

The Miser

Introducing to you a masterpiece by one of the 17th Century's most talented playwrights... Jean-Baptiste Moliere....

Summary of the Plot

Harpagon, a rich miser, rules his house with a meanness which the talk of the town. He keeps his horses so weak that they cannot be used. He lends money at such an extortionate rate that the borrower will be crippled by it and he is constantly in fear of having his wealth stolen from under his nose. Obsessively fearful, he suspects everyone and constantly checks his grounds where he has buried a large sum of money to keep it safe!

As for the real treasures, his children, he marginalises and dominates them. He deprives them of independence by denying them money. He deprives them of the freedom to choose a marriage partner for themselves. Instead, he uses them the gain more riches for himself by organising wealthy spouses for them. As if this isn't enough he is, hypocritically, planning to marry for lust.

Since father and son have designs on the same woman, they become rivals in love. But such is the force of true love that through a staged robbery the children take control of their own destinies forcing their father to give up his plans for their weddings in return for the restoration of his wealth. And en route they discover one or two surprises about themselves that they could not have begun to imagine.

The Play In Context

L'avare (The Miser) was written in 1668, after a difficult period for Moliere personally. It is the twenty second of the thirty plays that he wrote. The idea for a central character obsessed with money came partly from a play *Aulularia* by the classical author Plautus, which had recently been translated into French at that time and partly from a real life officer of the law, Tardieu, famed in Paris, mocked for his avarice and finally murdered by robbers in 1665.

Knowledge of life at the time really helps nowadays audiences to understand the main aspects of the story.

Children even when they came of age remained the legal responsibility of their father and could be told what to do by him. Fathers therefore decided on all aspect of their children's lives. They chose spouses for their children, often according to the dowry offered rather than the people their children would choose to marry.

Women were, from a legal point of view, second class citizens. They were considered merely as daughter or wife or mother. Without the support of a man, they led a very difficult life as is the case with Mariane and her mother (two central characters).

In a bourgeois household, they were roughly ten servants all with separate responsibilities. So the fact that Maitres Jacques (one of his Harpagon's servants) fulfils two roles demonstrates another spect of Harpagon's avarice.

Money features greatly in the play. At that time money came as metal coins. There were no such things as banknotes. You kept your money in a strong box or safe. The sum buried in Harpagon's garden, 10000 gold ecus, or 50000 francs would have been 33kg of 10 pound coins. The amount Cleante (his son) wants to borrow, 15000 francs, would have been 3000 ecus, weighing something like 9kg. If you compare the sums mentioned with costs documented by Madame de Maintenon ten years later in her *Lettres*, writing to her brother about the running costs for a household such as Harpagon's would have been, we can assume it would have been about £3500 per year. So the amount buried and the amount needed by Cleante could be considered as nearly thirteen times and four times respectively the annual budget for running the house. Critics have analysed the importance of money and its relative value compared to today but do not agree on the calculations. What we cannot deny is the importance of money generally to Harpagon. It's what destroys his relationships with the world. Even if he has got huge quantities of money in the house, he denies it. He suspects his servants of stealing from him. He finds ways to avoid spending money by refusing to nourish his houses amply, criticising the expenditure of his fashion conscious son and by choosing filling dishes for his guests rather than ones they might enjoy. The interest rate he suggests for Cleante's loan is five times the amount permitted by law as enshrined in a royal decree. Thus his avarice alienates his children and leads him to commit crimes.

The Author

Now a little about the author himself...

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was baptised in Paris in 1622. His mother was the daughter of a tapestry maker and his father was a tapestry merchant of the royal court. His mother died ten years later and his father remarried that same year!

In 1642 he began studying law in Orleans as his father requested but then he met an actress Madeleine Bejart who became his lover for nearly years. In 1643, he abandoned his studies and founded the 'Illustre Theatre' Company with Madeleine and her brother Joseph and here adopted the name Moliere.

After an unsuccessful start in Paris which saw Moliere imprisoned in 1645 for debts, the company set off to tour the provinces for 13 years.... The company returned to Paris in 1658 to the Petit Bourbon (part of the Louvre palace) under the protection of the King's

brother.

In 1661, the company moved to the Palais Royal and the following year, Moliere married Armande Bejart, Madeleine's sister (Harsh! and isn't that just slightly incestual?!?!). He also received an allowance from the King.

A year later their first son was born, with the King being godfather to young Louis, but sadly the baby died in 1664. This was the year when Moliere's play, Tartuffe which criticised religious hypocrisy, was banned. The next year signalled the arrival of his daughter Esprit-Madeleine but also of Moliere falling ill.

By 1668 he had split from the missus (I suppose she hadn't gone through enough for him with only two kids in two years!!!)and wrote L'avare -The Miser.

In his plays Moliere usually played the lead role and in 1673 during a performance of *Le Malade Imaginaire* - The Imaginary Illness, he became ill and died that very evening. There is something very fitting about his exit from the world, dramatic, unexpected and ironically playing a character feigning illness.

Scene Summaries

Act I

La Fleche, servant to Cleante, son of the rich miser Harpagon, is waiting for his master in Harpagon's house. Valere explains to the audience how he has assumed the role of a servant to be near his love Elise, Harpagon's daughter. They met when he rescued her from drowning, and they fell in love. He abandoned his own plans to seek out his mother and father. In order to gain favour with Harpagon, he behaves in ways which he knows will please him.

Harpagon enters, angry with La Fleche for hanging around. He suspects him of stealing something from him. La Fleche is angry at being suspected and points out that Harpagon is so careful with his money that it would be impossible to steal it. Harpagon inspects La Fleche's hand and breeches, La Fleche gets his own back by insulting misers in general. He avoids more trouble with Harpagon by implying that he doesn't believe Harpagon is actually a miser himself.

Harpagon confides in the audience expressing anxiety about the large sum of money he has buried in the garden.

As Cleante and Elise enter he is again fearful that they might have heard what he is saying about the hidden money. It is hard for him to check whether they did hear without introducing the theme of money again!

So he is obliged to imply that he was saying how nice it **WOULD** be if he had a lot of money at home. He criticises Cleante for his excessive spending. He interprets their

gestures to one another as a sign that are plotting to steal from him. They are actually trying to work out how to broach the subject of marriage with him since they have both found people they wish to marry.

Harpagon also wants to discuss marriage with them and he mentions a young girl called Mariane (who is the person that Cleante would like to marry). Harpagon wants to know what Cleante thinks of her and cites her lack of wealth as an issue standing in the way of marriage. Cleante says that money is irrelevant if true love exists, then Harpagon says he has decided to marry her. Cleante, shocked and sickened rushes off the stage. Meanwhile, Harpagon says that Elise is to marry Seigneur Anselme, which she vehemently opposes.

When Harpagon suggests they refer to Valere to judge the wisdom or lack thereof of her proposed marriage to Anselme, she is delighted and relieved as it is he whom she loves. She knows, as her love is reciprocated that he will not allow Harpagon to force her to marry someone else.

Valere, playing his usual fawning role, and before he knows what Harpagon IS talking about says that whatever it is, Harpagon must be right and then is shocked by what he has unwittingly endorsed.

Harpagon, hearing the strange noise Valere emits in his shock, thinks that he can hear a dog barking in the garden and that this must mean someone is after his money and rushes off to check. Valere reassures Elise that somehow they will sort things out and then on Harpagon's return, pretends to be lecturing Elise on how she should respect and obey her father. There is a certain irony when Elise readily agrees that she will do everything Valere tells her. Harpagon feels pleased that he has such a supportive servant in Valere.

Act II

Cleante expresses his frustration that he and his father are rivals in love with the same woman but plans to keep his own sentiments secret while he tries to secure funds to help Mariane and her mother. Cleante has dispatched La Fleche to meet with a money-lender. Maitre Simon has acted as an intermediary between La Fleche and the money-lender until the deal is done so as to protect his identity.

The sum in question is 15,000 francs, roughly one third of the money Harpagon has buried in his garden. La Fleche explains that there are some conditions attached to the loan. Cleante is ready to accept them whatever they are, so long as he can get money to give to his beloved. When La Fleche refers to them as 'several small conditions' it is rather an understatement. Firstly, the lender notifies the borrower of the extortionate (and illegal) interest rate, which will come into play if the lender himself has to borrow to provide the loan. Then he says that one fifth of the sum, 3000 francs is to be provided as goods and details a ridiculous list of outmoded useless bits of furniture and oddments including a stuffed crocodile.

Cleante is resentful but feels trapped by his desire for the money and his own father's

unwillingness to give him any.

Meanwhile, Maitre Simon enters with Harpagon discussing a young man who wants to borrow from Harpagon. It is clear to the audience from the moment Maitre Simon starts talking, that he is acting on the behalf of Cleante. There is much humour to be derived from listening in the way which Harpagon is described to himself as someone who is guaranteed to die soon and from anticipating the shock which duly follows as it is revealed to Cleante and Harpagon that they are the unidentified parties in the deal.

Cleante, dismissed by his father, expresses disgust and leaves. Harpagon thinks he ought perhaps to check his money.

The lovers briefly discuss a possible strategy to delay Elise's marriage by feigning illness.

Act III

The scene begins with Harpagon calling his household together to issue instructions in preparation for Mariane's arrival for dinner.

First, he tells La Merluche to clean everything but warns him not to rub the furniture too hard in case he wears it out! Next he explains to Brindavoine, who serves drinks, to wait until he's been asked more than once before topping the glasses up and to be sure to make plenty of water available.

When it is Maitre Jacques's turn, he wants to know whether he is being consulted as coachman or cook, insisting that he change outfit to receive his instructions, according to the role he is playing. Comedy arises out of this because it underline Harpagon's avarice in combining two unlikely roles in one servant. It also serves to show the audience, the relative lack of intelligence of Maitre Jacques.

Maitre Jacques insists that he can only produce excellent food if given money. Valere's comments imply that this is an unreasonable request and that it is perfectly possible to produce good food at no cost. Thus, they compromise, deciding to supply filling foods that they will enjoy less so that there won't be so much to pay for (ingenious!). Valere offers to organise it all.

Harpagon wants his carriage cleaning and horses getting ready. Maitre Jacques laboriously changes outfits again before answering and suggest that the horses are starved and unable to work. Valere says he'll sort the horses out too. At every opportunity to gain favour with Harpagon, he fawn and says whatever he knows Harpagon wants to hear. This enables him, as favourite, to spend more time looking after Elise. Maitre Jacques resents him immensely.

Now for the first time, we meet the much-loved Mariane. She enters confiding to the audience her anxieties at the prospect of her marriage to Harpagon. She might have felt happier at taking on an elderly rich husband if it hadn't been for the fact that recently, she

has met a young attractive man whose identity she does not yet know fully, but with whom she sense that she is in love.

She is shocked at how unattractive Harpagon is when they first meet and then even more shocked to be introduced to Harpagon's son, who is no other than the man with whom she is herself in love.

The conversation between Cleante and Mariane is extremely loaded with significance as Cleante finds way of complimenting her whilst continuing to hide his own burgeoning relationship with her. In doing this, he expresses his surprise, and his horror at the thought of her becoming his mother-in-law. Harpagon is very agitated because to him, Cleante's words sound insulting and offensive. Mariane clearly encourages Cleant, whilst herself not revealing the extent of her feelings to him. Cleante pays her compliments on his father's behalf and tells her of an expensive array of delicacies and drinks he has arranged (paid for by Harpagon). He then insists they takes as a present, the diamond ring on his father's hand, passing off his splutterings of rage at the extravagant spending of his son as expressions of offence that Mariane might not accept the expensive gift as a token of his esteem. Harpagon's impotence in the face of this extraordinary reversal of power is very funny to watch. He is so angry with Cleante for wasting his money.

Elise arrives, is introduced to Mariane, announcing that someone has brought Harpagon some money. Harpagon quickly exits while Cleante, and Elise escort Mariane on a tour of the garden.

Act IV

Harpagon sees Cleante kissing Mariane's hand and suspects that something is happening between them. Adopting a patronising tone, he wants Cleante to confide his impressions and feelings about Mariane to him. Still wishing to protect his true relationship with Mariane, Cleante expresses a lack of interest in her. Harpagon deviously tricks Cleante into confessing his true feelings by suggesting he is having second thought about taking her as his wife, and would have given her to Cleante if he thought that Cleante had any feelings for her. Since Cleante had just denied having feelings, he has to do a complete U-turn and says he would marry Mariane to please his father. Hypocritically, Harpagon says he wouldn't want to force him to do anything he didn't want. Through further questioning, he establishes that Cleante does feel for her and has visited her a few times. He is firm and falsely polite as he warns him that his secret is out before exploding with rage and reverts to anger when Cleante refuses to stop loving Mariane.

Maitre Jacques is called to judge which of them is right and wrong and sees an opportunity to get his own back on Harpagon. On stage, he moves between Cleante and Harpagon, listening to their complaints about each other and taking back to each, the version of the response by the other party that he knows each wants to hear. It is ridiculous to see how readily how each man is to believe that the other has had a change in heart. As Maitre Jacques leaves, he brings the two men together physically on stage to show their new found accord and then hastily leaves them to a new argument! Harpagon

cannot find it within himself to actually give the tip to Maitre Jacques which he acknowledges he deserves, such is the extent of his avarice.

As they make up, they promise respect and tolerance to one another and say thank you to one another for allowing the other to marry Mariane. It then becomes clear as to what has happened, and the conversation returns to the former state of exasperation, with Harpagon dismissing his son suddenly and threatening to disinherit him.

La Fleche enters excitedly. He has managed to steal Harpagon's money box! Harpagon enters in panic and distress, having noticed his box has now been stolen. He begs the audience to let him know what they know.

Act V

In this scene, we are first introduced to Seigneur Anselme. He is a reasonable man. He does not want to force Elise into an unhappy marriage with him and will endeavour to help Harpagon recover his money. Maitre Jacques accuses Valere without a shred of evidence. The fact that he cannot supply the relevant detail required sends a warning signal to the audience by Harpagon is so obsessed and so ready to believe the worst of everyone that he doesn't realise he supplies the detail himself that is missing from Valere's account. We are amused by Harpagon's blindness.

When Valere comes in he believes the crime to which Harpagon desires him to confess is the crime of stealing the love of his daughter. Talk of betrayal and abuse, getting into his household under false pretences continues the misunderstanding. When Valere openly says that he won't deny it and he has no regrets, he refers to loving Elise but Harpagon thinks he's admitting the theft of the money. When he says he had meant to tell him and explain, Harpagon is livid. There can be no explanations to justify theft.

The reason he gives for his actions is love. The audience has to laugh as it doesn't really make sense and Harpagon still misunderstands the situation.

Speaking of Elise as 'a treasure', that he is interested in only perpetuates the misunderstanding and the longer it goes on, the greater the humour in the scene.

When he talks of promises made to one another, Harpagon is puzzled. Out of courtesy and devotion to Elise, Valere assures Harpagon that in this matter Elise isn't to be blamed. Harpagon would not have expected her to be involved. He wants reassurances that sum taken is still intact and asks him,

"You have not touched her?" Valere is shocked that Harpagon even suspects he might have made any physical advance to his loved one before marriage and at the vulgar way in which Harpagon asks him the question. It would have been dishonourable to the relationship if he had got physically involved with her before marriage. It is perhaps hard for a modern audience to realise just how shocking that suggestion would have been to Valere.

In his defence, Valere talks of his entirely pure and respectful ardeur, which simply throws Harpagon into some confusion as he tries to work out what this might mean in relation to his stolen money.

Harpagon is then shocked by Valere's talk of his engagement to Elise which is an entirely new and most unwelcome topic of conversation. As far as Harpagon is concerned this comes on TOP of the theft. No wonder he calls him names. He is furious with Elise for falling for Valere, especially since he believes him to be a thief as well as being of a different social rank. Elise tries to justify this love as Valere saved her life, but Harpagon is not at all interested. Her protestations that he isn't a servant falls on deaf ears.

Valere reveals that he is the son of a nobleman, Dom Thomas d'Alburcy from Naples. Anselme says that this cannot be true as the whole family perished in a shipwreck 16 years ago. Valere reveals that when the ship went down, he was saved and he recently discovered his father had also survived. On his search for his father, he had met, saved and fallen for Elise and had decided the best way to be near her was to assume the role of servant. On producing the proof, a ruby seal belonging to the father and bracelet belonging to his mother, Mariane claims him as her long-lost brother! She also survived the wreck with her mother and eventually came to France.

Anselme then reveals he is their father!

Harpagon's first reaction is to hold Anselme responsible for the theft of his money. He shows no other emotion than greed. Harpagon is wary of letting the lovers marry because of the cost of ceremony and the need to provide a dowry.

However, Anselme generously offers to pay for everything. Harpagon is more bothered to find out who took his money and as the others hurry off to start the wedding preparations and tell Mariane's mother the joyful news that the whole family is alive and will be reunited soon, Cleante returns to Harpagon and calmly barter with him for the right to marry Mariane in return for getting his money box back. The play closes with the image of Harpagon scuttling off, not to join with his children's happy celebrations but to see his 'Dear money box' !!

The Miser

Program Note / Director's Note

If the purpose of comedy is to correct men's vices, I do not see why any group of men should have special privileges. If this were so, it would have a far more dangerous social consequence than all the other vices, and we have seen that the theatre's great virtue is its ability to correct vices. The most beautiful expression of a serious moral is most often less powerful than that of satire; and nothing reforms the majority of men better than the portrayal of their faults. To expose vices to everyone's laughter is to deal them a mighty blow. People easily endure reproofs, but they cannot at all endure being made fun of. People have no objection to being considered wicked, but they are not willing to be considered ridiculous.

Preface to *Tartuffe* 1669

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622-1673) changed his name to Molière in 1643 when he left the study of law to become an actor and playwright. Taking a pseudonym has been a common practice among theatre artists throughout the ages. While more contemporary performers may worry about public relations or a creative statement, those of centuries past attempted to avoid the stigma attached with an unseemly profession. The less flexible among us might say that actors routinely bear false witness and thus practice a sinful form of expression, one to be shunned. On a practical level, theatre remained the realm of "masterless men" because until relatively recently there were no accepted methods that an apprentice might study other than to gain experience. But if Molière wished to save his family from humiliation (his father was a Parisian upholsterer with an appointment to the royal court) or further separate himself from the legal profession, he hardly took an inconspicuous approach.

His plays served to question the very society he sought to entertain. He satirized at will skewering marriage arrangements (*The School for Wives*), medicine and hypochondria (*The Imaginary Invalid*), court manners (*The Would-Be Gentlemen*), religious hypocrisy (*Tartuffe*), and even the conventions of theatre (*The Rehearsal at Versailles*). *Tartuffe*, in particular, touched a nerve leading to official reprimand and banning of the play.