

Was Molière a Feminist? The Case of Célimène, an Independent Woman

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Article abstract

Molière has often been treated as an anti-feminist, but this qualification disregards the complexity of his woman figures. In *The Misanthrope*, Célimène represents an exceptional woman figure that is a novelty in the classical literature. A master of brilliant conversation, she is a witty and charming salon lady. Her freedom causes concerns particularly for Alceste, the protagonist who dominates the play with his critical worldview. His assessment of Célimène's conformism, coupled with her fickleness and falsity, was echoed by the majority of traditional commentaries that deemed her to be a slanderous coquette, hence a relatively banal figure. Countering such simplifications, the paper tries to establish Célimène as a complex, rich and subtle figure and explores the question to what extent she displays an independent spirit which equals Alceste's. It examines the possibilities of woman's freedom within the patriarchal framework of the time, and beyond.

Was Molière a Feminist? The Case of Célimène, an Independent Woman

Diana Koloini

Célimène in *The Misanthrope* is an exceptional character who stands out among the women represented not only in Molière's comedies but also in the literature of that period, and beyond. As a young aristocratic widow, she is a financially independent woman, free of the direct authority of a patriarchal master. She arranges her life on her own terms and practices her freedom by engaging in social life in which she establishes herself as an attractive and conversationally brilliant protagonist of the mondaine world, thus attracting numerous admirers. She is also the mistress of the home in which the comedy takes place and in which she alone dominates as a hostess. To a large degree she also dominates the action in the play (the plot follows her story), even though the focus of the play is on the protagonist, the misanthrope Alceste with his outspoken moral viewpoint and critical worldview.¹ Célimène (alongside the prudent Philinte) is his primary other: she embodies the splendor and misery of the mondaine society, which the protagonist deeply despises and accuses of falseness and corruption, and yet, in spite of all his misgivings and her shortcomings, he still loves her. Whether she also loves him is not quite certain, even though it's clear that they are deeply connected; she withdraws from his possessive desires and persists in entertaining her numerous admirers, who eventually accuse her of deception, then shame and reject her. Yet, even then, she still does not accept Alceste's courtship, with its demand to retreat into solitude. The comedy does not offer a happy resolution, ending on an unusually pessimistic note. Célimène's decision asserts her isolation as a choice.

Coquette *médisante*

Célimène is usually qualified as a coquette, or a slanderous flirt. That's how she's first depicted in the comedy itself, this is how Philinte describes her even before she first appears in Act I. The remarks published as the foreword to the first edition of the play include the label *coquette médisante*, presenting her as a representative of the type of woman well known in the social reality of the time. This label later gained an ever more negative connotation and marked her for good in almost all traditional commentaries of the play.²

The label is both accurate and misleading. It reduces Célimène's complex and enigmatic personality to something simple, banal and morally contestable. *Coquette médisante* appears as a universal female type which is easily converted into a projection screen for misogynistic prejudices (most obviously e. g. Jasinski 1951, who elaborated a complete phenomenology of the coquette and labeled her as the embodiment of *l'éternel féminin*). In the long reception history of *Le Misanthrope* Célimène is predominantly reduced to the role of Alceste's unreliable mistress, in complete disregard of her role in social critique as well as of her control of her own position and her extraordinary freedom.

The main reason for this is no doubt the fascination with the central figure of Alceste: he is the one who stands for an incisive highly critical worldview similar to

1 In her book *Lire le théâtre I*, Anne Ubersfeld presents *The Misanthrope* as a model of a play which can be read through two actantial models, with either Alceste or Célimène at the center. "It's obvious that the staging can privilege Célimène as a subject." (1977, 76)

2 Also, the "Notice" in the new edition in *Pléiade* describes her actions as fitting "l'essence de son caractère de coquette". (Forestier & Bourqui, 2010, 1450).

Molière's own. In the pre-Romantic times, he was interpreted as the tragic figure of a lone rebel against the corrupt society (Rousseau 1758, 2003, occupies a decisive, and symptomatic, place in this interpretation). With this focus, all the other characters fade into the insignificance of representatives of corruption, and most of all the unreliable Célimène. The figure of a woman who strives for the affection of numerous men was deemed too banal to be given proper attention. For the majority of the interpreters, as well as in the general perception, Célimène is often seen as no more than Alceste's delusion, the primary source of his unhappiness, a woman who does not understand the depth of male thought and his critical attitude, let alone the true value of love; thus, she is condemned as empty, hollow, and deemed unimportant.³

It is only in the second half of the 20th century that several readings (Guicharnaud, Brody, Mesnard, Norman, Dandrey) tried to expose other dimensions of Célimène, especially the meaning of her critical depictions which play a central role in Molière's comedigraphic strategy. Recently her persistence in pursuing feminine freedom has been pointed out (Chupeau), but it is surprising that Célimène has still not been thoroughly discussed from the feminist perspective.⁴ Thus the purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the unusual complexity of this unique character.

The primary reason for the feminist lack of interest is probably the fact that Célimène's freedom is never explicitly treated in the play, although it is a condition, even the aim, of her lifestyle and behavior. Her independence thoroughly determines the plot and affects the nature of all of the relationships in the play, most importantly the protagonist. Although all the characters deal with Célimène and her questionable behavior, no one explicitly takes up her independence. One might conclude that it does not interest Molière; that he pushed aside the question of feminine freedom in favor of the central questions that Alceste poses through his critical views. However, Alceste's stance can only be deployed in relation to a woman who confronts him with her individual independence; in this sense, her freedom is a condition for understanding his problem with the world. Even she herself does not speak directly about it, and one should note that she speaks very little about herself (in contrast to Alceste, who speaks about himself all the time). Célimène speaks confidently and boldly: with her eloquence she masters the situation and her interlocutors, and in dialogical conflicts she reaches to unexpected depths. However, she never really reveals herself, or does so only indirectly when defending herself against critics and through confrontations. But also when defending the right to decide about her life for herself, she speaks indirectly. She never explicitly discusses woman's freedom. We could conclude that as a woman who skillfully masters the relationships in her world, she is aware that she can only realize her freedom if she does not speak about it outright.

Célimène's freedom is not complete, far from it. From the very beginning, it is only conditional, even temporary. The position that her widowed status allows her (which is also only mentioned once and never explained any further) is unreliable; although it provides her with a legal status, it is also on the border of regularity. Society expects that

3 Surprisingly, she is deemed empty and superficial also by several commentators from the second half of the 20th century, even those who put into question the traditional understanding of Alceste and also find an emptiness in him (e.g. Guicharnaud, Gossman). The following description by Gossman is symptomatic: "Célimène has no being of her own. She is a Sphinx-like creature who acquires her reality from her suitors and whose entire being, like theirs, is contained in her appearance for others. [...] Only through the sentiments and reactions toward her that she finds in others can she experience her own self. The enigmatic being that all her suitors pursue behind her masks is perfectly elusive because it does not exist. [...] Apart from her masks Célimène is nothing, a pure seeming, transparent and opaque at the same time." (1963, 90-1)

4 The single internationally referential book about women in Molière's comedigraphy, Lalande (1996), does take note of her freedom, but surprisingly focuses mostly on Alceste.

a new marriage will soon put things in order. In the patriarchal world, she does not have a proper place, hence she needs the protection of various men. At different moments in the play we see how very dependent she is on the unreliable affection of admirers and the manipulable gaze of the public. Although she moves in the society that apparently grants women equality, she brutally experiences in the end the full misogyny of the society that does not allow trifling with male superiority. The freedom which she allows herself by withdrawing from the patriarchal subordination is risky and problematic.

Alceste's love for Céliamène is paradoxical: on the one hand he recognizes her as his equal, actually his only equal, but on the other hand he sees her 'slandering coquetry' as the epitome of the mondaine society which he himself despises. Yet in spite of that, he loves her, against his will and reason.

As he tells his confidente already in Scene 1, he is not blind to her many faults, but he cannot resist loving her, *sa grâce est la plus forte* (I, 1. 233).⁵ In the course of the play, he often calls this love *mon faible* (my weakness), describing its intensity mostly with his wish to be free from it. He also believes that with his love, he'll manage to *purger son âme* (cleanse her soul, 234) and extract her from the social life and suitors who rouse his jealousy. It seems that Alceste's belief in the power of love goes beyond the framework of patriarchal authority, but his stark desire for changing the one he loves, "cleansing her soul", sheds doubt on his motives. His love is inseparably connected to the expectation that a woman conform to his expectations, give up her habits and accept his views; she should show her true independence by subordinating herself to him.

As it turns out, Céliamène's subordination is something that everyone expects. Alceste wants to tear her from her world of social hypocrisy and totally transform her on the basis of his own principles; but, in fact, this is only a radicalized version of what the masculine world accords to a woman. Yet, it is no coincidence that she gets seriously involved with Alceste, her counterpart, her match, and this is her only relationship that may involve love.

Céliamène, who is the opposite of Alceste in every respect, rejects his demands. Thus, she's often accused of seeing love only as a game, but what this view misses is that her trifling mainly serves her in avoiding subordination (which is apparent already in their first meeting, II, 1). She refuses to give up her social life and her many visitors, although she herself is fully aware of their emptiness. What appears as coquetry and gossiping, which by her sheer brilliance exceed by far the fashionable manners, actually serves as her defense in face of Alceste's demands. She meets his jealous complaints with ambiguous excuses, maintaining all along her extraordinary autonomy, and to see in this merely her duplicity and manipulation is already conditioned by patriarchal bias. It is impossible to accuse her of lying;⁶ in fact, she persistently warns him that she has her own reasons for her conduct, and that he has no right to interfere with them. Her evading a direct response is a proper response to the contradictions of his own statements. Alceste, distressed by his own passion, threatens her with a break-up from the start, then immediately afterwards promises the sincerity of his love, one minute criticizing her, the next apologizing to her. His apparent demand for honesty drives him to contradictions.

5 His description of a woman who has the power to arouse love despite her flaws will fundamentally mark Céliamène's image in the reception of Molière's comedy, and indirectly, the character of a woman in a large part of European thought. Only few commentators, apart from the psychoanalytic ones (e.g. Orlando 1971), argued that Alceste does not love Céliamène in spite of, but rather because of, the way she is. This never occurred to Alceste himself.

6 Guicharnaud, author of an outstanding classical monograph about Molière's great trilogy (1963), was probably the first who insisted on Céliamène's sincerity and rejected the traditional interpretation that she is a "chronic liar". He also rejected the label of *coquette médisante*.

Célimène deflects his austerity and neutralizes it, without giving up either on him or on her lifestyle. The unexpected, but predictable arrival of guests (II, 2), which turns her home into a salon, interrupts their quarrel, setting it aside for later.

Slander and a critical worldview

The soirée of the elite aristocratic society, which in the middle of Act II gathers in Célimène's home, reveals all the splendor and misery of her fashionable life. In the "Portrait Scene" (II, 5), she masterfully displays her wit, charm and social prowess, thus establishing herself as the protagonist of this mondaine world, of which this scene gives an emblematic image.⁷

The primary, in fact, the only content of this gathering is slandering acquaintances from high society. Criticizing those absent serves the adulation of those present and confirms the elitism in which Célimène's salon competes with others of its kind, just as her guests compete with each other and with the visitors from other salons. Just as anyone can be flattered, anyone can be ridiculed; both serve to shape the relationship between belonging and exclusion. The two marquises, who start the conversation with their vapidity, put on full display the hollowness of this party, governed by narcissism.

Célimène nevertheless achieves a startling twist when, with admirable virtuosity, she elevates slandering to the art of painting social portraits. Social portraits were a fashionable small literary form at the time (see Dandrey 2005), they were presented in salon society and also present in serious literature (on this basis La Bruyère developed the popular *Les caractères*). Molière also used them time and again in his comedies, mainly to enlarge the represented circle. To Célimène, they serve to entertain her guests. In front of them, she creates a whole series of portraits (seven, with the eighth directed at Alceste), distinguished by wit, exceptional rhetorical skill and incisive insight. In various figures, they represent images of hypertrophic *amour-propre*,⁸ empty grandeur, an inflated appearance which mask the inability to communicate with and respect others. She presents them with verve and lucidity, elevating them into masterpieces by her performance. Thereby she positions herself in the center of the social world and also asserts herself as a real artist, comedigrapher and comedienne, a performer.

Her success is applauded by the guests, who reward her with enthusiastic admiration, which is interrupted by Alceste's outrage. Alceste opposes her on principle and no doubt he is to some extent right when he accuses social slandering of mendacity. But his criticism, clearly incited by his jealousy of Célimène's success, aims above all at exposing his own special value and is thus entirely prey to his *amour-propre*. Even more, his judgments of contemporaries, although grounded in his high morals, are ultimately very similar to her slandering.⁹ Philinte even tells him that he himself would accuse her portrait models of the same faults. The same vices that she exposes with wit fill him with indignation. With his intervention, the criticism now aims at the practice of criticism itself. Célimène understands that very well: she draws a critical portrait of Alceste (breaking the rule of gossiping about the absent) and precisely exposes this auto-referential knot of criticism. But even though she manages to reclaim her position and restore the party, the problem is not resolved. There remains the allegation that demotes her artistry to depravity, one of the major vices of the mondaine world.

7 The "Portrait Scene" has been exhaustively commented upon by many, especially Defaux (1980, 168-71) and Guicharnaud (1963, 405-16). Forestier points also to its meta-theatrical character (1990, 109).

8 *Amour-propre*, self-love, is the key concept of the 17th century moral thought, especially with La Rochefoucauld, who in the first of his *Maximes* (1664) writes: "L'amour propre est l'amour de soi-même et de toutes choses pour soi; il rend les hommes idolâtres d'eux-mêmes."

9 Brody already pointed out this similarity. (1969, 572)

Traditional Molerists, bound by the respect of Alceste's principles, have sharply distinguished his criticism from Célimène's slander. They acknowledged her wit, but at the same time saw in her portraits an exercise of frivolity (Arnavon 1946, 111), a lack of moral dimension (Guicharnaud 1963, 406-13); they alleged that she only observed the appearance of those she portrays, which should prove her adherence to superficiality; and her being bored indicates her need for constant entertainment (Defaux 1980, 169); some even claim that out of jealousy, she criticizes those better than herself (Jasinski 1951, 175).

In contrast, the first commentator of *Le Misanthrope*, Jean Donneau de Visé (in 1666), who probably wrote in agreement with Molière,¹⁰ acknowledged the special importance of Célimène's social portraits and connected them with the very concept of Molière's play. He explicitly highlighted her role in shaping a critical view of contemporaries, the central aim of the comedy. In *Le Misanthrope*, according to him, Molière wanted to "criticize the vices of the century" and for that purpose he found two ideally selected personae – the misanthrope and the slandering coquette – who together can criticize everyone:

On doit admirer que, dans une pièce où Molière veut parler contre les mœurs du siècle et n'épargner personne, il nous fait voir une médisante avec un ennemi des hommes. [...] Le misanthrope, seul, n'aurait pu parler contre tous les hommes ; mais en trouvant le moyen de le faire aider d'une médisante, c'est avoir trouvé en même temps celui de mettre dans une seule pièce la dernière main au portrait du siècle.¹¹ (636)

What is important for us is how Célimène occupies an outstanding place in this contemporary discussion about Molière's intentions. Together with Alceste, she is positioned at the center of the dramaturgical structure, providing the criticism which spares no one, and thus enables the presentation of the century. Both stand together to form a critical worldview, even more, with their critical stance they both occupy the very place from which Molière is criticizing the social ambiance.

Donneau does not deal with the problem of the ambiguity of their position: the paradox that the witty exposure of fashionable vices, which is the task of comedy, is itself a fashionable vice. One can say that the entire comedy reflects this problem, but without quite solving it; *Le Misanthrope* can thus be understood as a meta-comedy (Defaux 1980), and its unusually pessimistic ending may well be connected to the insolvability of that question. It is quite telling that Molière himself was often accused of slandering. And if one can reproach Célimène with using critical portraits to indulge her need to please, it would be also possible to reproach the same to the author, who marked his comedy with the formula: *rendre agréablement sur le théâtre les défauts de tout le monde* (*La Critique de L'École des femmes*, Scene 6: "to present agreeably in the theatre the faults of all"). This is what Brody points out in his discussion, referring also to Donneau: "Célimène's success reflects the success of her creator, whose gift and mission, like hers, consist in

10 His commentary, *Lettre écrite sur la comédie du Misanthrope*, was published as a foreword to the first book edition of the comedy (1667), according to many, against Molière's will; but nowadays the opinion prevails that the commentary is too insightful for Donneau to have written it himself and that Molière must have participated in its creation.

11 "We must admire how, in a play in which Molière wants to speak against the faults of the century and not spare anyone, alongside the enemy of men he positioned a slanderer [...]. A misanthrope alone would not be able to speak against all; when he found a way for the slanderer to help him, he at the same time found a way to complete in a single play the last moves of the portrait of the century."

using social criticism to entertain [...] These portraits, like Molière's comedies, achieve an aesthetic triumph over the very evils by which they are occasioned." (1969, 572)

Others (Mesnard, Riggs,¹² Dandrey, Vernet) also compared her with Molière, Norman even titled an entire chapter in his book with the question: "Is Célimène Molière?" (1999, 169)

If it is possible to envisage Célimène as Molière's alter-ego, this radically changes her role, which among traditional Moliéristes is conspicuously demeaned. This undermines the presumption that with coquettish slandering she only fits the habits of the mondaine world and conforms to it. Célimène, with her lifestyle, walks on a narrow edge (as is indeed the case for Molière) and is always on the border of what this world is willing to tolerate. But although the accusations on her account are to some extent similar to those experienced by Molière, she will be punished in the end mainly because she is a woman. More precisely, because she allowed herself to trifle with male affection.

The coquette and the prude: confrontation

To show that Célimène's position is questionable and her social behavior problematic, the central scene of the play stages a confrontation between her and her rival Arsinoé. It is telling that the central dialogical duel in this comedy about a misanthrope happens between two women, and its main theme is the position of woman in society, leading to the assumption that misanthropy is most distinctively revealed through misogyny.¹³

Arsinoé and Célimène confront each other as a prude and a coquette, two feminine figures opposed in every respect. They wrap their mutual disdain into a pretense of friendship, they echo the judgments of others and public judgments (again based on slander), practice mimicry and double games as well as compete in artistry. Surprisingly, what at first glance testifies to their duplicity actually allows them to say openly what they think of one another. Thus some commentators describe their confrontation as "one prolonged moment of truth" in a play which is marked by lies from one and all.¹⁴ Thus, Alceste's exalted truthfulness, only rarely heeded by himself, meets a curious twist, since this scene shows that complex speech strategies can reach further in telling the truth than his professed sincerity.

But although the two rivals reveal their ideas about each other and display sincerity in their hostility, their judgments are throughout marked by jealousy and rivalry: they are like reflections in a curved mirror in which all truths are conditional. But there is an important difference between them: what Arsinoé finds problematic is the ambiguity of Célimène's appearance (perhaps she is sinful, perhaps innocent), while Célimène makes a clear difference between appearance and truth when she asserts that her rival's display of virtue conceals thoroughly reprehensible behavior. She directly aims at exposing hypocrisy. The power of appearance, which governs the play, is thus at least momentarily pierced through. It is no coincidence that it happens apropos hypocrisy, the most

12 "She stands in for Molière; she produces satire, which has been misread as creating secure distinction between spectators and those being ridiculed." (2005, 125)

13 Patricia Francis Cholakian points out that this confrontation between two women displays the most hostile relation in the play and also indicates that Célimène doesn't have an ally even in Éliante. Yet I cannot concur with her line that men are capable of mutual respect and alliance, which should attest that "men possess an innate sense of their own superiority," whereas "women define their worth as individuals in terms of masculine admiration," thus Célimène "cannot effectively liberate herself from male domination because of her emotional dependence on her suitors" (524-5). I rather think that relations between men are equally determined by rivalry and hostility (e.g. Oronte's intrigues against Alceste that match Arsinoé's scheming against Célimène). Majority of commentators agree with this, most expressly Koppisch who claims that all relations in this play are entirely driven by rivalry (2004, 18-34).

14 For example, Brody (1969, 572), who brilliantly analyzed the strategy of their parallel portraits.

insidious version of mimicry (as well as Molière's favorite theme: a mechanism which, by enforcing morals actually produces vice, in connivance with the levers of power or authority). Just as it is no coincidence that this is the comedy's only moment when the motifs of social reality are brought up (e. g. the servants, whom Arsinoé beats and does not pay), as well as the only one where sex is mentioned (*amour de réalité*, 944).¹⁵

It is here that Célimène says something utterly unexpected for an artist of slander. When she denies her rival the right to judge her, she reminds Arsinoé: *Qu'on doit se regarder soi-même, un fort long temps, / Avant que de songer à condamner les gens*. (949-50: "We ought to look at home a good long time before we think of judging other people"). The statement points to the necessity to know oneself, indeed the maxim "know thyself" as the oldest philosophical injunction. Implicitly referring to the moralists of her time, Célimène goes well beyond the game of witty and manipulative slander, including her own. In what follows, she addresses the general purblindness (*ce grand aveuglement où chacun est pour soi*, 966), blind self-love that should be scrutinized by self-criticism. Throughout the play she seems to be governed by narcissism¹⁶ and to subordinate everything to the wish to be admired, but here she appears to be fully aware of the narcissism that dominates her world and herself, as well as of its traps. Célimène is singularly able to face the truth, not only about others, but also about herself.

This consciousness raises her above the ambient world and her interlocutors, who are all (and especially Alceste) fundamentally characterized by self-infatuation, incapable of accepting criticism as well as any self-reflection. And if it seems at first that Célimène's ability for reflection mainly serves pragmatic ends, it will turn out, as the play unfolds, that the opposite is the case: the perspicacious awareness about the world will not help her in practical matters (it will neither rescue her against her rival nor help her defend her position). Thus, one can argue that this awareness has rather a "cognitive", that is, a "philosophical" value. In what follows in the scene, the defeated Arsinoé allows herself an openly brutal attack and accuses Célimène of reaching social success by trading with love. She cannot confirm it on the basis of her behavior, but rather in accordance with the general rule that a woman can be successful only if she deals with the impermissible. In a sense, Arsinoé is right: the success that a woman reaches in the masculine world already testifies that she has broken the rules of that society. The hypocritical prude, who vainly endeavors for similar success, defends herself by flaunting feminine purity, thus demonstratively conforming to the authority of the patriarchal order.¹⁷ A woman who succeeds without man's control is suspicious and contestable. An independent woman is socially problematic and thus always subject to punishment.

Punishing the coquette

The web of intrigue that surrounds Célimène and her social success is in fact banal. It develops within her salon among her admirers who strive for her attention. Each of them expects that she will return his affection and thus place him above the other rivals and subordinate herself to him. This is not so much about feelings and fulfillment but rather social prestige and self-admiration, with which Célimène is obviously trifling. When Arsinoé intercepts her letters and delivers them into the wrong hands, the catastrophe is

15 The confirmation of alleged love by *réalité* is what Tartuffe expects from Elmire, directly connecting Arsinoé to the hypocrite.

16 Narcissism can conditionally be taken as the modern Freudian term for what was at the time designated as *amour propre*, self-love, a great theme of the 17th century.

17 Gossman is right to claim Arsinoé "has chosen the matronly role of active collaboration with the oppressor." (1984, 331)

inescapable.¹⁸ This mix of jealousy and rivalry produces an unprincipled coalition, where using dirty tricks (stealing letters, scheming between suitors) is admissible when it comes to exposing an independent woman.

The great punishment scene, in which all characters are gathered to destroy Célimène's reputation and condemn her to shame and solitude, is structured as an unmasking. With the public reading of her letters – in which she elusively promises affection first to one, then to another, and criticizes all the others – they accuse Célimène of falsity and trifling at all quarters.¹⁹ But just as the letters expose her, the scene also exposes her guests.

When in one of the letters she flatters a man, whom in the next she nastily vilifies in order to please another, Célimène reveals her duplicity. At the same time the recognition that she is bored by her admirers reveals another side of her predicament, which here remains ignored. But it is difficult to agree that she thereby also reveals the hidden truth about her character (as a comment in the new edition by Pléiade states, thus returning to the traditional interpretation). The duplicity of mondaine slander, which adjusts itself to the recipient and the current constellation, is a rule known to all (confirmed already in the social portraits scene). In promising affection in the letters she goes no further than trifling or flirting, which actually never amounts to anything like a serious engagement. Her admirers are enraged by the proof, laid bare in front of their rivals, that she has turned them into objects of her game as well as of her criticism.

Molière takes great care to expose the comic effect of their wounded self-infatuation and ridicules them one after another. With promises that they will quickly find comfort in other ladies, the insulted admirers confirm that seduction pertains to the nature of this world, which perceives love as a game for social reputation. But a man who rushes from one salon lady to another has entirely different rights than a woman; she is never allowed what men practice with self-evidence and entitlement. The apparent equality of Célimène's salon (and the mondaine world) stops here. A woman who put herself above her male admirers, using her wit and charm, must be punished.

It seems that the comedy takes a distance in relation to this punishment, although it is not explicit in that regard (explicitness is not its device, it is ambiguous throughout).²⁰ The ridicule of the admirers, transformed into vengeful enemies, calls into question the punishment's justification. Célimène appears as the scapegoat of the fickleness and cruelty permeating the mondaine world. But her deceitful attitude toward the admirers doesn't apply to her attitude toward Alceste, and in what follows she herself distinguishes between the two. The question is important because the attitude toward the protagonist, who fundamentally defines her world with his critical judgment, testifies to the true nature of her stance.

18 In most Molière's comedies letters serve women as means of empowerment, offering them possibility to express themselves outside patriarchal surveillance (most notably Agnès in *L'École des femmes*). With highly cultivated Célimène the opposite happens: writing letters turns against her and exposes her to surveillance. Finn, who has written exhaustively about women's reading and writing in Molière, claims that Célimène's eloquence proves she is very well read although she never mentions a book (2012, 43).

19 Molière borrowed this motif from the novel *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* (1649–53) by Madeleine de Scudéry, with the character Arteline, who simultaneously seduces several men and experiences the embarrassment of the crossed disclosure of letters. Célimène also owes something to the character of Dona Elvira from the tragicomedy *Le Favori*, which Molière staged in 1665. The author of the tragicomedy, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, also known as Madame de Villedieu, is known as the first French female playwright whose works were staged in a professional theatre. Cf. the notes in the edition of Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (2000).

20 The ambiguity of the play has been highlighted by many commentators, including Forestier and Bourqui (2010, 1438–41).

Célimène and Alceste

Given Alceste's criticism and her refusal to be subordinated, their ambiguous relationship is already put to the test before the "exposure" scene, in their confrontation in Act IV, Scene 3. The question of truth stands at the core of it.

Alceste kept complaining about Célimène's behavior from the outset, but in this scene he directly accuses her of duplicity and infidelity. His determination to break up with her is reinforced by offering his hand to her cousin Eliante – a tit for tat to avenge his doubt about Célimène's fidelity, supposedly confirmed by one of her letters, the one he got from the scheming Arsinoé.

The letter itself actually remains entirely unexplained. Not only has Alceste come by it in a problematic way, which entangles him in a web of intrigues, he does not even know for whom the letter was intended. Yet, he believes it proves the truth about Célimène with a certainty that he couldn't gain in his live interaction with her.²¹ At the same time, he admits that this unreliable message confirms his suspicions ultimately because he has already believed Célimène to be unfaithful. The letter is an enigma, we never learn to what it truly testifies. Célimène, who counters his jealous rage with annoyance and later with anger, adamantly rejects his demand to explain it. With unexpected sharpness she denies Alceste the right to look into her secrets when she says: *Je vous trouve plaisant, d'user d'un tel empire, / Et de me dire, au nez, ce que vous m'osez dire* (1357-8: "I find it amusing that you use such an empire, / And to tell me, to my face, what you dare to tell me.") This is the only moment in the comedy when Célimène, who otherwise masters any situation by trifling, puts forth a decisive "No" and rejects the patriarchal control and command. By denying Alceste an explanation she also displays her enigmatic nature. The letter remains her secret, and she too to some extent remains a secret for us.²² The suspicion will neither be resolved nor confirmed. The issue is strange, especially because this is one of the extremely rare moments in Molière's opus where an important element of the story remains unexplained. It establishes Célimène as one of the most enigmatic of his characters.

Perhaps we could presume that Célimène does not want to answer because she does not have a suitable explanation to counter the accusation of her infidelity. We might think that she misleads Alceste into doubts by skillfully creating a deceitful appearance of innocence. But the opposite happens. Alceste, divided between accusation and the wish for reconciliation, is the one who decides to play tricks with the truth: *Efforcez-vous, ici, de paraître fidèle, / Et je m'efforcerai, moi, de vous croire telle* (1389-90: "Strive to seem faithful, and I, in turn, will strive to think you so.") Driven by passion, he himself turns the categorical demand for truth into a desire for deceitfulness, for saving the appearances, not even realizing that he has thereby completely blurred the distinction between truth and appearances. When she rejects his request to lie, it is her second "No" in this key scene – once again she confirms her commitment to truth, which she already

21 Riggs (2005) argues that Alceste does not trust the intersubjective relationship and believes only in the value of the written document.

22 Goodkin offers an interesting theory "that Alceste confronts his mistress with the very love letter that she has been writing (and rewriting, and rewriting) to him," a very different kind of letter from those that she writes to others. She never sends out the letter – that "reflects a desire to allow herself to love Alceste" – because she rightfully doubts the seriousness of Alceste's love, and he confirms her doubts by not recognizing himself as the addressee: "The final irony of *Le Misanthrope* is that Célimène's letter is unequivocally for Alceste only if he realizes it is for him." (2015, 184-9) For Goodkin "critics who read Célimène as nothing more than the quintessential coquette [...] have misunderstood the play [...] Célimène is a précieuse who is in love with Alceste beyond any shadow of a doubt but who can allow her love to be expressed only within the highly restrictive limits of the code of preciosity." (188) This is a speculative hypothesis, but it vividly displays the ambivalence as well as the bond, even the interchangeable nature of the positions of both protagonists.

displayed in her confrontation with the prude. Perhaps she knows the value of truth better than Alceste, who boasts with the conviction that he is its only proponent in a world flooded with lies. This conviction itself is secretly based on deception, since it rests on his narcissism, his blindness as to his own problematic position.

Alceste does not even acknowledge Célimène's "No". In her claims of sincerity, he only sees new deception and calls her as a *traîtresse* (1415). Overcome with his passion and self-concern he does not hear her message: *Non, vous ne m'aimez point, comme il faut que l'on aime*, (1421: "You don't love me as one should") says Célimène near the end of the scene. He responds by protesting the solemnity and candor of his love, but thereby only demonstrates her point: namely, he expresses the wish for Célimène to lose everything, property, friends and her place in society, so that he might himself appear as her savior. Perhaps this is the truth of his love: the desire to destroy the beloved, whom he would then create anew.

It might even be said that with the social condemnation, Alceste's wish is realized: with the loss of her reputation and admirers, Célimène loses all her social standing and has to face her downfall. Moreover, when the guests depart, Célimène, for the first time in the play, actually admits her guilt. To Alceste, and only to him, she acknowledges the right to accuse her. When her sovereign self-confidence fades, she shows a new facet, evoking *mon âme confuse* (1739: "my confused soul"). But it doesn't quite follow that this involves a reassessment of her behavior – rather than an admission of depravity, it is an acknowledgment of defeat. This is confirmed by her final decision: even though she admits her guilt toward Alceste, she will not accept his plan of "salvation".

Alceste, who witnesses the punishment scene in silence and from a distance, waits for the departure of the guests to resume his critical tone. The dramatic scene of Célimène's utter degradation has not changed his attitude: he still cannot deny his love, which he understands as his weakness, but he is willing to forgive her for her wrongdoings, caused by the vices of the age (V. 1752-60). Perhaps he truly believes that the 'real' Célimène is something else, that her 'flirtatious slandering' is only an acquired habit, following the pressure of the fashion of the age. Perhaps he also believes that after the downfall she will more easily renounce the world. He is prepared to continue loving her, but only under the condition that she gives up the world and follows him into solitude, as he himself says, to *mon désert* (1763: "my desert").

Célimène cannot accept that. She is prepared to marry him if he desists from this request, but she cannot go to his desert.

This is a strange marriage proposal, it does not place love in the foreground, but rather the choice of a way of life. After Célimène's refusal, Alceste does speak about love in elevated terms, it is supposed to give meaning to life and entirely fulfill it, *Pour trouver tout en moi, comme moi tout en vous* (1780: "To find everything in me, as I find it in you"), thus accusing Célimène of not knowing its true value. However, he himself undermines the choice of love, because he conditions it with the decision for his choice of 'desert'. It is significant that he speaks about fulfillment only afterwards, when love has already been lost. Also that he considers solitude only in negative terms: as renouncing the mondaine world, which has no positive value in itself (this is also confirmed by Philinte who sees solitude as a hopeless choice). For Célimène, such a choice can only mean resignation and surrender. Not only would it rob her of everything that hitherto has shaped her life, it would also place her in the total subordination to Alceste.

Throughout the play it seems the outer social concerns prevent them from coming together. Now, when they remain alone, they stand more apart than ever. Like Alceste, Célimène also radicalizes her choice, since she rejects his condition in a situation in which she has lost all the support of her success. She justifies her unwillingness to depart

into the desert with the weakness of her soul: *La solitude effraye une âme de vingt ans ; / Je ne sens point la mienne assez grande, assez forte, / Pour me résoudre à prendre un dessein de la sorte.* (1774-6: “But solitude has terrors for a soul / Of twenty; mine’s not great and firm enough, / I fear, to let me take that high resolve”). When Alceste rejects her plea to withdraw his condition and marry her, she is defeated for the second time. She leaves the stage as a woman who has lost everything – except the value of her own decision. But Alceste is also defeated. The empty stage, which marks the end of the play and thwarts all comedic expectations, testifies that he also does not have the right solution. In defeat, he and Célimène are equal.

Feminine independence

Célimène truly confirms her independence only by rejecting Alceste’s proposal of marriage. Defeated, abandoned, alone, aware of her guilt and of her frailty, she still refuses subordination. This decision – taken at a moment when everything speaks against it – proves that Célimène is a woman all her own. The independence enabled by her widow status allowed her to participate in the mondaine world, where the true value of that independence could be put into doubt. Célimène’s true value only comes to light when faced with Alceste who, regardless of his problematic nature, presents the serious reflection and the harsh criticism of this world. It is no coincidence that she can get seriously involved only with him, despite his threats with utter submission. The relationship with Alceste testifies that her conduct reaches far beyond accommodating social expectations.

Can this impossible relationship be called love? The question raises many doubts, which have to do not only with her but also with the sincerity of Alceste’s proclaimed love.²³ Certainly their relationship is essential for both, each of them represents the measure for the other. They are equivalent in their differences and deeply related in their conflicts.

Alceste’s critical view of the social world is the main focus of the play. In contrast, Célimène moves in this world with ease and pleasure, while at the same time fully realizing its faults. Witness her social portraits, in which she verbally paints a critical view of her contemporaries, on the par with Alceste’s. His criticism is principled and universal, but also highly abstract, often ill-founded, since he applies it uniformly to all and evens out the differences, dwells on trivialities etc. which all makes him a comical character. Her criticisms aimed at acquaintances are, in contrast, precisely focused and serve the pursuit of her goal. To be sure, they serve her need to establish alliances, yet, they are more insightful in discerning the distortions of the mondaine world than his. Actually, the two protagonists complement one another in their critical worldview (in the comedy’s strategy they create a portrait of the century only together). This is what the jealous Alceste does not realize, he only sees her slandering as a cheap sort of entertainment, but his generalized and abstract misanthropy, fully revealing the conviction of his own superiority, displays a narcissistic delusion far beyond hers.

This is also evident in her capacity for self-reflection. She places the true value of criticism not in the generalized condemnation of filthy world, but ultimately in the pursuit

23 Apart from his problematic wish to change his beloved, expounded upon already by Adam (1956), some commentators harbor some other doubts about Alceste’s love. Gossman, who seriously distrusts Alceste’s misanthropy, maintains that he desires Célimène only because she is desired by others: “It is not Célimène that Alceste loves or desires. She is irrelevant as a person to his ‘love’. It is the world that he seeks to reach and possess through her. To have at his feet this woman whom all the world admires and courts would be to win the recognition of the world for himself.” (1963, 77) Goodkin agrees: “Had she accepted his offer, he would have ceased to ‘love’ her.” (561)

to know oneself. Such insight, enabling self-criticism along with criticizing the world at large, is something Alceste would never manage. Throughout the play, and even when he is defeated, he displays an utterly non-reflected delusion of grandeur which can also feed on defeats. Célimène on the other hand is aware of her own narcissism and knows how to set boundaries to it; thus, at the end she is also capable of admitting her mistake. Alceste never acknowledges being part of the distortion of the world that he criticizes. Even though he despises the society in which he supposedly lives against his will, he ardently desires the acknowledgement from this same society: from the famous demand *Je veux qu'on me distingue* (63: "I want them to acknowledge my distinction") in the introductory scene until the end, when his defeat – in the courtroom and in love – for him only proves his outstanding integrity.

Alceste is at his most radical when he criticizes the shady dealings in the judiciary and at the Court. His remarks tacitly imply the corruption of the whole political machinery (hence he was often deemed a rebel and critic of the monarchy²⁴). But even in doing so, he always places his own problem in the foreground. His criticism of public institutions and the functioning of society are refracted through the injustices that have been inflicted upon him; the allegations he makes about his opponents verge on wild calumny. Célimène is also aware of the corruption of the courts and public institutions, but she can't afford outspoken resistance. She endeavours to protect her position through the support of influential men, but as a woman without a proper position in public institutions, she does not have much choice. The difference of their approach is due not only to their individual decisions, but more to the gender difference, since a man in this social world has far larger means at his disposal than a woman.

It turns out that there is also a limit to her flattery. It may seem that her letters merely follow the logic of flattery and empty promises, but when she admits that her admirers largely inspire boredom in her, she goes beyond the limit of social trifling and intrigue. She steps out of euphoria and shows a clear distance to her own social life. The mondaine entertainment, with all the admiration she can get, does not yield true satisfaction. Her true core is somewhere else, but she never speaks about it. But if we were to raise the reproach that this true core is but a mirage, then one should point out that this holds even more for what allegedly lies at the core of Alceste's often pretentious discourse about his inner truth. Her unpretentious stance, irreducible to conformism, reaches further precisely because she does not point to it with a loud ostentation.

At first it seems that Alceste, who took his principled stance against society and is considering withdrawing from it, is a man of independent mind; whereas Célimène, who strives for social reputation, has conformed to the fashionable customs. A closer look shows that they are both, each in their own way, bound to the logic of this world, but also exceeding it by their individual attitudes and choices. Both strive for independence; he, following principles and unwilling to accept things as they are; she, with apparent acceptance, but which she exceeds by her lucid understanding of social relations, seeing through to their core. This is what enables her to move freely in this world, at least to a large extent, and maintain an independence of spirit which she demonstrates with virtuosic eloquence. Each of them adopts a critical distance, although by different means, which for a while endows them with social prestige (both are respected and admired), but then also instigates their downfall. They are both punished for their independence, each

24 Michelet, the author of the very influential *Histoire de France, XIII* (1860), maintained that through Alceste Molière criticized the Court politics, focused on the King's enjoyment and prestige: "If Alceste is enraged, then his rage aims less at Célimène than at the Court. All these pretenders/frauds in public office that infuriate Alceste, who chose them if not the King? This is a theatre play of courageous resistance." (quoted by Collinet 1974, 144-5).

in their own way expelled. At the end of the day, they are both outcasts. This parallelism shows that in the intricate strategy of this comedy, punishment is not a verdict, but rather shows the defeat of the possibility of an authentic response to this world.

Célimène's freedom, although problematic and conditional, is absolutely exceptional for a woman of her time, also given the sovereignty with which she insists on her independence and autonomy. In fact, it is not surprising that in the following centuries, defined by bourgeois morals and patriarchy, her freedom was predominantly seen as depravity. A woman who does not find the fulfillment of her life in the union with a loving husband was perceived as suspicious and dangerous. It's only in modern times that we can appreciate the way Molière granted a different value to a woman. Célimène possesses wit, social prowess and charm, but it is an autonomous and sharp consciousness of herself and the world that determines her complex image, the independence of spirit which *Le Misanthrope* highlights as the greatest value. Her author granted her the inalienable right to decide about her life for herself.

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