

The Misanthrope

By Molière

Translated by Robert Cohen

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Molière's comic masterpiece centers on the character of the French courtier Alceste and the beautiful young widow Célimène he hopes to marry. But the two have radically different personalities: Alceste is a snob who insists on telling everyone the truth as he sees it, and Célimène's instinct is to tell people - and particularly attractive men - only what they are dying to hear. So Célimène flirts and gossips with the courtiers who come to her house while Alceste fumes in jealousy.

A virtual menagerie of other characters seek to intervene, either to bring the lovers together or pull them further apart: these include the pompous poet Oronte; the prudish dowager Arsinoé; the quarreling fops Acaste and Clitandre; the sweet Éliante and the loyal Philinte; and the brazen comic servants Basque and Du Bois.

Molière's genius is seen on every page of the play, particularly in his always-engaging delineation of the thousand and one games, tricks, feints, parries and surprises that jealous lovers and witty sophisticates exchange in a single day's battle of the sexes.

With its fast pace, exquisite rhymes and beautifully detailed characters, this play (and translation) draws every possible laugh - and not a few pearls of wisdom - from the universal foibles of human life. And that Molière wrote the role of Alceste for himself, and played it in the play's 1666 premiere (*opposite his own wife Armande Béjart, known to be flirtatious and rumored to be promiscuous, as Célimène*) makes clear that the dramatist knew what he was talking about!

"Robert Cohen's highly entertaining translation is proof, among other things, that there is room for another equally fluent, stageworthy version of Molière's rhymed couplets, but one with a contemporary flavor full of colloquial yet literate pungency." *Los Angeles Times*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(7 m, 3 w)

PHILINTE: (M) A friend of Alceste. He is in love with Eliante.

ALCESTE: (M) A snob who insists on telling everyone the truth as he sees it.

ORONTE: (M) A pompous poet. Suitor of Célimène's.

CELIMENE: (W) A beautiful young widow, Alceste's love interest.

DU BOIS: (M) Alceste's servant. (Also doubles as Guard.)

ELIANTE: (W) Célimène's cousin. She is in love with Alceste.

BASQUE: (M) Célimène's servant.

ARSINOÉ: (W) A prudish dowager. She has an interest in Alceste.

ACASTE: (M) Suitor of Célimène's.

CLITANDRE: (M) Suitor of Célimène's.

SETTING

The action is set in Paris, variously in front of and/or inside the house of Célimène. Time is the present; i.e. 1666.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

These approximate the pronunciations of French names and foreign words appearing in this translation.

Acaste ah-KAHST
Adraste ah-DRAHST
Alceste ahl-SEST
andiamo! ahn-DYAM-oh!
Arsinoé..... ahr-sin-o-AY
artiste ahr-TEEST
au r'voir (for au revoir) orv-WAH
Basque..... bahsk
beau monde bo MAWND

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE – continued

beaux	(as used here) boze
Bélise	bay-LEEZ
Célimène.....	say-lee-MEN*
Cléon	klay-AWN**
Cléonte	klay-AWNT
Clitandre	klee-TAN-druh
Damis.....	dah-MEE
Damon	dah-MAWN**
demoiselles.....	(as used here) day-mwah-ZELLES
Descartes.....	day-KART
Dorilas.....	do-REEL-ah
Du Bois	dew-BWAH
Éliante.....	ay-lee-AUNT*
faux pas	(as used here) foh-paz
gauche	gosh (with the “o” in “go”)
Géralde	Zhay-RALD
idée fix	ee-day-FEEX
Il faut partir.....	eel-foh-par-TEER
j'accuse.....	zhah-KYUZE
je t'adores	(as used here) zhuh-tah-DORZ***
Jeu de Paume.....	zhuh-deu-POME***
de Sevigné.....	deu-seh-vee-NYAY
moi	mwa
Molière	mol-YEHR
Oronte.....	aw-RAWNT
Oubliette	oo-blee-YET
foie gras	fwa-GRAH
Philinte	fee-LANT
soirées	swa-RAYZ
savoir faire	sah-vwah-FARE
Schnell	shnell
tout Paris.....	too-pah-REE
très.....	treh
vis-à-vis.....	(as used here) VEEZ-ah-VEEZ

*the first two syllables are rushed together

** the last syllable is something like a honk through the nose, with the tongue not touching the roof of the mouth.

*** zh as the “s” in “pleasure”

ACT I

(AT RISE: PHILINTE and ALCESTE enter in the midst of an argument.)

PHILINTE: What is it? What's the matter?

ALCESTE: Leave me be!

PHILINTE: Good Lord, Alceste! This is insanity!

ALCESTE: Leave me alone, Philinte! Get out of here!

PHILINTE: I'm staying put until I have your ear!

ALCESTE: You hypocrite! You'll never understand!

PHILINTE: Dear friend, your words are getting out of hand--

ALCESTE: "Dear friend"?

You're calling me a friend of yours?

Such friendship's like the so-called love - of whores!

This morning, sir, our friendship was destroyed

When you pretended to be overjoyed.

PHILINTE: Just when did I do that? Why'm I to blame?

ALCESTE: How can you ask that and not die of shame?

Your honesty's been permanently bruised,

And what you did can never be excused!

That man today! You praised him to the skies

And kissed his cheeks! And tears came to your eyes!

But when I asked you what his claim to fame was,

You couldn't tell me what his stupid name was!

And when he left, your smile just sank like lead.

"Can't stand that stupid imbecile," you said.

Good lord, Philinte, it's utterly pernicious

To seem so sweet, yet really be so vicious!

If I were so dishonest with my feelings

I'd hang myself for moral double-dealings!

PHILINTE: (*Lightly.*) Well, I don't think it justifies a hanging

Nor all this philosophical haranguing.

Let's call a truce, Alceste! And let's both say:

We'll neither of us hang ourselves today!

ALCESTE: Philinte, your humor's sickening at best.

PHILINTE: Well, tell me what to do then, dear Alceste!

ALCESTE: Just be sincere! Just say the words you mean!

And nothing more! Or less! Or in-between!

The Misanthrope

-6-

PHILINTE: But when a fellow greets you in the street
You have to be A little bit discreet.

You can't say: "Look at you, you've gotten old!"
Or "Your wife's on the sauce again, I'm told!"

ALCESTE: Well, what's better, showing false affections?
Groveling in social genuflections?

These oily "thee and thou" words, how I hate 'em!
Your flatterers and cowards: Heaven grate 'em
Into microscopic, mortifying shreds!

With all their vile pretensions in their heads!
Their stuck-on-smiling, so-beguiling faces!
Their stupid, grinning, kiss-kiss-kiss embraces!
Their pompous and affected salutations
And condescending, foppish protestations!

That man today? Hypocrisy defined!
He praises everyone. Loves all mankind!
And you, Philinte? Indecently obscene!
To hug that monstrous love-and-praise machine!
What's flattery's appeal if it's from one
Who flatters absolutely everyone?

Ah no, Philinte, I'm one who quite abhors
The fawning tributes of these snobs and bores.
Give me a friend whose mind is still his own -
Who'll give his love to me, and me alone!
If there is praise that's going to be conferred,
Well, then, Philinte, I want to be preferred,
Not loved along with all the human race!
And so, "dear friend," how stand you in this case?
Do you prefer me to that simpleton?

Watch out! Who loves all men cannot love one!

PHILINTE: But in the real world, my "preferred" Alceste,
A little tact might - don't you think - be best?

ALCESTE: No tact! We must explicitly rebuke
All flatterers! Philinte, they make me puke!
Let us be free to say just what we mean;
Reveal our hearts. Emotionally, come clean.
Defy hypocrisy. And speak, in sooth,
The truth, th'whole truth, and nothing but the truth!

End of Freeview

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