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The Misanthrope

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Misanthrope: a person who hates or distrusts mankind.
–American Heritage Dictionary

Alceste so abhors the superficialities and trivialities of society in 17th-century France that he wishes he could withdraw from the world. Unfortunately, he is madly obsessed with Celimene, a flirtatious member of the same society he so dislikes. She has a nasty habit of baiting men with her affections and then turning them against one another. Philinte, Alceste's friend, warns him of the wily woman as well as his excessive diatribes against members of the elite, but Alceste will not listen. In this serio/comic farce, Molière presents a portrait of an egotistic, self satisfied society and its critic.

The business of comedy is to represent in general all the defects of mankind.
– Molière. The Impromptu of Versailles (1663)

Molière
(Jean Baptiste Poquelin)

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was born in Paris in 1622, the eldest of six children of a well-to-do middle class family. His father held a position as an upholsterer to King Louis XIII. Jean-Baptiste attended the Jesuit College de Clermont, a fine secondary school for children of the rich and noble. He received a classical education, studying dramas by Terence and Plautus. He was also exposed to the theatre by his grandfather, who took him to productions at the Hotel de Bourgogne. He briefly studied law, until he inherited his father's position in 1642. He renounced the position and its right of succession in favor of a theatrical career.

In 1644, he adopted the name Molière and formed the *Illustre Théâtre* or "Illustrious Theatre" with actress Madeleine Béjart, his leading lady, business partner and mistress. He acted, served as director and stage manager. The company toured the provinces, but soon went bankrupt. Rescued from debtors' prison by his father, Molière continued a theatrical career with a newly organized troupe and toured the provinces for the next 13 years.

On his return to Paris in 1658, Molière premiered one of his plays, *The Amorous Quarrel*. *W*ell received by audiences, especially the young King Louis XIV, Molière stretched even farther into social commentary with *The Precious Damsels* the following year.

This biting satire on upper class manners was the first of many to enrage the Church and the aristocracy. Molière had learned during his long years in the provinces how to fuse the jokes, gestures and comic situations so loved by rural audiences into the strictures of formal urban theatre. His writing ability elevated farce to the level of literature and gained him the favor of Louis XIV, who, in 1661, installed him in the premier theatre of the kingdom, the *Théâtre du Palais Royal*.

In 1652, at age 40, he married Armande Béjart, 20 years younger than he, and the sister—perhaps the daughter—of his former mistress, Madeleine. This unhappy marriage was often the subject of his plays, wherein an elderly husband is made a fool of by a young wife, with *The School for Wives* (1662) only the first of several such comedies.

His most controversial play, *Tartuffe* (1664), infuriated the Church, although the king, for one, rather enjoyed the attack on religious hypocrisy. It was deemed sacrilegious by the Archbishop of Paris and the king was forced to ban the play for five years while Molière rewrote it. In 1669, it was publicly performed in its new form and won great public praise.

While revising *Tartuffe*, Molière wrote and staged a number of other plays, including *The Miser* (1668). He continued his barbed thrusts at the Church and took aim at the aristocracy and the medical profession as well. Ceaseless criticism of his work, his unhappy marriage, and a demanding work schedule took its toll on him. His final play, *The Imaginary Invalid*, in which he played a hypochondriac, led to his death. He suffered a lung hemorrhage during the fourth performance of the play and died the evening of February 17, 1673. The Church refused to allow Molière the last rites of burial in consecrated ground, but Louis XIV intervened and arranged the burial in a parish cemetery.■

Molière and the Honnête *Homme*

In 1630, Nicolas Faret wrote of the accepted image of the ideal man in his work *Honnête Homme* or *Honest Man*, a phrase that carries an even broader definition in French. The *honnête homme* should be generous and brave and be of good character and virtue; he should have a good reputation, be well-informed in several subjects and present a pleasant appearance. Most of all, he knew man to be a rational animal. The ideals of the 17th century—reason, order and clarity—were part of this personality; and Molière's comedies are guided by these qualities.

In her book, *Molière,* Gertrud Mander says the playwright wrote his comedies to please the audience, *les honnêtes hommes,* "whether they be courtiers, burghers or men of the people."[1] Though Molière portrayed characters of his own times and held a mirror up to society to reflect its customs and morals, his plays entertain contemporary audiences as well. This fact is demonstrated in "the comical drama of human life as arising from conflict in social and personal relationships."[2] Molière's bourgeoisie had difficulties with communication, problems of authority and identity, and with the illusions people hide behind to protect themselves from reality. These predicaments still exist today.

In *The Misanthrope* Molière attacks those members of society who immerse themselves in gossip and gallantries to fill up the emptiness within themselves, writes Martin Turnell in *The Classical Moment*. That is the reason Alceste's lust/love for Célimène is so absurd; she is the complete representation of the society he finds so repellent. But Molière also incriminates the urbanity and moderation of the *honnête homme* and finds them insufficient. In his attempt to be honest and a man of honor, Alceste is angry, not about crime, poverty or injustice, but about trivialities. "All his attacks are directed at things outside himself; he only compares himself with other people in order to demonstrate his own superiority."[3]

Molière's comedies reveal sins against humanity, but to him the greatest sin was egotism. Whatever its form, this failing upsets the functioning of home and society. The egotist is his own worst enemy because this characteristic isolates him; unloved and incapable of making contact with others, he is condemned to keep his own company. He has disrupted man's natural social nature and "is not an *honnête homme* in Molière's sense."[4] These persons have all become caricatures of human beings at whom we laugh, although what they have become is so sad.■

It is difficult to esteem a man as highly as he wishes to be esteemed.

– Vauvenargues, Reflexions.

The Age of Molière

Molière's lifetime (1622-1673) embraces only a fraction of the period known as "The Age of Louis XIV." This period of French history is characterized by a search for regularity, order and decorum, following the turmoil of the prior half-century. New cultural institutions emerged that reflected a new sense of formal, regulated and controlled standards unlike any seen in Europe before.

The most structured institutions were the official academies established under royal patronage. These academies, whose pedigrees went back to Platonic times, set standards for artistic creations under the close supervision of royal overseers. The French Academy was founded in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu to uphold classical drama. The Royal Academies of Painting and Sculpture, Architecture, and Inscriptions and Literature followed over the next 35 years. Not until the Impressionists attacked the strict conventions of the academies in the late 19th century was their authority deeply challenged.

Alongside the formal academies, a second institution developed, that of the *salon* or drawing-room. While artists of all types have frequently united to share common interests, especially where rich and noble patrons have given them encouragement, a special version of these coteries developed in 17th-century France. Groups of artists began to meet in small, intimate gatherings in the drawing-rooms of rich aristocrats' wives. These sponsoring women were often ambitious and intelligent, and sought to attract the most brilliant artistic minds of their time. The artist came seeking patronage and fame. As a result, the rise of Paris as the cultural and political center of the nation was mirrored in the competitive society of the *salon*.

The intimate nature of the *salon* encouraged a shift to a more genteel view of the world, in contrast to the heroic ideals of the early century. The aristocrats and artists circulated through the twin cultural centers of the royal court and the *salons*. Members of an increasingly literate nobility vied with one another to provide patronage to those artists in current favor.

The growing urban nature of Paris also provided a wider audience for the creative arts. Theatres, opera houses and publishers made it possible to pursue a more popular audience, but patronage remained the most predictable route to financial success for most artists. The reliance on the good will of the nobility tended to restrict the range of aesthetically acceptable expression of the age.

Louis XIV was crowned king in 1654, although he had technically inherited the crown in 1643 at the age of five when his father, Louis XIII, died. Self-titled, "The Sun King," Louis XIV governed as an absolute monarch under the motto, *"L'état, c'est moi."* ("I am the state.") The opulence of his rule included the conversion of a small country castle into the palace at Versailles, the largest building in Europe. At Versailles, he forced the nobility into subservient roles, justifying his supremacy on the old political concept of the divine right of kings.

While his overall accomplishments made France the envy of Europe, the Sun King's last years were marked by the ruination of war and famine. These problems marked the end of an era for the lower classes, with brighter prospects ahead in the 18th century.■

Molière and the Principles of Neo-Classic Theatre

Molière's plays adhered to many of the standards of French neo-classic drama. These standards were a synthesis of ideas expressed through centuries of dramatic writing.

The concept of verisimilitude or the "appearance of truth" was a key standard. This requirement ruled out fantasy and supernatural occurrences. Soliloquies and choruses were discouraged on the grounds that it was unnatural for characters to speak aloud while alone. Instead, each main character would have a trusted companion on stage to whom he could reveal his innermost secrets. In addition, violence happened off-stage because of the difficulty of making it convincingly realistic.

The dramatist was also asked to teach moral lessons. He could copy life, but he had to reveal inner moral patterns. Wickedness had to be punished and goodness rewarded. All characters were expected to be reasonably "normal" men and women, and not too deviant in any way.

Tragedy and comedy, following the analysis developed by Plato, had their own patterns. Tragedy told stories based on the experiences of rulers of the nobility. Its endings were always unhappy in the description of the difficult affairs of the state and the downfall of its rulers. The style was lofty and poetic. Comedy, however, dealt with the private affairs of the lower classes. The endings were always happy, and the style was characterized by the use of ordinary speech.

Plays were divided into five acts written around the concept of unity of action, place and time. Thus, only one location could be depicted unless another could be logically reached within a day's journey; this represented the allotted time frame for a play. Subplots were not written into the scripts.

Molière stretched several of these strictures. By writing biting social commentary in an ironic, satirical and comical style, he constantly risked both artistic failure and personal harm. Comedy, while seen as an inferior theatrical art form, provided him an opportunity to fuse elements of the comedy of manners, French farce and *Commedia dell'Arte*.■

Molière, Comedy and Farce

The most important influences on Molière were the *Commedia dell'Arte* and farce. *Commedia dell'Arte* was largely improvised comedy performed by various troupes of highly professional Italian actors who toured Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. The troupes were between ten and 20 in number, and their plays were based on a set of widely known types. They operated within a varying scenario to which the actors brought a repertoire of jokes, acrobatic feats, set speeches and comic business or *lazzi*. The plots of *Commedia dell'Arte* were usually based on love intrigues involving people of all ages: masters and servants, mistresses and confidantes. Each actor would specialize in a particular role: the aged, avaricious and amorous *Pantalone*; the fat, pedantic and black-clad Doctor; the vainglorious and cowardly Spanish Captain with the bristling mustache; the shy and acrobatic servant *Arlecchino* (sometimes known as *Truffaldino)*; the deceitful, crooked-nosed, artistic *Brighella*; the young, unmasked, handsome lovers, and a variety of *zanni* or servant figures, instantly recognizable to the audience. Plot and dialogue were often improvised after a basic rehearsal. Improvisation was important because performances could be adapted to local and contemporary needs. The success of a play depended largely upon the comic ingenuity of the performers. It included mime, farce, clownish buffoonery and music in the presentation.

Farce is probably the most consistently popular form of drama. It has existed since the Greek plays through the *Commedia dell'Arte* to 19th century French farce and contemporary comedy. In farce, characters are subjected to various forms of indignity. They find themselves in compromising situations, lose items of clothing, and suffer physical assault. They do not, however, suffer too heavily either physically or from loss of face.

The characters of farce often have a curious childish innocence, a lack of awareness of other people's concerns and a total obsession with their own. We laugh at them while envying their capacity to ignore the hurts of life. They overcome indignity and chance, but chaos is close and the game is to avert every threat. Thus farce moves quickly. The characters are like jugglers and the situations grow even more complicated. There is not time for deep analysis. Farce depends on our awareness of problems of authority, sexuality and disorder, even while the play pretends to conjure them away.

Molière used elements from farce and the *Commedia dell'Arte* form of presentation to identify problems with the aristocracy, politicians, the medical profession, religious hypocrisy and society in general. His originality consisted in making great theatre of farcical theatre. Instead of using the device of a complicated plot, Molière started off with certain fixed masks and made them into human types by adding to them characteristics observed in contemporary life. This genre, called "character comedy," presents a spectacle of inner forces embodied in individualized characters who seek to dominate or protect themselves

Molière, Comedy and Farce

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with a persistence that provokes laughter through its extreme results. Molière's protagonists are thus absolute egotists who invent generally illusory values to satisfy their appetites. Hence the humor arises as they dupe themselves and become prisoners of their own natures.

Why has farce persisted for more than 2000 years? First, farce takes a particular perspective upon certain unchanging characteristics in human beings and on their relationship with each other and the world around them. The characters are pursuing either basic human needs or needs that society makes desirable: love, sex, food, money, power and glory. They characterize the very human traits of greed, lechery, avarice, arrogance or pomposity. Secondly, farce attacks all pretensions, all masks, and attacks them in the simplest way, usually physical, with a kick in the pants or a knock in the head. In the world that farce inhabits, people get their just desserts. Finally, farce goes for the belly and the backside; it makes us laugh at the fact that we look funny when we're at a disadvantage, when we're caught with out pants down.

Alceste and Rousseau

The body politic, like the human body, begins to die from birth, and bears within itself the causes of its destruction.
– Jean Jacques Rousseau.
The Social Contract, I. (1762)

Alceste's ideas and personality bear similarities to that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the French philosopher. Rousseau's mother died in childbirth and his father made him feel guilty about her death. Alternating between affection and rejection, his father abandoned the boy when Jean-Jacques was ten years old. As a result, Rousseau suffered from severe emotional distress and his whole life was marked by feelings of deep inferiority and guilt. Outwardly, however, his behavior was somewhat like Alceste's. He needed love, but was not able to have a satisfactory relationship with a woman. He needed friends, but spoiled his friendships with his critical, suspicious and hypersensitive nature.

Rousseau was a social critic and expressed his criticism of society in several essays, including *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) and *Letter to d'Alembert on Spectacles* (1758). In *The Social Contract* (1762), s significant work in the history of political science, Rousseau gave his views on government and the rights of citizens. He believed that man is not a social being naturally and felt that when people lived in a state of nature, isolated and without language, they were good—that they had no motive or impulse to hurt one another. But as soon as men began to live together in society, they became evil. According to Rousseau, society corrupts people by bringing out their inclinations toward aggression and egotism. While Rousseau did not advise that man return to a state of nature, he believed in a simple, agricultural society in which men's desires would be limited; their sexual and ego drives controlled, and all energies directed toward involvement in community life.

Rousseau was one of the first writers to support Romanticism, a movement that dominated the arts from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s. In his personal life and writings, he captured the spirit of romanticism by prizing feeling over reason and spontaneity over self-discipline.

Unfortunately, as he aged, Rousseau became more vain, inconsiderate and suspicious. He quarreled bitterly with former friends, a group of *philosophes* or philosophers. When his work, *Émile*, was condemned by the French government because of its views on religion, he fled to Switzerland. In 1766, he accepted an invitation of refuge in England from the Scottish philosopher, David Hume. But Rousseau quarreled with him too and returned to France in 1767.

Rousseau died near Paris in 1778. As far as we know, unlike Alceste, he never isolated himself in the desert.

ALCESTE: …I'll flee this bitter world where vice is king,
And seek some spot unpeopled and apart
Where I'll be free to have an honest heart.
—The Misanthrope

Activities

Act One
1. How would you describe Alceste's character? Who would you prefer as a friend, Alceste or Philinte? Why?
2. If he could, what kind of social "formula" would Alceste have Philinte and society follow? Why?
3. In what respect does Alceste's trial opponent embody all that he detests about mankind?
4. In Scene Two, how did you respond to Oronte's encounter with Alceste? Why? Support your answer.

Essay Question
• How would you characterize Molière's writing style? In Scene Two, what elements does he use to make this episode particularly humorous?

Act Two
1. What does Alceste find most disagreeable about Célimène?
2. In Scene One, how does Alceste feel about loving Célimène? Do you feel she is worthy of him? Why or why not?
3. In Scene Three, how does Célimène feel about Acaste? Why is she unable to turn him away?
4. In what ways do Eliante and Philinte distinguish themselves from the others in Scene Five?
5. What conclusions do you think Molière hopes that readers draw from the key events of Act Two?

Essay Question
• Imagine that you are a servant overhearing the discussions taking place at Célimène's home. How do you feel about what is being said? Whose views do you find most enjoyable? Disagreeable? Why?

Act Three
1. What do you think is the purpose of Acaste's turnaround in Scene One?
2. What is your reaction to Célimène's encounter with Arsinoé? Why do you feel this way? Support your answer.
3. Who do you think Molière favors more, Célimène or Arsinoé? What, if anything, might this suggest about his outlook on society?
4. In Scene Seven, how does Arsinoé attempt to gain Alceste's affection? Why does this not work?
5. How do you feel about Alceste's attitude in Scene Seven? How do you feel about his credibility thus far in the play?

Essay Question
• In terms of open honesty, whose attitude do you resemble most, Alceste's or Célimène's? Why? What is it about the 17th- century society—and our own—that causes people to behave deceptively?

Act Four
1. What is significant about Alceste's stand before the Marshals?
2. In Scene One, what commentary is Molière making about the nature of love?
3. If Alceste came to you for advice after reading the devastating letter, what would you tell him? Why?
4. Besides the betrayal of the letter, what complaints or threats does Alceste hurl at Célimène? What does he want her to do?
5. In his quarrel with Célimène, do you feel sympathy for Alceste? Why or why not?

Essay Question
• How do you feel about Célimène's reaction to Alceste's accusations and doomed plight? Do you believe her? To what extent is she herself helpless in this situation?

Act Five
1. Do you feel that Alceste's tragic, misanthropic feelings regarding the outcome of his case are justified? Why or why not?
2. In Scene One, what is Philinte's advice for Alceste? Why does this advice fail to sway him?
3. How does Célimène respond to the ultimatum? Why does she have difficulty confessing?
4. What is your reaction to the events in Scene Four? Support your answer.
5. Do you consider *The Misanthrope* to have a happy ending? Why or why not?

Essay Question
• What did you like or dislike about *The Misanthrope*? In what ways, if any, has it affected your view of relationships and society today?

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Administration 303/893-4000
Box Office 303/893-4100
www.denvercenter.org

Katharine Tyson • *Director of Communications*
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