

## Original Paper

# The Characteristics of Molière's Comedy Writing —Centred on Harpagon's Characterisation

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Received: June 10, 2024

Accepted: June 28, 2024

Online Published: July 17, 2024

doi:10.22158/sll.v8n3p20

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v8n3p20>

### Abstract

*The works of the French classical comedian Molière are of exceptional value. In his satirical comedies, Molière often creates sensible, vivid, contemporary, and real characters through descriptions of detailed behavior and the setting of coincident and conflicts. Harpagon, for instance, has become a global synonym for miserliness due to Molière's extreme focus on this single character trait. Critics of his time labeled Harpagon as a "flat character", yet it is precisely this "flatness" that makes the character memorable. Molière possessed a serious spirit of realism and a democratic tendency, using comedy as a means to educate the public. Through characters like Harpagon, he exposed the bourgeoisie's cruelty, hypocrisy, and greedy exploitation of the lower class, delivering sharp and pungent satire. Molière's ability to craft such characters not only entertained but also conveyed powerful social critiques, solidifying his importance in literary and social history.*

### Keyword

*Molière, Harpagon, satire*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Tartuffe

Harpagon is a quintessential character in *Tartuffe*, a work by the French classical comedian Molière. *Tartuffe* presents readers with a vivid portrayal of 17th-century French social life, offering a comedic yet incisive satire on the corrupt and scandalous behavior of the church and the gold-digging greed of the bourgeoisie under the feudal dictatorship. Through sharp and biting satire, Molière exposes and criticizes these societal flaws. *Tartuffe*, a five-act comedy in prose, was first performed in 1668 and has remained in the public eye for over three centuries. The main character, Harpagon, has evolved from an

abominable funny man in the realm of comedy to a universal synonym for stinginess. The other characters in the play frequently refer to Harpagon as a miser and a meanie, highlighting his defining trait over his given name. Belinsky has praised Molière's portrayal of Harpagon as "as good as a satirical painting by a famous artist", emphasizing its satirical implications and deeper connotations beyond the humorous surface. Harpagon, alongside Shakespeare's Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Balzac's Grandet in *Eugénie Grandet*, and Gogol's Plinshkin in *Dead Souls*, constitutes one of the four major Scrooge figures in European literary history.

*Tartuffe* emerged during the peak of Molière's comedic genius, against a backdrop of complex social dynamics. Louis XIV, relying on the feudal aristocracy's power, established an absolute monarchy. In this environment, deceptive aristocrats allied with the bourgeoisie to strengthen royal rule, contributing to the dark and corrupt fabric of French society. This period saw the brutal exploitation of ordinary working people by the upper classes, who were consumed by a worship of money that obliterated moral values. As a result, the lower classes endured immense suffering, with hypocrisy and stinginess becoming endemic societal ailments. Karl Marx, in *Capital* succinctly captures this ethos, "In the historical period of the capitalist mode of production...the desire to get rich and greed reign as absolute desires" (Marx, 2018). Molière clearly understood that, under such a regime, the pen is mightier than the sword. Thus, *Tartuffe* becomes a sharp weapon, exposing the deceit and avarice of the bourgeoisie in broad daylight. *Tartuffe* paints a vivid picture of 17th-century French bourgeois family life. The titular character exploits high-interest loans to amass a vast fortune, indulging in debt as a pastime. As the family patriarch, Harpagon is embroiled in significant conflicts with his children over money and love. Greedy and insatiable, Harpagon regards money as his lifeblood, hoarding wealth and being miserly with rewards. He epitomizes the penny-pinching, money-grubbing miser, entrapped by his own avarice.

### 1.2 "Flat characters"

Since the British novelist E.M. Forster introduced his concept of "flat characters" in *Aspects of the Novel*, many literary critics have applied this theory to Molière's portrayal of Harpagon. They argue that Molière simplifies complex life forms into single-dimensional characters, epitomizing Harpagon as merely a "miser". This view, often diminishing the character's value, is encapsulated by Pushkin's critique, "Molière's miser is miserly—but only so much; Shakespeare's Shylock is miserly on the one hand, but at the same time resourceful, vengeful, fond of his children, intelligent". Such criticism implies that Molière's characters are one-dimensional, each embodying only a single vice or virtue. However, this interpretation misreads both Harpagon and the theory of "flat characters". While Molière's portrayal may focus on Harpagon's miserliness, it is done with such vividness and consistency that it offers a sharp satirical insight into human nature and societal flaws.

"Flat characters" are often seen as 17th-century typecasts or caricatures, which has led to Molière's comedies being dubbed "comedies of character". However, it's important to recognize that these "flat

characters” do not imply a lesser quality of the work. Molière’s comedies, rich in character exploration, cannot be dismissed as merely “exhaustible in a single sentence”. As Forster noted, “flat characters” are not inherently shallower than “round characters”. They simply serve different purposes. Forster’s evaluation of Charles Dickens illustrates this point well: he acknowledges that Dickens’s characters are flat, yet they come alive through the masterful storytelling, underscoring that the beauty of a work lies not in the complexity of its characters but in how vividly they are brought to life. Flat characters have unique merits, particularly in comedy, where their exaggerated traits can highlight specific human follies. A flat character offers a focused, deep portrayal of a single human quality, making it typical rather than one-sided. Molière’s *Tartuffe* exemplifies the “comedy of character” with Harpagon serving as a quintessential flat character. The entire plot is designed to illustrate Harpagon’s miserliness and greed. While Harpagon is singular in his defining traits, he is far from monotonous. His miserliness is accentuated by his cunning, authoritarianism, and lust, making his portrayal vivid and clear. Molière’s genius lies in his ability to generalize and exaggerate the various manifestations of miserliness he observed, creating a character with enduring artistic appeal. Harpagon’s miserliness and greed are not just personal traits but emblematic of broader societal vices, making him a universal and realistic figure. This sharp exposure and satire of bourgeois vanity and materialism elevate the value of the work, showcasing Molière’s profound critique of his society.

## 2. Building Truth from Detailed Behaviour

Harpagon, as an absolutely stingy and singular character, becomes vivid and appealing under Molière’s masterful pen because Molière meticulously details Harpagon’s miserly actions and dramatic conflicts. His exaggerated miserliness is depicted in such a way that it becomes both credible and compelling.

Firstly, Harpagon’s miserly behaviors are numerous and varied throughout the play, and the details of his words and actions vividly convey his excessive greed and miserliness. From the very beginning of the play, Harpagon is seen furtively burying 10,000 écus in his garden, consumed with worry about his money’s safety. His paranoia is evident when he searches and chases away his servant, Laurent, fearing that he might lose his precious wealth. Faced with his son’s ribbons and wigs, his first thought was to estimate the value of the items and then lend them out for interest, “I will lay a wager that, in wigs and ribbons alone, there are certainly twenty pistoles spent, and twenty pistoles brings in at least eighteen livres six sous eight deniers per annum, at only eight per cent interest” (Molière, 2022). The calculation was rapid and precise, and the meanness and shrewdness of the man was evident. He exhibits extreme cunning and deceit in his money-lending practices, feigning kindness while borrowing money at exorbitant interest rates, sometimes as high as two and a half percent. He goes so far as to demand repayment in the form of rags, old clothes, and miscellaneous items, deceiving people shamelessly. He hypocritically lectures on compassion and kindness, asserting, “Charity, Mr. Simon, demands of us to gratify people whenever we have it in our power” (Molière, 2022). This self-serving bourgeois

character exploits others for substantial profit, leaping off the page with his venomous demeanor. Harpagon detests the notion of giving throughout his life; even his greetings and courtesies are painfully stingy. The phrase “I give” never crosses his lips; instead, it’s always “I lend”. His attempts at entertaining guests at dinner parties are laughably awkward. He even dispenses excessive advice to his servants, “Only when people are thirsty, and not according to the custom of certain impertinent lackeys, who urge them to drink, and put the idea into their heads when they are not thinking about it. Wait until you have been asked several times, and remember always to have plenty of water” (Molière, 2022). Under the guise of concern for guests’ health, he instructs the chef to prepare meals for ten guests, but only for eight, serving simple dishes disliked by the guests once they are full. His absurd actions include naming a cat that stole his neighbor’s leftover lamb leg and demanding it be brought to court, printing special calendars to extend his family’s fasting periods, withholding food from his horses, stealing oats from his own stables, and wearing outdated clothing. These are just a few examples of Harpagon’s myriad miserly and oppressive behaviors, too numerous to fully enumerate. His dialogue and penny-pinching “ingenuity” deepen the comedic portrayal of his miserliness. The character’s obsession with money is exaggerated through rich behavioral details, not merely suggested but vividly portrayed as inevitable.

Aristotle, in *Poetics*, contends that both tragedy and comedy portray universal truths that are either possible or necessary. However, they diverge in their use of names: comedy utilizes fictional names, whereas tragedy employs historical names. “What is possible is credible, and we find it difficult to believe in possibilities that have not yet occurred. However, events that have transpired are considered evidently possible, as the impossible does not occur” (Aristotle, 1996). He emphasized that events which have occurred are evidently possible and credible, contrasting them with events that have not occurred and remain unproven in terms of credibility. Events that have transpired are believed to be clearly possible because the impossible does not happen. Aristotle stressed that tragedy portrays what has happened, which is credible and believable, whereas comedy depicts what has not happened, which lacks credibility. Tragedy draws its subject matter from history, while comedy is rooted in fiction. In this pursuit of artistic truth, Molière sought to elevate comedy to the same status as tragedy, transcending traditional hierarchies and ensuring both genres could equally reflect the complexities of human experience. In the imitation of characters, it is also required that the characters are similar to the real people, but the truth of the characters is not to pursue the historical truth, but to show a special and higher intention, “when the writers leave their own and special truths, they are able to imitate the universal truths more faithfully” (Lessing, 1998). Lu Xun also said, “An author, with a refined, or perhaps downright exaggerated brushwork—but naturally it must also be artistically—writes about a group of people or a side of the truth, and this group of people being written about, call this work ‘satire’. The life of ‘satire’ is truth, not necessarily the truth of what has been, but the truth of what will be. The more commonplace things are in the society of a given age, the more common they are, and the

more they lend themselves to satire”. “The intentional preference for presenting such things, and refining them, even to the point of exaggeration, is indeed the skill of ‘satire’” (Lu, 2009).

Molière’s characters achieve realism precisely because they are “flat”. By focusing sharply and artistically on Harpagon’s singular trait of “miserliness”, Molière embeds him within a social context that reflects the characteristics of the nation and the times. This realistic portrayal is central to why Molière’s characters resonate so deeply. Through the “flatness” of characterization, Molière not only presents a plausible, vivid, contemporary depiction of a stingy individual but also underscores the inevitability of Harpagon’s behavior. This portrayal refracts a realistic persona that feels familiar yet unique, entirely integrating Harpagon into the hypocritical, greedy, and gold-obsessed bourgeoisie of his era. The “flatness” of Molière’s characters is crucial. It denotes relevance, allowing characters like Harpagon to cut through the bourgeoisie’s hypocrisy and stand as a prominent figure in European literary history alongside the likes of Scrooge. This “flatness” contributes significantly to the aesthetic value of Molière’s works, highlighting their enduring impact and relevance.

### 3. Revealing the Essence by Coincidences and Conflicts

The creation of theater, the dynamics between characters, and the setup of conflicts are crucial elements, and Molière uniquely explores these in *Tartuffe*, particularly in the relationships and conflicts involving Harpagon and his children concerning money and love. Harpagon distinguishes himself among other misers with his extreme self-interest and miserliness, which are vividly portrayed through the plot where he neglects his children’s emotions and moral considerations. His penny-pinching behavior is astonishing; despite his family’s wealth, he withholds money, forcing his children into debts. More unsettlingly, he acts as a ruthless loan shark, profiting from the misfortunes of others, including his own son, Cleante. This coincidental revelation ignites a fierce confrontation between them, sharply highlighting Harpagon’s relentless pursuit of wealth. When Cleante discovers the truth, tensions erupt into a heated argument. Harpagon accuses Cleante of accumulating massive debts and tarnishing the family’s name. In response, Cleante ridicules Harpagon for his greed and shamelessness, condemning him as a “bloodless murderer”, a “bandit”, an “executioner”, and a “murderer”, questioning Harpagon’s lack of shame. Faced with his son’s insults and accusations, Harpagon remains indifferent, calmly remarking, “After all, I am not very much vexed at this adventure; it will be a lesson to me to keep a better watch over all his doings” (Molière, 2022). This nonchalant response underscores his shameless cunning and calculated approach to accumulating wealth, revealing his heartless miserly nature in full view.

In addition to the fortuitous economic conflicts between them, Molière also orchestrates absurd love conflicts among the characters in *Tartuffe*. Harpagon, driven by his obsession with saving money, plans to marry off his daughter Élise, who is in love with the poor young man Valère, to a wealthy elderly man, Anselme, who refuses a dowry. Simultaneously, he arranges for his son to marry a wealthy older

widow to acquire more wealth. Unbeknownst to Harpagon, the girl he intends to marry as his second wife, Marianne, is actually his son's lover. To complicate matters further, during the signing of the marriage contract, Anselme is shocked to discover that Valère and Marianne are his long-lost children. This revelation turns the situation upside down. Ultimately, Harpagon is compelled to relinquish his desires and surrender to his relentless pursuit of money. The precious box containing "good louis d'or and pistoles" (Molière, 2022) is Harpagon's most cherished possession, and he adamantly refuses to part with it under any circumstance. This peculiar and intricately woven plot of coincidences significantly enhances the comedic aspect of the drama. Within these multiple coincidences orchestrated by Harpagon's choices, his miserly character is vividly depicted, showcasing his relentless pursuit of wealth.

Harpagon's obsession with money is further illustrated through his greed, hedonism, and extreme individualism throughout the play. His actions tear away the bourgeois facade of familial warmth, transforming all relationships that could be cherished into purely monetary transactions. This exposes the repulsive behavior and despicable nature of miserliness and greed.

Tartuffe draws inspiration from Plautus's Roman Republican comedy, *The Pot of Gold*, which tells the tale of Euclio, his daughter, and his nephew. In the original story, Euclio, fearful of theft, hides his discovered gold, causing suspicion and intrigue. His nephew, Luconides, schemes to marry Euclio's daughter by gaining his uncle's favor with the dowry from the hidden gold. Luconides' servant, Strobilus, discovers the gold buried in a willow grove and quietly steals it for his master. Euclio soon realizes the theft and searches frantically until he recovers the gold. In the end, uncle and nephew reconcile, and Euclio gives the recovered pot of gold as his daughter's dowry. In Molière's *Tartuffe*, the character Harpagon exemplifies a profound disregard for affection, ethics, and morality in pursuit of extreme miserliness, contrasting with the compromised principles of characters like Euclio. *Tartuffe* epitomizes an absolute, insatiable desire, exposing the bourgeoisie's relentless exploitation and obsession with wealth to an extreme degree.

#### 4. Conclusion

Molière's uniqueness lies in his departure from traditional comedic norms. He portrays humorous characters as aristocrats and bourgeoisie, satirizing the former while championing the latter, revealing his concern for the nation and its people. Additionally, Molière's transcendence is evident in his disregard for traditional family affection, instead setting up a "Faustian conflict between the desire for accumulation and the pursuit of pleasure" between Harpagon and his son. Even avant-garde thinkers like Rousseau found Molière's approach provocative. Molière's portrayal in *Tartuffe* as a comedy of bad manners pushed boundaries. This highlights Molière's courage in delving deep into societal issues and exposing them candidly.

Driven by a serious spirit of realism and democratic ideals, Molière saw it as his duty to educate the public. Amidst social upheaval, he refused to cloak the noble aristocracy and bourgeoisie in hypocrisy, instead revealing inherent tragedies and ironies through his comedic works. Molière firmly believed that comedic poets had a profound responsibility to enlighten their audience and rectify contemporary vices, using laughter as a means for people to grasp the true nature of the world. Molière's enduring image of Harpagon in *Tartuffe* owes much to the "flatness" that has been criticized by many. His singular "stingy" character is portrayed with detailed exaggeration, making him a compelling and memorable figure. Harpagon's obsession with money is so all-consuming that he views the world through a metaphorical "money hole", seeing nothing but wealth.

All in all, Molière shapes the archetypal image of Harpagon through meticulous character behaviors and coincidental conflicts, thereby revealing the essence of his miserly nature. This characterization serves to convey Molière's scathing satire of the bourgeoisie's money-worship and their exploitative oppression of the underclass.

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