

Marriage In Molière's *Misanthrope*

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Those of a Western culture tend to assume today that the true basis of marriage is love, variously defined, and that any other ground is radically insufficient. This belief makes it difficult to understand that other eras have with reason been suspicious of love as a sufficient ground of marriage. In the *Misanthrope*¹ of Molière, the one character deeply in love, the protagonist Alceste is also incapable of marriage. In the course of the drama, he experiences both misanthropy and exclusive love so deeply that he cannot agree to marry a woman who will marry him only if they live in society and not, as he proposes, in the solitude of virtue and love. This woman's refusal of Alceste's terms leaves him unable to address another woman, Éliante, who esteems him highly, and allows her to accept the offer of Alceste's friend, Philinte, who has never shared his friend's misanthropy nor sought to base marriage uniquely on romantic love. The play ends with the sharp contrast between the deep spirit who cannot marry and those whose marriage does not arise from the depths of human subjectivity.

The play is set in the 1660's at Paris, during the time of Louis XIV. It shows the collision between two powers that would have seemed absolute to the cultivated Frenchman of the day. The more obvious is the absolute monarchy of the King and the social order that depended on it. The aristocratic revolt that had earlier menaced the Throne was gone, and the sun King had attained his majority at the beginning of the decade. The reverence in which he was held appears very clearly also in Molière's *Tartuffe*² With almost semi-divine powers, the King can see the hypocrisy of Tartuffe, expose it, and restore Orgon to his earlier place in Society.

The other independent and absolute spirit is the aristocratic Alceste. While he would never challenge the King in the political realm, he aims at an equal and parallel freedom in the social and private spheres. He judges all actions by absolute standards of virtue, and he judges others not to reform them, but to denounce them and flee from them: in this lies his misanthropy. Even the Court, that magnet for aristocrats, has no appeal for him; because he despises its hypocrisy and flatter, he will flee it if necessary, to live in solitude

¹ All references to the French text are parenthetical and will take two forms, one according to the division into acts and scenes that Molière himself has made, and two, according to the consecutive numbering of lines made by G. Sablayrolles in his *Nouveaux Classiques Larousse* edition (Paris, Librairie Larousse, 1971). In the body of the paper, the text will be quoted in English translation, with the French in a footnote.

² When the title character has duped a formerly respectable bourgeois, Orgon, and even dencounced him to the King for treason, only the King can set matters to right.

in the country. He is moved by romantic love, that is, in his case, a love that finds in one other person a necessary and unique complement to oneself to the exclusion of all others. In brief he has in himself the kind of free subjectivity that one might find in the Meditations of Descartes or the paintings of Rembrandt, but this appears in his case without that governing reason which would order his passions.

This kind of collision presents an important difference from ancient Greek drama. On the one side there are the Olympian gods, the basis of the *polis*, the real existence of which they are. The hero is not a complete individual in himself from the beginning but by asserting or opposing one or another aspect of life in the *polis*, he discovers his subjectivity.³

The action of *Misanthrope* consists of two major plots. The first shows the development both of Alceste's misanthropy and of his love for the coquette Célimène, who lives in the vanity of being widely and constantly admired. His misanthropy becomes complete when the State prosecutes him wrongly for publishing a scandalous book, and it is revealed that Célimène has been hypocritical in her professions of love. Alceste then regards a true love-match between Célimène and himself as the only resolution possible in his situation. The other plot follows the developing friendship of Alceste's friend Philinte and Célimène's cousin, Éliante. While neither Philinte nor Éliante has the deep subjectivity of Alceste, they possess a certain freedom. Neither marries for money or station, and neither is constrained to marry according to parental match-making. Rather, as Alceste becomes more misanthropic and love-besotted, they grow in benevolent regard until the absolute failure of Alceste's proposal allows them to marry.

The action is set in the house of Célimène and presents the parallel development of Alceste's misanthropy and love. While various other characters, such as Célimène's other suitors and a woman intensely jealous of her appear, the action is centred in Alceste, Célimène, Philinte and Éliante. The first act develops Alceste's misanthropy, showing his insistence on absolute virtue and sincerity in the realms of private friendship and in civil society, and his violent hatred of anyone who does not live in accord with these absolute standards. The second act shows him in desperate love with a woman whose sincerity he openly doubts, and whose circle of admirers he despises. In the third act some of these admirers are shown growing weary of pursuing her, and a woman jealous of Célimène hypocritically advises her about her admirers. This latter also treacherously offers to prove Célimène's faithlessness to Alceste. The audience learns in the fourth act how Alceste's sincerity has led to his prosecution at the hands of the State. He also confronts Célimène for hypocrisy in maintaining her love for him and grows more obsessive in his love the more he despises her character. The fifth act shows Alceste's total hatred of

³ In the *Oresteia* Of Aeschylus, for example, Clytaemnestra can kill Agamemnon because she defines herself as a mother wronged by a hybristic king. Orestes can kill her only as the son of a wronged King. Finally, only the goddess Athena, appearing as the vice-gerent of Zeus, can reconcile the equally divine claims of those who defend the family and those the State. Thus human subjectivity is free only in relation to the divine and *polis*-order which incarnates it.

society, the revelation of Célimène's complete perfidy, and the failure of Alceste to persuade Celimen to join him in the solitude of marriage and virtue.

As the action opens, Alceste denounces his putative friend Philinte for showing excessive regard for a man he only recently met, and whose name he cannot now remember (I, i;17-22). In launching his criticism, Alceste implicitly claims to know the nature of friendship and what external expressions are suitable to the various degrees of it. In his view, one does not heap a new acquaintance with endless expressions of praise. Even for this seemingly minor social lying, Alceste thinks that the penalty should be high. If he were to do it himself, he says, he would hang himself in disgust.

Philinte is far from agreeing. He thinks it folly to be always sincere in expressing one's sentiments and telling one's acquaintance their faults as one sees them (I,I; 73-80). Further, he finds Alceste's entire attitude of misanthropy mistaken. The sins and vices of men excite his surprise, he says, no more than the various attributes of animals, inherent in their nature (I,I; 175-178), "It disturbs me no more to find men base, unjust, or selfish than to see apes mischievous, mowves savage, or the vulture ravenous for its prey."⁴

Alceste inhabits a world in which virtue is a very serious business, and in which one fall from grace spells catastrophe. Soon after this exchange, Alceste declares his ideas of proper behavior, and now in relation to his own situation. First, he declares to Philinte, and in contradiction to this latter's urging, that he will take none of the steps then customary, such as visiting the judge, to insure his victory in a law-suit now pending, with an unnamed adversary about an unnamed subject. He is in the right, he declares, and his opponent is a scoundrel; that is sufficient (I,i; 185-192). He manifests his actions as consonant with his recently expressed views about friendship. A certain Oronte approaches him, loads him with praise and declares his friendship. Alceste balks at this, saying that friendship is not the work of a day, but needs time to develop. Oronte then asks him to examine some verses that he has recently written, and despite Alceste's efforts to excuse himself, Oronte presses him, until Alceste declares them ill done and inferior. The result of Alceste's honesty is no improvement in Oronte's verses but the alienation of someone who had been eager for his friendship.

As Act II opens Alceste is in a different relation to the behavior of others than mere censoriousness. Here he combines censoriousness with love, to the amusement and disdain of the object of them both, Célimène. He tells her that she admits the company of others far too readily, and that if she will not change her behavior, it will end in a breach between them. Célimène does not at all deny that she enjoys having many admirers but assures Alceste of her love for him. During this interview Alceste also denounces her admirers to their faces, telling them that their flattery only encourages Célimène's worst

⁴ Molière, *The Misanthrope and Other Plays*, tr. John Wood (London, Penguin Books, 1959), p. 29.

*Et mon esprit enfin n'est pas plus offense
De voir un homme fourbe, injuste, intéressé,
Que de voir des vautours affamés de carnage,
Des singes malfaisants et des loups pleins de rage.*

characteristics, gossip and insincerity. With the object of his love, his criticism according to his absolute ideas of virtue does not end in an aloofness based on disgust, but aim at a reform that will contribute to the well-being both of himself and Célimène. Thus two sentiments war within the breast of Alceste. He is an acerbic misanthrope toward all the world but also a man deeply in love with one member of that world, despite his knowledge of her faults. As his hatred of the world grows so does his dependence on the one person whom he despises in order to reform.

During the interview between Alceste and Célimène, Éliante has shown something of her character. Alceste had therein not only denounced Célimène's faults to her face, but had also declared criticism of the beloved an essential aspect of the lover's love. Against this Éliante expressed the view that it belongs to the lover to regard as good what is really negative in the beloved (II,iv; 711-730). Thus she says of lovers that "they count defects as perfections and know how to give them favorable names. The pale woman is comparable to jasmin in her whiteness."⁵ This sentiment indicates that Éliante does not regard Alceste as an ordinary lover; the peculiar form of his love, just expressed in her hearing, is beyond her experience and comprehension.

Thus the first two acts have set forth the contradiction in Alceste's character that defines the action. The final three acts resolve this contradiction; they show a deepening of Alceste's misanthropy as a result of the injustices he suffers and the gradual exposure of Célimène's perfidy, ending with Alceste's attempt and failure to unite virtue and love by living with Célimène in married solitude. In the third act it appears that not only Alceste is critical of Célimène. Two other suitors, presented as conceited and silly, resolve that if either receives a sure sign of her affection, the rival will give up his suit. Her vanity, as all vanity, manifests itself as completely dependent on others, and even her less observant suitors are willing to desert her. Further, a pretend friend, Arsinoé, first hypocritically advises her to behave more guardedly to her large circle of admirers, and then offers to show Alceste proof of her unfaithfulness. The temporary success of vanity in one can give rise to a jealousy that will oppose it, and thus the ultimate exposure of Célimène's unfaithfulness has its beginning here.

As the spectators discover from Philinte's report (IV,ii; 1133-1162), Alceste has had to appear before the marshals of France to answer Oronte's charge that he has been dishonored by Alceste's criticism of his poetry.⁶ Alceste, his friend reports, has been as obstinate as one could imagine. He has refused to retract his opinion of Oronte's poetry and would only agree to say that he was sorry to be so difficult to please in these matters. Alceste's insistence on speaking the truth as he understands it has thus made him an enemy where he could easily, if insincerely, have gained a potentially powerful friend. Misanthropy, therefore, does not exist in a vacuum, but can rouse a desire for vengeance in others upon one who insists on speaking his mind.

⁵ *Ils comptent les défauts pour des perfections,
Et savent y donner de favorables noms.
La pâle est aux jasmins en blancheur comparable..*

⁶ This is a different action than the lawsuit Alceste has with the unnamed person.

At this stage in the action, moreover, Éliante's relation to Alceste becomes clearer. On the one hand, she tells Philinte, she hopes that Alceste is successful in his love for Célimène. Nevertheless she admires him for his sincerity and she would accept his hand if his suit to Célimène fails. Thus marriage is not for her based on romantic love, but on a certain esteem. Philinte now makes a proposal surprising to her, that he would happily marry her if she does not marry Alceste. Just as Philinte does not share Alceste's views on virtue, so he does not share his idea of love.

The next stage shows the love of Alceste turn to jealousy and revenge. On the basis of a letter given him by Arsinoé, Alceste realizes that Célimène does not love him alone. This sends him into a transport of rage. Earlier his denunciation of vice had been very strong and objective, but now he speaks as one himself wronged, as if here were the centre of the universe, imagining that the wrongs committed against him are the worst in the world. This appears first in his asking Éliante to marry him, so that he might be avenged on the unfaithful Célimène. Even though he will offer himself wholly to Éliante (IV,ii; 1252-1258), the end he has in mind is retaliation. Both the institution of marriage and the life of Éliante would be reduced to mere instruments of a private and subjective vengeance.

Neither Éliante nor Philinte can persuade him to moderate his passions, which only increase when he sees the object of his love and wrath. His megalomania reaches new depths as he exclaims to her (IV,iii 1281-4), "That all the horrors the mind can conceive are nothing in comparison with your perfidy! That fate, Hell, Heaven in its wrath never produced a thing so vile as you."⁷ He speaks here as if he were a god, that faithfulness to him is the criterion of virtue, and lack thereof the measure of vice.

Alceste's love takes a different turn when Célimène denies her lack of faithfulness. He does not accept this and declares how completely dependent he is on her love, (IV,iii; 1417) "My very soul depends upon your love."⁸ And he wishes her totally dependent on him as well; to this end he wishes that she were reduced to a kind of nothingness, so that he might supplant Heaven in supplying her every need. Love has led Alceste even to a kind of usurpation of divine prerogative.

This interview of love is interrupted by the arrival of Alceste's servant, who announces that a friend has left a message at his house to warn him of his imminent arrest, which arising from the lawsuit. When he returns to Célimène's house, he

⁷ Molière, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

*Que toutes les horreurs don't une ame est capable
À vos deloyautés n'ont rien de comparable;
le sort, les démons et le Ciel en courroux
N'ont jamais rien produit de si mé chant que vous*

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 64

À votre foi mon âme est toute abandonée..

announces what has happened. Not only has he lost the suit, and thereby 20,000 francs to a man he regards as a complete scoundrel, but his opponent, aided by Oronte, has wrongly accused him of writing a scandalous book; a warrant has been issued for his arrest. Philinte indicates that both these decisions can easily be contested, but Alceste would sooner suffer the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" in order to prove his misanthropic view of the world. In response, moreover, he has determined to leave Paris.

It is now apparent to Alceste that not only has society shown itself wicked in itself, but that this wickedness has now turned on him. To be punished wrongly for a dreadful crime is indeed the limit of society's injustice toward an individual. Thus it is logical that he can no longer live in it. In the hope, however, that Célimène might still love him he intends to consult her on this decision. Before he can do so, Oronte insists that Célimène make a definitive decision about her suitors, and Alceste joins in this. Thereupon proof is produced of Célimène's complete cynicism and hypocrisy: she has written letters critical of all her suitors. Célimène offers no defense and admits to Alceste that he has a right to despise her.

Alceste still loves her and will forgive everything she has done if she marry him and live in the seclusion that he has earlier proposed. She agrees to marriage, but not to the seclusion. This is intolerable to Alceste (V,iv; 1781-3), "Since you can't bring yourself to make me your all in all as you are mine, I renounce you."⁹ The proved wickedness of both the world and Célimène had meant that he could live only in secluded virtue where Célimène's repentance would make her still worthy of his love. Her refusal leads him, he thinks, no alternative but embittered solitude. While addressing Éliante as a woman whom a hundred virtues adorn, he feels that he cannot now offer her his hand. He truly esteems her, but having been refused by Célimène, thinks himself unworthy of her. Éliante neither accepts nor rejects these sentiments, but indicates that she would accept the offer of Philinte, who immediately makes one. Alceste, though wishing them the best, betakes himself to the solitude that his misanthropy has long indicated. Deprived of her suitors, Célimène is reduced, if only temporarily to the nothingness which vanity is. Philinte, who cannot understand the depths of his friend's spirit, concludes the drama by proposing to save him from his resolve.

The audience will see in this a benevolence that cannot be realized. Philinte has never experienced the depths of his friend's subjectivity, whether his love or misanthropy. Only when these have reached their extreme can his marriage with Éliante based on benevolent regard be realized. They can live in the mixed realm of good and evil, and so Philinte can see his friend's determination only as a kind of extremism. In comparison to the society of the day it indeed is, but it will only leave the stage for a time. In the

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p.74,

*Puisque vous n'êtes point, en des liens si doux,
Pour trouver tout en moi, comme moi tout en vous
Allez, je vous refuse*

Revolution that demands the absolute realization of inner virtue, it will cause all Europe to quake.

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The characters in Molière's *The Misanthrope* inhabit a world different from that of many of the playwright's other works: we are viewing the actions of people at the very top of the social ladder of 17th-century France. For example, the foppish Acaste and Clitandre, who come into Célimène's house in the second act, are marquesses, the second-highest rank one can hold in the country. Dock agrees with Tom Lawrenson's supposition that "Molière updated this costume in 1670 and wore it in fourteen subsequent performances." In Brissart's 1682 illustration of *Le misanthrope*, we see the first scene of the play: Philinte speaks to Alceste, depicted as Molière wearing an embroidered, buttoned, and be-ribboned justaucorps. "The richness of the costume," Dock points out, "is outstanding." *The Misanthrope*, p.6. Read and Save any Text online. 1 2 3 4 5 6. CÉLIMÈNE. How you weary me with such a whim! Is there any justice in what you ask? And have I not told you what motive prevents me? I will be judged by Éliante, who is just coming. I feel too unworthy, and begin to perceive that Heaven did not intend me for the marriage bond; that the homage of only the remainder of a heart unworthy of you would be below your merit, and that in short . . . ÉLIANTE. You may pursue this thought. *Le Misanthrope*, satiric comedy in five acts by Molière, performed in 1666 and published the following year. The play is a portrait of Alceste, a painfully forthright 17th-century gentleman utterly intolerant of polite society's flatteries and hypocrisies. He is hopelessly in love with the. { "385151": { "url": "/topic/Le-Misanthrope", "shareUrl": "https://www.britannica.com/topic/Le-Misanthrope", "title": "Le Misanthrope" ;"gaExtraDimensions": {"3":"false"} } }. *Le Misanthrope*. play by Molière. Article. Media.