

For Love or Money: The Comedy of Molière
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Molière is the stuff of legend in French theatre. Dubbed the “god of laughter,” Molière has been so influential that the French equivalent of the Tony Award is called *Le Molière*. Pivotal in the French national identity, Molière rose from the grave a century after his death; rumor has it that French Revolutionaries exhumed Molière’s remains with the intention of using portions of his skeleton to make a porcelain cup from which “one could drink patriotically to the Republic.”¹

Though we often remember Molière as a masterful comic playwright, he was first and foremost an actor. Frequently compared to Charlie Chaplin in style and skill, Molière performed the lead comic roles in many of his plays, including Alceste in *The Misanthrope* and Orgon in *Tartuffe*. Ironically, Molière died from tuberculosis a few short hours after performing the title role of *The Imaginary Invalid*.

In spite of this tragic ending, Molière’s plays reveal his comic genius. As a writer, he borrowed enthusiastically from the past. *The Miser’s* roots, for example, extend to Plautus’s ancient Roman comedy *Aulularia*. Molière’s enduring comic stylings—quick, witty banter, physical comedy, and the development of socially refined characters based on known types—remain widely used in theatre, television, and film today.

The Miser premiered in 1668 in the court of King Louis XIV, during an era marked by an obsession with external markers of wealth in architecture, clothing, and art. In a shining symbol of this attitude, the King’s stunning new palace at Versailles was literally gilded in gold. Since these physical embodiments of wealth were indicative of social status, it was particularly threatening to the nobles when members of the bourgeoisie began showing off their own wealth in similar ways. For Molière, however, these concerns provided the impetus for hilarious theatre. Nobles could laugh at Harpagon, a wealthy bourgeoisie who protected his wealth at all costs; his “sensible”—if extreme—attitude toward money ultimately reinforced the social order, even as it reminded the audience of the importance of love and family.

It may seem as if 17th century France has little to do with the 21st century here in the United States. Yet as we watch our own economic woes unfold, Molière reminds us to re-examine the place of material goods in our lives. In *The Miser*, laughter—and love—remain truly timeless remedies.

¹ From Mechele Leon’s *Molière, the French Revolution, and the Theatrical Afterlife*, 141.