

**Materiality of Money in Seventeenth-Century French Comedy:  
The Case of *Le Parisien***

by

**Matthew Pagett**

Molière's successors were quick to fill the void left on the French stage after his death. This generation of comic playwrights, which includes Noël Hauteroche, Jacques Robbe, Jean Donneau de Visé, Thomas Corneille, Edmé Boursault and Charles Chevillet (known as Champmeslé), had written under the shadow of the great comic author in his last years and flourished after 1673. Their theatrical production, while relatively little studied today, offers a fascinating window into representations of Parisian life in the 1670s. While the 1690s would be dominated by the works of Dancourt and Regnard, the late 1670s and the 1680s were a time of renewal in French comic theater, as, along with imitations of previous generations, new representations of Parisian life filled the stage.

One of the ways that these plays showed modern life was through their representations of money. The 1660s, with such plays as *L'Avare*, had marked a turning point on the French stage as theatrical representations of money became increasingly detailed, with paper money shown on the stage and lending transactions portrayed and explained to the audience. In the following decade, there was an expansion in the complexity and implications of how financial transactions were shown. The vilification and purge of the financial class during the four years of the 1661 Chamber of Justice, which saw the scapegoating of finance minister Nicolas Fouquet, was in the recent past, and France was engaged on a path toward mercantilism and colonial exchange like never before. In the years following Molière's comedies of manners, a number of plays examined money and finance in a new light. They portrayed a variety of forms of both paper and coin money, and showed the increasing importance of financial knowledge in a world where paper instruments were becoming more common.

Along with portraying these financial developments, comedies in the 1680s showed a departure from traditional ideas of economic and social value. Champmeslé's 1682 *Le Parisien* is a particularly good example of this, showing a consumer credit system that dominates over traditional sources of value, such as land, in the context of the newly reinvigorated Indies trade. In it, we see how theater, as a shared space of representation and of mutually recognized artifice, was an ideal venue for imagining the changing roles of social status, displaying a difference between how value appeared and how it was assessed. The analysis in this essay first exam-

ines how the play exploits a “monetary imaginary” composed of coins and financial instruments. The next section concentrates on the ways in which the play ties this use of money to a framework of colonial trade. The study concludes by looking at how the play puts into question the traditional association of nobility with value.

What we know about the production history of *Le Parisien* reveals a work that was moderately successful and met with favorable critical reception. The five-act verse comedy was first performed on February 7, 1682 by the newly founded Comédie-Française at the Hôtel Guénégaud, and was produced on alternating nights with a tragedy, *Zélonide, Princesse de Sparte*, for the next month.<sup>1</sup> In his preface to the printed edition, Champmeslé writes that the play’s fifteen or sixteen performances were successful beyond his expectations. It would go on to have 57 performances by 1724 (Lancaster, *History* 4:490). In comparison, *L’Avaro*, while not meeting with initial success, had 47 performances in its first three years (Lancaster, *History* 3:718). The *Mercure Galant* also gave a brief but glowing review of the play, where Donneau de Visé wrote that “les plus portez au chagrin se divertiroient à cette Piece. On y rit par tout; & il serait mal aisé de ramasser dans un seul Ouvrage un plus grand nombre de choses plaisantes” (173–74). Part of this success, as Donneau de Visé hints, may have come from the fact that Molière’s widow, Armande Béjart—by then known as Madame Guérin—played a starring role as Elmire, a character who only speaks Italian (likely a nod to the competing troupe, the Comédie-Italienne).<sup>2</sup>

Another reason for its success was related to genre. At the end of the century, actors were favoring comedy because it was more profitable—so much so that they were ordered by the King in 1712 to perform a tragedy for every comedy that they produced (Lancaster, *Sunset* 27). As the seventeenth century drew to a close, money had become an increasingly important element of French comedic theatrical production, which itself was more popular than ever before. More comedies than ever were produced during the end of reign years: the period between 1635–1672 counted 223

---

<sup>1</sup> Lancaster, *History* 4:490. “It was given from Feb. 7 to March 4 at almost every other performance, alternating with *Zélonide*, a somewhat grandiloquent tragedy that doubtless helped to enhance Frontin’s satirical eloquence. It remained on the stage until 1724 and was produced in all 57 times” (4:493).

<sup>2</sup> This is not the only Molière connection; *Le Parisien* in its plot and characterization shows evidence of some borrowings from Molière’s *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, *L’Étourdi*, and *M. De Pourcignac*. A detailed discussion of sources is found in Privitera 85–86.

comedies, making up 38 percent of theatrical production, while the 316 comedies produced between 1680–1715 accounted for 77 percent of all French plays during that time (Biet 16; Spielmann 125). About a third of comedies between 1661 and 1715 feature money as either a prop or as a principal plot element, in the form of coins, transactions, and paper money.<sup>3</sup> Comedy, with its portrayals of daily life, embraced these representations in a way that tragedy, although it was considered more prestigious, could not (Lancaster, *Sunset* 144). The different forms of money that comedy showed were more than mere props. Their evolving forms and characteristics were often instrumental in the action of plays, and were sometimes the subject of them as well.

In this popular genre, a certain way of representing money developed over the century, what can be referred to as the “monetary imaginary,” encompassing an idea of money that is constructed on the stage. There, a distinction is made between money as an object (the gold or silver to which value can become attached) and money as an abstract idea (detached from any particular material manifestation such as coin). Theater is particularly suited to this display because of its unique role as both a visual and literary representation of the world. Although there is no evidence to demonstrate a causal relationship between theatrical representations of money and subsequent developments in monetary policy or practice, plays from this period show a rich monetary imaginary of theater that developed in parallel with the monetary practices of the time. This is similar to how Philippe Desan defines the economic imaginary in dual terms, as “à la fois économie de l’imaginaire et imagination économique” (15). The latter term, referring to how economy was imagined, corresponds to the visual and dramatic use of money on the stage by French playwrights.

The increase in representations of money on the stage came at the same time as theater audiences were becoming an interactive and demanding public, as Jeffrey Ravel has shown. Theater was a place for visually examining ideas of exchange in front of a participatory audience. Theater and money share a similar lexical field—a *pièce de monnaie*, and a *pièce de théâtre*; *billets*, paper tickets, buy entrance to a play, and *billets* also refer to forms of paper money such as bills of exchange, bearer notes, and lottery tickets. Furthermore, from the Middle Ages on, the marketplace was a privileged location for theatrical performances. When theater

---

<sup>3</sup> See Spielmann 125, and Lancaster *History* 3:863–868. As Spielmann notes, this number did not take into account *foire* production or unpublished Comédie-Italienne production. Orkey cites 145 comedies with money between 1661–1715, a period during which there were over 424 comedies produced overall (according to Lancaster's numbers).

left the church, it went to the market, the fundamental place of exchange, and remained there into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with *foire* theater. The market was a place of transformation. In his study of theater, Jean Duvignaud looks to the market sale as the “magical” operation of wheat turning to gold, and draws a comparison between this transformation of goods into money and that of actors who became characters in the plays performed in the very same market spaces (78). While the Hôtel Guénégaud, where *Le Parisien* was performed, was not a market, the theater building did provide a space for representing similar types of transfigurations in a city that by this time functioned as a center both of financial operations and their representations. As Paris was increasingly the financial and commercial center of France, the title of Champmeslé’s play is well-suited.

Inscribed in this context of seventeenth-century money plays set in the city, *Le Parisien* crystallizes particularly well the conflict between noble and bourgeois approaches to money. The play examines two forms of currency—one social, that of titular nobility, and the other financial, that of gold—at a time when both were undergoing significant revaluation. The play is at the nexus of a colonial economy on the rise and a domestic aristocratic economy in decline. Its success may also have been related to the social context it evoked. It shows merchant bourgeois characters falling prey to their enterprising servants, whose financial skill arouses anxieties over social class and value. Displaying both nobility and money on the stage, *Le Parisien* shows the contrast between traditional sources of value and new ones. The play is a testament to a material world where money was taking on new roles, shapes, and national importance. It takes the spectator from the scribblings of notaries, to stashes of coins hidden away in a mattress, to jewels and silver coming from the Indies trade. It illustrates the conflict between bourgeois saving and noble spending, and the increasing difficulty of being able to tell who is noble and who is not. Crucially, the play displays how this financial world of credit and negotiation is best navigated by those who are initiated in its ways. Here, the play departs from the somewhat more subtle pedagogical role of comedy that Pierre Force describes in *Molière ou le Prix des choses*, where “le rôle éducatif de la comédie consiste donc à révéler, tout en les cachant, les règles de l’échange” (Force 253). *Le Parisien*, like other late seventeenth-century money plays, depicts a new economy in a way that explains it more explicitly to the spectator. It reflects an important intermediate step in theatrical depictions of money between coin and paper, years before *Turcaret*, Lesage’s 1709 masterful illustration of rags-to-riches financial ascent. Already in 1682, *Le Parisien* shows a rich economy of paper

money, as well as a servant—like Lesage’s valet, named Frontin—who takes center stage because of his financial knowledge. *Le Parisien*’s treatment of financial value falls along three main axes: how it treats coin and paper money, how it presents international and colonial trade, and how it shows and calls into question the values of nobility.

Viewed as a money play, *Le Parisien* is at a compelling point in the history of such representations: it is in between the world of gold and that of paper, and presents a world of coins, paper, and precious objects. The plot is premised on Clitandre’s search for specie (coin money, as opposed to notes), which he needs to impress his love interest. Most of the action of *Le Parisien* consists of Clitandre and his valet Frontin coming up with clever ways to take money from Clitandre’s father Jérôme. Jérôme, on the other hand, spends the play trying to come out ahead in his own enterprises: in marrying his son to the daughter of a wealthy trader, and in a property dispute with a neighbor at his country residence. The plot, like that of his *Rue Saint-Denys* from the same year, turns upon questions of inheritance.<sup>4</sup>

While the inheritance is a concern for the future, coins drive the immediate economy in *Le Parisien*, turning up in unusual places, and although Clitandre, Jérôme, and Frontin all search for them, the play consigns them to an old economic system. This is particularly visible in one scene where Clitandre’s valet, Frontin, asks his master’s mother if she has any money hidden away, telling her it is to purchase a captain’s commission in the army for her son, so as to keep him out of danger (2.9). She reveals a hidden treasure trove, uncovering sixty-six *double louis*, which were wrapped in a package hidden in her mattress, and which are described as being “tous batans neufs.” Behind a pile of old books, she has hidden another one hundred *louis* in a purse. Finally, she reveals 124 “demy Louïs” that she has stashed away in an old sock behind a painting (3.14).

Spectators would also have been aware that Madame Jérôme has kept these coins for a considerable period of time: *double louis* coins, described as looking brand new, were last minted in 1652, thirty years before the play’s production. The *double louis*, weighing 13.5 grams, would have been by far the most valuable gold coin in circulation at the time. Since coins made of the soft metal were easily subject to wearing down with use, their “newness” is a sign that they have not been touched. Yet we also

---

<sup>4</sup> The play’s ending reveals a case of mistaken identity following a shipwreck; Clitandre’s love interest is in fact the young woman his father wants him to marry.

know that the coins are at least newer than 1640, the date when the *louis d'or* was first minted. This hoard contrasts with what several characters in the play argue should be a credit economy. Jérôme, upon discovering the coins, takes the money and criticizes his wife for having hidden it away. He argues that he could have been putting it to good use earning interest:

Oüy, cet argent m'eust fait du profit davantage.  
 Qui le laisse moisir n'en connoist pas l'usage;  
 Si ce trésor caché depuis le temps qu'il l'est,  
 Eust esté dans mes mains, un honneste intérêt  
 L'eust fait doubler, tripler, en moins de rien. (4.1)

In this key phrase, Jérôme distinguishes his knowledge of money from that of his wife, “qui le laisse moisir.” Here he affirms his financial skill—that of placing money in wise investments or lending it. Jérôme argues that his wife should have instead loaned the money out: where it would be safe, the transaction recorded on paper, and earning interest. Yet even though he is quick to criticize hoarding, Jérôme, too, keeps coins hidden at home, in a strongbox that Frontin and Clitandre break into. Their on-stage attack with files, hammers, and picks on what should be the most secure place in the home, the “Dortoir aux Pistoles,” lends further credibility to the message that money is safest when it is circulating in the form of loans (4.5).

Those loans would have to be recorded on paper, another bearer of value that has an important role in the play. When Jérôme encounters Crispin dressed in black, he says he looks like a “Porteur de Billets mortuaires,” referring to the printed small pieces of paper that were used to announce deaths. Indeed, paper in the play is used to mediate several aspects of life and death. Jérôme seems to think he can control it. He states that his friend the *commissaire* can write the report of his son's death later, confident that because of their personal relationship, he will manipulate the document (“s'il en est besoin il l'antidatera” [4.6]). Moreover, a marriage contract that from the first act positions the play in a network of written obligations and penalties is only effective so long as it is in physical existence; it has a hefty *dédit* or forfeiture clause whose power is merely as strong as the integrity of the notary who keeps the sole copy. Jérôme's efforts to destroy this contract fail, however. He asks the notary, who is his wife's brother, to burn it. His brother-in-law refuses with horror, calling the act of trying to corrupt a notary “blasphemy” (3.2). The integrity of a notary is portrayed as being stronger than familial ties: for Jérôme (and perhaps for the spectator) this is a lesson about the strength of paper. Notaries held the contracts for private loans between individuals. As paper

## PAGETT

contracts with financial implications are portrayed in such a manner, the reliability of paper money is emphasized.

Precious objects also prove to be reliable bearers of value in the play. In one particular case, the play teaches a lesson on negotiating the value of objects, and on the kind of economic knowledge that is necessary to participate in this kind of transaction. Clitandre's love interest, Elmire, offers him a diamond ring to help him with his money problems, a ring which he uses to snare Jérôme into a trap. Her servant, Lysette, convinces Jérôme that she needs to sell the ring to provide her mistress funds to flee town. She explains that her plan is to bring it to a goldsmith, and to sell it to the first person who will buy it. Jérôme, the son of a jeweler, thinks he recognizes an opportunity for a good deal. When Lysette mentions the price she would like to get for the diamond—four or five hundred *écus*, half the price that she knows it is worth—Jérôme bites. The stage direction before his line, “*bas*,” indicates that his thought process is made explicit to the audience:

JÉROME *bas*. Quatre ou cinq cens Ecus! Il en vaut mille &  
plus,  
Achetons-le. (5.4)

As Jérôme prepares to count the money out to Lysette (driving a hard bargain, he agrees to pay 400 *écus*, the lowest amount she mentioned), Elmire's brother Géraste, disguised as a police official, bursts into the room claiming to be looking for a murderer he says is Lysette. She claims that the money Jérôme is counting is her payment for performing the murder, and so it becomes evidence of a crime. As the son of a jeweler, Jérôme had the technical knowledge to perform a jewelry appraisal, but his assessment ability has met its limits: he has walked into a setup, and stands falsely accused of contract murder. This scene shows the characteristic fungibility of coin money, pointing to its ambiguous and impersonal nature, and its capacity to be used for anything. The more traditional and personal bearer of value, the diamond ring, will be later instantly recognized by Elmire's father, Des Moulins, as that of his daughter. This recognition makes it possible for the play to end in a reconciliation that allows for the prospect of a happy marriage.

But the search for another kind of diamond provides a backdrop for the play. Behind all of these exchanges of objects and coins, the context of international trade, and in particular the Indies trade, remains in the background. The importance of navigating these various economies is especially true in the play's examination of overseas ventures. While Frontin, a servant, is charged with negotiating the domestic financial system, Jérôme

wants his son to learn about international commerce. He signed a contract agreeing to wed Clitandre to the daughter of a man engaged in the Indies trade, whom he describes as being a “bon Bourgeois, / Au trafic étranger instruit dès son jeune âge” (1.8). Jérôme encourages his son to leave France to trade overseas, arguing that Paris is no longer a place to get rich as it once was:

Abandonnez la France, aussi bien ce Païs  
 N'est plus pour s'enrichir ce qu'il estoit jadis.  
 Des procez épineux, la chicanne est bannie,  
 La foy dans le commerce est par tout rétablie,  
 La guerre est declarée aux pâles Usuriers,  
 La Finance n'est plus en pillage aux Fermiers,  
 Le Sort d'intelligence avec ses Economes,  
 N'y fait plus qu'à pas lents la fortune des Hommes,  
 Et comme au seul mérite il attache son choix,  
 Dans tout un siecle à peine en élève-t-il trois.  
 Chez un Peuple plus brute, où la simple ignorance,  
 Au milieu des trésors, languit dans l'indigence,  
 Allez, mon Fils, allez par des soins diligens,  
 Profitant de l'erreur, où sont ces bonnes Gens,  
 Vous ouvrir un chemin, aux fortunes heureuses,  
 Remporter de chez eux des Perles précieuses,  
 Des Diamans de prix, des Rubis de valeur,  
 Et de l'or, des Mortels le vray chasse-douleur (2.2).

This long exhortation in favor of searching for value abroad deserves a closer look. France is presented as a country where it was once possible to get rich, but no longer is. The methods Jérôme decries having passed into disuse are less than reputable: first, he bemoans the passing of useless trials or *chicannes* (of the sort he himself is involved in with his neighbor). “Faith in commerce is reestablished,” he declares, likely a reference to the 1673 *Code Savary* which regulated commercial operations in France. Jacques Savary’s contribution to French commercial law established basic principles of accounting and inventory keeping that companies were expected to uphold; it also provided for an overhaul of the means for settling commercial disputes precisely of the kind Jérôme himself seems to have benefited from in the past. Jérôme speaks of “war” declared against “pale usurers,” an allusion to Jewish moneylenders. He also refers to the cessa-

tion of the “pillaging” of Finance by tax farmers, likely a reference to the state’s consolidation of tax farms over the previous two years.<sup>5</sup>

His appeal that Clitandre travel to the Indies evokes a fantastical notion of riches: while the Spanish, English, Dutch, and Portuguese had been engaged in significant New World trade for decades, the French got off to a slow start. Jérôme’s discourse reflects a sort of vague monetary dream: diamonds, rubies, pearls, and gold. This is a far cry from silver, which was the predominant actual source of wealth that the Spanish had been bringing back from America. Jérôme assures Clitandre that his future father-in-law will be able to teach him all of the tricks of the “commerces secrets” (2.2). He further encourages his son to read the works of travel writers in order to understand the customs of the different nations with whom he could be trading, recommending by name François Bernier, whose *Mémoires sur l’empire du Grand Mogol* was published in 1671, and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, whose book relating travels in Turkey, Persia, and the Indies came out in 1676 (2.3).

In the monetary world portrayed in this play, knowledge of how the system works is key to being able to profit from it. By invoking the major influx of precious metals from the Indies trade, the play evokes a transatlantic silver transfer that was finally beginning to become a reality for the French, whose commercial ventures towards the Indies started to increase significantly in the 1680s (Goubert 198–203). In particular, on January 6, 1682 (just one month before the performance of *Le Parisien*), the *Compagnie des Indes* lost its monopoly on the Indies trade by royal decree, allowing private traders to use space on the company’s ships if they paid the freight (Sottas 72).<sup>6</sup> The discourse Jérôme employs to convince Clitandre to go abroad for the Indies trade is a strong exhortation of the value of colonial commerce. He positions this trade as the replacement for the easy enrichment possible in previous decades in France that was available to tax farmers who “pillaged” state finances, or that of usury. (In the late 1710s, it was this promise of New World wealth that would result in the Mississippi Bubble, as the stock price of the company that was tied to the French national bank continued to rise uncontrollably based on inflated hopes of potential trading gains.) The play’s colonial imaginary is reinforced by the lamentations of Clitandre’s mother:

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example Cornette, 297 for more information on the 1681 ruling establishing the *Fermes Générales*.

<sup>6</sup> Since the 1629 Code Michau, nobles had been authorized to participate in overseas *compagnies*, but this was a chance to participate without financing an entire voyage.

*MATERIALITY OF MONEY*

Mon fils, qui m'est si cher, l'enlever de la sorte,  
 Pour l'envoïer mourir chez les Topinambours?  
 Avant que cela soit, on tranchera mes jours. (1.8)

Madame Jérôme's New World allusion is to one of the first areas France tried to colonize, known as *France Antarctique*. This was France's failed 1560 venture, located in modern-day Brazil, described by André Thevet in his 1572 *Cosmographie universelle*, by Jean de Léry in his 1578 *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*, and alluded to by Michel de Montaigne in *Des Cannibales*. Thus, just like her monetary references to old coins, her colonial references date far in the past. The search for value abroad, as depicted here, is strikingly unspecific and reflects an antiquated conception of colonial trade. The play is nevertheless thus inscribed in a larger context of international trade as a substitute for a flagging domestic economy. While the nobility were not normally allowed to engage in business, an exception was made for international commerce. Here, aspiring to international trade blurs the lines between nobility and bourgeoisie.

Perhaps the most fundamentally charged axis of *Le Parisien* is its insistence on the importance of money over nobility. From the first act, the play revolves around Clitandre's search for cash. Previously, merchants and usurers had lent to Clitandre with his father's imminent death and therefore inheritance in mind. As opposed to that represented in *Dom Juan*, for example, Clitandre's borrowing is predicated upon his likelihood to repay, not upon any noble name. As the play begins, Frontin tells him that his usual sources are dry: his creditors, worried by Jérôme's longevity, are doubtful that they will be repaid any time soon. Frontin thus has to turn to new sources. *Le Parisien* shows a consumer credit system where the information that determines lending decisions involves a mix of qualitative and quantitative elements. Both Clitandre and his father turn to Frontin to navigate this world.

Despite his valet's warnings of the increasing difficulty he has in finding credit, Clitandre agrees to finance a large purchase of soldiers' uniforms, to help get his love interest's brother out of trouble. When Gé-raste, a captain in the army, says he needs 100 *pistoles*, Clitandre sends Frontin to get them, telling him to be creative: "Cherche, imagine, invente" (1.6). Frontin exclaims in frustration that all of the usual sources of ready cash ("le Marchand, l'Usurier, le Notaire") will no longer lend without a guarantee (1.7). At this point, all credit based on name alone (that is to say, Jérôme's reputation) has been exhausted. This situation represents a key turning point. The traditional credit market, where lending was based on interpersonal relations, has come to an end. Laurence

Fontaine writes in this sense of a “marché des obligations sociales et du pouvoir sur les hommes” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that existed in lieu of a credit market that rationally priced loans based on time and risk (216). The use of Frontin as an intermediary renders Clitandre’s borrowing more impersonal: lenders make their decisions based on their assessment of the chances that Clitandre and his family will repay, and with no consideration of any social obligation.

The play shows characters entering into a world of financial transactions that were traditionally viewed unfavorably. Géraste’s purchase of used clothes from another captain who was otherwise going to sell them to a used clothing dealer (a “fripier”) is one example of this kind of transaction. Géraste purchases the clothes for a bit more than the clothes dealer was going to offer, but the very action brings him into a realm of undesirable transactions. He is, as Lysette, says, “un peu moins Juif” than the clothing reseller—but a little nonetheless, the phrase implies; it is a compelling blurring of the lines between a bourgeois effort to make money and the activity typically associated with Jews in Paris at the time (1.6).<sup>7</sup> Géraste’s entry into this world of transactions signals a descent into the “unnatural” gains that were the focus of traditional prohibitions of usury.

The play also portrays cases where characters come into close contact with financial instruments and dealings with merchants, usurers, and notaries; characters are shown haggling and attempting to pull revenue out of any possible source. The methods by which Frontin ultimately gets money are personal: he obtains it directly from Clitandre’s father, telling Jérôme that his son has been arrested and that the guards will release him in exchange for a small bribe. When faced with this situation, Jérôme, like his son, depends on Frontin’s mastery of money. He wants to negotiate the sum down by two-thirds, relying upon Frontin’s abilities: “Frontin, par ton adresse / Ne m’en pourrait-on point diminuer deux tiers?” (1.9). When Frontin explains that this reduction in price will be impossible, Jérôme agrees to pay the full amount. By asking Frontin to carry out negotiations, Jérôme considers his servant’s financial skill to be a resource for him, as the employer, to exploit. He does not realize that it is precisely this knowledge that Frontin will continually use to gain power over his master. In his plea to Jérôme for money to bribe the guards, Frontin also negoti-

---

<sup>7</sup> As Furetière indicates, “Juif” could be synonymous for a range of terms: “On appelle aussi un usurier, un Marchand qui trompe, ou qui rançonne un *Juif*, parce que les *Juifs* sont de grands usuriers, fripiers, & trompeurs.” (2:396).

ates to his own benefit, starting first by asking for an undetermined sum—“quelques Pistoles”—then revealing his real request, for one hundred *louis* (1.9). Clitandre’s mother also trusts in, and falls victim to, Frontin’s financial skill. When Jérôme, exasperated by his son’s antics, agrees with Frontin’s assessment that he should be sent to the army, it is Frontin who makes the convincing argument to Madame Jérôme that, provided with the appropriate money for bribes, he can navigate this other sort of economy, the corrupt military system, to obtain a promotion for her son in order to ensure he will be out of harm’s way. This division of labor, with the valet engaged in domestic negotiations, and the master hoping to engage in international trade, mirrors the traditional image of the noble who is allowed to engage in overseas commerce, but forbidden to exercise a trade at home.

By invoking the one branch of the commercial trade in which the nobility could acceptably participate, the play invites an interrogation of the mechanisms that forbade them to engage in merchant activity. Although money circulates throughout the play, those who have the specialized knowledge to find it are not noble. Clitandre’s future father-in-law, who masters the Indies trade, is a “bon Bourgeois”; Frontin, who navigates the credit market, and makes cash come out of the most unlikely hiding places, is a servant; and Jérôme, who built his fortune himself, is not noble either (indeed, he is described in the character list as a “Bourgeois de Paris”). While the theatrical dream of getting rich from the Indies trade is not new—it was comically alluded to in Scarron’s *Héritier ridicule* (1648), for example—here it takes on a more credible face. Similarly the role of a servant with “adresse” had been seen before (La Flèche in *L’Avaro* comes to mind); but in this play the role of the servant begins to overtake that of the master. Jérôme pushes his son into business because his skills are no longer effective in a changing world, where a new kind of knowledge is needed. Indeed Jérôme, who clearly enjoyed financial success in the past, is often shown failing in his own negotiations in the play: first in trying to get Frontin to negotiate a lower bribe to get his son out of jail; later, in another of Frontin’s schemes, when he mistakenly thinks he is tricking a young woman out of a diamond ring; and he fails in his efforts to try to get out of the marriage contract he arranged for his son, which carries a 12,000 franc *débit*, or cancellation penalty. Jérôme seems powerless in the face of a new financial world of paper and international trade, where servants outwit their masters. His control of coin and credit is what had previously defined him as a financial man, and his own son’s efforts to steal coins from him weaken his grip, symbolically and literally,

on his money and his power. Just as nobles needed to look to new sources of wealth, so does this bourgeois.

Clitandre's constant spending is a heavy weight for his father to bear, since the legacy he wants for his son takes the form of both monetary assets and financial knowledge, two things Jérôme clearly values more than noble status. When, in a ruse to break Clitandre's arranged marriage, Lysette and Frontin disguise themselves as a pregnant countess and a squire, ready to "retirer son Fils des bras de la Roture," to "parfumer sa Race," Jérôme assesses her value quickly, and dismisses her, saying that she is literally worthless: "Non, vous ne valez rien" (2.5). For Jérôme, real value, which is to say monetary value, is all that counts. The play constantly indicts nobility and shows a search for real value—real coins—in a context where credit is increasingly unavailable without proof. Nobility by itself ceases to have currency in *Le Parisien*.

The connection between family values and monetary value appears in very clear terms when Jérôme hears a false report of Clitandre's death. He vows to exact his revenge, yet he speaks in financial terms, directly equating his son's spilled blood to monetary compensation. He tells Frontin that he will make his son's killer pay, quite literally: "Il n'aura pas pour rien versé le sang d'un Fils, / Et chaque goutte au moins me vaudra cent Louïs" (4.6). Jérôme devotes more attention to the formalities of this complaint than to any urge to physically track the killer down. The "illustre vengeance" he promises is primarily the bureaucratic and administrative procedure involved in obtaining his blood money, as his first thought is to go to his friend the Commissaire to lodge a complaint (4.3). The explicit connection between blood and money here echoes the connection Clitandre makes between the death of his father and the arrival of his inheritance. Even Jérôme's desire to sell his wife's house, worth at least 20,000 francs by her estimation, reveals a desire to convert a traditional seat of value—land and a house in the country—into money. To do so, he has goaded his neighbor into purchasing the house, having filed a lawsuit accusing him of encroaching on the property with trees he planted, and hoping to encourage the neighbor to buy the house in order to make the suit go away.

In its focus on negotiation, *Le Parisien* also explicitly comments on changing values, particularly those of integrity and sincerity. Frontin, complimenting Lysette on her skills at duping people for money, remarks that women have become skilled tricksters in a century "où regne l'artifice" (5.1). It is this "artificial" character of the time period that the play examines most convincingly. At one point, Crispin confesses to

Jérôme that he was not a witness to Clitandre's death, but admits his true nature: "Je suis un Fourbe" (4.8). This confession, more than just a statement of guilt, is a statement of identity. Clitandre's silence serves as an admission to Jérôme that he is a trickster too, having played a role in faking his own death to steal his father's money. Clitandre thus goes beyond being a spendthrift and into territory that is criminal, and profoundly damaging to the bourgeois image that Jérôme maintains. Interestingly, Clitandre never takes the opportunity to explain himself fully once his father discovers him, calling him a "fripon." He does not speak a word to his father for the rest of the play: it is as if he is still dead to him. The play's ending leaves open the possibility for reconciliation but does not guarantee it; the couples, we imagine, could get married but Jérôme is interested only in his *cassette*, a concern that he mentions in his last line in the play (in an echo of *L'Avare*). He is anxious to hold onto something of real value in the face of artificial substitutes; his embrace of coin money, and desire to keep it safe, are a reaction to instability (and a rather reactionary one at that: even though he knows he should be lending it out, he does not).

By examining the implications of finding new sources of money, the role of skilled mediators and masters of money, and the importance of money over nobility, *Le Parisien* focuses on the instability of traditional sources of value and shows a world in transition. Money is key to this change, both as something to be accumulated, and as something which itself is changing in form, from the crisply minted coins hidden away in the Jérôme household to the potential gains of the Indies trade. Throughout, the power of paper as a bearer of value is established as resistant to attempts to tamper with it, and increasingly appears as trustworthy and reliable. *Le Parisien* uses money to explore the impact of a new world where there are new sources of value to be exploited. This process in turn calls into question the traditional system of socioeconomic value in the country. The old merchant class is representing as adapting to a new socioeconomic order, where money is acquired differently and where nobility no longer has the same value. By insisting on the importance of making money circulate, of finding new sources of money, and of the role of skilled non-noble mediators and masters of money, *Le Parisien* serves as an important transition between the world of Harpagon, Molière's secretive bourgeois moneylender, and that of the title character of *Turcaret*, the shameless financier who started his own career as a servant. Far more than just using money as a reality effect, *Le Parisien* explores the circulation of money, and in so doing examines the evolution of tensions between class and wealth, and between what is earned, what is inherited, and ultimately

## PAGETT

what and how things are valued. An example of one of the many plays from these years that focus on money, *Le Parisien* uniquely displays both the search for value abroad, and the mortgage of traditional bearers of value, such as land and houses. By emphasizing the increasing importance of financial and commercial knowledge in a society in flux, it gives an insightful look at how economic and social value was being re-imagined on the stage.

University of Pennsylvania

## Works Cited

- Biet, Christian. *Droit et littérature sous l'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002. Print.
- Chevillet, Charles [Champmeslé, pseud.]. *Le Parisien, comédie*. Paris: Jean Ribou, 1683. *Gallica*. Web. 4 April 2013.
- Cornette, Joël. *Chronique du règne de Louis XIV*. Paris: SEDES, 1997. Print.
- Desan, Philippe. *L'Imaginaire économique de la Renaissance*. Mont-de-Marsan: Editions InterUniversitaires, 1993. Print.
- Donneau de Visé, Jean. *Mercure Galant*. Lyon: Thomas Amaulry. February 1682. *Google Books*. Web. 4 April 2013.
- Duvignaud, Jean. *Sociologie du théâtre : essai sur les ombres collectives*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965. Print.
- Fontaine, Laurence. "Relations de crédit et surendettement en France : XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles." In *Des personnes aux institutions: Réseaux et culture du crédit du XVIe au XXe siècle en Europe. Actes du colloque international centenaire des FUCAM. (Mons, 14–16 novembre 1996)*, edited by Laurence Fontaine, Gilles Postel-Vinay, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and Paul Servais, 206–219. Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 1997. Print.
- Force, Pierre. *Molière ou le Prix des choses : Morale, économie et comédie*. Paris: Nathan, 1994. Print.

## MATERIALITY OF MONEY

- Furetière, Antoine. *Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tous les mots françois . . .* The Hague: Arnout & Reinier Leers, 1690. *Google Books*. Web. 4 April 2013.
- Goubert, Pierre. *Louis XIV et vingt millions de français*. Rev. ed. Paris: Fayard, 1991. Print.
- Lancaster, Henry Carrington. *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century*. Baltimore: JHUP, 1924–42. Reprint, 1966. Print.
- Privitera, Joseph. *Charles Chevillet de Champmeslé: Actor and Dramatist, 1642–1701*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1938. Print.
- Ravel, Jeffrey. *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680 1791*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. Print.
- Sottas, Jules. *Histoire de la Compagnie royale des Indes Orientales : 1664–1719*. Paris: Plon Nourrit, 1905. Print.
- Spielmann, Guy. *Le Jeu de l'ordre et du chaos. Comédie et pouvoirs à la fin de règne, 1673 1715*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002. Print.
- Tavernier, Jean-Baptiste. *Les six voyages de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier : Ecuyer baron d'Aubonne, qu'il a fait en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes*. Paris: Gervais Clouzier et Claude Barbin, 1676. *Gallica*. Web. 4 April 2013.