



*The Imaginary Invalid* Study Guide  
Middle School  
by **KC Molière: 400 in 2022**

Teacher's Notes:

*The Imaginary Invalid* premiered February 10, 1673. It opened to rave reviews. Critics declared the play to be one of Molière's most energetic comedies. Molière played the lead role of Argan, and his criticism of doctors was justified. All of Paris laughed at the comedy and at the doctors whom it mocked. At the fourth performance (February 17), Molière became ill and was very weak. He was urged to remain home and cancel the performance.

Molière allegedly said, "Can I refuse to go on when so many persons' bread depends upon it? I should reproach myself for the distress I might cause them, having sufficient strength to prevent it." Rather than thinking of himself and his failing health, Molière wanted to help his troupe who would not be paid if he canceled the show.

*The Imaginary Invalid* along with *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, is one of Molière's best-known comedy-ballets. Molière described them as "mixed music and dance comedies." But this is not the type of ballets we think of today with dancers en pointe and tutus.

This play was a collaboration between Molière and Marc-Antoine Charpentier. Previously, Molière worked with Lully, who later went on to pursue other musical endeavors.

Molière was born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin. He studied law, but the theatre captured his imagination. Molière was not a strong enough actor or playwright for the preferred style of tragedy, but he excelled in comedy using farce and satire to point to other's faults. Satire is the use of irony, or sarcasm, to expose folly or vice. It is also the use of mocking or making fun of an individual or group of people. Farce is a coarsely comic dramatic work based on ridiculously impossible events and embellished characters.

discuss commedia dell'arte.

Characters:

ARGAN  
BÉLINE  
ANGÉLIQUE  
LOUISON  
BÉRALDE  
MONSIEUR DIAFOIRUS  
THOMAS DIAFOIRUS  
FLEURANT  
M. BONNEFOY  
TOINETTE

The Notary's name, Monsieur Bonnefoy, means "Good Faith," which is the opposite of his personality. The Doctors all have names similar to their specialties. Monsieur Purgon likes to purge. Monsieur Fleurant's name is derived from the verb "fleurer," "to give off an odor." It is less likely about body odor and more about smelling chamber-pots to examine bowel movements. M. Diafoirus has a Greek beginning (Dia, meaning "through), a Latin ending (-us), and diarrhea (foirer) in the middle.

There were two prologues for the play. The first is about Louis XIV's success in a particular battle. The second, first presented on May 4, 1674, is more general.

#### Themes and Ideas

- o Hypochondria
- o Self-delusion
- o Illusion vs delusion
- o Fear of mortality
- o Die with dignity
- o Greed
- o Manipulation
- o Gullibility
- o Deception
- o Dependency
- o Quackery

#### Medicine in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century:

The Faculty of Medicine controlled medicine in 17<sup>th</sup> Century France, and it was strictly hierarchical. There were three divisions in the medical profession: médecin (doctor); apothicaire (apothecary), whose job was to prepare and administer medicines according to the doctor's prescription, to administer the enemas, and send out patients' bills; and chirurgien-barbier (surgeon-barber), who did such menial tasks as bleeding patients, setting fractured bones, performing dissections, etc.

Doctors knew nothing of the body's inner organs. Dissection was rare: the law allowed that only executed criminals could be dissected. Surgery, as we know it, was a marginal activity. Incisions

would be made on visible tumors, for example, and limbs would be amputated, wounds closed, broken bones set. The surgeon was not the skilled physician we know today.

Latin was the language used in studying medicine during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Lessons placed emphasis on theory, but none of this was supported by any practical, first-hand observation through studying of anatomy. Doctors made theories on the basis of superficial observation of what the body expelled. This is why doctors scrutinized the patient's phlegm, urine, excrement hoping that they would indicate what was the cause of the illness.

#### Discussion Questions:

These questions we hope will spark some debate in your class. Please be sure to encourage your students to know there is no "wrong" answer. You can also use these questions as essay or short answer questions.

What do you think of Argan initially when he is counting his money?

What do you think of him not wanting to pay the doctors because he did not receive the result (health) he wanted?

Why do you think there are two prologues for the play?

The play is also called *The Hypochondriac*. Which name do you like better and why?

What do you think of arranged marriages?

What do you think of Argan marrying his daughter to a doctor?

Do you think Argan really believes he is sick?

Is he fooling himself or are others fooling him? Or both?

Do you think Argan will believe he's cured if he becomes a doctor?

#### Before the Play:

Encourage students to identify and think about the issues of the play and to develop an understanding of the context of the play.

What makes us laugh? Why is this play a comedy?

How is live theatre different than a movie theatre?

Consider appropriate expectations of the audience when attending a live performance. What is theatre etiquette? What is expected from an audience's response to different types of performances and venues?

It's not nice to mock someone or their profession, but is Molière doing that in *The Imaginary Invalid*? Or is he attempting to show the audience human weaknesses in a funny manner in order to have us change our behavior? Would a more serious tone be a better tool to have us change our behavior?

After the Play:

These activities focus on questions which can lead to improvisation, text analysis and response, and preparation for student review.

What were the “ah-ha” moments as the play progressed – the moments when questions were answered, revelations made, motivations understood etc?

What is the impact of particular characters in a play – e.g. Argan, Toinette, Béralde? What is the purpose of these roles in the play?

How did the actors use the space? Discuss how the physical entrances and exits were established.

How did the actors draw you into the play?

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We hope you enjoyed this Study Guide for *The Imaginary Invalid*. If so, please let your colleagues know.

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Sincerely,

Dani Trebus

Martin English

Felicia Londré