The Misanthrope Study Guide

The Misanthrope by Molière

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Contents

Introduction

The Misanthrope (Le Misanthrope m the original French) is one of the great masterpieces by France's most celebrated comic dramatist. It was first performed at the Palais-Royal Theatre in Paris in 1666, featuring himself in the title role and his own wife in the role of his love-interest.

The Misanthrope is set in the fashionable social milieu of seventeenth-century Paris. Alceste, the misanthrope of the title, is disgusted by the hypocrisy, injustice, and overall corruption in human society. Alceste's concern with the Issue of justice has to do with the fact that he is embroiled m several lawsuits, the outcome of which are determined not by which party is in the right but by who has the most influence in court. Nonetheless, Alceste is in love with Celimene, a young widow with a reputation for flirtation and for surrounding herself with suitors and who is a prime example of the insincerity that Alceste despises in others. In the final act, Celimene is confronted by all of her suitors for her lack of honesty when they discover that she has promised her love to each of them while ridiculing each of the others behind his back. Finally, fed up with society and fearing the consequences of various legal battles, Alceste vows to run off and live in seclusion in the wilderness.

The Misanthrope is concerned with themes of honesty and hypocrisy, justice and injustice, the manipulative social games people play, and the conflict between the individual and society. Critical discussion often focuses on interpretations of the character of Alceste and the question of whether the play professes a clear-cut moral lesson.

Author Biography

Molière, born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, was baptized in Paris. France. on January 15. 1622. His father, Jean Poquelin, was a furniture merchant who, in 163], was appointed chief provider of furnishings for the home of King Louis XIV. Molière's mother, Marie Cresse, died when he was ten years old, and in 1633, his father remarried. Molière received his education at the Jesuit College de Clermont, after which he studied law and was admitted to the Bar in 1641. After practicing law for six months, however, Molière informed his father, who had expected his son to inherit his court appointment, that he wished to pursue a career in the theater.

In 1643, he joined the newly formed theater company the L'Illustre-Theatre, soon taking the stage name of Molière. The company suffered financial troubles, however, and Molière was briefly jailed for debt in 1645. Later that year, he and others from the original troupe joined a theater touring company, with which they traveled throughout the south of France for the next thirteen years.

The first public performance of a five-act comedy written by Molière was staged in 1655.In 1657. Molière's theater company, having earned considerable renown as a traveling troupe, moved to Paris. In 1658 they gave their first performance before King Louis XIV, a farce written by Molière, *Le Docteur Amoureux* (The Amorous Doctor). It was a great success with the king, who found it amusing and offered them the patronage of his younger brother, known as "Monsieur." Now called the "troupe de Monsieur," Molière's company was provided performance space in the Petit-Bourbon. which they shared with an Italian theater company. Molière's first great personal success as an actor and an author came with the performance of *Les Precieuses Ridicules* (Such Foolish Affected Ladies), in 1659. When the Petit-Bourbon was demolished in 1660, the company was given space at the Palais-Royal.

In 1662, Molière. at age forty, married Armande Bejart, then nineteen years old. That year his comedy, *L 'Ecole des Femmes* (The School for Wives), was a popular success but created controversy that continued for over a year. In 1663, Molière was granted a royal pension and, in 1664, King Louis XIV was named godfather of his firstborn son, Louis, who died less than a year later. The year 1664 also began a five-year-long controversy over the play that came to be called *Tartuffe.* Although the king himself was not offended by *Tartuffe.* he was not immune to the influence of others and had the play banned. In 1665, Molière's play *Don Juan* was cancelled after just fifteen performances, due to its controversial nature, and it was never performed again in Molière's lifetime, although it was never officially banned. Nonetheless, that same year the troupe earned the patronage of the king, and Molière's pension was raised considerably. *The Misanthrope* was first performed in 1666 at the Palais-Royal Theatre, starring Molière himself in the lead role of Alceste, the "misanthrope," and his wife as the flirtatious coquette Celimene. While he enjoyed professional successes, Molière's health began to seriously decline due to tuberculosis, which occasionally prevented him from performing; these absences from the stage led in 1668 to rumors of his death. In 1672, his wife died. A year later, during his performance as the hypochondriac in *Le Malade*

Imaginaire (The Hypochondriac), Molière collapsed on stage and died later that evening. Although he requested a priest for his final confession, none arrived in time, and, not given the right to a proper funeral because he was an actor, Molière was buried at night

Plot Summary

Act 1

In act 1, Alceste and Philinte argue over the Issue of sincerity in social interaction. Alceste maintains that one should always be completely honest and sincere about one's feelings for other people, regardless of how influential they may be. Philinte argues that it is important to behave in a pleasant, friendly manner with all people, especially those who are influential at court Alceste, however, insists that one should always "be a man of honor" and "be sincere," while Philinte defends the importance of common courtesy. Philinte further points out that because Alceste is In the midst of a lawsuit, It would be in his best interest to make friends with someone who is influential. He adds that "ruthless truth telling" can do more harm than good and that "delicacy, tact" are virtues, as well as honesty. Philinte concludes, "Life would be an absolute nightmare" if everyone said exactly what they felt about another person to that person's face. He then brings up the fact that while Alceste criticizes everyone else for being insincere, he fails to see the many faults in one person-Celimene, the woman he is in love with. At this point, Oronte enters and reads aloud a love poem he has written, asking Alceste's opinion as to whether he should try to get it published. Alceste tells Oronte that his poem is "trash" and that he should bum it and give up writing poetry completely.

Act 2

In act 2, Alceste complains to Celimene, a young widow, that she constantly flirts with many other men and continues to lead them on, despite the fact that she has declared her love for him. Celimene retorts that she is only being polite to these other men, who are her visitors, and that, furthermore, they are very influential at court. If she does not cater to them, it may cause problems for her, particularly in relation to the lawsuit in which she is embroiled Alceste protests that he loves her more than any of the other men, but she points out, 'You only love me to find fault with me."

Eliante (Celimene's Cousin) and Philinte enter, followed a bit later by Acaste (a marquis), and Clitandre (another marquis). Acaste mentions several mutual acquaintances, each of whom Celimene criticizes at great length. Alceste points out that next time she sees each of these people she is now criticizing, she will behave toward them as a dear friend. Celimene retorts that Alceste is bent on contradicting whatever anyone else says, especially in regard to herself. Alceste claims that he is disgusted with her "malicious gossip." He goes on to say that his honesty in criticizing her proves that his love for her is true, while men such as Clitandre and Acaste, who continually flatter her, are weak and insincere. An officer enters and informs Alceste that a lawsuit has been filed against him by Oronte and that he is due in court Alceste is reluctant to go and leaves only when Philinte drags him off; as he does so, Alceste begs Celimene to let him see her again soon

Act 3

In act 3, Clitandre asks Acaste why he looks so happy. Acaste replies that he is happy because he is "young, blue-blooded, beautiful, and rich." He boasts that he is confident in his wooing of Celimene, to which Clitandre replies that he doesn't have a chance with her. Acaste concedes that he has been given no reason to believe that she favors him in any way. The two men make an agreement that, If either of them finds out that she prefers one or the other of them, the one she does not prefer will willingly drop out of the competition. Celimene enters and tells Acaste and Clitandre that her friend Arsinoe is a hypocrite. She says that Arsinoe is not very attractive but is desperate for a man She goes on to say that Arsinoe merely pretends to be pious and prudish as an excuse for the fact that men take no interest in her Arsinoe then enters and tells Celimene that, as her friend, she feels she must let her know that people are talking behind her back about her reputation for flirting with so many men. Celimene responds that, as Arsinoe's friend, she feels she must let her know that she is a hypocrite and that her piety is merely a false front Alceste enters, and Celimene walks out, leaving him alone with Arsinoe, who tells him that Celimene is deceiving him about her relations with other men and promises to show him proof If he will accompany her home.

Act 4

Philinte tells Eliante about the tribunal proceedings in which Alceste was accused of telling Oronte that his poem was terrible. While Alceste remained adamant in refusing to change his opinion of the poem, he agreed to apologize to Oronte for not liking it. The two men were then made to shake hands, and the matter was resolved. Eliante confesses to being in love with Alceste. She explains that she nevertheless sincerely does her best to foster the romance between Alceste and Celimene, but that, If Celimene ends up rejecting him, she hopes to win his love for herself. Philinte then admits to being in love with Eliante, but she assures him that she is holding out for A1ceste. Alceste enters and tells Eliante and Philinte that he has with him a love letter that Celimene wrote to Oronte. He tells Eliante that she must now marry him because that would be the best way for him to get revenge against Celimene for betraying him.

Celimene enters, and Philinte and Eliante leave. A1ceste accuses Celimene of loving another man and questions her about the letter. When he persists in this accusation, she concedes that she wrote it to Oronte, but she tells A1ceste that he, Alceste, really is the one she loves, and she criticizes him for doubting her love. Dubois, Alceste' s servant, enters and tells him that a mysterious letter pertaining to his lawsuit was just delivered to his home. He tells Alceste that he must pack his bags and flee immediately or else he may be in danger and may even risk being arrested. However, Dubois has forgotten to bang the letter with him, so A1ceste hurries home to read it. As he leaves, he pleads with Celimene to give him a chance to continue their conversation later.

Act 5

In act 5, A1ceste tells Philinte that he is resolved to abandon society and go live out in the wilderness, claiming that there is no decency, honor, or justice anywhere. He explains the ongoing lawsuit against him in which another man panted a book containing scandalous material and attributed it to Alceste's authorship. Furthermore, Oronte, who is very influential at court, is spreading vicious rumors about him, thus strengthening the legal case against him. Philinte suggests that he shouldn't be so hasty in leaving, that the court case is not yet settled and that no one believes the rumors about him anyway. But A1ceste insists that society is completely corrupt, to which Philinte responds that, yes, people are unjust and insincere but that it is "part of Heaven's plan," that the lack of justice in the world is what makes virtue so valuable. Philinte then goes to find Eliante

Celimene and Oronte enter. A1ceste and Oronte insist that Celimene simply tell them truthfully which of them she truly loves, to which she responds that she is too polite to hurt anyone's feelings with such a frank statement of her feelings. Acaste, Clitandre, and Arsinoe arrive. Acaste and Clitandre take turns reading aloud from letters Celimene has sent to each of them, in which she declares her love for the man she is writing to and criticizes each of the other men who are pursuing her. Acaste, Clitandre, and Oronte leave in anger, assuring Celimene that they will be telling others of her dishonesty and betrayal A1ceste tells Celimene that, although he should be angry with her, he will always love her He asks that she go off to the wilderness with him She responds that she could not bring herself to "renounce the world" and run off with him, although she would marry him If he stayed. He replies that he could never love her because she cannot accept him as he is. Eliante announces that she is in love with Philinte, to which Philinte responds that he will be hers. Alceste congratulates Eliante and Philinte on their true love but insists that he is determined to leave "this stinking sink of evil," where he has been "betrayed . . . persecuted, cheated, vilified." As soon as Alceste leaves, however, Philinte and Eliante hurry after him in an effort to try to convince him to stay.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

In a room in Paris, two men await the return of a young woman, Celimene, and her cousin, who are out shopping. Alceste is scolding his friend, Philinte. On their way to the home of Celimene, Alceste and Philinte had run into another man who hugged Philinte and acted like his best friend. Philinte responded in kind, just to be polite, although he couldn't remember the man's name. Alceste says he is disgusted by Philinte's insincerity in particular, and society's hypocrisy in general. He claims to hate humanity because of this sort of hypocrisy.

Philinte tries to reason with Alceste, suggesting he should not be so hard on people. He admits to being dishonest so that he will not offend the other man. One shouldn't blame human beings for their faults, Philinte says, any more than one would blame vultures or wolves for being what they are. He counsels Alceste to be more moderate in his judgment. As they argue, the audience learns two things about Alceste's situation.

First, Alceste is dealing with an unfair case brought against him in court. Philinte tries to convince him to get help with the case because his accuser is very popular and influential, especially at court, although people know him to be a liar. Alceste, however, has not sought legal counsel because his accuser is lying, Alceste is telling the truth, and he feels that should be enough. If he loses his case, he says, it will please him to be proven right as to what the human race has become.

Secondly, Alceste is in love with Celimene, although she embodies everything that Alceste says he hates in people. She is a flirt, a gossip, and a flatterer. Alceste admits all of this is true, but he hopes that his love might change her. In fact, he intends to confront her about her behavior.

Meanwhile, Celimene's cousin, Eliante, who sincerely admires Alceste, doesn't interest Alceste at all. He admits that his reason tells him Eliante would be a better match for him, but says that love is not decided by his reason.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Alceste and Philinte immediately introduce the theme of the play, which is the balance between honesty and compassion. Although Alceste is not a very appealing character, the audience can relate to his criticisms of polite society.

There is also a question of whether Alceste might suffer from depression, which would explain the extreme negativity and irritability of this character. Alceste mentions feeling depressed by what he observes, but it may be that depression also colors his perceptions. Philinte, also, mentions that Alceste's "black depressions" are tiring.

Although Alceste claims that honesty is important to him, his self-deception will be another theme throughout the play. He speaks as if he is ready to give up on the human race, but he is long-suffering where Celimene is concerned. He complains as if no friend is true, but Philinte is a loyal and patient friend.

The court case that Alceste faces will never be described in detail, and his accuser will never be named. We only know that the accuser is influential at court. The court is symbolic of the court of public opinion.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Another of Celimene's suitors, Oronte, arrives and enters the room. He gushes over Alceste and asks for his friendship, along with a hug. Alceste is courteous but blunt, saying that friendship needs time to grow. Oronte gushes again, this time over the wisdom of Alceste's response. He then claims he wants Alceste to be just as honest in his critique of a sonnet that Oronte has written. Alceste tries to warn him that he'll be truthful, and Oronte claims this is just what he wants.

Oronte reads his sonnet aloud. It is obviously written to Celimene. In it, he chastises her for giving him hope of gaining her love, when it seems she is only being kind. The poem says that her kindness is not kind at all, because his hope has turned to despair.

Throughout Oronte's reading, Philinte praises the sonnet, although Alceste scolds and curses Philinte in whispers. When Oronte finishes the reading and hears Alceste's very negative opinion, he becomes angry, defensive, and threatening. When Philinte steps in between the two to intervene, Oronte apologizes and leaves.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Oronte is the embodiment of Alceste's criticism of humanity. Oronte seeks instant friendship and requests honesty, when he really wants flattery. The playwright leaves it to the audience to decide if the sonnet is actually badly written, or if the real problem is that Alceste is jealous. If Alceste doesn't realize that the sonnet was written for Celimene, it is clear the sonnet would remind him of her.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

After Oronte leaves, Philinte and Alceste resume their argument. Philinte wants to know why Alceste wouldn't just give Oronte the little bit of flattery he obviously wanted. Alceste is too upset to discuss it, and he leaves, telling Philinte not to follow him. Philinte follows him out, though, trying to find out why Alceste is so upset.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

In this scene, the audience sees evidence that Alceste may not be as honest as he portrays himself to be. The sonnet, which he degraded so thoroughly, has obviously upset him because the writer's situation in love parallels his own. However, Alceste is either not able to be honest with himself about this, or he simply chooses not to share his awareness with Philinte.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Alceste speaks with Celimene, grieving because he is certain that he will have to leave her because she doesn't love him. She acts as if she doesn't know what he's talking about. Alceste confronts her with the fact that she turns no man away. He accuses her of welcoming them all and encouraging men to fall in love with her.

Alceste is especially jealous of Celimene's suitor named Clitandre, but Celimene insists she has to be nice to him, because he is influential in court. She has a case before the court and wants him to help her. Alceste wants her to forget about the case and be honest. He wants to know whether she feels anything different for him than she does for the other men. Celimene claims to love him and acts outraged and offended that he would doubt her. Alceste is tortured by their conversation and wishes he could stop loving her.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Alceste is as guilty as anyone of wanting to hear flattery and kind words, but his own good sense keeps him from being able to believe them.

Just as in Alceste's case, the audience will never learn the particulars of Celimene's case at court. This further strengthens the impression that the audience is to think in terms of public opinion, rather than legalities.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

In this very brief scene, Celimene's servant, Basque, comes to announce another visitor, Acaste. Alceste is upset when Celimene instructs Basque to let Acaste enter. Alceste wants Celimene to say that she is not receiving other visitors right now, but she says she is afraid she'll offend Acaste. Again, Celimene claims this is the only way to preserve her reputation.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

It is ironic that Celimene claims to protect her reputation, when her behavior actually is terrible for her reputation. She may well be the true misanthrope of this play.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

Next, Basque adds that Clitandre is also downstairs. When Celimene instructs Basque to let him in as well, Alceste prepares to leave. Celimene insists, at first, that she wants him to stay, but then becomes angry and says that he should go, since he's not indispensable.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Alceste is not quite honest when he threatens to leave. He's bluffing, and when Celimene calls his bluff, she says the only honest thing she's said yet. Alceste is dispensable to her.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

Two marquis, Acaste and Clitandre, enter. Also arriving are Eliante, Celimene's cousin, and Philinte, Alceste's friend. Alceste tries to pressure Celimene to make a choice between him and her other suitors, but she brushes that off.

The two marquis start naming various members of the royal court, just to hear Celimene decimate their characters. When Alceste complains that they are encouraging Celimene's gossip, he is ridiculed. Celimene says that Alceste's stance is only posing on his part and that his high principles are his way of distinguishing himself in company.

Even Philinte points out that Alceste is now defending people that he himself claims to dislike. He also observes that Alceste complains whether people praise him or criticize him. Alceste admits that he doesn't know which is worse, people's ridicule or their false friendship.

The marquis then begin defending Celimene. Alceste insists that if they really loved her, they would not encourage her faults. Eliante puts an end to that argument by saying that when a man truly loves, he loves faults and all.

Celimene suggests a walk in the gallery. She hints vaguely that any of her visitors may leave, but all three of her suitors stay. Alceste says he will wait to see whom she sends away first.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

Philinte's suggestion that the absent victims of Celimene's wit are the same people that Alceste dislikes misses the point. Alceste does not pretend to be a friend to them. In contrast to most people, Alceste claims no one as his friend. The only person he says he loves, Celimene, receives his harshest criticism. Alceste keeps saying he is sick of people, but he needs people just like anyone else. Though he criticizes Celimene and her faults, he can't quite bring himself to leave her.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

Basque returns with the news that there is someone at the door for Alceste, a man in uniform. Alceste is surprised, but has Basque send him up.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

It is interesting that while Alceste awaits Celimene's judgment, an official of some sort arrives to speak to him.

Act 2, Scene 6

Act 2, Scene 6 Summary

The man in uniform is the Marshal's Sergeant-at-Arms. Alceste is being summoned to the royal court. Philinte thinks it is in reference to Alceste insulting Oronte's sonnet. Alceste swears he won't back down, that the verse was horrible. Philinte goes with him to help smooth things over, while Celimene's other suitors have a good laugh at Alceste's expense.

Act 2, Scene 6 Analysis

Because Alceste has not learned to choose his battles wisely, he now has to go settle a silly matter, when he'd rather stay and settle his relationship with Celimene.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Clitandre and Acaste, the two marquis, speak alone. Clitandre asks Acaste if he is content. Acaste answers with a long list of his own best qualities. Clitandre teases him, asking why he hangs around Celimene when he doesn't have a chance with her. Acaste claims he is not like other men who hang around a woman who does not really care for him. When Clitandre says that Acaste is deluded, Acaste becomes sarcastic. Clitandre proposes a solution; if Celimene shows a preference for either of them, the other will back off. Acaste agrees.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Clitandre and Acaste are too arrogant to realize that they are being deceived by Celimene. These two marquis are so removed from honesty that neither suspects that she is duping them both. Although Alceste hopes for the best, at least he is honest enough to suspect the truth; Celimene does not care for him.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

In this scene of just three lines, Celimene re-enters the room. She has heard someone else at the door.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Celimene is always anxious to see who is at the door and is always ready for more attention.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

The servant, Basque, enters to say that Celimene's friend, Arsinoe, is at the door. Celimene is annoyed and immediately begins describing Arsinoe in the most vicious way possible. She says that Arsinoe plays the part of a prude who values her honor, only because she can't catch a man to spoil her honor. She claims that Arsinoe is especially jealous of Alceste's love for Celimene, as she wants him for herself.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

This scene further develops Celimene's poor character and suggests another way that society might view Alceste. Celimene claims Arsinoe only pretends not to be interested in men, because she doesn't attract them. A listener might also think that Alceste is not interested in social games, not because he has higher principles, but because he doesn't have the skill to play them well.

Act 3, Scene 4

Act 3, Scene 4 Summary

Although she's in mid-gossip, Celimene gushes over Arsinoe when she enters, and Clitandre and Acaste exit laughing.

Arsinoe has come, she says, to warn Celimene that she has heard gossip about what a flirt Celimene is. She says she tried to defend Celimene, but that she finally had to agree with the accusers.

Celimene takes her revenge by telling Arsinoe that there are people who have recently gossiped about what a prude Arsinoe is. She claims that she defended Arsinoe, but says that it was to no avail. She also suggests to Arsinoe that they should always report to each other all the gossip they hear of each other. Celimene then goes on to say that it's okay to flirt a bit when you're young, but that when she's as old as Arsinoe, she, too, may have to resort to priggishness.

Arsinoe angrily responds that everyone knows that a woman as popular as Celimene, is not popular for her virtue. She says that if she let herself go as Celimene does, she'd have suitors, too.

Alceste arrives, and Celimene asks him to entertain Arsinoe for a moment. So as not to appear rude, she claims that she needs to write a letter.

Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis

In the character of Arsinoe, the playwright further illustrates the problem of Alceste's personality. Prudery is not goodness.

Act 3, Scene 5

Act 3, Scene 5 Summary

Arsinoe relishes this opportunity to be alone with Alceste. She praises him and says he should play a more official role at court. Alceste wonders aloud why he would want to do that. His most prominent trait is his bluntness, which is not prized in courtiers.

Finally, Arsinoe turns the conversation to Alceste's love life. She says that he deserves better than Celimene, and she offers to show him evidence that Celimene is not the wife for him. As the scene ends, the two are going to Arsinoe's house, where she hopes Alceste will seek comfort in her arms.

Act 3, Scene 5 Analysis

There is a difference between Alceste and Arsinoe. Alceste is not merely prudish; he is honest even when it would benefit him to be less than honest. He could have more status in his society if he kept his thoughts to himself. Celimene is correct in saying that Arsinoe is romantically interested in Alceste.

Act 4, Scene 1

Act 4, Scene 1 Summary

Philinte describes to Celimene's cousin, Eliante, the hilarious result of Oronte's day in court. Alceste heaped all sorts of praise on Oronte, but he would not be dishonest and say that Oronte writes well. The closest thing to an apology that Alceste could give was that he was sorry if he was difficult, and he wished he could have liked Oronte's sonnet.

Eliante admits that Alceste is different, but she finds his commitment to the truth heroic. She wishes more people were like him. When Philinte asks, Eliante says she doesn't know if Celimene really loves Alceste or not. She is not even sure Celimene herself knows for sure. She wants Alceste to be happy with Celimene, if possible, but Eliante admits that if Celimene were out of the picture, she would hope that Alceste would be willing to learn to love her.

Philinte then surprises Eliante by saying that he wants Eliante to be happy with Alceste if possible. If Alceste does not come to love her, though, Philinte hopes that Eliante could learn to love him instead.

Act 4, Scene 1 Analysis

Philinte and Eliante seem to be examples of moderation. Both are honest with each other, but believe that it is appropriate to keep their feelings to themselves and not interfere with the outcome of Alceste and Celimene's relationship.

Act 4, Scene 2

Act 4, Scene 2 Summary

Alceste comes rushing in to speak with Eliante. He has seen a letter that Celimene wrote to Oronte; therefore, he knows for sure that she has been unfaithful to him. He wants Eliante to marry him right now, to avenge Celimene.

Eliante admits she would be glad to marry Alceste, but she suggests that he wait until his anger has passed, so that he doesn't do something he'll regret. Alceste insists he won't change his mind. He says he is going to break up with Celimene and then come back to Eliante.

Act 4, Scene 2 Analysis

Rather than take advantage of Alceste's anger at Celimene, Eliante would rather marry him when he is calm. Now that she knows she is another man's first choice, she might not feel as keen to be Alceste's second choice. Philinte has his own motives for suggesting that Alceste might be mistaken about the contents of the letter. He would like to see Alceste end up with Celimene, so that he has a chance with Eliante.

Act 4, Scene 3

Act 4, Scene 3 Summary

When Alceste confronts Celimene with the evidence of her letter, she continues to cover up her true motives and intentions. Even when she speaks the truth, she does so sarcastically, so that Alceste feels tortured and confused. Although he goes into the conversation determined to break off the relationship, he chooses to try to believe her lies and isn't yet able to leave her.

Act 4, Scene 3 Analysis

Although Alceste accuses others of hypocrisy, this scene illustrates that he is capable of lying to himself, just like other people. He pretends to himself to be confused about Celimene, when the truth is that he knows she's unfaithful.

Act 4, Scene 4

Act 4, Scene 4 Summary

Alceste's servant, Dubois, enters in a rush. He is alarmed and wants Alceste to prepare to leave town. He is so flustered he can barely tell his story. He says that a friend of Alceste came to deliver news about his court case. The friend wants Alceste to pack up and leave before he is arrested. Alceste can't imagine why this would be. Dubois tries to present a note from the friend, but left Alceste's home in such a rush he forgot it. Alceste follows him out to go find the note, but swears to Celimene that he will be back to resolve the matter between them.

Act 4, Scene 4 Analysis

The servant makes mention of caring for Alceste, yet he makes it almost impossible for Alceste to carry on his conversation with Celimene. The reader can't help but wonder if another of Celimene's suitors is playing a trick to get Alceste out of Celimene's house.

Act 5, Scene 1

Act 5, Scene 1 Summary

Alceste and Philinte are again waiting for Celimene. Alceste has not been arrested. He's upset, though, because he lost his court case in spite of the fact that everyone knows that his accuser lies.

Philinte tries to reassure Alceste that his accuser's reputation will be harmed by the lies he tells, and he encourages Alceste to appeal the verdict. However, Alceste is determined to pay his fine and let it be a testimony to the corruption of the system. He has decided to leave public life and move to the countryside. He intends to ask Celimene to leave with him. This way, she will finally have to choose between him and her other suitors.

Philinte points out that if humans were all good, there would be no need for goodness. He says that people's best traits are developed by bearing the faults of others.

Act 5, Scene 1 Analysis

Philinte's argument speaks to the theme of the play, which examines how much honesty is actually good. Philinte seems to suggest that compassion is actually more important than technical honesty. By being compassionate, a person acknowledges that he has just as many faults as others. Alceste is harming himself and those who care about him, because he takes such pride in how honest he is.

Act 5, Scene 2

Act 5, Scene 2 Summary

Oronte and Alceste both confront Celimene and insist that she name which of the two she prefers. Each man says that if Celimene loves the other, he will not interfere. Celimene still refuses to answer. She says that she knows whom she prefers, but that it is unfair to ask her to bare her heart publicly. Eliante enters the room, and Celimene asks for her help.

Act 5, Scene 2 Analysis

When human beings are habitually dishonest, as Celimene is, it is as if they lose the ability to tell the truth at all.

Act 5, Scene 3

Act 5, Scene 3 Summary

Eliante and Philinte enter. Eliante is not at all sympathetic to Celimene. She says she would prefer that Celimene speak her mind. Alceste and Oronte say she must speak now, but then they say they will understand her silence, too.

Act 5, Scene 3 Analysis

When they can't make her speak, Alceste says he'll understand if she doesn't. This has been the problem all along. Where she is concerned, he tries to believe whatever he wants to be true.

Act 5, Scene 4

Act 5, Scene 4 Summary

The two marquis, Acaste and Clitandre, enter with Arsinoe. Arsinoe has apparently provided these two with another letter that Celimene has written to yet another man. They read the letter aloud to everyone in the room. In it, each one of her suitors is ridiculed and criticized. Arsinoe tries to comfort Alceste, but he flatly tells her that he would never seek comfort in her arms.

Now that the truth is out, only Alceste is still interested in Celimene. He gives her one last chance, asking her to move with him to the countryside. Celimene refuses to go away with him. She says she's too young to drop out of society. But with no other suitors left, she offers to get married right now, to prove her love. However, Alceste is no longer interested. Since she won't go away with him, he knows that she has no intention to change.

Next, Alceste turns to Eliante. He praises her, but he feels it wouldn't be fair to come to her now. Eliante assures him she won't be lonely, that she might choose his friend Philinte. Philinte says he would like nothing more.

Alceste wishes them the best and exits, preparing to leave for the countryside. Philinte and Eliante follow him out, in hopes of convincing him to stay.

Act 5, Scene 4 Analysis

By ending the play in this way, the playwright seems to suggest that the only people who can be happy, like Philinte and Eliante, are those that can balance honesty with compassion.

Characters

Acaste

Acaste is one of the two marquis who pursue Celimene. In act 5, Acaste, along 'with Clitandre, confronts Celimene with love letters she has Written to each of them Acaste reads aloud from a letter which she wrote to Clitandre, in which she refers to him (Acaste) as "the little marquis" and assures Clitandre that, although she let Acaste hold her hand, he is "of no consequence." Acaste leaves with Clitandre, assuring Celimene that he has" *better women* standing by" who are interested in him.

Alceste

Alceste is the misanthrope referred to in the title. Throughout the play, he expresses his disgust with the dishonesty, hypocrisy, corruption, and lack of justice in society, claiming that he himself at least is completely frank and honest in all of his social interactions. Philinte, his friend, presents a variety of counterpoints to Alceste's arguments. When Oronte asks his opinion of a love poem he has just written, Alceste tells him that It is "trash," that it should be burned, and that Oronte should never write another poem. Oronte, who is highly influential at court, retaliates for the insult by filing a lawsuit against Alceste. Before a tribunal of marshals, however, A1ceste refuses to take back his criticism of Oronte's poem, and the matter is only settled when he agrees to apologize to Oronte for not liking it. Alceste, meanwhile, is also engaged in a lawsuit concerned with a man who has circulated a scandalous book and attributed it to Alceste's authorship. Alceste is in love with Celimene but constantly criticizes her for her insincerity and complains of her flirtations with other men. He claims that he is brutally honest with her only because he truly loves her.

Various interpretations of *The Misanthrope,* both in scholarly criticism and at the level of performance choices, revolve around whether Alceste is seen as representative of the moral message of the play or whether he is seen as a self-serving hypocrite, not unlike most of the other characters.

Arsinoe

Arsinoe is a so-called friend of Celimene. Celimene tells others that Arsinoe is a "hypocrite" and that, while unattractive, she is desperate to find a man and pretends to be prudish and pious as an excuse for the fact that men take no interest in her. Arsinoe tells Celimene that, in the name of friendship, she feels she must let her know that others are talking behind her back about her reputation for flirting with so many men. Celimene responds to Arsinoe by saying to her face what she has previ ously said behind her back Arsinoe later shows Alceste a letter in which Celimene tells Oronte that she loves him.

Basque

Basque is the servant of Celimene. He occasionally enters to announce the arrival of guests.

Celimene

Celimene is a very attractive and very flirtatious young widow, who is pursued simultaneously by at least four different men. Of all the characters, she is the most thoroughly insincere and represents social hypocrisy at its worst. She tells each of her suitors that he is the one she truly loves and proceeds to criticize all of her other suitors. Alceste is in love with her but continually criticizes her for her dishonesty, claiming that it is because he truly loves her that he is brutally honest, rather than insincerely flattering her lIke the other men. Alceste also complains of Celimene's flirtations with other men, but she defends herself on the grounds that they are all influential at court and that she must be polite to them or they may negatively influence the lawsuit she is engaged in.

When Alceste confronts her with a love letter she has written to another man, she at first claims it was written to a woman, then admits that it was in fact written to Oronte, Alceste's archrival. At the end of the play, several of her suitors confront her with letters she has Written to each of them in which she professes her love for the man she is writing to and ridicules each of the other men. These suitors then leave, vowing to malign her reputation among others. Alceste, however, claims that he will always love her, in spite of this revelation of her true insincerity. He asks her to flee to the wilderness with him, but she responds that, although she would marry him were he to stay, she would not be happy leaving society. Upon hearing this, Alceste Claims that he could never love her If she cannot love him by himself, away from society.

Clitandre

Clitandre is one of the two marquis who pursue Celimene. In act 5, Clitandre, along with Acaste, confronts Celimene with a letter she has written him in which she assures him that he is the only man she loves and makes a point of criticizing all of the other men who are pursuing her. In a letter to Acaste, however, she calls Clitandre a "love-struck loon" and claims that he is "the last man on earth I could fall for." Clitandre sarcastically comments in regard to Celimene that she is a "sweet creature " Before leaving with Acaste, Clitandre sarcastically assures her that "everywhere we go / We'll start to paint your splendid cameo!" meaning that they intend to ruin her reputation everywhere they go.

Du Bois

Du Bois is the servant of A1ceste. He enters in act 4 to inform Alceste that a mysterious letter pertaining to his lawsuit has been delivered to his home and that he must pack his

bags and flee immediately because he is in danger and may even be arrested. Du Bois is a bit of a buffoon and, in his urgency, has neglected to bring the urgent letter with him so that A1ceste must leave Celimene's house to go home and read the letter

Eliante

Eliante is Celimene's cousin She is in love with Alceste but, selflessly, does everything she can to nurture the relationship between Celimene and A1ceste. She tells Philinte that, if Celimene ever actually rejects A1ceste, she is hoping he will want her. Philinte confesses his love for her and asks that she consider turning to him should A1ceste end up with Celimene. When Alceste is angered by what he believes is Celimene' s betrayal, he insists that Eliante will have to marry him, because that would be the best way for him to get revenge on Celimene. In the final moments of the play, A1ceste turns to Eliante to apologize for not being in love with her, but she interrupts him to say that she is now in love with Philinte. Upon hearing this, Philinte jumps at the chance to express his devotion to her Eliante, along with Philinte, represents a character who is genuinely sincere and honest but, unlike A1ceste, also takes great care with the feelings of others.

Officer

The Officer of the Marshals of France enters in act 2 to inform A1ceste that a lawsuit has been filed against him by Oronte and that he is required to come before a tribunal of marshals, who are, he explains, court officials who arbitrate in some disputes.

Oronte

Oronte is a gentleman who is in love with Celimene. In act I, he asks for Alceste' s opinion of a love poem he has written to her. A1ceste replies with brutal honesty that the poem is "trash" and that Oronte should bum it and never write a poem again. Oronte, who is very influential in court, files a lawsuit against A1ceste for the offense. During the tribunal, A1ceste refuses to retract his statement about how bad he thinks the poem is but agrees to apologize for not liking It, which resolves the lawsuit. Oronte then begins to spread malicious rumors about A1ceste in order to weaken his defense in another lawsuit in which he is engaged.

Philinte

Philinte is a true friend of Alceste. As the play opens, Alceste is chastising Philinte for his insincerity in treating a distant acquaintance as If he were a dear friend. Philinte defends his behavior by pointing out that the man is very influential at court, and so it is in his best interest to treat him as a friend. Throughout the play, Philinte debates with Alceste the issue of sincerity and insincerity in social interaction. While A1ceste is insistent upon the virtue of complete honesty at all times, Philinte argues for the importance of common civility in social interactions When A1ceste announces that he is

fed up with the hypocrisy and corruption of society and is fleeing to the wilderness, Philinte argues that, yes, all people are flawed, but that it is "part of Heaven' s plan," and the lack of honesty and justice in the world are what make virtue so valuable. Philinte is in love with Eliante, who, for the first half of the play, is in love with A1ceste. Nevertheless, he confesses his love for her and asks that, should she be rejected by Alceste, she consider him instead. In the final moments of the play, Eliante declares her love for Philinte over Alceste-at which point Philinte jumps at the chance to be her "slave." As soon as A1ceste leaves to go off to the wilderness, Philinte insists they follow after him and try to convince him not to leave society. Philinte and Eliante are the only truly compassionate characters in the play and are able to balance honesty with civility.

Themes

Honesty and Hypocrisy

The overriding theme of *The Misanthrope* is honesty and hypocrisy. Alceste, the central character, is a misanthrope because he is disgusted by the hypocrisy that, in his view, characterizes human society. Alceste claims to be the only truly honest person he knows. As the play opens, he is criticizing Philinte for insincerely behaving with affection toward someone who is merely a mild acquaintance. When Oronte asks for A1ceste's opinion about the love sonnet he has written, Alceste is brutally honest in claiming that the poem is "trash" and that Oronte should refrain from ever writing another poem. Against Alceste's diatribes, Philinte argues for the value of insincerity in social interactions for the sake of the feelings of other people, as well as in the interest of endearing oneself to those with influence. Critical discussion of the character of Alceste, however, reveals that he may be the biggest hypocrite of all in claiming to be the only honest man around. Nicholas Dromgoole, in an introduction to a translation of *Molière: The Misanthrope,* argues that, while, in theory, Alceste' s argument is one that most people might agree with-that the world would be a better place if people were more honest and sincere with one another-"Alceste carries this idea to the point of obsession, of absurdity. "

Peter Hampshire Nurse, in *Molière and the Comic Spirit,* observes that Alceste' s so-called sin cerity in speaking his mind to others is merely a "rationalization for self-centered passion"; hence, "the inauthenticity of Alceste's whole code of sincerity." Thus, D. B. Wyndham Lewis asserts in *Molière: The Comic Mask,* "A moral theologian could indict [Alceste] almost at sight for the Sin of pride." By allowing for this ambiguity in Alceste's true character and motives, Molière's play thus leaves open the question of the value of absolute sincerity as advocated by a misanthrope.

Justice

Throughout the play, Alceste is concerned with the issue of justice, both in the abstract, moral sense and in more concrete terms, as practiced by the judicial courts. Among the characters in *The Misanthrope,* litigation seems to be the rule of the day. Lawsuits are apparently so common that characters frequently refer to "my lawsuit" without explanation of the nature of the suit. In the context of the play, however, one can assume that these lawsuits are essentially trivial and a matter of personal revenge rather than any claim to real justice.

Alceste, in particular, is embroiled in several lawsuits during the course of the play. Oronte takes him to court for the offense of having criticized his poem-a matter that is resolved only when Alceste agrees before a tribunal to apologize for not liking the poem, although he refuses to take back his statement that the poem is terrible. Alceste's other lawsuit involves a man who has circulated a publication criticizing the government and

attributed It to Alceste's authorship. While everyone else seems willing to play the game of legal battles by attempting to make friends with those who have influence at court, Alceste refuses to participate in this game even though It would be in his best interests. Rather, he prefers to remain self-righteous in his argument that true justice should prevail in the legal system, as elsewhere, and that the fact of his being in the right should suffice as his legal defense. It is made clear throughout the play, however, that justice is hardly a factor in legal disputes, because it is equally absent from society as a whole.

Games People Play

As a comedy of manners, *The Misanthrope* is about the game of social propriety as a cover for power-mongering, revenge, and manipulation.

Throughout the play, characters make reference to social custom and civility as a game. For instance, Celimene says of the need to flatter those who have influence at court: "It's not a nice game, but It must be played." Hallam Walker, in *Molière,* explains Molière's comic method as one in which "he sets up some guidelines for a game of human relations, gives the characters an initial nudge, and lets them play themselves." Alceste, then, is a misanthrope because he refuses to play by the rules of the social game in which everyone around him is engaged In this play, the game is one in which everyone pretends to adore everyone else, speaks critically behind everyone's back, and uses the power of influence at court to manipulate others, exact revenge, curry favor, and satisfy their own desires. Roxanne Decker Lalande, in *Intruders in the Play World,* reads the character of Alceste into the context of Molière's social milieu, observing that "by refusing to play the game, Alceste threatens to shatter the illusions upon which seventeenth-century polite society has secured its foundations."

The Individual in Society

In his distaste for common civility, which he sees as hypocrisy, his insistence on the belief that Justice should prevail, and his refusal to play by the rules of the game of society, Alceste represents the classic figure of the individual struggling against the conformity that society demands. Walker observes that, while the theme of "the conflict be tween one eccentric individual and the public good is a timeless scheme for comedy," which Molière had used in previous plays, *"Le Misanthrope* is the most subtle and far-reaching treatment of the theme."

In her article, "Oh, Those Black Bile Blues: Teaching *Le Misanthrope,"* Louise K Horowitz points out, however, that Alceste's very claim to individuality is merely an aping of an oft-repeated stance against society. As with the question of sincerity, Molière's play raises the question of the sincerity of claims to individuality, leaving open to interpretation whether or not Alceste's insistence on defying the everyday requirements of social convention is only an elaborate excuse for manipulating others and serving his own ends.

Style

Comedy of Manners

The term *comedy of manners* refers to a play that focuses on satirizing social customs and rules of etiquette among an elite class of the time period and society in which it is written. The comedy of manners is characterized by witty dialogue and a farcical plot revolving around scandalous love affairs with a cast of characters who are generally hypocritical and insincere and concerned with trivial matters of social conduct. Molière brought the comedy of manners to new heights of sophistication, which inspired playwrights of the English Restoration, such as William Wycherley and William Congreve. Walker asserts that *The Misanthrope* is "probably the world's greatest 'comedy of manners.'"

Rhymed Verse

The dialogue of *The Misanthrope* is written in the form of alexandrine verse, which became the standard verse form in French poetry. The alexandrine line of verse has twelve syllables, the major stresses falling on the sixth and last syllables, and is a versatile form suitable for a variety of poetic expressions Originally used in a classic French collection of romantic verses in the twelfth century, the alexandrine was revitalized in the sixteenth century and, by the seventeenth century of Molière's time, was a predominant verse form for drama and narrative poetry. Although it has primarily been used in French literature, the alexandrine line is referred to in English verse as "iambic hexameter." Thus, while the content of Molière's dialogue ridicules social convention, the structure of the verse expresses this critique through means of a conventional literary form. The effect of this is to stylistically unify the disparate voices that can be heard throughout the play. In an introduction to his 1955 translation of *The Misanthrope,* Richard Wilbur observes, "The constant of rhythm and rhyme was needed, in the translation as in the original, for bridging great gaps between high comedy and farce, lofty diction and ordinary talk, deep character and shallow."

Translation from French

The Misanthrope was originally written in French. Thus, the English language reader has access to the play only in translation, of which there are a number of different renditions. One grammatical feature of the French language that has no equivalent in English is the distinction between *tu* and *vous,* both of which mean "you." However, *vous* is the formal form of the word *you,* used in addressing figures of authority or those one does not know well; *tu,* on the other hand, is the informal word for *you,* to be used with friends and family or in some casual social situations. Because this distinction cannot be translated literally, translators of Molière, such as Nicholas Dromgoole, in his 1998 translation of *The Misanthrope,* have retained these French terms through the

translation. Thus, in act 2, Ce1Imene, who is ridiculing one of her acquaintances for his arrogance and "self-importance," complains that "he calls the bluest-blooded people 'tu'-/ Reserving 'vous' for plebs like me and you" In other words, he speaks to the most elite members of society using the familiar *tu* form while he regards those he considers to be of lesser Importance with the more distancing *vous* In this way, he shows off his intimacy with the most elite class and snubs all others as distant acquaintances. Because of inherent differences in French and English, this distinction would be lost without the translator retaining the original French forms of the word *you* in this line.

Self-Referentiality

The term *self-referential* describes texts that, directly or indirectly, refer back to themselves or their authors. In *The Misanthrope,* during a heated discussion with A1ceste, Philinte mentions the play *The School for Husbands* (1661), written by Molière.

He tells Alceste, "We're like the brothers in that Molière play-'The School for Husbands'-you recall the way." To which Alceste responds, "Your favorite trick-a facile parallel!" The effect of this self-referential passage in Molière's play is that of a gesture that literary theorists sometimes refer to as a "wink" at the audience; in mentioning another of his own plays, only to have his protagonist write off the reference as irrelevant, Molière invites his theatrical audience to have a laugh at his expense while reminding them that the events and characters they are watching are simply the creation of the dramatist and meant to be taken in a playful vein.

Denouement

The denouement of a story refers to the resolution or conclusion with which most stories end, providing the reader with a sense of closure and the Impression that the central conflicts of the story have been essentially resolved. The ending of *The Misanthrope,* defying the classic denouement, is disarmingly abrupt. It should not surprise a reader to find himself or herself flipping confusedly through the final pages of the play, wondering if a sixth act has been erroneously omitted from the text. This is because *The Misanthrope* does not end with the type of denouement that is standard to comedy, such as the happy marriage of several couples in many of Shakespeare's comedies. Rather, it ends with Alceste's final renouncement of his love for Celimene and his abrupt departure for the "wilderness," where he claims he will spend his life in solitude. Philinte insists on following after Alceste, hoping to convince him not to leave. Asserting that "the irresolution" of *The Misanthrope* "is the most daring bit of theatrical trickery that Molière undertakes," Walker describes the final action of the play as "a dash off the stage with a peculiar sense of projected energy utterly foreign to a proper resolution of a drama," adding that "indeed, nothing is at all finished or settled, nor was the contemporary audience wrong in finding the ending very odd."

Historical Context

The Reign of Louis XIV

The maturing of Molière's theatrical career took place during the reign of King Louis XIV of France, which lasted from 1643 to his death in 1715. The social, cultural, and political atmosphere that characterized the reign of Louis XIV was so distinct that it lent itself to the name of an era in French history. Louis XIV, the son of King Louis XIII, was born in 1638, officially ascending the throne at less than five years of age in 1643 As an adult, however, Louis XIV worked hard to consolidate his power and eventually became one of the most powerful monarchs in history. His policies were a combination of aggressive international warfare and a fostering of cultural arts such as architecture, theater, and dance at the domestic level. The "Louis XIV style" designated characteristic elements in the visual and decorative arts that developed during his reign, making Paris the European center of fashion, interior design, and architecture.

Seventeenth-Century French Theater

The reign of Louis XIV fostered the development of the theatrical arts, and Molière's career was largely dependent on the direct patronage of the king. During the seventeenth century, Paris held three main theaters. The first permanent theater to be built in Pans was the Theatre de l'Hotel de Bourgogne, which, after 1610, housed the theater company known as The King' s Players. In 1634, the Theatre du Marais was created on the site of a tennis court, which was converted for its purposes, and quickly became the leading theater in Paris The Marais Theatre burned down in 1644 but was rebuilt with updated stage machinery. After 1660, Molière's troupe was housed in the Palais-Royal Theatre.

The Italian *commedia dell' arte* (also called the Comedie-Italienne), a troupe with which Molière's company shared space in two different theaters, was an equally important presence in the world of French theater. Molière's contemporaries in the theatrical world included Jean Racine, a master of the tragic play and equal in status to Molière as master of the comic play. While Molière's troupe produced several of Racine' s early plays, a falling out occurred in 1665, when Racine secretly negotiated to have his plays produced simultaneously at the Hotel de Bourgogne. Racine's masterpiece, *Phedre,* was first produced in 1677. The year of Molière's death, 1673, the king ordered the close of the Marais, combining its theatrical troupe with that of the late Molière and later with the troupe that had been associated with the Hotel de Bourgogne. In 1680, this combined theatrical company was named the Comedie-Francaise, the first nationalized theatrical company in modern Europe.

The English Restoration

Molière's comedies of manners greatly influenced the seventeenth-century English stage, as well as the French. In 1660, King Charles II, having spent years in exile in France, was restored to the English throne. Influenced by his exposure to Parisian culture of the Louis XIV era, especially the theater, Charles II revitalized the English stage Within months of his return. The theatrical arts in England had suffered Since all theaters were shut down at the beginning of the civil war in 1642 and remained closed for eighteen years. Charles II first established two theatrical companies, the King's Players and the Duke's Players, and had two new theaters, the Theatre Royal and the Duke's Theater, built at the sites of converted tennis courts. He also allowed the presence of female actors on the English stage for the first time (whereas female parts had previously been played by boys and young men)

Restoration theater was greatly influenced by the comedies of manners of Molière, particularly in the works of William Wycherley (who studied in France as a young man), such as *The Country Wife* (1675) and *The Plain Dealer* (1676). Other writers of note include William Congreve, whose *Way of the World* (1700) represents the crowning achievement of Restoration theater. However, as these productions catered primarily to the elite and not the general populace, they were not entirely successful. In 1682, due to declining theater attendance, the King's Players and the Duke's Players were combined to form the United Company, which remained the only theatrical company in London for the next thirteen years.

Critical Overview

Molière is perhaps the greatest writer of the French stage. David Coward, in an introduction to *Molière: The Miser and Other Plays,* states that Molière is "one of the world's greatest comic playwrights." Margaret Webster, in an introduction to *Molière,* explains his significance as a literary figure in France, noting, "in his own language he is as towering a figure as Shakespeare is in ours." James F Gaines and Michael S. Koppisch, in *Approaches to Teaching Molière's Tartuffe and Other Plays,* state that "Molière has, almost since the moment he began writing, been a central-and controversial figure in French culture." In his lifetime, Molière enjoyed immense popularity among audiences, as well as the ongoing favor and patronage of King Louis XIV, while suffering the censorship and banning from the stage of some of his greatest works, as well as harsh condemnation from church and civic leaders. According to Coward,

In his day Molière had many enemies and they did not mince their words. He alienated a section of the Court, the devout party, doctors, the Faculty of Theology, not to mention rival actors and authors, who called him a 'public poisoner,' spread slanderous rumors about his private life and tried to silence him.

However, he enjoyed a popular international reputation during his lifetime. His plays, which were performed in England, Germany, and Holland, Coward notes, "immediately struck sympathetic chords with spectators unacquainted with the specific social culture of France." Coward adds that this "universal appeal" persisted into the twentieth century as Molière continued to be "a magician of the theatre." Hallam Walker points to the continuing popularity of Molière's plays as theatrical productions to indicate the immensity of his achievement: It is a fact that the plays seem to be ever prepared to go on stage, revealing to new audiences new meanings about themselves. An ongoing process of creation was set in motion by Molière more than three centuries ago, and this is his real legacy.

In the course of his career, Molière transformed the comic stage in France, adding a depth of humanity and philosophical complexity to the standard genres of comic theater. Coward observes that "Molière blended the various strands of traditional comedy-farce. Spectacle, manners, character and situation-into a new kind of integrated comedy of observation." Coward asserts, "Molière would bring these disparate comic strands together in plays which drew their unity from a more consistent concern with human behavior," adding that "he never forgot that farce was the great laughter maker, but he civilized it, building it into situations which highlighted personal and social folly." Dromgoole observes that Molière elevated the status of theatrical comedy to the extent that by the end of his career he had raised the status of comedy so that inside and outside theatre buildings that smiling mask of comedy and the anguished mask of tragedy were of equal size and equal importance.

He explains,

Molière was doing something new. He was bringing real life, recognisable people into the theatre. speaking down-ta-earth language and making fun of the artificial diction and pompous language his same audience were so enthusiastic about in their tragedies.

Three and one-half centuries of international notoriety have generated an overwhelming quantity of critical responses to the work of Molière. Critics generally concur in broad sweep overviews of the development of this criticism. Early discussion of Molière's work after his death was frequently concerned with the autobiographical elements of his plays, noting parallels between his own life and career and his central characters. For instance, as Peter Hampshire Nurse states, this biographical criticism led to .. .the view that plays like *Le Misanthrope.* in which Alceste suffers from being in love with an apparently unfaithful coquette, are based on the playwright's own unhappy relationship with an actress-wife who was twenty years younger than himself and was generally rumoured to be unfaithful to him.

Continuing discussion, however, has been primarily concerned with the question of the extent to which Molière wished to convey a moral message through his plays, as well as the precise nature of this message. However, a significant shift in Molière criticism took place in the mid-twentieth century. to a focus on Molière as dramatist, rather than Molière as moralist. Walker, for example, asserts that "Molière was above all a man of the theater and not a conscious promoter of philosophical views," and suggests that

. . . if we can accept him on his own terms. as the entertainer on the boards, and try to understand his works as living theater, then we shall follow the surest route to an understanding of his greatness.

Other critics in the latter half of the twentieth century delved into the social and political context of seventeenth-century France in order to illuminate Molière's plays. Walker describes Molière criticism since the early 1980s as an amalgam of approaches taking into account significant threads of thought developed throughout the twentieth century, so that now "work is done on Molière in the comic tradition, in the climate of his times, as a commentator on the human condition, and as a creator of theater. "

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

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Critics often note the universal appeal of Molière's plays, evidenced by his international popularity throughout three and one-half centuries. As a "comedy of manners," however, *The Misanthrope* is also set in the historically and culturally specific context of the fashionable upper-class Parisian elite of the Louis XIV era in France. Many references to fashion, high society, and court life thus run throughout the play. A better understanding of the history and culture of these references will enhance the reader's appreciation of the playas social satire, as well as increasing awareness of the highly topical nature of *The Misanthrope* from the perspective of Molière's contemporary audience.

Several specific references are made in *The Misanthrope* to the king, meaning King Louis XIV. In act 1, Oronte offers Alceste the possibility of benefiting from his influence with the king, letting it be known that:

I think my influence with the King
Is pretty widely known in everything
He's always proved-oh, quite sublimely kind

In act 3, Acaste, boasting of his all-around good fortune as a man who is "young, blue-blooded, beautiful, and rich," adds that "the King adores me " Later in act 3, Arsinoe lets Alceste know that she may be able to use her influence in order to procure for him the favor of the king, mentioning, "I'd like the King to take some note of you." Throughout the play, characters mention the king only in order to brag about their influence and favor in his majesty's eyes and for the purpose of manipulating others to benefit their own interests. In addition to continually reminding others of their associations with the king, the characters in *The Misanthrope* also frequently mention their influence at court. The court of the seventeenth century did not simply refer to the court of law, but included the array of nobles, officeholders, and social elite with which the king surrounded himself in his royal palace. Molière's characters are thus referring to this larger socialpolitical milieu when they speak of *court.* And, although none of the scenes in the play is actually set at court, the presence of the court offstage, including the court of law, represents a locus of social power around which the relationships between the characters revolve.

While frequently bragging about their social connections by referring to their influence with the king and at court, various characters also simply refer to their presence in Versailles or the Louvre, both palaces of the king For instance, in act 2, Clitandre enters, telling the others, "I've just been to the Louvre" Although it became a national art gallery in the eighteenth century, the Louvre in Paris was the royal residence and

location of court from the mid-sixteenth century through the first half of the reign of Louis XIV, during which time he added to its impressive collection of international art.

In 1655, just a year before the first performance of *The Misanthrope,* the king initiated renovation of the Louvre, the mention of which would have been of topical interest to Molière's audience Clitandre thus mentions his presence at the royal palace of the Louvre as a means of showing off his courtly social connections. Likewise, in act 3, when Arsinoe tells Alceste that she could use her influence in order to secure a government post for him at Versailles, she is referring to the king's royal palace at Versailles, one of the visible accomplishments of the king's reign.

The royal palace was eventually moved by Louis XIV from the Louvre to the village of Versailles, ten miles from Pans, where royalty had formerly enjoyed the comforts of a hunting lodge. Louis XIV renovated and extended the palace of Versailles over a period of fifty years, from 1661 to 1710, employing the most talented architects, landscapers, and interior decorators of the age in a spectacular achievement expressive of the king's far-reaching power. During the period in which *The Misanthrope* was performed, the remodeling of Versailles was an ongoing project of the king, who would most likely have been pleased by its mention in Molière's play. And, although it did not become the official residence of the king and his court until 1682, it was clearly functioning in this capacity as early as 1666, when *The Misanthrope* was first performed.

Alceste, however, assures Arsinoe that he "simply wouldn't prosper at Versailles," because of his inability to play the game of social politicking required for a government post. (One may note that Molière himself, in contrast to the fictional character of Alceste, greatly benefited from the favor and patronage of the king, who supported his theatrical company and his career, as well as providing significant increases in his pension over the years.)

In addition to topical references to the king and his court, and his majesty's ongoing achievements represented by renovations of both the Louvre and Versailles, Molière includes in his play reference to major events in the history of France. Philinte, complaining of the boring conversation of an acquaintance, mentions his habit of bragging about his service in the civil war as one of his more irritating conversational traits. Philinte mentions "Dorilas, who's such a bore / About his exploits in the Civil War" This is most likely a reference to the series of civil wars in France known as the Fronde, which were waged between 1648 and 1653. The Fronde occurred in several phases, each revolving around a somewhat different set of Issues and events. However, the overall thrust of the violent civil disturbances known as the Fronde was an effort of the upper classes to curtail the power of the monarch over parliament Once this period of rebellion was quelled, however, Louis XIV reacted by creating the most powerful monarchy in Europe, exercising extensive control over his dominion. At the time of *The Misanthrope,* the civil war would have been over for some thirteen years, and the man who still bragged about his participation in such events is seen as a bore because of his inability to discuss more pertinent, up-to-date matters.

Central to the comedy of manners are the specific fashions of the age in which it takes place, in this case a distinct aesthetic known as the Louis XIV style. The prominence of fashion in French high society was increased with the development of Paris as a center of European style and taste during this era. The attitude expressed in Molière's play toward men's fashions of the day is indicated by the description of Celimene's suitors, Acaste and Clitandre, as "fops"-men overly concerned with emulating high fashion to the point of rendering themselves ridiculously vain and clownish. A1ceste refers to several characteristics of the flamboyant men's fashions of the Louis XIV era when he interrogates Celimene about her reasons for flirting with Clitandre, one of his rivals for her attention. He asks her:

Just tell me what it is
You like about him That long mail of his? (His little finger nail.) or-let me see
His blonde wig-that's It' Well, admittedly, the world of fashion thinks it's quite the thing.
That's why you keep the poor fool dangling? Or is it all those ribbons you adore?
Is it his stocking that you love him for?
Have his vast breeches worked their
magic on you?

During the mid-seventeenth century, men's high fashion was characterized by massive wigs made up of curls that were styled high up on the head and then cascaded down below the shoulders. Ribbons, as well as lace, were a prominent feature adorning the male wardrobe, while the style of men's "breeches" became so full and loose that they were recognized as closer to the feminine skirt or petticoat Alceste thus makes note of the fashionable men's wardrobe of the day, made up of a Wig, ribbons, and "vast breeches." Ridicule of men's fashions continues in act 2, when Celimene complains of Timante, a male acquaintance whom she criticizes for his vanity. She suggests that, while he frequently claims to be running off on important business, in fact, "he's only crept off to adjust his bows / Or put some powder on his wig!" In act 5, Acaste reads aloud several letters that Celimene has Written to each of her suitors, criticizing each of the others behind his back She paints each man as a buffoon, making reference to his vanity in the use of fashion. Alceste she refers to as "the man with the green ribbons," associating the men's fashion characterized by extensive use of ribbons with A1ceste' s "green" envy of other men. And Oronte she calls "the buffoon in the waistcoat," referring to the hip or waist-length Jackets men wore over their white shirts. In all of these instances, the men's fashions of the day are mentioned only in order to be ridiculed as signs of vanity, clownishness, and self-absorption.

The Misanthrope, a masterpiece among Molière's comedies of manners, holds a universal appeal in its ridicule of social games of propriety and power-mongering, in the context of a setting that is unique to the fashion, society, and politics of the Louis XIV era. The king and his court, located both at the Louvre in Pans and the palace at Versailles, are brought into conversation among these characters only for the purpose of bragging about their social and political connections, either threatening or manipulating others with the power of their influence. Likewise, historical events are referred to in conversation for the purpose of ridiculing the outdated conversation of a

fellow acquaintance. Finally, the high fashions of the day, specifically the excessive quality of the latest men's fashions, are ridiculed as a sign of vanity and foolishness.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on *The Misanthrope,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 200l.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Riggs examines what aspects make Alceste's character a comic one.

It is in teaching literature that the critic/professor is forcibly reminded of the continuing reality of literary problems that he or she may have come to regard as solved. It is in trying to explain to students the logic of a particular solution that the critic is often led to new realizations by the unexpected vitality of an "old" question. Each time I teach *Le Misanthrope,* I am obliged to confront the question of the play's being or not being entirely comic; and I find that each group of students' initial response to Alceste is much like the one expressed by Rousseau in his "Lettre ll d' Alembert sur les spectacles." For each group I must repeat-and, indeed, re-think the critical process whereby I arrived at the conviction that Alceste is an entirely comic-and not at all an admirable-character. It is impossible to do this without recognizing that the issues raised bear on the essence of Molière's comic art, the nature and importance of comedy in general, and the nexus of the relationship between theatrical and real Identities.

The crux of the critic's difficulty in showing Alceste to be a thoroughly ridiculous character is that Alceste seems at first glance to be living the essentially tragic opposition between the integrity of the individual self and the arbitrary, ineluctable laws of collective existence. Alceste's choice of sincerity as his 1deal-or mask-is what makes the play so quintessentially theatrical and comic; he tries to use sincerity as a vehicle for radically ind1V1duating himself, despite the fact that sincerity is a characteristic of *communication* which can only be ascribed to an individual by a group whose language and basic expectations he shares "Sincerity," like any virtue, makes sense only as a performance evaluated within a context of perceptions and values. The play clearly ridicules the idea that there can be opposition between an indlv1dual and his social environment, except within socially defined limits.

Individuation itself is actually a function of collective existence. It is this complex aspect of context-generating and nourishing, as well as limiting, individuation-that Alceste tries to ignore. Indeed, It is the *fact* of context in general, and of his particular context, that Alceste, like most other comic figures, fails to consider. What makes a being real, or a performance meaningful, is the same thing-context-that makes It contingent.

Alceste would like to be his own source, and the source of all that surrounds him. He actually attempts to reverse the relationship between indlV1dual and group by imposing his condemnation-his misanthropy-as the defining context wherein *others* must exist. He wants to be the audience in whose gaze all performances find their meaning his situation becomes comic when it is clear that his refusal to perform is itself a performance, and that his apparent wish to annihilate others as morally significant beings clashes with his insistence that others acknowledge and admire his supposed difference from them. What the lucid spectator sees as the play progresses is that Alceste's "sincerity," both as an individual trait and as a characteristic of social relations, must be confirmed and participated in by the group. Like Molière's other *ridicules,*

Alceste hopes to escape the consequences of this interdependence by obscuring others' awareness of the mutuality Imposed by a shared context He wants to keep them from recognizing and playing *their* role in creating *his* meaning and identity The comedy is reinforced by the fact that the rhetoric of Alceste's performance, which he hopes will constitute a person whose essence is distinction, actually reveals the extent to which his thinking and behavior are *similar* to those practiced in the group.

Oronte's famous sonnet, presented in Act I, scene ii, is a key element in this comedy of convergence. It is typical of Alceste that he tries to place the poem in a definitive context-that of his negative judgment-before he has heard It. The significance he ascribes to this scene, and the role he will play in it, have been predetermined for Alceste by his loudly declared rejection of social conventions (Act I, scene 1). Writing sonnets and praising them are conventions. As Oronte reads the poem, Alceste classifies it as *sottises.*

The importance of the sonnet cannot be fully discovered by trying to decide whether Alceste is sincere, or correct, in his judgment of it. The scene itself is Important and comic in that it shows Alceste tom between his desire to condemn the poem and the difficulty of being blunt In terms of the play as a whole, however, the sonnet is central in a different way: the poem is, in fact, in its tone and logic, a brief summary of A1ceste's *own* speeches to and about Celimene. The fact that A1ceste is guilty here of both prejudice and equivocation is less important than the close correspondence between the rhetoric of the sonnet and Alceste's performance. Alceste's denunciation of the poem as fatuous becomes integral to *his* ridiculousness as his persona converges with its persona. In other words, the spectators' judgment, which is Alceste's and the play's ultimate context, is conditioned in part by this convergence.

Alceste, having warned Oronte that expatiating on love can lead one into playing *de mauvais personnages,* spends much of the rest of his time on stage expatiating on love, and creating a very comic *personnage.* The poem's persona is the lover who is tired of living on hope:

L'espoir, il est vrai, nous soulage
Et nous berce un temps notre ennui,
Mms, Philis, le triste avantage
Lorsque rien ne marche apres lui!

The lover then expresses despair at the prospect of eternal anticipation:

S'il faut qu'une attente eternelle
Pousse a bout l' ardeur de mon zele,
Le trepas sera mon recours

Alceste's frustration at waiting for an explicit understanding with Celimene, his belief that there is reason to hope, and his shows of desperation all closely parallel the sonnet. His threat to withdraw to a *desert-a* non-context--corresponds to the sonnet's rhetorical threat of suicide. Having failed to accept openly the necessity of performance, A1ceste

becomes a theatrical being in the worst sense: he constantly repeats the themes of a narrow, thoroughly prefabricated role. His "being" is as superficial as the word-play of the sonnet. His virtues and emotions look like mere textual formulas, and his awareness of context is as faulty as that of the stargazing philosopher who falls into a well. Alceste's comic downfall is consummated in the consciousness of the spectators, whose role in creating Alceste's-and the play's-meaning corresponds to that of the group in accepting or rejecting any individual's version of himself.

Awareness of context as a fact of life, and of the evolving patterns of a particular context is, then, an attribute that Molière's *ridicules* lack. A1ceste's attempt to evade the complexities of communication and to blind his "spectators" by identifying himself with sincerity is based on the comic error of ignoring the fundamentally social and theatrical nature of sincerity. He could scarcely have been more maladroit in selecting his stance *vis-a-vis* society; misanthropy is as much a social performance as is sincerity.

Another proof of Alceste's convergence with the group he wants to both dominate and reject is the fundamental similarity between misanthropy and the group's principal pastime, *medisance.* In Act III, scene v, Alceste listens to Arsinoe' s jealous gossiping about Celimene in order to gain a social advantage. Misanthropy's similarity to *medisance* is underscored by this partnership. Because of his desire to possess Celimene and to be individuated, A1ceste is bound to others in a relationship that is inescapable, and even mimetic, as well as contradictory. His performance is comic because his perceptual errors result from a willful Ignorance of context. His misanthropy is a form of lover's lament, and is thus convergent with the most hackneyed poetic attitudinizing. Sincerity and uniqueness must be ascribed by the group, and Alceste's performance follows a pattern which was, in a real sense, invented by and for the group. He never makes good his threat to flee to the *desert* of non-context and non-meaning, and thus denies himself the quasi-tragic status Rousseau erroneously gave him.

Molière is at pains to define the difference between proper and improper perception and use of performance, or theater. Life is theater-like, and Molière's comic theater ridicules any who ignore or misuse the analogy. In the case of *Le Misanthrope,* Molière dramatizes an attempt to oppose the social context and triumph *in* that context. In the process, he shows us-as theater nearly always does-that individual and context are not entirely distinguishable unless meaning and identity are to be sacrificed. It is certainly ridiculous to use absolute condemnation of the group as a means to obtain what only the group can confer. The very fundamental resources of individuation are derived from the context. Only after recognizing Alceste's ultimate similarity to his fellows can one appreciate the comic contradictions of his performance. Alceste is profoundly similar to any comic character who is clumsy and ineffectual because he Ignores something critically important about his environment; and the comedy makes perceptible the fact that this error is a very common one.

Source: Larry W. Riggs, "Context and Convergence IN the Comedy of *Le Misanthrope,"* in *Romance Notes,* Vol XXV, No 1, Fall 1984, pp. 65-69.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Jauss offers "an interpretation of the literary history" of The Misanthrope and *considers* it *"against the background of the history of the concept of character.* "

Our newly revived historical anthropology starts from the premise that despite its apparent immutability human nature in fact has a history and, further, that this history-the sediment of constantly reformulated and superseded projects in the process of human self-determination-can be understood as man's second nature. The literary historian can best illustrate what is meant by this formula by tracing changes in the presentation and interpretation of moral character types. No matter how timeless these characters may seem in comedy and moral reflection, they have not always been a part of Western tradition. They first appear at a later stage of Greek literature, in the new comedy of Menander, after Theophrastus had drawn up the first characterology based on observation of everyday life. With the appearance of Theophrastus' work, European comedy acquired a basic repertory of character types that lived on in the oral tradition of so-called mimology (short, crude scenes of popular farce), surviving the interruption of the Christian era in which they were excluded from the canon of the representable. Christian literature in the Middle Ages founded its official canon of characters on the ancient animal fables and on folkloric animal farces. The analogy of animal characters or manners with human nature revealed a new conception of human existence, and the newly created animal epic Reynard the Fox at the summit of medieval satire opposed the idealism of all heroic and courtly poetry for the first time.

The classical repertory of everyday characters was revived by the humanist rediscovery of Plautine comedy and underwent a period of fruitful reception culminating in classical French comedy. Its purest development, Molière's comedy of character, was once again accompanied by a moral-philosophical characterology, La Bruyere's *Caracteres ou les moeurs de ce siecle* (1688). This work assimilated and surpassed Theophrastus' characterology by attempting to portray the entire social life of the age of Louis XIV in its customs as well as its institutions. La Bruyere thus pursued the goal of a moralist: he examined his fellow man's behavior and forms of life in order to ascertain what could be attributed to human nature in general and what was conditioned by changing times. He thus assumed the role of observer as well as critic of his times.

The historical thought of the Enlightenment, foreshadowed in La Bruyere's text, devalued not only the characterology of the classical moralists, which can be considered a kind of protosociology, but also Molière's comedy. By 1800 Goethe could affirm that the time for character plays was over. How he arrived at this prognosis remains a question, but its accuracy seems thoroughly con finned by the subsequent history of comedy. As Peter Szondi has noted, Hofmannsthal's *Der Schwierige* has remained "the only modern figure in the character gallery of great comedy." As an untimely exception, *Der Schwierige* confirms the historical rule in a highly instructive manner. It allows us to see what was required in order to invent-as a reply to Molière's Misanthrope-such an unforgettable figure as Count Blihl, who had to be a "character" in

the eyes of others without having a character in his own. From this point on characterology was increasingly relegated to the museum of the history of science. Scientific psychology today recognizes only social norms and functions, and questions whether moral behavior is at all classifiable. The concept of "character," which is no longer found in psychological lexicons, has been replaced by a theory of "_personality" which does not require the notion of "human nature" but only that of the interaction of disposition and situation.

I have chosen to examine here the character of the Misanthrope because it is represented at the beginning, the culmination, and the end of this tradition in significant works of Menander-his *Dyskolos* is his only full preserved work-Molière, and Hofmannsthal. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the Misanthrope is not included in the Aristotelian classification of the ten affects of the soul accompanied by pleasure or pain, nor in Theophrastus' classification of moral attributes in social life. Does the Misanthrope fall to appear in such anthropological or moral-philosophical treatises because to be or to feel oneself an enemy of mankind would go against nature and the social condition of human existence? If this conjecture were true, then the Misanthrope would not be accidental invention shaped by poetic fiction, but would be rather a limiting case created to test and explore *(auszuspekulieren)* what human nature can be-if man is capable of acting against his own nature and to see how he can be brought to abandon his unnaturalness and return to . . . the ancient ideal of moderation. These considerations allow us to determine in a preliminary fashion what was involved in Menander's creation of a literary character, the Dyskolos, out of a comparable type of social behav ior described by Theophrastus as 'the distrustful man.' The genuine task of literary hermeneutics is the exploration of such transformations of philosophical questions into possible literary answers and their testing through aesthetic experience. My study will offer an interpretation of the literary history of Molière's *Misanthrope,* whose well-documented reception exemplifies the changing horizon of characterology. I shall consider this character against the background of the history of the concept of character and in the light provided by the mutual illumination of practical philosophy and literary fiction.

Character (from the Greek word [meaning] 'to scratch or etch') has the basic meaning of something engraved, imprinted, hence indelible. The corresponding Latin word also signifies a brand, a letter, a military identification mark, and, in an extended sense, a writer's hallmark. After Theophrastus, the word is applied not only to an exterior mark but also to inner nature, and thus acquired the moral meaning of an inscribed personal characteristic For Theophrastus, differences in human behavior reflect differences in nature, and are thus innate and immutable. This is in accord with his belief that after the child's native dispositions have been fully developed no further education is possible-a view which deviates from Aristotle's. Nevertheless, Theophrastus uses the Aristotelian principle m evaluating his characters: their description illustrates a prior definition (e.g., "Distrustfulness is a presumption of dishonesty against all mankind; and the Distrustful man *is* he that will. . .") through observations which compose a mosaic portrait, representing human behavior in terms of excess or deficiency in relation to an ideal but unmet mean. From the outset, ethical characters are negatively determined by their failure to attain the proper measure of the Good Life, and consequently by their

weaknesses or "vices." Virtues apparently have no characters, as Christian tradition later confirmed (virtue acting through the holy man transcends all merely individual differences in human nature).

When these ethical characters enter literature, in the passage from Theophrastus to Menander, they are not merely developed in dramatic action involving conflict with others. The literary elaboration also draws attention to the paradox of a consciousness aware of depending upon nature, against its will to be another nature. The characters of the Boor, the Distrustful Man, the Superstitious Man, the Shy Man, the Misogynist, and the Misanthrope, all characters corresponding to the titles of Menander's plays, are not simply the objects of ridicule The comic exaggeration of their behavior makes the one-sidedness of their nature evident and thus confirms, *ex negativo,* in the eyes of the unconcerned spectator, the unrealized norm of the Good Life. The comedy sets before our eyes a character who deviates from the ethical norm and at the same time remains completely enslaved by his own nature. He may become more or less aware of his enslavement, he may suffer or obstinately persist in it, even to an extreme, when his affectively rigid, circular behavior runs counter to his own ends As an example of this kind of comic effect we may adduce the beginning of the *Dyskolos,* where the grumbler Cnemon summarily turns away a visitor by calling him a "criminal" (even though the visitor wants to offer him an advantageous business opportunity), pelts him with stones and clods of earth and, finally, "when nothing else was left," with pears, the hard-won fruit of his dry, infertile land. Cnemon's contempt for all his fellow men may not only damage his own interests but may even lead to the wish to destroy himself. Thus when his future son-in-law Sostrates appears, Cnemon first wishes he could go a bout like Perseus with a Medusa's head "to turn all those who pestered him to stone" and then complains that "ever if a man should somehow want to hang himself,/there's nowhere he could find the privacy he needs for that I" Menander's Misanthrope also goes beyond the simpler character of the Distrustful Man, in that Cnemon's unnatural behavior extends even to the most natural family relations, which Theophrastus' Distrustful Man still respects.

Menander raises the Dyskolos to the level of a limiting case that makes it possible to investigate the most extreme possibilities and contradictions of human nature within the framework of literary fiction He achieves this ultimately by means of an astute experiment which he apparently tried only in this comedy' the reversals of the action-the fall into the well, the encounter with death, and the rescue by the stepson Gorgias-bring Cnemon to see that he has fallen prey to an error "The mark of inhumanity drops away, and the spectator glimpses the clenched pain of a tormented soul which calls for pity." Cnemon's great monologue, in which he recognizes as delusion his belief that he was "self-sufficient and would need no help" and rejects the philosophical ideal of autarchy, arouses in the modern spectator the expectation that a different Cnemon, freed from his unnaturalness and more open to his fellow man, will result from his recantation. We therefore find it all the more strange that this expectation will be disappointed and that, instead, Cnemon's return to his solitary nature in the last act and his punishment for it in the final harassment scene must have been fully in accord with the classical spectators' expectations.

This hermeneutic crux permits us to recognize an archaic horizon which allowed classical comedy to plumb the depths of a character by playing out the consequences of a limiting case, but only in order to bring to light his unchangeable and ultimately unmotivated nature. Of course, Menander is not content merely to show that his Dyskolos' nature is unmotivated. His comedy implies a question which Theophrastus had not yet asked in his characterology: how can a person, against his own nature, become an enemy of mankind? But the answer that Cnemon's monologue gives does not illuminate grounds for his misanthropy, It only reveals his error in having followed the philosophical principle of autarchy. By saving his life, Gorgias has proven that selfless help among human beings is needed and provided, but Cnemon is not cured of his misanthrophy by being freed from his delusion of autarchy He does not merely repeat the fate of Timon, whose fall from power, riches, and generosity to rum and isolation motivates his contempt for human beings and gods; rather, the groundlessness and inalterability of Cnemon's misanthropy is thrown into relief at the very moment of insight when, faced with deadly danger, his delusion is stripped away from him. In an act which is both a reconciliation and a farewell, Cnemon hands over his rights and responsibilities as family head to his adopted stepson in order from that time on to live completely alone and outside all human society ("No man on earth/would ever suit me. One thing-let me live the way I want"). This decision is the only action that Cnemon himself initiates in a play that always portrays him-in accord with his character-as reacting, not acting

But Cnemon's decision to want to be as he believes himself compelled to be by nature can no more be the comedy's last word than the celebration of the double wedding can be its last scene, although on the religious level of the ritual sacrifices which frame the *Dyskolos'* action It fulfills Pan's prediction of a happy ending. Cnemon's last request that even the old kitchen servant attend the merry celebration so that he can be completely alone m the house is an affront not only to the solidarity of the family, to which he no longer wants to belong, but also to the entire human community represented by the ritual of sacrifice The provocation of this extreme separation is avenged by even the humblest members of the community, a slave and a cook, who take it upon themselves to exorcise their former master's nature with an "ennobling" beating and to close the action of the play with a Dionysian wedding feast Of course we have learned to explain this denouement as a punishment meted out by "poetic justice." But nevertheless we cannot but recognize such a poetic Justice as unjust and so foreign to us that the case of the classical Misanthrope seems to illustrate the hermeneutic paradox: that is, a perfect explanation of a remote horizon of experience does not necessarily imply an understanding of its alterity.

La Bruyere, who translated and further elaborated Theophrastus' *Characters,* designated the aesthetic norm of French Classicism against which Molière's comedy should be measured when he wrote that the principal source of comedy is not Witticisms, obscenities, *double entendres,* or any other type of linguistic joke. Rather, comedy must rely on characters alone to make a wise, virtuous-hence educated-audience laugh. La Bruyere did not explain why human characters should produce the purest comic effect, and therefore never asked how characters could trigger laughter for different reasons at different times. Molière, in turn, did not add much theoretically to La

Bruyere's apodictic assertion. Once when he does discuss the peculiar enterprise of making the *honnetes gens* laugh, he points out only that it is not done by portraying people according to their nature. The difficulty, for Molière, lies in portraying this nature in a way that will bring out the failings of one's contemporaries. Since tragedy, in Molière's view, does not pose this problem, he considers it a less exacting genre. Neither La Bruyere nor Molière apparently suffered from any anxiety of influence; for them the perfection of their classical models rendered superfluous any effort to justify their own work theoretically. We can see this attitude in another cryptic statement by Molière' "Le ridicule" is defined as "la forme exterieure et sensible que la providence a attachee a tout ce qui est deraisonnable." Molière can thus counter the church's criticism of the immoral effect of theater in the final analysis comedy, which reveals in the ridiculous a deviation from what is natural and reasonable in order to reaffirm the "farneux *quod decet* des anciens," cannot but serve the ends of Christian Providence. Has Providence in its wisdom not placed before us a "perceptible sign" in the form of the comic so that we might recognize in the defects of human nature what the golden mean of an upright life demands of us?

In the realm of art, theory and practice seldom coincide, and this is also true for Molière. In matters of theory he was an "ancient" and wanted to raise the *ridiculum* to the level of an agent of Providence in order to legitimize the moral claims of classical comedy. But in matters of practice he was a "modern," and his conception of literary characters decisively questions the naive harmony posited by his theory. His Miser or his Hypocrite can no more be understood on the basis of the classical norm of the comic than can his Sosias or Georges Dandin, his "Malade imaginaire" or "Bourgeois Gentilhomme." These modern characters are no longer definable by the mimetic presentation of a one-sided nature; rather, they are caught between having to be and wanting to be what their nature requires, between natural being and reflective consciousness. They play out their self-contradictions in such a way that the spectator's laughter constantly subsides, changing suddenly into pity or alarm. Far from being a perceptible sign of a self-evident, providential world order, the comic is now aimed at society's claim that it already knows what is natural and reasonable rather than at individual weaknesses and vices I have shown elsewhere in my interpretation of Harpagon's monologue in *L'Avare* how a consciousness enslaved by an unnatural greed can again become productive and rise above all natural and societal orders. Molière thereby brings out a specifically Christian problematic' an evil gradually revealed in the unnaturalness and self-contradiction of the characters. In other words, his comedy represents an aspect of fallen human nature. But this modern view of characters remains untouched by the discovery of the individual, which the history of ideas shows as undergoing a change of meaning in which the Christian conception of human nature gradually prevailed over the inheritance of classical anthropology.

The Christian phase of the history of the concept of character presupposes a new determination of human nature which developed eventually out of a new value placed on individual existence. Augustine, who discovered the individual self in the act of conversion, described in his norm-building *Confessions* the constitution of Christian subjectivity as from the very beginning a divided, temporally split, and-as the mere Image of its creator-necessarily imperfect existence. But the lost wholeness of the

primal nature was restored as soon as the new Christian received through the sacrament of baptism his indelible mark. To this end, Augustine took over the popular expression *militiae character* and extended it as *character Crucis* to the trinitarian baptismal formula. According to the subsequent Christian view, still evident in Thomas Aquinas as well as in Martin Luther, the baptized person receives through the sacrament a "spiritual mark on the soul." Later this concept seems to move away from the theological toward the philosophical meaning of character in that the feature of indelibility is taken from the sacrament of baptism and applied to the *individualitas* of a man, m order to distinguish h1s specific character as the nature of his singularity.

The same word which in the pre-Christian view referred to the unalterable being of different human types or "natures" acquires in the Christian conception a dynamic and later a historical meaning. According to Lelbniz the power of ideas operated m mathematical characters and more particularly m the formula as a rule-for-construction which allows the comprehension of an infinity of numbers. Lessing was the first to speak precisely of the "formation *[Bildung]* of a character" which can lend unity to dramatic action German Idealism then completes the reversal of meaning from character as a determination of nature to character as a determination of freedom. Kant introduced the distinction between physical and moral character, distinguished the latter as a type of thought from the natural dispositions of what he called temperament *(Naturel),* and ultimately defined man as a rational being on the basis of "what he is willing to make ofh1mself." Hence, more precisely, the enlightened man "has a character, which he himself creates, insofar as he is capable of perfecting himself in accord with goals that he establishes for himself ".

One of the most interesting differences between French and German language and culture is that the meaning of "character" as defined by the ph1losophy of German Classicism appears m French for the first time only a century later. We do not find a French equivalent to the famous lines from Goethe's *Torquato Tasso-"Es* blldet em Talent sich in der Stille, / Sich em Charakter in dem Strom der Welt" -before the phrase "former son caractere I" used by Andre Gide and by Andre Maurols This shows that in France the question of character was posed primarily in terms of the social nature of man. What La Bruyere and Molière interpreted through their characters was further developed m moral philosophy and psychology as a specific heritage of French Classicism, and also taken up by the German Enlightenment in the literary form of "moral portraits." Later tills tradition continued in the so-called "physiologies" or "tableaux" (e.g., of Paris, of France) which were periodically revived m the nineteenth century as a way of portraying society. Finally, It entered into the ambitions project of

Balzac who, as a *historien des moeurs,* wanted to produce a complete description of h1s time. Contrary to tIns French development, a process of singularization, sinular to what Reinhart Koselleck has termed the paradigm change from histones to history, was iuitiated in Germany. A singular character based on the ability of an individual to create and to *perfect* himself is detached from the *plurale tantum* of social characters. Character as *sing ulare tantum* becomes henceforth the privileged subject of aesthetic formation *(Bildung)* which, m Germany, was raised to the level of the Ideal life and given a literary form in the *Bildungsroman.* The latter was unknown in France where the ideal

of aesthetic formation seems to be absent m nineteenth-century culture and literature The modern character of the Misanthrope created by Molière is strongly affected by this multiple, changing honzon, as is shown by the history of his reception.

In order to summarize Mohere's comedy, I shall follow the example of French classicism and attempt to construct a portrait" a la maniere de Theophraste" from the details of Alceste's behavior. Misanthropy can be defined as the melancholy temperament of a grouser *(esprit chagrin* the language of Molière's time) who without any visible cause is angry at everyone and meddles at every opportunity in order to condemn the corruption of human nature and in doing so to find his own solitary satisfaction The Misanthrope is something like the following he wants to renounce the friendship of his only friend simply because the latter received a third party with studied politeness and afterwards had to acknowledge that he was, m fact, indifferent to him. Alceste goes so far as to claim that if he had been caught behaving in such a deceitful way be would have hanged himself immediately. When a lawsuit is brought against him, he relies only on his own righteousness to win his case, refusing all good advice and announcing that he would gladly pay a goodly price to lose "Pour la beaute du falt." When his case is lost in the first court, he refuses to appeal to a second because a 20,000 franc fine would be a small price to pay for the privilege of complaining with full justification about the injustice of all humanity. When a would-be poet reads his most recent work to him and awaits his praise, Alceste tells him candidly, "Franchement, il est bon a mettre au cabinet." To complete the affront, A1ceste presents him with a poem that is an example of good taste□that is, of Alceste's taste. In matters of the heart, he does not choose the woman who shares his convictions, but rather confesses his weakness for an extremely worldly and coquettish young widow, whom he is willing to accept despite her failings so that he may purge her soul of them. When she informs him that she favors him, he provokes her by asking if she tells her other suitors the same thing and expresses his love with the bizarre compliment "Et c' est pour mes peches que Je vous aime ainsi." When he decides once and for all to turn his back on all mankind, he is caught in the contradiction of wanting to take with him a member of the very society that is so hateful to him. But his scandalous beloved, who is supposed to share his solitude from then on, does not, of course, agree to this.

This character portrait allows us to see how the modern Misanthrope contrasts with his ancient predecessor whom Molière possibly-if at all-knew in the modern form of Shakespeare's Timon of Athens. The scene is no longer a wilderness in which a Cnemon or a luckless Timon must hoe or dig in the earth: now, society itself is the stage on which the unsociable man must bear his contradiction, only to finally turn away into an even deeper solitude. Molière's Misanthrope is not taught by others and is not brought back to reason from his delusion of autarchy. Nor, at the end of the comedy, when he persists m his unnaturalness, is he punished with the beating that fulfilled the classical spectator's expectation of poetic justice. Now it is the Misanthrope himself who poses as the Judge of his age constantly instructing his friends, his lover, and eventually everyone At the same time, the comic exaggeration raises questions concerning the more profound justice of social conventions, and the expected confirmation of poetic justice is not forthcoming. Thus Molière suggests, for example, that the "Marshals of France" -the highest arbiters in courtly society-might decide whether Oronte's sonnet is

as bad as Alceste, doubly provoked, thinks it is. At this point, the laughter prompted by the absurd cause and the spite of the misanthropic Judge of culture surreptitiously turns around and ends up being directed against the arrogance of a royal authority that would decide by decree what shall be considered beautiful. The comic in Molière is not simply based on a deviation from a societal norm of *bienseance.* SubversIvely the play draws attention to and revalidates what had been repressed by the claim of the upper class to be the unquestioned representative of reason. The modern Misanthrope, who Him offiziell Geltenden das Nichtige und im offiizell Nichtigen das Geltende sichtbar werden laBt," is, according to this famous formula of Joachim Ritter, at the same time a comic and a morally ambivalent character: in social matters because of his unconditional righteousness m a society schooled in the value of *bienseance,* but also as a character, because of the pathological foundation of his nature.

Molière makes the grandiose one-sidedness of Alceste problematic by playing him off against a counter-character Alceste is contrasted with Philinte, the melancholic with the phlegmatic man, and the temperaments of the two men are compared in turn with the contrasting female figures of Celimene, Eliante, and Arsinoe Thus Molière constructs a communicating system of characters who must unfold their nature dialogically rather than monologically in reciprocal role-playing. Alceste's and Philinte' s temperament and even their linguistic demeanor are presented in accordance with the traditional theory of the four bodily humors. This theory was still held in high regard by the medical science of Molière's time, and it is entirely possible that a portion of Molière's contemporary audience recognized symptoms of humoral pathology in the individual traits of these characters. But even if a spectator were acquainted with the pathological basis of the comic figures of Alceste and Philinte, the conflict of such completely contrasting temperaments would have constantly challenged him to consider whose side he should take and how he might find a reasonable mean between these two extremes, because Molière's play assails the prevailing reason and very self-righteousness of his society. But even If these serious challenges which interpreters have answered in the Misan thrope's history of reception in three different ways- threaten to dissolve all comic effects in moral reflection, the audience could always be brought to laughter or smiles by the ultimate idiosyncrasy which most clearly distinguishes Alceste from Cnemon or Timon and which, according to La Bruyere and Bodeau, was the very reason the *honnetes gens* laughed at him. The schism between wanting to be and having to be expresses itself in the comic self-contradiction of an *atrabilaire amoureux* who is in principle a misanthrope but, by way of exception, is nevertheless in love.

The response of Molière's contemporaries indicates that they had to change their views and realize why the comic figure Alceste was in bitter earnest. The spectators in the *parterre* (mere consumers in Molière's day) found nothing to laugh at in the play. The gallery (the connoisseurs and critics) laughed at the wrong times. They had to be taught, for example, that Oronte's sonnet, which was at first considered quite beautiful, was being made fun of as a modish, clumsy pIece written by a would-be poet. Symptomatic of this change of views is the case of a certain Monsieur de Montausier. He summoned Molière in a rage because he had been told that the Alceste everyone was laughing at was his exact portrait. But the high-born man received the trembling author with surprising respect. He had read the work himself in the meantime and could

now only thank Molière because his Misanthrope was the most perfect gentleman he had ever encountered m his life Molière's first public came to esteem Alceste to the extent that they began to see that his ridiculous behavior and bizarre speech were the other face of a rare virtue, righteousness, and that no character could "speak more effectively against the corruption of his fellow men than their enemy." Contemporary critics went so far as to praise the consistency with which Alceste "maintains his character" in all situations, as if it were not his enslavement to his nature but rather his free will and honor which prompted him to set an example for society. "Soutenir bien son caractere"-this newly coined meaning shows that in French Classicism the concept of character encompassed both nature and will. This new understanding presupposed that an individual in his social role maintains the character embedded in him, but It did not yet include a concept of the singular and the private, of the individual as distinguished from a public role

The modern view of Alceste as a misunderstood individual in a degenerate society first arose in German Classicism, and was developed by the Romantics. This major shift in the interpretation of the *Misanthrope* was ushered in by Rousseau's criticism of Molière.

The classical understanding of the Misanthrope was indeed renounced point by point barely a century later. Rousseau reproached Molière for adapting his comedy to the prevailing taste and-worse yet-for not having seen through the ideology of his society In Rousseau's view, Molière exposed to ridicule the only Sincere, indeed the only Just man who had the courage to point out society's vices. To pillory "Ie ridicule de la vertu" on stage was to commit the ultimate sin of withholding from a deluded society the fact that its much-praised advances in knowledge and the arts were being purchased by a parallel decline in its morals and virtues. Was the derided enemy of humanity not actually the unrecognized friend of humanity; was it not because Alceste loved humanity that he was compelled to hate and denounce its vices? A new ideal of human nature was thus imposed by this complete reversal of the classical meaning. In Rousseau's view, Alceste prefigures the *homme naturel* of the French Enlightenment and his failure is the typical fate of the "citoyen de Geneve," who in his sincerity tears away the mask of social appearances and wants to set an example of the path to a natural existence.

It is apparent in the subsequent effects of Rousseau's new interpretation that a new understanding of a classical work often involves both a gain and a loss in meaning. Rousseau himself recommended that the text be revised so that Alceste could become a tragic figure. The "misanthrope amoureux" should be abandoned and instead Philinte the conformist should be exposed to ridicule. What Goethe, echoing Rousseau, called the solitary "Konflikt mit der socialen Welt, in der man ohne Verstellung und Flachheit nicht mehr umhergehen kann" no longer tolerates the spirit of comedy. Molière's Misanthrope could no longer be understood simply as a comic subject because in his sOcietal tragedy the inner world of a great individual had been revealed. Thus Goethe asked "ob Jemals ein DIchter sein Inneres vollkommener und liebenswurdiger dargestellt habe," as did Molière-a quality which Schlegel, in Goethe's view, completely failed to recognize. Goethe and the Romantics were not the only followers of the tragic Alceste. French readers of Rousseau drew another conclusion. Alceste could only be found ridiculous or tragic during the Ancien Regime. Once republican freedom is

developed comedy will have exhausted its purpose and A1ceste have lost his right to complain. Perhaps Stendhal put it best when he wrote that the children of the revolution could no longer be expected to enjoy the pleasures of classical comedy. Its characters should be replaced by a new source of the comic for which Stendhal believed he had found the formula: "se tromper sur Ie chemin qui mene au bonheur." Alceste in particular should have realized that all his suffering derived from the power of the monarchy. The ref ore Molière could retain only a historical interest for his nineteenth-century public unless and this actually happened after 1789-his enemy of mankind was interpreted as a Jacobin *avant la lettre*

The second great shift in the history of reception of the *Misanthrope* results from a reversal of Rousseau's paradigm It is precisely his unquestioned premise that sincerity was the ground for Alceste's behavior that is now doubted. The psychoanalytic interpretation given to Molière's character gave rise to a profusion of aesthetically important readings and thereby weakened the prejudice that psychoanalytic approaches to literature reduce the artistic character of a work to concerns alien to art. This new understanding can be summaried in the following questions, which had not been asked before: Is the comic figure of Alceste rightly and without loss of meaning reducible to the modern character of the sincere individual-a character not found in the tradition before Molière-or does he not rather remain a profoundly ambivalent character? When Alceste demands of Philinte and eventually of everyone, "Je veux qu'on soit sincere" is only the sincerity of others in question and never his own? Why does he still seek the unconditional recognition of others ("Je veux qu' on me distingue") when he finds them incorrigible and, indeed, hates humanity *in toto?* Is something else hiding behind his demand for unconditional sincerity-perhaps the compulsive need to subject all other wills? Does not the initially legitimate protest against the self-righteousness and self-delusion of society always change suddenly into the hubris of one who despises the world and considers only h1rnself upright? Karlheinz Stierle has noted that "m Molière's *Misanthrope* a fundamental social fear-the dissolution of society by the I that posits itself as absolute-is thematized in such a way that the public is freed from this fear through laughter." If the audience of French classicism could free itself from such fears through laughter, wouldn't that laughter subside if today's audience were to see in an enemy of humanity the possible appearance of a tyrant?

It is certainly possible, however, to laugh freely at Hofrnannsthal's *Der Schwierige.* Considering it in relation to Molière's work, we could say that tills belated comedy of character corrects, as it were, its classical model. If contrary to all classical expectations-expectations which the most intricate action of the play strengthens almost to the end-the Misanthrope is at last cured, this comic catharsis is made possible by the fact that in Count Buhl Hofrnannsthal has created and investigated an eminently modern "character." For this "difficult man," who was first conceived in terms of the traditional character of a hypochondriac, is in fact far from being a character coined by nature. Rather, Count Buhl is-like the hero of Musil's contemporary novel-a "man without qualities" or, better yet, a "man without intentions," as Hofrnannsthal first wanted to call his hero in a title he later rejected. So both the natural character of French Classicism and the self-creating character of German Classicism are discarded with the figure. The comic sovereignty of the "difficult man" originates in that others ascribe to

him feature by feature the qualities he lacks in order to form a stable image of his being, an image County Buhl denies and finally destroys in an unexpected action. Thus the self-contradiction of Molière's character, the schism between his nature and his will, is converted into anew, specifically modern contradiction between being for oneself and being for others and dissolved in the cathartic outcome of the comedy. But this denouement is by no means a triumph of narcissism confirming the principle of individuality. Nor is Count Buhl, who considers it naive to think "dab man etwas aus sich machen kann", a character m the German idealist sense. His comic dilemma does not grow out of the autonomy of a subjectivity that, in Hegel's phrase, "sure of itself, can bear the dissolution of its goals and realizations," but rather out of the heteronomy of an action which finally solves his difficulty unexpectedly, bringing him *nolens volens* back to sociability.

If one sees in Hofmannsthal' s comedy a palinode or an ironic antiphony to Molière's comedy of character, then the humor of *Der Schwierige* onginates in the contrariness of a plot which entangles m the "odiosen Konfusionen" a "man without intentions" for whom nothing seems more demanding than to understand "wie man von einer Sache zur andern kommt." At a soiree which he finds perfectly awful he sets out to accomplish diplomatically three extremely delicate intentions' the reconciliation of his former mistress with her husband, the engagement of his nephew with Helene, and his own farewell to her whom he loved m secret What effects the ironic reversal of the classical role of the Misanthrope is that Count Buhl is no longer the critical adversary but rather the perfect representative, admired by all, of the aristocratic society of Old Vienna, who, from a superior position, presides over its declining art of conversation His difficulty is caused not so much by the fact that the medium of conversation, on which he constantly meditates, itself becomes problematic to him. He first gets into an "unentwirrbarer Knauel von MiBverstandnissen" by not avoiding the role of lecturing others, although he, in contrast to Alceste, considers lessons impossible. He falls in his mission at every step and indeed produces the opposite of what he intended. Helene finally teaches him the most unexpected, indiscreet, and at the same time simplest of all lessons wInch penetrates the wall of confusion he had erected and relieves him forever of the difficulty implied in his non-character. The lesson of the comedy with respect to the character of the *Schwierige* is contained in the explanation Helene gives for IDS bizarre behavior-an explanation which is a worthy close to the long history of Misanthrope interpretations, since it teaches us to see the ultimate cause of his self-contradiction in a new light: "Was Sie hier hmausgetrieben hat, das war Ihr MiBtrauen, Ihre Furcht vor Ihrem eigenen Selbst .. Vor Ihrem eigenthchen tieferen Willen." with respect to the behavior of the *Schwierige* in society the lesson of the comedy is the cure of the unsociable man by Helene's confession of her love. What seems to be a social "Enormitat" allows tills remarkable pair to attain sociability in the process of finding themselves-paradoxically, in the very act by which they withdraw from society" Aber es ist die letzte Soiree," announces Count Buhl, "auf der sie mich erscheinen sieht "

One of Hofmannsthal's conCise and programmatIc notes reads "Das *erreichte SoZiale: die Komodien"* His comedy *Der Schwierzge* ends ironically, but there is also a "promesse de bonheur " The power of the comic resolution can only initiate .the reconciliation with society; it cannot complete it. The normative seriousness of social life

is challenged anew since the engagement kiss must be sanctioned by the bridegroom's sister and the bride's father as their delegates. But can we not see in the comic catharsis a desire to turn the solitude of the *Schwierzge* into a regained sociability shared by two, which leaves us with some hope?

I should like to explain tills hope by introducing a notion of truth which, I suppose, may be pertinent not only in poetry but also in social life. If a truth which could convince all would be too much for us, and If truth possessed by one man alone would be too little, are there not many things which are true for at least two people? Do not Count Buhl and Helene, who begin history anew as a first couple in the image of Adam and Eve, and who succeed in destroying the illusion of a truth possessed by a single person (that is, the illusion of classical autarchy as well as of modern individualism), thereby pave the way for a truth which can perhaps someday constitute a "promesse de bonheur" for all?

Source: Hans R. Jauss, "The Paradox of *The Misanthrope,"* in *Comparative Literature,* Vol 35, No.4, Fall 1983, pp 305-322.

Adaptations

FACSEA video distributors offers the 1989 version of *The Misanthrope,* directed by Jacqueline Due, as part of its series collection *Molière: Plaisir du Theatre,* which includes productions of five other Molière plays.

The video entitled *Molière* is a fictionalized dramatic production of the life of Molière, based on the biographical novel by Mikhail Bulgakov, which focuses on the social and political controversy surrounding Molière's theatrical career.

Topics for Further Study

Molière was a key figure in seventeenth-century French drama. Learn more about other areas of French literature in the seventeenth century, such as poetry, fiction, or nonfiction prose. Who are the key figures of the genre, and what are some of their major works? What general concerns and literary values characterize French literature of this period?

Molière's lifetime coincided with the Baroque period in the arts. Learn more about the Baroque period in art or architecture. What specific elements characterized Baroque? Who were some of the major artists and architects of the Baroque period, and what were some of their major works or buildings?

France in the seventeenth century was involved in important international affairs throughout Europe. Learn more about the history of Europe during this period. What major conflicts occurred between France and other European nations during this era? What major events took place in international relations among European nations?

The era of seventeenth-century Restoration thea ter in England was directly influenced by the French theater of Molière. Learn more about England during the Restoration and the historical events that led to the English Restoration. List the elements that you find as being a direct influence from Molière.

Compare and Contrast

1645-1715: The reign of King Louis *XIV* is characterized by the exercise of near absolute sovereign authority.

1715-1789: The reigns of King Louis XV and King Louis XVI witness the waning power of the French monarchy, which culminates in the French Revolution.

1789-1799: The French Revolution of 1789, partly inspired by the American Revolution of 1776, initiates the end of the French monarchy.

The former King Louis XVI is executed in 1793.

The new government becomes known as the First Republic.

1799-1815: Napoleon Bonaparte rules France, naming himself emperor in 1804.

1815-1848: France returns to monarchical rule with the reigns of King Louis XVIII (18151824), King Charles X (1824-1830), and King Louis-Phillip (1830-1848).

1848-1852: The Revolution of 1848 results in the formation of the Second Republic and in the election of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (the nephew of the original Napoleon) to the presidency.

1852-1870: After staging a coup, Louis-Napoleon takes the title of emperor of France In the Revolution of 1870, LOuis-Napo1eon is deposed, and citizens demand the formation of a Third Republic.

1940-1945: France agrees to occupation by Nazi Germany during World War II, resulting in the Vichy government. The French Resistance movement, Free France, works to undermine German rule and the Vichy cooperation.

1945-1958: The end of the war leads to the formation of a Fourth Republic. Women in France are granted the right to vote.

1959: A military coup in French colonial Algiers leads to the end of the Fourth Republic. The Fifth Republic is headed by General Charles de Gaulle.

1968-1969: A national crisis is caused in May 1968 with the occupation of the Sorbonne University in Paris by student radicals, which inspires a surge of wildcat strikes among workers throughout France. De Gaulle, whose national standing never quite recovered from May 1968, resigns in 1969.

1981-1995: The election of François Mitterrand ushers in a socialist presidency in France, which lasts through two terms. In 1995, Jacques Chirac is elected president of France, ending the fourteen-year period of socialist rule.

1600s: The reign of Louis XIV fosters the theatrical arts. Three theaters dominate the Parisian world of drama: The Marais, the Hotel de Bourgogne, and the Palais-Royal. After the death of Molière in 1673, the king orders the merging of three main theater troupes, which, in 1680, become the Comedie-Francaise, the first national theater in Europe.

1790s: During the French Revolution, the Comedie-Francaise is divided along lines of political sympathies.

1800s: Under the emperor Napoleon, the Comedie-Francaise is re-established. In 1812, Napoleon issues a decree stating the rules according to which this national theater is to be run.

1900s: A new director, appointed to the Comedie-Francaise in 1970, initiates the performance of new plays, along with traditional plays.

What Do I Read Next?

L'Ecole des Femmes (1662; The School for Women), by Molière, was a popular success in its initial production but created controversy that lasted for over a year. The story concerns a man who, afraid of the power of mature women, opts to marry an inexperienced young woman only to find himself at her mercy.

Tartuffe (1667), by Molière, was so controversial that it was cancelled shortly after its first run and not performed publicly again until years later. *Tartuffe* is now considered among Molière's masterpieces and is the most popular choice of his plays for student productions.

Le Malade Imaginaire (1673; The Hypochondriac), by Molière, starred, in its initial production, Molière himself as the hypochondriac who is afraid of doctors. He had written the part to suit the cough from tuberculosis he suffered but collapsed on stage during the fourth performance and died several hours later.

The Plain Dealer (1676), by William Wycherley, is an English comedy of manners of the Restoration period, frequently compared to Molière's *The Misanthrope.* It presents a crudely expressed, harsh satire of greed among the upper classes.

Phedre (1677), by Jean Racine, is the masterpiece of the great seventeenth-century tragic playwright. It concerns a woman who is hopelessly in love with her stepson.

The Importance of Being Ernest (1895), by Oscar Wilde, is an English comedy of manners of the late nineteenth century. The plot concerns two young men, both of whom have invented imaginary alter-egos, in a drawing-room farce centered on their romantic dealings with two young women.

Further Study

Bernier, Olivier, *Louis XIV A Royal Life,* Doubleday, 1987. This is a biography of King Louis XIV of France, who reigned from 1643 to 1715 and who remained an ardent supporter of Molière' s theatrical career.

Jones, Cohn, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of France,* Cambridge University Press, 1994.

This is a history of French civilization with an emphasis on graphic display, such as artwork, engravings, and photographs.

Lalande, Roxanne Decker, *Intruders In the Play World. The Dynamics of Gender in Molière's Comedies.* Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996.

This is a feminist reading of the representation of women and gender in Molière's major theatrical comedies.

Marshall, W Gerald, *A Great Stage of Fools. Theatricality and Madness in the Plays of William Wycherley,* AMS Press, 1993.

This book contains a discussion of the works of Molière's English counterpart as the master of the comedy of manners on the English stage.

Maskell, David, *Racine A Theatrical Reading,* Clarendon Press, 1991.

This book discusses the works of the greatest tragic playwright of seventeenth-century France.

Powell, Jillian, *A History of France through Art,* Thomas Learning, 1996.

Powell's text contains a history of art in France, in a cultural and historical context, from medieval through modern tunes.

Walker, Hallam, *Molière,* Twayne, 1990.

Walker's book discusses the development of Molière's dramatic career, with a focus on his major works.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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