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Harpagon: the Paradox of Miserliness

by

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Being mean is not funny. We despise those whom we consider to be tight-fisted. People such as Harpagon, therefore, are unpromising subjects for comedy. Yet, as Pierre Gaxotte has pointed out:

Par bonheur, Molière a éclairé son homme de tant de façons, lui a prêté tant de postures que non seulement il fait rire de ce qui aurait pu paraître odieux, mais qu'Harpagon se trouve être de tous les temps, du nôtre comme du sien.¹

Few would dispute this. The status of *L'Avare*, unlike *Le Misanthrope*, is in no doubt: it is a comedy. There is, as Gaxotte says, a density of characterization that raises Harpagon above mere meanness.

Robert McBride finds density of another kind. For him it is:

the simultaneous perception of two self-contained but rationally incompatible ideas [that] characterizes through and through the purely intellectual form of Molière's comedy.²

The word "incompatible" is crucial here. Molière's other plays demonstrate McBride's definition. The titles often contain two ideas, one of which undermines the other. *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* designates two incompatible social statuses. *Le Médecin malgré lui* boldly announces the disparity between appearance and reality as does *Le Malade imaginaire*. Yet *L'Avare* would appear to be an exception if we accept the definition of miserliness given by Sylvie and Jacques Dauvin:

Le mot latin *avaritia* nous renseigne mieux: il désigne un vif désir de conserver, mais surtout d'acquiescer toujours plus.³

¹ Pierre Gaxotte, *Molière* (Paris, 1977), p. 290.

² Robert McBride, *The Sceptical Vision of Molière: A Study in Paradox* (London and Basingstoke, 1977), p. 14.

³ Sylvie and Jacques Dauvin, *Molière: L'Avare* (Frankfurt am Main and Paris, 1984), p. 51.

The acquisition and keeping of riches are on the face of it compatible. Harpagon's happiness depends on holding on to his riches and if possible increasing them. But happiness is not assured as can be gauged from his first monologue in I,iv:

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. On n'est pas peu embarrassé à inventer dans toute une maison une cache fidèle; car pour moi, les coffres-forts me sont suspects, et je ne veux jamais m'y fier: je les tiens justement une franche amorce à voleurs, et c'est toujours la première chose que l'on va attaquer. Cependant je ne sais si j'aurai bien fait d'avoir enterré dans mon jardin dix mille écus qu'on me rendit hier. Dix mille écus en or chez soi est une somme...

Ici le frere et le seur paraissent s'entretenant bas.

O Ciel! je me serai trahi moi-meme: la chaleur m'aura emporté, et je crois avoir parlé haut en raisonnant tout seul.⁴

As the above demonstrates, the possession of money induces not pleasure but anxiety. The reason is that possession also brings with it a fear of loss. The whole environment becomes threatening and Harpagon even feels that he cannot trust himself to keep his money safe.

Herein lies the paradox of miserliness: Harpagon was much happier when he had given someone else his money. Furthermore, he acquired more riches since interest had to be paid on the loan. Consequently Harpagon spends much of the play trying to give his gold to someone else. This is why we find him funny. He is doing the opposite of what we expect a miser to do. For him it is indeed more blessed to give than to receive – but not quite in the way Christ intended.

Thus it is that this devil can quote scriptural precepts for his own ends:

La charité, maître Simon, nous oblige à faire plaisir aux personnes, lorsque nous le pouvons. (II,ii)

It is not hard to imagine Harpagon bathing in a righteous glow. But his motivation is not charity or the desire to do good but his fear of losing his money and his desire to increase it. Harpagon is being hypocritical. Similarly, the contract with Cléante makes great play of fairness and willingness to oblige but it is only as the reading of the document proceeds that we have cause to realize what that generosity means. The contract concludes:

Le tout, ci-dessus mentionné, valant loyalement plus de quatre mille cinq cents livres, et rabassé à la valeur de mille écus, par la discrétion du prêteur. (II,1)

Harpagon is defining himself as a generous man while in reality being miserly. He tries to present what he believes is an attractive image of himself while satisfying a deep-seated need to protect his wealth. An obligation to repay – and Harpagon's questioning of Maître Simon shows that he makes sure of his potential debtor – is a stronger protection for his miser's hoard than his back garden can provide.

Moreover, as the Dauvins have pointed out, avarice also means increasing what riches you have and an interest-bearing loan satisfies this desire as well. Harpagon's version of generosity is, like his concept of charity, quite different from that of the rest of us. His vision is not shared by us. Yet it is coherent and logical in its own terms. As McBride has pointed out above, rationality is self-contained. The ideas are developed in accordance with logic but without reference to our shared reality. It is the incongruities arising from Molière's exploitation of this that enables us to see the humour in Harpagon. Miserliness is dressed in surprising and, to us, inappropriate forms of behaviour – just as Harpagon wears clothing that is not appropriate for the times in which he is living. This tension constitutes the unifying dynamic of the play.

An additional comic piquancy is added when miserliness is caught in its own stratagem and forced to comply with its outward show of generosity. This happens when Cléante admires his father's ring and gives it to Mariane so that she too may admire it. He then announces that his father wishes her to have it:

N'est-il pas vrai, mon père, que vous voulez que Madame le garde pour l'amour de vous? (III,vii)

Unlike the encounter just discussed, Cléante wins this particular struggle between himself and his father by forcing upon the latter a pattern of behaviour similar to those which Harpagon uses to clothe his miserliness. The difference is that this takes Harpagon further than he would have gone of his own accord. He who normally says, according to La Flèche: "Je vous prête le bonjour" (II,v), would merely have lent the ring.

Yet the notion that giving is only a temporary lending eventually triumphs for Mariane ends the scene by saying:

Pour ne vous point mettre en colère, je la garde maintenant; et je prendrai un autre temps pour vous la rendre. (III,vii)

Of her own accord, Mariane accepts the principle so dear to Harpagon whereby what is given must be returned. He is not alone in his values. In

⁴ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Georges Couton, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols (Paris, 1971), II, p. 524. All references are to this edition.

Harpagon's moral code ownership is inviolate and injustice occurs when the owner is deprived of what is rightfully his. This principle turns out to be the foundation of the play's moral universe.

Loss is the major threat to this moral order. Giving is a means by which Harpagon can control loss. He retains power over what he has given and can recover it. However, there are other forms of loss which he cannot control. Indeed, a sense of loss is at the heart of his personality as is attested by his daughter:

Il est bien vrai que, tous les jours, il nous donne de plus en plus sujet de regretter la mort de notre mère, et que... (I.ii)

There is a suggestion here that Harpagon's wife was a restraining influence on his avarice or that she shielded her children from its effects. One could perhaps go further and suggest that it was the loss of his wife that triggered off his current behaviour in that it may have caused him to transfer his affections to something he believes more durable. In itself, her death is not perhaps a noteworthy fact given the mortality rates of the seventeenth century and the large number of widowers in Molière's plays. What is perhaps more significant is the patterning – the way death is woven into the lives of the major female characters.

If we take Harpagon's wife as our point of departure, we can discern a progression based on the closeness of the main female characters (excluding Frosine) to death. Thus the next in order is Mariane's mother. It is from Cléante that we first learn about her when he tells Elise about the young girl with whom he has fallen in love:

Elle se nomme Mariane, et vit sous la conduite d'une bonne femme de mère qui est presque toujours malade, et pour qui cette aimable fille a des sentiments d'amitié qui ne sont pas imaginables. Elle la sert, la plaint, et la console avec une tendresse qui vous toucherait l'âme. (I.ii)

The impression that we have is of a woman in failing health – one who is not dead but whose life is in danger. Like Harpagon's wife she is not to be seen but unlike her, she is still alive.

The progression continues with the next generation. Mariane is presented on stage but not until half-way through the play. She is in some distress and when asked why by Frosine, she replies:

Hélas! me le demandez-vous? et ne vous figurez-vous point les alarmes d'une personne toute prête à voir le supplice où l'on veut l'attacher? (III.iv)

Mariane, too, is under the shadow of death, albeit metaphorically. She strikes us as being a fragile creature, more passive than Elise:

Mon Dieu! Frosine, c'est une étrange affaire, lorsque pour être heureuse, il faut souhaiter ou attendre le trépas de quelqu'un, et la mort ne suit pas tous les projets que nous faisons. (III.iv)

Mariane is a creature who is at the mercy of events and who has no control over them. It is ironic that she who sees marriage as a form of death in the first of the two quotations above, should, in the second, see death as her only means of liberation. In this respect she is the opposite of Harpagon, who seeks to preserve and acquire. She sees her future happiness depending on the loss of her husband.

Against this, Elise stands out as a much stronger character. She is present from the beginning of the play and although in many ways the helpless victim of Harpagon (her statement about the effect that her mother's death had on her father suggest that she has no power to reform him), she seems to be made of sterner stuff. We find out early on that she was in fact saved from drowning by Valère. Her escape suggests someone whose link to life is stronger. But even here, she is in a position of dependence, saved by Valère, her future husband, in a way that Harpagon could not do for his own wife. So, in this respect, Elise is like Mariane in that she cannot herself have any control over death.

The position of these women on a scale of encroaching mortality reinforces the notion that loss cannot be confined to money. If Harpagon is obsessed by the need to keep what he has within his control and indeed increase that which he has, this must be seen against the background of impermanency in the play. In his struggles, he is representative of a humanity living in a world where no-one can be sure that anything will last. Even the younger generation are not immune. The fragility of the younger women has already been mentioned but it goes further than that. Valère's very first words state the fear clearly:

Hé quoi? charmante Elise, vous devenez mélancolique, après les obligantes assurances que vous avez eu la bonté de me donner de votre foi? Je vous vois soupirer, hélas! au milieu de ma joie! Est-ce du regret, dites-moi, de m'avoir fait heureux, et vous repentez-vous de cet engagement où mes feux ont pu vous contraindre? (I.i)

Human affections, like human beings, are transient. Valère fears that he will lose Elise. Thus, like Harpagon, he does what he does in order to preserve that which he values. Just as Harpagon dons the deformed habits of generosity, so Valère dons the livery of the miser. This means not just that he wears a servant's clothes but rather that his actions, willingly or unwillingly, are made to conform to those we would expect of Harpagon at his meanest. Thus he upbraids the cook with: "Il faut manger pour vivre, et non pas vivre pour manger" (III.i). He is acting as a miser would. Harpagon's

deformation of this, his inability to get it right, is another example of the ambiguous behaviour trapped between meanness and generosity that is the wellspring of comedy in this play. Indeed, here Harpagon and Valère are mirror images of each other, one acting the generous man and the other the miser, and it is curious that the name that the young man has adopted is almost an anagram of "l'avaré". Even if this is pure coincidence, the bond between the two men is very strong. Valère's independence is circumscribed by Harpagon and, as we see in I, v, he does not allow himself any thought that might contradict Harpagon.

Given this, the *quiproquo* of V, iii acquires new resonances:

VALÈRE: Non, Monsieur, ce ne sont point vos richesses qui m'ont tenté; ce n'est pas cela qui m'a ébloui, et je proteste de ne prétendre rien à tous vos biens, pourvu que vous me laissiez celui que j'ai.
 HARPAGON: Non ferai, de par tous les diables! je ne te le laisserai pas. Mais voyez quelle insolence de vouloir retenir le vol qu'il m'a fait!
 VALÈRE: Appelez-vous cela un vol?
 HARPAGON: Si je l'appelle un vol? Un trésor comme celui-là!
 VALÈRE: C'est un trésor, il est vrai, et le plus précieux que vous ayez sans doute; mais ce ne sera pas le perdre que de me le laisser. Je vous le demande à genoux, ce trésor plein de charmes; et pour bien faire, il faut que vous me l'accordiez.

The comedy in this scene, as can be seen from the extract quoted above, derives from the fact that Valère's language of love is a series of metaphors taken from the world of finance. Normally, such expressions are treated as mere clichés but in this case the humour makes us look at them in a new light. Because Harpagon takes words like "trésor" literally and does not realize that in moving from the plural "biens" to the singular form "celui", Valère is moving on to a metaphorical plane, the audience is made aware of the two different levels of meaning and the metaphorical one is thrown into relief, thereby bringing to life the clichés: they have an intensity of meaning that they would not otherwise have. The result of this is that we are able to view Valère's passion in a new light. The metaphorical linking of love and miserliness cuts both ways. It is not just that Harpagon loves money the way a normal man loves a woman but also that Valère loves Elise the way a miser loves money. Harpagon and Valère love in the same way.

The similarities are pointed up from the start of the play. Elise has been restored to her father just as the loan has been repaid. Indeed she too is like a piece of property and his immediate preoccupation is to dispose of her to someone else on advantageous terms – just as he is trying to arrange for someone else to take his money. His method of safeguarding his gold until

such time as he gives it away is to bury it and similarly, when he becomes aware that Valère seeks to possess his other treasure, he threatens to confine her: "Quatre bonnes murailles me répondront de ta conduite" (V, iv). This is the equivalent of burying the gold in the garden where no one can get it. For Valère, Elise is to be got from her father by stealth and stratagem. His courtship depends not on consent but on using trickery to persuade her father to give her up. His devious, round-about conduct to acquire Elise is forced upon him just as Cléante is forced into borrowing against his expectations, without his father being aware of it.

But if Harpagon and Valère can be seen as trying to conserve, Cléante is someone who dissipates. Harpagon accuses his son of spending his money on trapperies:

Je vous l'ai dit vingt fois, mon fils, toutes vos manières me déplaisent fort: vous donnez fureusement dans le marquis; et pour aller ainsi vêtu, il faut bien que vous me dérobiez. (I, iv)

Furthermore, his own servant, La Flèche, warns him about his extravagant lifestyle:

Je vous vois, Monsieur, ne vous en déplaîse, dans le grand chemin justement que tenait Panurge pour se ruiner, prenant argent d'avance, achetant cher, vendant à bon marché, et mangeant son blé en herbe. (II, i)

Cléante is presented here as the opposite of his father. Where the latter seeks to conserve wealth and increase it, he spends it and reduces it. The two most telling jibes are that he is like the marquesses, those useless parasites, and that he is eating the seed corn. He has no useful function in the present and his squandering jeopardizes the future.

But in seeking to conserve, Harpagon also places the future in doubt for while change may bring undesirable consequences, on the whole it is natural and an inevitable part of living. So, ironically, Harpagon's actions caused by his reaction to his wife's death are anti-life. He is inimical to the process of living. Significantly, the method of preserving the gold from harm is to bury it – just as we mark the deaths of family and friends by burying them.

Thus Harpagon is someone who seeks to arrest life. Mariane on entering his house feels the shadow of the gallows upon her. By retaining Elise's dowry, Harpagon is seeking to impede this natural flow of wealth from one generation to the next. Indeed, the pattern of marriages that he has arranged – himself to the young Mariane, Elise to Anselme and Cléante to a widow – is a mixing up of generations, a binding of young to old, so that there is no smooth transition of one to the other.

In such a context, Cléante's response to La Flèche is significant:

Que veux-tu que j'y fasse? Voilà où les jeunes gens sont réduits par la
 manie avarice des pères; et on s'étonne après cela que les fils
 souhaitent qu'ils meurent. (II,1)

As we have seen, Cléante is in his own way an enemy of the future, squandering its possibilities by his commitments. However, he is forced to do so by Harpagon's avarice. Furthermore, the father becomes the target of the son's hostility and in a final twist, Cléante's subterfuge leads his father to join in his wish that the latter may soon die:

MAITRE SIMON: Tout ce que je saurais vous dire, c'est que sa
 famille est fort riche, qu'il n'a plus de mère déjà, et qu'il s'obligera, si
 vous voulez, que son père mourra avant qu'il soit huit mois.
 HARPAGON: C'est quelque chose que cela. (II,11)

Like some character in a Greek tragedy, Harpagon is made to utter the words that unknown to him are a curse upon himself. But this is comedy and the outcome is quite different. Nonetheless these words are not just a throw-away joke. They have a point. Harpagon's reaction to the theft of his money is more than just hyperbole:

Au voleur! au voleur! à l'assassin! au meurtrier! Justice, juste Ciel! je
 suis perdu, je suis assassiné, on m'a coupé la gorge, on m'a dérobé
 mon argent. (IV,vii)

The theft is seen not just in terms of loss but in terms of murder. Thus the money that Harpagon seeks to conserve and increase is not just symbolically representative of his daughter, it also stands for himself. To steal his money is to take Harpagon's life. What Harpagon really fears is his own death.

That is why he takes such delight when Frosine tells him that he will outlive his children. That is why he seeks to marry again and parades as he does in front of Mariane. He is refusing to accept the reality of a death that is part of life and is instead seeking to create a little world that will be within his control, a world where everyone will be like a debtor beholden to him. Without him, others are as nothing. They need him as a debtor needs a creditor, as Cléante needs his father, as Valère needs Harpagon. Need becomes the instrument by which Harpagon exercises control and ensures that his own existence is essential.

Yet this is a lie. Despite what he pretends, he is not attractive to Mariane and, as we have seen earlier, she is one of those wishing for his death. There is an air of unreality about the Harpagon household. Harpagon is a domestic tyrant unwilling to listen to the truth from Maître Jacques.

Valère is not a real servant. He is in disguise in order to worm his way into Harpagon's good books and gain Elise:

Vous voyez comme je m'y prends, et les adroites complaisances qu'il
 m'a fallu mettre en usage pour m'introduire à son service: sous quel
 masque de sympathie et de rapports de sentiments je me déguise pour
 lui plaire, et quel personnage je joue tous les jours avec lui, afin
 d'acquiescer sa tendresse. J'y fais des progrès admirables; et j'éprouve
 que pour gagner les hommes, il n'est point de meilleure voie que de
 se parer à leurs yeux de leurs inclinations, que de donner dans leurs
 maximes, encenser leurs défauts, et applaudir à ce qu'ils font. (1,1)

Here we see Valère openly admitting that he is adopting the viewpoint of the miser. He seems to believe that he can do so and maintain his own integrity. He is only wearing a mask. But it is rather like Hamlet's antic disposition: the mannerism becomes indistinguishable from the reality. Valère is not just adopting the same point of view as Harpagon. His attitudes influence his actions. He runs the household in the miserly fashion that Harpagon wants and like his master he beats Maître Jacques. In short Valère is sucked into the world of Harpagon not against his will but because his stratagem has made him susceptible. Despite what he thinks Valère is not his own man. For all his cleverness he dances to Harpagon's tune.

Cléante is also drawn into this world of scheming and subterfuge. He attempts by devious means to borrow money. He fails not because he is unable to carry out the pretense but because he runs up against the deviousness of his father who similarly hides his true identity in order to lend money. Similarly, in IV,iii, Harpagon outwits his son, who is concealing his true feelings beneath a variety of subterfuges, by appearing to offer him Mariane's hand in marriage. What this scene shows is that creating false images of the self, acting out a role that is untrue to one's own nature is not a way of controlling the situation – there is always the risk of meeting a better actor. Indeed, in the two scenes that follow, the factitious reconciliation and its breakdown demonstrate that pretense is not a viable means of conducting affairs. The truth will out.

With this in mind, we may now consider the character of Frosine, who lives by intrigue. What Valère says of himself could apply to her. Flattery is liberally applied to Harpagon's ego. She boasts to La Flèche:

Mon Dieu! je sais l'art de traire les hommes, j'ai le secret de m'ouvrir
 leur tendresse, de chatouiller leurs cœurs, de trouver les endroits par
 où ils sont sensibles. (II,iv)

However, Frosine's wiles are to no avail against Harpagon. She creates a picture of his own personal attractiveness and of Mariane's infatuation for him – but to no avail. Harpagon accepts what she has to offer but feels

under no obligation to help her out of her financial difficulties. It is not just that Harpagon's love of money is greater than his love of flattery, but also that Frosine's stratagems depend on insincere flattery being paid for in sincere thanks, that is, real money. In this instance, she meets someone who, when the subject of money is mentioned, retreats further into his own world, where it is he who is in charge. At the end of the scene, the audience has the impression of two people moving in separate worlds, with Frosine excluded from Harpagon's:

HARPAGON: Adieu. Je vais achever mes dépêches.

FROSINE: Je vous assure, Monsieur, que vous ne sauriez jamais me soulager d'un plus grand besoin.

HARPAGON: Je mettrai ordre que mon carrosse soit tout prêt pour vous mener à la foire. (II, v)

No matter how skillful Frosine is, Harpagon manages to escape her ploys. Her description of Mariane's imaginary dowry is a tour-de-force but it does not take in Harpagon:

FROSINE: [...] De plus elle a une aversion horrible pour le jeu, ce qui n'est pas commun aux femmes d'aujourd'hui; et j'en sais une de nos quartiers qui a perdu, à trente-et-quarante, vingt mille francs cette année. Mais n'en prenons rien que le quart. Cinq mille francs au jeu par an, et quatre mille francs en habits et bijoux, cela fait neuf mille livres; et mille écus que nous mettons pour la nourriture, ne voila-t-il pas par année vos douze mille francs bien complés?

HARPAGON: Oui, cela n'est pas mal; mais ce compte-là n'est rien du réel. (II, v)

What is particularly comic about this is that Frosine's accounting methods bear more than a passing resemblance to Harpagon's. As we saw in II.i, he attributes arbitrary values to junk and then just as arbitrarily reduces them so as to appear not to be taking advantage of the second party. Frosine is doing something similar. Mariane's economies are no more likely to produce money than selling the junk will. Frosine, however, has met her master, for Harpagon sees through the obfuscation.

Yet this interchange has resonances beyond the present context. It suggests that money saved is not real. Harpagon is a miser and one of the characteristics of the miser is not spending money. The quotation above makes us ponder the extent to which money saved by Harpagon and money saved by Mariane are different since neither will ever be spent. It is as though money only exists when it is put to use: either in spending or in usury. Money is unreal in itself. This is perhaps easier to accept in the late twentieth century when money is reduced to a promise on a piece of paper or information shifted from one area to another. It is only when translated

into goods and services that we can have some appreciation of its value. So the money buried in Harpagon's garden is as much use to him as none at all. If he does not use it, he might as well not have it. The irony of the theft by La Flèche is that Harpagon is really no worse off than he was before. He has lost only that which he did not use.

This is the important difference between Harpagon and Cléante. At the time the play begins, the latter is prepared to use money for some purpose. Where previously, he had been content to buy fine clothes for himself, now he wants to help Mariane and her mother. The money will be used beneficially instead of lying uselessly in the ground, buried like a corpse, or merely serving to beget more money if put out to usury.

So, keeping money is just as pointless as Frosine's flatteries. Both are equally valueless. Frosine, far from being a master intriguer who is able to manipulate the world around her, is merely a creator of illusions that are insubstantial and have no impact on reality. Her plot to help the young people by impersonating a lady from Brittany, is just another such and stands just as much chance of succeeding. Deceptions in general cannot succeed in the moral universe created by this play. There is always reality breaking in or someone who is not taken in or who finds out. Until the end of the fourth act, it is Harpagon who manages to outwit the others. Yet even he cannot win all the time. He has attempted to build up a picture of himself as a poor man but no-one, least of all his children, is taken in. Finally, La Flèche spies on Harpagon and the latter's anxiety about his money betrays him so that he gives away the truth — the location of the treasure.

Manipulation is not a viable means of controlling one's destiny, of ensuring against loss. However, this is a comedy and despite the darker aspects of the play, the mood is humorous. Even when Harpagon is most cast down, that is when he loses his money, we still laugh. This is because we feel that the emotion and reaction are in excess of what the situation requires. We do not know but we strongly suspect that the strong box will be returned. We know that the object of Cléante's passion is not the money but Mariane and so we see the theft not as an end but as a means to an end.

What is most striking is that it is chance which permits La Flèche to steal the money. Indeed, by concentrating on the role of manipulation and control, there is a danger that we will overlook the role of chance in the play. Manipulation is an attempt to exploit cause and effect. For example, Frosine flatters Harpagon in the hope that it will cause him to give her money. Similarly, Cléante is able to give Mariane his father's ring because he knows how his words will produce certain effect in the old man. However, Harpagon does not lose the ring, as we have seen. Mariane promises to return it, an unexpected and indeed unprovoked gesture on her

part. There is no reason for her to make the offer she does. The unexpected also plays an important part in preventing Cléante taking out a ruinous loan – though he does not see it in that light at the time. More importantly, it is chance that saves Elise's life when she is saved from drowning by a fortuitously present Valère. But this is an amoral force – if force it is – for it is by chance that Harpagon spies his son kissing Mariane's hand, thereby arousing his suspicions. Nevertheless, though change and the transience of human life bring about loss, they also give conjunctions of circumstances, opportunities that we must seize.

In a sense we are back with the second sense of miserliness as proposed by the Dauvins. It is possible to increase what we have but it implies that our own efforts are not enough. There has to be a favourable conjunction of circumstances, a moment when we are offered something we could not have expected. To live by manipulation is to live by exploitation, to become a Frosine. The latter gives nothing and has nothing to give. She is a complete parasite. This is why she is not involved in the working out of the dénouement. For her to have succeeded in her plan would have involved the younger generation in her intrigues and the foundations of their lives would have been based on manipulation. Similarly, it would have been inappropriate for Valère to have succeeded in worming his way into Harpagon's favours. Had he succeeded it would have been either because he was sufficiently like the old man to win his approval or sufficiently deceitful to outwit him. Neither situation promises well for the future.

The dénouement when it comes resolves the problems satisfactorily and unexpectedly. Anselme is an unlikely source of help. Indeed, the fact that he is the husband Harpagon had chosen for Elise, predisposes us against him. We imagine that if he is a friend of Harpagon, then he must be like him and have similar motivations. Indeed, the way Harpagon behaves when first introduced to Mariane, is subliminally used to build up a picture of Anselme. The truth is quite different. Yet though Anselme is a key factor in the resolution of the play, his role is more of a catalyst than anything else. His presence causes the situation to be changed. Truth can at last be revealed, creating a number of opportunities to be taken advantage of:

ANSELMÉ: Le Ciel, mes enfants, ne me redonne point à vous pour être contraire à vos vœux. Seigneur Harpagon, vous jugez bien que le choix d'une jeune personne tombera sur le fils plutôt que sur le père. Allons, ne vous faites point dire ce qu'il n'est pas nécessaire d'entendre, et consentez ainsi que moi à ce double hyménéé. (V, vi)

It is evident from this that Anselme accepts unquestioningly the forward movement of time. For there is nothing more natural than that life should move on from one generation to the next. His reaction is one of generosity.

He gives his consent. As was pointed out earlier, it is one of the paradoxes of miserliness that in order for Harpagon to keep his money safe and indeed increase it, it was necessary for him to give it away. Similarly here, in order that life may be secured and humanity increase, it is necessary for Anselme to give up his claims on Elise and give his own daughter and son in marriage to the children of Harpagon. More importantly, it is necessary for the miser to give away his children.

Giving is the key-note of the finale of the play and Molière dresses it up in many different guises. To begin with there is the open-handed generosity of Anselme who consents to the younger generation giving themselves in marriage and paying the wedding expenses, Harpagon's suit and the officer. There is also Cléante, giving back that which was taken. More interesting is Harpagon. He too is part of the process of giving. Indeed he is an essential part both artistically and thematically. In the first instance his demands prevent the play degenerating into the mawkishly sentimental. A reformed Harpagon, brimming with the milk of human kindness, would not be credible. A Harpagon exploiting the situation is. But is he doing anything different from the other characters? He like them is simply taking advantage of the situation. It benefits him but, and this must not be overlooked, it benefits them. They are better off at the end of the play than at the beginning. In the case of Maître Jacques the situation is more ambiguous. Harpagon's "Pour votre paiement, voilà un homme que je vous donne à pendre" (V, vi) is a parody of the theme of giving but just as much a part of it all the same. Indeed, Harpagon's consent, his giving away of his family is crucial to the dénouement. Without it, no new family would be created. Thus, Harpagon's actions do not place him beyond the pale.

This is not, however, the opinion of critics such as Harold Knutson:

Harpagon, however, is spared the humiliating retreat of Arnolphe. Instead, the lost *cassette* severs him from human reality. Society's place will be somewhere off-stage; the world in front of us is now cold, lifeless, and metallic. The reunited family is imbued with the vision of the soon-to-be-found mother: what glows in Harpagon's mind is the image of more gold to be extorted from Anselme, and of the only form that woman can ever take in his vision of the world as objects to be amassed, "ma chère cassette."

Like Argan and Monsieur Jourdain, Harpagon is protected from the sense of defeat by his very mania. But while the other two join the triumphant family, imparting joy to it in their own happiness, however illusory, Harpagon stands alone. Society has not expelled him, it has left him behind.⁵

⁵ Harold C Knutson, *Molière: An Archetypal Approach* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1976), p. 102.

"Extort" is a strong word not justified by the exchange between Harpagon and Anselme:

HARPAGON: Je n'ai point d'argent à donner en mariage à mes enfants.

ANSELME: Hé bien! j'en ai pour eux; que cela ne vous inquiète point.

HARPAGON: Vous obligerez-vous à faire tous les frais de ces deux mariages?

ANSELME: Oui, je m'y oblige; êtes-vous satisfait?

HARPAGON: Oui, pourvu que pour les noces vous me fassiez faire un habit.

ANSELME: D'accord. Allons j'aurai de l'allégresse que cet heureux jour nous présente.

LE COMMISSAIRE: Holà! Messieurs, holà! tout doucement, s'il vous plaît: qui me payera mes écritures? (V. vi)

There is no indication in the original that Harpagon extorts any gold from Anselme. The money that he receives is his own, returned to him by Cléante. His first speech is merely an attempt to avoid spending money. His claim obviously is untrue but it is not a demand. Anselme offers to take upon himself Harpagon's responsibilities. The second speech is a question – which puts more pressure on Anselme but the sum involved must be less than for the marriage settlements. In neither case does Harpagon receive any money for himself. In the third speech, Harpagon does indeed state a condition but it is for a suit not money. Knutson's claim that Harpagon is thinking about all the gold he can extort from Anselme is not borne out by the text.

Nor is his claim that Harpagon is isolated. Anselme's "Allons j'aurai de l'allégresse" surely does not exclude the person he has just addressed. Rather, the first person plural includes Harpagon and extends the invitation beyond the pair of interlocutors to the other members of the two families. Such an interpretation fits the facts of the text much better – as can be seen from the reaction of the officer to what is going on. His "Messieurs" is obviously addressed to those whom he takes to be in charge. Anselme and Harpagon, and it is highly unlikely that he would call out to them to stop ("tout doucement") if what he was hearing or seeing did not lead him to believe that both of them were leaving or about to leave the scene. Thus, there can be no doubt that Harpagon is leaving not just to see his "chère cassette" but to join in the celebrations. He is anything but isolated. In fact, his condition that Anselme buy him a new suit is highly significant. Harpagon's clothes are old and out of date. They have served to mark him out from the rest of his family and are a statement of his being out of step with society. The new clothes will remedy that. They are a mark of his reintegration.

Yet he remains true to himself. He is coaxed into giving away his family but in a kinder, gentler way than was the case when he gave up his ring to Mariane. No-one loses. He is taking advantage of the situation as everyone else is. Like Anselme, he is giving consent but on his own terms. The paradox of miserliness is vindicated: in order to preserve and increase what one has, one must be prepared to give. The way a miser gives – while remaining what he is – is comic and adds to the humour of the piece. Harpagon gets what he wants, his "chère cassette" and for the first time in the play he is truly content. The play has a happy ending, as befits a comedy.

