

Winthrop University

From the Selected Works of Andrew Vorder Bruegge, Ph.D.

2007

The Imaginary Invalid: Moliere in a Nutshell

Andrew Vorder Bruegge, *Winthrop University*



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SHAKESPEARE
THEATRE COMPANY

SEASON 2007/08

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ASIDES

THE IMAGINARY INVALID

HARMAN CENTER FOR THE ARTS
LANSBURGH THEATRE

450 7th Street NW
Washington, DC 20004

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Artistic Director
Michael Kahn

Lansburgh Theatre
450 7th Street NW
Washington, DC 20004-2207

Sidney Harman Hall
610 F Street NW
Washington, DC 20004-2207

Box Office
202.547.1122

Administrative Offices
516 8th Street SE
Washington, DC 20003-2834
202.547.3230
FAX 202.547.0226
Please do not fax ticket exchanges to this number.

ShakespeareTheatre.org

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**Director of Communications
and Marketing**

Graphic Designer	Selena Robleto
Graphic Design Intern	Larissa Schwartz
Publications Manager	Shawn Helm
Publications Coordinator	Annie Hunt

Contributing Writers:
Andrew Vorder Bruegge
Lauren Beyea
Akiva Fox
Liza Lorenz

The Imaginary Invalid art by Selena Robleto.
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pages 1, 2 and 6 by Carol Rosegg. Photo of Michael
Kahn by Henry Linser.

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Dear Friend:

Welcome to our final production of this season—*Molière's The Imaginary Invalid*. Possibly the most famous of Molière's plays, *Invalid* embodies the playwright's best traits: his comedic flair, brilliant characterization and sharp social criticism.

I am pleased to welcome back director Keith Baxter, whose golden touch has graced our productions of *The Country Wife*, *The Rivals* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Keith will direct Tony Award winner René Auberjonois in his STC debut. René is one of the great classical actors working in America; he has performed in numerous Broadway and regional theatre productions, and made countless film and television appearances.

Following *The Imaginary Invalid*, I hope you will join us for our 2008-2009 season, which will feature three plays by Shakespeare, including one of his greatest comedies, his most enduring love story and one of his most powerful dramas. The 2008-2009 season also includes an acclaimed translation of a play by Euripides and three sensational comedies from the great European tradition: an English Restoration play, a Spanish Golden Age play and our first Noël Coward play. For more information, please see page 11.

I will see you at the theatre!

Best always,

Michael Kahn

Michael Kahn
Artistic Director

P.S. *The Imaginary Invalid* caps an extraordinary season—one that would not have been possible without an invaluable supporting cast of donors. On behalf of the entire Company, I thank each and every contributor for your loyal commitment throughout this past year. Your generous contributions make it possible for the Shakespeare Theatre Company to ensure the future of classical theatre in America, and you can be proud of the role your gifts to the Company play in that legacy. Everyone here—actors, artistic teams, board and staff—is truly grateful for your support.

Imaginary Invalid:

Molière in a Nutshell

Anyone writing about *The Imaginary Invalid* is sure to remind us that it's Molière's last play. Few scholars or theatre artists, however, examine this comedy with enough diligence to see embedded within it like DNA coding the story of Molière's development as a dramatist. On the one hand, the script contains many derivative elements from Plautus, medieval secular farce and *commedia dell'arte*, and these links to the past connect Molière to his theatre's aesthetic tradition. On the other hand, it amplifies an emerging pattern of innovative features first seen in earlier comedies such as *The Bores* and *The Middle-Class Gentleman*. We can detect a new hybrid theatrical form emerging. *The Imaginary Invalid* not only documents the masterful craft of a mature, seasoned playwright and actor but also signals the birthing of a new theatrical genre.

Molière takes a conventional approach to the arrangement of action, setting and characters in this comedy. As is proper for comedy, the characters in this story portray the world of the middle class – merchants, lawyers, doctors, soldiers, etc. The action in each act flows seamlessly forward in real time. The playwright also observes faithfully the three unities – a single time, place and action. Indeed, the comedy is quite simple: we observe gyrations over a marriage settlement transpiring in one family's home over the course of one day. Indeed, one of the marks of Molière's genius rests in his ability to create non-stop hilarity within tightly compressed dramatic situations, as in *Tartuffe*, *The School for Wives* and *The Misanthrope*. In mastery of this skill, he and his compatriot, Racine, are admired as equals in their respective fields of comedy and tragedy.

Even though Molière is writing *The Imaginary Invalid* in his maturity, he still relies upon popular *commedia dell'arte* character and plot constructions that he first encountered in his youth. He generates laughter with all the usual devices. This script contains not one but two scenes where characters use disguises.

First, Cleante uses the well-worn disguise of the music teacher to gain access to his beloved Angélique, and second – and more interestingly – Toinette disguises herself as a doctor to confuse Argan. The play begins with a quarrel between Argan and Toinette, and these antagonistic master/servant exchanges continue throughout the script. Silly dialogue abounds, as in the humorously awkward exchange between Argan and Diafoirus Senior upon the latter's entrance. Molière weaves the entire story around satiric humor directed at medical doctors – one of the favorite targets of derision in the *commedia* tradition. In using all of these techniques, Molière engages his audience through familiar dramatic channels.

In his Director's Notes, Keith Baxter asserts that Molière is experimenting with "a totally new style of theatre" in *The Imaginary Invalid*. We readily acknowledge his grandly innovative fusion of comedy, ballet and music together in a hybrid theatrical form. Having explored its possibilities earlier in his career, Molière now has the vast resources of Louis XIV's theatrical-industrial complex to command. This ideal situation allows him to create an integrated work with focused intentionality. Hence, *The Imaginary Invalid* moves forward into song, dance and dialogue with a dramatically logical flow and exuberance not seen in those earlier experiments. Molière weaves the three arts together through the characters that appear in all phases of the work, the verbal, physical and musical lampooning of the medical profession and the comic mood that permeates all elements. Not only do the ballet and musical interludes blend into the dramatic action of the comedy, but they also frame it nicely at the beginning and end, like bookends. Molière's achievement represents an advancement in genre comparable to that of *Showboat* in the development of the modern American musical.

Molière is also experimenting with some of the intricacies of comedic structure. His choice to write the

text in prose represents his most obvious deviation from accepted practice. While such an artistic choice seems unremarkable to a 21st-century, English-speaking audience, it marks this dramatist as an outsider in his own day. Everyone from the king down to the meanest lackey in Molière's Paris would know that characters on the stage speak in the rhyming couplets of Alexandrine verse.

Molière makes some unusual choices in handling characters in *The Imaginary Invalid*. He generally organizes his characters according to the traditional lines of stock characters in comedy. The scholar Northrop Frye delineates these four archetypes as the self-deprecator (the lovers and other "normal" types who support them), the imposter, the buffoon and the churl (or grump). The self-deprecators and imposters generate the primary conflict, while the churls and buffoon intensify the comic tone around the conflict. Molière violates this typical structure by putting a churl at the center of *The Imaginary Invalid* and pushing the lovers and their dilemmas to a level of secondary theatrical importance. Here Molière continues his long-standing fascination with the creation and portrayal

of eccentrics – Monsieur Jourdain (buffoon) in *The Middle-Class Gentleman*, Tartuffe (imposter) in *Tartuffe* and Alceste (churl) in *The Misanthrope*. Of course, any one of these functions as a marvelous star vehicle for the leading player, sole author and manager of his own theatre company. In Argan, though, we see a fully confident and highly skilled Molière relishing the opportunity to win audience empathy with a very unattractive character. He has become willing to build, sustain and stake his career on characters such as Argan who invite audiences to laugh at their foolishness. Molière also undermines the integrity of the self-deprecator role in *The Imaginary Invalid*, and this gives the audience a pleasant surprise. Molière introduces the brother, Beralde, into the action. As soon as he comes on stage, the audience recognizes him as "the voice of reason" in the play. This character type is a standard fixture of 17th-century French drama, including most of Molière's comedies. In *Tartuffe* he is the brother-in-law, and in *The Misanthrope* he is the close friend. Molière allows us to pigeon-hole Beralde in our minds as the dull, boring second-banana who exists primarily to soothe Argan (and the audience) with his

platitudes. Though we expect Argan and Toinette to lash out at doctors with cynical disdain, and we expect Fleurant and Diafoirus Senior to make fools of themselves as doctors, we depend on Beralde to drone on in a calm, even cheerful tone. In the second half of the comedy, though, Molière transforms this "voice of reason" into a "shock jock." Beralde turns into an even bigger churl than Argan, as he blasts the medical profession with some of the most biting satire in the entire script!

The Shakespeare Theatre Company offers its audience a rare treat with this unbawdlerized production of *The Imaginary Invalid*. The Company assembles an artistic team of musicians, choreographer, translator, dancers, actors, director, technicians and designers to collaborate on this complex work. In its day this piece marked the inception of a new, dynamic, flexible theatrical genre that was unfortunately cut off by Molière's untimely death. The Shakespeare Theatre Company gives us a window into what might have been with this authentic recreation of *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Andrew Vorder Bruegge
Associate Professor of Theatre
Winthrop University

"The end of *The Imaginary Invalid* is a celebration of several things: it is a celebration of comic theatre, of music and dance and of human creativity; it is a celebration of the escape from reality afforded by those arts; it is a celebration of another imaginary world in which folly has triumphed over reason and which the spectator can enjoy for a few moments. The medical ceremony of *The Imaginary Invalid* is thus a reminder of the therapeutic properties of theatre."

Julia Prest. "Medicine and Entertainment in *Le Malade Imaginaire*." *The Cambridge Companion to Molière*. 2006.