Flattery and *The Misanthrope*

Abstract

Molière's Alceste is often discussed with reference to his misanthropic personality but what he aspires to doing, truth-telling, has received relatively less attention. This is curious especially if we consider that Alceste defines flattery, the opposite of truth-telling, as his main adversary. Indeed, it is Alceste's hatred of flattery that explains his misanthropy, not the other way around. We will first discuss the significance of flattery. Then we trace the consequences of this idea in the play drawing on Aristophanes, Plato, and Aristotle where they define flattery as a relation to untruth and in opposition to friendship. In Plato's *Gorgias*, however, a second sense of flattery transpires: distorting ideas and practices through instrumental use. We ask what a reflection on flattery in these two interrelated senses can contribute to our understanding of Molière's comedy. What frames our discussion is the relation between Alceste and Philinte (as a stand-in for the social) on the one hand and the relation between Alceste and Célimène (as a stand-in for seduction) on the other. Alceste cuts an abject figure in relation to both Philinte and Célimène. We end with a discussion of how Alceste can, for all his abjection, continue to fascinate us.

The function of comedy is to correct the vices of men.

Molière

Introduction

'Oh, what's the matter? What's wrong now' (Molière 2001: I.1.1)? *The Misanthrope*, Moliere's masterpiece, starts with this question addressed to Alceste, the misanthropic protagonist, by his best friend, Philinte. Alceste answers angrily, stating that he wants to be left alone. Philinte asks Alceste to control his temper. But Alceste wants to 'make a stand' (6) against flattery which he contrasts with friendship. For he sees flattery everywhere, including in Philinte's behavior. Thus,

when Philinte expresses that he finds it hard to understand Alceste's abrupt moods although they are 'good friends' (7), Alceste replies that he does not want Philinte's friendship anymore because he has just 'witnessed' him flattering someone:

> I'm telling you, there's no excuse for what you've done—
> Your antics must seem scandalous to everyone.
> You met a man, you treated him as your best friend,
> You were all over him, you hugged him without end,
> You said he mattered to you, swore by Heaven above
> That what you felt for him was liking, even love.
> I asked you for the fellow's name, when he had gone,
> And you scarcely remembered who he was—come on! (Molière 2001: I.1.15-22)

Alceste 'hates' Philinte for he is a flatterer 'rotten to the core' (12). Habitual flattery is an unworthy way of being which stifles one's soul. 'But seriously, what am I supposed to do?' (34), asks Philinte. Is there an alternative to flattery? For Philinte, a pragmatist, sociality consists in role playing: 'you must play the game' (39). And the game is one of exchange. Exchange of flattery 'seems only polite' (38) in the civil society. If somebody flatters you, 'swears you're his best friend, you do the same' (40). But Alceste cannot accept this. He wants to eliminate appearances, simulation and role playing. To appear friendly is not being a friend. On the contrary, flattery corrupts the self and the society. It degrades esteem for respecting everyone is respecting no one. Flattery flattens values by treating the decent and the foolish alike (48). 'No, if a man who has the slightest self-respect is faced with such hypocrisy, he must object' (53-4). One must do this for the sake of the self and for society. But how? Through truth-telling, frank speech, which 'should come straight from the heart' (37).

In *The Misanthrope*, Molière turns Alceste, a philosophically orientated figure obsessed with truth-telling, into a unique comic character, mocking, through him, the tragic response to the human condition. However, Alceste is often discussed with reference to what he is, his misanthropic personality, while what he aspires to doing, truth-telling, which the play explicitly juxtaposes to flattery in a consistent manner, has received relatively less attention. This is curious especially if we consider that Alceste defines flattery as his primary enemy throughout the play. And importantly, this antagonism does not stem from Alceste's misanthropy but is what grounds and

conditions it. It is, in other words, Alceste's hatred of flattery that explains his misanthropy, not the other way around.

From Alceste's viewpoint, Philinte does not differ from the majority because he too abandons himself to exchanges of flattery. But Alceste wants 'to be distinguished from the rest' (63). And it is first at this point we hear an explicitly misanthropic opinion: 'I've had enough. Mankind's an absolute disgrace. I'll make a stand, alone against the human race' (Molière 2001: I.1.95-6). Significantly, here misanthropy is not articulated as a cause (of Alceste's actions) but as a consequence of, as a reaction to flattery, which surrounds him. He hates flattery before he hates human beings. This is not even a general hatred of human vices as such; this is first and foremost the hatred of flattery, which is why the most natural alternative to flattery is its opposite, truth-telling. Alceste's is a world of flattery reminiscent of the Hobbesian state of nature. In this world, love and friendship are rare 'since man is nothing but an arrant wolf to another man' (Molière 2001: IV.1.1524). And in such a world, only what Foucault called care of the self can promise redemption. Absolute individual truthfulness against socialized flattery, even at the cost of abandonment from society (see Molière 2001: I.1. 68-69).

So far there are three points to make. First, in *The Misanthrope* flattery is a major theme contrasted with friendship and with truth-telling. Second, the alternative set against flattery in the play is frank speech or truth-telling, a constitutive element of friendship. And third, misanthropy emerges as a topic first as a reaction to the normalization of flattery. In the following, we start our discussion by focusing on the antagonism between flattery and truth-telling, which is articulated in the play by Alceste. Then, drawing on Foucault, we show that what is ultimately at stake in this antagonism is the self and its relation to the social world. We then turn to the classic texts of Aristophanes, Plato and Aristotle to consider the first sense of flattery, which is defined in opposition to friendship, as a false friendship based on simulation and deception. In Plato's *Gorgias*, however, a second sense of flattery transpires. In this second sense, flattery, which Plato opposes to *techne*, means not merely a relation to untruth but emptying out, revising and distorting ideas and practices through instrumental use. We reflect on flattery in these two senses, asking what they can contribute to our understanding of Molière's comedy and of Alceste as a misanthropic character. What frames our discussion is the relations between characters: Philinte and Alceste on the one hand and Célimène and Alceste on the other. We argue that in the play Philinte is mainly a stand-

in for friendship and sociality, Célimène signifies seduction, and Alceste is defined in his outright opposition to flattery. We end with asking why Alceste, for all his abjection, does continue to fascinate today.

Flattery, friendship and Alceste

Who is the flatterer? In which ethical-political contexts does the flatterer act? With what cultural, political, economic consequences? These are some of the questions that must be answered to understand Molière's Alceste. As Alceste points out, flattery has a constitutive role in social life. Wherever there is power, there is flattery. Far from being incidental to social, cultural, political life, flattery is constitutive of the social. It is an integral part of power relations. Indeed, in humans 'deception, flattering … is so much the rule and the law that almost nothing is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure urge for truth could make its appearance among men' (Nietzsche: 1976: 42).

The ancient Greeks used the term *kolakeia* for flattery in two senses, as a relation to untruth and as the very process of the distortion of the truth. As such, from Plato to Foucault, flattery is the opposite of *parrhesia*, truth-telling, understood as a practice that enables the subject to access truth, communicate it to others, and to criticize power to be governed less. *Parrhesia* is:

> a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. (Foucault 2001: 19)

To emphasize, *parrhesia* is not only a theoretical pursuit but also a 'practice' (Ibid. 106) that shapes the critical relations between the self and the society and between the self and truth. The problem of the truth-teller is not only how to escape the order of things, to be left alone, but also to ask, as Alceste does, how one is to become a self and live that self in the context of always-already existing social relations. What is at stake in *parrhesia* is therefore the very nature of the self. *Parrhesia* and flattery (*kolakeia*) are different because they imply different kinds of selfhood. What is ultimately

at stake in flattery, in other words, is the self. This is another reason why we need to investigate the discontents of flattery in more detail in *The Misanthrope*.[1]

These points, and accordingly Alceste's relational position, will appear in a clearer light if we turn to the systematic accounts of flattery in ancient literature. The flatterer appears to be a common figure already in old comedy, for instance in Aristophanes' *Wasps* and *Knights* (see especially 1971: 419, 683, 1033), and in ancient philosophy, particularly in Plato and Aristotle. In both traditions, flattery is seen to be part of an unequal, hierarchic relation. The flatterer is characteristically a weak, meek, slavish person, capable only of praising whoever the master is and whatever the master does. But the flatterer can also be a fox. Hence, flattery is seen as a strategic, instrumentalizing mode of action. As such, flattery also involves trickery and deception. Thus, simulation and dissimulation are indispensable to it (see Kapust 2018).

These two aspects of flattery, its slavishness and its instrumentalizing logic, are also what is emphasized by Plato and Aristotle. Thus, in the *Symposium*, Plato (2011: 183a4-b3) describes flattery (*kolakeia*) as a slavish undertaking. Even Plato's tyrant appears slavish insofar as he must 'flatter the worst people' for instrumental reasons (2003: 9.579e). Aristotle, too, accentuates the slavish aspect of the flatterer in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, claiming that 'all flatterers are servile' (Aristotle 1999: 1125a 5-10; see also Edwards 2006: 309, Duncan 2006: 106-108). Aristotle's flatterer, too, is bent on pleasing others with hidden motives, to further his or her own interests (1999: 1157a). For the same reason, the friendship of the flatterer is fake. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle describes the flatterer as a false friend: 'to beflattered and have a flatterer is pleasurable; for a flatterer is an apparent admirer and apparent friend' (2007: 1371a18). Falseness here is grounded in the flatterer's appeal to the *hedon*, to the pleasant (Ibid. 17). While a friend always aims at doing

[1] Of course flattery can be put into the service of truth-telling. A classic example in this regard is Dio Chrysostom's (1932) *Discourses*, where Diogenes is comes across as a tactical flatterer. Hence it is important to differentiate flattery from other significant concepts such as the 'trickster' (Benjamin), 'tactics' (de Certeau), the 'parasite' (Serres), 'line of flight' (Deleuze), 'profanation' (Agamben), concepts which all refer to situations where one seeks to escape the grip of strategic (governmental) apparatuses from within by playing with, subverting, the prescribed modes of use. They are all reminders of a critical 'art' (*techne*) that can trick the existing order of things. But in flattery an 'art' is tricked and captured by an existing order of things (see Diken 2025 for a further discussion of this aspect).

and saying what is best for one, the flatterer aims only at what is pleasant (Aristotle 1915: 1221a5-8). Yet, what is pleasant is not necessarily what is good and feeling good is not the same as being good. But why are people caught up in the schemes of flattery, then? Aristotle's answer is self-love. People love flatterers because they love themselves. 'For the flatterer … pretends to love more than he is loved' (Aristotle 1999: 1159a 15-20). The cost of listening to flattery is being deceived because the flatterer lives at the expense of those who do not, to use a Socratic expression, know themselves, who cannot control their passions (such as self-love) by their reason and thus yield to the temptations of flattery.

As such, Aristotle's point serves as *locus classicus* for a generic conception of flattery as a social relation which is antithetical to friendship. And Alceste's discourse is very much in line with this classic conception of flattery. He is opposed to flattery because it is a pretense of friendship, a simulation, which should be 'banned' (Molière 2001: I.1.67-68).

There is, however, a second sense of flattery in Plato which is more interesting in our horizon. In Plato, too, the discussion of flattery is grounded in the distinction between the good (friendship) and the pleasant (flattery). But a significant surplus meaning comes into view in *Gorgias* (Plato 1884: 461b-466a) where he defines *kolakeia* (flattery) in relation to *techne* (art). While *techne* defines a function, a form of activity which demands insight and exercise, the latter, flattery, signifies its distortion. Flattery is thus opposed to art. While *techne* can bring forth the useful and the good (*kalon* and *agathon*), *kolakeia* is harmful and bad (*aischron* and *kakon*). More interestingly, the same activity can appear as *techne* and *kolakeia* at once. Thus, rhetoric, for instance, can be considered both as *techne* and *kolakeia*. Indeed, for every *techne*, there is a corresponding *kolakeia*, which functions as a distorted picture (*eidolon*) of it; each *kolakeia* wears the mask of a *techne*, pretends to be a *techne*, thus captivating the ignorant who cannot put a distance to it (see Sløk 1987: 68-69, 73-4).

It is in these two senses that Plato (2003: 7.538a-d) demarcates *parrhesia* as the opposite of *kolakeia* (flattery) where flattery does not only indicate simulation and dissimulation of truth or falsehood in a straightforward fashion, but also implies, in a more sinister sense, the revision, internal perversion of, rather than opposition to, ideas and practices. Flattery designates a strategic field of formation which involves appropriating, revising, abusing, accommodating, twisting, and

emptying out ideas and principles. In *The Misanthrope*, too, flattery is understood in both senses, as a relation to a straightforward lack of truth and as the twisting of values and virtues at once.

Let us, at this point, return to the first scene where Alceste complains about the complicity between the knaves and the fools, between the mischievous flatterers and those who condone and lend themselves to the flatterers' traps (Molière 2001: I.1.120). They know flatterers are flatterers, that their manners are just a 'charade' (125), but, cynically, they behave as if they do not know … and reward the flatterers:

> Call him confounded liar, no one will object;
> Say he's a fraud, and nobody will contradict.
> Yet, with his smirking face, he gets himself received
> In the best circles, though his hosts are not deceived.
> …
> Yes, curse him, every time! It cuts me to the quick
> To see him get away with every dirty trick.
> Sometimes, it overwhelms me. I feel mortified
> By all mankind, and long to run away and hide. (Molière 2001: I.1.135-145)

To this accusation of cynicism, Philinte responds by accusing Alceste of being inflexible. Alceste shouldn't torment himself so much with the vices of his contemporaries. He should look with some indulgence to people's failings:

> The stuffy moral code our ancestors display
> Is scarcely suitable for how we live today.
> And nowadays, perfection's not what we expect—
> We try to fit in, and be worthy of respect.
> I'm telling you, my friend, it's madness to inform
> Us all we're in the wrong, and tell us to reform. (Molière 2001: I.1.153-158)

We need values and virtues to be more pliable, bendable, and flexible. Or, in one word, we must yield to the times, 'fit in' the world of flattery (156), which is the only possible world. What we have here is a normalization and justification of flattery, which is Alceste is opposing. There are two points to make in this respect. The first relates to the use of ideas. Every idea can be captured, 'twisted' and misused by anybody for any purpose by flattery. 'Twisting' is a given in an ontology

of becoming. Every dramatization of an idea necessarily involves producing a difference. But the real question here relates to use. Philinte and the society which he is a stand-in for approach ideas in an instrumental way. Effectively, the real opposition we have here is one between free use (Alceste's *parrhesia*) and instrumental use (Philinte's *kolakeia*).

In the next section, we discuss Alceste's understanding of flattery and truth-telling, laying out the differences in Alceste's and Philinte's positions and clarifying the way Molière ridicules Alceste as a figure who takes himself too seriously.

Alceste's truth-telling as madness and blindness, and comedy

Alceste articulates his desire as truth-telling, claiming that he has a relation to truth through frankness. But does Alceste risk anything in his pursuit of truth? As Morgan points out, Alceste seems to be generally accepted by other characters in the play and it is possible that they enjoy and even provoke his outbursts 'precisely because they do not expect him to go beyond limits they can accept and even control' (1984: 297). Alceste, in other words, is not a radical truth-teller for *parrhesia* always involves a risk (Foucault 2001: 17-9). His is a permitted revolt. Nevertheless, he is intoxicated by the desire for truth-telling to the point of losing self-control, of madness. If, as Pascal suggested, there are '[t]wo excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason' (quoted in Boysen 2024: 36), one could say that the society of flatterers which Alceste hates and Molière mocks is guilty of the first excess while Alceste 'most certainly excels in the second kind' (Boysen 2024: 36). But 'nothing but reason' is not reason; it is an obsession, an intoxication. If truth-telling is an intervention into time to change its course, this intervention always involves a strategic decision, reason; *parrhesia* always seeks to 'seize' the right moment to act as well as an intoxication which results from being 'seized' by the moment. This kairological combination of intoxication and reason, which is essential to *parrhesia*, is what is missing in Alceste. His is an intoxication without strategic reasoning, thereby a madness (see Boysen 2024: 38-43 and Lacan 2006: 141 on Alceste's madness in a clinical sense).

What could be madder than convincing oneself that truth-telling is what the spectacle of flattery needs more than anything else? Unsurprisingly, people around him instantly set Alceste down as mad. But from Alceste's own point of view reality itself is perverted, which is why truth-telling

‘appears’ to be mad to flatterers. From the point of view of Philinte, however, the problem is ‘not whether the truth can or should be told, but, rather, by whom, to whom, when, where, and-most important-how?’ (Brody 1969: 570). While Philinte reasons that total frankness can be ‘idiotic’ and risks being totally misunderstood (Molière 2001: I.1.74), Alceste insists that one must, always, ‘tell the whole, unvarnished truth’ (80), sparing nobody. While Philinte can live with the ‘faults’ of human nature, the same faults appear as vices to Alceste and put him in a depressive rage (93-96). Philinte thinks that Alceste’s ‘grim philosophy’ (97) has turned him into a ‘ridiculous’ comic figure, into ‘a laughing stock’ in the eyes of others (106, 108). Alceste responds: ‘I’d be disgusted, if they thought that I was wise’ (112). The recognition of others is valueless because the others themselves are devoid of value. As Bernard Höfer summarizes, for Alceste ‘otherness’ is associated with superiority. His rejection of role-playing and moderation is an expression for his demand for distinction and for his vanity (2010: 138). ‘He’d fear he was an ordinary human if he agreed with any man—or woman’ (Molière 2001: II.4.675-76).

Alceste draws a surplus enjoyment from lack of recognition. Concomitantly, nowhere in the play he refrains from staging his contradictions and weaknesses (see Molière 2001: I.1.229-31). Even losing a court case gives Alceste satisfaction (Molière 2001: I.1.195) for it is an opportunity to blame and accuse the corrupted society and to turn his misfortunes into a source of surplus enjoyment. Nevertheless, Höfer argues, ‘Incapable of affirming himself apart from the gaze of others, [Alceste’s] notion of subjectivity is grounded on that very society that he scorns’ (2010: 138). Even though he feels great disappointment towards society, he still cares about social judgment. Alceste says, ‘Everyone knows of my integrity’ (Molière 2001: V.1.1489). Höfer further claims that ‘Molière reveals how reason remains ineffective to control anger’ (141). In fact, what is absent in Alceste is an ability to or attempt at distinguishing anger and spite. Critique presupposes indignation and anger. And Alceste has good reasons to be angry. Alceste’s anger and disappointment are so profound that he feels compelled to take drastic action against what he sees as the inherent flaws of the human race. He outbursts, ‘I plan to dash head-on with the whole race of man’ (Molière 2001: I.1.95-96). The problem is that his anger cannot articulate itself reflexively in terms of a meaningful conflict and thus turns to spite. Spite is the disarticulation of anger. Anger always has a chance to become a social relation, to communicate while disagreeing. This is what the philosophers of truth-telling from Socrates to Diogenes to Foucault excel at. Spite, on the other hand, does not care about anything. Spite is anger that cannot find rational expression, and

precisely therefore it is the transgression, and ultimately the disintegration, of the social (see Schmidt 2006: 99). Philinte warns Alceste about his extremism: 'Perfected reason flees extremity [...] Be wise, but with sobriety' (Molière 2001: I.1.151-52).

Apropos of the discussion between Alcaste and Philinte, let us recall that philosophy, love of wisdom, is a medium between knowledge and ignorance. But Alceste seems to *know* rather than *love* the truth (see particularly Molière 2001: III.5.1123-24). His is, so to speak, a loveless truth, which knows no limit, rational or ethical. And unsurprisingly, this 'knowledge' coincides in Alceste with a particular form of ignorance, which is related to, if not grounded in, his lack of humor: Alceste does not know himself. In three senses:

First, taking himself too seriously, Alceste is ignorant of the fact that he is a 'laughing stock' in the eyes of others and insists on remaining so even when Philinte and later Célimène point this out to him. Philinte says, 'And inasmuch as frankness charms you so, I'll tell you, frankly, that this malady is treated everywhere as comedy and that your wrath against poor humankind makes you ridiculous in many a mind' (Molière 2001: I.1.104-108). Thus, Alceste continually inspires laughter in the other characters in the play and in the audience (Calder 2002: 99). Second, Alcaste is ignorant of the fact that 'what a man hates, he takes seriously' (Montaigne 1993: 133). Just as Shakespeare's Timon, Alceste wishes all ill and desires their ruin. But the point here is not that Alceste's diagnosis is necessarily wrong. Often the world is insane and human beings are base. But, taking life too seriously, Alceste overlooks the power of laughter, that laughter communicates 'more contempt' than melancholic hatred (Molière 2001: I.1.133). In this sense, Alceste 'has not learned that human folly is more deserving of laughter than of tears and rage' (Calder 2002: 100). Finally, demonstrating a lack of self-control and refusing to learn how to acquire it (Molière 2001: I.1.5), Alcaste is ignorant of limits. Philinte advises him to control himself: 'Men do not find me full of wrath like you; I take men as they are, with self-control (Molière 2001: I.1.162-163). He does not know where to stop, and this often takes the form of tastelessness. What is tastelessness? Wittgenstein defines it as 'succumbing to every temptation' (1980: 3e). Agamben, likewise, insists that somebody who lacks taste 'cannot refrain from anything; tastelessness is always a not being able not to do something' (2019: 14). Consider the scene where Oronte asks Alceste to critique one of his poems. Alceste accepts but ends up angrily blurting out that the poem lacks force. What we must note here is that initially Alceste tries to hide an insult in eloquent rhetoric. But when he

realizes that his rhetoric is not working (Molière 2001: I.2.374), he immediately reverts to malicious language: ‘Quite frankly, you’d much better throw the thing away’ (376). As Brody draws attention to, here Alceste gives away an aesthetic incapacity to disguise an insult in an elegant way, and he gradually loses control while his critique boils down to a spiteful attack ‘on the poet who forces him to blurt out bluntly what he had meant to insinuate skillfully through an elegant rhetorical device’ (1969: 571).

Hence Philinte has a point when he suggests to Alceste that he should ‘show some self-control’ (Molière 2001: I.1.128). But Alceste does not listen. Throughout the play he oscillates between farcical extremes. Recalling the scene with Oronte, in which Alceste is asked to give ‘a verdict on his sonnet, he first tries desperately to find ways of not having to give one, then to give it in the most indirect, general, tactful way possible’, John Simon draws attention to the ‘double-edged comedy’, and argues that ‘it is not only that his position is exaggerated and intransigent, it is also that he himself cannot truly abide by it, either in social intercourse or in love’ (1975: 408). While he pushes truth-telling to loveless extremes (see Molière 2001: II.4.642), he falls in love without reasoning (I.1.211, 231). At the point at which truth without love converts into love without truth, Alceste’s moralistic will to truth turns into its opposite, a desirous, cynical blindness, which will be further discussed in the next section.

Alceste, Célimène and seduction

The second act opens with Alceste complaining about Célimène. He ‘just can’t cope with’ her flirtation with too many lovers (Molière 2001: II.1.454, 460). Célimène responds by saying that it is not her fault (461). Among her lovers, Alceste is annoyed particularly by Clitandre. But Célimène reassures Alceste that he shouldn’t take him seriously, that she is really in love with Alceste (503). She humors Clitandre only for reasons related to flattery, only because he has the power to help her out by pleading her cause in the court (489-492). This, however, can hardly calm down Alceste’s torment. Another lover of Célimène’s is Acaste, who is also an influential figure who can ‘control what happens at the court’ (Molière 2001: II.2.544). Again, Alceste is jealous and angry. But he cannot leave. Instead, he wants Célimène to ‘decide now: is it them, or me?’ (562). In short, Alceste desires, Célimène seduces.

Alceste is seduced. Being seduced means being 'turned from one's truth' (Baudrillard 2001: 81). Seduction threatens Alceste's principle of truth for it belongs to the register of appearances. Alceste's world is a world that has lost its imaginary. With Célimène we perceive a glimpse of another world which can only be decoded in terms of seduction, play, challenge and symbolic exchange. Célimène knows that appearances can manipulate every power. But Alceste does not know how to oppose or deal with Célimène's strategy, seduction. He cannot play truth against truth. For him truth is an imperative and it is immoral not to acknowledge and act according to the truth. Célimène's is different; her strategy consists in postponing the realization of truth, in withdrawal, preferring not to play Alceste's and others' games (which becomes clearer and clearer as we approach the end of the play). Alceste is against the exchange of flattery but he turns love into an exchange relationship: I love you and I am challenging you to return my love so that our love will realize its potential in our union. But this is not Célimène's strategy. While Alceste wants to realize a potential, Célimène plays another game with no end, seduction, creating a space of refraction in which Alceste's discourse is eclipsed by diverting attention from meaning and intentions. Célimène evades all relations (love, intimacy, exchange…) without direct confrontation. Célimène does not deny the interest of her suitors in her or her own in them, but she takes the issue to another level.

> Célimène: Why, everyone excites your jealousy.
>
> Alceste: You welcome everyone so charmingly.
>
> Célimène: But this should reassure your anxious mind:
>
> That all who seek, this same complaisance find;
>
> And you would have more cause for discontent If there were only one recipient. (Molière 2001: II.1.495-500)

Her strategy is disappearance, escaping Alceste's amorous expectations and moralistic demands, trapping him in his own desire. When Alceste expresses insecurity and doubt about Célimène's sincerity, questioning whether she might say the same flattering things to other men as she does to him. Célimène responds:

> My! That's a charming way to pay your court,

And that makes me appear a pretty sort!

Well then, to give you no more cause to sigh,

All I have said I here and now deny.

There's no deceiving to be fearful of

Except your own. (Molière 2001: II.1.509-514)

To appease Alceste and end the argument, Célimène sarcastically denies everything she has said to him, suggesting that the only deception he should worry about is his own mistrust. This conversation demonstrates the conflict in their relationship as Célimène's humorous and evasive personality clashes with Alceste's jealously. In this sense, seduction 'involves a certain mental cruelty' (Baudrillard 2001: 86), a sublimated violence, which, in Célimène's case, materializes itself as sense of humor and mastery of ridicule (Molière 2001: I.1.219). 'Her power lies in the irony and elusiveness of her presence' (Baudrillard 2001: 87). The seductress keeps her target uncertain and intrigued, making him question what is truly beneath the surface. However, 'It is not quite the feminine as surface that is opposed to the masculine as depth, but the feminine as indistinctness of surface and depth' (Ibid. 10). This deliberate ambiguity and manipulation of perception are key to the power dynamics in seduction.

To appreciate what is involved here we must turn to the third act where Célimène has a discussion with Arsinoé, a prude who has a 'weakness for Alceste' (Molière 2001: III.4.866). Arsinoé has come to Célimène's house to give her some advice as a 'true friend' (880). She is worried for Célimène's sake because people talk of her disapprovingly (884). Here Arsinoé attacks Célimène while hiding herself behind others' simulated accusations. In her reply, Célimène neither confronts Arsinoé directly nor tries to deny her accusations but responds through a more radical simulation.

Well, thanks, Madame, for warning me what people say.
It was too kind, and I won't take it the wrong way.
Instead, I'll do you the same for you, dear, in return:
Yes, I'll defend your honour, I'll be very stern.
You've been a good friend to me, I can clearly see—
You hear the gossip, and report it back to me.

You set a good example, but it's my turn now
To tell you how you strike your friends, if you'll allow.
The other day, as I was visiting somewhere,
I met some very worthy people gathered there.
They talked about the things that decent people do,
And then, Madame, the conversation turned to you.
They said you're so uptight, so prudish, and repressed,
You set a poor example: no one was impressed.
You always look so grim, respond so charmlessly,
You try to seem so wise, and drone on endlessly,
You shriek with horror at what's only harmless fun,
You sniff out innuendo, find it where there's none. (Molière 2001: III.4.914-930)

The similarity between Arsinoé's technique here and the one Alceste used against Oronte in the first act is notable: they both try to mask their opinions under the guise of opinions; they are both preoccupied with form to articulate a cruel insult within the framework of elegant politesse without revealing their personalities behind a fiction (Brody 1969: 572). But Célimène is smart enough to see through this strategy. She advances through mimicry, insinuating, tactically, herself in her opponent's position. Obviously, she is insincere, engaging with a fiction, but manages to tell a truth through a fiction, by demonstrating 'her consummate artistry by managing to squeeze out of a maximally elaborated politesse a maximum of incivility' (Ibid. 573). Arsinoé is effectively unmasked and ridiculed, emerging, as with Alceste, as a loser 'in a game which consists in … clothing an insult in the garb of politesse' (Ibid.). Arsinoé tries to draw Célimène into her territory, moralism. But Célimène is not fooled. Arsinoé's strength becomes her weakness.

The play indicates that Arsinoé's world is, like Alceste's, a disenchanted, reified world, a simulacrum suffocated in its own accumulation. The problem with this world is demonstrated in their unsuccessful attempts at truth-telling. Célimène challenges this world. As John D. Lyons puts it, Célimène lacks interest in sincerity and engages in a surface-level, observational form of truth-telling through verbal portraits. In contrast, Alceste bases truth on his inner feelings, confident that he speaks the truth because he believes it. While Alceste's truth is self-validated, Célimène's descriptions are crafted to be validated as truthful by the listener (2019: 104-105). While for

Alceste the social is a stand-in for flattery, selfishness, and apathy, for Célimène, the social presents itself as a field of seduction. For Célimène, as for Goffman (1959), social life is comparable to acting. As fiction, sociality is like a scene with a front stage and a backstage. Reality, in this prism, is always traversed by the spectacle, by fiction and fantasy. Célimène enjoys this reality, while Alceste despises it. The sad paradox is that Alceste falls in love with somebody who enjoys what he hates. A truth, the realization of which brings Alceste unhappiness.

Such an analysis, however, will be incomplete unless we include Philinte in the frame. Philinte is a pragmatist who accepts society as it is and takes appearance seriously. Thus, it is difficult to disagree with Calder (2002: 95) that the 'main action' of *The Misanthrope* revolves around the 'contrasting attitudes to sociability.' While the majority of the characters in the play (Célimène, Arsinoé, Oronte and the marquis) use social interaction instrumentally, and while Alcaste 'forgets that man, by his very nature, is a social being,' Philinte is the only one who is concerned about sociality (Calder 2002: 96-7). Thus, his attitude borders on a mediocre conformism bent on protecting society at any cost, regardless of how hypocritical and corrupted it is.

Crucially, even though Célimène refers to instrumental use when she justifies her flirtation with her lovers, the overall effect of her actions does not amount to an instrumental strategy. Rather, seduction seems to be an end in itself for her. Thus, in the end of the play she chooses to withdraw from the relationship rather than uniting with Alceste, which would mean stopping the cycle of seduction. As such, as a capacity for withdrawal, seduction is non-social par excellence. Seduction is a 'challenge' to the social in the sense that it de-activates and profanes social contracts through a playfulness whose rules cannot be stated explicitly. Seduction is a game whose 'sole principle … is that by choosing the rule one is delivered from the law' (Baudrillard 2001: 133).

Alceste fears seduction (which Célimène incarnates), Philinte fears anomie (which Alceste symbolizes). Alceste's provocation works because it has an anomic referent, which is beyond the social law per definition. Philinte wants to domesticate Alceste, trying to contain the danger of anomie within social limits, so that the primacy of the social law can be maintained in appearance. Yet, what Célimène seeks to do is different: to de-activate the logic of both the social law (Philinte's conformism) and Alceste's symbolic violence at once. For only when the bond between the two is not undone, we can imagine a politics of life in terms of a 'destituent power' (Agamben 2013), which cannot be captured by the dialectic of anomie (Alceste) and norm (Philinte).

Célimène or seduction, as such, signifies the 'accursed share', which cannot be included within and thus challenges the reality principle of the world *The Misanthrope* deals with. Célimène partakes in the world of exchange but her own practice, seduction, is one that cannot be exchanged in this world for it has no equivalent in it. This is the reason why Célimène is sarcastic about Alceste's obsession with truth which reduces truth-telling to moralism. Along the same lines, Célimène's logic short-circuits the principle of economic exchange (of flattery) regulating the others' world, the illusion of which consists in denying its outside, symbolic exchange. After all, as Baudrillard insisted, a world in which symbolic exchange is not possible can only be destroyed symbolically. Concomitantly, all Alceste's efforts (to turn 'seduction' into love, exchange) and all Philinte's exertions (to appropriate anomie, justifying the society of flatterers) are annulled by Célimène's tactics. For 'behind *the exchange of something*, we have, … always, *the exchange of the nothing*' (Baudrillard 2001: 7). The real catastrophe is not being seduced by Célimène but living in a world in which this 'nothing,' the void created by Célimène's discourse, is foreclosed, a world in which we are left at the mercy of Alceste's moralism and Philinte's mediocrity.

Seen in this light, *The Misanthrope* plays at the collapse of meaning as well as its production. *The Misanthrope* demonstrates why 'the real is what one must not consent to' (Baudrillard 1987: 69). If freedom is, at the most elementary level, to experiment with the link between what exists and what is possible, only on flight from the existing order of things there emerges a chance for a new sociality to transpire that is more than what already exists. Hence Célimène's pharmakon-like gift, seduction, which functions as the ground zero of *The Misanthrope*.

Ressentiment and revenge

Philinte is in love with Éliante who is in love with Alceste who is in love with Célimène. In the fourth act, Philinte and Éliante discuss Alceste, particularly his love for Célimène. Éliante finds Alceste's love 'obscure' (Molière 2001: IV.1.1181-1182). Philinte himself is preoccupied with Éliante, hoping that, since Alceste is not responsive towards her, 'it will be my turn to propose' (1216). Exactly at this moment Alceste finds a scandalous letter revealed by Arsinoé. In the letter, addressed to Oronte, Célimène insults all her lovers and mocks their flaws. Alceste is in 'despair' in face of this confession (Molière 2001: IV.2.1222). He believes he has now seen the 'vicious'

truth underneath Célimène's 'lovely face' (1225). Feeling betrayed and resentful, Alceste decides to dedicate himself to Éliante and make her happy. He proposes to her. 'That way, I'll be avenged' (1234).

If not taking one's enemies, misfortunes or accidents too seriously is a sign of a surplus of power, Alceste's moralism is a sign of weakness. And imagining revenge is the only compensation for this weakness. Alceste is a man of *ressentiment* (Nietzsche 1996: 32). Waiting, dreaming of revenge, he becomes full of hatred, and in this process his weakness leads to imputation of wrongs, delegation of responsibilities to others and perpetual accusation (see Deleuze 1983: 118). Such accusation of others is indispensable to *ressentiment* and often amounts to an inability to admire or love others, to 'a secret, spiteful, vulgar, and perhaps unacknowledged instinct to belittle man' (Nietzsche 1996: 11). Thus, *ressentiment* needs a hostile, opposing world (see Nietzsche 1996: 24-5; Deleuze 1983: 119). Célimène reveals this in her own way when she describes Alceste as a contrarian (Molière 2001: II.4.669). The paradox here is that in an ideal environment Alceste would be deprived of his enemy, the hostile world, and it would be impossible for him to perceive his own failure as contingent, or, underserved. Only in so far as he can depict others as evil, the man of *ressentiment* can be good; thus, his fundamental formula: 'You are evil, therefore I am good,' a formula based on an inversion of the master's discourse: 'I am good, therefore you are evil' (Deleuze 1983: 119).

Significantly, however, *ressentiment* cannot be reduced to a desire for revenge. What is crucial is what gives revenge a means: 'a means of reversing the normal relation of active and reactive forces. Which is why *ressentiment* itself is always a revolt; the triumph of the weak *as* the weak, the revolt of the slaves and their victory *as* slaves' (ibid. 116-7). There are several illusions at work in this process. Firstly, the man of *ressentiment* builds upon a fiction, the fiction of a force that can be separated from what it can do (e.g. a bird of prey that does not prey on lambs). Alceste dreams of a Célimène who stops being Célimène. Following this, secondly, the man of *ressentiment* projects the force (that is separated from its effect) into a subject that is presumably free not to manifest its force. A seduction-free world. And finally, in a moment of moralizing, the man of *ressentiment* reverses the values and derives a morality in which the weak is depicted as superior: the lamb is good because it is eaten. Alceste is good, Célimène bad. Thanks to this self-deception, the weakness of the weak can appear as 'a free achievement, something willed, chosen, a *deed*, a

merit' (Nietzsche 1996: 30). Alceste loathes the triviality of the society around him. But unable to escape the terror of the trivial, he is drowned in his own *ressentiment*, which makes him a tragi-comic figure.

Alceste tries to confront Célimène about her infidelity. He demands an explanation but Célimène refuses to give one. Interestingly, we realize at this point that Alceste would really like to hear a lie: 'Tell me you're not unfaithful, please, I beg you to, And I'll try to believe this latest story's true' (Molière 2001: IV.3.1389-1390). But Célimène confirms that the letter is written to Oronte, that she admires and respects him. Here Célimène is on the side of truth while Alceste is on the side of the illusion, trying to deceive himself. The question emerging is: who is more moral, Alceste, who wants to hear a lie, or Célimène, who remains faithful to the truth of seduction?

Instead of conclusion: Alceste's seduction

Alceste is obsessed with fighting flattery, neglecting all other aspects of his social life, sublimating truth-telling as an ideal in the name of which he can perform virtue. His madness turns him into a 'laughing stock' for others as his mad obsession with truth-telling is a symbol of a world alien to exchanges of flattery. He lives in a world of deceptions and appearances in which it is infinitely easy to treat the decent and the foolish alike (Molière 2001: I.1.48). And most importantly, he is caught up in his own illusions in his fight against the illusions of others. Why, then, people like Rousseau cannot forgive Molière for he turned Alceste, a 'sincere' and 'good' man for whom we can feel respect for, into a ridiculous character (Harris 2022: 154-5; see also Rousseau 1995: 34)?

The problem here is not cruelty involved in comedy but relates to the nature of morality. The key to recognize this problem is hinted at in the 188th section of *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here Nietzsche argues that a morality can only be objected by another morality. And since every morality is a kind of 'tyranny,' this implies that the latter morality can exert on the moral actor a superior 'constraint,' another 'tyranny' with its arbitrary laws that can make the first morality's tyranny and unreason impermissible. 'Freedom' can only develop on this basis. Every artist, every thinker experiences that this state of things is far from simply letting oneself go, that their activity requires strict discipline and obedience to numerous laws, the rigidity and precision of which simply defy conceptualization. 'This tyranny, this arbitrariness, this rigorous and grandiose stupidity,' in turn,

educates the spirit, showing that the essential thing is '*obedience* in *one* direction.' It is out of absolute obedience, of narrowing of one's perspective, that there emerges something for the sake of which life is worth living, 'something transfiguring, refined, mad, and divine.' Thus, paradoxically, slavery becomes a means of spiritual discipline (Nietzsche 1972: 91-4).

We encounter such a distinct form of slavery in Alceste. But paradoxically, insofar as he identifies himself as a slave to an idea, truth-telling, Alceste ceases to be slaves. Freedom, after all, has nothing to do with 'feeling free' (*kolakeia*). In authentic freedom 'we accept voluntary servitude as serving a Cause and not just ourselves,' because the identification with the position of slave, saying that I am a slave, is already a recognition that I am free (Žižek 2018: 204). Unsurprisingly, therefore, if we push the idea of 'free will' to its logical limits, it turns into a form of (modern) servitude, while the assertion of voluntary servitude to a Cause has the potential to break away from it by assuming the form of its opposite (Ibid. 204). What fascinates one in Alceste is therefore the very element of intoxication. He is a possessed person with no personal interest: everything in him is absorbed in a single idea and a single passion; he is an enemy of the established order, which he perceives as a spectacle, negating all relation to it without compromise. And paradoxically, this makes him a seductive character despite his contradictions. It is a pity that Alceste undervalues his own courage because of his delusions.

Let us, to end with, return to Plato's distinction between the good and the pleasant once more. Significantly, the 'idea' of the good in Plato functions as a transcendental principle which signifies a latent infinity directly related to all activity of *techne*. *Kolakeia*, in contrast, can only be thought of in relation opinion. Hence the opposition between truth-telling and flattery is also an opposition between infinity of ideas and the finitude of opinions. Flattery is that which reduces idea to opinion. It always justifies itself with reference to opinion, by negotiating existing values, recognizing only already accepted desires and desiring recognition.

And insofar as *The Misanthrope* is read in the horizon of opinion, it will be easy to find a 'proper' point of view from where to judge Alceste guilty. In the perspective of ideas, though, one must seriously consider the possibility that Molière makes us laugh at someone whose critique of society is justified, relevant and interesting (Harris 2022: 84). 'The function of comedy,' after all, 'is to correct the vices of men' (Molière quoted in Slater 2001: xiv). Let us hope laughter can meet thought. Otherwise, fire is the next:

> It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to warn the public; they thought it was a jest and applauded. He repeated his warning; they shouted even louder. So I think the world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits, who believe that it is a joke. (Kierkegaard 1959: 30)

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