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JEAN BAPTISTE POQUELIN DE MOLIÈRE

The Misanthrope
and
Tartuffe

Translated into English verse by
Richard Wilbur

Drawings by Enrico Arno

HBJ

A Harvest/HBJ Book
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers
San Diego New York London
Act One, Scene Two, of this translation of The Misanthrope was first published in New World Writing 5. Certain scenes of this translation of Tartuffe appeared in Poetry, Drama Critique, and the Massachusetts Review.
[A Note to the Harvest Edition]

Unfortunately entertaining. A fuzzy anxiety on the part of the director, whereby the dialogue is hurried, cut, or swamped in farcical action, is the commonest cause of failure in productions of Molière. To such want of confidence in the text we owe the occasional presentation of the fops, Acaste and Célimène, as flouncingly epicene, or the transformation of Tartuffe’s two interviews with Elmire into a couple of wrestling bouts. In the first case the characters are falsified for the sake of an easy laugh, and cease to be legitimate rivals to Alcâte for the hand of Célimène; in the second case, a real quality of Tartuffe’s—his lustfulness—is manifested, but at the cost of making his great speeches seem redundant and pointlessly nuanced. The cost is too great, and once again the audience, though it may consent to laugh, will not be satisfied.

The introductions to the original editions still say what I think, and I shall let them stand. Were I to revise them, the second would explicitly and gratefully refer to the criticism of Jacques Guicharnaud, and each would contain a qualification of my claim to accuracy. The translation of The Misanthrope does not fully reproduce the formulaic preciosity with which some of the characters speak of love. In translating Tartuffe, I have not always captured Madame Pernelle’s way of slipping into old-fashioned and inelegant speech, or Mariane’s of parroting the rhetoric of artificial romances. My excuse for these deficiencies is that, while echoes of an unchanging scripture or liturgy are readily duplicated, as in the speeches of Tartuffe, a translation that seeks to avoid a “period” diction cannot easily find equivalents for such quirks and fads of language as I have mentioned.

R. W.

Portland, Connecticut, 1965
The Misanthrope

COMEDY IN FIVE ACTS, 1666
To Harry Levin
INTRODUCTION

The idea that comedy is a ritual in which society's laughter corrects individual extravagance is particularly inapplicable to The Misanthrope. In this play, society itself is indicted, and though Alceste's criticisms are indiscriminate, they are not unjustified. It is true that falseness and intrigue are everywhere on view; the conventions enforce a routine dishonesty, justice is subverted by influence, love is overwhelmed by calculation, and these things are accepted, even by the best, as "natural." The cold vanity of Oronte, Acaste, and Clitandre, the malignant hypocrisy of Arsinoé, the insincerity of Célimène, are to be taken as exemplary of the age, and Philinte's philosophic tolerance will not quite do in response to such a condition of things. The honest Eliante is the one we are most to trust, and this is partly because she sees that Alceste's intransigence A quelque chose en soy de noble & d'héroïque.

But The Misanthrope is not only a critique of society; it is also a study of impurity of motive in a critic of society. If Alceste has a rage for the genuine, and he truly has, it is unfortunately compromised and exploited by his vast, unconscious egotism. He is a jealous friend (Je veux qu'on me distingue), and it is Philinte's polite effusiveness toward another which prompts his attack on promiscuous civility. He is a jealous lover, and his "frankness" about Oronte's sonnet owes something to the fact that Oronte is his rival, and that the sonnet is addressed to Célimène. Like many humorless and indignant people, he is hard on everybody but himself, and does not perceive it when he fails his own ideal. In one aspect, Alceste seems a moral giant misplaced in a trivial society, having (in George Eliot's phrase) "a
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certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity"; in another aspect, he seems an unconscious fraud who magnifies the petty faults of others in order to dramatize himself in his own eyes.

He is, of course, both at once: but the two impressions predominate by turns. A victim, like all around him, of the moral enervation of the times, he cannot consistently be the Man of Honor—simple, magnanimous, passionate, decisive, true. It is his distinction that he is aware of that ideal, and that he can fitfully embody it; his comic flaw consists in a Quixotic confusion of himself with the ideal, a willingness to distort the world for his own self-deceptive and histrionic purposes. Paradoxically, then, the advocate of true feeling and honest intercourse is the one character most artificial, most out-of-touch, most in danger of that nonentity and solitude which all, in the chattery, hollow world of this play, are fleeing. He must play-act continually in order to believe in his own existence, and he welcomes the fact or show of injustice as a dramatic cue. At the close of the play, when Alceste has refused to appeal his lawsuit and has spurned the hand of Célimène, one cannot escape the suspicion that his indignation is in great part instrumental, a desperate means of counterfeiting an identity.

Martin Turnell (whose book The Classical Moment contains a fine analysis of The Misanthrope) observes that those speeches of Alceste which ring most false are, as it were, parodies of "Cornelian tirade." To duplicate this parodistic effect in English it was clearly necessary to keep the play in verse, where it would be possible to control the tone more sharply, and to recall our own tragic tradition. There were other reasons, too, for approximating Molière's form. 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. Again, while prose might preserve the thematic structure of the play, other "musical" elements would be lost, in particular the frequently intricate arrangements of balancing half-lines, lines, couplets, quatrains, and sestets. There is no question that words, when dancing within such patterns, are not their prosaic selves, but have a wholly different mood and meaning.

Consider, finally, two peculiarities of the dialogue of the play: redundancy and logic. When Molière has a character repeat essentially the same thing in three successive couplets, it will sometimes have a very clear dramatic point; but it will always have the intention of stabilizing the idea against the movement of the verse, and of giving a specifically rhetorical pleasure. In a prose rendering, these latter effects are lost, and the passage tends to seem merely prolix. As for logic, it is a convention of The Misanthrope that its main characters can express themselves logically, and in the most complex grammar; Molière's dramatic verse, which is almost wholly free of metaphor, derives much of its richness from argumentative virtuosity. Here is a bit of logic from Arsinöe:

Madame, l'Amisté doit sur tout éclater
Aux choses qui le plus nous peuvent importar:
Et comme il n'en est point de plus grande importance
Que celles de l'Homme et de la Bienfaisance,
Je viens par un avis qui touche votre honneur
Témoin de l'amisté que pour vous a mon Coeur.

In prose it might come out like this: "Madam, friendship should most display itself when truly vital matters are in question: and since there are no things more vital than decency and honor, I have come to prove my heartfelt friendship by giving you some advice which concerns your reputation." Even if that were better rendered, it would still be plain that Molière's logic loses all its baroque exuberance in prose; it sounds lawyerish; without rhyme and verse
[Introduction]

to phrase and emphasize the steps of its progression, the logic becomes obscure like Congreve’s, not crystalline and followable as it was meant to be.

For all these reasons, rhymed verse seemed to me obligatory. The choice did not preclude accuracy, and what follows is, I believe, a line-for-line verse translation quite as faithful as any which have been done in prose. I hasten to say that I am boasting only of patience; a translation may, alas, be faithful on all counts, and still lack quality.

One word about diction. This is a play in which French aristocrats of 1666 converse about their special concerns, and employ the moral and philosophical terms peculiar to their thought. Not all my words, therefore, are strictly modern; I had for example to use “spleen” and “phlegm”; but I think that I have avoided the zounds sort of thing, and that at best the diction mediates between then and now, suggesting no one period. There are occasional vulgarities, but for these there is precedent in the original, Molière’s people being aristocrats and therefore genteel.

If this English version is played or read aloud, the names should be pronounced in a fashion roughly French, without nasal and uvular agonies. Damon should be *da-b-MOAN*, and for rhythmic convenience Arsinóé should be *ar-SIN-ob-éb*.

My translation was begun in late 1952 in New Mexico, during a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation, and finished this year in Rome under grants from the American Academy of Arts & Letters and the Chapelbrook Foundation. To these organizations, and to certain individuals who have befriended the project, I am very grateful.

R. W.

Wellesley, Massachusetts.

CHARACTERS

ALCESTE, in love with Célimène
PHILINTE, Alceste’s friend
ORonte, in love with Célimène
CELIMENE, Alceste’s beloved
ELIANTÉ, Célimène’s cousin
ARSINOÉ, a friend of Célimène’s
ACASTE [marquesses
CLITANDRE
BASQUE, Célimène’s servant
A GUARD of the Marshalsea
DUBOIS, Alceste’s valet

The scene throughout is in Célimène’s house at Paris.

First produced by The Poets’ Theatre,
Cambridge, on October 25th, 1955
SCENE ONE

PHILINTE, ALCESTE

PHILINTE
Now, what's got into you?

ALCESTE, seated
Kindly leave me alone.

PHILINTE
Come, come, what is it? This lugubrious tone . . .

ALCESTE
Leave me, I said; you spoil my solitude.

PHILINTE
Oh, listen to me, now, and don't be rude.

ALCESTE
I choose to be rude, Sir, and to be hard of hearing.
[Act One · Scene One]

PHILINTE

These ugly moods of yours are not endearing;
Friends though we are, I really must insist . . .

ALCESTE, abruptly rising

Friends? Friends, you say? Well, cross me off your list.
I've been your friend till now, as you well know,
But after what I saw a moment ago
I tell you flatly that our ways must part
I wish no place in a dishonest heart.

PHILINTE

Why, what have I done, Alceste? Is this quite just?

ALCESTE

My God, you ought to die of self-disgust.
I call your conduct inexcusable, Sir,
And every man of honor will concur.
I see you almost hug a man to death,
Exclaim for joy until you're out of breath,
And supplement these loving demonstrations
With endless offers, vows, and protestations;
Then when I ask you "Who was that?", I find
That you can barely bring his name to mind!
Once the man's back is turned, you cease to love him,
And speak with absolute indifference of him!
By God, I say it's base and scandalous
To falsify the heart's affections thus;

PHILINTE

If I caught myself behaving in such a way,
I'd hang myself for shame, without delay.

PHILINTE

It hardly seems a hanging matter to me;
I hope that you will take it graciously
If I extend myself a slight reprieve,
And live a little longer, by your leave.

ALCESTE

How dare you joke about a crime so grave?

PHILINTE

What crime? How else are people to behave?

ALCESTE

I'd have them be sincere, and never part
With any word that isn't from the heart.

PHILINTE

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.

ALCESTE

No, no, this formula you'd have me follow,
However fashionable, is false and hollow,
[Act One · Scene One]

And I despise the frenzied operations
Of all these barterers of protestations,
These lavishers of meaningless embraces,
These utterers of obliging commonplace,
Who court and flatter everyone on earth
And praise the fool no less than the man of worth.
Should you rejoice that someone fondles you,
Offers his love and service, swears to be true,
And fills your ears with praises of your name,
When to the first damned fop he'll say the same?
No, no: no self-respecting heart would dream
Of prizing so promiscuous an esteem;
However high the praise, there's nothing worse
Than sharing honors with the universe.
Esteem is founded on comparison:
To honor all men is to honor none.
Since you embrace this indiscriminate vice,
Your friendship comes at far too cheap a price;
I spurn the easy tribute of a heart
Which will not set the worthy man apart:
I choose, Sir, to be chosen; and in fine,
The friend of mankind is no friend of mine.

PHILINTE

But in polite society, custom decrees
That we show certain outward courtesies. . .

ALCESTE

Ah, no! we should condemn with all our force
Such false and artificial intercourse.
Let men behave like men; let them display

PHILINTE

In certain cases it would be uncouth
And most absurd to speak the naked truth;
With all respect for your exalted notions,
It's often best to veil one's true emotions.
Wouldn't the social fabric come undone
If we were wholly frank with everyone?
Suppose you met with someone you couldn't bear;
Would you inform him of it then and there?

ALCESTE

Yes.

PHILINTE

Then you'd tell old Emilie it's pathetic
The way she daubs her features with cosmetic
And plays the gay coquette at sixty-four?

ALCESTE

I would.

PHILINTE

And you'd call Dorilas a bore,
And tell him every ear at court is lame
From hearing him brag about his noble name?
ALCESTE

Precisely.

PHILINTHE

Ah, you're joking.

ALCESTE

Au contraire:

In this regard there's none I'd choose to spare. All are corrupt; there's nothing to be seen In court or town but aggravates my spleen. I fall into deep gloom and melancholy When I survey the scene of human folly, Finding on every hand base flattery, Injustice, fraud, self-interest, treachery. . . Ah, it's too much; mankind has grown so base, I mean to break with the whole human race.

PHILINTHE

This philosophic rage is a bit extreme; You've no idea how comical you seem; Indeed, we're like those brothers in the play Called School for Husbands, one of whom was prey . . .

ALCESTE

Enough, now! None of your stupid similes.

PHILINTHE

Then let's have no more tirades, if you please. The world won't change, whatever you say or do And since plain speaking means so much to you, I'll tell you plainly that by being frank You've earned the reputation of a crank, And that you're thought ridiculous when you rage And rant against the manners of the age.

ALCESTE

So much the better; just what I wish to hear. No news could be more grateful to my ear. All men are so detestable in my eyes, I should be sorry if they thought me wise

PHILINTHE

Your hatred's very sweeping, is it not?

ALCESTE

Quite right: I hate the whole degraded lot.

PHILINTHE

Must all poor human creatures be embraced, Without distinction, by your vast distaste? Even in these bad times, there are surely a few . . .
No, I include all men in one dim view:  
Some men I hate for being rogues; the others  
I hate because they treat the rogues like brothers,  
And, lacking a virtuous scorn for what is vile,  
Receive the villain with a complaisant smile.  
Notice how tolerant people choose to be  
Toward that bold rascal who's at law with me.  
His social polish can't conceal his nature;  
One sees at once that he's a treacherous creature;  
No one could possibly be taken in  
By those soft speeches and that sugary grin.  
The whole world knows the shady means by which  
The low-brow's grown so powerful and rich,  
And risen to a rank so bright and high  
That virtue can but blush, and merit sigh.  
Whenever his name comes up in conversation,  
None will defend his wretched reputation;  
Call him knave, liar, scoundrel, and all the rest,  
Each head will nod, and no one will protest.  
And yet his smirk is seen in every house,  
He's greeted everywhere with smiles and bows,  
And when there's any honor that can be got  
By pulling strings, he'll get it, like as not.  
My God! It chills my heart to see the ways  
Men come to terms with evil nowadays;  
Sometimes, I swear, I'm moved to flee and find  
Some desert land unfouled by mankind.

Come, let's forget the follies of the times  
And pardon mankind for its petty crimes;  
Let's have an end of rantings and of railings,  
And show some leniency toward human failings.  
This world requires a pliant rectitude;  
Too stern a virtue makes one stiff and rude;  
Good sense views all extremes with detestation,  
And bids us to be noble in moderation.  
The rigid virtues of the ancient days  
Are not for us; they jar with all our ways  
And ask of us too lofty a perfection.  
Wise men accept their times without objection,  
And there's no greater folly, if you ask me,  
Than trying to reform society.  
Like you, I see each day a hundred and one  
Unhandsome deeds that might be better done,  
But still, for all the faults that meet my view,  
I'm never known to storm and rave like you.  
I take men as they are, or let them be,  
And teach my soul to bear their frailty;  
And whether in court or town, whatever the scene,  
My phlegm's as philosophic as your spleen.

This phlegm which you so eloquently commend,  
Does nothing ever rile it up, my friend?  
Suppose some man you trust should treacherously  
Conspire to rob you of your property,  
And do his best to wreck your reputation?  
Wouldn't you feel a certain indignation?
[Act One · Scene One]

PHILINTE

Why, no. These faults of which you so complain
Are part of human nature, I maintain,
And it's no more a matter for disgust
That men are knavish, selfish and unjust,
Than that the vulture dines upon the dead,
And wolves are furious, and apes ill-bred.

ALCESTE

Shall I see myself betrayed, robbed, torn to bits,
And not . . . Oh, let's be still and rest our wits.
Enough of reasoning, now. I've had my fill.

PHILINTE

Indeed, you would do well, Sir, to be still.
Rage less at your opponent, and give some thought
To how you'll win this lawsuit that he's brought.

ALCESTE

I assure you I'll do nothing of the sort.

PHILINTE

Then who will plead your case before the court?

ALCESTE

Reason and right and justice will plead for me.

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[Act One · Scene One]

PHILINTE

Oh, Lord. What judges do you plan to see?

ALCESTE

Why, none. The justice of my cause is clear.

PHILINTE

Of course, man; but there's politics to fear. . . .

ALCESTE

No, I refuse to lift a hand. That's flat.
I'm either right, or wrong.

PHILINTE

Don't count on that.

ALCESTE

No, I'll do nothing.

PHILINTE

Your enemy's influence
Is great, you know . . .

ALCESTE

That makes no difference.

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[Act One · Scene One]

PHILINTE

It will; you'll see.

ALCESTE

Must honor bow to guile?
If so, I shall be proud to lose the trial.

PHILINTE

Oh, really . . .

ALCESTE

I'll discover by this case
Whether or not men are sufficiently base
And impudent and villainous and perverse
To do me wrong before the universe.

PHILINTE

What a man!

ALCESTE

Oh, I could wish, whatever the cost,
Just for the beauty of it, that my trial were lost.

PHILINTE

If people heard you talking so, Alceste,
They'd split their sides. Your name would be a jest.

[Act One · Scene One]

ALCESTE

So much the worse for jesters.

PHILINTE

May I enquire
Whether this rectitude you so admire,
And these hard virtues you're enamored of
Are qualities of the lady whom you love?
It much surprises me that you, who seem
To view mankind with furious disesteem,
Have yet found something to enchant your eyes
Amidst a species which you so despise.
And what is more amazing, I'm afraid,
Is the most curious choice your heart has made.
The honest Philinte is fond of you,
Arsinoë, the prude, admires you too;
And yet your spirit's been perversely led
To choose the flighty Célimène instead,
Whose brittle malice and coquettish ways
So typify the manners of our days.
How is it that the traits you most abhor
Are bearable in this lady you adore?
Are you so blind with love that you can't find them?
Or do you contrive, in her case, not to mind them?

ALCESTE

My love for that young widow's not the kind
That can't perceive defects; no, I'm not blind.
I see her faults, despite my ardent love,
[Act One · Scene One]

And all I see I fervently reprove.
And yet I'm weak; for all her falsity,
That woman knows the art of pleasing me,
And though I never cease complaining of her,
I swear I cannot manage not to love her.
Her charm outweighs her faults; I can but aim
To cleanse her spirit in my love's pure flame.

PHILINTE

That's no small task; I wish you all success.
You think then that she loves you?

ALCESTE

Heavens, yes!
I wouldn't love her did she not love me.

PHILINTE

Well, if her taste for you is plain to see,
Why do these rivals cause you such despair?

ALCESTE

True love, Sir, is possessive, and cannot bear
To share with all the world. I'm here today
To tell her she must send that mob away.

PHILINTE

If I were you, and had your choice to make,
Eliante, her cousin, would be the one I'd take;

That honest heart, which cares for you alone,
Would harmonize far better with your own.

ALCESTE

True, true: each day my reason tells me so;
But reason doesn't rule in love, you know.

PHILINTE

I fear some bitter sorrow is in store;
This love . . .
SCENE TWO

ORONTE, ALCESTE, PHILINTE

ORONTE, to Alceste

The servants told me at the door
That Eliante and Célimène were out,
But when I heard, dear Sir, that you were about,
I came to say, without exaggeration,
That I hold you in the vastest admiration,
And that it's always been my dearest desire
To be the friend of one I so admire.
I hope to see my love of merit required,
And you and me in friendship's bond united.
I'm sure you won't refuse—if I may be frank—
A friend of my devotedness—and rank.
(During this speech of Oronte's, Alceste is abstracted, and seems unaware that he is being spoken to. He only breaks off his reverie when Oronte says:)
It was for you, if you please, that my words were intended.

ALCESTE

For me, Sir?

[Act One · Scene Two]

ORONTE

Yes, for you. You're not offended?

ALCESTE

By no means. But this much surprises me. . .
The honor comes most unexpectedly. . .

ORONTE

My high regard should not astonish you;
The whole world feels the same. It is your due.

ALCESTE

Sir . . .

ORONTE

Why, in all the State there isn't one
Can match your merits; they shine, Sir, like the sun.

ALCESTE

Sir . . .

ORONTE

You are higher in my estimation
Than all that's most illustrious in the nation.
[Act One  ·  Scene Two]

ALCESTE

Sir . . .

ORONTE

If I lie, may heaven strike me dead!
To show you that I mean what I have said,
Permit me, Sir, to embrace you most sincerely,
And swear that I will prize our friendship dearly.
Give me your hand. And now, Sir, if you choose,
We'll make our vows.

ALCESTE

Sir . . .

ORONTE

What! You refuse?

ALCESTE

Sir, it's a very great honor you extend:
But friendship is a sacred thing, my friend;
It would be profanation to bestow
The name of friend on one you hardly know.
All parts are better played when well-rehearsed;
Let's put off friendship, and get acquainted first.
We may discover it would be unwise
To try to make our natures harmonize.

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[Act One  ·  Scene Two]

ORONTE

By heaven! You're sagacious to the core;
This speech has made me admire you even more
Let time, then, bring us closer day by day;
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.
In short, I am your servant. And now, dear friend,
Since you have such fine judgment, I intend
To please you, if I can, with a small sonnet
I wrote not long ago. Please comment on it,
And tell me whether I ought to publish it.

ALCESTE

You must excuse me, Sir; I'm hardly fit
To judge such matters.

ORONTE

Why not?

ALCESTE

I am, I fear.
Inclined to be unfashionably sincere.

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[Act One · Scene Two]

ORONTE

Just what I ask; I'd take no satisfaction
In anything but your sincere reaction.
I beg you not to dream of being kind.

ALCESTE

Since you desire it, Sir, I'll speak my mind.

ORONTE

Sonnet. It's a sonnet. . . . Hope . . . The poem's addressed
To a lady who wakened hopes within my breast.
Hope . . . this is not the pompous sort of thing,
Just modest little verses, with a tender ring.

ALCESTE

Well, we shall see.

ORONTE

Hope . . . I'm anxious to hear
Whether the style seems properly smooth and clear,
And whether the choice of words is good or bad.

ALCESTE

We'll see, we'll see.

ORONTE

Perhaps I ought to add
That it took me only a quarter-hour to write it.

ALCESTE

The time's irrelevant, Sir: kindly recite it.

ORONTE, reading

Hope comforts us awhile, 'tis true,
Lulling our cares with careless laughter,
And yet such joy is full of rue,
My Phyllis, if nothing follows after.

PHILINTHE

I'm charmed by this already; the style's delightful.

ALCESTE, sotto voce, to Philinte

How can you say that? Why, the thing is frightful.

ORONTE

Your fair face smiled on me awhile,
But was it kindness so to enchant me?
'Twould have been fairer not to smile,
If hope was all you meant to grant me.
[Act One · Scene Two]

PHILINTE
What a clever thought! How handsomely you phrase it!

ALCESTE, sotto voce, to Philinte
You know the thing is trash. How dare you praise it?

ORONTE
If it's to be my passion's fate
Thus everlastingly to wait,
Then death will come to set me free:
For death is fairer than the fair;
Phyllis, to hope is to despair
When one must hope eternally.

PHILINTE
The close is exquisite—full of feeling and grace.

ALCESTE, sotto voce, aside
Oh, blast the close; you'd better close your face
Before you send your lying soul to hell.

PHILINTE
I can't remember a poem I've liked so well.
[Act One · Scene Two]

ORONTE

Are you suggesting in a devious way
That I ought not . . .

ALCESTE

Oh, that I do not say.
Further, I told him that no fault is worse
Than that of writing frigid, lifeless verse,
And that the merest whisper of such a shame
Suffices to destroy a man's good name.

ORONTE

D'you mean to say my sonnet's dull and trite?

ALCESTE

I don't say that. But I went on to cite
Numerous cases of once-respected men
Who came to grief by taking up the pen.

ORONTE

And am I like them? Do I write so poorly?

ALCESTE

I don't say that. But I told this person, "Surely
You're under no necessity to compose;
Why you should wish to publish, heaven knows.

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[Act One · Scene Two]

There's no excuse for printing tedious rot
Unless one writes for bread, as you do not.
Resist temptation, then, I beg of you;
Conceal your pastimes from the public view;
And don't give up, on any provocation,
Your present high and courtly reputation,
To purchase at a greedy printer's shop
The name of silly author and scribbling fop."
These were the points I tried to make him see.

ORONTE

I sense that they are also aimed at me;
But now—about my sonnet—I'd like to be told . . .

ALCESTE

Frankly, that sonnet should be pigeonholed.
You've chosen the worst models to imitate.
The style's unnatural. Let me illustrate:

For example, *Your fair face smiled on me amile,*
Followed by, *'Twould have been fairer not to smile!*
Or this: *such joy is full of rue;*
Or this: *For death is fairer than the fair;*
Or, *Phyllis, to hope is to despair
When one must hope eternally!*

This artificial style, that's all the fashion,
Has neither taste, nor honesty, nor passion;
It's nothing but a sort of wordy play,
And nature never spoke in such a way.
What, in this shallow age, is not debased?
Our fathers, though less refined, had better taste;
One Scene

Tuol

I'd better that men admire today
For one old love-so

I shall say to say,

If the King had given me for my own
Paris, his citadel,
And I for that must leave alone
Her whom I love so well,
I'd say then to the Crown,
Take back your glittering town;
My darling is more fair, I swear,
My darling is more fair.

The rhyme's not rich, the style is rough and old,
But don't you see that it's the purest gold
Beside the tinsel nonsense now preferred,
And that there's passion in its every word?

If the King had given me for my own
Paris, his citadel,
And I for that must leave alone
Her whom I love so well,
I'd say then to the Crown,
Take back your glittering town;
My darling is more fair, I swear,
My darling is more fair.

There speaks a loving heart. (To Philine) You're laughing, eh?
Laugh on, my precious wit. Whatever you say,
I hold that song's worth all the bibelots
That people hail today with ah's and oh's.

Oronte

And I maintain my sonnet's very good.

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[Act One · Scene Two]

Alceste

It's not at all surprising that you should.
You have your reasons; permit me to have mine
For thinking that you cannot write a line.

Oronte

Others have praised my sonnet to the skies.

Alceste

I lack their art of telling pleasant lies.

Oronte

You seem to think you've got no end of wit.

Alceste

To praise your verse, I'd need still more of it.

Oronte

I'm not in need of your approval, Sir.

Alceste

That's good; you couldn't have it if you were.
[Act One · Scene Two]

ORONTE

Come now, I'll lend you the subject of my sonnet; I'd like to see you try to improve upon it.

ALCESTE

I might, by chance, write something just as shoddy; But then I wouldn't show it to everybody.

ORONTE

You're most opinionated and conceited.

ALCESTE

Go find your flatterers, and be better treated.

ORONTE

Look here, my little fellow, pray watch your tone.

ALCESTE

My great big fellow, you'd better watch your own.

PHILINTE, stepping between them

Oh, please, please, gentlemen! This will never do.
[Act One · Scene Three]

ALCESTE

Leave me alone.

PHILINTE

If I . . .

ALCESTE

Out of my sight!

PHILINTE

But what . . .

ALCESTE

I won't listen.

PHILINTE

But . . .

ALCESTE

Silence!

PHILINTE

Now, is it polite . . .

PHILINTE

Really, now . . .
[Act One · Scene Three]

ALCESTE

By heaven, I've had enough. Don't follow me.

PHILINTE

Ah, you're just joking. I'll keep you company.
SCENE ONE

ALCESTE, CELIMENE

ALCESTE

Shall I speak plainly, Madam? I confess
Your conduct gives me infinite distress,
And my resentment's grown too hot to smother.
Soon, I foresee, we'll break with one another.
If I said otherwise, I should deceive you;
Sooner or later, I shall be forced to leave you,
And if I swore that we shall never part,
I should misread the omens of my heart.

CELMENE

You kindly saw me home, it would appear,
So as to pour invectives in my ear.

ALCESTE

I've no desire to quarrel. But I deplore
Your inability to shut the door
On all these suitors who beset you so.
There's what annoys me, if you care to know.
[Act Two · Scene One]

CELIMENE

Is it my fault that all these men pursue me?
Am I to blame if they’re attracted to me?
And when they gently beg an audience,
Ought I to take a stick and drive them hence?

ALCESTE

Madam, there’s no necessity for a stick;
A less responsive heart would do the trick.
Of your attractiveness I don’t complain;
But those your charms attract, you then detain
By a most melting and receptive manner,
And so enlist their hearts beneath your banner.
It’s the agreeable hopes which you excite
That keep these lovers round you day and night;
Were they less liberally smiled upon,
That sighing troop would very soon be gone.
But tell me, Madam, why it is that lately
This man Clitandre interests you so greatly?
Because of what high merits do you deem
Him worthy of the honor of your esteem?
Is it that your admiring glances linger
On the splendidly long nail of his little finger?
Or do you share the general deep respect
For the blond wig he chooses to affect?
Are you in love with his embroidered hose?
Do you adore his ribbons and his bows?
Or is it that this paragon bewitches
Your tasteful eye with his vast German breeches?

[Act Two · Scene One]

CELIMENE

Perhaps his giggle, or his falsetto voice,
Makes him the latest gallant of your choice?

CELIMENE

You’re much mistaken to resent him so.
Why I put up with him you surely know:
My lawsuit’s very shortly to be tried,
And I must have his influence on my side.

ALCESTE

Then lose your lawsuit, Madam, or let it drop;
Don’t torture me by humoring such a fop.

CELIMENE

You’re jealous of the whole world, Sir.

ALCESTE

That’s true, since the whole world is well-received by you.

CELIMENE

That my good nature is so unconfined
Should serve to pacify your jealous mind;
Were I to smile on one, and scorn the rest,
Then you might have some cause to be distressed.
ACT TWO · Scene One

ALCESTE

Well, if I mustn't be jealous, tell me, then,
Just how I'm better treated than other men.

CELIMENE

You know you have my love. Will that not do?

ALCESTE

What proof have I that what you say is true?

CELIMENE

I would expect, Sir, that my having said it
Might give the statement a sufficient credit.

ALCESTE

But how can I be sure that you don't tell
The selfsame thing to other men as well?

CELIMENE

What a gallant speech! How flattering to me!
What a sweet creature you make me out to be!
Well then, to save you from the pangs of doubt,
All that I've said I hereby cancel out;
Now, none but yourself shall make a monkey of you:
Are you content?

ALCESTE

Why, why am I doomed to love you?
I swear that I shall bless the blissful hour
When this poor heart's no longer in your power!
I make no secret of it: I've done my best
To exorcise this passion from my breast;
But thus far all in vain; it will not go;
It's for my sins that I must love you so.

CELIMENE

Your love for me is matchless, Sir; that's clear.

ALCESTE

Indeed, in all the world it has no peer;
Words can't describe the nature of my passion,
And no man ever loved in such a fashion.

CELIMENE

Yes, it's a brand-new fashion, I agree:
You show your love by castigating me,
And all your speeches are enraged and rude.
I've never been so furiously wooed.

ALCESTE

Yet you could calm that fury, if you chose.
Come, shall we bring our quarrels to a close?
Let's speak with open hearts, then, and begin . . .
SCENE TWO

CELIMENE, ALCESTE, BASQUE

CELIMENE
What is it?

BASQUE
Acaste is here.

CELIMENE
Well, send him in.

SCENE THREE

CELIMENE, ALCESTE

ALCESTE
What! Shall we never be alone at all? You're always ready to receive a call, And you can't bear, for ten ticks of the clock, Not to keep open house for all who knock.

CELIMENE
I couldn't refuse him: he'd be most put out.

ALCESTE
Surely that's not worth worrying about.

CELIMENE
Acaste would never forgive me if he guessed That I consider him a dreadful pest.

ALCESTE
If he's a pest, why bother with him then?
IAct

SCENE THREE

CELIMENE
Heavens! One can't antagonize such men;
Why, they're the chartered gossips of the court,
And have a say in things of every sort.
One must receive them, and be full of charm;
They're no great help, but they can do you harm,
And though your influence be ever so great,
They're hardly the best people to alienate.

ALCESTE
I see, dear lady, that you could make a case
For putting up with the whole human race;
These friendships that you calculate so nicely . . .

[Act Two • Scene Three]

SCENE FOUR

ALCESTE, CELIMENE, BASQUE

BASQUE
Madam, Clitandre is here as well.

ALCESTE
Precisely.

CELIMENE
Where are you going?

ALCESTE
Elsewhere.

CELIMENE
Stay.

ALCESTE
No, no.
[Act Two · Scene Four]

CELIMENE

Stay, Sir.

ALCESTE

I can't.

CELIMENE

I wish it.

ALCESTE

No, I must go.
I beg you, Madam, not to press the matter;
You know I have no taste for idle chatter.

CELIMENE

Stay: I command you.

ALCESTE

No, I cannot stay.

CELIMENE

Very well; you have my leave to go away.

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SCENE FIVE

ELIANTE, PHILINTE, ACASTE, CLITANDRE, ALCESTE,
CELIMENE, BASQUE

ELIANTE, to Célimène

The Marquesses have kindly come to call.
Were they announced?

CELIMENE

Yes. Basque, bring chairs for all.
(Basque provides the chairs, and exits.)
(To Alceste)
You haven't gone?

ALCESTE

No; and I shan't depart
Till you decide who's foremost in your heart.

CELIMENE

Oh, hush.

ALCESTE

It's time to choose; take them, or me.

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[Act Two · Scene Five]

CELMENE

You're mad.

ALCESTE

I'm not, as you shall shortly see.

CELMENE

Oh?

ALCESTE

You'll decide.

CELMENE

You're joking now, dear friend.

ALCESTE

No, no; you'll choose; my patience is at an end.

CLITANDRE

Madam, I come from court, where poor Cléonte
Behaved like a perfect fool, as is his wont.
Has he no friend to counsel him, I wonder,
And teach him less unerringly to blunder?

CELMENE

It's true, the man's a most accomplished dunce;
His gauche behavior charms the eye at once;

[Act Two · Scene Five]

And every time one sees him, on my word,
His manner's grown a trifle more absurd.

ACASTE

Speaking of dunces, I've just now conversed
With old Damon, who's one of the very worst;
I stood a lifetime in the broiling sun
Before his dreary monologue was done.

CELMENE

Oh, he's a wondrous talker, and has the power
To tell you nothing hour after hour:
If, by mistake, he ever came to the point,
The shock would put his jawbone out of joint.

ELIANTE, to Philinte

The conversation takes its usual turn,
And all our dear friends' ears will shortly burn.

CLITANDRE

Timante's a character, Madam.

CELMENE

Isn't he, though?

A man of mystery from top to toe,
Who moves about in a romantic mist
On secret missions which do not exist.
[Act Two · Scene Five]
His talk is full of eyebrows and grimaces;
How tired one gets of his momentous faces;
He's always whispering something confidential
Which turns out to be quite inconsequential;
Nothing's too slight for him to mystify;
He even whispers when he says “good-by.”

ACASTE

Tell us about Géralde.

CELIMENE

That tiresome ass.
He mixes only with the titled class,
And fawns on dukes and princes, and is bored
With anyone who's not at least a lord.
The man's obsessed with rank, and his discourses
Are all of hounds and carriages and horses;
He uses Christian names with all the great,
And the word Milord, with him, is out of date.

CLITANDRE

He's very taken with Bélise, I hear.

CELIMENE

She is the dreariest company, poor dear.
Whenever she comes to call, I grope about
To find some topic which will draw her out,
But, owing to her dry and faint replies,

ACASTE

Now for Adraste.

CELIMENE

Oh, that conceited elf
Has a gigantic passion for himself;
He rails against the court, and cannot bear it
That none will recognize his hidden merit;
All honors given to others give offense
To his imaginary excellence.

CLITANDRE

What about young Cléon? His house, they say,
Is full of the best society, night and day.

CELIMENE

His cook has made him popular, not he:
It's Cléon's table that people come to see.
[Act Two · Scene Five]

ELIANTE

He gives a splendid dinner, you must admit.

CELIMENE

But must he serve himself along with it?
For my taste, he's a most insipid dish
Whose presence sours the wine and spoils the fish.

PHILINTE

Damis, his uncle, is admired no end.
What's your opinion, Madam?

CELIMENE

Why, he's my friend.

PHILINTE

He seems a decent fellow, and rather clever.

CELIMENE

He works too hard at cleverness, however.
I hate to see him sweat and struggle so
To fill his conversation with bons mots.
Since he's decided to become a wit
His taste's so pure that nothing pleases it;
He scolds at all the latest books and plays,
[Act Two · Scene Five]

ALCESTE

No, no, by God, the fault is yours, because
You lead her on with laughter and applause,
And make her think that she's the more delightful
The more her talk is scandalous and spiteful.
Oh, she would stoop to malice far, far less
If no such claque approved her cleverness.
It's flatterers like you whose foolish praise
Nourishes all the vices of these days.

PHILINTE

But why protest when someone ridicules
Those you'd condemn, yourself, as knaves or fools?

CELIMENE

Why, Sir? Because he loves to make a fuss.
You don't expect him to agree with us,
When there's an opportunity to express
His heaven-sent spirit of contrariness?
What other people think, he can't abide;
Whatever they say, he's on the other side;
He lives in deadly terror of agreeing;
'Twould make him seem an ordinary being.
Indeed, he's so in love with contradiction,
He'll turn against his most profound conviction
And with a furious eloquence deplore it,
If only someone else is speaking for it.

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[Act Two · Scene Five]

ALCESTE

Go on, dear lady, mock me as you please;
You have your audience in ecstasies.

PHILINTE

But what she says is true: you have a way
Of bridling at whatever people say;
Whether they praise or blame, your angry spirit
Is equally unsatisfied to hear it.

ALCESTE

Men, Sir, are always wrong, and that's the reason
That righteous anger's never out of season;
All that I hear in all their conversation
Is flattering praise or reckless condemnation.

CELIMENE

But . . .

ALCESTE

No, no, Madam, I am forced to state
That you have pleasures which I deprecate,
And that these others, here, are much to blame
For nourishing the faults which are your shame.

CLITANDRE

I shan't defend myself, Sir; but I vow
I'd thought this lady faultless until now.

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[Act Two · Scene Five]

ACASTE
I see her charms and graces, which are many;
But as for faults, I've never noticed any.

ALCESTE
I see them, Sir; and rather than ignore them,
I strenuously criticize her for them.
The more one loves, the more one should object.
To every blemish, every least defect.
Were I this lady, I would soon get rid
Of lovers who approved of all I did,
And by their slack indulgence and applause
Endorsed my follies and excused my flaws.

CELIMENE
If all hearts beat according to your measure,
The dawn of love would be the end of pleasure;
And love would find its perfect consummation
In ecstasies of rage and reprobration.

ELIANTÉ
Love, as a rule, affects men otherwise,
And lovers rarely love to criticize.
They see their lady as a charming blur,
And find all things commendable in her.
If she has any blemish, fault, or shame,
They will redeem it by a pleasing name.
The pale-faced lady's lily-white, perforce;

But I still say . . .

CELIMENE
I think it would be nice
To stroll around the gallery once or twice.
What! You're not going, Sirs?

CLITANDE AND ACASTE
No, Madam, no.

ALCESTE
You seem to be in terror lest they go.
Do what you will, Sirs; leave, or linger on,
But I shan't go till after you are gone.
[Act Two - Scene Five]

ACASTE
I'm free to linger, unless I should perceive Madame is tired, and wishes me to leave.

CLITANDRE
And as for me, I needn't go today Until the hour of the King's couche.

CELIMENE, to Alceste
You're joking, surely?

ALCESTE
Not in the least; we'll see Whether you'd rather part with them, or me.

SCENE SIX

ALCESTE, CELIMENE, ELIANTE, ACASTE, PHILINTE, CLITANDRE, BASQUE

BASQUE, to Alceste
Sir, there's a fellow here who bids me state That he must see you, and that it can't wait.

ALCESTE
Tell him that I have no such pressing affairs.

BASQUE
It's a long tailcoat that this fellow wears, With gold all over.

CELIMENE, to Alceste
You'd best go down and see. Or—have him enter.
SCENE SEVEN

ALCESTE, CELIMENE, ELIANTE, ACASTE, PHILINTE, CLITANDRE, A GUARD OF THE MARSHALSEA

ALCESTE, CONFRONTING THE GUARD

Well, what do you want with me?

Come in, Sir.

GUARD

I've a word, Sir, for your ear.

ALCESTE

Speak it aloud, Sir; I shall strive to hear.

GUARD

The Marshals have instructed me to say
You must report to them without delay.

ALCESTE

Who? Me, Sir?

GUARD

Yes, Sir; you.

[ACT TWO • SCENE SEVEN]

ALCESTE

But what do they want?

PHILINTE, TO ALCESTE

To scotch your silly quarrel with Oronte.

CELIMENE, TO PHILINTE

What quarrel?

PHILINTE

Oronte and he have fallen out
Over some verse he spoke his mind about;
The Marshals wish to arbitrate the matter.

ALCESTE

Never shall I equivocate or flatter!

PHILINTE

You'd best obey their summons; come, let's go.

ALCESTE

How can they mend our quarrel, I'd like to know?
Am I to make a cowardly retraction,
And praise those jingles to his satisfaction?
I'll not recant; I've judged that sonnet rightly.
It's bad.
[Act Two · Scene Seven]

PHILINTE

But you might say so more politely. . . .

ALCESTE

I'll not back down; his verses make me sick.

PHILINTE

If only you could be more politic!
But come, let's go.

ALCESTE

I'll go, but I won't unsay
A single word.

PHILINTE

Well, let's be on our way.

ALCESTE

Till I am ordered by my lord the King
To praise that poem, I shall say the thing
Is scandalous, by God, and that the poet
Ought to be hanged for having the nerve to show it.
(To Clitandre and Acaste, who are laughing)
By heaven, Sirs, I really didn't know
That I was being humorous.

CELIMENE

Go, Sir, go;

Settle your business.

ALCESTE

I shall, and when I'm through,
I shall return to settle things with you.
SCENE ONE

CLITANDRE, ACASTE

CLITANDRE

Dear Marquess, how contented you appear;
All things delight you, nothing mars your cheer.
Can you, in perfect honesty, declare
That you've a right to be so debonair?

ACASte

By Jove, when I survey myself, I find
No cause whatever for distress of mind.
I'm young and rich; I can in modesty
Lay claim to an exalted pedigree;
And owing to my name and my condition
I shall not want for honors and position.
Then as to courage, that most precious trait,
I seem to have it, as was proved of late
Upon the field of honor, where my bearing,
They say, was very cool and rather daring.
I've wit, of course; and taste in such perfection
That I can judge without the least reflection,
And at the theater, which is my delight,
Can make or break a play on opening night,
And lead the crowd in hisses or bravos,
[Act Three · Scene One]

And generally be known as one who knows.
I'm clever, handsome, gracefull polite;
My waist is small, my teeth are strong and white;
As for my dress, the world's astonished eyes
Assure me that I bear away the prize.
I find myself in favor everywhere,
Honored by men, and worshiped by the fair;
And since these things are so, it seems to me
I'm justified in my complacency.

CLITANDRE

Well, if so many ladies hold you dear,
Why do you press a hopeless courtship here?

ACASTE

Hopeless, you say? I'm not the sort of fool
That likes his ladies difficult and cool.
Men who are awkward, shy, and peasantish
May pine for heartless beauties, if they wish,
Grovel before them, bear their cruelties,
Woo them with tears and sighs and bended knees,
And hope by dogged faithfulness to gain
What their poor merits never could obtain.
For men like me, however, it makes no sense
To love on trust, and foot the whole expense.
Whatever any lady's merits be,
I think, thank God, that I'm as choice as she;
That if my heart is kind enough to burn
For her, she owes me something in return;
And that in any proper love affair
The partners must invest an equal share.

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[Act Three · Scene One]

CLITANDRE

But have you any proofs to cite?

ACASTE

I tell you I'm deluded.

CLITANDRE

Have you, then,
Received some secret pledge from Célimène?

ACASTE

Oh, no: she scorns me.

CLITANDRE

Tell me the truth, I beg.

ACASTE

She just can't bear me.

CLITANDRE

Ah, don't pull my leg.
Tell me what hope she's given you, I pray.

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[Act Three · Scene One]

ACASTE

I'm hopeless, and it's you who win the day.
She hates me thoroughly, and I'm so vexed
I mean to hang myself on Tuesday next.

CLITANDRE

Dear Marquess, let us have an armistice
And make a treaty. What do you say to this?
If ever one of us can plainly prove
That Célimène encourages his love,
The other must abandon hope, and yield,
And leave him in possession of the field.

ACASTE

Now, there's a bargain that appeals to me;
With all my heart, dear Marquess, I agree.
But hush.
SCENE TWO

CELMENE, ACASTE, CLITANDRE

CELMENE

Still here?

CLITANDRE

T'was love that stayed our feet.

CELMENE

I think I heard a carriage in the street. Whose is it? D'you know?

SCENE THREE

CELMENE, ACASTE, CLITANDRE, BASQUE

BASQUE

Arsinoé is here, 

Madame.

CELMENE

Arsinoé, you say? Oh, dear.

BASQUE

Eliante is entertaining her below.

CELMENE

What brings the creature here, I'd like to know?

ACASTE

They say she's dreadfully prudish, but in fact I think her piety ...
Act Three · Scene Three

CELIMENE

It's all an act.
At heart she's worldly, and her poor success
In snaring men explains her prudishness.
It breaks her heart to see the beaux and gallants
Engrossed by other women's charms and talents,
And so she's always in a jealous rage
Against the faulty standards of the age.
She lets the world believe that she's a prude
To justify her loveless solitude,
And strives to put a brand of moral shame
On all the graces that she cannot claim.
But still she'd love a lover; and Alceste
Appears to be the one she'd love the best.
His visits here are poison to her pride;
She seems to think I've lured him from her side;
And everywhere, at court or in the town,
The spiteful, envious woman runs me down.
In short, she's just as stupid as can be,
Vicious and arrogant in the last degree,
And . . .

Scene Four

ARSINOE, CELIMENE, CLITANDRE, ACASTE

CELIMENE

Ah! What happy chance has brought you here?
I've thought about you ever so much, my dear.

ARSINOE

I've come to tell you something you should know.

CELIMENE

How good of you to think of doing so!

(CLITANDRE AND ACASTE GO OUT, LAUGHING.)
SCENE FIVE

ARSINOE, CELIMENE

ARSINOE

It’s just as well those gentlemen didn’t tarry

CELMENE

Shall we sit down?

ARSINOE

That won’t be necessary
Madam, the flame of friendship ought to burn
Brightest in matters of the most concern,
And as there’s nothing which concerns us more
Than honor, I have hastened to your door
To bring you, as your friend, some information
About the status of your reputation.
I visited, last night, some virtuous folk,
And, quite by chance, it was of you they spoke;
There was, I fear, no tendency to praise
Your light behavior and your dashing ways.
The quantity of gentlemen you see
And your by now notorious coquetry
Were both so vehemently criticized

[Act Three · Scene Five]

By everyone, that I was much surprised.
Of course, I needn’t tell you where I stood;
I came to your defense as best I could,
Assured them you were harmless, and declared
Your soul was absolutely unimpaired.
But there are some things, you must realize,
One can’t excuse, however hard one tries,
And I was forced at last into conceding
That your behavior, Madam, is misleading.
That it makes a bad impression, giving rise
To ugly gossip and obscene surmise,
And that if you were more overtly good,
You wouldn’t be so much misunderstood.
Not that I think you’ve been unchaste—no! no!
The saints preserve me from a thought so low!
But mere good conscience never did suffice:
One must avoid the outward show of vice.
Madam, you’re too intelligent, I’m sure,
To think my motives anything but pure
In offering you this counsel—which I do
Out of a zealous interest in you.

CELMENE

Madam, I haven’t taken you amiss;
I’m very much obliged to you for this;
And I’ll at once discharge the obligation
By telling you about your reputation.
You’ve been so friendly as to let me know
What certain people say of me, and so
I mean to follow your benign example
By offering you a somewhat similar sample.
[Act Three · Scene Five]
The other day, I went to an affair
And found some most distinguished people there
Discussing pietly, both false and true.
The conversation soon came round to you.
Alas! Your prudery and bustling zeal
Appeared to have a very slight appeal.
Your affectation of a grave demeanor,
Your endless talk of virtue and of honor,
The aptitude of your suspicious mind
For finding sin where there is none to find,
Your towering self-esteem,
That pining face
With which you contemplate the human race,
Your sermonizings and your sharp aspersions
On people's pure and innocent diversions—
All these were mentioned, Madam, all in
Were roundly and concertedly attacked.
“What good,” they said, “are all these outward shows,
When everything belies her pious pose?
She prays incessantly; but then, they say,
She beats her maids and cheats them of their pay;
She shows her zeal in every holy place,
But still she's vain enough to paint her face;
She holds that naked statues are immoral,
But with a naked man she'd have no quarrel.”
Of course, I said to everybody there
That they were being viciously unfair;
But still they were disposed to criticize you,
And all agreed that someone should advise you
To leave the morals of the world alone,
And worry rather more about your own.
They felt that one's self-knowledge should be great
Before one thinks of setting others straight;

[Act Three · Scene Five]
That one should learn the art of living well
Before one threatens other men with hell,
And that the Church is best equipped, no doubt,
To guide our souls and root our vices out.
Madam, you're too intelligent, I'm sure,
To think my motives anything but pure
In offering you this counsel—which I do
Out of a zealous interest in you.

ARSINOE
I dared not hope for gratitude, but I
Did not expect so acid a reply;
I judge, since you've been so extremely tart,
That my good counsel pierced you to the heart.

CELIMENE
Far from it, Madam. Indeed, it seems to me
We ought to trade advice more frequently.
One's vision of oneself is so defective
That it would be an excellent corrective.
If you are willing, Madam, let's arrange
Shortly to have another frank exchange
In which we'll tell each other, entre nous,
What you've heard tell of me, and I of you.

ARSINOE
Oh, people never censure you, my dear;
It's me they criticize. Or so I hear.
[Act Three · Scene Five]

Celimene

Madam, I think we either blame or praise
According to our taste and length of days.
There is a time of life for coquetry,
And there's a season, too, for prudery.
When all one's charms are gone, it is, I'm sure,
Good strategy to be devout and pure:
It makes one seem a little less forsaken.
Some day, perhaps, I'll take the road you've taken:
Time brings all things. But I have time aplenty,
And see no cause to be a prude at twenty.

Arsinoe

You give your age in such a gloating tone
That one would think I was an ancient crone;
We're not so far apart, in sober truth,
That you can mock me with a boast of youth!
Madam, you baffle me. I wish I knew
What moves you to provoke me as you do.

Celimene

For my part, Madam, I should like to know
Why you abuse me everywhere you go.
Is it my fault, dear lady, that your hand
Is not, alas, in very great demand?
If men admire me, if they pay me court
And daily make me offers of the sort

You'd dearly love to have them make to you,
How can I help it? What would you have me do?
If what you want is lovers, please feel free
To take as many as you can from me.

Arsinoe

Oh, come. D'you think the world is losing sleep
Over that flock of lovers which you keep,
Or that we find it difficult to guess
What price you pay for their devotedness?
Surely you don't expect us to suppose
Mere merit could attract so many beaux?
It's not your virtue that they're dazzled by;
Nor is it virtuous love for which they sigh.
You're fooling no one, Madam; the world's not blind:
There's many a lady heaven has designed
To call men's noblest, tenderest feelings out,
Who has no lovers dogging her about;
From which it's plain that lovers nowadays
Must be acquired in bold and shameless ways,
And only pay one court for such reward
As modesty and virtue can't afford.
Then don't be quite so puffed up, if you please,
About your tawdry little victories;
Try, if you can, to be a shade less vain,
And treat the world with somewhat less disdain.
If one were envious of your amours,
One soon could have a following like yours;
Lovers are no great trouble to collect
If one prefers them to one's self-respect.
[Act Three · Scene Five]

CELMENE

Collect them then, my dear; I'd love to see
You demonstrate that charming theory;
Who knows, you might . .

ARSINOE

Now, Madam, that will do;
It's time to end this trying interview.
My coach is late in coming to your door,
Or I'd have taken leave of you before.

CELMENE

Oh, please don't feel that you must rush away;
I'd be delighted, Madam, if you'd stay.
However, lest my conversation bore you,
Let me provide some better company for you;
This gentleman, who comes most apropos,
Will please you more than I could do, I know.

SCENE SIX

ALCESTE, CELMENE, ARSINOE

CELMENE

Alceste, I have a little note to write
Which simply must go out before tonight;
Please entertain Madame; I'm sure that she
Will overlook my incivility.
SCENE SEVEN

ARSENOE

Well, Sir, our hostess graciously contrives
For us to chat until my coach arrives;
And I shall be forever in her debt
For granting me this little tête-à-tête.
We women very rightly give our hearts
To men of noble character and parts,
And your especial merits, dear Alceste,
Have roused the deepest sympathy in my breast.
Oh, how I wish they had sufficient sense
At court, to recognize your excellence!
They wrong you greatly, Sir. How it must hurt you
Never to be rewarded for your virtue!

ARSENOE

Some virtues, though, are far too bright to hide;
Yours are acknowledged, Sir, on every side.
Indeed, I've heard you warmly praised of late
By persons of considerable weight.

ALCIDE

Ah, forget my merit; I'm not neglected.
The court, I think, can hardly be expected
To mine men's souls for merit, and unearth
Our hidden virtues and our secret worth.

ALCIDE

Why, Madam, what cause have I to feel aggrieved?
What great and brilliant thing have I achieved?
What service have I rendered to the King
That I should look to him for anything?

ARSENOE

This fawning age has praise for everyone,
And all distinctions, Madam, are undone.
All things have equal honor nowadays,
And no one should be gratified by praise.
To be admired, one only need exist,
And every lackey's on the honors list.
ARSINOE

I only wish, Sir, that you had your eye
On some position at court, however high;
You'd only have to hint at such a notion
For me to set the proper wheels in motion;
I've certain friendships I'd be glad to use
To get you any office you might choose.

ALCESTE

Madam, I fear that any such ambition
Is wholly foreign to my disposition.
The soul God gave me isn't of the sort
That prospers in the weather of a court.
It's all too obvious that I don't possess
The virtues necessary for success.
My one great talent is for speaking plain;
I've never learned to flatter or to feign;
And anyone so stupidly sincere
Had best not seek a courtier's career.
Outside the court, I know, one must dispense
With honors, privilege, and influence;
But still one gains the right, foregoing these,
Not to be tortured by the wish to please.
One needn't live in dread of snubs and slights,
Nor praise the verse that every idiot writes,
Nor humor silly Marquesses, nor bestow
Polite sighs on Madam So-and-So.

ARSINOE

Forget the court, then; let the matter rest.
But I've another cause to be distressed

ALCESTE

About your present situation, Sir.
It's to your love affair that I refer.
She whom you love, and who pretends to love you,
Is, I regret to say, unworthy of you.

ARSINOE

Why, Madam! Can you seriously intend
To make so grave a charge against your friend?

ALCESTE

Alas, I must. I've stood aside too long
And let that lady do you grievous wrong;
But now my debt to conscience shall be paid:
I tell you that your love has been betrayed.

ARSINOE

I thank you, Madam; you're extremely kind.
Such words are soothing to a lover's mind.

ARSINOE

Yes, though she is my friend, I say again
You're very much too good for Célimène.
She's wantonly misled you from the start.

ALCESTE

You may be right; who knows another's heart?
But ask yourself if it's the part of charity
To shake my soul with doubts of her sincerity.
[Act Three • Scene Seven]

ARSINOE

Well, if you'd rather be a dupe than doubt her,
That's your affair. I'll say no more about her.

ALCESTE

Madam, you know that doubt and vague suspicion
Are painful to a man in my position;
It's most unkind to worry me this way
Unless you've some real proof of what you say.

ARSINOE

Sir, say no more: all doubt shall be removed,
And all that I've been saying shall be proved.
You've only to escort me home, and there
We'll look into the heart of this affair.
I've ocular evidence which will persuade you
Beyond a doubt, that Célimène's betrayed you.
Then, if you're saddened by that revelation,
Perhaps I can provide some consolation.
PHILINTE

Madam, he acted like a stubborn child;
I thought they never would be reconciled;
In vain we reasoned, threatened, and appealed;
He stood his ground and simply would not yield.
The Marshals, I feel sure, have never heard
An argument so splendidly absurd.
"No, gentlemen," said he, "I'll not retract.
His verse is bad: extremely bad, in fact.
Surely it does the man no harm to know it.
Does it disgrace him, not to be a poet?
A gentleman may be respected still,
Whether he writes a sonnet well or ill.
That I dislike his verse should not offend him;
In all that touches honor, I commend him;
He's noble, brave, and virtuous—but I fear
He can't in truth be called a sonneteer.
I'll gladly praise his wardrobe; I'll endorse
His dancing, or the way he sits a horse;
But, gentlemen, I cannot praise his rhyme.
In fact, it ought to be a capital crime
For anyone so sadly unendowed
To write a sonnet, and read the thing aloud."
At length he fell into a gentler mood
And, striking a concussive attitude,
He paid Oronte the following courtesies:
“Sir, I regret that I'm so hard to please,
And I'm profoundly sorry that your lyric
Failed to provoke me to a panegyric.”
After these curious words, the two embraced,
And then the hearing was adjourned—in haste.

His conduct has been very singular lately;
Still, I confess that I respect him greatly.
The honesty in which he takes such pride
Has—to my mind—its noble, heroic side.
In this false age, such candor seems outrageous;
But I could wish that it were more contagious.

What most intrigues me in our friend Alceste
Is the grand passion that rages in his breast.
The sullen humors he's compounded of
Should not, I think, dispose his heart to love;
But since they do, it puzzles me still more
That he should choose your cousin to adore.

It does, indeed, belie the theory
That love is born of gentle sympathy,
And that the tender passion must be based
On sweet accords of temper and of taste.
Act Four · Scene One

I'd gladly play the role of substitute;
Nor would his tender speeches please me less
Because they'd once been made without success.

PHILINTE

Well, Madam, as for me, I don't oppose
Your hopes in this affair; and heaven knows
That in my conversations with the man
I plead your cause as often as I can.
But if those two should marry, and so remove
All chance that he will offer you his love,
Then I'll declare my own, and hope to see
Your gracious favor pass from him to me.
In short, should you be cheated of Alceste,
I'd be most happy to be second best.

ELIANTE

Philinte, you're teasing.

PHILINTE

Ah, Madam, never fear;
No words of mine were ever so sincere,
And I shall live in fretful expectation
Till I can make a fuller declaration.

SCENE TWO

ALCESTE, ELIANTE, PHILINTE

ALCESTE

Avenge me, Madam! I must have satisfaction,
Or this great wrong will drive me to distraction!

ELIANTE

Why, what's the matter? What's upset you so?

ALCESTE

Madam, I've had a mortal, mortal blow.
If Chaos repossessed the universe,
I swear I'd not be shaken any worse.
I'm ruined. . . I can say no more. . . My soul . . .

ELIANTE

Do try, Sir, to regain your self-control.

ALCESTE

Just heaven! Why were so much beauty and grace
Bestowed on one so vicious and so base?
[Act Four · Scene Two]

ELIANTÉ

Once more, Sir, tell us . . .

ALCESTE

My world has gone to wrack;
I'm—I'm betrayed; she's stabbed me in the back:
Yes, Célimène (who would have thought it of her?)
Is false to me, and has another lover.

ELIANTÉ

Are you quite certain? Can you prove these things?

PHILINTE

Lovers are prey to wild imaginings
And jealous fancies. No doubt there's some mistake. . . .

ALCESTE

Mind your own business, Sir, for heaven's sake.
(To Eliante)
Madam, I have the proof that you demand
Here in my pocket, penned by her own hand.
Yes, all the shameful evidence one could want
Lies in this letter written to Oronte—
Oronte! whom I felt sure she couldn't love,
And hardly bothered to be jealous of.

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[Act Four · Scene Two]

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 own affairs; leave mine to me.

ELIANTÉ

Compose yourself; this anguish that you feel

ALCESTE

Is something, Madam, you alone can heal.
My outraged heart, beside itself with grief,
Appeals to you for comfort and relief.
Avenge me on your cousin, whose unjust
And faithless nature has deceived my trust;
Avenge a crime your pure soul must detest.

ELIANTÉ

But how, Sir?

ALCESTE

Madam, this heart within my breast
Is yours; pray take it; redeem my heart from her,
And so avenge me on my torturer.

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Let her be punished by the fond emotion,
The ardent love, the bottomless devotion,
The faithful worship which this heart of mine
Will offer up to yours as to a shrine.

ELIANTE

You have my sympathy, Sir, in all you suffer;
Nor do I scorn the noble heart you offer;
But I suspect you'll soon be mollified,
And this desire for vengeance will subside.
When some beloved hand has done us wrong
We thirst for retribution—but not for long;
However dark the deed that she's committed,
A lovely culprit's very soon acquitted.
Nothing's so stormy as an injured lover,
And yet no storm so quickly passes over.

ALCESTE

No, Madam, no—this is no lovers' spat;
I'll not forgive her; it's gone too far for that;
My mind's made up; I'll kill myself before
I waste my hopes upon her any more.
Ah, here she is. My wrath intensifies.
I shall confront her with her tricks and lies,
And crush her utterly, and bring you then
A heart no longer slave to Célième.
[Act Four · Scene Three]

ALCESTE

Madam, it's not the moment to be witty.
No, blush and hang your head; you've ample reason,
Since I've the fullest evidence of your treason.
Ah, this is what my sad heart prophesied;
Now all my anxious fears are verified;
My dark suspicion and my gloomy doubt
Divined the truth, and now the truth is out.
For all your trickery, I was not deceived;
It was my bitter stars that I believed.
But don't imagine that you'll go scot-free;
You shan't misuse me with impunity.
I know that love's irrational and blind;
I know the heart's not subject to the mind,
And can't be reasoned into beating faster;
I know each soul is free to choose its master;
Therefore had you but spoken from the heart,
Rejecting my attentions from the start,
I'd have no grievance, or at any rate
I could complain of nothing but my fate.
Ah, but so falsely to encourage me—
That was a treason and a treachery
For which you cannot suffer too severely,
And you shall pay for that behavior dearly.
Yes, now I have no pity, not a shred;
My temper's out of hand; I've lost my head;
Shocked by the knowledge of your double-dealings,
My reason can't restrain my savage feelings;
A righteous wrath deprives me of my senses,
And I won't answer for the consequences.

CELIMENE

What does this outburst mean? Will you please explain?
Have you, by any chance, gone quite insane?

ALCESTE

Yes, yes, I went insane the day I fell
A victim to your black and fatal spell,
Thinking to meet with some sincerity
Among the treacherous charms that beckoned me.

CELIMENE

Pooh. Of what treachery can you complain?

ALCESTE

How sly you are, how cleverly you feign!
But you'll not victimize me any more.
Look: here's a document you've seen before.
This evidence, which I acquired today,
Leaves you, I think, without a thing to say.

CELIMENE

Is this what sent you into such a fit?

ALCESTE

You should be blushing at the sight of it.
[Act Four · Scene Three]

CELIMENE

Ought I to blush? I truly don’t see why.

ALCESTE

Ah, now you’re being bold as well as sly;
Since there’s no signature, perhaps you’ll claim . . .

CELIMENE

I wrote it, whether or not it bears my name.

ALCESTE

And you can view with equanimity
This proof of your disloyalty to me!

CELIMENE

Oh, don’t be so outrageous and extreme.

ALCESTE

You take this matter lightly, it would seem.
Was it no wrong to me, no shame to you,
That you should send Oronte this billet-doux?

CELIMENE

Oronte! Who said it was for him?

[Act Four · Scene Three]

ALCESTE

Why, those
Who brought me this example of your prose.
But what’s the difference? If you wrote the letter
To someone else, it pleases me no better.
My grievance and your guilt remain the same.

CELIMENE

But need you rage, and need I blush for shame,
If this was written to a woman friend?

ALCESTE

Ah! Most ingenious. I'm impressed no end;
And after that incredible evasion
Your guilt is clear. I need no more persuasion.
How dare you try so clumsy a deception?
D’you think I’m wholly wanting in perception?
Come, come, let’s see how brazenly you’ll try
To bolster up so palpable a lie:
Kindly construe this ardent closing section
As nothing more than sisterly affection!
Here, let me read it. Tell me, if you dare to,
That this is for a woman . . .

CELIMENE

I don’t care to.

What right have you to badger and berate me,
And so highhandedly interrogate me?

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[Act Four · Scene Three]

ALCESTE

Now, don't be angry; all I ask of you
Is that you justify a phrase or two . . .

CELIMENE

No, I shall not. I utterly refuse,
And you may take those phrases as you choose.

ALCESTE

Just show me how this letter could be meant
For a woman's eyes, and I shall be content.

CELIMENE

No, no, it's for Oronte; you're perfectly right.
I welcome his attentions with delight,
I prize his character and his intellect,
And everything is just as you suspect.
Come, do your worst now; give your rage free rein;
But kindly cease to bicker and complain.

ALCESTE, aside

Good God! Could anything be more inhuman?
Was ever a heart so mangled by a woman?
When I complain of how she has betrayed me,
She bridles, and commences to upbraid me!
She tries my tortured patience to the limit;
She won't deny her guilt; she glories in it!

[Act Four · Scene Three]

And yet my heart's too faint and cowardly
To break these chains of passion, and be free,
To scorn her as it should, and rise above
This unrewarded, mad, and bitter love.
(To Célimène)
Ah, traitress, in how confident a fashion
You take advantage of my helpless passion,
And use my weakness for your faithless charms
To make me once again throw down my arms!
But do at least deny this black transgression;
Take back that mocking and perverse confession;
Defend this letter and your innocence,
And I, poor fool, will aid in your defense.
Pretend, pretend, that you are just and true,
And I shall make myself believe in you.

CELIMENE

Oh, stop it. Don't be such a jealous dunce,
Or I shall leave off loving you at once.
Just why should I pretend? What could impel me
To stoop so low as that? And kindly tell me
Why, if I loved another, I shouldn't merely
Inform you of it, simply and sincerely!
I've told you where you stand, and that admission
Should altogether clear me of suspicion;
After so generous a guarantee,
What right have you to harbor doubts of me?
Since women are (from natural reticence)
Reluctant to declare their sentiments,
And since the honor of our sex requires
That we conceal our amorous desires,
[Act Four · Scene Three]

Ought any man for whom such laws are broken
To question what the oracle has spoken?
Should he not rather feel an obligation
To trust that most obliging declaration?
Enough, now. Your suspicions quite disgust me;
Why should I love a man who doesn’t trust me?
I cannot understand why I continue,
Fool that I am, to take an interest in you.
I ought to choose a man less prone to doubt,
And give you something to be vexed about.

ALCESTE

Ah, what a poor enchanted fool I am;
These gentle words, no doubt, were all a sham;
But destiny requires me to entrust
My happiness to you, and so I must.
I'll love you to the bitter end, and see
How false and treacherous you dare to be.

CELIMENE

No, you don’t really love me as you ought.

ALCESTE

I love you more than can be said or thought;
Indeed, I wish you were in such distress
That I might show my deep devotedness.
Yes, I could wish that you were wretchedly poor,
Unloved, uncherished, utterly obscure;
That fate had set you down upon the earth

[Act Four · Scene Three]

Without possessions, rank, or gentle birth;
Then, by the offer of my heart, I might
Repair the great injustice of your plight;
I’d raise you from the dust, and proudly prove
The purity and vastness of my love.

CELIMENE

This is a strange benevolence indeed!
God grant that I may never be in need. . .
Ah, here’s Monsieur Dubois, in quaint disguise.
SCENE FOUR

CELIMENE, ALCESTE, DUBOIS

ALCESTE

Well, why this costume? Why those frightened eyes? What ails you?

DUBOIS

Well, Sir, things are most mysterious.

ALCESTE

What do you mean?

DUBOIS

I fear they're very serious.

ALCESTE

What?

DUBOIS

Shall I speak more loudly?

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[Act Four · Scene Four]

ALCESTE

Yes: speak out.

DUBOIS

Isn't there someone here, Sir?

ALCESTE

Stop wasting time.

DUBOIS

Sir, we must slip away.

ALCESTE

How's that?

DUBOIS

We must decamp without delay.

ALCESTE

Explain yourself.

DUBOIS

I tell you we must fly.

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[Act Four · Scene Four]

ALCESTE

What for?

DUBOIS

We mustn't pause to say good-by.

ALCESTE

Now what d'you mean by all of this, you clown?

DUBOIS

I mean, Sir, that we've got to leave this town.

ALCESTE

I'll tear you limb from limb and joint from joint
If you don't come more quickly to the point.

DUBOIS

Well, Sir, today a man in a black suit,
Who wore a black and ugly scowl to boot,
Left us a document scrawled in such a hand
As even Satan couldn't understand.

ALCESTE

Forget his name, you idiot. What did he say?

DUBOIS

Well, it was one of your friends, Sir, anyway.
He warned you to begone, and he suggested
That if you stay, you may well be arrested.

ALCESTE

What? Nothing more specific? Think, man, think!
[Act Four · Scene Four]

DUBOIS
No, Sir. He had me bring him pen and ink,
And dashed you off a letter which, I’m sure,
Will render things distinctly less obscure.

ALCESTE
Well—let me have it!

CELI MENE
What is this all about?

ALCESTE
God knows; but I have hopes of finding out.
How long am I to wait, you blitherer?

DUBOIS, after a protracted search for the letter
I must have left it on your table, Sir.

ALCESTE
I ought to . . .

CELI MENE
No, no, keep your self-control;
Go find out what’s behind his rigmarole.
SCENE ONE

ALCESTE, PHILINTE

ALCESTE

No, it's too much. My mind's made up, I tell you.

PHILINTE

Why should this blow, however hard, compel you . . .

ALCESTE

No, no, don't waste your breath in argument; Nothing you say will alter my intent; This age is vile, and I've made up my mind To have no further commerce with mankind. Did not truth, honor, decency, and the laws Oppose my enemy and approve my cause? My claims were justified in all men's sight; I put my trust in equity and right; Yet, to my horror and the world's disgrace, Justice is mocked, and I have lost my case! A scoundrel whose dishonesty is notorious Emerges from another lie victorious! Honor and right condone his brazen fraud, While rectitude and decency applaud!
Before his smirking face, the truth stands charmed, And virtue conquered, and the law disarmed! His crime is sanctioned by a court decree! And not content with what he's done to me, The dog now seeks to ruin me by stating That I composed a book now circulating, A book so wholly criminal and vicious That even to speak its title is seditious! Meanwhile Oronte, my rival, lends his credit To the same libelous tale, and helps to spread it! Oronte! a man of honor and of rank, With whom I've been entirely fair and frank; Who sought me out and forced me, willy-nilly, To judge some verse I found extremely silly; And who, because I properly refused To flatter him, or see the truth abused, Abets my enemy in a rotten slander! There's the reward of honesty and candor! The man will hate me to the end of time For failing to commend his wretched rhyme! And not this man alone, but all humanity Do what they do from interest and vanity; They prate of honor, truth, and righteousness, But lie, betray, and swindle nonetheless. Come then: man's villainy is too much to bear; Let's leave this jungle and this jackal's lair. Yes! treacherous and savage race of men, You shall not look upon my face again.

Oh, don't rush into exile prematurely; Things aren't as dreadful as you make them, surely.

It's rather obvious, since you're still at large, That people don't believe your enemy's charge. Indeed, his tale's so patently untrue That it may do more harm to him than you.

Nothing could do that scoundrel any harm. His frank corruption is his greatest charm, And, far from hurting him, a further shame Would only serve to magnify his name.

In any case, his bald prevarication Has done no injury to your reputation, And you may feel secure in that regard. As for your lawsuit, it should not be hard To have the case reopened, and contest This judgment . . .

No, no, let the verdict rest. Whatever cruel penalty it may bring, I wouldn't have it changed for anything. It shows the times' injustice with such clarity That I shall pass it down to our posterity As a great proof and signal demonstration Of the black wickedness of this generation. It may cost twenty thousand francs; but I
[Act Five  Scene One]

Shall pay their twenty thousand, and gain thereby
The right to storm and rage at human evil,
And send the race of mankind to the devil.

PHILINTH

Listen to me. . . .

ALCESTE

Why? What can you possibly say?
Don't argue, Sir; your labor's thrown away.
Do you propose to offer lame excuses
For men's behavior and the times' abuses?

PHILINTH

No, all you say I'll readily concede:
This is a low, dishonest age indeed;
Nothing but trickery prospers nowadays,
And people ought to mend their shabby ways.
Yes, man's a beastly creature; but must we then
Abandon the society of men?
Here in the world, each human frailty
Provides occasion for philosophy,
And that is virtue's noblest exercise;
If honesty shone forth from all men's eyes,
If every heart were frank and kind and just,
What could our virtues do but gather dust
(Since their employment is to help us bear
The villainies of men without despair)?
A heart well-armed with virtue can endure. . . .
SCENE TWO

CELMENE, ORONTE, ALCESTE

ORONTE
Yes, Madam, if you wish me to remain
Your true and ardent lover, you must deign
To give me some more positive assurance.
All this suspense is quite beyond endurance.
If your heart shares the sweet desires of mine,
Show me as much by some convincing sign;
And here's the sign I urgently suggest:
That you no longer tolerate Alceste,
But sacrifice him to my love, and sever
All your relations with the man forever.

CELMENE
Why do you suddenly dislike him so?
You praised him to the skies not long ago.

ORONTE
Madam, that's not the point. I'm here to find
Which way your tender feelings are inclined.
Choose, if you please, between Alceste and me,
And I shall stay or go accordingly.

ALCESTE, emerging from the corner
Yes, Madam, choose; this gentleman's demand
Is wholly just, and I support his stand.
I too am true and ardent; I too am here
To ask you that you make your feelings clear.
No more delays, now; no equivocation;
The time has come to make your declaration.

ORONTE
Sir, I've no wish in any way to be
An obstacle to your felicity.

ALCESTE
Sir, I've no wish to share her heart with you;
That may sound jealous, but at least it's true.

ORONTE
If, weighing us, she leans in your direction . . .

ALCESTE
If she regards you with the least affection . . .

ORONTE
I swear I'll yield her to you there and then.
[Act Five · Scene Two]

ALCESTE
I swear I'll never see her face again.

ORONTE
Now, Madam, tell us what we've come to hear.

ALCESTE
Madam, speak openly and have no fear.

ORONTE
Just say which one is to remain your lover.

ALCESTE
Just name one name, and it will all be over.

ORONTE
What! Is it possible that you're undecided?

ALCESTE
What! Can your feelings possibly be divided?

CELIMENE
Enough: this inquisition's gone too far:
How utterly unreasonable you are!
Not that I couldn't make the choice with ease;

[Act Five · Scene Two]

My heart has no conflicting sympathies;
I know full well which one of you I favor,
And you'd not see me hesitate or waver.
But how can you expect me to reveal
So cruelly and bluntly what I feel?
I think it altogether too unpleasant
To choose between two men when both are present;
One's heart has means more subtle and more kind
Of letting its affections be divined,
Nor need one be uncharitably plain
To let a lover know he loves in vain.

ORONTE
No, no, speak plainly; I for one can stand it.
I beg you to be frank.

ALCESTE
And I demand it.
The simple truth is what I wish to know,
And there's no need for softening the blow.
You've made an art of pleasing everyone,
But now your days of coquetry are done:
You have no choice now, Madam, but to choose,
For I'll know what to think if you refuse;
I'll take your silence for a clear admission
That I'm entitled to my worst suspicion.

ORONTE
I thank you for this ultimatum, Sir,
And I may say I heartily concur.
[Act Five • Scene Two]

CELIMENE

Really, this foolishness is very wearing:
Must you be so unjust and overbearing?
Haven't I told you why I must demur?
Ah, here's Eliante; I'll put the case to her.

SCENE THREE

ELIANTE, PHILINTE, CELIMENE, ORONTE, ALCESTE

CELIMENE

Cousin, I'm being persecuted here
By these two persons, who, it would appear,
Will not be satisfied till I confess
Which one I love the more, and which the less,
And tell the latter to his face that he
Is henceforth banished from my company.
Tell me, has ever such a thing been done?

ELIANTE

You'd best not turn to me; I'm not the one
To back you in a matter of this kind:
I'm all for those who frankly speak their mind.

ORONTE

Madam, you'll search in vain for a defender.

ALCESTE

You're beaten, Madam, and may as well surrender.
[Act Five · Scene Three]

ORONTE
Speak, speak, you must; and end this awful strain.

ALCESTE
Or don't, and your position will be plain.

ORONTE
A single word will close this painful scene.

ALCESTE
But if you're silent, I'll know what you mean.

SCENE FOUR

ARISINAE, CELIMENE, ELIANTE,
ALCESTE, PHILINTE,
ACASTE, CLITANDRE, ORONTE

ACASTE, to Célimène
Madam, with all due deference, we two
Have come to pick a little bone with you.

CLITANDRE, to Oronte and Alceste
I'm glad you're present, Sirs; as you'll soon learn,
Our business here is also your concern.

ARISINAE, to Célimène
Madam, I visit you so soon again
Only because of these two gentlemen,
Who came to me indignant and aggrieved
About a crime too base to be believed.
Knowing your virtue, having such confidence in it,
I couldn't think you guilty for a minute,
In spite of all their telling evidence;
And, rising above our little difference,
I've hastened here in friendship's name to see
You clear yourself of this great calumny.
[Act Five • Scene Four]

ACASTE

Yes, Madam, let us see with what composure you'll manage to respond to this disclosure. You lately sent Clitandre this tender note.

CLITANDRE

And this one, for Acaste, you also wrote.

ACASTE, to Oronte and Alceste

You'll recognize this writing, Sirs, I think; the lady is so free with pen and ink. That you must know it all too well, I fear. But listen: this is something you should hear.

"How absurd you are to condemn my lightheartedness in society, and to accuse me of being happiest in the company of others. Nothing could be more unjust; and if you do not come to me instantly and beg pardon for saying such a thing, I shall never forgive you as long as I live. Our big bumbling friend the Viscount . . ."

What a shame that he's not here.

"Our big bumbling friend the Viscount, whose name stands first in your complaint, is hardly a man to my taste; and ever since the day I watched him spend three-quarters of an hour spitting into a well, so as to make circles in the water, I have been unable to think highly of him. As for the little Marquess . . ."

In all modesty, gentlemen, that is I.

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[Act Five • Scene Four]

"As for the little Marquess, who sat squeezing my hand for such a long while yesterday, I find him in all respects the most trifling creature alive; and the only things of value about him are his cape and his sword. As for the man with the green ribbons . . ."

(To Alceste)

It's your turn now, Sir.

"As for the man with the green ribbons, he amuses me now and then with his bluntness and his bearish ill-humor; but there are many times indeed when I think him the greatest bore in the world. And as for the sonneteer . . ."

(To Oronte)

Here's your helping.

"And as for the sonneteer, who has taken it into his head to be witty, and insists on being an author in the teeth of opinion, I simply cannot be bothered to listen to him, and his prose wearies me quite as much as his poetry. Be assured that I am not always so well-entertained as you suppose; that I long for your company, more than I dare to say, at all these entertainments to which people drag me; and that the presence of those one loves is the true and perfect seasoning to all one's pleasures."

CLITANDRE

And now for me.

"Clitandre, whom you mention, and who so pestered me with his saccharine speeches, is the last man on earth for whom I could feel any affection. He is quite mad to
suppose that I love him, and so are you, to doubt that you are loved. Do come to your senses; exchange your suppositions for his; and visit me as often as possible, to help me bear the annoyance of his unwelcome attentions.

It's a sweet character that these letters show, And what to call it, Madam, you well know. Enough. We're off to make the world acquainted With this sublime self-portrait that you've painted.

Madaur, I'll make you no farewell oration; No, you're not worthy of my indignation. Far choicer hearts than yours, as you'll discover, Would like this little Marquess for a lover.

So! After all those loving letters you wrote, You turn on me like this, and cut my throat! And your dissembling, faithless heart, I find, Has pledged itself by turns to all mankind! How blind I've been! But now I clearly see; I thank you, Madam, for enlightening me. My heart is mine once more, and I'm content; The loss of it shall be your punishment. (To Alceste) Sir, she is yours; I'll seek no more to stand Between your wishes and this lady's hand.
[Act Five • Scene Six]

ARSINOE

What makes you think you could, Sir? And how dare you
Imply that I’ve been trying to ensnare you?
If you can for a moment entertain
Such flattering fancies, you’re extremely vain.
I’m not so interested as you suppose
In Célimène’s discarded gigolos.
Get rid of that absurd illusion, do.
Women like me are not for such as you.
Stay with this creature, to whom you’re so attached;
I’ve never seen two people better matched.

ALCESTE

Madam, permit me, I implore you,
To represent myself in this debate.
Don’t bother, please, to be my advocate.
My heart, in any case, could not afford
To give your services their due reward;
And if I chose, for consolation’s sake,
Some other lady, t’would not be you I’d take.
SCENE SEVEN

CELIMENE, ELIANTE, ALCESTE, PHILINTE

ALCESTE, to CELIMENE

Well, I've been still throughout this exposé,
Till everyone but me has said his say.
Come, have I shown sufficient self-restraint?
And may I now . . .

CELIMENE

Yes, make your just complaint.
Reproach me freely, call me what you will;
You've every right to say I've used you ill.
I've wronged you, I confess it; and in my shame
I'll make no effort to escape the blame.
The anger of those others I could despise;
My guilt toward you I sadly recognize.
Your wrath is wholly justified, I fear;
I know how culpable I must appear,
I know all things bespeak my treachery,
And that, in short, you've grounds for hating me.
Do so; I give you leave.

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[Act Five · Scene Seven]

ALCESTE

Ah, traitress—how,
How should I cease to love you, even now?
Though mind and will were passionately bent
On hating you, my heart would not consent.

(To ELIANTE and PHILINTE)
Be witness to my madness, both of you;
See what infatuation drives one to;
But wait; my folly's only just begun,
And I shall prove to you before I'm done
How strange the human heart is, and how far
From rational we sorry creatures are.

(To CELIMENE)
Woman, I'm willing to forget your shame,
And clothe your treacheries in a sweeter name;
I'll call them youthful errors, instead of crimes,
And lay the blame on these corrupting times.
My one condition is that you agree
To share my chosen fate, and fly with me
To that wild, trackless, solitary place
In which I shall forget the human race.
Only by such a course can you atone
For those atrocious letters; by that alone
Can you remove my present horror of you,
And make it possible for me to love you.

CELIMENE

What! I renounce the world at my young age,
And die of boredom in some hermitage?
[Act Five · Scene Seven]

ALCESTE

Ah, if you really loved me as you ought,
You wouldn't give the world a moment's thought;
Must you have me, and all the world beside?

CELIMENE

Alas, at twenty one is terrified
Of solitude. I fear I lack the force
And depth of soul to take so stern a course.
But if my hand in marriage will content you,
Why, there's a plan which I might well consent to,
And . . .

ALCESTE

No, I detest you now. I could excuse
Everything else, but since you thus refuse
To love me wholly, as a wife should do,
And see the world in me, as I in you,
Go! I reject your hand, and disenchant
My heart from your enchantments, once for all.

SCENE EIGHT

ELIANTE, ALCESTE, PHILINTE

ALCESTE, to Eliante

Madam, your virtuous beauty has no peer;
Of all this world, you only are sincere;
I've long esteemed you highly, as you know;
Permit me ever to esteem you so,
And if I do not now request your hand,
Forgive me, Madam, and try to understand.
I feel unworthy of it; I sense that fate
Does not intend me for the married state,
That I should do you wrong by offering you
My shattered heart's unhappy residue,
And that in short . . .

ELIANTE

Your argument's well taken:
Nor need you fear that I shall feel forsaken.
Were I to offer him this hand of mine,
Your friend Philinte, I think, would not decline.
[Act Five · Scene Eight]

PHILINTE

Ah, Madam, that's my heart's most cherished goal,
For which I'd gladly give my life and soul.

ALCESTE, to Eliante and Philinte

May you be true to all you now profess,
And so deserve unending happiness.
Meanwhile, betrayed and wronged in everything,
I'll flee this bitter world where vice is king,
And seek some spot unpeopled and apart
Where I'll be free to have an honest heart.

PHILINTE

Come, Madam, let's do everything we can
To change the mind of this unhappy man.