CHAPTER FIVE

BOURGEOIS RECIPROCITY AND IMBALANCE

All social groups must come to grips with problems and tensions within their own boundaries as well as with intergroup confrontations. The survival of the bourgeoisie in seventeenth-century France, torn by bouts of internal strife, depended on a deceptively delicate balance of social engagements and reciprocal gifts, exchanges of children and wealth that were institutionalized in the form of marriages and dowries. No more fitting summary of the ancien régime attitude toward social engagements can be found than that of the great jurist Domat, who wrote, “Dieu ne les forme et n’y met les hommes que pour les lier à l’exercice de l’amour mutuel.” We of the twentieth century, who are accustomed to viewing the emerging bourgeoisie through a glass darkened by merchant villains like Dickens’s Ebenezer Scrooge and Uriah Heep, Balzac’s Baron Nucingen and his accomplice Du Tillet, or Flaubert’s Monsieur Lheureux, may too easily forget how essential compromise and reciprocity were to the bourgeois clans during the insecure era before the appearance of organized capitalism and the self-made man. Fernand Braudel’s theories about the ancien régime’s overriding concern with “material life” and “capital before capitalism” help to put in a proper perspective the force of mutual dependency in the thought of Molière’s fellow citizens.  

The divine and secular approbation of social relations evoked by Domat found its most perfect expression in the rite of mar-

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riage, which provided for a contractual blending of family fortunes in the form of dower and dowry, as well as for the continuation of the lineage through another generation. Ever larger dowries were, along with land and office investment, consequences of a sluggish economic climate when capital, business opportunities, and trade were declining in France. The imperative of solidarity through the creation and extension of homogeneous (occasionally hypergamous) alliance networks, or parenthèses, is evident in the major studies of urban life in Dijon, Beauvais, and Amiens, and in research on groups ranging from the highly privileged secretaries of state to the humble watermen of the Seine Basin. It is no wonder that the necessity for reciprocity is a common concern of writers ranging from the practical Jacques Savary, who prefaced his ground-breaking treatise on business, *Le Parfait Négociant*, with an explanation that commerce was necessary and useful because of human interdependence, to theorists like Charles Chappuzeau, who used the heuristic example of social insects to illustrate human cooperation, and Eustache Le Noble, who stated, "Toutes les fortunes ne viennent que de l'apui des Amis que l'on se donne dans le monde."

Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect universal observation of even a mutually beneficial standard such as the code of bourgeois reciprocity; the system of exchange contained, and may even have encouraged, a certain number of disruptors—individuals who attempted to destroy the balance of familial alliance for egotistical ends. The phenomenon of imbalance appears to some degree in many of Molière's plays, often in combination with other structural failures. For example, the précieuses ridicules, Cathos and Magdalon, refuse to accept bourgeois reciprocity. So do Sganarelle of *L'Ecole des maris* and Arnolphe of *L'Ecole des femmes*. Yet, it was not until 1668 that a five-act play, *L'Avare*, was devoted particularly to the struggle between reciprocity and imbalance.
The words spoken by L’Avare’s protagonist, Harpagon, at the end of a desperate soliloquy on the theft of his buried gold, are most revealing: “Je veux faire pendre tout le monde; et si je ne retrouve mon argent, je me pendrai moi-même après” (4.7). These utterances express the miser’s lonely struggle against a society he can neither understand nor control. They guarantee Harpagon a prominent place in the pantheon of greed, along with such other literary creations as Shakespeare’s Shylock and Le Sage’s Turcaret. Yet, Molière takes care to show that, unlike Shylock, who extends credit to Venetian merchants, or Turcaret, who farms the king’s taxes, Harpagon is not a professional usurer and has no institutional justification for his avarice. Rather than serving the monarch or the business community, he preys upon gullible heirs and seeks to gobble up their patrimonies. Compared to the nonprofessional miser on whom he is based, Euclion in Plautus’s Aulularia, Harpagon is far more active and dangerous; for Euclion accidentally discovered his gold in a fireplace and passively continued to hide it, but Harpagon seeks to enlarge his treasure by illicit means. From Boisrobert’s La Belle Plaideuse Molière derived the striking scene of a father arranging to lend at usurious rates to his own child. When angered, Shylock is content to pursue his creditor Antonio in the courts, and Turcaret quells his rage by smashing china; but Harpagon nearly leaps into the audience in his frenzied persecution of those who took his treasure. Molière thus invites the reader to inquire whether his miser’s pattern of behavior can be of any benefit to household, family, or state, or whether it threatens, on the other hand, to destabilize the bourgeois world reflected in the play.

Among the numerous status indicators in L’Avare, the key to establishing Harpagon’s condition as a distinguished burgher is the large sum of money he has hidden in his garden, 10,000 écus, or about 30,000 livres tournois—enough money to buy a political office in the sovereign courts, to establish an attractive
dowry, or to pay about one hundred servants' salaries for a year. 
A messenger who arrives in the third act with further business propositions leads one to suspect that the 30,000 livres may represent only a fraction of Harpagon's cash reserves, which in turn make up, according to Pierre Goubert's research, less than ten percent of most bourgeois fortunes.

As befits his standing, Harpagon has a house, a carriage and team, and numerous servants, including his son's valet La Flèche, Maître Jacques the cook-coachman, the maid Dame Claude, two lackeys named La Merluche and Brindavoine, and most important of all his intendant Valère. The services of the latter were required only in a large estate with diverse business interests and farmland, for his duties included dealing with the tenant farmers and signing sharecropping leases, as well as auditing the accounts of the maître d'hôtel. The existence of a nearby farm is suggested by the arrival of a cochon de lait in act five, an event that the bloodthirsty Harpagon misinterprets, for he believes at first that it is the robber who is to be split open, grilled, broiled, and hung. It was common bourgeois practice to invest heavily in property in the nearby countryside and to stipulate that part of the rent be paid in kind in order to furnish the larder.

These social indicators tend to depict Harpagon as a member of the middle bourgeois stratum, which produced many magistrates and other public officers. The sum of 30,000 livres contained in the strongbox is associated in Furetière's Roman bourgeois with the amount of dowry for a woman marrying "un auditeur des comptes, un trésorier de France, ou payeur de rentes." Officier or not, Harpagon is identified with the upwardly mobile segment of the bourgeoisie that yearned for nobility. He has clearly risen above the precarious level of the struggling artisan. Even those for whom immediate anoblissement was impossible would attempt to "live nobly" from the
interest on conventional investments, to avoid any dishonorable activity, and to hope that, with the passage of time, their descendants might, through the accumulation of offices and marriage alliances, elevate themselves to the *état* of nobility.\textsuperscript{11}

Molière's audience would expect a man in Harpagon's position to be absorbed with the concerns of his lineage. The son had to be provided with a legal or financial office or with a commission in the army, as well as with a dower for marriage. Even more crucial was the daughter's dowry money, which might well claim the major share of the patrimony. Not only would this sum be the bride's only sure resource in case of need, but the quality of son-in-law it attracted, and his chain of alliances, might also have a decisive effect upon the rise of the family. The signing of the marriage contract would be the occasion for a gathering of the clan, including friends and clients, a practice whose subsequent disappearance heralded the arrival of the modern class system and the nuclear family. The sacrifice of self-indulgent expense in favor of the establishment of future generations was based on the haunting need for a circle of security that Robert Mandrou observes to persist in seventeenth-century bourgeois man, who was only content when "installé dans sa maison, derrière ses remparts, encadré par ses concitoyens."\textsuperscript{12}

Having determined as nearly as possible from the status indicators in *L'Avar*e the social identity of Harpagon and the normative concerns that Molière's contemporaries would have associated with this level, one must return to the text to appreciate the nature of the miser's transgressions. According to the master plan explained in the first act, Harpagon's son, Cléante, is betrothed to an old widow, his daughter, Elise, to the ancient Anselme, and the miser himself is to wed the young Mariane. The obvious danger in this design is that none of the couples is very likely to produce offspring, thus threatening the survival of
the lineage in an age when, as most demographers would agree, nature was given free rein to produce all the births biologically possible. Harpagon has no doubt arranged these sterile unions to protect his hoarded gold from the claims of potential heirs. When the go-between Frosine flatters him by claiming, “Vous mettirez en terre et vos enfants, et les enfants de vos enfants” (2. 5), he characteristically responds, “Tant mieux!”

Relying on what he supposes to be absolute parental authority, Harpagon intends to compel Cléante and Elise to follow his plans, although marriage required the consent of both parents and children, and unilateral compulsion was denied legality by jurists: “Droit de puissance paternelle n’a lieu.” The miser cannot envision the possibility that two families may both gain through the reciprocal gift of their children and their fortunes, the exchange of their genetic and economic identities. Any provision for the welfare of the youngsters must, in his view, subtract from his personal wealth, if not from his very identity. Thus, he must live by the outlandish credo of refusal, “sans dot” (1. 5), which sounds like a death knell for the future of his family.

It is not surprising that the miser is just as inadequate in the role of suitor as in the role of father. He shows none of the lighthearted generosity that his son demonstrates, and instead of an elegant contract feast, he orders disgusting, inedible dishes: “Il faudra de ces choses qu’on ne mange guère, et qui rassasient d’abord: quelque bon haricot bien gras, avec quelque pâté en pot bien garni de marrons” (3. 1). Whereas most men would seek to regale their lady, he orders the servants to pour the wine sparingly. Rather than to escort her to some gallant entertainment, such as the theater, he offers to take her as far as the fair, which is free. In his overwhelming fear of giving anything away, Harpagon ironically chooses in Mariane a partner who will bring him nothing in return, except an imaginary
12,000 livres annually in spared expenses, enumerated by Frosine, "Cinq mille francs au jeu . . . et quatre mille francs en habits et bijoux . . . et mille écus que nous mettons pour la nourriture" (2. 5). Frosine accurately predicts Harpagon's negative approach to marriage, but this does not help her to pry from him a payment for her services.

Harpagon's relationship with his servants shows that his obsession with hoarding money has discredited him beyond the boundaries of the family unit. Master-servant associations depended to a great extent on decorum and esteem, but as La Flèche says of Harpagon, "Il aime l'argent, plus que réputation, qu'honneur et que vertu" (2. 4). The valet mocks the miser, who, he says, will not even give a person good-day, but only lend it. When the servants show him the holes in their threadbare clothes, he advises them, "Rangez cela adroitement du côté de la muraille, et présentez toujours le devant au monde" (3. 1). It is true that he scarcely takes better care of his own physical appearance, judging by the obsolete ruff and quaint hat he wears. This fear of the movement of money surpasses thrift and constitutes a wasteful neglect, for Harpagon would rather see his people deteriorate like his decaying carriage and unshod horses than to restore them to a state congruent with his condition. The dowries, apprenticeships, and other rewards that many masters bestowed on their servants are unknown to the miser. Instead he subjects the staff to constant humiliations, such as the insults he hurl at La Flèche, "maître juré filou, vrai gibier de potence" (1. 3), and the hilarious close inspection of the valet's pants. Sarcastic Maître Jacques speaks for all the servants when, disappointed that Harpagon pulls a handkerchief from his pocket instead of a reward, he sneers, "Je vous baise les mains" (4. 4). As with his children, Harpagon shirks paternalistic responsibilities toward his servants and crassly exploits them.
Harpagon's patterns of irresponsible misbehavior seem impervious to any lessons of reform; he is certainly one of Molière's most "unreconstructed" characters, to use Robert J. Nelson's terminology. Without some extraordinary measures for survival, his lineage seems doomed to wither and die, for he is in a position to deny his approbation for any normal bourgeois marriage. It is in this light that one must judge the antiauthoritarian reactions of La Flèche, Valère, and Cléante. La Flèche explains that he robs Harpagon not for personal gain, nor to recoup the servants' rightful wages, but as a moral example to combat the miser's perversions: "Il me donnerait, par ses procédés, des tentations de le voler; et je croirais, en le volant, faire une action méritoire" (2. 1). Valère's deception of his master through the disguise that permits him to woo Elise clandestinely is counterbalanced by the suitor's deserving actions. He has earned Elise's love by giving her the precious gift of life when he saved her from drowning. His generosity and her gratitude developed into "cet ardent amour que ni le temps ni les difficultés n'ont rebuté" (1. 1).

The force of natural reciprocity that draws the young people together is thus identified as a sort of bourgeois "cri du sang." Cléante's motives in helping Mariane are typical of this spirit of good will: "Figurez-vous, ma sœur, quelle joie ce peut être que de relever la fortune d'une personne que l'on aime; que de donner adroitement quelques petits secours aux modestes nécessités d'une vertueuse famille" (1. 2). Contrast these sentiments with those of Harpagon, who says of the girl: "Son maintien honnête et sa douceur m'ont gagné l'âme, et je suis résolu de l'épouser, pourvu que j'y trouve quelque bien" (1. 4; emphasis added). The miser is quick to reproach his son for indulging in un-bourgeois luxury: "Toutes vos manières me déplaisent fort: vous donnez furieusement dans le marquis" (1. 4). Yet, it is the son who is the true guardian of the family's social identity. When Harpagon is exposed engaging in usury in act two,
Cléante reminds him that such conduct constitutes derogation for anyone claiming to live nobly: "Comment, mon père? c'est vous qui vous portez à ces honteuses actions? . . . Ne rougissez-vous point de déshonorer votre condition par les commerces que vous faites?" (2. 2). This ban rested on the fact that since 1560 roturiers holding offices exempt from the taille were treated like nobles in matters of derogation and were forbidden even from engaging in commerce; furthermore, all lenders were expressly forbidden to loan to "fils de famille."20 Indeed, it seems that Harpagon's activities extend far beyond this one incident of derogation, for La Flèche declares that he doesn't recognize any of the furniture mentioned in the promissory note and that it must come from a secret warehouse associated with other loans (2. 4).

In the third act, Cléante's generosity once again confronts Harpagon's avarice, as both seek to woo Mariane. It would seem that Harpagon should have the upper hand, since he enjoys the advantages of money and authority, but he ruins his opportunity to impress the young lady by scrimping on the entertainment and by failing to conceal his coarseness. Speaking of his daughter, he cannot resist the urge to use rustic proverbs: "Vous voyez qu'elle est grande; mais mauvaise herbe croit toujours" (3. 6). Cléante, on the other hand, quickly demonstrates a command of refined conversation when he upstages his father and compliments Mariane:

Souffrez, Madame . . . que je vous avoue que je n'ai rien vu dans le monde de si charmant que vous; que je ne conçois rien d'égal au bonheur de vous plaire, et que le titre de votre époux est une gloire, une félicité que je préférerais aux destinées des plus grands princes de la terre. [3. 7]

Cléante further emphasizes his own virility and Harpagon's decrepitude by putting the old man's diamond ring on Mariane's finger. In a gesture that demonstrates his willingness
to share and his sophistication as a lover, he makes her keep it, insisting, "Il est en de trop belles mains" (3. 7).

On witnessing this, Harpagon erupts in a series of curses.21 The son, wise and worldly, has stolen the center of attention, proving his mastery of the social ritual of courtship. The more the old man rages, the more Cléante urges Mariane that she must keep the ring. Molière underscores Harpagon's impotence by stressing his inability to share with his betrothed or even to articulate a reasonable response to his son's gallant rivalry. The only recourse he has at the end of the scene is to send his valet to collect the leftovers of the feast, or cadeau, that Cléante had secretly arranged for Mariane.

Homogamy is an important influence on the young couples. They are attracted to each other by affinities of sentiment, language, and dignity that prevail despite the concealment of identities at the beginning of the play. Mariane and Valère are actually the children of the Neapolitan Thomas d'Alburcy, whose title "dom" implies that he is a member of the Italian urban aristocracy.22 Cléante and Elise share this ambiguous condition between merchant life and hereditary noblesse, but they are one generation closer to full recognition than their upstart father. Donald Hunt, studying the patterns of family life in early modern France, shows that infractions against homogamous codes more often than not entailed disastrous results.23 Valère expresses this same idea of marriage as "cette douce conformité qui sans cesse y maintient l'honneur, la tranquillité et la joie" (1. 5).

The miser and his fellow characters differ noticeably in the degree of trust they have in society. Although the young people rebel against Harpagon to the extent that they secretly meet with their lovers, they retain enough confidence in social conventions that they never attack the principle of paternalism or seek to wed without fatherly permission. Both Cléante and
Valère admit to their passions when the truth becomes necessary, the latter declaring, “C’est d’une ardeur toute pure et respectueuse que j’ai brûlé pour elle” (5. 3). It is significant that Harpagon misunderstands this openness, assuming that Valère is a thief, since gold is the only thing the miser considers worthy of devotion. For this sociopath, “de tous les humains l’humain le moins humain” (2. 4), all life becomes the occasion for fear and larceny; he thus fails to appreciate the return of his strongbox by his son. Even his unfortunate borrowers are subjects of suspicion, for when he is tripped up by clumsy La Merluche, he grumbles, “Le traître assurément a reçu de l’argent de mes débiteurs, pour me faire rompre le cou” (3. 9). Harpagon is alienated from both the generous and the needy and lacks faith in all segments of the social network.

The dénouement of L’Avare resolves all questions of social disparity by reorganizing a new clan around old Anselme. This paterfamilias might well adopt the motto of Monsieur Orgon in Marivaux’s Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard, “Il faut être un peu trop bon pour l’être assez.”24 He withdraws all plans of marriage in favor of his son’s future role as family leader. After all, the recovery of his long lost heir removes from his shoulders any responsibility for beginning another family and obviates his motives for marrying Elise. At the same time, his riches replenish Mariane’s dowry and eliminate the need for her to choose a husband on the basis of support. For the sake of bourgeois reciprocity, he is obliged to make several petty concessions to Harpagon’s avarice, including paying the legal officers and purchasing a wedding suit for the miser, but this is a small price to pay for removing the only obstacle to the double marriage. Valère, his status and fortune restored, may now totally discard his intendant disguise and marry Elise. Mariane, freed from poverty, can accept the proposal of Cléante rather than that of his disagreeable father. In a fitting twist of reciprocal irony,
Harpagon’s children, who seemed at the beginning of the play to be too well placed in the hierarchy for their loved ones, are finally in a position to benefit greatly from their alliance.

Critics since the eighteenth century have followed the example of Riccoboni in arguing that the ending of L’Avare is immoral because it fails to punish adequately either Harpagon or his antagonists, a charge based mainly on the financial crimes of usury and burglary and on the children’s disobedience. However, even La Flèche realized that Harpagon’s gold was not the central issue of the play when he exclaimed, “Que nous importe que vous en ayez ou que vous n’en ayez pas, si c’est pour nous la même chose!” (1. 3). The morality of fleecing a Shylock or a Turcaret in the name of comic example is at best debatable; the chastisement of Harpagon is never an issue, for sums of wealth are overshadowed by the forms of social solidarity that they are meant to represent. The scène de renaissance and the advent of Anselme mark the triumph of conscious mutual responsibility over the monomaniacal money interests of the protagonist. Having removed his opposition to the marriages, he can do no further harm and is free of others as others are free of him. As Anselme’s new clan leaves the stage to sign the contracts that will solemnly bind them together, Harpagon heads for a lonely rendezvous with his chère cassette. His isolated and egotistical greed stands in stark opposition to the words of Charles Chappuzeau, who expressed the underlying principle of the codes of reciprocity when he wrote, “Il faut prendre peine pour le mieux, non d’accroître nos richesses, mais de diminuer notre convoitise.”

Les Femmes savantes, produced four years later, adds an important dimension to the structure of reciprocity and imbalance, and to the social dynamics of Molière’s theatre in general, for it is his only comedy to feature a struggle between two equally developed social units. In earlier plays the dramatist
had concentrated his attention on confrontations between an aberrant individual, such as Harpagon or Arnolphe, and a cohesive group of characters representing the values of the seventeenth-century *société d'États*. This form of juxtaposition between a reasonable social body and a mad, even dangerous, nonconformist is as old as Aristophanes, and it provided Molière with an excellent framework for both fully evolved comedies and short entertainments written well into the 1670s, as evidenced by *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and *La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas*. Yet by 1672, less than a year before his death, Molière sought to supplement the age-old model with a more evenly matched rivalry. On one side are the remnants of a prosperous bourgeois *ménage*, headed in theory by Chrysale, and including his brother Ariste, his loyal daughter Henriette, her suitor Clitandre, and an old cook named Martine. Opposing them are the members of an upstart intellectual salon founded by Chrysale's imperious wife Philaminte: her daughter Armande, her sister-in-law Bélise, and the obsequious *bel esprit* Trissotin.

The balanced forces of the household and the coterie confront each other in a series of carefully orchestrated and rigorously sustained skirmishes. In fact, the verbal symmetry is nearly perfect, if one takes into account that 50 percent of the lines (889) are delivered by members of the *ménage*, as compared to 49 percent (874) for those of the salon.28 Soliloquies, which figured so prominently in the roles of Harpagon and Arnolphe, are entirely absent from this play. On one level, the measured discourse of *Les Femmes savantes* reminds the audience of that of a courtroom, for each party is given equal time to present its case and to argue for the survival of the way of life it represents. At stake is not merely the whimsical authority of Chrysale, nor the pleasant companionship of Henriette and Clitandre, but rather the survival of a high bourgeois lineage, of which the *ménage* serves as a single temporal manifestation.

Paradoxically, one cause of the disorder may be the success
and affluence of Chrysale himself. Audiences in 1672 would have quickly recognized him as a comfortable bourgeois by his costume “composé de justeacors et hault de chausse de vel-lours noir et ramage à fonds aurore, la veste de gaze violette et or, garny de boutons, un cordon d’or, jartieres, esguillettes et gands.” Moreover, Chrysale’s name would recall to seasoned spectators that of an earlier bourgeois character, Chrysalde of L’Ecole des femmes. The most revealing indicators of his economic status are that he has invested all his wealth with two colleagues in Lyon, one of the banking capitals of France, and that he has traveled to Rome as a young man. Of course, it is impossible to determine absolutely from such meager evidence whether Chrysale is engaged in commerce, holds an office in the courts or finance administration, or is simply retired, “living nobly.” The Lyon investment (somewhat remarkable in that age of prevailing rente foncière) and the trip to Rome do hint at the possibility of an officier background. What is told about Philaminte’s wealth confirms this impression, for she has at stake in a lawsuit 40,000 écus (about 120,000 livres) of her own funds. It may be assumed that this sum represents at least part of her dowry, since that was the only normal source of wealth for a married woman. In Furetière’s Roman bourgeois, the “Tariffe ou évaluation des partis sortables” matches a dowry of that size with a husband who is “un conseiller au Parlement ou un maître des comptes,” a man in whose house servants would provide for every need and idle ladies could afford expensive distractions.

Chrysale’s honorary position as père de famille makes his presence on stage indispensable and gives him as many speaking scenes as the other major characters. Faced with the problem of portraying a feckless but basically bonnête person, Molière emphasized the comic irony of the materialist who, having filled his youth with worldly successes and amorous conquests, can only oppose encroaching powerlessness with hazy memories
("Nous étions, ma foi! tous deux de verts galants" [2. 2. 346] and the promise of Henriette's future. His language, a remnant of his former lustiness, is rich in colorful, concrete expressions, such as those he uses to send the meddling Armande back to her mother: "Taisez-vous, péronnelle! / Allez philosopher tout le soûl avec elle,/ . . . Qu'elle ne vienne pas m'échauffer les oreilles" (3. 6. 1109-13). It would be wrong to interpret such speeches as vulgar or to brand Chrysale as an extreme anti-intellectual on the basis of his wish to discard all Philaminte's books except an old Plutarch for pressing his collars, for comparison shows that in neither respect is he in conflict with the norms of his group. His well-known motto, "Je vis de bonne soupe, et non de beau langage" (2. 7. 531), is an affirmation of the realistic values of the *ménage* in the face of the salon's aggressive pseudo-idealism.

Henriette summarizes her father well when she tells Clitandre, "Il a reçu du Ciel certaine bonté d'âme,/Qui le soumet d'abord à ce que veut sa femme" (1. 3. 207-8). His failing is one of power, rather than intent, for he repeatedly tries to help the young lovers and reinstates the discharged Martine. It is an overdeveloped sense of compromise that leads to the collapse of his will in the final act, where he seems ready to accept his wife's proposal of a double marriage of Henriette to Trissotin and Armande to Clitandre. He cannot see Philaminte's ruse as anything more than an "accommodement" (5. 3. 1679). Thus, Chrysale lets an unscrupulous opponent take advantage of a propensity for negotiation that would not be out of place in a market or a court of law.

Molière devotes the beginning of *Les Femmes savantes* to an extensive discussion of the phenomenon of marriage in the bourgeois family, first from a theoretical, and then from a practical, view. Armande criticizes her sister's intention to marry and to give up the exalted state of spinsterhood, declaring, "Le beau
nom de fille est un titre, ma soeur” (1. 1. 1). In Armande’s curious ideology, the unmarried woman enjoys aesthetic and social superiority over the wife, whose household set of priorities she deems “vulgaire . . . sale . . . d’un étage bas” (1. 1. 4, 12, 26). Henriette, on the contrary, describes married life in terms of conventional duties and responsibilities, “un mari, des enfants, un ménage . . . les douceurs d’une innocente vie” (1. 1. 16, 24). Henriette’s willingness to assume the responsibilities and risks of marriage, motherhood, and the ménage contrasts with her sister’s failure to accept even the most harmless preliminary offers of faith and companionship from Clitandre.

It is ironical that, as the debate turns from the general to the particular, Armande reveals that she has deliberately rejected an opportunity to marry Clitandre and adopted a spinsterhood more suited to an hobereau’s penniless daughter than to a girl from the officer class. In order to appreciate the gravity of Armande’s mistake, it is helpful to consider the dilemma faced by many daughters of the poorer nobility. Noblewomen were discouraged from marrying commoners, since the children of such unions would inherit the socially inferior condition of their fathers. In addition, aristocratic girls hoping to find an eligible mate in their class faced stiff competition from bourgeois heiresses with huge dowries, who enjoyed the advantage of female hypergamy. Many aristocratic youths and their families seized the opportunity to renew their finances through alliance with officers or other wealthy bourgeois; for example, the lofty comte d’Evreux married the daughter of the financier Crozat. Rather than capitalizing on her status as the daughter of a rich burgher, Armande has allowed her anxiety over staying intact and her penchant for dodging obligations to lead her to a sterile existence in a social unit without a future. Her mother’s salon, which seemed to be an environment free of earthly responsibility, entails the cruel and hidden comedy of helpless celibacy.
In contrast to Armande’s behavior, Henriette and Clitandre approach marriage in a manner consistent with the norms of their backgrounds. Consoling each other for their misfortunes as cadette and spurned suitor, they form a lasting reciprocal bond, the “paroles de futur,” which were regarded as a serious form of engagement. Clitandre is justified in saying, “Il n’est rien qui me puisse à mes fers arracher” (1. 2. 150). Moreover, the lovers adhere to custom in seeking the consent of both parents, thus fulfilling the requirements set forth by the eminent jurist Domat: “C’est une suite naturelle de cet ordre divin que le mariage soit précédé et accompagné de l’honnêteté, du choix réciproque des personnes qui s’y engagent, du consentement des parents.” This mutual commitment is a fitting conclusion to family attractions that can be traced back to the days when Chrysale and Clitandre’s father were youthful companions.

Through her scheme to marry Henriette to Trissotin, Philaminte threatens the survival of the family and denies all social responsibility. Henriette hints that such a couple is unlikely to produce domestic progress or legitimate heirs: “Savez-vous qu’on risque un peu plus qu’on ne pense/A vouloir sur un coeur user de violence?” (5. 1. 1537–38). In reality an impoverished hack writer, Trissotin is likely to dissipate rather than increase the patrimony of the ménage, for Vadius reminds him of “ton libraire à l’hôpital réduit” (3. 3. 1024). Furthermore, contemporary legal usage did not recognize any parental right to compel children to marry against their will. As the theorist Gabriel Argou explains, “Dans la coutume de Paris et dans la plupart des autres, les parents n’ont guère plus de pouvoir sur leurs enfants que les tuteurs sur leurs pupilles.” Yet the salon members seek to inflict on Henriette and the other characters their one-sided notions, without any consideration for the souverain bien so important to all contemporary moralists.

One of the most crucial elements in the struggle between
salon and ménage in *Les Femmes savantes* is the peculiar relationship between Philaminte and Trissotin. Clitandre denounces this poetaster as “Un benêt dont partout on siffle les écrits, / Un pédant dont on voit la plume libérale / D’officieux papiers fournir toute la halle” (1. 3. 234–36); and Vadius eventually points out that he has not only driven his editor to the poorhouse and drawn the devastating critical fire of Boileau, but is also plotting to marry Henriette to get at the family fortune. Yet Philaminte summarily dismisses both indictments against her “bel esprit,” for she appears to be attracted to him by a combination of bad literary taste and misplaced sexual interest. She responds to nearly every line of his crippled verse with an undeniable intensity of feeling (“mille doux frissons” [3. 2. 811]). For his part, Trissotin describes the relationship of his poetic production to his patroness in reproductive (and implicitly erotic) terms: “Hélas! c’est un enfant tout nouveau-né, Madame. / Son sort assurément a lieu de vous toucher, / Et c’est dans votre cour, que j’en viens d’accoucher” (3. 1. 720–22). Philaminte responds by acknowledging Trissotin as the poem’s father, an admirable progenitor! There can be little doubt that the patroness and her creature intend to reign tyrannically over their learned pseudo-society. Having already enlisted the aid of the more easily confused members of the household, such as Bélise and Armande, Philaminte will govern her husband with an iron hand that refuses to compromise: “La contestation est ici superflue, / Et de tout point chez moi l’affaire est résolue” (2. 8. 635–36). The scribbler of verses is equally unscrupulous in his efforts to circumvent social codes by marrying Henriette, for he admits to her, “Pourvu que je vous aie, il n’importe comment” (5. 1. 1536).

On the linguistic level, the pointless echoes with which Philaminte, Armande, and Bélise respond to Trissotin’s poems are typical of an attitude that fosters conformity. Vadius and Tris-
sotin treat each other with similar empty praise until a disagree-
ment over a poem sets off a chain reaction of discord between
them. The trite, forced, self-serving conversations of the salon
barely conceal a hunger for power, made explicit by Armande,
which can only be satisfied by the subjugation of the entire
Republic of Letters: “Nous serons par nos lois les juges des
ouvrages; / Par nos lois, prose et vers, tout nous sera soumis”
(3. 2. 922-23).

The scope of the salon’s ambitions is truly monumental. On
one extreme, Trissotin wishes to supplant the court as the arbiter
of literary fortune, a usurpation that verges on lese majesté and
draws a sharp rejoinder from Clitandre, who defends the court’s
ability to discern the common good. On the other hand, much
hilarity results from the ladies’ efforts to complete their con-
quest of the ménage by making each of the servants submit to
their intellectual decrees. Chrysale bemoans the fact that the
majority of the staff has already let itself be corrupted, that he
has servants but is no longer served, except by the cantankerous
cook, Martine, who identifies totally with her condition.

Molière uses the character of Martine to illustrate the funda-
mentally reciprocal nature of the master-servant relationship in
the household: although Martine provides her specialized skill
for the maintenance of the family, she also depends on it com-
pletely for care in her old age and infirmity (“Service d’autrui
n’est pas un héritage” [2. 5. 420]). Martine’s importance to the
ménage should not be underestimated, for as the expert Audi-
ger stated, “dans la plupart des maisons de noblesse, gens de
robe, partisans et bourgeois, il y a aussi des demoiselles ou filles
de chambre qui ont presque tout le gouvernement.” Phil-
aminte’s clique disregards these responsibilities of work and
care in their haste to subordinate the entire society to a single
power principle: “La grammaire, qui sait tout régenter jus-
qu’aux rois, / Et les fait la main haute obéir à ses lois” (2. 6.
465–66). However, Martine takes for granted the customary function of language as an agent of human harmony, which she expresses in the delightfully naïve metaphors of the cock and the hen, and the woman as the book of her man. As for the words themselves, “Qu’ils s’accordent entre eux, ou se gourment, qu’importe?” (2. 6. 503). Unfettered by the conventions of upper-class politeness, Martine can represent the more overtly physical, and even sexual, arguments in favor of the ménage. Her expulsion underscores the incompatibility between earthly bourgeois reciprocity and the sterility of the salon as expressed by the précieuse aunt Bélise: “Nous en bannissons la substance étendue” (5. 3. 1686).

Bélise has her own bizarre way of distorting social values. Deprived of husband and suitors by unspecified circumstances, she has collapsed all male roles into one category—that of secret admirers. For her the normal progression from eligible bachelor to suitor to husband has been broken, not merely at the uppermost rung, but at every level. The distinction between eligible bachelors and ineligible men has also become so thoroughly confused that Bélise numbers among her “suitors” several married men. As the imaginary object of desire, she convinces herself that she already enjoys the kind of immense power that Philaminte and Armande seek through learning, and that she could easily cause Clitandre to turn his attentions from Henriette. Nevertheless, it is apparent to everyone that Bélise’s chimerical notions stem from a deep alienation that, although it is less dangerous than that of the other ladies, is just as blind to personal responsibility.

The solution to the contest between ménage and salon must come from a remote, but not completely extrinsic, source—the letters forged by Ariste that announce economic ruin and legal disaster to Chrysale and Philaminte. Far from being considered improper or overly contrived, this dénouement was applauded
in its day as being both dramatically convincing and aesthetically pleasing.41 Ariste intervenes with his mock crisis only after the normal social conventions, embodied in the notary, have reached an impasse. Faced not only with Bélise’s ridiculous request to count the dowry in ancient talents and minas but also with the prospect of two husbands, the notary can only conclude, “C’est trop pour la coutume” (5. 3. 1624). In simulating a financial crisis, Ariste is simply putting the rival collective entities to the ultimate test, confronting them with the prospect of immediate suffering that could result at any point, either from the plagues and famines of nature or from the wars and injustices of man.

It is significant that Molière wastes no time in removing Trissotin from the scene and in convincing Philaminte that this “lâche déserteur” (5. 4. 1766) has misled her. Instead, the playwright returns again to the theme of reciprocity by examining an unforeseen objection to marriage on the part of Henriette. She had always conceived of her relationship with Clitandre as one that was mutually beneficial, “En satisfaisant à mes voeux les plus doux/ J’ai vu que mon hymen ajustait vos affaires” (5. 4. 1742–43). Taken in by Ariste’s ruse and thinking that she can offer her generous suitor only a life of want and suffering, Henriette puts the time-honored values of her milieu before the gratification of her personal needs, and she only agrees to the wedding once the illusion has been revealed. Such self-control on the part of the bride demonstrates most conclusively that Molière’s theatre reflects an ideology in which the decision to marry is a commitment to collective goals rather than an act of self-gratification.

In the end, ménage must prevail over salon; for although it is unable to enforce a permanent authoritarian structure, such as the one Philaminte envisions, it is resilient in crises and admirably suited to survival. Clitandre’s generous example of shared
fortunes and Henriette’s forceful insistence on reciprocal benefits in marriage combine to ensure that the next generation will inherit a patrimony of values as well as of wealth. By contrast, Trissotin and the learned ladies are so sterile that their only “children” are misshapen madrigals and so socially deluded that their alliance crumbles at the first suggestion of poverty. It is significant that the upholders of the *ménage* never attack the specific intellectual interests of the clique; Descartes, men in the moon, and *ruelle* poetry merely served, after all, as pretexts for the salon’s hunger for power. Although it is necessary that Trissotin and his hopes for marriage with Henriette are vanquished, there is no reason that the ladies, once they have abandoned their pretensions as an upstart social unit, cannot continue to console themselves with philosophy. The *ménage*, its future assured, can find room even for a trio of bumbling, peevish bluestockings.

Both *L’ Avare* and *Les Femmes savantes* are triumphal plays, showing a bourgeois order that is healthy and able to respond to crises. One has only to read a few comedies by such contemporaries as Chevalier or Poisson, who wrote for rival theaters, to appreciate the delight of a play that provides for the prospect of prosperous new generations, without recourse to such hackneyed devices as drunkenness, mistaken identity, promiscuity, or elopement. Molière may have been a sharp critic of bourgeois individuals who challenged the concept of social differentiation or gradual, conditional mobility, but his treatment of the structure of reciprocity and imbalance shows that he believes in the bourgeoisie and in its place within the *société des états*. Moreover, his stress on mutual gifts, benefits, concessions, and attractions evokes an ideology of mercantile exchange that is not at all out of place under the ministry of Colbert.

Molière’s bourgeois families are lineages, not dynasties; there is no sense that the fortunes or the *conditions* in themselves
predetermine behavior, or even happiness. Quite the contrary, it is human action that is continuously called upon to reaffirm values, to amend dissonance, and to shape society. Figures like Harpagon or Bélise are ridiculous because they have refused to play an active role in their dramatic world. They have deliberately transformed themselves, through their egotistical rigidity, into terminal cases of *comédie de caractère* in the midst of an environment that asks only that they mind their manners.

2. Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme, XV*-XVIII*-e Siècle*. It is also worthwhile to keep in mind the reservations about Engels's theory of class struggle, which are expressed in Jacques Heers, *Le Clan familial au Moyen Age*.
4. Roupnel, *La Ville et la campagne*, pp. 124–86; Goubert, *Beauvais*, pp. 305–47; Deyon, *Amiens*, pp. 258–348; Bluche, "L'origine sociale"; Jean-Yves Tirat, "Les Voituriers par eau parisiens au milieu du XVIIe siècle"; Daniel Dessert points out that even the *financiers*, stereotyped as upstarts, were actually the products of a close kinship system in "Le 'laquais-financier' au Grand Siècle: mythe ou réalité?"
10. Antoine Furet, *Le Roman bourgeois*, in *Romanciers du XVIIe Siècle*, p. 920. Goubert, in *Beauvais*, mentions the artisan Charles Toupet, a Beauvais weaver who employed twelve workers, but whose wealth consisted only of a few pieces of cloth and 56 livres.
12. Mandrou, *Introduction à la France moderne*, p. 151. Altruistic devotion to family and group goals was not limited to France: in seventeenth-century Cambridgeshire, parents regularly established their children's careers as they came of age, and a father's gradual retirement began with the first marriage among his offspring; see Margaret Spufford, "Peasant Inheritance Customs and Land Distribution in Cam-

bridgeshire from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries," in *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800*.

13. Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV et vingt millions de Français*, pp. 15–19; J. L. Flandrin, "La Cellule familiale et l’oeuvre de procréation dans l’ancienne société." Molière’s own family was a good example of the reproductive imperative, since his father Jean had seven brothers and sisters, and Jean-Baptiste himself had five; see Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller, *Cent ans*, pp. 23–24.


15. Marcel Gutwirth’s remarkable essay “The Unity of Molière’s *L’Avare*” stresses this point as a central link to the roles in the play; his argument is far more convincing than that of James Doolittle, “Bad Writing in *L’Avare*,” who maintains that the play is both aesthetically and morally faulty; an interesting existentialist view that Harpagon’s hoarded riches are a materialization of his identity, without which he refuses to exist, may be found in Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, *Molière ou la liberté mise à nu*, pp. 130–45; and Ralph Albanese’s “Argent et réification dans *L’Avare*” provides an interesting study of Harpagon in the light of Colbert’s mercantilist policies.

16. In the Brissart and Sauvé engraving (*OC La Grange*, 4:94) Molière is shown, as Harpagon, dressed in a rather simple outfit of bourgeois cut, but with an archaic *fraise* and an upturned hat. This is confirmed by the inventory of Molière’s goods, which lists the costume as “concistant en un manteau, chausse et pourpoint de satin noir, garny de dantelle ronde de soye noire, chappeau, peruke, soullier, prisé vingt livres” (*Cent Ans*, p. 568). To appreciate the social shock of Harpagon’s overly frugal clothes, one need only turn to La Mothe Le Vayer’s opuscule “Des habits et de leurs modes,” where even kings and popes are reprehended for underdressing and sartorial conformity is lauded: “Il faut observer une certaine bienséance en nos habits, qui ait son rapport au temps, au lieu, et aux personnes. ce serait être trop rigide de vouloir heurter toutes ces modes” (*Oeuvres*, 2:49–50).


18. Antoine Adam stressed the importance of this scene in establishing Harpagon as a butt of ridicule rather than a sympathetic figure (“Molière,” p. 374); W. G. Moore notes that the play is full of such concrete illustrations of moral qualities (*Molière, A New Criticism*, p. 22); Charles Dullin, in his memorable interpretation of Harpagon, emphasized that the miser’s *idée fixe* demanded the sacrifice of everyone else in the play, through such sight gags as a candle that Maitre Jacques continues to light and Harpagon to extinguish; see “On *L’Avare*,” in , *Molière, A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 155–59.


listed in particular as a case of dérogeance for élus in 1627; Loyseau stated, "C'est proprement le gain vil et sordide qui déroge à la noblesse, de laquelle le propre est de vivre de ses rentes" (Traité des ordres, p. 62); see also G. A. de La Roque de la Lontière, Traité de noblesse, pp. 437–39.

21. The importance of Harpagon's madness to the comic structure of the play is discussed in David J. Wells, "The Structure of Laughter in Molière's L'Avare"; see also G. Chamarret, "Harpagon est-il un personnage comique?"

22. In fact, as Judd Hubert points out, Anselme's language reinforces the synthesis between aristocracy and bourgeoisie ("Theme and Structure in L'Avare").


24. Marivaux, Théâtre complet, 1:803. Legal precedent for Anselme's generous unilateral donations is found in Loysel, Institutes coutumières, 2:92; practical evidence in Couturier, Recherches sur Châteaudun, p. 147.


26. William O. Goode has shown, in "The Comic Recognition Scenes in L'Avare," that most of the recognition scenes in the play are of a perversely unhappy nature, but the final scene reverts to the classical pattern.

27 Chappuzeau, Le Devoir général, p. 134.

28. These figures are rounded to the nearest whole percentile and include Vadius's lines with those of the salon.


30. If, however, Chrysale is a merchant, he may possibly be in the cloth trade, since Goubert found that Amiens cloth merchants often had considerable sums outstanding in Lyon (Pierre Goubert, "Types de marchands amiénois au début du XVIIe siècle").

31. Furetière, Le Roman bourgeois, p. 920.

32. Roland Mousnier's La Stratification sociale à Paris, pp. 69, 94, confirms the association of Philaminte's dowry level with the officer class and notes that books, even at this high social level, were relatively rare and unevenly distributed.

33. Lebrun, La Vie conjugale, pp. 20–25.

34. Jacques Wilhelm, La Vie quotidienne des Parisiens au temps du Roi-Soleil, p. 45; see also, Mousnier, Etat et société, pp. 160–64.


38. For a discussion of this sexual humor, see J. H. Pérvier, "Equivoques molièresques: le sonnet de Trissotin."

39. Lebrun points out, in La Vie conjugale, p. 22, that it was not permissible for a man to raise his status through marriage. Simon Jeune, in "Molière, le pédant et le
pouvoir," speculates that Molière's campaign against Trissotin, in reality the writer Gilles Ménage, entailed approval of the court power structure. More common is the identification of Trissotin as the abbé Cotin, a satirical portrait that may have been related to Molière's problems with some religious fanatics, as discussed in Jean Cazalbou and Denise Sevely, eds., *Les Femmes savantes*, pp. 20–36.
