

Le Malade imaginaire: The Symbolic and the Mimetic

by
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L'on n'a qu'à parler avec une robe et un
bonnet, tout galimatias devient savant,
et toute sottise devient raison.

Many critics indulgently dismiss Molière's apparent lack of attention to structural unity as unimportant in view of his comic genius, which liberates him from the constraints facing ordinary playwrights. Without arguing against the poetic license of genius, I should like to point out that this view of Molière's plays as a series of sketches favoring the display of comic character does very little justice to his talent for plot construction. *Le Malade imaginaire* has been singled out as one of Molière's most dismembered plots. Naturally, this has a great deal to do with the fact that the play is a *comédie-ballet*. The incorporation of music and dance into a broadly farcical main plot may appear somewhat arbitrary, and Molière's attempts at careful integration of the interludes seem, at least initially, very casual. Paradoxically, this flagrant lack of integration is, as I shall try to prove, a very important feature of the structural unity of the play.

The first scene of act I is of critical importance to our understanding of Argan, for the spectator is made aware of the semi-conscious nature of his game. The fact that the protagonist is engrossed in monologue indicates how seriously he takes his role. On the other hand, his need to be surrounded by others manifests his desire for an audience.

Il n'y a personne. J'ai beau dire, on me laisse
toujours seul; il n'y a pas moyen de les arrêter ici
(I,1).

He is therefore presented as a comedian, but as one who is only half-conscious of his play-acting. His infantilism and his helplessness are merely attention-getting artifices, which allow him to manipulate his audience. This child-subject cannot be satisfied with self-appraisal. He needs the gaze of others to substantiate his being. Argan therefore simultaneously depends upon and controls this gaze. Carol Mossman points out the paradoxical nature of the protagonist's manoeuvre:

If, on the one hand, Argan has wished himself into a position of total dependence on his family, the family is in turn forced to focus its attention on this counterfeit child (Mossman 51).

Argan is indeed an invalid who measures the state of his health by the number of medications he has ingested.

Si bien donc que, de ce mois, j'ai pris une, deux, trois quatre, cinq, six, sept et huit médecines et un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept, huit, neuf, dix, onze et douze lavements; et l'autre mois, il y avait douze médecines et vingt lavements. Je ne m'étonne pas si je ne me porte pas si bien ce mois-ci que l'autre (I,1).

This comical use of inverted logic points to the equivalence of pleasure and pain. The masochistic proclivity of Argan, for whom illness is a veritable source of pleasure, a means whereby to become the center of attention in a circle of ludic activity of his own creation. According to Philip Berk:

He has the pleasure of knowing (...) that his helplessness is willed and therefore a function of his strength (Berk 41).

One should never underestimate Argan's puerile behavior and seeming dependency, which serve as a pernicious smoke screen for authoritarianism. His patriarchal powers remain intact, perhaps all the more so because of the false security his childish disposition inspires.

Although Argan's play world may seem utterly foolish to those who do not share in his obsessions, absorption is intense for those who take the game and its rules seriously. Ralph Albanese perceives the carefully constructed demarcation line between reality and play:

L'univers chimérique dans lequel il s'enferme doit être perçu, on le verra, comme une stratégie de défense contre les impératifs de l'univers réel (Albanese 4).

It is thus participation or non-participation in Argan's play world that marks the delineation between the two groups of opponents within the play. The attributes and activities of the two circles of adversaries, though diametrically opposed, will eventually overlap and fuse. It is in this respect that Molière reveals his true talent for plot construction.

A primarily male society has formed around the patriarch Argan, consisting of members of the medical profession: Diafoirus Father and Son, Monsieur Fleurant and Docteur Purgon. Béline's rather marginal presence within this society will be examined at some length later on. One thing that these male characters share is their serious regard for their profession. Indeed, even the skeptical Béralde must concede that Purgon's intentions are sincere:

Votre Monsieur Purgon, par exemple, n'y sait point de finesse; c'est un homme tout médecin de la tête jusqu'aux pieds; un homme qui croit à ses règles plus qu'à toutes les démonstrations des mathématiques, et qui croirait du crime à les vouloir examiner (...). Il ne faut point vouloir mal de tout ce qu'il pourra vous faire; c'est de la meilleure foi du monde qu'il vous expédiera, et il ne fera, en vous tuant, que ce qu'il fait à sa femme et à ses enfants, et ce qu'en un besoin il ferait à lui-même (III,3).

This impression is confirmed in scene 5 of act 3, when Béralde attempts to dismiss the overeager Monsieur Fleurant who has prepared yet another of Purgon's prescribed enemas. Purgon's outrage is vented in a litany of imprecations and threats of impending doom. Argan's behavior is characterized as rebellious, insubordinate, even sacrilegious. His subsequent excommunication from the sacred realm of medicine leaves him feeling the anguish of an outcast from that very group of which he was initially the center. The equivalence between the science of medicine and religious doctrine demonstrates once again the utter seriousness of the endeavor and the ethical overtones the participants confer upon their activity, but most importantly it indicates the exclusive nature of enclosure within the ludic circle.

Diafoirus Père is portrayed as obsequious, conservative and unjustifiably proud of his foolish son Thomas. Unwittingly, he reveals the faults of the very person he desires to praise:

Il n'a jamais eu l'imagination bien vive, ni ce feu d'esprit qu'on remarque dans quelques-uns; mais c'est par là que j'ai toujours bien auguré de sa judiciaire, qualité requise pour l'exercice de notre art. Lorsqu'il était petit, il n'a jamais été ce qu'on appelle mièvre et éveillé. On le voyait toujours doux, paisible et taciturne, ne disant jamais mot, et ne jouant jamais à tous ces petits jeux que l'on nomme enfantins (II,5).

Thomas' predicament is that he is intrinsically colorless, having no imagination, no gift for spontaneity and no desire to play. His inability to reason for himself is demonstrated by his rote memorization of medical theory and his constant need for parental guidance. One of the main attributes of all those within Argan's sphere is a humorless disposition. Because the boundaries of ludic activity are largely undiscernible to them, their play-acting is executed with dead-earnestness. This confusion between reality and play, medicine and comedy, is further illustrated by Thomas' proposal to take Angélique to a

dissection for an evening's entertainment. Toinette rebukes him in the following manner:

Le divertissement sera agréable. Il y en a qui donnent la comédie à leurs maîtresses; mais donner une dissection est quelque chose de plus galant (II,5).

With the exception of Béline, Argan's cohorts all abide in utter devotion by the laws of medicine. As his name indicates, Purgon's practice is almost exclusively based on purgative remedies. When he threatens Argan, it is with severe digestive disorders. Based on medical theories of the time, one can assume that Argan suffers primarily from melancholia, attributed to a malfunction of the spleen, which produces inordinate amounts of black bile and black vapors. Hellebore, a medicinal laxative plant was the habitual cure for this ailment, although it is interesting to note that the other commonly prescribed cure was laughter. Thus, melancholy patients were often enjoined to attend comic plays. The evacuation of anguish could hence be a physical or a psychic phenomenon. Purgon's heavy reliance on enemas can be attributed to his insensitivity to the comic spirit.

The constant cleansing of Argan's digestive track has a theatrical effect. It allows the protagonist to interrupt the action at frequent intervals, riveting the audience's attention on his physical presence. According to Ralph Albanese:

L'hypocondrie permet à Argan de faire de son corps un pur objet d'exhibition, de l'ériger en spectacle. (...) La passivité de son corps est telle que l'on assiste à un processus permanent de prise et l'évacuation de médicaments sous forme de substances malignes (Albanese 6-7).

Small wonder that Béline heaves a sigh of relief at the simulated death of her loathsome husband:

Un homme incommode à tout le monde, malpropre, dégoûtant, sans cesse un lavement ou une médecine dans le ventre, mouchant, toussant, crachant toujours, sans esprit, ennuyeux, de mauvaise humeur, fatiguant sans cesse les gens, et grondant jour et nuit servantes et valets (III, 12).

The audience is left with an impression of uncleanness, humorlessness and irritability. The constant process of ingestion and excretion is in essence destructive, draining Argan physically, emotionally and financially, and proving the ineffectiveness of the cure.

Béline forms a striking contrast to the other members of Argan's clan. Argan's wife accurately perceives the delineation between reality and play and her astuteness is a measure of her effectiveness as a player. Unlike the other characters surrounding Argan, Béline's game is consciously hypocritical and motivated by self-interest. Angélique's youthful stepmother is a cheat, a female incarnation of the trickster. The false player pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the rules of the game. This is why Argan is so much more lenient toward Béline than toward the other members of his family who refuse to condone his fantasies and who reveal the relative fragility of the play world in which he has shut himself up with others.

Unlike Madame Jourdain, here is an example of a wife whose speech is listened to and whose opinion is respected, but this is only because Béline has made herself the receptacle of her husband's projections and an echo to her husband's voice. Béline says what Argan wants to hear and it is only at this cost, the cost of losing her identity in speech, that she retains his interest. However, Béline's "decapitation" is a short-term sacrifice for a long-term gain. Like Tartuffe, her ultimate goal is to gain control of the family fortune by disinheriting the rightful heirs. Her strategy is to help Argan reinforce and define the boundaries of his play world by casting out the dissenting others. By reflecting her husband's gaze, allowing it thereby to turn back on itself, and by offering herself as

the mirror in which the narcissist can consume himself, Béline becomes an object of fascination for Argan.

Béline's role as wife-mother to Argan, in spite of her youth, casts a murky shadow over the nature of their matrimony. Béline refers to her husband as "mon pauvre mari" and "mon petit fils" in almost the same breath, whereas her husband refers to her as "mamie", which can be interpreted as either "my dear", "little mother" or possibly even "grandmother". The ambiguity of Argan's own assertion that he would require the assistance of Purgon in order to conceive a child with Béline has been interpreted by some as an abdication of paternal power and a desire to return to the irresponsibility of childhood:

Tout le regret que j'aurai, si je meurs, mamie, c'est de n'avoir point un enfant de vous. Monsieur Purgon m'avait dit qu'il m'en ferait faire un (I,7).

However, this allusion to Argan's sexual impotence allows one to draw the conclusion that the protagonist's enthrallment with his wife is purely narcissistic and that this willed impotence represents not an abdication, but a reaffirmation of paternal authority through the vehicle of the false child who is controlled by and controls his mother, who desires his mother, but only as an extension of himself.

The opposing cast of characters includes Cléante, Angélique, Louison and Toinette: all those whose actions are directed against Argan's egocentric fantasies. Although Béralde takes the side of the younger generation, he will be only marginally involved in their plotting. Béralde's function is primarily dramatic. Though he may sympathize with the young, he belongs to Argan's generation and he will attempt to exploit the advantages of age by acting as go-between for the two groups of opponents. His moralizing tone indicates his adherence to the serious values of an older generation, yet his long-windedness has very little real effect on his brother. Unlike the comic spirit, didactic reason has not the ability to divert (entertain) and it is precisely a diversion from his

obsession that Argan so vitally needs. Béralde's position as intermediary is thus established by the seriousness of his logical argumentation, while he remains nonetheless a proponent of the healing power of comedy.

It is therefore significant that it is Béralde who initially suggests the equivalence of comedy and medicine. In his view, medical practice is a superfluous art, for the body has the inherent power of healing itself. The primary function of doctors is not to heal, but to name, to enumerate and to classify diseases.

Ils savent la plupart de fort belles humanités, savent parler en beau latin, savent nommer en grec toutes les maladies, les définir et les diviser; mais, pour ce qui est de les guérir, c'est ce qu'ils ne savent point du tout. (...) Toute l'excellence de leur art consiste en un pompeux galimatias, en un spécieux babil, qui vous donne des mots pour des raisons et des promesses pour des effets (III,3).

Medicine is thus closely connected to the nominative function of linguistic discourse, as well as to the art of deception and disguise. Ralph Albanese makes the following observation in his study of *Le Malade imaginaire*:

(les Médecins) font de leur art l'objet d'une érudition puérile et sclérosée, une expérience essentiellement discursive et formaliste (Albanese 9).

The exclusion of women from the medical circle is thus partially attributable to what is perceived as their inability to grasp the Symbolic. According to Hélène Cixous:

...woman is said to be "outside the Symbolic": outside the Symbolic, that is outside language, the place of the Law, excluded from any possible relationship with culture and cultural order (Cixous 46).

It is also in this respect that medical practice is truly an art similar to that of comedy, based on illusion rather than substantive acts. Doctors can be seen as comedians whose sense of self-importance leaves them prey to self-deception.

In his endeavor to free his brother from the tenacious ascendancy of medical practitioners, Béralde addresses him with the following exhortation:

Songez que les principes de votre vie sont en vous-même, et que le courroux de Monsieur Purgon est aussi peu capable de vous faire mourir que ses remèdes de vous faire vivre (III,6).

Béralde's alternative to physical purgation is, of course, the intake of comedy, the true means for the elimination of psychic anguish. The medicinal value of pleasure and laughter operates by means of diversion, allowing for a psychic discharge of anxiety. Not content to prove his point in the abstract, Béralde has brought with him a band of Egyptians for Argan's entertainment:

Ce sont des Egyptiens, vêtus en Mores, qui font des danses mêlées de chansons où je suis sûr que vous prendrez du plaisir; et cela vaudra bien une ordonnance de Monsieur Purgon (II,9).

At this point in the play the theme of medicine as comedy and comedy as medicine has been firmly established by Béralde, who thus provides an important link between the two circles of ludic activity present within the play. It is this link that accounts for the very central importance of this character and his somewhat lengthy discourse. It will now be up to the others to put his suggestions to work.

If the art of medicine is the bond between the members of Argan's group, the art of comedy is certainly the common link between their adversaries. Indeed, Angélique and Cléante's first encounter took place at the theater:

...l'on vous a dit l'étroite garde où elle est retenue, qu'on ne la laisse ni sortir, ni parler à personne, et que ce ne fut que la curiosité d'une vieille tante qui nous fit accorder la liberté d'aller à cette comédie qui donna lieu à la naissance de votre passion... (II,1).

According to Philip Berk,

...the gesture of liberation transports Angélique to the comédie, quintessentially a place of art and illusion, but where too nature can run its course, a locus of freedom and love not unlike the pastoral locus amoenus of medieval and Renaissance romance. It is then at the theater that are born the forces that will oppose Argan's hypochondria (Berk 39).

Comedy is thus associated with liberation from the constraints of Argan's hegemony. With the exception of the suitor Cléante, the circle of comedians is primarily composed of women: Angélique, Louison and Toinette, who plays the leading role. Nor should we forget Béline's role as comedienne and tacticien within the opposing group. Though outside the Symbolic, women are not outside the Mimetic. Deprived of Language, they employ their bodies as signs. Although Molière's female characters seem to share a common aversion to participating in a man's game that has lost sight of its playful origins, they are not at all adverse to forming a play world of their own. From Argan's point of view, these characters are spoilsports, refusing as they do to participate in his circle of fantasy. By withdrawing from his game, they reveal the falsehood of his hypochondria and shatter the illusion of his play world. This is all the more distressing to Argan, as he has lost sight of the temporal and spacial limitations of his game.

It is not surprising that Cléante, the lone male participant in this circle, is initially met with distrust. It is interesting to note that his presence in the female locus is structurally analogous to Béline's presence within the

masculine circle of medical practitioners. It is the more worldly Toinette who cautions Angélique against the perils of love and the deceit of men:

Hé! hé! ces choses-là, parfois, sont un peu sujettes à caution. Les grimaces d'amour ressemblent fort à la vérité, et j'ai vu de grands comédiens là-dessus (I,4).

The doubt cast upon the authenticity of Cléante's intentions is further heightened by his first appearance on stage under the assumed identity of Angélique's music instructor. Cléante is in fact a consummate actor, the "grand comédien" of Toinette's warning. However, any initial ambivalence toward Cléante is immediately tempered by admiration for his skill, especially in view of the contrast established between himself and Thomas Diafoirus. Unlike his rival, Cléante is creative, playful, spontaneous, boldly imaginative and a skillful improviser. Whatever the initial distrust, one cannot help but be taken in by such a beguiling entertainer.

Despite Cléante's charismatic presence, it is the servant girl Toinette who is the most protean character of all, changing roles to suit the moment. Toinette's inferior social status affords her freedom from behavioral norms in spite of her economic dependency. Béline's reluctance to fire her spirited maid in spite of Argan's insistence demonstrates the soubrette's indispensable position in the household. Furthermore, Toinette's freedom is attributable to her status as unattached female. She is the only woman in the play unfettered by a male consort or a father and thus the only woman who is able to speak for herself. This allows her to assume the leadership of the group opposing Argan's wishes. The brief appearance of her suitor Polichinelle in the first interlude only serves to emphasize her complete detachment. She has no interest in her aging admirer and merely summons him to use him as an emissary. Furthermore, no encounter will take place at any time between Toinette and Polichinelle. Such freedom will allow her to assume a number of different identities in the course of the play.

When she first appears on stage, summoned by her master, she pretends to have knocked her head against a shutter. This tactic allows her to continuously interrupt Argan's discourse with her cries of pain, frustrating thereby his desire to quarrel with her:

Tais-toi donc, coquine, que je te querelle (I,5).

Like Jourdain's servant Nicole, Toinette makes a mockery of her master's attempts to impose his authoritative voice, while stifling hers. However, unlike Nicole's involuntary convulsions, Toinette's behavior is willfully disruptive. By her own admission, she can turn the tears on and off:

Si vous querellez, je pleurerai (I,5).

She opposes her own form of body language to paternal authority, forcing the father to silence by blocking the reception of the message and by forcing him to shout to the point of hoarseness. The effectiveness of the command is inversely proportional to the loudness of its transmission.

Toinette's second role as Angélique's confidente is equally one at which she excels. Understanding the ingénue's need to talk about her love, to recreate emotions through speech, and to gain self-confidence through approval, Toinette keeps her replies to a monosyllabic minimum, laced with gentle irony. Her only statement of any length cautions Angélique to distinguish the mask from the person, reality from illusion. The accomplished actor must never confuse the two. It is therefore appropriate that it be Toinette who issues such a statement.

In the next scene, Toinette will step in for Angélique, whose reticence leaves her prey to her father's commands. The servant will speak for her mistress, giving voice to the latter's objections to a marriage with Thomas Diafoirus. She will play her role for her while Angélique remains silently present. Finding, however, that paternal authority prevails and that Argan discredits her ability to reason, Toinette will usurp the voice of the father, taking over the prerogative to issue commands, the masculine voice:

-Je lui commande absolument de se préparer à prendre le mari que je dis.

-Et moi, je lui commande absolument d'en faire rien. (...) Quand un maître ne songe pas à ce qu'il fait, une servante bien sensée est en droit de le redresser (I,5).

Argan immediately detects the subversiveness of this intrusive move into absolutist political discourse and counters with a:

Viens, viens, que je t'apprenne à parler (I,5)!

What Argan really wants is to teach Toinette to speak like a woman who allows a man to in-form her speech. The servant has overstepped the boundaries of propriety by using the traditionally masculine imperative voice.

Although Toinette uses very little circumspection to dialogue with her master, her behavior changes radically in the presence of Béline. Both women are play-acting, but Toinette is the more skillful of the two, as she is able to deceive the deceitful wife. Toinette has vowed to employ her talents in the service of young love. Her machinations will lead to the gradual integration of spectacle within the structural framework of the play. This integration parallels the disintegration of Argan's illusory circle of play and a gradual shifting of his loyalties from the medical clan to that of the comedians, the final substitution being that of comedy for medicine.

The intention of the prologue, for example, is painfully obvious. Molière makes no attempt to disguise the obsequious flattery directed at his benefactor, the King, for whose entertainment this comedy has been devised. In a pastoral setting, shepherds and shepherdesses sing of the ailment and fatal suffering of love, as well as of its pleasures, laughter and games. The juxtaposition of pleasure and pain, vaguely sketched out in the prologue, will form one of the major thematic building blocks of the play. Nevertheless, to most spectators, the transition

between the artificial convention of the bucolic scene and Argan's first appearance on stage, seems tenuous at best.

Another point of interest which is frequently overlooked, is that it is presumably these shepherds and shepherdesses who perform *Le Malade imaginaire*, which can therefore be perceived from its inception as a play within a play, a royal *divertissement*. The main plot is thus on a plane of illusion once removed from that of the eclogue and yet, strangely enough, the vivid realism of Argan's first monologue makes the audience perceive the preceding ballet as the less "real" of the two. Nonetheless, a framework is established from the outset, whereby *Le Malade imaginaire* is presented first and foremost as a theatrical diversion. It is interesting to note that this framework will remain open, for the play will never return to the initial pastoral illusion and thus one loses sight of the pretext for the play.

The pretext for the first interlude can be located within the first act. Toinette needs to advise Cléante of the impending marriage between Angélique and his rival. To this effect, she summons her admirer Polichinelle. Although the first interlude appears somewhat better integrated than the Prologue, its introduction of music, mime and rhythmic movement gives it a more stylized reality than that of the rest of the play. Once again, the martyrdom of love is evoked, however this time Polichinelle's laments are interrupted by a beating in the vein of farce. More importantly, Toinette's message to Cléante will never be transmitted and Argan will remain unaware of the events. Cléante will have to appear of his own volition in the next scene to hear of his misfortunes. Thus, the pretext for the first interlude seems to be rather transparent: the simple desire to add a gratuitous comic spectacle to the play, the justification being solely the pleasure it affords.

Aside from Toinette's frequent role playing, Cléante is the first character to offer a formal comic presentation. His impromptu opera is the first true spectacle to occur within an act of the play and to be carefully integrated, as

it contributes directly to plot development. Argan insists upon witnessing his daughter's music lesson, adding a comment on his appreciation of the fine arts. This claim will soon reveal itself false, as the protagonist has little patience for the impertinent love duet. The previously silent Angélique now comes alive under the tutelage of her lover, as he coaxes her to break her silence and teaches her what to say/sing. Cléante's thinly disguised commentary on paternal tyranny irritates Argan who puts a halt to the spectacle. Once again, comedy is a vehicle for the freedom to communicate and the liberation from external constraints. Even more pertinent is the fact that the operatic subject matter is that of the play itself. Cléante thus affords us a glimpse at miniature version of his own reality-as-comedy.

Argan's growing irritation at his daughter Angélique's insubordination is further compounded by his discovery that the music master has visited her within the confines of her private chambers. His attempt to force his younger daughter Louison into a sisterly betrayal is countered by her pretending to be dead. For one so young, she is an accomplished actress in her own right and shows an awareness of female solidarity. This time, Argan is taken in by the deception which has aroused his greatest fear, that of death. He is so jarred by his daughter's comedy that he momentarily forgets his own ailment:

Ah! que d'affaires! je n'ai pas seulement le loisir de
songer à ma maladie (II,8).

Argan's state of confusion is so great by this time, that he barely has the energy to counter the next offensive by Béralde, who has brought a band of gypsies to distract and amuse his brother. The song and dance constitute the second interlude which removes Argan for a moment from his troubled illusions. Integration is more complete than for the first interlude. Not only does the spectator understand the motives for the introduction of the diversion, but s/he also witnesses its effects on Argan.

The healing effect of comic diversion may have been proven to the audience, but Argan's conversion will be obtained with greater difficulty. The first step in extricating him from the doctor's hold will be taken by Béralde. By dismissing Monsieur Fleurant, Argan's brother causes the ire of Doctor Purgon, who will subsequently expel Argan from his circle of support. As Gérard Defaux points out:

"Ce n'est pas lui qui quitte la médecine mais, avec un Purgon offensé, la médecine qui le quitte" (Defaux 298).

At this crucial moment, Toinette's intervention becomes imperative, for fear that the patient find some way to regain his medical sanctuary. Toinette understands that the only means of shattering Argan's play world is from within, by invading his ludic space and gaining his confidence within his own frame of reference. She is also perceptive enough to understand that the only way to gain stature and credibility in Argan's mind is to assume a masculine identity. By donning the disguise of a physician, that is, through the Mimetic, Toinette gains access to the Symbolic and consequently to authoritative discourse. Understandably, this is a concession on her part, as her ability to reason was established from the start.

Toinette's strategy is simple. Initially she discredits Purgon and his consorts by proposing remedies contrary to those that have been prescribed. Having accomplished this, she proceeds to discredit her own remedies by prescribing such a drastic cure that even Argan must flinch at its execution:

Voilà un bras que je me ferais couper tout à l'heure si j'étais de vous (III,10).

It should not escape notice that Toinette's proposed remedy is a thinly disguised form of castration. The maid servant thereby calls upon the father to do in actuality what he has already done symbolically: relinquish the phallus and the accompanying paternal power by assuming the role of the

unsexed child. Argan is thus forced to finally distinguish between reality and his fantasy world when all of his concerted efforts were focussed on erasing the boundaries between the two. Carol Mossman concludes:

I suggest that by erasing the barriers between reality and illusion, between adult and child, begetter and begotten, Argan is attempting to deny the fact of his mortality (55).

Argan is also jarred into recognizing that his infantilism was never in fact an abdication of power, but a pernicious means of consolidating it. Toinette's suggested castration is a means to feminine empowerment by removing the phallus that is said to constitute the a priori condition of all symbolic functioning. Naturally, Argan will refuse this final solution. Although by now the disintegration of Argan's play world is nearly complete, one further step will prove necessary.

Béline's importance within the circle of Argan's illusions has been discussed at some length. As long as her presence reflects the image of himself that he wants to see, Argan can retreat to her mirror gaze as he projects himself into the space she provides for him. This mother figure is the last remaining shelter from the harshness of reality. In order to pry Argan loose from his narcissistic contemplation, it becomes necessary to afford him a view of Béline as Other. This can only be done by enlisting his participation in a subterfuge. Argan must become Other himself, a comedian, but in order to do so he must first subdue his overriding fear of death:

N'y a-t-il point quelque danger à contrefaire le mort? (III,11)

The effort involved in acting out his own death is cathartic and relieves some of his morbid anguish. It allows him to merge with the image of death rather than be riveted by it. Argan's abandonment by the doctors and his subsequent disengagement from Béline leaves him nowhere to turn for refuge but to the opposing clan.

The final shift in loyalties is momentarily delayed by the protagonist's obstinacy, as he consents to his daughter's betrothal to Cléante, but only on condition that he become a doctor himself:

Qu'il se fasse médecin, je consens au mariage. Oui,
faites-vous médecin, je vous donne ma fille
(III,14).

Thus, Argan's permutation takes place within the structural permanence of fantasy. Although his obsession with medicine does not seem to have diminished and in this respect no change is apparent, he does seem to have grasped the playful nature of the transformation and the inherent kinship between comedy and medicine. If the authority of medicine rests upon the art of deception, disguise and language, then it is essentially a theatrical art:

En recevant la robe et le bonnet de médecin, vous
apprendrez tout cela (...). L'on n'a qu'à parler,
avec une robe et un bonnet, tout galimatias devient
savant, et toute sottise devient raison (III, 14).

To which Toinette slyly adds:

Tenez, monsieur, quand il n'y aurait que votre
barbe, c'est déjà beaucoup; et la barbe fait plus de
la moitié d'un médecin (III, 14),

thereby obliquely acknowledging the inherent kinship between the masculine identity and the realm of the symbolic. However, if comedy proves more effective than medicine, it is ultimately because it makes use of magical, poetic and evocative language rather than nominative discourse; of creation and mimesis rather than symbolic representation. When considered from such a vantage point, it is obviously Cléante, the inveterate actor and not the unimaginative Thomas, who will afford the better cure.

It is not enough, however, for Argan to surround himself with comedians, he needs to exchange one fantasy for another, thereby becoming a comedian himself. His

stubborn clinging to his former illusion, his insistence on surrounding himself with doctors, forces a bilateral compromise. Though he may have to make due with make-believe doctors, the comedians must comply with his obsessions. Béralde exhorts his brother to become a doctor himself, thus reiterating his previous plea to cure himself from within. As a doctor/comedian, Argan will internalize and assimilate comedy, the ultimate remedy. Thus, the ingestion and incorporation of comedy-as-medicine is symbolically represented on-stage by the donning of a doctor's gown and the fusion of the initially separate play worlds of the symbolic and the mimetic is complete. Although the solution is fantastic, it is eminently logical within the context of the play. Healing will take place in an atmosphere of complete comic liberation and rebirth authorized by carnival:

...ce n'est pas tant le jouer que s'accommoder à ses fantaisies. Tout ceci n'est qu'entre nous. Nous y pouvons aussi prendre chacun un personnage, et nous donner ainsi la comédie les uns aux autres. Le carnaval autorise cela (III, 14)).

The term "entre nous" stresses the exclusivity of the play world's membership and the awareness of its temporal and spatial limitations.

In spite of the liberating experience of comedy, the structural paradigm of patriarchy remains intact. For the women in particular, the experience of freedom has definite temporal limitations. Having managed to extricate Argan from the shelter of his hypochondria, Toinette will now, at Béralde's behest, relinquish her leadership position within this group, deferring to the father. The third interlude can be seen as an initiation ritual confirming Argan's adherence to this new group in which a fusion of comedy and medicine has taken place. It is interesting to note that it is Béralde, Argan's male sibling and member of the older generation, who seeks to firmly establish the patriarch's centrality to this new group:

Les comédiens ont fait un petit intermède de la réception d'un médecin, avec des danses et de la musique; je veux que nous en prenions ensemble le divertissement, et que mon frère y fasse le premier personnage (III,14).

It must be remembered that Argan has never entirely lost his grip on power and that his shift to Toinette's group was contingent upon his retention of the male hegemony. Hence his stubborn insistence on retaining the right to give his daughter away. In fact, his switch becomes an imperative move in his struggle to retain paternal power. Although the author seems to recognize woman's ability to perform and improvise in the realm of the mimetic, the inaccessibility of the symbolic leaves her outside of authoritative discourse, outside of "any possible relationship to the cultural order". This engenders a void that will ultimately be filled by Argan's appropriation of comedy.

Paralleling this development, that is the progressive fusion of the initially separate worlds of comedy and medicine, the spectacular elements and most notably the play's interludes, which are initially almost separate entities, become increasingly incorporated into the fabric of the plot, as the play ends on a note of delirium. Thus, *Le Malade imaginaire*, the last opus of a brilliant comic playwright, with its complete integration of meta-dramatic reflections on the nature and value of comedy, can be regarded as one of the most auto-referential of Molière's works: comedy ingesting itself. In the words of Defaux:

Molière, en rejoignant dans sa dernière comédie la grande et ancienne tradition du rire médical, nous apprend, après Hippocrate, L. Joubert et Rabelais, que le rire est non seulement le propre de l'homme, mais encore son salut, sa plus belle sagesse et sa dignité (301).

I will simply add that the word "homme" in this citation should be viewed as gender-specific.

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