

# Loss as Profit/Profit as Loss: The Self-Devouring, Unsustainable Appetite of Molière's Miser

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**Abstract:** Harpagon, Molière's miserly usurer, creates, encourages, and profits from the insatiability that also makes him fearful. The desire he fears is both the source of, and the threat to, the wealth he accumulates. An economic arrangement that encourages ever-escalating appetites, in order to profit from them, cannot indefinitely avoid exhausting what sustains it. Such a system first creates, and then manipulates, the perception of scarcity. The reality of scarcity will eventually follow. Exclusive focus on maximizing profit is not sustainable.

**Keywords:** profit/loss – ethics – sustainability – desire – fear – usury – capitalism – repression – hunger.

Recommencer, revivre, être un autre fut la grande tentation de mon existence. (Gary, *Vie et Mort* 29)

Central to my present motivation as a Molière scholar is the fact that we are living a moment, and it looks like it is lasting much longer than a moment, in which the critical faculties nurtured by comedy are both urgently needed and in short supply. This reality has inspired my recent re-readings of early modern French literature, and especially of Molière. It has always fascinated me to see in early modern literature, and particularly in Molière, anticipations of cultural battles that we too often see as having broken out only recently. Our current deep concern and cultural conflict about sustainability—or unsustainability—and about enormous, ever growing inequalities of wealth, have inspired me to take another close look at Molière's *L'Avare*.

In the course of my long study of and reflection on Molière's works, I have been increasingly impressed by the dramatist's position at the historical point when what we think of as modern culture was coming into dominance. It is too seldom recognized, I believe, that his time, as much as ours, was a period of cultural change and contestation, of pervasive intellectual and ethical struggle.

Hypertrophic individualism and rapacious exploitation of people and resources for profit, at the expense of the future, on the one hand, and passionate concern for

sustainability, on the other, seem to be the order of the day, now, for many of us. It is fascinating, I find, to see in Molière's miser a surpassingly brilliant portrayal, at an early stage of the process of "modernization," of an insecure, tyrannical, solipsistic, greedy, and ultimately self-destructive narcissist. In other words, Molière's portrayal of Harpagon anticipates, in my reading of the play, some of our own major concerns today.

If, as is often asserted, comedy has its origins in ritual feasts celebrating fertility and the triumph of life forces over stultification and death, then it is interesting to read *L'Avare* as an archetypal struggle between hunger and feasting, between death-like, rigid, excessively individualistic control and the life-forces that promise a livable future. It can be understood to be about the question of sustainability and fertile, egalitarian exchange. Harpagon's all-devouring, self-devouring desire marks an early stage of the crisis we face now.

I have always been convinced that comedy in general, and Molière's plays in particular, are most interestingly interpreted when they are taken seriously. The old comic motto, *castigat ridendo mores*—punish and correct bad conduct by ridiculing it—combined with various critics' and commentators' insights, can alert us to meanings in the plays that reveal their considerable power as critiques of thinking and behavior as observable and damaging today—or even more so—than in Molière's time. Interestingly, the Latin phrase itself is usually attributed to Molière's contemporary, the neo-Latin poet, Jean-Baptiste de Santeul. The implication of the *devise* is that comedy has important ethical and even cognitive significance. It can be a powerful tool of intellectual and ethical exploration, and it can improve perception and understanding.

Social theorist Peter Berger explicitly ascribes to comedy a cognitive function; according to Berger, comedy permits perception of dimensions of the world and aspects of behavior to which we are ordinarily inattentive (6). Berger says, too, that comedy can make us aware of incongruences between thought and behavior (7). Gérard Defaux makes a complementary point, referring to "la vocation didactique de la comédie, sa nature essentiellement morale" (19). James F. Gaines argues eloquently for rich, serious readings of Molière's plays. These are assertions that comedy can have—indeed, should have—both cognitive and ethical impact. My own approach to Molière has, from the beginning, been inspired and informed by Judd Hubert's concept of intellectual comedy.

These and many other commentators support my conviction that Molière's critique goes beyond lampooning the foibles of particular characters; it dramatizes issues of larger and broader human significance. C. S. Lewis once said that evil behavior is always very close to being ridiculous (35). Perhaps, for Molière, and for serious comedy in general, the reverse is also true: the behavior of Molière's major comic types is always close to being evil. The difference may be merely one of dramatic tone: tragic flaws and comic foibles are truly the halves of a Janus-mask. Comedy, in its way, can be as serious as tragedy.

One of my mentors, Ronald Tobin, once called *L'Avare* Molière's darkest play, and its main character, Harpagon, the closest thing to a diabolical figure there is in the

plays (97). Perhaps this play seems particularly dark to us because Harpagon's rapacious greed is uncomfortably familiar and portentous. I see Molière's great *ridicules*, including Harpagon, as more Faustian than Mephistophelean, more Promethean than diabolical in the strictly Christian sense, but I still agree with Tobin's main point: the play is deadly serious. The modern proliferation of Promethean and Faustian figures, including Molière's comic types, has accompanied the coming into dominance of long-decried temptations and character flaws. The very foundation of the modern quest for knowledge and control, in fact, is quintessentially Promethean. Perhaps its consequences should be reminding us of Prometheus's fate.

Frédéric Rouvillois locates the rise of the ideology of "progress," and an intense debate about its implications—some of which were distinctly rapacious and even totalitarian—precisely in Molière's time. I find this cultural struggle reflected and, in fact, conducted in Molière's great comedies. As Samuel Weber says, following Jean-François Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne*, to produce language is to struggle for cultural influence (Weber 9). Molière was, I firmly believe, a committed combatant in a cultural struggle that continues today. The stakes have only gotten higher. Molière's comic types exhibit behavior and habits of thought that the comedian treats as flaws deserving to be corrected by ridicule. In recent years, I have concentrated on exploring Molière's critical examination of much that is modern, and on applying that critique explicitly to some tendencies that seem obvious in our own reality right now. Some of these traits are dramatized and lampooned spectacularly in *L'Avare*.

Modern epistemology, most famously defined and advocated by Francis Bacon and René Descartes, with its emphasis on knowledge as instrumental power over nature; emerging capitalist economies, with their separation of economics from ethics; increasing individualism; and the general preoccupation with mastery or control—what eco-feminist Val Plumwood calls the "master model" of cognition itself (23)—are, it seems to me, put on stage, and on trial in Molière's major comedies. I once called this instrumentalist epistemology "conquistador cognition," and I stand by that epithet (Riggs *Cognitive*). For his part, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that modern knowledge, which he characterizes as coming "after virtue," makes two main claims: value-neutrality and instrumental power (86).

It seems clear to me that Molière's miser is an incarnation of instrumental power, manipulation for profit, and economic motives unfettered by values or ethics. All of Molière's great comedies—*L'École des femmes*, *Le Misanthrope*, *L'Avare*, *Dom Juan*, *Tartuffe*—unfold in the world that MacIntyre places after virtue, after the divorce of instrumental power from constraining ethics. In that—this—post-virtue world, self-interest and manipulative potency are sought avidly, and successful accumulation of material wealth is taken as proof that the "value-free" ethos is powerful, and therefore correct. Might

makes right. In some of the plays, the pretense of virtue—Alceste's *sincérité*, Tartuffe's *dévotion*, for example—serves self-interest, while also disguising it.

Descartes's promise that his method would make man the *maître et possesseur* of the world implies an economic motive and a potent impact for instrumental reason. The new epistemology, Descartes claims, will confer power, ownership, and control. The knowing, masterful, subject is, fundamentally, a seeker of profit and power, who treats things and people as actual or potential property. Knowledge and method serve this aggressively acquisitive self-interest.

In his particular drive toward monopoly, Molière's miser exhibits what capitalist orthodoxy theorizes as the motive and engine of "progress": the desire for, and single-minded pursuit of, profit. Relentless self-seeking by individuals indifferent to ethical values, and to consequences beyond benefit to their own immediate economic interests, would, a century later, be defined by Adam Smith's capitalist doctrine as the engine of progress. Situated between Molière and Smith, historically, is the ethical and economic philosopher, Bernard Mandeville. Even more uncompromisingly than Smith, Mandeville argued that private vices, most notably economic selfishness, are more profitable to a society than are private virtues. Indifference to ethical considerations is, by capitalist economic alchemy, converted into "the Good." It is hard to imagine a better exemplar of selfish, relentless profit-seeking than Molière's Harpagon.

In discussing capitalist orthodoxy in his new book, Cambridge University anthropologist James Suzman notes that "... resources are only ever scarce because individuals want them for themselves ..." (159). Suzman also argues that the short-term benefits of self-interest are "almost always outweighed by the longer-term social costs ..." (159). It is, of course, the long term that determines whether individual behavior and social practices are sustainable. In his excellent study of Molière as an author, Michael Call gives productive attention to the modern myth of the autonomous, self-seeking individual who, strategically, denies dependence on others and obligations to them (Call). Such denial of dependence and obligations, along with indifference to or exploitation of the future, is unsustainable.

The epistemology of mastery and control, along with its psychological motives and problematic consequences, have recently been given unusually systematic consideration in Benjamin Fong's *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and the Subject of Late Capitalism*. Fong's bold analysis was actually anticipated by the work of Ernest Becker (*Denial* 181). Like Becker, Fong finds the roots of the impulse to achieve mastery in the fear of death, and in the delusional ambition to escape it. Along with that fear and ambition go rejection of the body and the emotions, and misogynist distrust of and hostility to women. What is connected with the body, the emotions, and physical nature—typically conceptualized as female—is feared and repressed; it becomes the object of active hostility. The repression, predictably, perpetuates and intensifies the fear. Since a human being is a bodily and emotional entity that is destined to die, the hostility becomes hostility to the real self. Harpagon's systematic, even maniacal, deprivation of

all in his household, including even his starving horses, certainly qualifies as denigration of the body. His investment of all his love in his strongbox is, equally, a denigration of emotion.

In recommending his version of “objectivity” in science, Bacon compared it to a merchant’s ability to submerge emotional responses in order to pursue profit (*Solomon* xvi). This admirably reflects the “liberation” of both science and economic activity from ethics in the pursuit of power and profit. Another of Molière’s contemporaries, Père Mersenne, joined Bacon and Galileo in recommending the separation of facts from values (Berman 110). Our current recognition of the urgent need to think in terms of sustainability is, by clear implication, acknowledgement that economics can no longer legitimately or viably be divorced from ethics. For three hundred years, the benefits of capitalism emancipated from ethical concerns have been celebrated. Its enormous costs are now becoming clear. I see *L’Avaro* as a brilliant dramatization of extreme individualistic profit-seeking, and of its consequences. It seems clear, today, that both science and economics should be re-embedded in considerations of value and ethics. As we will see, Harpagon withdraws emotion from his family, “investing” it, instead, in his *cassette*. At the same time, he divorces his drive for profit, not only from emotion, but also from ethics or values.

Michael Koppisch applies the concept of contagion to the pervasive hunger, the artificially exacerbated desire, that rages in Harpagon’s household (32). This contagion is inextricably connected to the self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating nature of Harpagon’s paranoia, since the miser projects his own rapacious desire for money onto others, while simultaneously giving them concrete reasons to hate him and to covet his possessions. Harpagon’s combination of chronic suspicion, obsessive watchfulness, and deep insecurity conforms perfectly to the usual definition of “paranoia.” In addition, of course, the illusion of perfect control, the kind of control desired by Harpagon and other narcissists, in and of itself, entails paranoia for two main reasons: first, it inevitably fails to provide the sought-after dominance and security; and, second, it inspires hostility and resistance. If Becker and Fong are right to see the lust for control as motivated by fear of death, then it is certainly futile. Harpagon’s greed makes enemies of all who surround him. His fear, especially if it is, in fact, fear of death, can end only with its ultimate fulfillment.

So, Harpagon is paranoid, and he is also surrounded by real enemies whose appetites have been exacerbated by his régime—by his power, not only to control, but also to deprive. In fact, deprivation is at the heart of his self-defeating method. The monsters he fears are the creatures of the actions motivated by that fear. Harpagon, like all of Molière’s great *ridicules*, reminds me of two perceptions often taken to be essential to tragedy: the steps we take to avoid our fate become the means by which that fate is accomplished, and obsession with asserting strength is a sure sign of weakness. It can be added that the effort to achieve complete control leads to increasing resistance in those who are to be controlled, along with what the would-be master experiences as increasingly

threatening disorder. Again, we can see that the laughable and the catastrophically tragic are twins.

Michael Hawcroft emphasizes a related point that is useful here: there is comic incongruity, according to Hawcroft, between the *ridicules'* methods for achieving mastery and those methods' failure to reach their objective (53). The effort to achieve mastery produces, dependably and ridiculously, incompetence and disorder. Elisabeth Roudinescu argues that refusal or disruption of generational succession, which is clearly part of what Harpagon intends, leads to social chaos (66). Becker makes a point that is helpful here, too: modern society provides little opportunity or incentive to be concerned with what happens beyond one's own lifespan (*Birth* 125). Self-interest cannot, by definition, include concern for others or for a future beyond the lifespan of the self. The self-interest lauded in capitalist ideology as the engine of progress is inherently narcissistic and unsustainable. Fear of death turns out to be, in effect, a death-*wish*. Harpagon's regime is a living death.

In *L'Avare*, Molière connects the desire for control with what we might call an obsessive-compulsive neurosis: the miser keeps doing things that create and perpetuate the problem that he thinks they will solve. The ritual, enacting the return of the repressed, dependably reminds Harpagon that he is afraid, while also inspiring in others the hatred that he fears. Like all of the comedian's great types, Harpagon has a method, and he never deviates from it. That method leads inexorably to his undoing. What Harpagon is trying to repress, in himself and in others, returns in and through the methodical behavior that is intended to overpower and eliminate it. As the compulsive user of a method, Harpagon is its slave; he is *used by* the method. Seeking vast power is disempowering, and wanting ever more wealth is, effectively, a form of poverty. Harpagon lives in a world of pervasive threats, manufactured scarcity, and consequent fear, and his repressive regime guarantees that there will be no relief from that fear. Harpagon himself generates and perpetuates the threat. Loss and lack are the products of his obsession with profit. His enclosure within his self is reflected by his enclosure in the hunger-ridden panopticon that is his home.

The wealth that Harpagon accumulates through usury is deposited in his strongbox, which is buried in his yard. He is desperately afraid that someone will learn of the *cassette's* existence and steal it. At the same time, he obsessively "visits" the *cassette*, as if it were the grave of a lost loved one. These visits, along with his incessant, equally obsessive prattling about the strongbox, increase the risk that its existence and location will become known.

The linkage of desire and suspicion is a key Molièresque theme: the sense of the value of a possession depends crucially on the belief that others want it. This can be seen in Arnolphe's obsession with cuckoldry, in *L'École des femmes*, and in Alceste's extreme jealousy, in *Le Misanthrope*. Each of them treats a woman as an object to be controlled and a property attractive to male rivals. What Harpagon wants, perhaps, is to be envied; in order to be envied, one must have what others desire. One must believe that others know of it and covet it. Harpagon's fear of theft is inseparable from his lust to accumulate.

It seems, (psycho)logically, that he wants to be robbed. As Becker points out, keeping secrets is a source both of a sense of power and of fear or anguish (*Birth* 28).

Harpagon's paranoia about others' allegedly lurking, invasive desires is, therefore, exacerbated by his inability to be silent. His superficial asceticism does not prevent his taking almost sensuous pleasure in speaking of his wealth; he cannot control his impulse to talk about, and thereby display, his "hidden" money: "Oh ciel! je me serai trahi moi-même! La chaleur m'aura emporté, et je crois que j'ai parlé haut" (I, iv). Harpagon's paranoia amounts, as we can now see, to a self-contradictory, but psychologically necessary, and even consistent, way of flaunting what he is also trying to hide. To be of value, his *cassette* must be put at risk. His sense of its worth depends on his assumption that others lust for it. His riches can serve his narcissism only by virtue of a kind of financial coquetry. The value of profit is the threat of loss; the "secret" can inspire envy only by being revealed.

As a usurer, Harpagon, exploits those whose desires outstrip their means. It is interesting, I believe, to contemplate in this connection the fact that, for centuries, the Church prohibited usury by Christians on the grounds that it was an attempt to own time, which belongs only to God (Le Goff 51). Jacques Le Goff says that the launching of modern capitalism depended crucially on the advent of large-scale usury (10). According to Le Goff, historians tend to see the early modern rise of moneylending as a precursor of capitalist "progress" (53). Garret Hardin places at around 1600 the moment when modern ideology began repudiating limits on economic and political ambition, and on the usury that largely financed it (3). Usury was surely still a controversial subject in Molière's time. Then, as now, the miser's "foibles" would have been of timely concern.

The issue of ownership of time, in particular of the future, is an interesting one as regards Harpagon. The "emancipation" of usury from ethical constraints is an aspect of the general modern separation of economics from values, and therefore from ethical limits—especially from concern about the future. Harpagon imagines the future only as an emptiness into which to project and extend his *present* greed. Thinking about sustainability is, of course, concern about a future outside and beyond one's own desires, even beyond one's own existence. The most often used definition of sustainability states that the term means "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This implies, of course, that the future must be free of debts contracted, or deficiencies incurred, in the present. Unbridled self-seeking, however much wealth it may generate and accumulate in the short run, is unsustainable.

In *L'Avare*, Harpagon obviously tries to exert ownership over the future; he is, literally, a *marchand d'avenir* (Le Goff 54). I would adjust Le Goff's point, however, in applying it to *L'Avare*. Harpagon does not actually sell the future; he *buys* it, and at a price that will be more than fully reimbursed, in the future, by his debtors. He will own and control—stifle—the borrowers' future at no discernible cost to himself. In fact, he seeks ownership of the future without actually paying anything for it. On the contrary, lending

at interest generates both control and profit, while burdening the future of the debtors. Harpagon's present greed will limit his debtors' options in the future. Therefore, it will define and bind that future to the motives of the present.

Harpagon intends to be a sort of financial alchemist, turning desperate desire into gold. Moreover, his usurious lending contracts will actually prevent any adaptation to future conditions. We can already anticipate the implication that Harpagon is a thief. He is a *voleur d'avenir*.

This effort to assert ownership of the future is exemplified by the miser's refusal to submit to the natural succession of generations, as well as by his draconian lending contracts. He denies his children their inheritance, and he wants to marry the young woman whom his son loves. The power of the scene in which he worries that he has spoken aloud of his *cassette* (I, iv) is accentuated by the fact that it is his own children whom Harpagon suspects of overhearing his babblings. Harpagon threatens the normal, natural transition toward a viable future by treating inheritance as theft, and his own children as thieves. The fact is that he has stolen their inheritance and wants to steal their desire for himself.

Harpagon's desire to substitute himself for his children and to appropriate their future is given strong emphasis in Act II, scene v. There, the cynical *entremetteuse*, Frosine, wanting to profit from Harpagon's desire to marry a woman as young as his daughter, the very woman whom his son hopes to marry, tells the miser that he is destined to bury his children: "Il faudra vous assommer, vous dis-je; et vous mettrez en terre et vos enfants et les enfants de vos enfants." Frosine's understanding of Harpagon's desire is brilliant; she flatters his delusional ambition to absorb his children's desire and their future into himself.

Perhaps Harpagon's obsessive repetition of the "visits" to the strongbox and the babbling about his wealth represent both a return of and to something repressed, and the unsatisfactory nature of money as a substitute for what Harpagon really lacks and desires. This systematic but unsatisfying substitution is at the heart of his method, and of its futility. Reflecting on Harpagon's conversion of all values into money leads us to money's role in the rise of modernity: it became the "universal proxy" (Berry 22). Literary responses to this phenomenon were not confined to Molière, nor to France. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare explored the voracious appetite whetted by this historical process. Using the usurious Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh, as Molière used Harpagon's regime of starvation, Shakespeare evoked money's invasion of, and substitution for, the body itself. We might correctly say that Harpagon is a "shylock." Like Harpagon, Shylock is a merciless moneylender, and Shakespeare's play, though classified as a comedy, is, like *L'Avare*, very serious. The theme is usury is obviously central, as is the exploitation for selfish gain of the sanctity of a contract. The modern trend toward the separation of economics from ethics is decried by both dramatists.

The delusions engendered by Harpagon's substitution of money for all other beings and values are most dramatically exposed in Act IV, scene vii, and Act V, scene ii.



In the first of these scenes, he equates the loss of his strongbox with his death. Moreover, he calls the strongbox “mon support, ma consolation, ma joie,” suggesting that it has replaced his dead wife. In Act V, scene ii, when Valère speaks of his love for the miser’s daughter, Elise, Harpagon takes him to be speaking of the strongbox. Clearly, money has been made the exclusive object of the miser’s emotions, even being substituted for his wife and child. The use of money as a universal proxy, or universal signifier of value, has extended to replacement of family by money. The future, even in the person of his own daughter, matters to Harpagon only as a source of profit in the present. He misappropriated his children’s inheritance, and he also denies his daughter status in marriage by refusing to supply a dowry.

Molière’s play shows that, not only does Harpagon exploit the desires of others, but his own desire is monstrously excessive, perhaps because its real object is repressed, or an unsatisfying substitute, or both. This desire, able to be unlimited and uncontrolled because it has no concrete object, would ultimately consume *him*, along with everyone associated with him. The miser literally and figuratively starves all the members of his household—including himself—and ingests their hunger. He forces on them an appetite that enables him to see them as a threat. Their lack is, in the short term, his profit. However, his *régime* is one of increasingly pervasive loss. Harpagon is being devoured from within by the hunger he imposes on others, as well as by his own excessive desire for an unsatisfying abstraction. Again, the desire may be insatiable because its superficial object is an unsatisfactory substitute for the real, repressed object(s). In the end, money is an abstraction. Substituting it for actual beings and real objects is self-defeating. Harpagon and his household are a yawning abyss of lack. The miser’s *régime* creates disordered desire, which he then cites as proof that his oppressiveness is necessary and legitimate. His own all-devouring appetite produces a maelstrom of unsatisfied desire in his children.

It seems clear that the dramatic and thematic center of the play is Act II, scene ii. There, Harpagon encounters his own son, Cléante, as a borrower whose desperation has driven him to accept the miser’s voraciously usurious terms. In the play’s second scene, Cléante had spoken to his sister about the *rigoureuse épargne* and the *sécheresse* of their father’s household, which were driving him to ruinous borrowing (I, ii). This earlier passage made explicitly the point that Harpagon has created the conditions that, now that his son has become his borrower, will turn the prospect of profit into the threat of loss.

The lender’s terms and the borrower’s acceptance are communicated without Harpagon and Cléante knowing that they are the lender and the borrower. The self-defeating, self-devouring logic of Harpagon’s greed becomes clear in this scene. The miser’s lust for ownership of the future threatens the future of his own family. Moreover, the son’s desperation is no doubt in large part the result of the miser’s appropriating the mother’s legacy that should have gone to his children, as well as of the general regime of scarcity in Harpagon’s household. Patriarchal abuse in general, of which Harpagon is one of Molière’s strongest examples, flourishes in the absence of the mother (Riggs *Modernity*).

Self-interested damage to the future of his own children is perhaps Harpagon's worst abuse. It is, I believe, valid and useful to associate Harpagon's excesses with the real-life tightening of patriarchal control over families under absolutist monarchy (Hardwick).

When, later in the play, Harpagon suspects even himself of being a thief (IV, vii), we can reflect on the fact that he *is a thief*: he has stolen his children's inheritance, and he tries to steal the future from the next generation. Because of Cléante's desperation, born out of Harpagon's own avarice, the miser's usury, which has served to invade and swallow the wealth of other individuals and families, is now visibly threatening his own family, and therefore himself.

The confrontation with Cléante is the point in the play at which Harpagon's refusal of generational succession, and his will to project himself and his control into the future, are most brilliantly explored. He encourages and profits from the very same desires that, in his home, he fears and schemes to stifle. Like his practice of starving his own horses, thereby actually depriving himself of their energies and utility, Harpagon's miserliness creates the appetites that he both exploits and fears. This scene also undermines the modern capitalist myth of an unlimited field of exchange, an unlimited scope for exploitation, and an indefinite deferral of "externalities," of unacknowledged costs. In the person of Cléante, the true costs of Harpagon's greed have become clear and concrete; they have come home to him. It seems that there would be no "externalities," no binding of the future to the desires of the present, in a truthful, ethical economics.

Ultimately, then, Harpagon's financial cannibalism devours the substance on which he and his own family depend. The consequences of his effort to colonize the future by encouraging others to live on credit literally come back home to him through Cléante. The son's desire, intensified by the miser's domestic regime of manufactured scarcity, threatens to bankrupt Harpagon, himself. It seems to me that Molière suggests here that economic activity does not occur in an unlimited field, but rather in a closed system. However much economics may be separated from ethics in theory, in practice it is concrete and circular; consequences cannot be avoided. The future should not be polluted with the "externalities" of exclusively self-interested actions in the present.

This scene, then, is both an example of the source of Harpagon's wealth in aggressively exploitative, selfish lending tactics, and a demonstration of that wealth's ultimate illusoriness. In the end, Harpagon cannot deny or escape the kinship relations that ought to have encouraged him to accept ethical limits, concern for the future, and the imperative to share, in the first place. His unbridled individualism is symptomatic of the seventeenth-century turn toward what we think of as modernity (Riggs *Modernity*). Social theorist Nikolai Genov, in *Challenges of Individualization*, has done an incisive study of the costs of the early modern rise of individualism.

As we have seen, the miserly usurer creates, encourages, and profits from the same insatiability that also makes him fearful. The desire he fears is both the source of, and the threat to, the wealth he accumulates. His desire for power and control is not merely a response to something fearful that exists independently of him. *He* is the threat

to stability, the fomenter and exploiter of excessive desire. His consolidation of power and control through imposed scarcity engenders the monster that he fears. In fact, Harpagon himself *is* that monster. An economic arrangement that encourages ever escalating appetites, in order to profit from them, cannot indefinitely avoid exhausting what sustains it. Such a system first creates, and then manipulates, the perception of scarcity. The reality of scarcity will eventually follow. Exclusive focus on maximizing profit is not sustainable.

Cléante also represents a convergence of something much like Luce Irigaray's *demande* (58) and the modern, capitalist concept of demand. His avid desire to consume commodities may be a substitution motivated by the loss of his mother, as well as by the stinginess of his father. The fact that Cléante's mother is dead can be interpreted as making him an archetype of modernity's more general deprivation of relations with the female (Riggs *Modernity*). This adds yet more depth to the darkness of *L'Avare*: Harpagon's ruthless exploitation of others' attempts to compensate for a painful, pervasive sense of loss may be motivated by the same sense of loss *in him*: he has lost his wife. We saw that, later in the play, he will speak of the strongbox in terms that normally describe a human mate. The compensation for repressed loss, and the unsatisfying exploitation, grow and multiply, perhaps because what has been lost is not really clearly recognized, or cannot be acknowledged. It may be that Harpagon tries to assuage his pain by inflicting it on others, and, inevitably, thereby intensifies it. Here, again, the concept of contagion seems highly relevant (Koppisch). The means chosen to assuage the sense of loss actually deepens it. The repressed ineluctably returns.

This scene can certainly be interpreted as dramatizing the fact that Harpagon is enriching—and impoverishing—himself by exacerbating and exploiting desires that will exhaust resources on which he himself depends. His usurious hunger, which feeds on excessive desires, has invaded his own household. In the most literal way, now, Harpagon is a member of the family that could be bankrupted by his usury. His miserliness is the cause of his son's recourse to the rapacious usurer, who is Harpagon. As I have said, and as Harpagon will ultimately suspect, the miser is a thief who steals from himself. In my reading of the play, one of Molière's main points is that kinship relations, and social stability in general, depend on shared benefits, on equitable, sustainable exchanges. Monopolistic accumulation of wealth and power is incompatible with a family's, and a society's, long-term viability.

It is vital to a rich interpretation of this scene to see that it shows Harpagon participating in a transaction that, when he finds his own son involved, he denounces as ethically wrong. The costs of modernity's artificial separation of ethics from economics literally come back home to Harpagon, here. The miser characterizes this loan, from which he was ready to extract an exorbitant profit, as an example of *coupables extrémités* and *débauches*. He accuses Cléante of shameful dissipation and horrifically excessive expenditures: *bonteuse dissipation* and *dépenses effroyables*. So, perhaps Tobin was right to see Harpagon as diabolical, since he profits from what he knows to be culpable extremes to

which he has driven his victim. That victim is, this time, his own son. Cléante answers by pointing out that Harpagon is anxious to engage in such dishonorable transactions, sacrificing his reputation to his *désir insatiable*. This scene suggests that Cléante's only inheritance from his father will be hunger, loss, debt, and lack.

Cléante challenges his father to say which of them is more to blame—*criminel*. Harpagon's response to this confrontation is typical of Molière's would-be absolute masters: he vows to *watch* Cléante even more closely: "Je ne suis pas fâché de cette aventure; et ce m'est un avis de tenir l'oeil plus que jamais sur toutes ses actions." The predictable results of this more thorough visual "devouring" of Cléante will be intensification of Harpagon's fear of being consumed from within, and further exacerbation of his son's desperation. Converting his home into a panopticon will only exacerbate the miser's paranoia. Moreover, this scene prepares the way for the one in which Harpagon will think he has captured the thief of his *cassette* when he grabs his own arm (IV, vii). That single absurd but profoundly appropriate gesture "captures" the play's deepest meaning.

As we can now see clearly, thanks to our reading of this scene in particular, Harpagon *is* a thief, and he *does*, in effect, steal from himself. He is part of the modernizing society, and of the world, that are being despoiled for the short-term, delusional profit of rapacious individuals like himself, and by those whom they have infected with excessive, all-consuming desire. Our current urgent concern with sustainability reflects a dawning awareness of what Molière seems to have recognized over three hundred years ago: fomenting and exploiting ever increasing desire is, ultimately, a self-defeating, self-devouring, self-impooverishing enterprise.

Harpagon's home can be seen as a microcosmic copy of the emergent capitalist economy. Manufactured and manipulated scarcity, competitive materialism, hypertrophied desire, and the separation of economics from ethics in the pursuit of profit dominate this hungry world. Harpagon's avarice is a self-deprivation and a self-impooverishment, as much as, and before, it is a deprivation and an impooverishment imposed on others. Harpagon tries to achieve control and autonomy by substituting methodical economic calculation for bodies and emotions—his own and others'. He is a patriarch who imposes a system of denial and repression, a system of which he himself is actually the first victim. This point is made most strongly in his confrontation with Cléante.

As we have seen, Harpagon's way of understanding and controlling his world is motivated by a desire to defend himself against what he perceives to be ubiquitous threats. It is typical of Molière's great comedies that the methodical, ultimately single-minded, and *simple-minded*, way in which a *ridicule* tries to exert mastery and assuage fear is the means by which that fear will be perpetuated and realized. Again, Harpagon is, in the comic register, analogous to the great tragic figures: his effort to avoid his fate is the means by which that fate is accomplished.

Cléante and his sister, Elise, hope to obtain Harpagon's consent to their marrying the partners whom they have chosen. However, Harpagon goes beyond the typical Molièresque patriarch's insistence on choosing his children's mates to announce that he himself plans to marry a young woman. In fact, his intended is the same woman with whom Cléante is in love. This revelation makes it clear that Harpagon's narcissistic mania extends to substituting himself for his son and making himself his son's rival. He also, of course, substitutes his desire for that of his daughter. His lust to save money obliterates her desire to have a congenial mate. His rejection of a future not dominated by him thus inspires him to go to the extreme of trying to replace his son, and of substituting his greed for his daughter's desire and welfare.

Becoming his own son's rival in love is symptomatic of Harpagon's refusal to confine his selfhood within a social role, a context of ethical constraints, or a succession of generations. This is more evidence that he rejects relationships, and it confirms his determination to escape the limitations and mutual obligations that constitute kinship. His all-pervasive miserliness is, like the persistent patriarchal obsession with control of female sexuality, related to incest. It is a refusal of real exchange and a rejection of a future that will move beyond himself. Moreover, as Elisabeth Roudinesco emphasizes, refusal or disruption of generational succession leads to social chaos (66). This is another way in which Harpagon's effort to achieve control is self-defeating.

Here, it is appropriate to recall Louis Marin's connection of the absolute monarch and the incestuous father (184). Incest is perhaps the ultimate expression of the lust for control, especially control of the future. Paul Shepard reminds us that gold is a traditional patriarchal symbol of female virginity (176). Harpagon's hoarding of wealth is thus closely connected with his desire to control his daughter's sexuality—to dispose of it for his own benefit. Molière suggests that the ultimate consequence of patriarchy is suffocation of the future by the tyrannical, incestuous lust for permanence of the present, lust for ownership of the future. That is, as Molière has also shown us, the intent and the consequence of the usury that laid the groundwork for modern capitalism.

We have seen that the *entremetteuse*, Frosine, in Act II, scene v, accurately senses the implications of Harpagon's attitude toward his children. Frosine's flattering description of the miser as a man still young enough to be desirable to a young woman culminates in her saying that he is destined to live long enough to bury his children and grandchildren. In a sense, he already *has* buried them: in his oppressive, death-like realm of scarcity. In addition, this flattery prefigures both the confusion of Elise with the *cassette*, in Act V, scene iii, and Harpagon's threat to "bury" her in the permanent sensual deprivation of a convent (V, iv). This is another reference to the miser's lust for control over the future, and to his refusal to give way to a new generation.

The obsessiveness of Harpagon's substitution is further underlined by his saying that the impoverished mother of Cléante's beloved, Mariane, should bleed herself in order to make a contribution to the marriage (II, v). So, Harpagon, who wants to deprive his daughter of status in her marriage, and of her mother's legacy, by refusing to supply her

with a dowry, wants the poor mother of his intended wife to bleed and starve in order to give *him* a dowry. These demands, of course, will both impoverish his daughter's future and reverse the usual marriage practices in order to produce profit for Harpagon. Frosine inadvertently provides us with yet another reason to think of Harpagon as a parasite on his children when she says that Mariane's favorite image is that of "père Anchise sur les épaules de son fils" (II, v). This is a reference to Aeneas saving his father by carrying him out of flaming Troy. Harpagon threatens the future of his family and his society by exploiting and weakening the next generation.

This scene consummates the convergence of weakened motherhood, disrespect for kinship and the body, and the use of money as a symbolic substitute, as an unsatisfying compensation. Harpagon has substituted money for more appropriate objects of his emotion, partly because money is something without desire, without the otherness that can never be subjected to perfect control. It is also calculable. However, desire for money is insatiable, perhaps, precisely because money is an inherently abstract, unsatisfactory substitute for things and persons that have concrete value but are inherently beyond absolute control.

Harpagon cannot love his children because that would entail accepting their separateness from him, and thus their embodiment of limits to his selfhood and his autonomy. They will outlive him. The fact that his wish for omnipotence actually amounts to a death wish is implied by the fact that the money is *buried*. He has planted this symbol in the garden, as if it might literally grow. As an emptiness, or a sign of insatiable appetite, it *does* grow. The emptiness actually represented by the *cassette* can only become deeper and wider. When it is stolen, the strongbox becomes, literally, what it always was, figuratively and symptomatically: a hole, a lack, an aggrieving absence, the dead content of a grave. This yawning emptiness is what Harpagon produces, exploits, and fears. It is what he wants to bequeath to the future. The miser's house is the starving world, the rapacious world, that is brought forth by all-devouring desire.

*L'Avare's* ending resolves the threat posed by Harpagon, introducing the character of Anselme (V, v). It is as if Anselme were called into the play by Elise's appeal to *amour paternel* (V, iv), a futile appeal, of course, when it is addressed to Harpagon. Anselme contrasts spectacularly with the miser, in that the former not only accepts, but embraces and materially supports, the succession of generations and the sustainability of social practices and relations. Because Anselme is rich, and therefore a potential source of wealth, Harpagon intends to give his daughter to him in marriage. When Anselme learns that Elise loves Valère, however, he defers to the young people's desire. The blockage imposed by the miser is broken, and hunger is replaced by feasting. Moreover, in Act V, scene vi, Anselme agrees to pay all the expenses of two weddings, thereby opening the future that Harpagon had sought to foreclose.

Anselme, obviously embodying what Elise meant by fatherly love, arrives to break the stranglehold of Harpagon's domestic absolutism. Anselme will cure the contagion of egotism raging in Harpagon's realm. Roxanne Lalande correctly points out that Anselme

does not represent an alternative to patriarchy itself (53). It is clearly not Molière's purpose to criticize all forms of authority, and thereby to endorse further intensification of the very social atomization that he is decrying. The figure of Anselme is best understood as standing for values that have their origin outside patriarchy, and that are certainly incompatible with the hypertrophied, absolutist monopoly-patriarchy of Harpagon and of the seventeenth-century French legal system (Hardwick). Moreover, Anselme, unlike Harpagon, uses his wealth to benefit others—others who will outlive him. He goes so far as to provide Harpagon's daughter with the dowry the miser is refusing to pay. In this way, he limits the power that her husband will have over her, and thus contributes to her dignity and authority in her future household. Anselme does not regard money as so perfect a substitute for everything else that accumulating it can be an end in itself. He represents a social authority that does not see itself as above and outside the sustainable exchange network. He is emphatically not an absolutist.

A very important point for appreciating *L'Avare's* ending is that Anselme is going to supply and preside over a marriage celebration, no doubt including a feast, and that he facilitates exchanges that the participants do not experience as oppressive. He uses his wealth to distribute pleasure, not to advance selfish interests, and he prepares the way for a future that will move beyond him. His authority does not depend on imposing scarcity; he overthrows Harpagon's regime of fasts. Thus, he has no fear of theft, and he is not his own children's rival. Unlike Harpagon's all-devouring, incestuous monopoly, Anselme's liberality encourages fertile exchange in the form of freely chosen marriages. It contributes to a sustainable version of social relations and material wealth.

Anselme's liberality thus puts an end to Harpagon's regime of deprivation, envy, and selfish acquisitiveness. Anselme uses his wealth to subsidize the future and preserve familial and social order, rather than devoting himself to egocentric, stifling accumulation. If, as I suggested earlier, comedy has its origin in celebrations of fertility, then it is appropriate that this play celebrates Anselme's sacrifice to permit two young couples to reproduce in accord with their desires. Appropriately, as a rejection of Harpagon's hungry regime, the celebration takes the form of a wedding feast.

It seems clear that Anselme accepts ethical limits on his selfhood and ends the pursuit of unsatisfying substitutions by those whose desires have been repressed. Concern for the future is linked to the imperative to share. The threat to social order represented by a chaos of envy is ended. Harpagon's quest for stiflingly absolute control had produced a nihilistic regime of hunger and conflict. One of Molière's main points is that kinship relations, and social stability in general, depend on shared benefits, on equitable, sustainable exchanges. Again, monopolistic accumulation of wealth and power is incompatible with a family's, and a society's, long-term viability. Anselme reestablishes the fertile connection of economics and ethics that is indispensable to sustainability.

A final contrast between Anselme and Harpagon, and an extremely suggestive final variation on the theme of substitution, is contained in the play's last lines (V, vi). Anselme suggests that they all go to share the joyous reunion with his wife, and Harpagon

says that he will go see his *chère cassette*. The juxtaposition of these impulses not only reminds us that Harpagon has substituted his money for all social and familial involvements, but also validates the inference that it is a lost female—his dead wife—whom he has replaced with the *cassette*. The lot of the intransigent individualist is inextricably entangled in grief. The feast financed by Anselme will nourish the bodies—other than Harpagon's—and reintegrate the emotions starved and repressed by the miser's regime. Sustainability can only be a collective, generous enterprise motivated by concerns beyond the individual self. The *ethos* implied by Molière's critique of Harpagon clearly values sustainability over economic self-interest.

If we consider, again, the ethical dimension, what Defaux called the didactic purpose, of comedy, together with the possible origin of what we know as comedy in celebrations of fertility, we can appreciate fully the contrast between Harpagon and Anselme. Moreover, our present concern about sustainability can enrich that appreciation, just as the play can help us to focus our conception of what is and is not sustainable in behavior and mindset. As we have seen, Harpagon embodies the extreme individualism, the denial of meaning and obligation beyond the individual self, that undergirds much modern economic thinking. Harpagon, as is shown by both his hoarding of wealth and his refusal to give way to the next generation, refuses both sociability in the present and concern for the future. Through his miser, Molière denounces the divorce of economics from ethics in general, and the short-term, profit-oriented thinking that characterizes much of our own economic ideology and practice, in particular.

Anselme, on the other hand, seems to see, and to treat, wealth as a collective, rather than an individual, possession. Unlike Harpagon, he does not try to own the future and to bind it to his present, selfish desires and interests. Reflecting, it seems, both rejection of usurious economics and commitment to fertility, Anselme uses his wealth to open, rather than foreclose, the future. His open-handed giving of feasts defeats and replaces Harpagon's regime of imposed scarcity, of unsatisfied hunger. Anselme literally makes way for the next generation. Rather than using his patriarchal authority in favor of his individual desire, he uses it to open the future for the next generation. I think it is quite legitimate to conclude that *L'Avare* uses the critical, ethical resources of comedy to teach a lesson that can be applied to our own search for a sustainable mindset and a sustainable socio-economic practice.

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