

# X

## ...NOT!

### *Le Misanthrope; ou, L'Atrabilaire Amoureux*

*as conceived by Molière*

*as translated by Richard Wilbur*

*as translated by Neil Bartlett*

*as directed by Robert Falls*

*as directed by Pierre Dux*

*Le Misanthrope* stands at the exact center of Molière's life's work. He was in the middle of his journey – “in a dark wood where the straightway was lost.”<sup>1</sup> This chapter will deal with that dark wood, that lost straightway, that is the subtext behind this magnificent play.

In March 1665, *Don Juan* closed at the Palais-Royal after only fifteen performances, in spite of a very strong box office. No reason has ever been given as “the” reason. There are many guesses, among them that Molière was ill or that La Grange had an uncontrollable cough. Some more likely reasons are: pressure put upon the king by the French nobility who didn't like seeing even a Spanish aristocrat going down in flames; or by the clergy who were outraged by the blasphemy in the Poor Man scene; or quite probably, both. A clue may have been given a few months after the second forced closure in a year of a major play: Molière was summoned by the king to Versailles and was told a new title had been created for the company, “La Troupe du Roi,” which would bring with it a handsome stipend and the king's protection. Maybe that was the “deal” the king made to compensate for the closing of two controversial plays in a row because they roused the indignation of highly placed members of the church and the nobility. Surely Molière would not have closed a major play before they had paid off the scenery, so this must have been an “offer he couldn't refuse.” Molière and his family of actors were firmly established in the Palais-Royal.

Whatever the reason, Molière abruptly canceled a successful performance and, according to most biographers, removed himself by water taxi to a retreat

in suburban Auteuil. He had been forced to abandon two major plays about significant themes; he was ill from tuberculosis and had been put on a milk diet; he was in despair over Armande, who was paying too much attention to the aristocratic stage-door Johnnies paying her court. Stardom, it seems, was turning her beautiful head. While isolating himself from the company and his wife, he worked on a new play about two people in love. The days had grown darker and the grin over a love quarrel between Charlotte and Pierrot was meeting up with a real life grimace of pain. He worked and reworked each line of his new play as he wrestled with a major artistic and personal dilemma. He struggled to put down on paper his anguish over loving a woman he felt was indifferent to him. His words seem to bleed on the page.

As he fashioned these thoughts into rhymed couplets, he also had to face the necessity of fashioning a role he could act that would not violate his contract with his audience. He had been seeking and achieving his public's love as an actor for twenty years. He knew that, above all, to be self pitying or to whine does not create sympathy for an onstage character. Raw sexual yearning cannot appear naked on stage. The outrageous greed of the hot Tartuffe and the cruel nihilism of the cold Don Juan had not offered comedic protection to him; he had played supporting roles to them. For his next play, he was seeking a theatrical mask through which his own obsession could be expressed. He was always two spirits: man and actor. His first title for the play was *Le Misanthrope; ou, L'Atrabilaire Amoureux*. *Atrabilaire*, as defined by the Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, goes back to a word used by the doctors of classical times meaning a person with "a thick or dense humor, a black bile, causing melancholy."<sup>2</sup> He had used the familiar choleric fool as a mask in many roles but this "dense, black-biled" persona was new to him and would be new to his public. If he could put this over his own personal agony he could be sure that his play would stay in the world of comedy. Behind the mask of black bile, the man would be there, wearing a costume bedecked with green ribbons.

In Pirandello's play, *Traversi*, a young actress says about her search for her "self":

It is true only that one must create oneself, create! And only then does one find oneself.

Robert Brustein, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater at Harvard, says that this young actress was:

... seeking her essential but illusive personality. She discovers that it lies not in herself but in her art, in the various roles she has played and the theatrical

disguises she has assumed in front of her audiences. These are what constitute her real identity ... actors are not only the sum of their own actions, but *they are the sum of the roles they play*.<sup>3</sup>

Molière, like any great professional actor, knew his type; knew what he could do best on stage; knew that what he did had to be funny as well as true to his inner “self.” The melancholic “black-biled” soul had to live on stage in the body of a choleric fool. The solitary writer, cloistered in the suburbs of Auteuil, worked out this duality by constructing a classic play in verse in which, as a playwright, he was moving in a totally different direction from *Don Juan*. He had to present the battle between himself and Armande in a way that was winning for both of them before their public, and to do so he needed the concentration of time and place.

Thus immersed in solitude, he was interrupted by an abrupt summons from the king for the newly baptized “Troupe du Roi” to appear in Versailles with a new play in September of 1665. Molière left Auteuil and wrote, rehearsed, and performed *L'Amour Médecin* (*The Love Doctor*) in five days. In this little formula *comédie-ballet*, Molière played a tyrannical father with his wife, Armande, acting the role of his listless, melancholic – but non-choleric – daughter, Lucinde. In the first act he talks baby-talk to her but that all changes when she confesses she wants to marry a handsome young man she has met. A fatherly explosion results! Sound familiar? In the second act, five doctors appear. For these five doctors Molière turned again to masks but ones that he had modeled and painted to resemble well-known physicians at court. They each treat her “illness” and after their examination they each give the father their final diagnosis that she is “ill” – in Latin. In the third short act, the young lover appears disguised as a doctor and, of course, the wedding is approved. Shades of the more complex *Imaginary Invalid* to come. The play moved to the Palais-Royal and was a success in most of 1665 and 1666. *Le Misanthrope* did not open until June 4th of 1666, and we can assume that, after this hasty visit to Versailles, Molière returned to his task of developing his new character, Alceste.

The man behind the *Atrabilaire* role is someone passionately in love with one woman. Gone is the infatuated guardian with his girl-child; gone is the hypocrite in lust; gone is the womanizer with multiple sexual partners; gone are the liars and pretenders. This character was to be one who is an absolute truth-teller, one who wants an idyllic union with his true love. Alceste, however, unlike his author's other choleric fools, is a man of great intelligence. He can hold steady to the logic of his views about social evils through long speeches wrought out of extraordinary language. Unlike Sganarelle in *Don Juan*, he does not go to pieces emotionally in the midst of an argument. Molière was

writing a role that would allow him to play out of his deepest feelings and to express those feelings in the diction of a poet. Through Alceste, he sought to realize his personal despair at the pervasive lying that dominates the life of human beings in society, and to declare through word and action, scene and act, the madness of his passion for Armande. Alceste – which rings with an undertone that reminds one of the word “incest” – is a profoundly conflicted character. On one hand, Alceste is a name derived from the Greek, meaning – as described by Fernandez – a “man of strength, a powerful champion ... the sort of fighter who in the prize ring keeps boring in.”<sup>4</sup> And on the other hand, he is the “Fool in Love” who can’t tell the difference between being “honest” about a lady’s hat and demanding that perfect love can only exist outside the ridiculous rules of society. He knows the wrongs of society, but knows little about his own nature. He finds he knows even less about the nature of Célimène.

Molière again begins the play with a debate between two “friends,” but this time each is a person of clear intelligence, each representing a profoundly different argument about how to live in the world. This time they are social equals even though they are two contrasting theater types: the angry one and the reasonable one, the fool and the straight man. The actors debate the true meaning of friendship and the first scene of the play is a rhetorical masterpiece which pulls the audience’s sympathy from one character’s words to the other’s. The debate format between master and servant – as in *Don Juan* (or *Don Quixote*) – is revisited here but now the two debaters are both *grands seigneurs* and both are equally persuasive. Undeterred by his emotional blindness and verbal extravagances we feel the moral passion of Alceste; we also respect the incisive intelligence of his friend, Philinte, played by that most seductive man-of-the-world, La Grange. Fresh from his role as Don Juan, he now tells us the truth about how it *really* is in society. Both men are clearly *au courant* with the works of Montaigne.

In his essay on “Friendship” Montaigne writes about his relationship with La Boétie: “If I were pressed to say why I love him, I feel that my only reply could be: Because it was he, because it was I.”<sup>5</sup> These intense, idealistic words seem to directly echo in Alceste’s (and Molière’s) yearning for oneness. Montaigne in another instance writes about lesser, more quotidian social relationships: “As familiar company at table, I choose the amusing rather than the wise; in bed I prefer beauty to goodness; and for serious conversation I like ability even combined with dishonesty.”<sup>6</sup> This is the part of the essay that Philinte seems to have read. Philinte will consistently argue that there are friendships that are intrinsically social and thus need not be held to such absolute idealism. It will be seen that the argument for absolute “oneness” is one that Alceste will make an absolute necessity for true love between a man and a woman.

The two men are at the richly furnished home of the young widow, Célimène, for a social gathering. Philinte seeks the pleasures of company; Alceste wants no company but Célimène's and hungers for Adam and Eve's private Eden. He has come with the intention of finding out whether Célimène is willing to give up everything and live for him alone as he would do for her. After witnessing in the next room her flirtations with those he deems as mindless idiots, he has stormed out followed by his concerned friend.

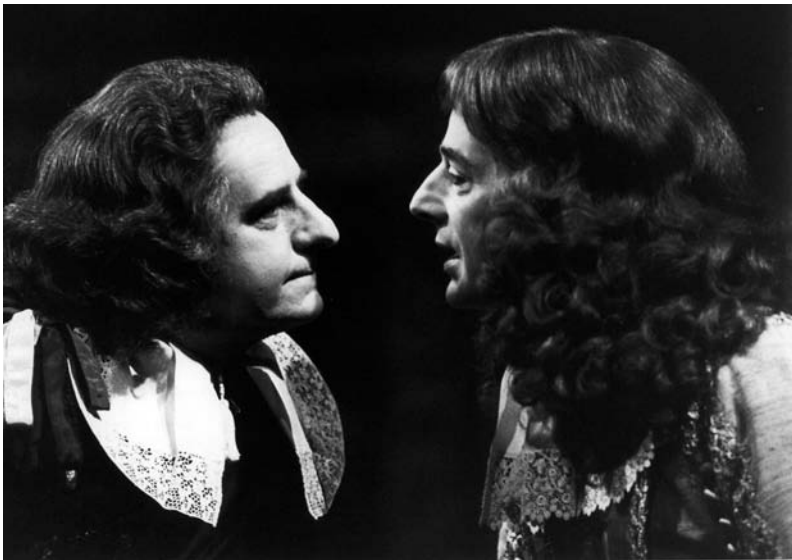
Jean Donneau de Visé, whose essay was printed in the first edition of the play, wrote that Molière "begins with the title character whose actions let everyone know that he is a misanthrope before he even opens his mouth."<sup>7</sup> It is most likely that Alceste came on first and that Molière as Alceste attacked the stage space with ferocity, plunking himself down hard on the edge of his chair and presenting, before Philinte speaks the first words, a comical parade of angry facial expressions and physical gestures – probably in wicked imitation of the social behavior he has just observed in the next room: "form without content, effect without cause: not a moral position, but a grimace and a posture." Within a few lines his strong-willed hero, Alceste, is heard stating the absolute: "I choose to be rude, Sir, and to be hard of hearing." ("Je veux me fâcher, et je ne veux point entendre.") Sounds like the solipsistic infantilism characteristic of farce types. The statement is made more absolute in the French by the use of the word *point* to supply a more absolute negative than the usual *pas*. Another onstage example of this *atrabilaire* attribute was displayed in the eighteenth century, when an actor named Molé smashed that downstage chair. A critic commented with disdain on that performance: "Alceste is, after all, not a stable hand; there is a description of his elegant and aristocratic silk costume of grey and gold with green ribbons." But the fierce, farcical type is a compelling role and surely was a vital part of the character as Molière played him. We will see later how the man with the "green ribbons" – Molière's favorite color and also the color of jealousy – can be played in a somber, heroic posture.

Alceste's anger in the opening lines is not just based on a matter of abstract principle but is part of the given circumstances of the scene. As Alceste has watched Célimène so obviously enjoying the flattery of those around her, he hears Philinte, his "best" friend, talking with fawning and facile phrases to one of his rival suitors for Célimène's hand. He feels betrayed and disgusted. Seeing Philinte succumb to the artifice of silly social conventions, he can foresee Célimène also betraying him. She, too, might not be strong enough to leave the pleasures of her life in society and love only him. This is happening on the very day he has chosen for confronting her. He is highly motivated and filled with energy as the play begins. This is to be the tipping point in his life.

Philinte starts the first scene of the play by gently inquiring into the reason for his friend's rage and in the next line of verse is told to get out and leave



**Figure 24.** The Philinte vs Alceste debate in the seventeenth century. Comédie-Française Archives.



**Figure 25.** The Alceste vs Philinte debate in the twentieth century. Photo © Laurencine Lot.

him alone. Thus begins a very long exposition scene, which is like a prize fight between two evenly matched contenders. La Grange, who speaks for society as Philinte, played lovers for good reason: audiences were drawn to his warmth and attractiveness. Molière played the comic roles and audiences loved the laughter he brought them. The public must have been intrigued to hear such a philosophical discussion between the two well-known actors. Each character is given carefully written speeches to completely explain his point of view and to make us clearly understand what each friend feels about the right way for men to behave with honor in society. The debate, however, is not only between two characters in the same social environment, but also mirrors the ambivalence that tortured Molière's own soul as it ricocheted between the demands of his quotidian and artistic roles. It is a debate within himself, expressed through the words of a dramatist and the craft of an actor.

For the actor, what lies under the give and take of the ideas and carries them along, is the "action." Alceste's "intention" in the scene – the spur to his action – is to propose to Célimène that she come away with him. This is what he "wants," and that subtext, like the spinal cord, channels the flow of emotion: the passion of desire and the yearning for love; the despair of loneliness; the deep hatred for the hypocrisy of society. Célimène is the real spark for the rage of the opening and makes manifest the subtext for the whole play with all its digressions and arguments. She personifies the passions that surge all through the action in the play; she is the theatrical embodiment of Armande. And she *is* Armande! As the new star of the company, Armande has been cast in her first great leading role, as Célimène. She and Molière have been married a little over four years.

We hear one man declaring one should always speak the truth from the heart and if one doesn't, one should be hanged. Well surely, says the other, hanging is a little extreme as punishment for a social misstep and surely one has to play by society's rules. No! says Alceste, I don't want to be like everyone else; I don't want to be mediocre, I want to be a man of honor. Well, says Philinte, surely we can't change the world by being rude and your extreme point of view is making you ridiculous. Good, says Alceste, "Je veux qu'on me distingue, et, pour le trancher net, / L'ami du genre humain n'est point de tout mon fait" ("I choose, Sir, to be chosen; and in fine, / The friend of mankind is no friend of mine").<sup>8</sup> Well, he is answered, you are just excusing your own bad manners and forgetting man's nature; one must accept the world as it is and forgive the weaknesses that are part of human nature.

Then they get into deeper waters by arguing about human nature. Alceste, a true Hobbesian, thinks that human nature is evil and that those who tolerate evil are equally evil. His explosive character argues that one should reject the world, since liars control it. Ha, well, says Philinte, you might as well blame



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,  
Éliante, 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.<sup>9</sup>

In the theater, we all live by T. S. Eliot's phrase, "The wheel turns and still is forever still." The wheel turning in the interpretation of *Alceste* began only a few years later, in 1672 – one year before his death – when Molière



replaced himself with the young Michel Baron who played Alceste in a reprise of the play. Molière had seen Baron as a child actor at age 12 and had immediately brought him into the company. While Armande was not happy with him and even slapped him silly at one time, the boy actor remained very close to the aging head of the troupe, and even shared time with him out at Auteuil. Baron, with his experience as a child actor and later as a juvenile in the company, was an exceptionally handsome youth who was to become a great tragic actor long after Molière's death. He would never have played Alceste as a crusty, choleric, black-biled character. He began the tradition of playing Alceste as a romantic or glamorous figure. Baron may have played an elegant thirteen-year old in Molière's unfinished *Mélicerte* in 1666, so he was not yet twenty when he played Alceste. A nineteen-year old Alceste was a very different idea, especially against Armande who had reached the great age of twenty-four. How strange it must have been to see his two adopted children playing out his love story. There are many, since Baron, who have weighted the play with Alceste as a suffering hero, but few have been able to duplicate Molière, who knew just how to recreate a man's suffering, and then deflate it with laughter.

One of the important productions in the twentieth century was at the Comédie-Française in 1977 under the direction of Pierre Dux, who had begun his work on the play in 1933 playing Oronte, the foppish poet that so irritates Alceste. In later years he played Alceste. When he came to direct the play, he wrote in the program that "nowadays, Alceste no longer makes us laugh." After playing Molière's play before, during, and after World War II, it is not surprising that he and many others came to such a point of view and that he chose a powerful actor, Georges Descrières – with iron grey hair, a subdued puritanical costume, and a deep bass voice – to play the role in a new production. Mr. Herzel, in the publication of the Modern Language Association, found the interpretation to evoke a reaction similar to the one for the Ghost in Hamlet: no one laughed at his presence. Mr. Herzel describes the relationship between Alceste and Célimène as follows:

This was not one of those coquettish Célimènes who keeps all her suitors impartially at arm's length; she may touch Clitandre on the forearm or allow Acaste to kiss her hand, but with Alceste we see her in one tight embrace after another as a willing, even aggressive participant. These physical displays cease, of course, when other characters enter and she becomes kittenish again, but the audience is entirely convinced of her love for Alceste even though Alceste himself is not. When he finally refuses her (in Act 5), she crosses to him, places her left hand on his left breast while he stares stonily ahead; she inclines her head briefly on his shoulder, her face averted from his (and from the audience). Then,

the picture of dejection, she makes her long, slow, painful progress upstage and off, leaving not a dry eye in the house.<sup>11</sup>

Molière might have had some problem with the choices made by these players, but he would have held these later thespians in the greatest respect as members of his extended troupe.

The great scene between Célimène and Alceste onstage – and the hidden presence of Armande and Molière felt in the subtext – takes place in act 4. A compelling production of the play was presented in 1988 in London, and was re-created in 1989 at the La Jolla Playhouse. The California production of the translation by Neil Bartlett was directed by Robert Falls, and Alceste and Célimène were played by David Darlow and Kim Cattrall facing off as a screenwriter and a movie star. The scene was played with a grown-up intensity, in a translation by Neil Bartlett that successfully married the rigors of the alexandrine line with American diction. The act 4 scene begins with Alceste storming on stage brandishing a letter he supposes to be a love letter from Célimène to the supercilious Oronte. He compares that “scrap of paper” to an earthquake.

ALCESTE. Oh God. I'm going mad. I don't know what to do.

CÉLIMÈNE. You look terrible. What on earth is wrong with you?

If looks could kill, just one look like that would fell me.

Darling, is there something that you want to tell me?

One cannot help but think of Ms. Cattrall saying this in her role as the promiscuous sex goddess in *Sex and the City*.

ALCESTE. Tell you that of all evils to which flesh is heir

Your infidelity is quite without compare;

Tell you Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned,

Nor Hell a fury like a lover who's been burned.

CÉLIMÈNE. You always did have such a clever turn of phrase.<sup>12</sup>

The almost Strindbergian man/woman struggle uncovers the reason for his burning jealousy: the letter. She moves so surely and with such ease to demolish both the letter and the man who has believed it. Simple! She wrote it to the woman, Arsinoé, who had given the letter to Alceste. She goes on with steely aplomb to tell him to stop “crashing around the place” and then, to finish him off, she reverses her tactics to tell him with a shrug, that, yes, she did write it to Oronte and to just “leave me alone, you give me a headache,” unwittingly echoing his own opening statement on his first entrance. He crumbles and

begs her to stop pretending she is guilty, but she goes on twisting the knife, telling him that she wishes she had had an affair so that he would have a real reason to make such a tiresome scene. He is now crumpled on the floor as she yells at him to “Get out.”

Telling the truth – or pretending to tell the truth – leads to a transition from anger in each to a gentle and quiet attempt by each, standing close and holding hands, to make the other understand their differing ideas of love. Here is Bartlett’s rendition of the scene (*italics mine*):

ALCESTE. Oh, you’re wicked! How strange that I should fall for you.  
When you are lying, I love it. What can I do?  
I give myself up to your scorn and derision;  
My love is in your hands; please, make your decision.  
I must know, and know now, what you’re thinking inside;  
Must see what treachery your black heart can hide.

CÉLIMÈNE. Oh! Why don’t you behave like a lover’s meant to! (*Shades of Pierrot!*)

ALCESTE. No one ever felt the way I feel about you.  
I want to tell the world I love you so madly  
That I fantasize about hurting you, badly.  
I wish no one ever admired your loveliness.  
I wish I could watch you stripped of your happiness,  
I wish God had had you born in obscurity,  
With no home, with no wealth, no health, in poverty,  
So when I offered you the chance to be my wife,  
Offered, with that single gesture, to transform your life,  
I would be so happy, because then you would see  
That everything you had, you had it all from me.  
(*Shades of Arnolphe!*)

CÉLIMÈNE. What a strange way you have of making me happy.  
I hope you never have the opportunity—<sup>13</sup>

She is interrupted by the phone ringing.

To see these two people on stage standing close, holding each other’s hands, yet disagreeing so profoundly, is surely to witness one of the most unusual love scenes in all of dramatic literature. They can no more go on to domestic tranquility than could Romeo and Juliet but here one does not have the clarity or the chill of the tomb at the end. The Alceste in *La Jolla* wore a trench coat like Columbo and Célimène wore a designer dress; Monsieur Descrières in Paris wore a puritanical coat; and Baron and Armande were elegantly dressed and very young. So the wheel turns from irony to romantic tonalities, and back to its roots as comedy and is still the same play.

The ending of this mysterious and marvelous work has had many kinds of staging. While the play may end in ambiguity, the production has to make more specific choices. Some modern versions, including my own, have left Célimène in the loneliness of her deserted “salon” after all the other characters have gone – a slip of a twenty-year-old girl in a dark corner of the room, deserted by everyone of importance in her life. Her long silence after the exit of the happy Philinte and Éliante gives her pathos and brings her a little rueful sympathy. Ms. Catrall was no such girl. Here’s the text Bartlett gave his actors at the end of act 5 (*italics mine*):

CÉLIMÈNE. Me? Live in a desert? Darling, what would I do?  
Sit quietly down and grow old? Alone? With you?

ALCESTE. But if your life was only fired by my passion,  
All this would seem empty – prestige – people – fashion.  
We would have each other and that will be plenty.

CÉLIMÈNE. Solitude is too much to bear when you’re twenty.  
I’m neither old enough nor strong enough to cope  
With the thought of us living off just Love and Hope.  
If the promise of engagement would be enough  
To start with, I could agree to that, perhaps Love  
And marriage...

ALCESTE. Please, spare me all the rest. I’ll just go;  
Your answer tells me ev’rything I need to know.  
Since you are not able to do what you’re asked to,  
To live for me alone as I have lived for you...  
*(Ms. Catrall, at this point, simply turned and left the stage, and Alceste yelled after her.)*  
All right, I’m leaving you. The blow you’ve just dealt me  
Severs the chain of obligation; I ... am ... free.<sup>14</sup>

Astonishingly, he turns and proposes an affair with Éliante, which is, of course, rejected.

The same scene in French with Mlle Mars, who played at the Comédie-Française for decades before and after the French Revolution – and who not only might have been a bed-mate for Napoleon, but had the beauty and the voice to play young roles until she was past sixty – took another direction. Her exit as Célimène is still described by editors of Molière’s works:

All the pride of a woman-of-the-world, who would never confess to the wound she suffered at the rage of Alceste was shown in the way she prepared for her exit. She began a deep bow as Alceste starts his last angry speech and she finished



**Figure 26.** Célimène in the early nineteenth century. Comédie-Française Archives.



**Figure 27.** Célimène responding to Alceste's passion in the early twentieth century. Comédie-Française Archives.



**Figure 28.** Célimène responding to Alceste's passion in the late twentieth century. Photo © Micha Langer.

the bow on his last word. As she moved to her exit she regained her appearance of defiance, and her fan looked as if it had much to say while the final gesture confirmed that she was ending her conversation with him.<sup>15</sup>

I dare say none of the older generation actresses would, like Kim Cattrall, simply turn and walk out on him. They waited patiently, as he tells them that he detests them and that he is through with them before they leave sadly accepting the impossible like the Célimène for Monsieur Dux, or defiantly gaining control at the end like Mlle Mars over one hundred years earlier, or, since the word “exit” is not actually written in the text, an actress could stay in place until all the stage was empty and once alone wonder if she had done the right thing.

Trying to understand the process that produced this enigmatic and mysterious play, biographers and scholars have wrestled with a document written by “Anonymous” in 1688, which contains a section purportedly about a conversation between Molière and Chapelle about the nature of love. This section some think was the work of La Fontaine and therefore tend to give it credit; others, who think Chapelle himself might have been the author, discount it because Chapelle was a drunk and could not be relied on. Still, Chapelle was a lifelong friend of Molière’s and knew him from school days at the Collège until the day Molière died – and it was Chapelle who wrote him the verse quoted earlier about the moss and the willow tree, warning him to share the suggestive lines only with Armande. That letter was written in 1659 when Armande was only 15, three years before the couple married. So the two friends must have shared a rare intimacy about this love before it came to be known by others. Chapelle spent a good deal of time visiting with Molière at Auteuil – sharing other marvelous conversations about suicide and drinking – and the passage certainly rings true for a writer for whom sexual feelings are the core of his four great central plays, from *L’École des Femmes* to *Le Misanthrope*. I share with you the concluding part of the passage as translated by Virginia Scott in her chapter about Marriage (with my interpolations in italics).

“I see,” answers Molière, “that you have never been in love and you have taken the appearance of love for love itself.” He (*Molière*) agrees that he has studied human weakness, but personal experience convinces him that not all weaknesses can be overcome. “I was born with the utmost disposition for ‘tendresse’ (*a code word for sexual desire*) and as all my efforts have not been able to conquer the penchant I have for love, I have tried to be happy, that is to say, as much as one can be with a sensitive heart” (*also a code phrase for one who is vulnerable to sexual desire*) ... Molière describes how he raised Armande to be the kind of wife he needed, innocent and untouched by self-interest, ambition, or vanity. “As she was still young when

I married her, I did not perceive her bad inclinations” ... But after marriage “I found so much indifference that I began to perceive that all my precautions had been useless and that what she felt for me was far from what I needed to be happy ... and I attributed to her nature what was an effect of her lack of sexual feeling for me” ... Now he is determined “to live with her as if she were not my wife. But if you knew what I suffer, you would pity me ... I tell myself perhaps she has the same difficulty suppressing the penchant that she has to be a coquette, and I find myself more disposed to be sorry for her than to blame her. You will no doubt say that one must be a poet to love that way? But, for me, I believe there is only one kind of love, and that people who do not have a weakness like this have never truly loved: everything in the world is related to her in my heart; my mind is so occupied with her that nothing can divert me in her absence; when I see her, an emotion and ecstasy that I can feel but never express takes away my power of reason; I have no eyes for her defects, I only see what is lovable in her. Isn’t this the extreme of madness? And don’t you admire the way my reason shows me my weakness, without being able to triumph over it.”<sup>16</sup>

Sounds a little like Alceste.

In the center of his life’s work Molière touched this deepest core of his being – the agony of unanswered, unreturned love – and whoever was that Anonymous who wrote those words must have understood the man he was writing about. What hovers over the burning words of *Le Misanthrope* is the inexpressible presence of Armande in his life and on stage, caught up in the mysteries of love in the human experience; and while the emotions of such experience are inexplicable, so too is the overwhelming need to write a play like this, if you could. Molière has fused this all together in a poetic burst of truth-telling from some unconscious place that has kept this play alive over the centuries and given great joy to actors and actresses and audiences who have shared the thrill of knowing and receiving these characters in their hearts and souls.

As we have seen, dramatists can work from the inside out, or from the outside in; or they can do both at the same time as Molière did when he wrote – and acted in – *Le Misanthrope*. The end result at many times brought about that ecstatic experience when the actor, the actress, and the audience all breathed in the same rhythm and the art of acting brought release and healing to Molière’s heart if not to his lungs. In *Le Misanthrope*, as Alceste, Molière finally took the title role and played out his own love story, and the tidal wave of turbulent love seemed finally to subside. After playing Alceste to Armande’s Célimène for twenty-one performances, Molière opened a new play. He never again wrote a play about love. When he comes on stage again, he is a different man, with a different story.