

ALCESTE

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Alceste (in Moliere's *The Misanthrope*) **disagreeable**

Overview Molière (1622-1673) was a French playwright and actor, whose comedies -- *Tartuffe*, *The Miser*, *The Misanthrope*, *The Imaginary Invalid*--epitomize the sharp wit and social canniness of 'le grand siècle,' that mid-seventeenth century dominated by the monarchy of Louis XIV and by its culturally brilliant court at Versailles. Through extensive experience as a stage actor, and high connections at court, Molière built himself into the perfect analyst of the foibles of his new bourgeois/pretentious culture, and though making many enemies—among the church hierarchy, for one thing—he prevailed as one of France's most beloved dramatists/social critics.

Character Alceste, the misanthrope in Moliere's *Misanthrope*, was first staged in June of 1666. Molière himself was playing the role of Alceste, the misanthrope, and rapidly established the work as of the highest quality. The misanthrope himself is both suspicious of mankind, anti-social, and at the same time a lover—which makes him vulnerable to human beauties that by his philosophy he might seem to view with a wary eye. In the end, Alceste remains an asocial critic of mankind, ready to flee to his own desert island, but in our minds we also remember Alceste the lover, and his sensitivity to the least disapprobation of his girlfriend.

Parallels There are many forms of misanthropy, from intellectual cynicism to the mindset of the misfit. One might say that Grendel (*Beowulf*, 8th century) is a classic misanthrope, out to destroy the human. Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (1623) portrays a king who turns his back on humanity, after having recklessly given away all his goods, and then discovered that no one will help him out. Jonathan Swift, in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), speaks through Gulliver to characterize as disgusting the brutish humans he meets. In the *World as Will and Representation* (1818), Arthur Schopenhauer accounts for all human behavior as the by product of the malign will which rules the universe, and which replaces in mankind the possibility of an individual will. One might add a 20th century parallel: John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederation of Dunces* (1980), whose main character is an eccentric New Orleans misanthrope, whose particular hatred is for anything like pop culture.

Illustrative moments

Conflictual We open the play to a conflict between Alceste and his friend Philinte, with whom Alceste has a serious quarrel. Alceste comes on with what the mediaeval doctors called *atrabilliousness*, the condition of chronic bad humor or black bile. Reminded by Philinte that the two of them are friends, Alceste advises his buddy to drop the friend idea. What he has seen of Philinte's behavior is enough to cancel out the notion of friendship! It is a facile social notion with no real basis in human nature. Alceste does not sell his friendship that easily.

Bearish Alceste builds out his critique of friendship, telling Philinte he cannot endure current fashions in empty social joviality. 'There's nothing I hate more than the affable exchanges of fatuous greetings, polite mouthers of meaningless words, who bandy civilities with all comers...' Mankind is cursed with banality, and nothing could better exemplify it than the likes of Philinte, who take friendship for granted, without attending even to the implications of it—as Philinte is failing to do in his crass assumption that Alceste is his friend. 'Surrender to the foolish manners of the age, and by God you're no friend of mine!'

Fugitive The argument with Philinte rapidly accelerates, and in the course of it Alceste deepens and clarifies his philosophy of life. 'I hate all mankind, some men because they are wicked and perverse, others because they tolerate wickedness'—and here Alceste refers to a law suit he is pursuing, and which is going south on him. 'There are times when the urge suddenly

takes me, to find some solitary place and avoid all contact with humankind.' Philinte tries to calm his 'friend,' by reminding him of the compromises required for social co-existence, but by now Alceste has gone beyond that perspective.

Romantic As the argument grows, between Philinte and Alceste, the latter must increasingly defend his romantic passion for Célimène. Alceste assures his rival/buddy that he sees faults in Célimène—what mortal isn't flawed?—but that 'I must confess my weakness...I am captivated by her...her charm is irresistible.' In other words, love is bending his stalwart desire to flee mankind, and setting up an uncomfortable conflict between misanthropy and weakness. The misanthrope will live with this conflict throughout the play, and emerge the richer for it. In the end, of course, he will return to his plan to flee from mankind!

Discussion questions

Why is Alceste so critical of humanity and its hypocritically benign behavior? Why is he so suspicious of 'friendship'? Is he a misanthrope, or just honest?

What kind of dilemma is Alceste in, when he falls in love with Célimène? Is he able to resolve that dilemma?

Does Molière want us to think that Alceste's difficult law suit is a serious reason for his wanting to flee society? Or does Molière want us to think Alceste is a truly idealistic believer in the evil of mankind?