

Meredith Brown

Prof. Howard Eiland

21L.002

15 April 2004

The Value of Friendship

The idea of the hero has evolved a certain flexibility that allows the hero's human flaws as well as his valiance to be acknowledged. The protagonist of *The Misanthrope* embodies both ridiculous and heroic qualities. Alceste's histrionic rants are comically absurd, but he is the only character that attempts to effect social change, which makes him a hero in the context of the play. This dichotomy of heroism and absurdity makes Alceste a complex and fascinating character. Although Moliere's characters tend to fit stereotypical roles, Alceste's moral ambiguity makes him more realistic and interesting than most prototypical heroes. Alceste endorses genuinely emotion-based friendship in a world where emotion is usually either overlooked or manipulated. However, his failure to adhere to this ideal hinders his heroic potential.

Moliere begins his play by introducing the misanthropic nature of his protagonist. Alceste's first line is, "Kindly leave me alone." (Wilbur 1.i), and throughout the first scene he elaborates upon his hatred of mankind through moral discourse with Philinte. Alceste is convinced that the human race is "base / And impudent and villainous and perverse" (l.i) and admits that he "include[s] all men in one dim view" (l.i), a sweeping generalization that he repeatedly avows. The placement of this dialogue at the beginning of the play is structurally significant,

and this placement combined with the title communicates the importance of Alceste's misanthropy to the audience.

The cultural context of *The Misanthrope* is key to understanding the misanthropic tendencies of its protagonist. At the end of the play, Alceste refers to society as "this bitter world where vice is king" (V.viii). In a sense, vice reigns not only over virtue but also over France itself. King Louis XIV, during whose reign this play was written and performed, encouraged and even required the flattery, artifice, and corruption against which Alceste rails. Many aristocrats actually lived at the royal palace because royal approval was contingent on regular attendance at the king's awakening, bathing, eating, and bedtime ceremonies. Clitandre mentions that he attends "the hour of the King's *coucher*" (Wilbur, II.v) and "le lever du roi" (Moliere, II.iv.567, footnote). These references confirm that the characters in the play are conscious of the social obligations imposed on the nobility. The superficiality of society in the play probably results in part from this political climate.

The typical attitude towards relationships in this society is pragmatic rather than emotional. Most people view friendships and courtship as political tools which can potentially increase personal power and influence. Philinte introduces this idea in the opening exchange with Alceste: "When someone greets us with a show of pleasure, / It's but polite to give him equal measure, / Return his love the best that we know how, / And trade him offer for offer, vow for vow." (Wilbur I.i). Philinte uses economic language to describe interpersonal interaction. He indicates that the semblance of reciprocation is far more important than

reciprocation itself in most social interactions. Declarations of friendship and love lose emotional significance in this society because the social convention is to use vows of affection to increase individual power. Emotional speech is a formality in the process of making this kind of transaction. Those who fail to give “equal measure,” like Alceste, are regarded as aberrant at best and criminally hostile at worst.

The degree of power that an individual possesses is critical in the initiation of friendship. Oronte recommends himself to Alceste by mentioning his influence: “Meanwhile, I shall be yours in every way. / If, for example, there should be anything / You wish at court, I’ll mention it to the King. / I have his ear, of course; it’s quite well known / That I am much in favor with the throne.” (I.ii). Although Oronte claims his allegiance to Oronte in “every way,” he focuses almost exclusively on the ways in which he can increase Alceste’s political influence, which hints that Oronte is really proposing a pragmatic connection. Similarly, Celimene, whose womanhood prevents acquisition of direct political power, exploits her sexuality to gain influence: “Why I put up with [Clitandre] you surely know: / My lawsuit’s very shortly to be tried, / And I must have his influence on my side.” (II.i). Celimene’s relationships are vehicles of economic exchange: she offers her courtiers the hope of winning her hand in return for the power of their influence. Arsinoe reverses this strategy. She attempts to seduce Alceste by utilizing her influential connections: “On peut, pour vous servir, remuer des machines, / Et j’ai des gens en main, que j’emploierai pour vous” (III.v.1078-79). In these lines, Arsinoe tells Alceste that she can serve him by setting machines

into action, and that she has people in her hand that she can employ for his sake. Arsinoe discusses her friends with casually impersonal language, referring to them merely as players in a political machine. Her metaphor of holding these influential people in her hand implies that she can not only control them but can also crush them; it leaves little room for mutual respect or equality. Arsinoe sees her friends chiefly in terms of their usefulness to her, which is clearly the established social norm.

Alceste's rejection of these false relationships and adherence to honesty border on revolutionary in this society. Although he is well-respected, most people regard his opinions with dubious curiosity. Philinte calls Alceste's candor a "bizarrarie" (Moliere I.i.2) and a "maladie [qui], / partout ou vous allez, donne la comedie, / et [qui] vous tourne en ridicule aupres de bien des gens." (I.i.105-08), which can be translated as: "a sickness which gives comedy wherever you go, and which will make you a laughingstock in the opinion of a good many people." Philinte regards Alceste's zealous nonconformity as an illness, which reveals the extent to which adherence to social norms is taken for granted by most people. Philinte, like most of the other characters, seems to believe that the root of this conflict of interest lies not in society but in Alceste's "sick" perspective.

Nevertheless, Alceste's moral strength attracts the few genuine friendships found in the play. The friendships that Philinte and Eliante feel toward Alceste are based not on ambition but on genuine respect. Eliante mentions this explicitly: "Still, I confess that I respect him greatly. / The honesty in which he takes such pride / Has – to my mind – its noble, heroic side." (IV.i). They both honor

Alceste's desire for honest, straightforward interaction. In his arguments with Alceste, Philinte articulates his own view and firmly defends it: "With all respect for your exalted notions, / It's often best to veil one's true emotions." (I.i). This display of independent thought shows that the friendship between Philinte and Alceste transcends the artifice typical of relationships in this society, even as Philinte defends these superficial interactions. Although Philinte flatters other characters, such as Oronte, he never flatters Alceste and is even able to criticize the "bizarrerie" of Alceste's behavior (I.ii.2), because their friendship is strong enough to withstand criticism. Eliante too corrects Alceste when their opinions do not coincide; she counters Alceste's idea of love with her own more generous opinion (II.v). In a way, both Philinte and Eliante honor Alceste's belief that "one should object / To every blemish, every least defect" in a loved one (II.v). They both voice their opinions when they disagree with Alceste, which demonstrates the strength of their respect and friendship.

Alceste's ideal of friendship is based on emotion rather than ambition. He believes that "l'amitié demande un peu plus de mystère, / Et c'est assurément en profaner le nom / Que de vouloir le mettre a toute occasion. / Avec lumière et choix cette union veut naitre" (I.ii.278-81), which translates as: "Friendship requires a little more mystery, and it will surely profane its name to want to apply it to all occasions. With light and choice this union wants to be born." Alceste's ideal of friendship involves a conscious choice following a period of acquaintance and an emotional bond rather than a pragmatic one. The use of the word "choice" echoes his dialogue with Philinte in the first scene of the play, when Alceste

declares that he “chooses to be chosen” (I.i) and emphasizes the importance of differential preference in friendship. Furthermore, Alceste’s language indicates that friendship is sacred to him. He uses words that carry religious connotations, like “mystery,” “profane,” and “union,” in an careful effort to instill in Oronte a respect for genuine friendship.

Alceste does avoid utilizing friendships for political gain; for example, he “refuse[s] to lift a hand” to defend himself in his lawsuit (I.i). However, his behavior occasionally contradicts his sacred attitude towards friendship in other ways, as in the second scene of act 4:

Philinte: Still, in a letter, appearances may deceive;

This may not be so bad as you believe.

Alceste: Once more I beg you, Sir, to let me be;

Tend to your affairs; leave mine to me. [. . .]

Madam, this heart within my breast

Is yours; pray take it; redeem my heart from [Celimene],

And so avenge me on my torturer.

Ironically, Alceste himself fails to adhere to his ideal of friendship. This scene reveals several levels of hypocrisy and absurdity in Alceste’s treatment of Philinte and Eliante. First, Alceste responds to Philinte’s attempts to calm him down with contemptuously terse commands. In this scene, Alceste seems to lack a basic respect for Philinte’s position as his friend, as if the “dim view” in which he holds mankind overrides his ideal of friendship. Furthermore, although he chastises Philinte for benevolent meddling, Alceste involves Eliante in a much more injurious

way by basing his entire plan for revenge on the manipulation of her love. Although he never seeks political favor through relationships, here he does attempt to exploit Eliante's affection for personal profit: he offers her his heart, which he knows she desires, in exchange for the pleasure of revenge on Celimene. This offer is not only unjust but also empty, because Alceste is not in control of his heart, which cannot "break these chains of passion, and be free" (IV.iii). Ultimately, despite his ideas about the sacredness of friendship, Alceste seems unable to appreciate the value of the consistent loyalty of Philinte and Eliante. At the end of the play, he laments that he has been "betrayed and wronged in everything" (V.viii), failing to acknowledge the powerful loyalty that keeps Philinte and Eliante by his side.

Alceste's self-absorption, histrionic outbursts, and failure to turn his overly critical eye on himself render him an absurd character. However, even the awareness of a social problem is a step in the right direction, and Alceste's ideals lend his character elements of heroism. His idea that criticism is the highest expression of love is less comically extreme and more noble when he unconsciously applies it to society as a whole. Blind support of a flawed system seems harmless but is actually destructive, for it hinders others' attempts to effect necessary changes. Any system, political or otherwise, that wishes to remain open to improvements should be open to criticism. And any concerned citizen or member should have the courage to criticize.

Works Cited

Moliere. *Le Misanthrope*. Ed. G. Sablayrolles. Librairie Larousse: Sorbonne, 1971.

Moliere. *The Misanthrope and Tartuffe*. Trans. Richard Wilbur. Harcourt Brace & Company: New York, 1965.