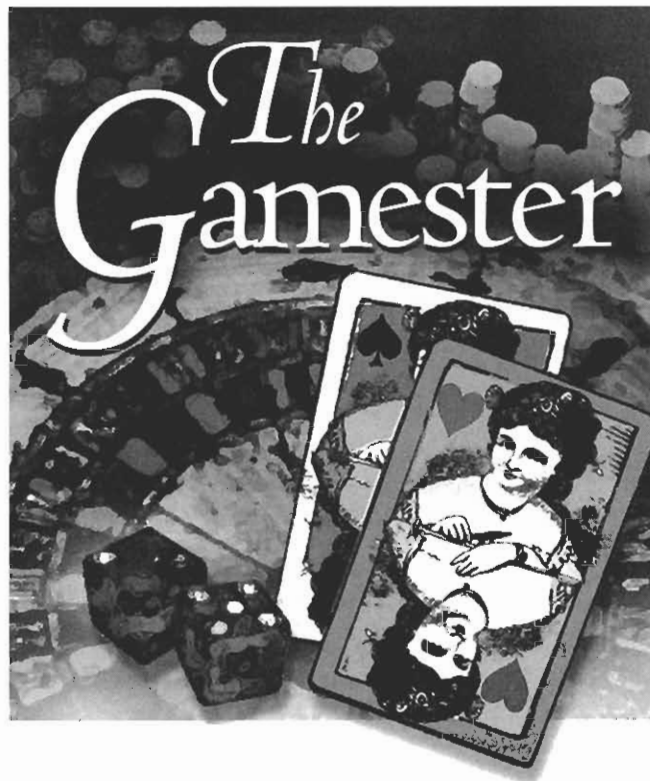


STUDY GUIDE

THE REPERTORY THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS



BY FREYDA THOMAS

BASED ON *LE JOUEUR* BY JEAN-FRANCOIS REGNARD

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Who's Who



Valere is a charming young man who suffers from two unequally matched addictions: gambling and his fiancée, Angelique.

Angelique is a beautiful, intelligent young woman whose only real flaw is her love for Valere.

Hector is Valere's servant of two years, a man wise enough to see his master's folly but too loyal to walk away from it.

Thomas is Valere's father whose distaste for gambling is matched only by his love for his son.

Mme Securite is a wealthy fifty-something widow who finances many a young man's gambling habit in exchange for personal favors.

Mme Preferee, in her 30s, provides Angelique with a woman's guidance but also has designs of her own.

Mme Argante is Angelique's older widowed sister who is secretly in love with Valere.

Dorante is Valere's fat and balding uncle who, in spite of being 30 years her senior, fervently pursues Angelique as his bride.

The Marquis de Fauxpas is a bumbling, middle-aged blind date nightmare who is passionately in love with the savvy Mme Argante.

Betty is Mme Argante's young maid.



Words to the Wise

A trick is the group of cards played in a single round of a game and is often the basic unit of scoring. "My partner played badly, but we won the trick anyway."

An admonition is a gentle but firm warning against undesired behavior.

Divertissement is another term for a diversion or a form of entertainment.

A chemise is a woman's loose-fitting shirt style undergarment.

Prudence, the exercise of good judgment, is rare in *The Gamester*.

A trump card outranks all other cards in a game, so to trump is to win or take a trick by playing that card.

Creditors are constantly shadowing Valere, as they are people to whom he owes money.

A lackey is how Hector identifies himself, because he is a servant to Valere.

Mollifying or soothing Valere's creditors is almost a full-time job for Hector.

Sating or satisfying Valere's appetite for gambling is almost impossible.

The wheel refers to the roulette wheel, a slotted disc that spins. Roulette players place bets as to where on the wheel a small ball will land when the wheel stops spinning.

Debauchery or allowing himself whatever pleasures he likes seems to be Valere's area of expertise.

Conniving or scheming is a thing of the past for Valere—or so he claims.

Limpid is how Valere describes

Angelique's clear, calm eyes.

To forswear is to give up something or to deny oneself a pleasure.

Wanderlust takes on new meaning for Valere. He has a strong urge to travel, but only from gaming house to gaming house.

The malady or sickness of gambling is something that Hector fears will always be with his master.

To be bereft of one's fortune is to be separated from it.

To rue something is to regret having done it.

Rectitude or right behavior is Valere's newly-claimed path for life.

To implore is to plead or beg.



Pick a Card, Any Card

Chemin-de-fer is a card game in which two hands are dealt, any number of players may bet against the dealer, and the winning hand is the one that comes closest to but does not exceed a total of nine on two or three cards.

Hearts is a card game in which the goal is to avoid taking tricks containing cards of this suit.

Ecarte is a two-person card game whose object is to win three tricks. According to French rules, a "gallery" of spectators may place bets on the players and offer advice to those that they back.

Baccarat is a card game very similar to chemin-de-fer in that the winner is the player whose cards' total is closest to nine.

Faro is a card game in which players place bets on the top card of the dealer's deck.

Piquet is a two-person card game, in which the dealer is called the younger and the other player is called the elder. Each hand of cards is divided into five parts which are played in order and the object is to be the first player to score 100 points.

Trente et Quarante is a card game in which any number of people place bets against the dealer, choosing to bet on either red or black. The dealer then turns cards alternately for red and black and the first color with a total card value of 31 or more, but less than 40, wins.

Whist is a card game which inspired bridge and is played by two teams of two players. The last card dealt indicates trump, tricks of four cards are played, and a point is scored for each trick over six won by each team.

Twenty-one is another name for the card game, black jack, the object of which is for the player to have a total card value higher than that of the dealer without exceeding 21.

Curry in this case, is not a tasty seasoning, but instead a verb meaning to groom or prepare.

The filial dedication to which Valere pledges himself is simply devotion to his family.

Bairn is a Scottish term for child.

Bumptious or pushy is how Thomas describes Dorante.

To be betrothed or engaged to Angelique is Valere's goal.

Collateral is something of value given to a lender by a borrower until the loan is repaid.

To roust an enemy is to defeat him.

N'est-ce pas is a French phrase meaning "Isn't it so?"

Austere or bare is how Valere describes his current living quarters.

Mon pauvre is French for "my poor one."

La grande maison des jeux translates to "the big house of games" or a serious gambling hall.

A siren call is a desire that is too strong to be overcome, like the mythological Sirens whose beautiful singing drove sailors mad.

The haute bourgeois is the upper middle class of this society.

To prostrate oneself is to lie face down in front of someone to show love or respect.

Myopic or nearsighted is how Mme Argante describes Fauxpas because he is blind to all of the suggestive jokes that she makes.

To eschew a person is to cast him or her aside.

Avarice is one of the seven deadly sins, greed.

What's the Story?

Act I

The Gamester opens in, quite naturally, a casino, with the whirl of the roulette wheel, the clatter of dice and upbeat popular music playing in the background. This isn't Las Vegas during spring break, though. Instead the scene is 1700 Paris, but the action is all too familiar. Young man-about-town, Valere, is on the brink of losing everything, including his love, Angelique, because he can't stop gambling.

As early as dawn, creditors appear at Valere's dilapidated door, hoping to collect long-overdue loans made to further his expensive habit. Fortunately for Valere, Hector, his dedicated-to-a-fault servant, is prepared to run interference. With a skill that comes from repeated practice, Hector turns away collection agent after collection agent with a barrage of confusing and conflicting instructions. Afterwards though, he laments his own decline and asks himself why he continues to work so hard for a master who can barely provide him with room and board, much less an actual wage. He complains that he would like to have a wife but with his present wages, can't afford one. He convinces himself that Valere is worth the trouble though and decides to stay—at least for a little while.

Another knock at the door reveals someone perhaps more dangerous than a creditor, Mme Preferee, the guardian of Valere's fiancée, Angelique. She doesn't hold Valere or his habit in high regard and seems to enjoy delivering the message that because of the gambling, Angelique is breaking her engagement with Valere to marry his wealthy (but fat and balding) uncle, Dorante. Valere enters just as Preferee is leaving and fails to understand exactly what she has said. When Hector brings him up to speed though, he vows to give up gambling for good and persuades Hector to play cards "harmlessly" with him to help him break the habit. Thomas, Valere's father, arrives to check on his wayward son while the game is in progress. Disappointed, but still holding a glimmer of hope for his son's redemption, Thomas offers Valere one final chance to change before he disinherits him. Valere assures him (as he has many times before) that this time will be different and that having Angelique at his side as his wife will guarantee his success. Thomas is thrilled with this news, but less excited when Valere asks him for money so that he can win his love back from Dorante. Thomas denies him the loan and says that he must win his lady honestly.

With empty pockets and Angelique slipping away from him, Valere decides to make money the only way that he knows how (outside of gambling). Against his better judgment, he gives in when Hector arranges for the wealthy widow, Mme Securite to pay a visit. This aging beauty supplies young men with money in exchange for personal favors and is only too happy to finance Valere's latest loan.

Meanwhile, Angelique debates whether or not she should actually leave Valere for Dorante. Mme Preferee pressures her to do so, but Angelique is confident that her love can redeem the gambler and sets off to see him.

Making matters even more complicated is the fact that Angelique's older widowed sister, Mme Argante who is widely-regarded as a shrew, is in love with Valere as well. She, of course, is the object of yet another man's desire, the hopelessly foppish Marquis de Fauxpas. As his name suggests, when he is around Mme Argante, everything he says and does is wrong. He stammers, makes jokes that aren't at all funny and completely misreads everything Mme Argante says. As a result, she could not be more pleased when Valere arrives asking for her assistance. She assumes that he is interested in her, but he actually wants her to appeal to Angelique on his behalf. She is crushed but agrees to do it (secretly planning to speak against, rather than for him). Valere is so grateful that he drops to his knees and kisses her hand—just as Angelique arrives. Mme Argante turns the situation to her advantage and acts as if he were making advances on her, sending Angelique into a fury. After a flowery speech and a vow never to touch cards again, though, Valere wins back her love and her promise of marriage. As a token of her pledge, she gives him a portrait of herself in a jewel covered frame but warns him that if he parts with it for any reason, she will never speak to him again.

Dorante and Preferee are both disappointed—he because he has lost a bride and she because she has lost money—but Preferee quickly develops a new plan to put them back in the running. She dictates a moving letter from Dorante to Angelique and instructs Dorante to lure Valere into the gaming hall so that he will break his vow and lose his fiancée.

With renewed energy, Valere sets about getting his affairs in order for marriage, but it is not an easy task since he has a mountain of debts to pay and no money with which to start a new life. He sends Hector to persuade his father to pay his existing debts and turns again to Mme Securite for a little seed money. Both men are successful in their missions, and Valere, true to form, invests part of his money in a dog race. He then tries to convince Hector to give him the money from Thomas to make more "investments." Thinking of himself as much as his master, Hector steers him away from this mistake and Valere is ready to pay his bills and live within his means when Dorante arrives. Per Mme Preferee's instructions, he tricks Valere into returning to the gaming house. The only problem is that Valere fears being seen by Angelique, so Hector, knowing that he shouldn't, creates disguises for his master and himself so that they can go into the casino unnoticed.

At the same time, Mme Preferee conveniently leads Angelique past the gambling hall and casually mentions that Dorante told her Valere plans to play tonight. Angelique falls right into the trap and is quickly persuaded to go into the gambling hall dressed as a man so that she can spy on Valere without his knowing it.

All the while, Mme Argante has been making her own plans and sends her maid Betty into the casino with a letter for Valere declaring her love and promising him her estate. While she waits, she runs into the Marquis, who has written her yet another hideous poem; Thomas, who fears that his son will break his vow; Dorante and Mme Preferee who are fretting over whether or not their plot will succeed; and Mme Securite, who laments her lack of a "gaming partner."

Act II

This crowd of conspirators, each with his or her own agenda (but all looking for Valere) moves into the gambling hall. Valere and Hector (both in disguise) part ways, but not before Valere gives his servant a little cash with which to gamble, keeping the rest for himself. Valere has a momentary scare when Thomas walks right by him, but the disguise is successful. Angelique and Mme Preferee scan the room for Valere but do not find him.

They are preparing to leave when Angelique decides that she wants to gamble a bit to learn what makes it so irresistible for her love. She chooses a dice table at which Valere is playing (and winning). At first, she does not recognize him, but when he pulls her portrait out of his pocket to look at it, she knows him instantly. He, however, thinks that she is a young man, new to the game and invites him to join the table. She accepts and he offers to coach her through the game. When she wins several throws in a row, he suggests that they switch to a card game, explaining that continuing to win could make her overconfident. Valere moves to the card table, and Mme Preferee urges Angelique to exercise caution. But Angelique is enjoying her success and is eager to play.

As their game gets under way, Mme Securite tries to strike up a game of her own with the Marquis, but he politely declines, telling her that he has given his heart to another woman and cannot share his body with her. She accepts the refusal and moves on to other prospects, while Mme Argante, who has overheard the conversation from her nearby hiding place, is stunned. She cannot believe that this gallant man is the same stammering fool she knows. She decides to follow the suit of the evening and disguises herself behind a fan to talk to the Marquis. Not knowing who she is, he tells her about the woman he loves, speaking eloquently and explaining that his love makes him too nervous when he is near her. Moved by his sincerity, she encourages his love and tells him that he might be engaged to this woman by tomorrow night. Thrilled by this idea, he rushes off, leaving her to realize that she actually loves him as well.

Dorante wanders past looking for Valere and bumps into Mme Securite who is still in search of entertainment. Within minutes, she ensnares him and drags him away to give him a lesson in love. In the meantime, Angelique shows a real talent for cards and wins all of Valere's money. Valere begs Hector for the money that he

gave him, but Hector says he has lost it as well. Valere decides to place Angelique's portrait on the table as collateral. At the same time, Betty mistakes the disguised Angelique for Valere and gives her the letter from Mme Argante. Angelique keeps the letter, not wanting to reveal her disguise, and agrees to one final hand of cards, with the portrait at stake. She wins the hand and sadly takes the portrait from him. Before she leaves the table, she gives him the note from her sister and reveals herself. Valere removes his disguise as well and suddenly the whole room realizes what has happened. Thomas is grieved but stays true to his word and disowns his son. Dorante sees an opportunity to snatch Angelique and goes in search of her. Left with only Hector, Valere reads the letter from Mme Argante and decides to accept her offer of marriage, since he is bankrupt in both love and money.

Preferee swoops in to comfort Thomas, and Hector adds his own regrets. Realizing that Hector will have no chance of income with Valere in his current state, Thomas kindly offers him some money to sustain him until he finds a new position. Hector politely refuses the offer though, revealing two huge wads of cash in his pockets. He explains that he found favor at the roulette table with the money that Valere gave him and knowing that Valere would only squander it, lied when asked for the money. Thomas assures him that he acted wisely and wishes him well. With more than enough money to support a wife, Hector dashes off to find an agreeable woman. This inspires Mme Preferee and she loosely suggests that perhaps she and Thomas should consider marriage as well. They leave together, and Mme Argante enters searching for Betty so that she can retrieve the letter for Valere. When she finds her though, she learns that it is too late and turns on Betty. The young woman flees and Mme Argante drops her fan, exposing her face just as the Marquis enters. He instantly recognizes her as the woman he spoke to earlier and is horrified. She quiets him though, telling him that everything will be fine, as soon as she sees someone (Valere). She runs away to retract her offer from Valere and Fauxpas follows closely behind.

Dorante is not so fortunate, as Angelique declines his proposal. But he rebounds quickly, seeking out the ever-eager Mme Securite. Valere arrives to find Angelique alone and begs her to return the portrait so he may at least look at her face. She obliges but walks away without a word. Before Valere can recover, Mme Argante finds him and pleads to be released from her proposition. Valere agrees and Mme Argante hugs him in gratitude. The Marquis sees this and misinterprets it, leading him to challenge Valere to a swordfight. Valere refuses to fight him but explains the situation and puts himself at the tip of Fauxpas' sword, begging him to end his miserable life. Hector and Betty rush forward to pull Valere out of danger, and as their eyes meet, they fall instantly in love and decide to marry. Valere returns to Fauxpas' sword, but the Marquis cannot bring himself to kill him. Moved by Valere's apparent repentance, both Thomas and Angelique forgive him and Angelique agrees to marry him... if he can live "as if you were a monk" for a whole year, giving up gambling and helping others to do the same. Valere agrees to the bargain and Hector promises to "keep him on the straight and narrow" with Betty at his side. Fittingly, the evening closes with the crowd placing bets on how long (or short) Valere's vow will last this time.

From the Director's Chair



Below are excerpts from a conversation between Rep staff members and The Gamester director, Bruce Longworth, in which Longworth situates the play in both historical and contemporary contexts.

The Gamester is a manners comedy. Manners comedy has a very long tradition, one which is by no means over. Contemporary playwrights like John Guare and Christopher

Durang are still producing this form, albeit in modern settings as opposed to period settings. Manners comedy focuses on society's foibles. It examines them through a prism of tremendous wit and in this case, elegance. It is satirical and it has tremendous bite. The characters in this play are aware of their obsessions. They have moments of clear, astute self-examination. This is not farce. There are elements of farce because this is a contemporary adaptation and a very free adaptation of a 1696 play. But the difference between farce and this play is that these characters all have moments of very clear self-awareness. But most of them, and perhaps all of them, depending on how optimistic or pessimistic you are, are unable and unwilling to make a change. They live in a world that celebrates excess with little or no apology and it's fundamentally a world that's doomed not to last because of that. Manners comedy has a splendid contradiction in it. It uses some of humanity's greatest assets—wit, elegance, intellect—at the service of some of our basest desires—greed, lust, revenge, money. We use our best to achieve our worst. In these kinds of plays, the glitter of the world reveals the grubbiness of the desires. The reason I think the genre has remained around so long is that it reveals the truth about human nature—warts and all. But it does it with tremendous gusto and tremendous fun. Shaw once said, "If you're going to tell someone the truth, you'd better make them laugh." And this play does that.

The rules of the society are very complex—how to walk, how to talk, how to behave. The pursuits are highly elemental—what they want. They want love, they want sex, they want revenge, they want money. They're single-minded in going after what they want, but it's precisely because what they want is so elemental and because they pursue what they want with almost a naked vulnerability is what makes them human and what gives the play its heart—that combined with their sense of self-awareness. Valere knows he should stop gambling. He knows that it's destroying his relationship with Angelique, but he can't do it. Hector knows that logically he should leave Valere; it's been a two-year slide and this kid shows no sign of

changing—and he says as much. But he just loves him and he can't leave him. Mme Securite knows that she is too old to be a young beauty but she still conducts her life as if she is. Everybody has those wonderful moments of kind of stunning self-realization that I think make the play very, very human and give it a dimension that is often lacking in traditional manners comedies of this period. And I think, frankly, it's a modern dimension.

By and large, this is a self-involved society in which compassion plays little part and they admit as much at the end of the play. They don't care how it turns out. They have other interests, their own interests and their own pursuits. And we will take great care to say that this is not a sentimental play. But [note] two things: the fact that the characters are at the mercy of their desires and they pursue them with a vulnerability that strikes a chord and the fact that there is a component of love matches here, of human interaction. This is what gives the play its heart, despite the fact that the society in which it occurs is pretty harsh. I also think it's what gives the play an interesting sense of complexity, more complex than traditional plays written in this period, and it gives a sense of modernity. It brings it, in a way, into things that we can identify with. The play was originally written in 1696 which puts it at a very interesting place in a dramaturgical sense—right on the cusp of the Age of Reason. In 1651, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote *The Leviathan*, in which he argued that reason is the immediate function of sense perception, "and not something that has an existence separate from the senses. Therefore the only things that truly exist are the things we know through our senses. Reason is a culmination of what we gather through our senses." There are clearly things that we cannot verify through our senses: God, religion, ethics. These are values that we hold, but we can't point to their existence concretely through what we see, we smell, we feel, we touch and we hear. What happened in the second half of the 17th century is the real rich folks took this notion of Hobbes' and twisted it. They perverted it into a period of tremendous hedonism. If you can't verify that God exists through your senses or that ethics are valid through your senses, then it's a hop, skip and a jump to anything goes. If it feels good, do it. So in this period, the senses are elevated above the brain, above the reason. Now by the end of the 17th century, the pendulum is starting to swing back and find a new center. And the plays at the end of the century started to reverse the trend where the reason or the brain was once again elevated above the senses and it was viewed as a general at the army of the senses. At which point, our more contemporary notions of God and ethics and behavior—moral conduct began to reassert themselves and you see it reflected in the plays towards the end of the 17th century. But what I find interesting is that in this play, like many plays written in the last couple decades of the century and the first decade of the next century, they contain elements of both.

The Compleat Gamester

Charles Cotton, a writer in Restoration England, penned this 1674 work on gambling, *The Compleat Gamester*. Cotton's vivid descriptions of the gaming house and the mindset of a gambler in the following excerpts offer some insight into Valere's obsession with playing the odds and the roller coaster ride on which they take him.

Of Gaming in General, or an Ordinary [gaming house] Described

Gaming is an enchanting Witchery, gotten betwixt Idleness and Avarice: An itching Disease that makes some scratch the head whilst others, as if they were bitten by a Tarantula, are laughing themselves to death; or lastly, it is a paralytical distemper, which, seizing the arm the man cannot choose but shake his elbow. It has this ill property above all other Vices, that it renders a man incapable of prosecuting any serious action, and makes him always unsatisfied with his own condition; he is either lifted up to the top of mad joy with success, or plunged to the bottom of despair by misfortune, always in extremes, always in a storm; this minute the Gamester's countenance is so serene and calm, that one would think nothing could disturb it and the next minute so stormy and tempestuous that it threatens destruction on to it self and others and as he is transported with joy when he wins, so losing he is tossed upon the billows of a high dwelling passion till he hath lost fight with both sense and reason.

This restless man, the miserable Gamester, is the proper subject of every man's pity. Restless I call him, because (such is the itch of play) either winning or losing he can never rest satisfied, if he wins, he thinks to win more, if he loses he hopes to recover. To this man's condition the saying of Hannibal to Marcellus may be fitly applied that...he could not be quiet, either Conqueror, or Conquered. Thus have I heard of some who with five pounds have won four hundred pounds in one night, and the next night have lost it to a sum not half so much; others who have lost their estates and won them again with addition, yet could not be quiet till they lost them irrecoverably.

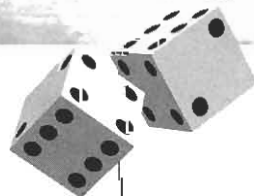
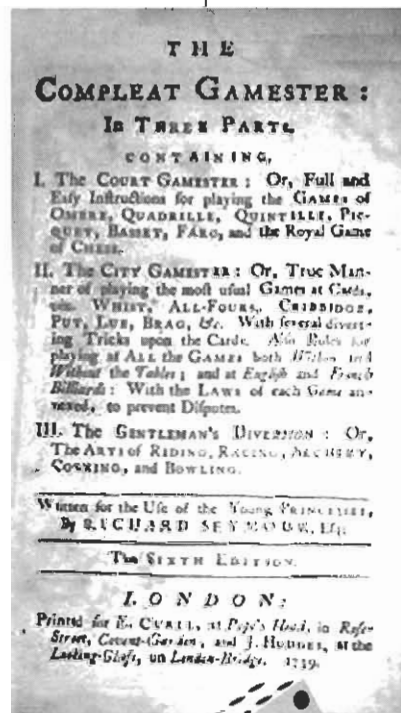
And therefore fitly was that question propounded, Whether men in Ships at Sea were to be accounted among the living or the dead, because there were but few inches betwixt them and drowning. The same query may be made of great

Gamesters, though their estates be never so considerable, Whether they are to be esteemed poor or rich, since there are but few Casts at Dice betwixt a rich man (in that circumstance) and a beggar.

The Character of a Gamester

Some say he was born with cards in his hands, others that he will die so; but certainly it is all his life, and whether he sleeps or wakes he thinks of nothing else. He speaks the language of the Game he plays at, better than the language of his Country; and can less endure a solecism in that this: he knows no Judge but the Groom-porter [court officer responsible for supervising gambling], no Law but that of the Game at which he is so expert all appeal to him, as subordinate Judges to the supreme ones. He loves Winter more than Summer, because it affords more Gamesters, and Christmas more than any other time because there is more gaming then. He gives more willingly to the Butler than to the Poor-box, and is never more religious than when he prays he may win. He imagines he is at play when he is at Church; he takes his Prayer-book for a Pack of Cards and thinks he his shuffling when he turns over the leaves. This man will play like Nero when the City is on fire or like Archimedes when it is sacking, rather than interrupt his Game. If play hath reduced him to poverty, then he is like one a drowning, who fastens upon any thing

next at hand. Amongst other of his shipwracks he hath happily lost shame, and this want supplies him. No man puts his brain to more use than he; for his life is a daily invention, and each meal a new stratagem, and like a flie will boldly sup at every man's cup. He will offer you a quart of Sack out of his joy to see you, and in requital of this courtesy you can do not less than pay for it. His borrowings are like Subsidies, each man a shilling or two, as he can well dispend, which they lend him not with the hope of being repaid, but that he will come no more. Men shun him at length as they do an Infection, and having done with the Aye as his clothes to him, hung on as long as he could, at last drops off.



Bios and Beyond



Jean-Francois Regnard

Regnard was a French comic dramatist born in Paris on February 7, 1655. His father, a rich shopkeeper, died when Regnard was a young man, leaving him master of a considerable fortune. With newfound wealth in hand, he set off at once for Italy, and, after a series of romantic adventures, journeyed by Holland, Denmark and Sweden to Lapland, and then by Poland, Turkey, Hungary and Germany. In 1678, he was captured by Barbary pirates and held in slavery until ransomed a year later.

He returned to Paris at the end of 1683, where he kept a house in the Rue Richelieu and also acquired the small estate of Grillon near Dourdan in the department of Seine-et-Oise, where he hunted, feasted and wrote comedies. His first effort came in 1688, with a piece called *Le Divorce*, which was performed at the Théâtre Italien. He collaborated on four other similar works with writer Charles Dufresny and gained access to the nearly-impenetrable Théâtre Français in May of 1694 with *Attendez-moi sous l'orme*. Two years later, in December of 1696, he produced what would become the skeleton for *The Gamester*, *Le joueur*. The concept for the play actually began as a joint project with Dufresny, but the writers disagreed about how the idea should be executed. As a result, each produced his own comedy on the subject—Dufresny in prose, Regnard in verse—and naturally each accused the other of plagiarism. Although neither of the plays can be considered classics, Regnard's version appears to have been the more commercially and critically successful of the two.

Other dramatic works include *La Sîrnade* (1694), *Le Bourgeois de Falaise* (1696), *Le Distrail* (1697), *Démocrite* (1700), *Ile Retour impreveu* (1700), *Les Folies amour uses* (1704), *Les Ménechmes* (1705) and *Le Légataire universal* (1708). In addition, Regnard wrote miscellaneous poems, the autobiographical romance, *La Provenâle*, and several short accounts in prose of his travels, published posthumously under the title *Voyages*. His style, especially in his purely prose works, is not considered faultless. He is often unoriginal in his plots, and, whether Dufresny was or was not justified in his complaint about *Le joueur*, it seems likely that Regnard owed not a little to him and to others; but he had a thorough grasp of comic situation and incident, and a gift for dialogue.

At Regnard's death on September 4, 1709, there was some speculation that he might have been poisoned—an unfortunate after-effect of his youthful wanderings, but these claims were never substantiated. It is more likely that his early death was brought about by his pace of living and not his brush with Barbary pirates.



Freyda Thomas

The Gamester is the fifth of Freyda Thomas' plays. It was a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn playwriting award in 2000. Though the basic plot and character names are borrowed from Regnard's 1696 opus, it is otherwise a completely original work, styled in the period and written in verse. *The Gamester* had its world premiere at Chicago's Northlight Theatre in March of 2001.

Ms. Thomas' first play was an adaptation of Moliere's *The Learned Ladies*, which had its world premiere at CSV Repertory Theatre in New York in 1991, starring Jean Stapleton. It was produced by the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, Florida Studio Theater and several university theatre departments. Her modern verse adaptation of *Tartuffe* (retitled *Tartuffe: Born Again*) had its world premiere on Broadway in the spring of 1996, starring John Glover as the infamous religious hypocrite. In this version Tartuffe is an American televangelist from Baton Rouge.

She is also the author of *The Heir Transparent*, which she modeled after another Regnard play entitled *Le Légataire universal*. It was produced by the Alabama Shakespeare festival in 1986 as a commission for the opening of their new theatre complex. It has since been mounted by several regional and university theatres around the country and won first alternate in the 1986 American College Theater Festival.

In addition she was commissioned by the Virginia Museum Theater to adapt Goldoni's *The Mistress of the Inn*, set in colonial Williamsburg on the eve of the American Revolution. It had its world premiere at that theater in 1984. Her other original works include *The Creature Concert*, a musical fable for family audiences, which has won two playwriting awards and was performed in 1992 at Lincoln Center under the baton of Marin Alsop.

Most recently she co-authored *The Layover* with Jean-Noel Fenwick, one of France's most notable contemporary comic playwrights. The play features 3 characters who have just died and can arguably be called the comic, or perhaps the karmic side of Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit*.



SHOP TALK

1700s Vegas—that is what *The Gamester* director Bruce Longworth asked scenic designer John Ezell to create. Taking his task to heart, Ezell set out for Las Vegas, a few shows on the strip and a stay at the classic casino hotel, The Bellagio. His big score for the trip was not a win at the craps table or a lucky pull at the slot machines. Instead, it was a book—*How to Design Casinos to Totally Dominate the Competition*. No, The Rep won't be unveiling a new riverboat casino next season, but you may think that we have when you see Mr. Ezell's transformation of the Browning Mainstage. The dominating element of the set is a huge portal or framework that spans the full breadth of the stage and serves as the façade for the gaming hall. Largely gold with dark red accents, the frame boasts both gilding and gold leaf techniques, adding the glitter and glitz of Vegas with a touch of elegance. At the portal's center is the original "wheel of fortune," the roulette wheel, made of gold and red Plexiglas and wired to spin and illuminate. Attached to the back of the wheel is a propeller of sorts that puts into motion a perpetual dog race, with a cut-out Greyhound continually chasing a rabbit, both of which will, in the Prologue, be briefly replaced by a live dog and a stuffed rabbit in a mad dash across the stage. Ezell has carried the gaming theme on to the stage, literally, with a game board inspired floor design as well.

These characters do occasionally venture out of the gambling hall, though, allowing us to see the ritzy glamour of the casino in relief against the rest of their world. In sharp contrast to the opulence of the gaming house is the shambles of a boarding house that Valere calls home, a physical testament to the dangers of excessive gambling. The small room is bare and almost colorless

by comparison. Instead of grand drapes and enormous chandeliers, it offers natural light creeping through the uneven slats in the walls and around a tattered rag of a curtain. Ezell does provide relief from this dismal room with a beautiful sky view through the window. This is created with a muslin covered frame which when backlit gives the appearance of a bright, luminous sky. Maybe this is Valere's light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. Maybe he can reform... maybe.



READ MORE ABOUT IT

We encourage you to explore the world of the play in more detail using the following books and plays.

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: In Four Books by John Locke. London: Printed for A. and J. Churchill and Samuel Monship, 1710.

Discourse on Method and Related Writings by René Descartes; translated with an introduction by Desmond M. Clarke. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: the Navel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-century France by Thomas M. Kovanogh. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Gambling and Speculation: a Theory, a History, and a Future of Some Human Decisions by Reuven Brenner with

Gabrielle A. Brenner. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Gambling, Game, and Psyche by Bettina L. Knapp. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes; edited with an introduction by J.C.A. Gaskin. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

The Man of Mode by Sir George Etherege; Edited by W.B. Cornochon.

Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1966.

The Misanthrope and Tartuffe by Jean Baptiste Poquelin de Molière; translated into English verse by Richard Wilbur; drawings by Enrico Arno. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965.

The Way of the World by William Congreve; edited by Brian Gibbons. London: A & C Black; New York: W.W. Norton, 1994.

Lighten Up!

The world of *The Gamester* provides an intriguing look at a critical phase in cultural and philosophical history—the Age of Enlightenment. Respected scholars hold varying opinions as to when this period began and ended, but it is widely accepted that at least the seeds of this movement were germinating in the seventeenth century, even though it may not have grown into full bloom until the mid-eighteenth century. While it is safe to say that none of the characters in *The Gamester* are philosophers, or even intellectuals, they are, for the most part, members of the upper-middle class whose lives, consciously or unconsciously feel the impact of this gradual shift in world view.

Broadly, the term “Enlightenment” refers to a series of changes in European thought and letters, and unlike most historical periods is a self-imposed expression by the writers, philosophers and scientists of the time. They felt that they were departing from past traditions and ushering in a new era driven by the “light” of truth. The main tenets of Enlightenment thought include:

- The universe is fundamentally rational, that is, it can be understood through the use of reason alone;
- Truth can be found through observation, the use of reason, and systematic doubt;
- Human experience is the foundation of human understanding of truth; authority is not to be preferred over experience;
- All human life, both social and individual, can be understood in the same way the natural world can be understood; once understood, human life, both social and individual, can be manipulated or engineered in the same way the natural world can be manipulated or engineered;
- Religious doctrines have no place in the understanding of the physical and human worlds.

Initially, these ideas were applied primarily to “hard” science and philosophy, but in time, they were extended to the human or social sciences as well. Previously, human behavior had been explained largely by religious or moral motivations, but seventeenth-century thinkers shifted towards an experiential and mechanical explanation of human interaction. One of the first philosophers to make this transition was Englishman, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Hobbes was extremely interested in the application of the new ideas governing the physical sciences to political theory.

Hobbes believed that human beings were material, physical objects that were ruled by material, physical laws.



Thomas Hobbes,
philosopher

Everything that human beings feel, think and judge, are simply physical reactions to external stimuli. Sensation produces feeling, and feeling produces decision and decision produces action. We are all, then, machines. The fundamental motivation that spurs human beings on is selfishness: all human beings wish to maximize their pleasure and minimize their pain. As long as political philosophy is built on some other principle, such as morality, the human inclination to selfishness will always result in tragedy.

Since all human beings are selfish, this means that no person is really safe from his or her fellow beings. In its natural state, humanity is at war with itself. Individuals battle other individuals in a perpetual struggle for advantage, power and gain. Hobbes argued that the society was a group of selfish individuals that united into a single body in order to maximize their safety—to protect themselves from one another. The primary purpose of society is to maximize the happiness of its individuals. At some early point, individuals gathered into a society and agreed to a “social contract” that stipulated the laws and rules they would all live by. Human beings, however, could not be trusted simply to live by their agreements. For this reason, authority was created in order to enforce the terms of the social contract. The creation of authority, by which Hobbes meant a monarch, transformed society into a state. For Hobbes, humanity is better off living under the circumscribed freedoms of a monarchy rather than the violent anarchy of a completely equal and free life.

Using this reasoning, Hobbes argued for unquestioning obedience of authority. In a twist of fate, however, both his methods of inquiry and his basic assumptions would form the basis of arguments against absolute authority. It is through this kind of manipulation and limited reading of Hobbes that the characters in *The Gamester* justify their lives of excess. They acknowledge only the first component of his theory—that we are driven by external forces, as machines—and fail to accept the necessary “social contract” that follows. Instead, they happily declare that their passions, desires and drives (whether they are money, love, lust or power) are beyond their control and their only connection to truth through lived experience. This rationalization affords them the freedom that they want to live as they like, but at the same time, it renders them powerless to stop these behaviors if they choose to do so. Perhaps that is why, at the end of Act II, in spite of all they have seen and heard, they return, like machines to the lives that they know best:

*And does the outcome really truly matter?
Debate it if you will, 'tis naught but chatter.
We know not if it be or be not sin,
And who is harmed?
Let the games begin!*



These questions and activities are designed to help students anticipate the performance and then to build on their impressions and interpretations after attending the theatre. The activities and questions are divided into “**Before the Performance**” and “**After the Performance**” categories. While most of the exercises provide specific instructions, please feel free to adapt these activities to accommodate your own teaching strategies and curricular needs. To assist you in incorporating these materials into your existing curriculum, we have provided the numbers of some of the corresponding Missouri Knowledge Standards and Illinois Learning Standards.

Communication Arts

Before the Performance

1 Imagine that you have a friend in another state who has e-mailed you for advice. Your friend tells you that he or she really likes a boyfriend or girlfriend, but is considering ending the relationship because the significant other has a really annoying habit that he or she won't quit. Maybe he is a smoker, or she is obsessed with having the trendiest clothes—whatever the problem, it has become so severe that it is causing serious ripples in the relationship. Write your friend an e-mail advising him or her how to handle the situation. (MO: CA1, CA3, CA4 IL: 1, 3, 5)

2 *The Gamester* is based on a 1696 play by French playwright, Jean-Francois Regnard. Both the original play and Freyda Thomas' recreation of it are written in verse form, meaning that each line has a specific number of syllables. At the time that Regnard was writing, it was standard practice to write 12-syllable lines. However, the English language falls more naturally into 10-syllable lines, so Ms. Thomas has used a form of verse called heroic couplets. These are ten-syllable lines arranged in rhyming pairs or couplets. So, lines 1 and 2 rhyme, lines 3 and 4 rhyme and so on. For example:

*Oh, Angelique, what have I done? I'm lost!
I've learned my lesson but at such a cost!
I do not ask forgiveness for my sin,
But if you could but let your heart begin
To soften when you think of me, I might
Not tremble at the endless, sleepless night
Without You. It's my punishment, I know,
To live this wretched life alone—but oh,
I think I could endure it with some ease
If I could gaze upon you sometimes. Please,
Give me the picture to remind me of
The only woman I shall ever love.*

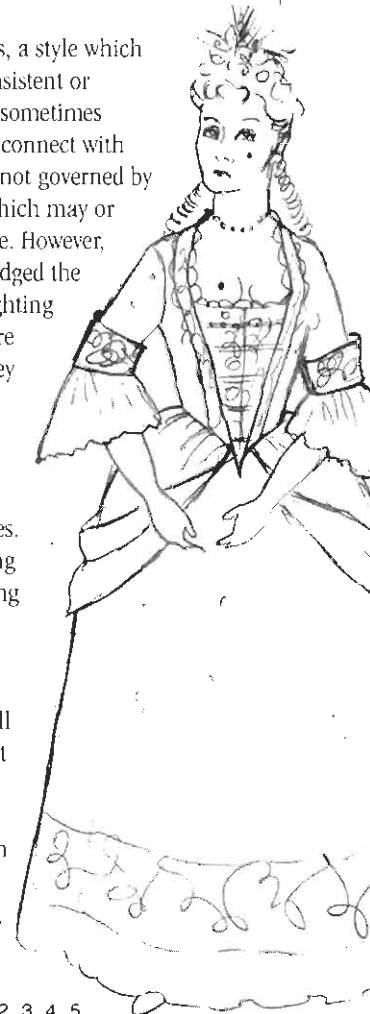
Write a dialogue (a conversation between yourself and another person) using heroic couplets. The subject can be anything you choose. For example, you might think of a situation in which

one of your friends is on the verge of doing something very foolish, and you are trying to show him/her how foolish this would be. Try to make your dialogue at least six lines.

(MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5, CA7, FA1, FA2 IL: 1, 2, 3, 5, 25, 26)

After the Performance

3 *The Gamester* is a comedy of manners, a style which pokes fun at society by exposing inconsistent or hypocritical behavior. These plays are sometimes challenging for contemporary audiences to connect with because the societies portrayed in them are not governed by a code of morals, but by one of manners, which may or may not be familiar to the modern audience. However, playwright Freyda Thomas has skillfully bridged the gap between the past and present by highlighting needs and desires in these characters that are common to both worlds, such as love, money and power. People throughout time have sought these things, always with varying degrees of success and watching this struggle, regardless of the time period in which it is set, strikes a chord with audiences. With a partner, try your hand at modernizing another work of Regnard's. Visit the following web address, <http://ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext03/unfor10.txt>, where you will find the translated text for one of Regnard's one-act plays, *The Unforeseen Return*. Read the full play; then with your partner, look at the first scene between Mrs. Prim and Lucy. Identify what you believe to be the main need or desire for each character in that scene. Then translate that into language that you think will appeal to a modern audience, rewriting the dialogue for both Lucy and Mrs. Prim. Present your scene for the class. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)





Fine Arts



Before the Performance

1 Writers, artists and musicians frequently use comic frameworks to address serious issues. For example, the animated television series, *The Simpsons* often comments on social or political questions through an exaggerated portrayal of a similar situation. In a recent episode, a character planned to speak before Congress regarding an upcoming bill, but found only one person in attendance. The lone Congressman explained that no one came to the daily sessions unless a vote was being held. Of course this is easily recognizable as an exaggeration, but through this extreme, the writer makes a statement about the less than stellar attendance records of some Congressmen. In the next week, look at political cartoons in the newspaper, television programs, movies and the books that you read for hints of social commentary via comedy. Clip cartoons and make journal entries for other examples that you find. At the end of the week, exchange your research with classmates and look for common themes. Discuss whether you view these primarily as forms of entertainment or as serious

forums for societal critique. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA5, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA5, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 26, 27)

After the Performance

2 Find a research partner and divide between you the artistic periods, baroque and rococo. Each partner will be responsible for creating a presentation on his or her style. The presentation should include but is not limited to a characteristic painting, sculpture, musical composition and architectural design for the period, using audio and visual samples whenever possible. The presenter should also explain the dominant themes and ideas driving the artistic movement. Within your group, decide which of these artistic movements is most clearly represented in *The Gamester*, considering not only the scenic and costume elements, but also the attitudes and tastes of the characters. How does each movement operate in comparison with the philosophies discussed in the article, *Lighten Up! ?* (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, CA1, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)



Social Studies



Before the Performance

1 Almost all of the characters in *The Gamester* are members of the upper middle class—a ranking in their society which placed them immediately below royalty. This meant that for the most part, they were independently wealthy and did not generally work for a living, leaving them with a great deal of leisure time and the resources to fill it however they liked. As a result, they very easily fall into lives of excess, particularly in the area of gambling. How do you think this parallels with today's society? Do money and leisure time

necessarily lead to lives of extravagance or is addiction and compulsive behavior equally common in lower economic classes? Does the structure of society make it more or less difficult for any particular group to break out of these kinds of behaviors?

Discuss these questions in a small group. (MO: SS2, SS6,

CA1, CA3, CA6 IL: 1, 4, 5,

16, 18)

After the Performance

2 The world of *The Gamester* is one undergoing a great deal of change, as it is situated during the Scientific Revolution and in the beginning stages of The Enlightenment. The Enlightenment had its foundation in three new theories about human beings. The first, individualism, stressed the importance of the individual and his (at this time, these rights were fairly exclusive to men) rights as a citizen. The second, relativism, consisted of the concept that different ideas, cultures, beliefs and value systems had equal merit. The third, rationalism was the conviction that using the power of reason, humans could arrive at truth and make progress toward improving human life. These three new theories gained widespread adherence as Europe experienced some important changes. Choose one of the following philosophers to research and identify his particular view points on individualism, relativism and rationalism: John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Rene Descartes or Baruch Spinoza. Then compare and contrast these ideas with the behavior of the characters in *The Gamester*. To what extent can you see the influence of these ideas on characters such as Valere, Mme Securite and the Marquis? Write a brief essay on this theme. (MO: SS2, SS3, SS6, SS7, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18, 27)

