THE IMAGINARY INVALID

By Molière
Adapted by Constance Congdon
(Based on a translation by Dan Smith)

STUDY GUIDE

CONTENTS:
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ACT 1

Argan believes he is afflicted with a variety of diseases and illnesses. In order to procure constant medical attention, he decides he is going to marry his daughter Angelique to his doctor’s nephew — who is also a doctor! However, Angelique has already fallen madly in love with a young man, Cleante, and when she hears the news of her father’s marriage proposal she is devastated. Argan’s wife, Beline, having only married Argan for his money, is angered at the prospect of having to pay a dowry and plots with her notary lover to scam Argan into willing his entire estate to her. But the quick-witted maid Toinette has always been suspicious of Beline’s intentions. Accordingly, when Cleante tumbles through the window she helps disguise him as a music teacher. The lovers face their situation in despair as Argan rejoices in his plan to secure his medical future.

ACT 2

Argan’s doctor, Purgeon, brings his nephew, the awkward, chicken-like Claude De Aria, to meet Angelique. Supposedly for the entertainment of the guests, Cleante and Angelique improvise an “opera”, using the opportunity to declare their love to each other. Purgeon has Claude show off his proficiency at doctoring by performing a diagnosis on Argan, during which Beline provokes Claude by telling him Angelique will never marry him. The guests leave in a huff. Toinette comes up with a plan to stop Angelique’s marriage and whatever Beline is planning. She sends Angelique to bed with a migraine and calls for “another” doctor, while Beline dances around with Argan, proclaiming him well enough not to receive any more enemas, infuriating the apothecary, Monsieur Bonnefoi. Purgeon learns of the different doctor attending to Argan and leaves him to his inevitable death. Argan demands to see the “new doctor” (Toinette in disguise) who pretends to cure him by recommending dismemberment, shaking Argan’s faith in the medical world. However, Argan still believes that only Beline cares about him, so Toinette convinces him to lie down on the floor, pretending to be dead. When Beline learns of his “death,” she dances for joy, revealing her nature to Argan. He plays dead again, and when Angelique discovers him she is heartbroken, to the point of not wanting to marry Cleante out of sorrow for her father. Realizing his follies, Argan wakes up and reconciles with his daughter, granting her permission to marry Cleante, on one condition: that he become a doctor. Toinette suggests that Argan become a doctor himself, and he takes to the idea and is initiated into the medical world.

“The man Molière was, above all, a chronicler of passions.”

— Virginia Scott, Professor Emeritus, UMass Department of Theater and Author, Molière: A Theatrical Life
CAST OF CHARACTERS

Argan:
An imaginary invalid.

Toinette:
Argan’s maid and Angelique’s confidante; smart, spirited, and cunning.

Beline:
Argan’s second wife; wants nothing but his money.

Angelique:
Argan’s daughter; an innocent romantic, devoted to her father.

Cleante:
Angelique’s love interest; a little silly but completely smitten with Angelique.

Doctor Purgeon:
Argan’s doctor, a notable quack.

Claude de Aria:
Doctor Purgeon’s nephew and proposed husband to Angelique; awkward and dull, has a tendency to squawk like a chicken.

Monsieur Fleurant:
The apothecary who works with Purgeon; a specialist in enemas, but still a quack.

Monsieur de Bonnefoi:
The scheming notary.

Set designer Rob Christiansen is a graduate student in the Department of Theater. He created this model of the set you will see on-stage.

Costume designer Esther Hammond, a graduate student in the Department of Theater, created this rendering of Argan’s costume.
Molière

The son of a court upholsterer and one of the King’s valets du chambres, Molière (1622-1673) was a bright child with an overactive imagination. His family was rich enough to send him to study at the Jesuit-run College de Clermont, where he was educated in ballet, philosophy, and other humanities subjects.

After he left Clermont, Molière decided his true calling was the stage, and he went on to form L’Illustre Théâtre. The early years of the troupe were fraught with problems; however, as Molière grew in favor with the King, he and his company moved up to the Théâtre Palais-Royal.

His final years were spent in sickness. He suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis, likely contracted while spending a night in debtor’s prison. During the premiere performance of The Imaginary Invalid, Molière (as Argan) suffered a coughing fit, which ruptured a vessel and caused severe hemorrhaging. He managed to finish the performance, but collapsed backstage with another coughing fit and more hemorrhaging. He was taken home, where he died several hours later without receiving last rites (two priests refused and the third was late).

Because of this and the fact that he was an actor, he was denied permission to be buried or given a proper funeral, but the King ended up giving him a “secret” funeral at night, attended by 800 people. He was buried in a corner of a cemetery reserved for unbaptized babies. In 1792 his remains were taken to the French museum, and in 1817 he was reburied in Père Lachaise, a famous Parisian cemetery.

MOLIÈRE TRIVIA

• Molière was born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin. However, he changed his name when he became an actor, most likely to avoid shaming the family name. Acting at this time was frowned upon and actors were still frequently excommunicated from the Catholic Church.
• It is rumored that when Molière was a young man, he spent time working for a “Snake-Oil” salesman, pretending to be a patient that had been cured by the “miracle elixir.” Perhaps this gave him the experience with fake doctors he needed to write The Imaginary Invalid.
• Molière lived a rather scandalous personal life as well. Madeline Bejart, a cofounder of the L’Illustre Théâtre, and Molière were intimate for a number of years; however, Molière went on to marry Amanda Bejart, who was either Madeline’s sister or daughter. Molière enthusiasts (“Molièrists”) have gone so far as accusing him of incest, even though evidence of this is inconclusive.
• Legend has it that, during the performance of The Imaginary Invalid that would prove to be his last, his fellow actors begged him at intermission to see a doctor. He refused, however, saying something to the effect of, “The show must go on,” finishing the show and dying by the end of the night.
Under the reign of Louis XIV, France became the most powerful and influential country in Europe. To give theater a certain nobility, the neoclassicists formulated guidelines that would reflect the order, logic, and refined emotion of the ancient classical models: verse was to be used in tragedy and comedy; plays were to exhibit “decorum” (no violence or battle scenes or mix of registers); the three unities of time, place and action were to be observed (i.e. all action must unfold within a single day, in the same place, with no subplots). Molière was able to use these limitations to his advantage, focusing on the willpower and self-mastery of his characters to construct a theater of exceptional clarity.

The sets for any production start as sketches by the scenic designer. This is an early version of the design created by graduate student Rob Christiansen.

Costume designer Esther Hammond created these renderings of the costumes Beline and Toinette wear in the Department of Theater production of *The Imaginary Invalid*. 
Think about your last visit with a doctor. Chances are, it didn’t look or feel anything like a visit with the doctor in the 1600s. For starters, the doctor would likely have come to your house, as in the case of Argan.

Think about these major medical advances of the 17th century…

■ 1628

English scientist William Harvey publishes *An Anatomical Study of the Motion of the Heart and of the Blood in Animals*, describing how blood is pumped throughout the body by the heart. The book is originally very controversial but eventually becomes the basis for modern research on the heart and blood vessels. Before this, there had been a thousand-year-old belief that blood originated from the liver and flowed until it was absorbed in the lungs!

■ 1656

Sir Christopher Wren, architect of the famous St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, invents a method of administering drugs intravenously (the precursor to IV’s that are slipped into the arm veins of medical patients) with an animal bladder and an iron quill. Imagine – a ball point pen being stuck into the veins of your arm!

■ 1670

Anton van Leeuwenhoek refines the microscope invented only 90 years before. He is able to produce about 500 copies in his lifetime.

CLASS ACTIVITY — 2008 and beyond?

In the last century, we have successfully cloned animals, eradicated many of the deadliest of diseases, implanted fully functional artificial hearts, and created embryonic stem cells which could one day lead to unimaginable medical advances.

• What kind of medical advances do you think we will see in the next hundred years?
• Think of how today’s medical breakthroughs would have looked to someone living in Molière’s day.
• Imagine what medical practices 400 years from now would look to us.
Dr. Purgeon prescribes the following remedies for your aches and pains ...

Rules for Blood Letting

“The vein above the thumb is good against all fevers.... The vein between the thumb and the forefinger, let blood for the hot headache, for frenzy and madness of wit. Also be ye always well advised, and wary, that ye let no blood, nor open no vein, except the Moon be either in Aries, Cancer, the first half of Libra, the last half of Scorpio, or in Sagittarius, Aquarius, or Pisces...”

— Peter Levens, master of arts In Oxford, and student in physick and chirurgery The Pathway to Health 1664

One author of the time was aware of the ritualistic, even superstitious aspects of the “medicine” of his age:

“It lay chiefly in the people deceived, and this was in wearing charms, exorcism, and amulets, to fortify the body with them against the plague, as if the plague was not the hand of God, but a kind of a possession of an evil spirit; and that it was to be kept off with crossings, signs of the zodiac, papers tied up with so many knots, and certain words or figures in a triangle or pyramid, thus”

ABRACADABRA
ABRACADABR
ABRACADAB
ABRACADA
ABRACAD
ABRACA
ABRAC
ABRA
ABR
AB
A

— Daniel Defoe, A Journal of the Plague Year, 1665

The following are actual doctor’s orders from the time of Molière and The Imaginary Invalid.

“If you would get rid of the chills and sweating, go by night alone to a crossroads, and just as the clock is striking midnight turn round three times and drive a large nail into the ground up to the head. Walk backwards from the nail before the clock has finished the twelfth stroke. The fever will leave you, but will go to the person next to step on the nail.”

— English folk belief of the 1600’s

Doctor Purgeon’s costume, as designed by costume designer Esther Hammond
Ideas of Translation

UMass Amherst graduate and Amherst College professor Constance Congdon had the challenge of adapting a literal translation of a 17th century French comedy. Let’s examine some of the challenges of this process. Here we look at four renditions of the same lines.

Below we have just a few lines from the original French text of *The Imaginary Invalid*. This scene comes at the end of the play when Argan is pretending to be dead in order to discover how his scheming wife, Beline, truly feels about him.

BÉLINE
Le Ciel en soit loué. Me voilà délivrée d’un grand fardeau. Que tu es sotte, Toinette, de t’affliger de cette mort!

Next, let us look at a literal, word for word translation with no considerations of artistic value:

BÉLINE
The Heavens be praised! I have had a great burden taken away from me. How stupid you are, Toinette, to be upset about his death!

Here is the same line from a famous adaptation of *The Imaginary Invalid* by John Wood, published in 1959.

BÉLINE
Heavens be praised for that! What a relief! Don’t be so silly Toinette. What are you crying for?

Finally, let us look at what the adapter of *The Imaginary Invalid*, Constance Congdon, has interpreted this line. She has taken the line and adapted it. The original intent of the line is still there, but Congdon has given it a more contemporary feel.

BÉLINE
Oh my – I am quite beside myself with unmitigated JOY!! JOY!! JOY!! I am delivered at last from this millstone of a man I’ve carried around my neck. How silly of you, Toinette, to be so upset. At last!!! I’m free!

De Bonnefoie and Fleurant’s costumes, as designed by costume designer Esther Hammond.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER
• What are the differences between the literal translation, Wood’s translation, and Con- gdon’s adaptation?
• How have the two adaptations stayed true to the intent of the line yet taken some artistic license?

Try it yourself. Pretend you are the “adapter” of a new production of Le Malade Imaginaire. Below is the original French and a literal translation of the same line. How would you adapt it to make it something that you would want to hear onstage? Make sure you don’t lose the original intent of the line!

This line comes in the scene we looked at on the previous page, when Argan, after revealing that he has not died, throws Beline out of the house. He calls after her: ARGAN,
Je suis bien aise de voir votre amitié, et d’avoir entendu le beau panégyrique que vous avez fait de moi. Voilà un avis au lecteur, qui me rendra sage à l’avenir, et qui m’empêchera de faire bien des choses.

ARGAN
I am very glad to see your good feeling and to have heard the fine panegyric* that you have pronounced on me. This is a wholesome advice that will make me more prudent for the future, and will prevent me from doing many things.

* A panegyric is a public speech of praise. Argan is being sarcastic because Beline, thinking him to be dead, has been busy calling him all sorts of awful names and celebrating his passing.

CLASS ACTIVITY
• Go through this study guide and identify each of the costume sketches done by The Imaginary Invalid costume designer Esther Hammond. (just like the one at left)
  • What characters are being portrayed?
  • How might the style of clothing embody each character’s traits?
  • How might the costume color embody character traits?
• Now, it’s your turn. Take your favorite character from The Imaginary Invalid and create a costume sketch for him or her. Remember to consider the costume styling and color choices in your design.

The character of Claude de Aria will wear this costume designed by costume designer Esther Hammond.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Here are a few questions to consider when you come and see *The Imaginary Invalid*.

- Why is Argan deceiving himself into believing that he is constantly ill?
- What is his self-deception causing him to miss in his own life? With his family members? With his friends?
- In what ways do the characters hide their true motives or intentions?
- How are these intentions or wants pursued and discovered?
- By the end of the play, how has Argan changed? What has he discovered about himself and those around him?

Study guide prepared by Jason Lites and Morgan Fox.

SOURCES


Molière. *The Imaginary Invalid*. Translated by Dan Smith; Adapted by Constance Congdon. 2006.
