

# **MOLIÈRE'S *THE MISANTHROPE*: MASKING THE TRUTH**

An Analytical Paper (Rewrite)

by

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## **MOLIÈRE'S *THE MISANTHROPE*: MASKING THE TRUTH**

Molière's *The Misanthrope*, a comedy of character and manners, attacks the superficiality and hypocrisy of society through the witty dialogue and interaction of its characters. In the opening scene, Molière promptly criticizes the pervasive social hypocrisy through a heated ethical discourse between two of his main characters, Alceste and Philinte. Though Alceste's argument for blunt honesty is equally as valid as Philinte's reasoning for tolerance, Molière clearly condemns affectation, as demonstrated by Alceste's unwavering adherence to his convictions throughout the play. Nevertheless, Molière also indicts hypocrisy in society in subtler ways, such as through the character of Arsinoé. In a witty exchange of "bons mots" (II.v) with Alceste's love interest, Célimène, the supposedly pious Arsinoé is delineated as one who dons the very mask of hypocrisy that Alceste vehemently condemns.

Arsinoé is first introduced through the sharp yet credible tongue of Célimène. Immediately, the audience is told, "It's all an act" (III.iii). Célimène explains that Arsinoé is a woman who pretends to be pious, constantly criticizing everyone else's loose morality, but who, in reality, "lets the world believe that she's a prude/To justify her

loveless solitude” (III.iii). Furthermore, Célimène is quite aware that Arsinoé gossips about her behind her back, asserting, “And everywhere, at court or in the town,/The spiteful, envious woman runs me down” (III.iii). Therefore, when Arsinoé actually makes an appearance and pretends to be a good friend looking out for Célimène’s best interests, the scene carries a tone of amusement and dramatic irony. Bustling into Célimène’s chateau, Arsinoé insists that she has some important business to discuss with her friend:

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 vehemently criticized  
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. (III.v)

Arsinoé makes a point of emphasizing words such as “friendship” and “as your friend” (III.v) in order to maintain the illusion that she only tells Célimène what others have said to her because she cares for her friend. However, both Célimène and the audience, which has already been given a glimpse into the reality of Célimène and Arsinoé’s relationship, can see through this guise. As careful as Arsinoé is to choose words like “friendship,” as if to verify her sincerity, she also inadvertently uses diction, such as the business-like phrase “the status of your reputation” (III.v), that reveals her fakeness. Arsinoé insists, “Of course, I needn’t tell you where I stood” (III.v), as if it is obvious that she would defend her friend. Yet one line later, she proceeds to tell Célimène exactly where she stood, claiming “I came to your defense as best I could” (III.v). In an attempt to seem more genuine by clarifying and explaining herself, Arsinoé actually comes across as more insincere. Arsinoé continues in this manner, persistently inserting explanatory appositives after every statement, thereby further exposing her pretentiousness. For example, when Arsinoé says, “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” (III.v), the audience suspiciously questions if the topic of conversation really turned to Célimène’s flirtatious ways “by chance” without any subtle suggestions from Arsinoé.

In fact, though Arsinoé lists all the facets of Célimène’s behavior that are socially unacceptable—her “light behavior,” “dashing ways,” “quantity of gentlemen,” and “notorious coquetry” (III.v)—as the opinions of others only, Arsinoé herself is probably the person who feels and insinuates these sentiments most strongly in conversation.

Since the audience is already aware that Arsinoé, driven by her jealousy, publicly criticizes Célimène behind her back, Arsinoé's exclamations that "I was forced at last into conceding/That your behavior, Madam, is misleading," and "Not that I think you've been unchaste—no! no!" (III.v) hardly come off as believable. Instead, it seems as if Arsinoé secretly delights in the "ugly gossip and obscene surmise" (III.v) that she hears about Célimène, who possesses all that Arsinoé wishes she had: beauty, youth, wit, charm, suitors—in particular, Alceste.

However, as Célimène promptly asserted in her initial portrait of Arsinoé, Arsinoé hides her frustration at her "poor success/In snaring men" (III.iii) by a show of excessive piety. Her monologue is rife with religious references, speaking of "honor," "some virtuous folk," "your soul," and "saints" (III.v), but, as others have commented about Arsinoé, "What good...are all these outward shows,/When everything belies her pious pose" (III.v)? Indeed, Arsinoé attempts to hide her own flaws by emphasizing those of others, by putting "a brand of moral shame/On all the graces that she cannot claim" (III.iii), something her "pious pose" allows her to do without censure. For example, though Arsinoé claims she did not participate in the others' criticism of Célimène, she still 'suggests' ways that Célimène may change her behavior in order to avoid such criticism: by being "more *overtly* good" and by "avoid[ing] the outward show of vice" (III.v). Nevertheless, because Arsinoé knows that, even if she were to act as coquettishly as Célimène does, she would not receive the same kind of attention from men, Arsinoé's piety and prudishness are only a means of protecting herself. Alceste confirms Arsinoé's fears near the conclusions of the play when he bluntly denies Arsinoé's flattery.

Offended, Arsinoé immediately retreats behind her pious mask, replying, “And how dare you/Imply that I’ve been trying to ensnare you” (V.vi)? Thus, rather than stemming from a true devoutness to God, Célimène’s piety originates from her pride.

Indeed, in light of the fact that Arsinoé commits the very “human folly” (I.i) that Alceste condemns from the opening lines onward, it is no surprise that Alceste should reject Arsinoé’s syrupy compliments. In his ethical debate with Philinte, Alceste reveals his vehement hatred of “base flattery,/Injustice, fraud, self-interest, treachery...” (I.i), each of which are characteristic of Arsinoé. She pretends to flatter Célimène even as she is delighting in putting her down, while every encounter Arsinoé has with Alceste is full of flattery. In both cases, Arsinoé’s words are revealed as “base flattery” because as soon as her “good counsel” (III.v) is rejected, her tone immediately changes. Moreover, though Arsinoé feigns concern for Célimène, her real reasons for informing Célimène what others have said about her are selfish. Therefore, what Arsinoé claims is “a zealous interest” (III.v) in Célimène is actually motivated by her self-interest and treachery.

Célimène, however, also has a way with words, and immediately follows suit with her own cutting appraisal of Arsinoé’s character. Imitating Arsinoé’s passive-aggressive approach—even concluding with the identical four lines that Arsinoé also used—Célimène comments on Arsinoé’s hypocrisy, of course under the guise that these are only words she heard other people say. Of Arsinoé, Célimène highlights her false piety, “affectation,” “endless talk of virtue and of honor,” “suspicious mind,” and “sermonizings” (III.v). Even the mask that Arsinoé dons to simultaneously criticize others while still maintaining a façade of piety is mentioned as her “towering self-esteem,

that pitying face/With which you contemplate the human race...” (III.v). Thus, both women end up indirectly declaring what they really think of each other without ever exposing themselves as the true insulters, something that Alceste also criticizes, rather preferring:

... We should condemn with all our force  
Such false and artificial intercourse.  
Let men behave like men; let them display  
Their inmost hearts in everything they say;  
Let the heart speak, and let our sentiments  
Not mask themselves in silly compliments. (I.i)

Instead, in a way, Arsinoé and Célimène act according to Philinte’s recommendations that “It’s often best to veil one’s true emotions./ Wouldn’t the entire social fabric come undone/If we were wholly frank with everyone” (I.i)? Again, superficial masks allow each woman to say what she has to say without actually having to take any real responsibility for what her biting words imply about the other’s character.

In *The Misanthrope*, Molière’s characters are more multi-faceted than the typical, flat stereotypes of traditional satires. Since Molière was known as a moralist, it follows that the play carries a didactic quality, ultimately attempting to improve humanity by castigating such things as hypocrisy and excess. Since there is very little plot development, however, these lessons must be taught through the behavior and motivations of those complex characters, above all else. Even a seemingly more minor character such as Arsinoé must be evaluated on a deeper level than can be found by merely observing superficial qualities. Though Arsinoé may be hypocritical and pretentious, the audience cannot help sympathizing with her. Thus, while one may laugh at Arsinoé’s shameless praise of Alceste, Alceste’s curt rejection of Arsinoé, despite her

efforts, is not quite so humorous. In this way, Molière's comedies are actually more bitter than they are merry. Rather than induce the members of the audience to laugh out loud, Molière's plays might instead make them squirm, especially when they begin to recognize in Molière's characters something of real life, or perhaps even something of themselves.

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