

Money Immobility and Mobility in Moliere's Last Comedies

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In the 17th century society reflected in Moliere's comedies money appears to be a fundamental power: Above all, it is defined as a way of life. From a certain point of view, in Moliere's last works money appears tracing the channels of capital circulation or emphasizing the capital immobility marked by the avarice of the main characters. Money and particularly the inheritance or even the dowry represent an important value for the times and highlight a power in these works, which is by no means to be despised. On the one hand, we will be interested in the money mobility and immobility in Moliere's last three comedies while sketching the socio-professional framework of his times, that of the bourgeoisie, and on the other, we will explore the psychological attitudes of the characters towards money and the means used to realize their own ambitions.

Keywords: channels of capital circulation, money mobility and immobility, society of the 17th century, spirit of preciosity, psychological attitudes

Introduction

From the year 1671 to 1673, Moliere is engaged in the composition of his last three comedies in which money plays an essential role. Throughout his life, as it is well known, the author has experienced financial difficulties, even though he came from the petty bourgeoisie, which he knows very well: It is a nearly similar background that he depicts in *The Impostures of Scapin*, *The Learned Ladies*, and *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Moliere was not the only author concerned with money at that time: La Bruyère, too, presented money as the cause of the corruption of that century. They both testify to "(...) the vertiginous injustice of the distribution of goods, and especially (of) the violence that is continually made to the poorest so that they provide the rich with the means of their luxury" (Tournand, 1970, p. 156). On the one hand, we will refer to the money immobility or not in the society of the 17th century reflected by Moliere's world in relation to upper class and professional classes, such as the liberal and judicial professions but always in relation to matrimony. On the other hand, we will investigate the psychological attitudes of the characters in Moliere's last comedies while addressing the spirit of preciosity and the attraction towards money.

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The Circulation or Not of Money in the Society of the 17th Century

Money and the Upper Class

Molière refers to a society where the money circulates allowing various financial obligations to be met. It presents itself as the indispensable means to survive and the characters meet in order to comply with the regulations in question.

In Scapin's delusion the valet Silvestre is interested in ensuring his survival. In this way, the class of the valets and their pressing daily needs is sketched out, a fact emerging against the ambitious Scapin's plans (*The Impostures of Scapin*, I, 5). As far as Scapin is concerned, he hopes to make money by establishing contacts with people more powerful than him, and more precisely with the bourgeois. First, he meets Argante and presents himself as the intermediary of the so-called brother of Hyacinthe. To ask for a large sum, Scapin adopts financial arguments to attract his interlocutor's interest: He explains in detail how the so-called brother will invest this capital to buy goods. Using a free indirect style, he brings back his lyrics and emphasizes his needs by the redundant repetition of "Il faut".

Further on, Scapin uses the same trick again, disguising himself as a boy. That element is remarkable indeed. If the shrewd valet wishes to circulate the money of the bourgeoisie for his own benefit, the bourgeoisie wants to accumulate and keep the capital. Indeed, Scapin intends to overcome that obstacle by inventing Zerbinette's abduction, intending to demand a ransom. Carle has set the conditions under which he can release kidnapped Zerbinette (*The Impostures of Scapin*, II, 4). Scapin also presents himself as the intermediary between fathers and sons, who as a new Mercury circulates the immobilized sums of money owned by those stingy bourgeois. In this way, there is an exchange between those who receive the money and those who provide it. Once that mechanism is activated, Léandre receives the ransom to release Zerbinette. That trade is regulated according to the laws of supply and demand, purchase and sale (*The Impostures of Scapin*, II, 8). In that situation, money is used not only for material goods to be purchased, but also for a person to be redeemed. It is closely linked to a theft, because Zerbinette, who became a slave, loses her fortune as we will later discover in the scene of the recognitions.

The Learned Ladies illustrate the case of an unexpected accident in the circulation of money, which can make one lose his fortune. Chrysale learns that he is ruined by bankruptcy (*The Learned Ladies*, V, 6, 1705). Thus, it is possible to take advantage of the circumstances as Scapin does and steals the money of the bourgeois, but it also happens that the business of the latter becomes so complicated that leads to loss of reliability. Scapin explains to Argante how the solidarity between some members of the society is producing a profit to the detriment of the uninformed individual.

Thus, Molière gives the opportunity to characters belonging to the well-to-do, affluent social class emerging from the third class to appear, a fact which ascribes to the bourgeoisie the image of a society in which duplicity and a lust for gain reign. Whenever a financial affluence appears above all as a guarantee of respectability, we must examine it twice: Sometimes the conditions under which money flows make us pause to reflect on the apparent honesty of people. However, as in the case of the "debtors" and the "borrowers" hired by Panurge, the hero of Rabelais in his third book, money, is also here again a "cornerstone" of society (Rabelais, 1973).

Money and the Liberal Professions

Molière draws the picture of his contemporary society. He illustrates that money is a social value par excellence, on this point joining Bruyère who describes a corrupt society governed by injustice in the distribution of goods: “according to Bruyère, the 17th century was the century of money in the history of French society” (Tournand, 1970, p. 155).

Molière's last plays reflect the power of money over morals and over those who practice a liberal profession such as doctors or notaries, who are mercilessly characterized by their lust for gain and their scandalous abuses. The exhibition scene of *The Imaginary Invalid* highlights the profit-making spirit of the doctors, who consider their profession as a means of accumulating wealth. Argan, and his brother, Beralde, both admit that doctors do not exercise their social duty in an honest way (*The Imaginary Invalid*, III, 3). However, the doctors are not the only ones involved. Everyday life is full of lies. As the notary explains to Argan, lawyers strictly follow the law. However, he exposes to the Invalid a strategy using illegal means, in case the latter would like to make profit out of his capital (*The Imaginary Invalid*, I, 7). The three means to make profits clearly outlined by the notary underline the intelligence and know-how he possesses and uses in order to give unfair advice. For this reason, financial means to evade the law are invented.

Money and Justice

Thus, the legal system is condemned in advance: Justice is at the service of the wealthy. Indeed, trials had multiplied in the 17th century, during the times of the “Chicanneaux” and greed or venality reigning at all levels of the judiciary system was denounced everywhere.

In *The Imaginary Invalid*, a usurer named Polichinelle is arrested by archers, who lead him to prison. Polichinelle pretends to have no money, but he does not escape caning and ends up paying (*The Imaginary Invalid*, first interlude). Money is therefore presented as a means of escaping the torments inflicted by those who possess a certain power, which they use in an insolent and arbitrary manner.

In the case of *The Learned Ladies*, Philaminte was ordered to pay 40,000 ECU plus the costs by judgment of the Court of Justice (*The Learned Ladies*, II, 6, 1702-1704). Artiste points out that the expression “condemnation” is not appropriate in this case. The case of Philaminte reveals the abuse of the judicial system which pursues the innocent. The duplicity of the lawyers is evidenced by the ineffectiveness of their pleadings.

In *The Impostures of Scapin*, Argante wants to appeal to court to get his son divorced. Scapin advises him not to do so (*The Impostures of Scapin*, II, 5). Again, Molière is not alone in denouncing that situation. In fact, the humanistic comedies of the 16th century, such as the works of Turnèbe, already advise against resorting to trial presented as a loss in all points of view. As we have just seen, one of the most frequent circumstances in which the characters of those comedies are tempted to appeal to justice is that of the case of marriage or love.

The Role of Money in Matrimony

In family relationships marriage depends on money. In general, the parents' will, who are portrayed as stingy, is an obstacle to the young people's happiness. Parents insist on trying to impose their authority by settling the dowry with a notary. In this sense, marriage appears to be a case or even a negotiation with articles, confirming the parental authority.

Philaminte caused her daughters' misfortune especially by exercising her parental authority on Henriette as Argan did on Angélique. Philaminte is ridiculed, desiring to sign a contract written in a formal style (*The Learned Ladies*, V, 3, 1601-1602). Thus, a gap between the essence and the conventionality of matrimony is simultaneously underlined, as it is conceived at those times: monitoring and pretext with manifestations from the refinement to the expression of joy that show-off the person's status to the society the subtle bond which unites the essence and the conventionalities of a marriage: money. As M. C. Giblin points out,

The two sisters, Armande and Henriette have very opposite views regarding life. At the opening of the play, Armande urges her sister to raise herself to more dignified heights, to forget Clitandre, to cultivate a taste for noble accomplishments, and to give herself up to intellectual pursuits. (Giblin, 1941, p. 25)

From his point of view, Argan wants to marry his daughter to a doctor's son, which is a way to reduce his expenses as much as possible. As Furetière writes in *Roman Bourgeois* what the corruption of the century marries is a bag of money, rather than a young man to a woman.

However, in Molière's last comedies, the stubbornness of the parents linked to the dowry and the contract must yield to the love of the young people who, according to humanist principles and with moderation, follow the way of Nature. When Octavian meets Hyacinte, he feels drawn to her, despite the simplicity of her adornment (*The Impostures of Scapin*, I, 2). Octavian falls in love with Hyacinte for her virtues and decides to marry her, although he learns that she does not possess any fortune. The young people's love, far from being dependent on money, is realized in the reciprocity of feelings; without rejecting the conventions. At the same time, the intelligent Zerbinette, while addressing Scapin, stresses cold-blooded that with the ransom, Léandre can redeem himself but not his feelings. Léandre will have to show his fidelity, which is expressed in a marriage proposal (*The Impostures of Scapin*, III, 1). Thanks to Zerbinette's ingenuity, their mutual love is based on honesty and sincerity of feelings, in this case opposed to money.

However, money and love can go together. In *The Learned Ladies*, for Clitandre marriage is associated with love without financial restrictions. At the time when Henriette's family thought they were ruined, he generously offered to allocate his possessions to Philaminte (*The Learned Ladies*, V, 6, 1731-1732).

In Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid*, money can be associated with a certain wisdom. From his point of view, Chrysale knows the importance of money and distinguishes himself from his Philaminte "philosopher" wife. Before the coup du théâtre where he thinks he is ruined, he willingly accepts Clitandre as his son-in-law who, although without great wealth, demonstrates moral qualities (*The Imaginary Invalid*, II, 4, 405). The example of the reasonable father is reminiscent of the Girard Des Contents of Turnèbe, which follows the humanist principles. The esteem in which "virtue" is held heralds the aesthetic of bourgeois drama. The marriage of young people succeeds because of mutual love.

The previous generation, that of Béline, testifies in Molière that the young ladies were married against their own will. Béline's reaction in *The Imaginary Invalid* highlights the weight of the conjugal yoke by supporting a hated husband throughout her life to finally enjoy his money (*The Imaginary Invalid*, III, 12). In this case, money appears as a compensation or a substitute in order to denounce the scandal of these disproportionate marriages between old men and young women.

Those comedies offer the spectacle of the confrontation of two generations, the young one struggling for a marriage based on love, while that of the parents by making marriage a matter of funds, above all. Once the arguments of the parental generation are refuted or ridiculed, the young people are open-minded to new experiences and they reverse the order of outmoded values by exalting the reciprocity of love feelings, while continuing to respect the solemnity of the commitment of marriage.

Psychological Attitudes Towards Money

Money is presented as an object of compensation and even of seduction as already indicated with the case of Béline in *The Imaginary Invalid*. Faced with the money issue, the character will show his instinct for self-preservation, but also sometimes his passion for power, and even that of enjoying other people's money. In these grounds, Molière reveals a depiction of the human vices that are expressed by the means of money. He analyzes the insanity it can provoke, whilst the character lives in an illusion since all self-control disappears. The money reveals human weakness, ridiculing the superficial pretensions of the characters: Once again, their reliability is questioned when this passion reigns them, by using stratagems to deceive others.

The Spirit of Preciosity and Money

That is, for hypocrisy the spirit of preciosity is a choice of life. According to M. C. Giblin, "One of the favorite diversions of the précieuses was to paint wood portraits of characters" (Giblin, 1941, p. 16). For Molière, human nature is considered perverted by the perfectionism of preciosity in the 17th century, which distances itself from reason. Discussing *The Learned Ladies*, R. Garapon notes:

It is that in reality we are in the presence of an authentic comedy of character: the source of the intrigue and the interest depend almost entirely on the two central figures of Trissotin, new avatar of Tartuffe, and Philaminte in whom the indiscreet inclination for science is mixed with a brilliant authoritarianism and an authentic stoicism. (Garapon, 1977, p. 195)

Clitandre accuses the narrowness of mind of those who want to be affluent (*The Learned Ladies*, IV, 3, 1379-1380). In this way "wealth", in the metaphorical sense of the spirit of preciosity, is denounced.

Trissotin is defined as a greedy and unfeeling calculator. This cynicism and brutality will finally bring him down. At the announcement that Philaminte and Chrysale have lost all their possessions, he suddenly changes his mind (...), Philaminte will finally discover the taste of Trissotin's gain (*The Learned Ladies*, V, 6, 1727-1728). Trissotin is undoubtedly attached to material wealth. At the time of reading sonnets, his spirit of profit is revealed by the terms used taken from the lexical field of money. He began by extolling the richness of the apartment (*The Learned Ladies*, III, 2, 774-775). Later his love metaphors reveal his attachment to money (op. cit., 827-830). The acquisition of power and money then passes through a love strategy based on "appearances" and vice versa.

For the affluent, all values even literary are reduced to a numerical estimate, whose hyperbolic character strengthens the ridiculous element, as Belise points out (*The Learned Ladies*, III, 2, 833). Trissotin aims at Henriette's dowry as a means for him to gain money. Not only his avarice but also his cover-up attitude and unmasked hypocrisy is brought to light. Thus, his motives are falsely honest, and they will not convince Henriette (*The Learned Ladies*, V, 1, 1473-1475). His monstrous attitude, called "self-esteem" by La Rochefoucauld, is finally a manifestation of an exclusive attachment to one's own person.

The Attraction of Money

Molière pinpoints the vanity of human nature which spreads to those obsessed and tormented by the love of money.

Fathers are dominated by an intense desire to save more and more, and to do so, their parental authority violates the natural rights of their children. Argan thought of taking advantage of her daughter by marrying her with the son of a doctor (*The Imaginary Invalid*, I, 5). "It is perfectly understandable, therefore, that our man took it upon himself to institutionalize, as it were, his illness and the care he requires, by marrying his daughter to Thomas Diafoirus and testing in favour of his nurse" (Garapon, 1977, p. 182). Father's greed highlights his passion for gold. Love for children is thwarted by greed and thirst for hoarding.

Geronte also reveals his avarice facing Scapin and Zerbinette. Even in front of eminent danger, he makes promises to Scapin, manifesting his avarice and calculating spirit (*The Impostures of Scapin*, III, 2). By his desire to preserve and specially to acquire ever more wealth, the stingy father provokes. Zerbinette's story highlights the Geronte's human vice. First, the girl is characteristic of that case, pointing his excessive avarice (*The Impostures of Scapin*, III, 3). The use of superlative underlines the extreme degree of avarice. Molière refers here to the case of the poor youth, who must obey to the authority of the avaricious fathers. Later, Zerbinette explains in detail that passion which takes hold of his being, making him unable to fight against it, since the real dilemma is that Geronte finds himself divided between this passion for gold and his paternal love (*The Impostures of Scapin*, III, 3). It should be noted that Molière analyses that degrading passion, and finally, the issue of filthy money. Certainly, the blind passion manages to isolate a person from reality. It enslaves man and feeds him with lies. By creating illusions and ridiculed, man becomes an unfortunate toy of vice, a fact which demonstrates his weakness.

But not all suffer pathologically from the lust for money. Dominated by lucidity, it can serve to reveal other mechanisms, while continuing to dictate behaviors though. Thus, the genius of the deceitful man is to exploit established situations. This ability to deceive belongs to Scapin, who uses his tactics to profit from the money of the avaricious fathers. This smart and cunning servant, borrowed from the traditional farce, is distinguished by his ingenuity. Scapin remains perfectly aware of the sneaky means he uses to deceive others as he addresses Octavian (*The Impostures of Scapin*, I, 2).

For Scapin, his hypocritical game is associated with winning and exploitation. He did not hesitate to deceive his master, Léandre, since he stole the watch he was supposed to deliver to Zerbinette. He keeps this secret only to be revealed on another occasion, when Leandre urges him to confess the revelation of his affair with Zerbinette. Skillfully, Scapin denounces the infidelity to his master by confessing a fact of less importance, that of the theft of the watch (*The Impostures of Scapin*, II, 3). Scapin uses a whole array of disloyal means with the purpose to disguise the truth. Being agile and a cheater, he always invents tricks to fool the greedy fathers. Argante is wary of giving Scapin his money. On two occasions, Scapin pretends with finesse not to accept it (*The Impostures of Scapin*, II, 6).

Sometimes there's no better lie than telling the truth. Once again there is the problem of reliability, a theme favorite to Molière. Scapin's technique is to help others by taking advantage of them. In this sense, the cunning valet expresses his contempt for those he deceives. He succeeds in stealing money from Argante and Geronte. The two fathers, meeting each other, realize that they had been duped (*The Impostures of Scapin*, III, 6). Geronte insists that Scapin deceived him not only materially, but also personally.

However, the roles will be reversed: In turn Scapin will “pay”: The mobility of money and the mobility of situations will be stronger than him. So, the greed that Scapin, too, displays, will backfire. It was himself who, by having set in motion the mechanism of deceit, invented a humiliating revenge for Geronte (*The Impostures of Scapin*, II, 7). Scapin plays on the semantic double meaning of the term “money”. In this case, it designates the affront to Geronte. The technique of persuasion used for is morally reprehensible. In return, the stratagem of Ariste to reveal the power of youth love and the betrayal of Trissotin, that of Toinette disguised as a doctor underline the power of love.

From a humanist point of view, Molière emphasizes the struggle between the forces of Nature and the force of goodness associated with freedom and human ambition. The lust for money makes man more than a slave of gold; a slave of his own passions: “never of nature one must depart” (Boileau, 1804, Chant III, 414). Molière puts into practice this maxim of Boileau, until the end of his life with constancy, which is transformed to an interest for morals (Garapon, 1977, p. 193). That is why he gives us lessons in practical morality while keeping his works pleasing in style. Laughter, born most often of exaggeration, presents itself as a means which allows man to remain lucid and conscious of his faults.

Conclusion

Money thus plays a major role in Molière's last comedies and more precisely, in *The Impostures of Scapin*, *The Learned Ladies*, and *The Imaginary Invalid*. The money interests Molière to the point of constituting a pre-text for his comedies. Molière once again depicts a picture of contemporary society and of the power that money represents in everyday circumstances, as well as of the spirit of profit-making which inspires the liberal and judicial professions, but also governs marriage, being conceived as a contract. That critical view of his contemporary society and interpersonal relations still reflects positive attitudes towards money. But, more often Molière offers the spectacle of the vices linked to money, which freely reign man. The refined psychological analysis of the individual offered by Molière reveals, on the one hand, the degradation and the sclerosis that represent the spirit of affluence, which far from caring about philosophy, is mobilized by the desire of the acquisition of material goods, and, on the other hand, the more common lust for gold. Thus, deceit reigns, whether at the level of the person living in illusion or at the level of the deceitful means the man uses to assert his authority either material or intellectual among the others. Through the truth of observation, the characters' reaction to money invites us to reflect on man's dishonesty and vanity while provoking laughter. As a connoisseur of detours of human nature, Molière highlights the harmful consequences of passion by using the comical springs of farce. Above all humanism remains fundamentally charming. Molière still knows how to make people laugh, and he proves it well in his last works: deliberately and out of aesthetic ambition, as we have tried to show; but also, by the effect of a natural inclination (Garapon, 1977, p. 229).

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