

MISANTHROPE

Moliere

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.

Story Moliere is forever satirizing the habits of his culture, and mocking the pretence that thrives there. *The Misanthrope* aims its central critique at M. Alceste, who is fed up with all the fakery of polite society, with all the platitudes that people say without meaning. It is appropriate that the play opens with Alceste haranguing his friend, Philinte, on the topic of corruption in French society. As there are two sides to every opinion, Philinte maintains that human nature is simply flawed, and that we should not try to become perfect. A test case crops up immediately, as Oronte enters, asking for a frank opinion of a poem he has just written, and being told, by Alceste, that the poem is no good.

In a second scene, Alceste turns on his girl friend, Celimene, to rebuke her for her flirtatious behavior with his own rivals. Celimene, worldly and sophisticated, clearly appreciates the 'false compliments' she is receiving right and left from her suitors, and we can see that Alceste is going to be left out in the cold in this conversation. Celimene's retinue of girlfriends show nothing but scorn for her professed boyfriend, Alceste.

At this point Alceste is called to appear at court to answer a lawsuit that has just been brought against him by the poet Oronte—who is charging Alceste with slander. While he is away there is much 'galant conversation' among the fashionable suitors of Celimene. Celimene's friend Eliante confides, on the side, that she is attracted to Alceste, and would accept his advances if he were to make a move on her. But Alceste has other matters on his mind, and storms into the room at just this point, furious with Celimene for having professed her affection for another rival suitor. Celimene accuses Alceste of being foolish, but in fact simply manages to make him desperately jealous—a passion that sits badly with his professed cynicism about human behavior and feelings.

Alceste's servant, Du Bois, enters to tell his master to get out quickly, because he has lost his court battle and is in danger of being arrested. As Alceste rushes out he meets his friend, Philinte, who advises him to fight the judgment against him. Alceste totally balks at this advice, insisting that he will let the judgment against him stand, as testimony to the corrupt stupidity of mankind—for which a dose of the truth is intolerable.

The conflict between Alceste and the poet Oronte will not go away, and they demand that Celimene should choose between them. She refuses, saying she wants her friend Eliante to make her decision for her. But then Eliante refuses. At the end of this battle royale two of Celimene's suitors appear, and read out from letters which confirm that the lady has little respect for any of her suitors. By this point, Alceste is the only suitor remaining.

There is a final spat between Celimene and the misanthrope: he asks her to marry him, but adds that she must agree to live with him in solitude, which she then naturally refuses. Their marriage off, Alceste makes a half hearted play for Eliante, but tacitly admits defeat, and exits, while Philinte and Eliante follow him, encouraging him not to return into isolation.

The misanthrope is about our inevitable reliance on one another, and our inability to live in isolation.

Themes

Honesty Moliere is a master of picking apart the foibles of those who are socially pretentious—like Tartuffe or M. Jourdain—and for this reason he does not spare Alceste, who might otherwise seem a ‘good guy,’ what with his penchant for honesty. .

Gossip. Moliere suggests that honesty is not essentially to the successful function of society, but he suggests more, that duplicity, gossip, and mockery are the vivifying raw materials of a working society.

Characters

Alceste remains the dominant character, though in the end he has no luck enforcing his cynicism or love of isolation on the highly social group in which he finds himself. Quite the reverse; though stark in his critiques, and an enemy to all cant, he is essentially a loser, condemned in the end to wish to be teased back into society.

Philinte represents the ‘common sense’ viewpoint, that society inevitably requires a sacrifice of blunt honesty. Only by ‘playing the social game,’ to a certain degree, can one enjoy friendship and the famous advantages of the social network.

ALCESTE (Disageeable)

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 *atrabiliousness*, 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?