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# Cheer Up, Emo Kid

Molière's Commentary on Human Nature in The Misanthrope

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From the title of the play, which lets the audience know what to expect of the main character, to the end, Molière's The Misanthrope is a character study. He experiments with human nature by placing a man who is the epitome of a particular trait into society, and records the results. In this case it is Alceste, whom he places in the middle of the French aristocracy. It is the ending of the play that really showcases Molière's experiment. Molière appears to end the play without a definite conclusion. The conflicts of Alceste's lawsuit and his courtship of Célimène, which are brought up at the beginning of the play, are both resolved in Act V. However these resolutions are merely wrapping up the plot elements before play finishes; they are not important by themselves. Instead Molière uses the unexpected break between Alceste and Célimène and the open ending to imply that everyday events are unimportant compared to a man's character.

Despite being the title character, Alceste does not have much depth. Nor do any of the other characters. This is not a deficiency of the play. Instead it allows the audience to focus on the immediately apparent and most pertinent characteristics of the characters. Molière draws on medieval medicine to emphasize this point. In medieval times, a person's character was supposedly determined by the balance of four humors – blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. This method of determining personality is very straightforward. An excess of any humor would create a certain personality. Philinte uses this idea when he tells Alceste “My phlegm's as philosophic as your spleen” (Molière, 23). Alceste's “spleen”, where black bile was produced, is what defines his personality, whereas Philinte's personality is dominated by phlegm. Molière is unconcerned about character traits that may only reveal themselves under certain circumstances. He is interested in the one trait that stands out, in this case Alceste's spleen and Philinte's phlegm.

Within each of the male and female casts of characters, there is a spectrum of personalities. Among the male characters, Alceste is one extreme. He is a misanthrope, loudly

against all of society. Alceste's friend Philinte is in the middle. He has a very moderate nature, neither specifically upholding current society nor damning it. Oronte's personality and actions contrast those of Alceste. He is also loud, like Alceste, but he uses society instead of railing against it. Within the female caste, Arsinoé, "the prude", is one end of the spectrum (27). She is not a misanthrope to the degree Alceste is, but she scorns much of society in her own way. The middle ground is provided by Eliante, who is "honest" but still well respected among other aristocrats, unlike Alceste who is criticized for his frankness (27). On the other extreme end of the spectrum is Célimène, who personifies the gregarious aristocratic society. The conflicts throughout the play serve to demonstrate these traits.

Alceste's defining trait is his misanthropy. This brings about the first of the conflicts in the play - Alceste's undescribed lawsuit. His misanthropy has brought him into a conflict that is to be settled in court. Molière uses the lawsuit to show how proud Alceste is about his contrary nature. Alceste refuses to dispute the case, and knows he will probably lose even if he tries to uphold his point in court. He claims his lack of action will demonstrate that his point of view of humanity is true because "the justice of [his] cause is clear". He believes he should win the case because he is doing the right thing according a higher power than the corrupt society he lives in. He believes he has such abstract concepts as morality and justice on his side, so if he loses it will prove that "men are sufficiently base/ And impudent and villainous and perverse / To do [him] wrong before the universe" (26). By taking no action, he can blame the outcome on humanity, not on his own skills or lack thereof in court. Thus he uses the lawsuit against him to prove his misanthropy is justified.

Philinte's moderate nature, on the other hand, prompts him to try to convince Alceste to argue the lawsuit in court. Philinte does not necessarily condone society's actions, but he wants Alceste to learn to live with it. Alceste refuses outright, displaying his stubbornness. If Alceste conceded to go to court, he would be playing society's game, and associating with its

corruption. He would rather have society consider him disgraced due to a lost lawsuit than disgrace himself in his own eyes by playing along with what he believes to be corrupt. Philinte's attempt to persuade Alceste that a more moderate course of action might be necessary demonstrates his position in the middle of the personality spectrum.

Oronte provides the final end of the spectrum. While Alceste refuses to settle an argument using society's rules, Oronte takes advantage of them. After Alceste gives Oronte an honest opinion on his sonnet, Oronte takes offense. He calls up the Marshals to “arbitrate the matter”, thus making an personal disagreement between two men a public affair, and bringing it to society's attention (73). While Oronte was not involved in the original lawsuit, he helps demean Alceste after it is decided in the other man's favor by “lend[ing] his credit to . . . [a] libelous tale” (130). He uses gossip, rather than confronting his antagonist directly as Alceste would do. Oronte's actions show him to be one who takes advantage of society, rather than one who forces himself against it.

The lawsuit allows all three male characters to display their particular characters, but the lawsuit itself is very obviously insignificant. The audience never learns what it is about or who started it. After Act 1 it is not mentioned again until Act 5 when Alceste tells Philinte “justice is mocked, and I have lost my case” (129). The verdict of the lawsuit provides another opportunity for Alceste's character to reveal itself. Although in Act 1 he claims “[he] could wish, whatever the cost,/Just for the beauty of it, that [his] trial were lost” he does not seem to appreciate the beauty of the moment when he actually loses the case (26). Instead the verdict prompts him to finally declare his self exile, so that the “treacherous and savage race of men/ . . . shall not look upon [his] face again” (130). His ultimate action as a misanthrope is to give up entirely on humanity. While in the beginning of the play he hopes that society will recognize his way of life as correct, after he loses his lawsuit he realizes that society won't change. The conclusion of this conflict provides a reason for Alceste decide that the

only way he can fully express his hatred for human society is to leave it.

Philinte once again displays moderation, by trying to convince Alceste that he should not go into exile. His final lines, “let's do everything we can/ To change the mind of this unhappy man” do not sum up the play as the audience might expect a final couplet to do, but are rather a call to action (152). They imply that the events of the play continue beyond what an audience sees performed. As long as Alceste continues to be contrary, more can happen. Using these lines, Molière shows that a man's character counts more than any event, because while resolving events has caused the play to come to its conclusion, the unresolved nature of Alceste's misanthropy leaves the play open ended and ready to continue.

While the men display more of their character when the issue is the lawsuit, among the women, it is Alceste's courtship of Célimène that allows them to show off their personalities. Alceste's analogue among the female characters is Arsinoé. Philinte tells Alceste that Arsinoé “admires [him]”, which associates the two characters. However because Alceste is courting Célimène, Arsinoé “seems to think [Célimène has] lured him from her side” (86). Like Alceste, she speaks against society. Célimène explains that “she's always in a jealous rage/ against the faulty standards of the age” (86). However while Alceste's defining characteristic is misanthrope, Arsinoé's discontentment stems from jealousy.

Eliante does not have many lines, but Molière still uses Alceste's courtship to show her moderation. Philinte presents her as an alternative to Célimène because she is “honest”, and Eliante herself says that she is “all for those who frankly speak their mind” (27, 139). However she is not quick to anger like Alceste, and like Philinte acts as a moderator. When Alceste is upset over the contents of Célimène's letter, it is Eliante who pleads “do try, Sir, to regain your self-control” (107). Within the conflict between Alceste and Célimène, she tries to keep the emotions at a moderate level.

Despite Eliante's calming influence, Célimène remains at the extreme social end of the

spectrum. Within the frame of the courtship, she leads on four different suitors, never telling any of them what she really thinks. While the play does not try to confront Alceste's misanthrope, Célimène's flirtatiousness is ended in Act 5. After reading a letter in which she frankly discounts each suitor in turn, all of her suitors turn away from her.

The courtship between Alceste and Célimène is an attempt at partnering misanthropy with the heart of society. Célimène's letter also reveals this pairing. She is attempting to mix frank opinions with her social life, and it is ultimately her undoing. Although most comedies would end with the main characters getting married, Alceste and Célimène do not. After reading Célimène's letter, Acaste, Clitandre, and Oronte all drop their suits. Oronte tells Alceste directly “Sir, she is yours; I'll seek no more to stand/ between your wishes and this lady's hand” (145). Even Célimène offers herself to Alceste, saying “but if my hand in marriage will content you, / why, there's a plan which I might well consent to” (150). According to all the traditions of comedy, everything has been set up to conclude this courtship with marriage. However it is instead resolved when Alceste declares “I detest you now” and finalizes their separation (150). By ending the play with this rupture Molière shows that natures which conflict cannot ever be reconciled in a fairy tale ending, no matter how easy it is to set up. Thus the personalities of individuals are worth more than any set of events.

At the end of The Misanthrope, Molière leaves the main characters unmarried and leaves the end of the play very vague. He chooses to focus on the personalities of the characters rather than what they say or do. By leaving the play open ended, and Alceste unmarried, he opens the future up to interpretation. Many traditional comedies follow a pattern which starts in civilization, moves to the wild, and then returns to civilization to conclude the play. At the end of The Misanthrope, Alceste is preparing to leave civilization in favor of exile. It's as if Molière has written the first act of the play and invites us to make our

own conclusion about the nature of mankind.

### Bibliography

Molière, The Misanthrope. Orlando: Harcourt, 1993.

note: because this edition did not provide line numbers, I found that it was more informative to provide the page number in parenthetical citations rather than the act and scene.

### Acknowledgments

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