laps up every word without question, and even attempts to trade his daughter for unrestrained access to medical attention. In one scene, Argan asks his brother if he believes in medicine as though he were asking if he believes in God (Molière, III, p. 3). When Argan is reprimanded for disobeying his physician's orders, he behaves like a terrified child, begging for forgiveness:

The audacity! A patient who rebels against his doctor! Unnatural! An enormity, a crime against medicine!

(Molière, II, p. 3).

## **The Physician and the Patient**

The power structure between the physician and the patient continues to be an issue of contentious debate in modern medicine. Boundaries are being blurred by an increasingly educated information society, where patients can look up their own diseases on the internet. Physicians can no longer claim an exclusive right to the expert knowledge from where they formerly derived their power. However, the archetypal image of the authoritarian seen in the play has survived, as later demonstrated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Stanley Milgram's (1933-1984) shock experiment, where a white coat could induce people to deliver shocks of almost fatal voltages to others (Blass, 2008).

Moliere presents a culture of medicine that is formalistic and ritualistic, even to the detriment of the patient's health. In the play, the physicians mask their ignorance with pretentious jargon and Latin:

But what pleases me most about him is his blind attachment to the opinions of ancient authorities and his refusal ever to try to understand or even listen to the arguments in favour of such so-called discoveries of our own age as the circulation of blood and other notions of similar ilk.

(Molière, II, p. 5)

He sticks blindly to the opinions of the ancient authorities and has never wanted to understand or listen to the reasons or the evidence of the alleged discoveries of our century.

(ibidem)

This likely reflects the experiences Moliere had while living at the Court of King Louis XIV.

The topic of physician compensation in the play is also worth discussing. Modern society constantly battles with the cost of medical care, and frequently accuses pharmaceutical companies of unethically charging patients excessive amounts for medication. In this reflection, many people mourn the loss of the so-called "benevolent physician". It is interesting to note that the attitude held by Argan of his apothecary is remarkably similar to current complaints. In fact, the play begins with the patient muttering about what he sees as unreasonably high costs of medication:

You only charged me 20 sous in previous bills, and when an apothecary says twenty he really means ten, so there you are: ten sous.  
(Molière, I, p. 1).

Other characters in the play reference the idea that the physician is there not to cure the patient, but rather to collect his dues:

The general public is accommodating. You are not accountable to anybody and providing you follow the rules of the art, nobody makes a fuss whatever happens. But what is tricky with the great and the good is that, when they fall ill, they really want their doctors to cure them.  
(Molière, II, p. 5).

Some of them honestly share the common mistaken beliefs which they exploit for their own ends, and others who don't believe any of it but still take the money.  
(Molière, III, p. 3).

While analysis of Molière's ideas and writing proves to be a rich source of insight into medicine of the period, it is important to recognize the perils of treating a literary work as a historical text:

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Molière has been treated by historians as an unimpeachable authority.  
(Brockliss & Jones, 1997).

Molière's writing is shaped primarily by his personal experiences with medicine of the age. These influences are particularly prominent in *Le Malade Imaginaire*, because the play was written at a time when Molière himself was in failing health and feeling particularly vulnerable.

Many scholars have speculated that the physicians mentioned in the play are caricatures of physicians of King Louis XIV<sup>th</sup>'s Court. For example, it has often been speculated that Monsieur Purgon mentioned in the play is modeled after Dr. Guenaut who was one of the King's personal physicians (Prest, 2008). It is important to note that the experiences Molière had at the Royal Court were likely not reflective of the medical treatment the broader public received. Molière belonged to a small but significant coterie of 16<sup>th</sup> century writers who were influenced by the new philosophy of Cartesian mechanism. These philosophers believed that a man's ability to understand himself and his environment was very limited, and hence they looked down upon immaterial things such as spirits. Molière's negative view of the ritualistic medical culture pokes fun at the medical profession's claim to have derived their expertise from their learning when they openly excluded the opportunity to learn from new philosophical ideas. The founding father of this philosophical movement was largely claimed to be an essayist named Montaigne. He was hostile to the medical profession, both fearing and despising physicians, and many of the ideas expressed in his essays are echoed in Molière's work (Brockliss & Jones, 1997).

It is also important to keep in mind the dramatic intentions of Molière's writing. As many literary critics are quick to point out, Molière was a satirist, and in both French *farce* tradition and the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the medical doctor and the pedantic lawyer or philosopher feature as recognized comic types:

The fact that Molière returned to the theme of medicine and to the satire of the medical profession time and again throughout his career tells us less about any obsession or vendetta he might have had than about what a successful comic strategy he had found.

(Prest, 2006).

## Conclusion

The many characteristics of medicine portrayed in *Le Malade Imaginaire* were likely exaggerated, or at least used to provide the audience with framework of archetypal figures in which the characters could be placed. The dramatic purpose of a comedy of the time was not just to entertain but to change behaviour. Molière wanted to convince the Court that consulting a physician could be a waste of time and potentially dangerous:

If you're not careful he'll take such good care of you that he'll see you off into the next world".

(Molière, III, p. 3).

However, simply outlining philosophical beliefs would be boring and difficult to understand. The portrayal of the physician's practical and social ineptitude (the inability to identify a healthy man, and the boorishness of the physicians in the play) appeals to the audience's emotions, and allow Molière to introduce rather non-conventional beliefs of time. The time of King Louis XIV was one where many people believed that the art of healing was divinely constituted. Molière attempted to suggest that doctors only existed through the demands of their patients.

The play became part of contemporary Court discourse, but for the most part the crown and courtiers of the seventeenth century remained just as dependent on medical practitioners as before. A good example is Madame de Sévigné (1626-1696), who lived in King Louis XIVth's Court and witnessed Molière's play. She was a self-professed hypochondriac (Hall, 1984), who adopted Molière's ideas and rhetoric, but failed to internalize his message and continued to frequent Court physicians as before.

Molière wrote the part of the ill hypochondriac, Argan for himself, and performed it himself at the King's Court. Ironically, at the time of the performances, he was failing with tuberculosis and died hours after the 4<sup>th</sup> performance of the play. Given his criticism of the faculty of medicine, many of the audience went on to view his demise as either poetic justice or divine chastisement.

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