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**Money for Nothing: Molière’s Miser and the Risky World of
Early Modern France**

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Molière’s 1668 comedy L’Avare, or The Miser, takes place during a significant shift in the way that early modern Europeans thought about chance and risk. Staged at the same historical moment that Pascal, Huygens, and Leibnitz were developing the first foundations of probability mathematics, L’Avare conjures up an atmosphere of uncertainty, setting in opposition risk-takers and the risk-averse. As the characters encounter and debate the concepts of usury, life expectancy, gambling, and the risks of maritime travel, they grapple palpably with the consequences of an uncertain world in which Divine Providence can no longer be assumed—a new world in which assurance (the French term for both certainty and insurance) is sometimes granted by faith, but is also sold as a policy. Situated between the notion of Providence and the emerging science of probability, Harpagon the miser’s treasure consequently becomes a re-imagined theatrical touchstone for changing notions of faith and doubt, certainty and risk.

One of Molière’s first biographers recounts that during a 1670 performance of *La Gouvernance de Sanche Pança* Molière (playing the title character) was to enter the scene astride a donkey. The biographer, Jean-Léonor Le Gallois, Sieur de Grimarest, notes that the donkey, “qui ne savait point le rôle par cœur” [“who didn’t know his role by heart”], decided to make his stage appearance before his cue and that Molière, pulling on the halter with all his might, was forced to yell out, “à moi ! ce maudit âne veut entrer !” [“Help me! This cursed donkey wants to go on stage!”], while the other actors laughed.¹ Unable to overcome the animal’s determination, Molière slipped off the donkey’s back and let it wander on stage “pour aller faire telle scène qu’il jugerait à propos” [“to perform whatever scene it deemed appropriate”].²

1 Jean-Léonor Le Gallois, Sieur de Grimarest, *Vie de M. de Molière* (1705), in Molière, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), 21. All translations from French are my own, with the exception of the selections from Molière’s *L’Avare* (for which I use Donald Frame’s translation), or unless otherwise indicated.

2 Grimarest, 21.

The donkey incident (true or not) is merely one more reminder that theater is unpredictable, a laboratory of probability in which the relatively stable text encounters the infinite variety of performance. As an actor, author, and director, Molière was keenly aware of this, writing to the potential reader of *L'Amour médecin* (1666): “On sait bien que les Comédies ne sont faites que pour être jouées, et je ne conseille de lire celle-ci qu’aux personnes qui ont des yeux pour découvrir dans la lecture tout le jeu du Théâtre” [“Everyone knows that plays are only made to be played, and I recommend the reading of this one only to those people who have the eyes to discover in the reading all the play of the theater”].³ Molière’s description of theater underscores the notion of play, understood here both in its theatrical sense (the stage action or “playing”) and as a sort of semi-spontaneous and entertaining supplement to the written text.⁴ Indeed, the “game” (*le jeu*) of live theater, as we might term it, involves an element of unpredictability, each performance (though carefully rehearsed) always subject to the contingencies of time, place, actors and audience. No amount of rehearsal can ever (or should ever) eliminate the particularities that make each performance a step into Heraclitus’s always-changing river. In that sense, to put on a play or *jouer* is, as the French term’s synonyms suggest, also to gamble.

But gambling, in all forms, was undergoing a significant change in the mid-seventeenth century when Molière was writing and performing his comedies. While evidence of extensive gambling dates back to ancient Egypt and Sumeria, historian Ian

3 Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Forestier and Claude Bourqui, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade], 2010), 1:603.

4 In this sense, Molière’s description of the relationship between text and performance approaches Derrida’s notion of *jeu*, described as “la substitution des contenus, l’échange des présences et des absences, le hasard et le risque absolu” (*De la Grammatologie* [Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967], 433) [“the substitution of contents, the exchange of presences and absences, chance, and absolute risk” (*Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976], 307)]. As Derrida writes, the “salle de théâtre” is “arrachée à soi par le jeu et les détours de la représentation, divertie de soi et déchirée par la différance” (*Grammatologie*, 433) [“wrenched away from itself by the games and detours of representation, diverted from itself and torn by difference” (*Grammatology* 307)]. For both playwright and critic, performance becomes a site of chance, variation, and semiotic polyvalence, in a sense staging the nature of language itself.

Hacking has written that no sustained notion of probability existed prior to 1660. Roman dice games, for example, included odds entirely incommensurate with the likelihood of the throws; Hacking concludes, “Someone with only the most modest knowledge of probability mathematics could have won himself the whole of Gaul in a week.”⁵ The idea (and measurement) of probability emerged around 1600, independently and rather suddenly in a wide variety of fields, and in the work of a number of different individuals, including Pascal, Leibniz, and John Graunt.⁶ Probability necessarily implies a change in the way early modern Europeans viewed causality and determinism. From an earlier world-view in which Providence held sway, deciding the fate of an ocean voyage or the lifespan of a human being, the new universe of probability must allow for accidents, as their etymology implies, simply to happen. Ships must sink, people must die of the planet, lethargy, impostume, and surfeit (to cite from the seventeenth-century London bills of mortality) without such events invariably representing a manifestation of God’s will, and in ways—most importantly—that are patterned and predictable.⁷

Molière’s plays, staged in Paris from 1658 to 1673, consequently unfold in a hybrid historical period when spiritual determinism is giving way to impersonal chance, from a cosmos in which every sparrow’s fall is noted (Matthew 10:29) to one in which the Creator may have left the clockwork universe. At the same time Bossuet, the eloquent Bishop of Meaux, is preaching “what is chance to the eyes of men is design to the eyes of God,”⁸ Pascal is calculating the Chevalier de Méré’s odds of rolling double-sixes, given twenty-four throws.

5 Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 3.

6 Hacking, 1, 11.

7 The causes of death mentioned in the London bills of mortality are included in John Graunt’s pioneering study of life expectancy first printed in 1662 (John Graunt, *Natural and Political Observations Mentioned in a following Index and made upon the Bills of Mortality*, 3rd ed. [London: John Martyn and James Allestry, 1665], 14-16).

8 Thomas Kavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 16.

This incongruity is particularly apparent in Molière's 1668 comedy *L'Avare* [*The Miser*]. Paul Claudel wrote in his journal that Molière's theater is characterized by "une atmosphère de passions déchaînées, d'avarice, de mensonge, de tromperie, etc., *comme si Dieu n'existait pas*" ["an atmosphere of unrestrained passions, greed, lying, deceit, etc., *as if God did not exist*," emphasis added].⁹ *L'Avare*'s universe, confirming Claudel's description, is not one in which God certainly does not exist; rather, it is a world in which God might not exist or is potentially absent. While the characters in *L'Avare* do not discuss theology, they grapple palpably with the consequences of an uncertain world in which Divine Providence can no longer be assumed—a new world in which *assurance* (the French term that means both certainty and insurance) is sometimes granted by faith, but is also sold as a policy. Molière's play features several of the central concepts that will spur the seventeenth-century development of a calculus of risk, including usury, gambling, life expectancy, and the dangers of maritime travel. Situated between the notion of Providence and the emerging science of probability, Harpagon the miser's treasure becomes a re-imagined touchstone for changing notions of faith and doubt, or certainty and risk.

The play's prominent inclusion of usury constitutes one of the most important changes that Molière made to his principal literary source, Plautus's *Aulularia*. Plautus's miser, Euclio, is a hoarder—despite the wealth that he has discovered hidden away in his hearth, he chooses to live in an artificial penury and keeps his money out of circulation.¹⁰ While Molière's miser Harpagon also maintains a tight hold on his domestic expenses, his problem is not necessarily one of hoarding. As Jean-Marie Apostolidès has pointed out, "Harpagon is a seventeenth-century miser, that is to say, a usurer."¹¹ The money that Harpagon is hiding does not come from

9 Barbara Alsip, "L'Avare: History of Scholarship," *Œuvres et critiques* 6.1 (1981), 105.

10 Plautus, *Plautus*, tr. Paul Nixon, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966), 1:236-39.

11 Jean-Marie Apostolidès, "Molière and the Sociology of Exchange," tr. Alice Musick McLean, *Critical Inquiry* 14.3 (Spring 1988), 480.

an inheritance or from his own savings. It is the repayment (with interest, we are to understand) of a loan. Nor does Harpagon intend to keep it around. When first given the chance to express himself in private, Harpagon states, “Certes, ce n’est pas une petite peine que de garder chez soi une grande somme d’argent ; et bienheureux qui a tout son fait bien placé, et ne conserve seulement que ce qu’il faut pour sa dépense” [“It’s certainly no small trouble to keep a large sum of money in the house; and happy is the man who has all his pile well invested, and keeps around only what he needs for his expenses”].¹² Harpagon is looking actively for ways to place the money elsewhere, where it can earn, as he terms it, “honnête intérêt” [“decent interest”].¹³ We see his efforts in this regard in the second act, in which he inadvertently almost becomes the usurer to his own son, a transaction that would have assured that at least twelve thousand *livres* of the thirty thousand that he is hiding would have been placed in a way to earn over twenty-five percent interest.¹⁴

In their early modern French context, Harpagon’s actions are both commonplace and contrary to state and canon law. Catholic officials and theologians in the Middle Ages, drawing on patristic writings and Aristotelian philosophy, had long prohibited any loan that demanded interest. As Thomas Aquinas argued, it was impossible to sell the use of fungible goods separate from ownership of the goods themselves; in addition, usury also constituted an arrogant human appropriation (and commoditization) of time, a good owned only by God.¹⁵ Changing economic conditions in Italy and Flanders necessitated some accommodations and the institution of new technologies of credit (including specialized provisions for maritime loans), but for private lenders and borrowers the Church’s

12 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:13; *The Miser*, in *The Misanthrope and Other Plays*, tr. Donald Frame (New York: Signet Classics, 1968), 144.

13 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:15; *The Miser*, 146.

14 Harpagon’s loan is offered at a combination of “denier dix-huit” (that is, one *denier* for each eighteen loaned, or a little over five and a half percent) and “denier cinq” (twenty percent) (Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:23).

15 René Taveneaux, *Jansénisme et Prêt à Intérêt* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1977), 20.

prohibition remained in place in Catholic countries until close to the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ When Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's minister of finances, sought to establish state-run loan offices which would permit private individuals to borrow money at interest, the king consulted the theologians of the Sorbonne and, upon their negative reaction, discontinued the project.¹⁷

Profit-generating private loans in seventeenth-century France could therefore legally assume one of only two forms. The first was an annuity, either constituted for life (a *rente viagère*) or until repayment of the principal (a *rente perpétuelle*). While a *rente* included an annual interest payment (fixed by the government at five percent in Molière's day), it could not include any term limit for full repayment—the lender essentially alienated his or her capital for as long as the borrower chose, since the borrower could repay the principal at any time, or simply continue to make the interest payments.¹⁸ The second form of permissible private loan was the *obligation*, a notarized borrowing of money arranged between two private individuals that could include terms of repayment, but which could not (at least officially) include any interest provisions. However, as Hoffman, Postel-Vinay, and Rosenthal conclude from their study of *ancien régime* French notary records, “[W]hile the contracts could not legally mention any interest due, it is nonetheless

16 Taveneaux, 18. The situation was complicated by the growing distinction between civil law and ecclesiastical policy. Renaissance Humanism brought a revival of Roman law, which had permitted interest-bearing loans while still regulating them. In addition, certain theologians (Gerson, in particular) maintained that the state could enact policies regarding loans that differed from Church positions. This mirrors the stance that Calvin takes, giving stern moral warnings against individuals engaged in loaning money at interest, but acknowledging the right of governments to create laws that depart from scriptural injunctions (Taveneaux, 24-27). The more liberal economic conditions of Protestant (and specifically Calvinist) countries in this period will reflect this change.

17 Taveneaux, 44.

18 Philip T. Hoffman, Gilles Postel-Vinay, and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, “Private Credit Markets in Paris, 1690-1840,” *Journal of Economic History* 52.2 (June 1992), 296. These provisions meant that *rentes* escaped the Thomist critique that usury attempted to sell use separately from full ownership of the borrowed funds. The borrower essentially became the owner of the loaned amount, as long as she continued to, in essence, pay the rent. As Taveneaux writes regarding *rentes*, “Les docteurs les plus rigoristes, et les jansénistes eux-mêmes, les tenaient pour licites et foncièrement différentes du simple prêt à intérêt” [“The most rigorous doctors of theology, and the Jansenists themselves, maintained that they were approved and fundamentally different from a simple interest-bearing loan”] (35).

clear that interest was charged on the *obligations*—indeed, often at a rate above the limit on *rentes*.¹⁹ These interest-bearing *obligations*, immoral and illegal, constitute the shadowy world of Harpagon and his kind, profiteers taking advantage of the need created by a growing capitalism, the shortage of hard cash, and the government’s own unwillingness to enter into the credit market.²⁰

Molière’s play presents a very unique moment for Harpagon, the time in between the repayment of a loan and the opportunity to make new loans—the time in which a substantial portion of the usurer’s wealth is reified and present in his own home. Harpagon’s anxiety, manifest in the constant visits to the garden, does not stem from a habitual love of seeing his gold; rather, it demonstrates the degree to which the present situation is atypical. The repayment of the massive debt creates a moment—the only moment—in which Harpagon and his money are vulnerable. There is no evidence that Harpagon intends to keep this particular sum around any longer than it will take him to find opportunities to lend it back out.

While Harpagon’s obsession with money certainly could be said to commoditize the world around him, the miser’s activities might be more accurately described in terms of liquidation. In a marked difference from Plautus’s hoarder, who simply refuses to spend, Harpagon seeks to transform all the solid assets around him into cash, such as his “ample magasin de hardes” [“big warehouse of used furniture”]²¹ that furnishes a significant part of the lending contract. Indeed, the existence of this warehouse stocked with all varieties of physical objects—beds, guns, musical instruments,

19 Hoffman et al., 296.

20 The sense of *obligation* as a private loan contract may well be setting up ironic word games in *L’Avaro*’s loan scene. Maître Simon, discussing the loan arrangements with Harpagon, states that the young man “*s’obligera*, si vous voulez, que son Père mourra avant qu’il soit huit mois” [“will guarantee, if you want, that his father will die in the next eight months”]. Harpagon responds, “La charité, Maître Simon, nous *oblige* à faire plaisir aux Personnes, lorsque nous le pouvons” [“Charity, Maître Simon, obliges us to do favors to people when we can”] (Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:26; *Miser*, 158, my emphasis).

21 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:27; *Miser*, 160.

stuffed crocodiles—provides clear evidence that Harpagon’s lending practices have led to the bankruptcy of some of his debtors, leading to the seizure of their property.²²

James Gaines has even claimed that Harpagon is in a sense “short selling,” that is, counting on his debtor defaulting, which would allow him to seize the individual’s property.²³ But Harpagon does not intend to collect or keep these items.²⁴ In order to be usable (with “use” constituting the benefit that usury sells), the property in turn must be transformed back into money capable of being put to work. Nor are objects the only things that Harpagon seeks to liquidate: he announces at the beginning of the play his intention to marry his two children in ways that reduce his financial liabilities: Cléante is to be married to a rich widow, Elise to Seigneur Anselme, who will take her famously “sans dot,” that is, without a dowry.²⁵

22 M.J. McCarthy, for example, states that the warehouse’s goods undoubtedly are “defaulters’ effects which [Harpagon] had confiscated as debt settlement” (“The Black Economy in Molière’s *L’Avare*,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 28.3 [1991], 238). Some commentator, including Gaines and Taveneaux, have argued that the objects mentioned in the contract turn the loan into a Mohatra contract, a method of avoiding the charge of usury by having the borrower buy goods on credit and then immediately resell them at a lower price to the lender, thus receiving a certain amount of money immediately, with the obligation to pay back an increased amount at a later date (see James Gaines, *Molière and Paradox: Skepticism and Theater in the Early Modern Age* [Tübingen: Narr Francke (Biblio 17), 2010], 118; Taveneaux 34). This cannot be the case, though, since the physical objects are merely a formality in the true Mohatra contract, never really changing hands. Cléante, on the other hand, is legitimately concerned about receiving the ramshackle objects and the necessity to find a buyer for them (Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:25).

23 Gaines, 118.

24 As Forestier and Bourqui point out, the “peau d’un lézard,” or crocodile skin, is a typical decoration for a *cabinet de curiosités* (Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:1339, note 15). Harpagon is consequently dispersing the contents of a collection.

25 Ralph Albanese, in his excellent discussion of the play, notes: “Plus précisément, Harpagon envisage sa famille comme une entreprise dont il faut à tout moment évaluer la rentabilité ; il traite ses enfants en biens négociables soumis aux lois du marché (le bénéfice qu’entraîne le non-paiement d’une dot), car il conçoit leur mariage en termes de profit” [“More precisely, Harpagon sees his family as a business whose profitability must be constantly evaluated; he treats his children as tradable goods subject to the laws of the market (the advantage that comes from the nonpayment of a dowry), since he conceives their marriage in terms of profit”] (Ralph Albanese, “Argent et réification dans *L’Avare*,” *L’Esprit créateur* 21.3 [1981], 36).

Harpagon's efforts at universal liquidation are so thorough that perhaps a better term would be sublimation, in reference both to the process by which a solid is vaporized and to the Freudian sense where psychic energy is rerouted towards other ends. This is particularly true since Harpagon is not only caught in a classic Oedipal triangle—the rival to his own son for Mariane's affections—but even reduces his own pending marriage to one more financial transaction.²⁶ Interrogating Frosine regarding the possible size of Mariane's dowry, Harpagon insists that Mariane's mother sacrifice in order to provide a financial incentive for the wedding to take place—"Lui as-tu dit qu'il fallait qu'elle s'aidât un peu, qu'elle fit quelque effort, qu'elle se saignât pour une occasion comme celle-ci?" ["Did you tell her that she had to bestir herself, make some effort, and bleed herself, for an occasion like this one?"]²⁷—and in the process, flesh linguistically is made cash, a currency of "blood money" that will allow the contractual negotiations to proceed.

Money, Harpagon's transcendental signifier, regulates exchange values, eliminating pleasure and play, and dissolves all other human obligations—when his children resist his marriage plans for them, the miser responds by disinheriting his son and threatening to put his daughter in a convent.²⁸ In a related process, Harpagon's solid assets are inexorably converted into intangible investments. The physical gives way to the abstract, to the point that his coachmen/chef Maître Jacques can say that Harpagon's poor horses, for lack of food, can no longer properly be called horses, and "ne sont plus rien que des idées ou des fantômes; des façons de Chevaux" ["are nothing more but ideas or phantoms or shadows

26 In this respect, he is strikingly different from another prominent *vieillard amoureux* from Molière's theater, Sganarelle from *Le Mariage forcé* (1664), over fifty years old and engaged to the young coquette Dorimène. For the rich and elderly Sganarelle, marriage is emphatically a corporeal affair, as his *blason* of the various parts of Dorimène's body that will soon belong to him makes quite clear (Molière, *Œuvres*, 1:943).

27 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:30; *Miser*, 163.

28 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:58, 67.

of horses”].²⁹ Everything around Harpagon is disintegrating into the abstract, from his relationship with his children to his servant’s breeches, which are “tout troué par-derrrière” [have “a big hole in the seat”],³⁰ such that we might invoke Marx’s famous description of capitalism’s transformative effects: “All that is solid melts into air.”³¹

In his love of the intangible and in his search for security or certainty, Harpagon represents an aberrant form of Cartesianism, privileging the abstract or intellectual over the physical world, or in other words, favoring abstract debt relations over solid substance. Usury eliminates uncertainty, guaranteeing a certain return or, in the event of default, seizure of other assets. Claiming that loans are a form of safety might strike the modern readers as odd, accustomed to viewing interest as the sign of a loan’s nonpayment risk, but seventeenth-century commentators rejected this interpretation. When the Jesuit casuist Mateo de Moya, expressing the modern approach, suggested that it might be permitted to “celuy qui preste d’exiger quelque chose outre le sort principal, à cause du peril du remboursement où il s’expose” [“he who loans to require something beyond the principal, because of the risk of repayment to which he

29 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:39; *Miser*, 172. Interestingly enough, Freud’s own choice of metaphor to describe the dangers of excessive sublimation is a starving horse (Sigmund Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* [New York: Norton, 1961], 61-62).

30 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:35; *Miser*, 169.

31 Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 476. In this dystopian portrait of a universe in which all ties become sordid economic ones, we might well suspect a subtle allusion back to Rabelais, Molière’s most well-known comedic predecessor. In the opening chapters to Rabelais’s *Tiers Livre* (an important sixteenth-century meditation on risk, chance, and Providence), Panurge runs up an enormous debt and justifies his actions to Pantagruel by pronouncing an encomium of lending and borrowing, amplifying the ideas metaphorically until he argues that both the macrocosm and microcosm function essentially according to a series of obligations, ending with the “devoir” (a play on “duty” and “debt”) that husbands and wives owe each other. Pantagruel responds that it is love, not debt, that fills this all-pervading function and states, “Mais preschez et patrocinez d’icy à la Pentecoste, en fin vous serez esbahy comment rien ne me aurez persuadé” [“But preach on from now until Pentecost, in the end you will be surprised to see that you haven’t persuaded me at all”] (François Rabelais, *Le Tiers Livre* [Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1995], 71). That Molière knew the passage well is evidenced by his direct citation of it in *L’Ecole des femmes* (Molière, *Œuvres*, 1:403).

exposes himself”],³² the theology faculty of the University of Paris responded tersely in 1665, “La doctrine de ces propositions est fausse, scandaleuse, porte à commettre des usures, enseigne divers artifices pour les pallier & pour violer la justice & la charité ; & elle a déjà esté condamnée par la Faculté” [“The doctrine of these propositions is false, scandalous, leads to committing usury, teaches various artifices for disguising it, robbing justice and charity, and has already been condemned by the Faculty”].³³

More extensive justification of the stance against usury is provided by the 1697 volume *Les Loix civiles dans leur ordre naturel*, in which the author distinguishes between risks of commerce and usury: if a debtor loses money on a commercial venture, such losses in no way affect the amount owed to the creditor, which continues to grow regardless of market vicissitudes.³⁴ Usury therefore presents for these pious early modern commentators the condemnable image of “un profit, sans industrie, sans risque, & sans peine” [“profit without industry, without risk, and without effort”].³⁵ From this perspective, usury represents the idle safety of a guaranteed return. Harpagon would agree: when he discusses lending money at interest, he revealingly says that it is “afin de le trouver un jour” [“so as to get it back some day”].³⁶

32 *Censure de la Faculté de Théologie de Paris contre le livre d'Amadeus Guimenius* (Paris: Frédéric Léonard, 1665), 41.

33 *Censure*, 44-45.

34 “Car c’est la regle des profits à venir, que pour y avoir part il faut s’exposer aux événements des pertes, qui peuvent arriver, au lieu des profits que l’on eseroit. Et le parti d’avoir part à un gain futur, renferme celui de ne point profiter, s’il n’y a pas de gain, & de perdre même si la perte arrive. On ne sçauroit donc sans inhumanité, ni même sans crime, se décharger de la perte, & s’asseurer du gain” [“For it is the rule of future profits that in order to have a share one must be exposed to the losses that might occur, instead of the profits that were hoped for. And the wager to have a share in future gains includes that of not profiting, if there is no gain, or to lose if losses occur. One cannot therefore without inhumanity, or even without crime, free oneself from loss and ensure gain”] (Jean Domat, *Les Loix civiles dans leur ordre naturel*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. [Paris: Pierre Aubouin, Pierre Emery, and Charles Clouzier, 1697], 1:251).

35 Domat, 1:252. The *Conférences ecclésiastiques de Paris sur l’usure* published in 1766 will repeat these same arguments, stipulating also that ample legal measures exist that allow a creditor to be compensated upon default of a loan, including provisions that would account for any possible loss created by the delay in receiving the money (*Conférences ecclésiastiques de Paris sur l’usure* [Paris: Estienne, 1766], 173-77).

36 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:15; *Miser*, 146.

Certainly in the wider universe of Molière’s comedies, there are good odds that a lender will not be repaid, as Monsieur Jourdain and Monsieur Dimanche discover in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and *Dom Juan*, respectively. But Harpagon is the great exception to this—not only does he receive the spectacular repayment of ten thousand *écus* in gold the day before the play begins, but in Act Three he is interrupted by yet another debtor arriving with payment.³⁷ It should be noted that Harpagon takes great precaution that no real risk of loss is involved and certainly does not lend to the impecunious aristocracy. As he meets to arrange the loan to the as yet unknown young man in the second act, Harpagon asks, “Mais croyez-vous, Maître Simon, qu’il n’y ait rien à périlcliter?” [“But do you think, Maître Simon, that there’s no risk?”], proceeding then to inquire concerning “le nom, les biens et la Famille” [the name, the means, and the family] of the would-be debtor.³⁸ Maître Simon reassures him that the young man comes from a rich family and, with his mother already dead, soon stands to receive a large inheritance.³⁹ As he carefully places his money, making sure that he profits whether or not the loan can be repaid, Harpagon eliminates uncertainty and reduces the physical world to its abstract cash equivalent. In this sense he anticipates Molière’s other exaggerated Cartesians, the *femmes savantes*, who will belittle the needs of the body in favor of a ridiculous version of the life of the mind. Philaminte’s high-handed dismissal of the body as “cette guenille” [“this rag”] finds its visual

37 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:48.

38 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:26; *Miser*, 158.

39 The conditions of the loan, including Cléante’s assurance that his father will soon die, recall the infamous “Macedonian” edict of the Roman Senate that prevented sons in their minority from contracting debts. A 1677 volume of jurisprudence explains that the law was drafted because of a certain usurer “qui avoit de coutume de prester de l’argent à des fils de famille, dont il connoissoit les biens, à des interests & des usures si horribles, que les enfans étoient obligez non seulement de s’ennuyer de la vie de leurs peres, mais aussi de procurer la mort à ceux desquels ils avoient receu la vie” [“who had the habit of lending money to sons of families whose wealth he knew at such horrible interest rates and usury that the children were incited not only to impatiently wait out their fathers’ lives, but also to procure death to those from whom they had received life”] (Claude de Ferrière, *La Jurisprudence du Digeste, conférée avec les ordonnances royales, les coutumes de France, et les décisions des cours souveraines*, 2 vs. [Paris: Cochart, 1677], 1:341).

representation in Harpagon himself, old, broken-down, coughing, and dressed ridiculously in dilapidated clothing held together with string.⁴⁰

A foil for Harpagon is provided in his own son, Cléante. Father and son, creditor and debtor, Harpagon and Cléante are locked together in relationships that are mutually constitutive but oppositional. Even more importantly, Cléante's mode of living contrasts fundamentally with Harpagon's. While Harpagon accumulates wealth, Cléante dissipates it. Harpagon transforms the objects (and the people) around him into money; Cléante transforms money into objects and relationships. Explaining clothing expenditures to his father, Cléante states, "[J]e mets sur moi tout l'argent que je gagne" ["I put all my winnings on my back"].⁴¹ Furthermore, he aims to use his family's wealth in order to make Mariane his wife. To his father's grim rationalism, Cléante opposes an ethics of pleasure in which money's sterile abstraction serves only to procure actual enjoyment, the sole true good: "Je dépense, donc je suis." Perhaps the clearest moment of Cléante's willingness to convert cash into relationships (and Harpagon's correspondingly opposite approach) is the final scene in which Cléante offers to trade his father the stolen moneybox in exchange for Mariane's hand, an offer which Harpagon accepts.

In addition, at least rhetorically Cléante presents a method of accruing money that is completely at odds with Harpagon's approach. When questioned by his father regarding where he gets the money to buy clothing, Cléante responds that he gambles.⁴² As opposed to his father—who predictably replies that instead of purchasing things, Cléante should loan his winnings out—Cléante claims to be a risk-taker. Rather than accepting his situation passively, Cléante explores dangerous alternatives that will perhaps catapult him to more advantageous opportunities. He takes out loans; he considers eloping with Mariane and starting a new life elsewhere; and of course, he becomes a willing

40 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:33, 564.

41 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:15; *Miser*, 146.

42 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:15; *Miser*, 146.

accomplice in the theft of Harpagon's gold. The concluding bargain with his father gives a sense of how far he is willing to go in risking everything to get Mariane: Plautus's young lover took the gold from his wily servant and returned it to Euclio, thus acquiring the father's good graces. For Cléante, already disinherited and evicted from the household, the bargain that he proposes does not in any way seek to repair his relationship with his father, and Cléante is wagering his last material possessions. He is indeed a gambler.

Cléante is not alone, since the other younger characters—Harpagon's daughter Elise and the love interests of Harpagon's children, Valère and Mariane—are risk-takers as well. Indeed, the play opens with a statement on taking chances in an unknowable world, as Elise wonders if her decision to sign a promise to marry Valère was wise or not: “Non, Valère, je ne puis pas me repentir de tout ce que je fais pour vous...Mais, à vous dire vrai, le succès me donne de l'inquiétude ; et je crains fort de vous aimer un peu plus que je ne devrais” [“No, Valère, I cannot repent of anything I do for you...But to tell you the truth, the outcome gives me some uneasiness; and I am very much afraid that I may love you a little more than I ought”].⁴³ She openly expresses her doubts regarding the constancy of young men, and acknowledges that her rather audacious decision (by seventeenth-century standards) was made despite an atmosphere of uncertainty. In a similarly risky move, Mariane abandons the admittedly distasteful surety of a marriage to Harpagon by agreeing to Frosine's scheme to dupe the miser out of the proposed wedding. Valère also is characterized by bold decision-making despite unsure outcomes. We are first introduced to him as someone who daringly rescued Elise from drowning, and who subsequently has disguised himself in order to enter Harpagon's household and win the miser's favor. His dramatic revelation of his true identity at the conclusion of the play is likewise characterized by other characters as hazardous: as Seigneur Anselme warns him, “Vous risquez ici plus que vous ne pensez” [“You're taking a bigger risk than you think”].⁴⁴

43 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:5; *Miser*, 136.

44 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:69; *Miser*, 206.

Claudel's comment that Molière's theatrical atmosphere is full of lies and deception is true in the sense that these younger characters bluff, conceal, and calculate like poker players, making decisions despite limited knowledge and divergent possible outcomes, a far cry from Harpagon's world of certain returns and win/win contracts. We could say that theirs is not the Cartesian world of certainty, presided over by a God proven beyond doubt through clear and distinct ideas, but instead the Pascalian universe of a hidden God, whose existence is not so much known as wagered. Accepting the possibility of failure, betrayal, and unhappiness, *L'Avare's* younger characters nevertheless commit themselves because of the potential payoff. Such a decision is not necessarily irrational: as Pascal had argued, bets become rational as the prospective felicity increases.⁴⁵ Given that there is no certainty, one would be a fool not to wager in a game where such happiness was a possibility. And such betting is unavoidable—like the gambler Pascal analyzes in his famous wager, the characters in *L'Avare* are already “in the game.”⁴⁶ We could say, then, that the play sets in opposition the risk-averse miser and those who are willing to *miser*, that is, to bet or gamble.

And like any decent gambler (at least beginning in the seventeenth century), Molière's characters begin to think about the odds, particularly concerning the play's most important explicit wager: how long Harpagon will live. Harpagon's age is a centrally important theme, developed at length in the conversation between the miser and Frosine in which he states that he is sixty years old.⁴⁷ Speculations multiply regarding how much longer he can survive: Cléante estimates that his father will not last eight months; Frosine, flattering Harpagon, pretends to read his palm and predicts that

45 In his *Pensées*, Pascal remarks: “Or quand on travaille pour demain et pour l'incertain, on agit avec raison, car on doit travailler pour l'incertain, par la règle des partis qui est démontrée” [“Now when we work for tomorrow and for what is uncertain, we act rationally, for we must work for what is uncertain, according to the rule of wagers which has been demonstrated”] (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, [Paris: Gallimard, 1977], 345).

46 “Oui, mais il faut parier. Cela n'est pas volontaire, vous êtes embarqué” [“Yes, but you must wager. It is not optional, you are already embarked”] (Pascal, 249).

47 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:29; *Miser*, 162.

he will live another sixty years; speaking later to Mariane, who is facing the prospect of having to marry the decrepit old man, she will reduce this estimate to three months.⁴⁸ Harpagon, for his part, reacts with pleasure at the assurance that he will outlive his children and grandchildren.⁴⁹

The projected loans and marriages of the characters in *L'Avare* are all dependent upon the timing of Harpagon's death, and family relations consequently resemble more and more a grim sort of tontine, the novel seventeenth-century French financial scheme in which the lone survivor inherited the capital left by the deceased partners. And, in the 1660s, such financial arrangements were about to be placed on solid factual foundations: John Graunt in 1662 undertook the first study of life expectancies by analyzing London bills of mortality. In 1669, Christian Huygens would also tackle the mathematical calculation of life expectancy, and Sir Edmond Halley of comet fame would make a similar set of calculations for English annuities in 1693.⁵⁰ Paris started tracking death statistics in 1667, a year before *L'Avare*'s premiere.⁵¹ Molière's characters are therefore living in the first European generation to have a numerically probable answer to the question, "How long will I live?"

Such calculations represent yet one more extension of rationality into an area hitherto dominated by determinism and the metaphysical. By moving death into the realm of mechanistic contingency—no longer seen as an act of Fate or divine will—life, like the Borgesian lottery of Babylon, became indistinguishable from a game of chance, although with calculable odds and a way to make rational bets against the unknowable. Harpagon's ludicrous reliance on palm reading will be replaced with a system that, while it

48 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:26, 29, 43; *Miser*, 158, 162, 177.

49 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:29; *Miser*, 162.

50 Hacking, 99-100; Peter L. Bernstein, *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 84-88.

51 Hacking, 102.

will not guarantee him sixty more years, will be able to provide him with convincing evidence that, having reached sixty, his chances of reaching seventy are 58.7%, based on Halley's tables.⁵²

But it is one final area of risk calculation that illustrates most strongly the ideological fault lines that undergird Molière's play: maritime travel. Shipwrecks, pirates, and other dangers at sea are ubiquitous in seventeenth-century literature, to the point that Georges de Scudéry, in the preface to his sister Madeleine's novel *Ibrahim* (1640), writes that "la Mer est la Scene la plus propre à faire de grands changemens" ["the sea is the most appropriate setting for creating large changes"], adding "quelques-uns l'ont nommée le Theâtre de l'inconstance" ["some have dubbed it the theater of inconstancy"].⁵³

Of course, these incidents were prevalent enough in real life to spur efforts at compensation. The burgeoning trade of the Italian city-states in the fourteenth century led to a number of financial innovations, including shipping insurance.⁵⁴ Such insurance was the subject of lengthy ecclesiastical debates, particularly concerning its possible relation to usury, but more importantly regarding the way in which insurance claimed to commoditize and sell security,

52 Edmond Halley, "An Estimate of the Degrees of Mortality of Mankind," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 17 (1693), 600.

53 Madeleine Scudéry, *Ibrahim ou L'Illustre Bassa*, 2nd ed. (Paris: La Compagnie des Libraires, 1665), sig. A11r. Scudéry criticizes the overuse of the ocean as the scene for the unexpected, writing about other novelists, "On dirait que ce Dieu [Eole] leur a donné les vents enfermez dans un Antre, comme il les donna à Ulysse, tant ils les déchainent à point nommé. Ils font les tempestes & les naufrages quand il leur plaist ; ils en exciteroient sur la mer pacifique, & trouveroient des escueils & des rochers en des lieux où les Pilotes les plus experts n'en ont jamais remarqué" ["It would seem that this god (Aeolus) gave them the winds in a bag, like he did for Ulysses, seeing how they unleash them at will. They make storms and shipwrecks whenever it pleases them; they stir up the peaceful sea and find reefs and rocks in places where the most expert navigators have never seen them."] (Scudéry, A11r). He will add, though, "Ce n'est pas que ie pretende bannir les naufrages des Romans ; ie les approuve aux Ouvrages des autres, & ie m'en sers dans le mien" ["It's not that I seek to banish shipwrecks from novels; I approve of them in the works of others, and I use them in mine"] (Scudéry, A11r), proceeding to recommend moderation in all things, shipwrecks included.

54 Giovanni Ceccarelli, "Risky Business: Theological and Canonical Thought on Insurance from the Thirteenth to the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31:3 (Fall 2001), 617.

something which did not properly belong to human beings. As historian Lucien Febvre pointed out, before insurance or securities could acquire their modern definitions, a conceptual transition from heaven to earth had to take place.⁵⁵ The Spanish ecclesiastical writer Juan Medina, writing in an earlier age, equated chance and God: “Deus qui fortuna est” [“God who is Fortune”];⁵⁶ with the advent of a mathematics of probability and a mechanistic physics, conceptual space was opened for the existence of pure chance.

Two ecclesiastical discussions of maritime insurance help illustrate this historical transition. In 1474, the Carmelite author João Sobrinho will argue against the sale of insurance, on the grounds that “the safety of a venture proceeds only from God’s will.”⁵⁷ In 1766, ecclesiastical conferences held in Paris will state that maritime insurance for cargo is certainly permitted by civil and canon law.⁵⁸ Closer to Molière’s own time, eighteen years after *L’Avare*’s publication, Edward Lloyd will open his famous coffee shop in London, eventually leading to the most famous insurance company in history.⁵⁹

But the play’s lone sea voyage will be the clearest indication of the split between the calculating, mechanistic world of risk aversion that Harpagon inhabits, and the other characters’ providential comic universe. The disastrous shipwreck that had separated Dom Thomas

55 Lucien Febvre, “Pour l’histoire d’un sentiment : Le besoin de sécurité,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 11.2 (avril-juin 1956), 245.

56 Ceccarelli, 626.

57 Ceccarelli, 624.

58 *Conférences ecclésiastiques*, 335-37. However, the text will maintain that life insurance for the sailors is not allowed, adding, “Qui peut répondre de la vie d’autrui, dont Dieu seul est le maître?” [“Who can answer for the life of another, of which God alone is the master?”] (*Conférences ecclésiastiques*, 342). By the mid-eighteenth century, then, the Church acknowledged that certain events — the loss of cargo — could merely happen; death, on the other hand, was still another matter. Perhaps the hybrid nature of the early modern approach is best exemplified in a 1619 Rouen guide for maritime insurance that specifies in the chapter “Ce que doit contenir la Police” [“What the Policy should contain”] that the first provision should be the invocation of the name of God (*Guidon, stile et usance des marchands qui mettent à la mer* [Rouen: Martin Le Mesgissier, 1619], 5).

59 Bernstein, 88-92.

(now going by the name of Seigneur Anselme) and his family nevertheless spared all of their lives, allowing for the surprising and happy reunification of the entire family in Harpagon's house in the play's final act. Dom Thomas apparently has *assurance* of a different, older kind—as he exclaims upon the rediscovery of his children: “Ô Ciel ! quels sont les traits de ta puissance ! et que tu fais bien voir qu'il n'appartient qu'à toi de faire des miracles” [“O Heaven! How great are the works of your power! And how well you show that it is for you alone to work miracles”].⁶⁰ Heaven preserves Dom Thomas and all the money that he was transporting, reuniting him with the members of the family that he had feared lost, and restoring the family fortune.

Molière's play clearly reflects the changing financial and epistemological problem of risk in seventeenth-century France. But if with the character of Harpagon, *L'Avare* casts a look forward to the era of probability mathematics, its surprising final assertion of Providence rejects the terrestrial pragmatism of the future to embrace the worldview and the comedic traditions of the past. For Harpagon's children and Dom Thomas's family are *joueurs* in two important senses: they are not only gamblers but actors, and comedy is not the clockwork universe of measurable chance; it is the realm of Providence, underwriter of miracles.

In its rewarding of risk-taking and its invocation of a Divine determinism, the play ends up confirming not only Thomas Kavanagh's statement that “to be alive is to gamble,”⁶¹ but also that if you are betting on adventurous young love and happiness in a comedy, you are bound, improbably, to roll double-sixes. Risk in this comedic world merely represents the testing of divine will, as Furetière's 1690 *Dictionnaire universel* states regarding the etymology of *jeu*: “Du Cange dit que le mot de *jeu de dez* ne vient pas de *jocus*, mais de *juis de Dieu*, vieux mot François qui signifioit *jugement de Dieu*, parce qu'ils mettoient les *jeux* de hasard au nombre des jugemens de

60 Molière, *Œuvres*, 2:71; *Miser*, 208.

61 Kavanagh, 30.

Dieu” [“Du Cange states that the phrase ‘dice game’ does not come from *jocus*, but from *juis de Dieu*, an old French word which meant *judgment of God*, because they placed *games* of chance among the judgments of God”]⁶² The illusion of vertiginous chance is ultimately dispelled, replaced by the revelation of a fundamental order. Despite the uncertainties of Cléante, Elise, Valère, and Mariane, the end result of *L’Avare* is never really in doubt.

But the miser could be said to have the last laugh. In the play’s final scene, the reunited family and happy couples set off to see Dom Thomas’s long-lost wife and plan the weddings, while Harpagon announces a different intention: to see his money. Invited to the festivities but not cured of his mania, Harpagon will probably not live to bury his children and his grandchildren as he had hoped, but they will live in a world largely shaped by his obsessions: an era of life expectancies and interest rates, an era in which, as Febvre put it, gains will be gains, not “un don reçu avec l’agrément du Tout-Puissant” [“a gift received with the All-Mighty’s approval”] and losses will simply be “le résultat d’un erreur de calcul” [“the result of a calculating error”].⁶³ Harpagon may be on the outs with his actual family, but the family of ideas that he represents will triumph in the end. Time, we might say, is always on the side of the usurer.

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62 Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, 3 vols. (La Haye: Arnout et Reinier Leers, 1690), 2: sig. Hh4r.

63 Febvre, 246.

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Portrait of Molière by Nicolas Mignard