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ALCESTE AT THE PRINT SHOP: PUBLICATION AND AUTHORSHIP IN MOLIÈRE'S *LE MISANTHROPE*

In the stormy first scene of *Le Misanthrope*, Alceste announces in comically grandiose fashion his intention to “rompre en visière à tout le Genre Humain” (1: 651).¹ The play must indeed lend itself to themes of rupture, since prominent critics have cited it as a crucial turning point in Molière’s dramaturgy, the crossing of a comedic Rubicon. In his classic study, Jacques Guicharnaud made it the final play of a central trilogy that, having explored the possibilities and limits of comedy, ends with an empty stage, a comedic *nec plus ultra* signifying the end of an aesthetic. Guicharnaud concluded, “Après *Le Misanthrope*, [Molière] aurait pu cesser d’écrire” (527). Likewise, for Gérard Defaux, Alceste’s farewell to the world is also Molière’s authorial farewell to an erudite tradition of humanist (and moralist) satire (184, 290–91). However, if Guicharnaud and Defaux had paid attention to the publication history of Molière’s theater, they might have added a further rupture to the list: in 1666, the year of *Le Misanthrope*’s premiere, Molière fell out with the initial group of *libraires* that had published his work since *Les Précieuses ridicules*, his first printed play. This split, brought to critical attention most prominently by C.E.J. Caldicott’s work on Molière’s publishers, did not fail to leave its mark on the themes of Molière’s theater. While *Le Misanthrope* is not an occasional piece on the order of *La Critique de L’École des femmes*, its creation—as well as its treatment of authorship, reception, and publication—nevertheless plays out against the turbulent backdrop of Molière’s struggles with the printing industry.

The Crisis of the 1666 Œuvres

In 1666, the Parisian bookseller Gabriel Quinet obtained a new royal privilege, valid for six years, authorizing the printing of a collected edition of nine of Molière’s plays to date.² This privilege was then shared with the

1. All Molière quotations are taken from the 2010 *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* edition, edited by Georges Forestier and Claude Bourqui.

2. *Les Précieuses ridicules*, *Sganarelle*, *L’École des maris*, *Les Fâcheux*, *L’Étourdi*, *Le Dépit amoureux*, *L’École des femmes*, *La Critique de l’École des femmes*, and *La Princesse d’Élide*.

seven other *libraires* that had collaborated on the publication of *L'École des femmes* and *La Critique de l'École des femmes*, several of whom had also participated in publishing various Molière plays since *Les Précieuses ridicules*, the playwright's first printed work. The participation of all eight publishers (as well as that of Robert Ballard, the publisher of *La Princesse d'Élide*) was a necessity for the 1666 collected works to be legal—most of the individual privileges for the plays included in the two-volume set had not yet expired, and printing them without their owners' consent would have violated those privileges' monopoly clauses. It would appear, though, that while all of Molière's previous publishers (with the understandable exception of Jean Ribou, publisher of a stolen version of *Sganarelle*) participated in this project, the *libraires* did exclude someone else: the author. In the text of a 1671 privilege, Molière complains that Quinet obtained his 1666 royal permission to print the collected works “par surprise” and “sans en avoir son consentement” (2: 418). This statement leads Caldicott to conclude that the publishers of the 1666 edition (which he dubs the “cartel des huit”) were unethically seeking to extend their control over Molière's printed theater at the author's expense (123–30).³

While such practices may run counter to our own notion of authors' rights, there is little doubt that Molière's publishers were acting within acceptable seventeenth-century norms. If Molière could have made a convincing case to challenge the legitimacy of the 1666 edition, it would have been to his advantage to do so immediately upon its publication, allowing him to seize the edition and profit from it, but no legal documents exist to suggest that he did. On the other hand, it is more likely that while Molière may have personally disapproved of the edition, there was no case for challenging its legality—the publishers that had previously purchased the manuscripts had applied for and received a valid privilege. Molière's successful suit against Jean Ribou in the 1660 *Sganarelle* affair demonstrates that the French judicial system did recognize an author's right to choose the time and manner of publication (or at least the choice of publisher), but nothing suggests that an author retained any control over the text after the cession of his or her rights to a *libraire*.⁴ As David Pottinger has written regarding *ancien régime* publication practices:

3. The existence of this “cartel des huit” is problematic: the bibliographies of Racine, Corneille, and Quinault show these same *libraires* working in fluid groups and with other publishers, indicating that Molière's case most likely represents an arrangement of convenience among publishers who were competitors as well as colleagues.

4. For an early French legal case regarding an author's control over a text prior to publication, see Cynthia Brown's discussion in *Poets, Patrons, and Printers: Crisis of Authority in Late Medieval France* of the 1504 lawsuit instigated by André de la Vigne (17–19).

“The author least of all had any ‘rights.’ He sold his manuscript to a publisher and thereafter had no financial interest in it. He could not print and sell his own books but was obliged to deal with a member of the guild. He might be given a small additional payment for a revised edition though not for new printings” (211).

Even if we posit a scenario in which Molière was wronged by the publication of the 1666 *Œuvres*, there remains a more fundamental ambiguity to resolve: Who broke the partnership first? While Molière’s belated protests regarding the “surprised” privilege have oriented critics toward blaming the publishers, some important bibliographical facts complicate the narrative. Quinet received his privilege on 6 March 1666 (Guibert 2: 567); it was registered with the *Communauté des libraires* on 24 March. However, on 30 December 1665, more than two months prior to Quinet’s actions, Molière received a privilege for his latest work, *L’Amour médecin*, and presented it in person to the syndic of the *Communauté* for registration on 4 January 1666 (Guibert 1: 157; Thuasne 22); he then transferred the privilege to Trabouillet, Girard, and Legras, three publishers with whom he had never worked before, sometime before 15 January 1666, the *achevé d’imprimer* for the edition. In other words, well before Quinet and his associates made any official move to print Molière’s collected works, the playwright had already begun working with a different set of *libraires*.

The editors of the 2010 *Pléiade* edition of Molière’s works postulate that this decision was due to the imminent project of the collected edition: “Au moment où les marchands-libraires qui avaient publié ses huit premières pièces s’apprêtaient à exploiter leur monopole en ajoutant *La Princesse d’Élide* à la première édition de ses *Œuvres* en 1666, Molière cessa toute collaboration avec eux pour s’entendre avec une autre association de marchands-libraires” (1: 1427). But Molière’s prior publishers had jointly printed *La Princesse d’Élide* with Robert Ballard in January 1665, a year before *L’Amour médecin*. We have no record that shows any further preparation, any attempts to appropriate Molière’s plays, prior to Molière’s own actions in December and January. Furthermore, if Molière knew about the proposed collection in December 1665, then the “surprised” privilege in March was really no surprise at all, reinforcing the notion that if Molière could have blocked it, or had wanted to in 1666, he had ample warning to do so.

Whether or not Molière was “more sinn’d against than sinning” in this case, the publication of the 1666 *Œuvres* certainly exacerbated the rift between the two parties, and Molière did not ever work again with any of the *libraires* involved in its publication. At the very least, it presented to the playwright the curious image of a book (in two volumes with engraved frontispieces, no less) that listed him as its author but that he had not authorized. Molière’s fractious battles over his authorial image, his various constructions of an

authorial identity or persona during his early career, and the quarrel over *L'École des femmes* had accustomed him to using his texts as vehicles for self-representation.⁵ With the edition published by Quinet and his associated *libraires*, Molière's plays took on an existence independent of their author, or to use Alexander Nehamas's distinction, their writer (99). The precision is useful, since the author was still very present: the 1666 *Œuvres*, much more so than the editions of the individual plays, relies on the author-principle for its internal logic and its external marketing. For the first time in a continuously paginated edition, the figure of Molière was used in order to group together certain texts.⁶ Furthermore, in addition to the playwright's prominent name on the title page, the facing-page frontispiece of the first volume contains no fewer than three Molières: Molière as Mascarille, Molière as Sganarelle, and an authorial bust crowned with laurels. In this case, the editors' overcompensation serves as the ironic sign of the writer's effective absence.

Regardless of who ended the association between Molière and his original publishers, therefore, the result in 1666 was a separation between author and book, an authorial consecration that the author himself disavowed. Quinet and his associates may not have been able to work any longer with Molière, but they convincingly demonstrated that they still had a share in "Molière," the authorial persona that was a product of the texts. However, to assert that Molière was powerless to do anything about this is misleading—while there appears to have been no immediate legal remedy, we might look for his response in a different, theatrical venue: the universe of *Le Misanthrope*, in which these issues are reformulated in surprising ways, as individuals' reputations are made and broken through written representations that circulate largely outside of their control. Like the 1666 *Œuvres*, the play invites a consideration of the extent to which an author becomes synonymous with his work. Furthermore, in a setting where writing is a natural extension of social standing, the characters in *Le Misanthrope* engage with the same problems of reception and control that Molière was discovering were endemic to the enterprise of publication.

5. Joan DeJean's *The Reinvention of Obscenity* contains an excellent analysis of the ways in which *L'École des femmes* and the subsequent controversy allowed Molière to shape his authorial image, transforming him into, as DeJean claims, "the first truly modern author in the French tradition" (84).

6. This, of course, is the most fundamental aspect of Foucault's *fonction-auteur*: "[Un nom d'auteur] assure une fonction classificatoire ; un tel nom permet de regrouper un certain nombre de textes, de les délimiter, d'en exclure quelques-uns, de les opposer à d'autres" (82).

The Salon of Célimène, or A World of Letters

Writing about seventeenth-century literary culture, Jean-Paul Sartre observed, "Si [le lecteur] critique l'écrivain, c'est qu'il sait lui-même écrire. Le public de Corneille, de Pascal, de Descartes, c'est Madame de Sévigné, le chevalier de Méré, Madame de Grignan, Madame de Rambouillet, Saint-Évremond" (95). The reading public was also a writing public, or as Sartre states, "On lit parce qu'on sait écrire ; avec un peu de chance, on aurait pu écrire ce qu'on lit" (95). Sartre's depiction of seventeenth-century society is one of authors among equals, where writers address those capable of responding and where a reader is always an "écrivain en puissance" (95). The implications are that writing and (critical) reading become two sides of the same coin, interchangeable activities that are undertaken in light of this potential alternation. For Sartre, reading and writing in the seventeenth century also carry socioeconomic connotations: "[Le lecteur] fait partie d'une élite parasitaire pour qui l'art d'écrire est, sinon un métier, du moins la marque de sa supériorité" (95).

Sartre's depiction overly simplifies the contentious world of *écrivains* analyzed by Alain Viala and others, but it corresponds well to the restricted world of *Le Misanthrope*—"élite parasitaire" is an apt description of certain denizens of Célimène's salon, and the corresponding link to writing and representation in this case holds true. Letters, portraits, light verse: Célimène and her friends are involved in a dizzying circuit of literary production and consumption, and Donneau de Visé noted that those who criticized Molière's portrayal of this society only revealed their own ignorance and low social standing: "L'on ne peut ne la [la pièce] pas trouver bonne, sans faire voir que l'on n'est pas de ce Monde, et que l'on ignore la manière de vivre de la Cour, et celle des plus illustres Personnes de la Ville" (1: 644).

The second scene of *Le Misanthrope* illustrates the importance of writing for "ce Monde," as well as Sartre's closed literary circuit that binds together authors and readers (or more accurately in this instance, critics). Oronte has written a sonnet and asks Alceste's opinion of it—one amateur author soliciting the opinion of another author *en puissance*. The singularity (if there is any) of the sonnet is not in the fact that it is either good or bad: Donneau de Visé wrote that "le Sonnet n'est point méchant," though adding the stinging qualifier "selon la manière d'écrire d'aujourd'hui" (1: 638); echoing him, Guicharnaud writes that the sonnet "n'est pas mauvais" and that it is at least as good as "certains passages écrits par Molière lui-même" for the king's royal entertainments (380). Rather, the significance of the sonnet lies in its relationship to Oronte: Oronte's sonnet is a literary extension of himself, an attempt at social and literary self-fashioning. The sonnet is in the *style galant* common

to salon culture, or as Oronte describes it, “Ce ne sont point de ces grands Vers pompeux, / Mais de petits Vers doux, tendres, et langoureux” (1: 660). Oronte does not claim that the sonnet is original, striking, or significant from a literary standpoint. Rather, it is meant to showcase an urbane wit, and if it seeks to convey any true emotion, it does so beneath the façade of acceptable social banter. Like a sort of calling card, the poem is essentially a text that invites an equally dissimulating and socially coded response. As Philinte states to Alceste, Oronte presented the poem “afin d’être flatté” (1: 666), and in this sense, the sonnet becomes a touchstone for the function of writing among the social elite, the first in a series of texts that the play’s characters will create, debate, attribute, and even disavow.

Philinte’s observation that the sonnet’s true role is to solicit praise for its author illustrates the hypertrophied author-function that dominates the world of *Le Misanthrope*. Sonnets and letters (as well as books, as we will see) *must* be authored, and these texts’ content is largely relevant only to the extent that it impacts the image of their implied authors. In his preliminary (and disingenuous) self-deprecations, Oronte may belittle the genre, style, and any effort made (“je n’ai demeuré qu’un quart d’heure à le faire” [1: 660]), but the one thing that he will not disclaim is that he is the author. The sonnet is not anonymous; indeed, its entire raison d’être is to portray Oronte, an emphatic response to Foucault’s epigraphical question regarding authorship, “Qu’importe qui parle?” (77). For Oronte, Alceste, Célièmène, and their associates, nothing matters more.

Alceste’s virulent critique of the sonnet demonstrates that while he and Oronte have deep-seated disagreements regarding style, tone, and ethos, they share the fundamental assumption that textual hermeneutics necessitates the consideration of the implied author. Alceste’s comments move quickly from stylistics to a consideration of who is speaking:

Ce style figuré, dont on fait vanité,
Sort du bon Caractère, et de la Vérité ;
Ce n’est que jeu de Mots, qu’affectation pure,
Et ce n’est point ainsi, que parle la Nature.
Le méchant Goût du Siècle, en cela, me fait peur. (1: 664)

For Alceste, the poem’s artificiality and dissembling reflect back upon its author, and the poetic conversation between author and addressee consequently becomes a manifestation of the degraded nature of contemporary interpersonal relationships. The merit of the “vieille chanson” that Alceste proposes instead lies in the authorial ethos of the speaker. As he claims, “La Passion parle là toute pure,” adding, “Voilà ce que peut dire un Cœur vraiment épris” (1: 664). For Alceste, there is no distance between H. L. Hix’s “creative author” and

“created author” (39), no room for a poetic “I” who differs from the agent who takes responsibility for the literary product. In this regard, Alceste is not so different from the society that he claims to scorn.

In his initial (and comically oblique) critique of the sonnet, Alceste moves rapidly from general remarks about writing to an attack on printing, asking his invented interlocutor (and in reality Oronte), “Et qui, diantre, vous pousse à vous faire Imprimer?” and counseling him:

Et n'allez point quitter, de quoi que l'on vous somme,
Le nom que, dans la Cour, vous avez d'honnête Homme,
Pour prendre, de la main d'un avide Imprimeur,
Celui de ridicule, et misérable Auteur. (1: 663)

While Alceste's reaction is laughably exaggerated, his attacks on publishing seem particularly misplaced. Oronte suggests to Alceste that he is considering exposing the sonnet to the public, but it is unclear what Oronte intends. Oronte could be said to be “publishing” the sonnet in a general sense by sharing it with other members of a salon, as might befit a work couched as light, occasional poetry. Alceste's criticisms, though, are directed toward printing, assuming (perhaps with good reason) that Oronte's literary ambitions will not remain bounded by Célimène's salon.⁷ The misanthrope's belittling of Oronte's writing itch, as he characterizes it, is cast in terms that Boileau's *Art poétique* will echo in 1674: printing is for desperate lower-class writers and constitutes a derogation both of the noble art of writing and of the class superiority of the author.

But Molière's row with his publishers means that complaints about “avides Imprimeurs” are less innocent in 1666 than they may at first appear. Given Molière's dissatisfaction with his former *libraires*, it is no coincidence that *Le Misanthrope* incorporates the most direct references to publication since *Les Précieuses ridicules*, nor is it surprising that the treatment of these themes has shifted. Indeed, the scene of Oronte's sonnet seems a calculated reworking of Mascarille's impromptu, although if Philinte obligingly echoes Cathos and Magdelon's enthusiastic admiration (“Cathos : voilà qui est poussé dans le dernier galant” [1: 18]; “Philinte : qu'en termes galants, ces choses-là sont mises !” [1: 661]), Alceste provides a bracingly negative response entirely absent from the earlier scene. A more serious Mascarille has found someone who will tell him his “vérités” and who is completely intractable. The best

7. Nicholas Hammond, in his analysis of how authorship and authority are linked in the play, comments, “It is precisely this dimension of authorship—trying to circulate creative writing—that provokes Alceste's wrath” (61). Hammond also notes that Alceste very explicitly equates “the term ‘auteur’ with the idea of ‘se faire imprimer’” (61).

that even the *maréchaux* can accomplish is a grudging: “Monsieur, je suis fâché d’être si difficile ; / Et, pour l’amour de vous, je voudrais, de bon cœur, / Avoir trouvé, tantôt, votre Sonnet meilleur” (1: 698). The irresistible force of authorial egoism, present in the earlier play, has encountered here the immovable object of critical reception.

We might counter that Alceste *wants* to dislike the sonnet. His “Esprit contrariant,” as Célimène dubs it (1: 678), leads him naturally to dislike what is receiving widespread praise. He resembles the description of Damis given by Célimène in her series of satirical portraits:

Depuis que dans la tête, il s’est mis d’être habile,
Rien ne touche son goût, tant il est difficile ;
Il veut voir des Défauts à tout ce qu’on écrit,
Et pense que louer, n’est pas d’un bel Esprit.
Que c’est être Savant, que trouver à redire ;
Qu’il n’appartient qu’aux Sots, d’admirer, et de rire ;
Et qu’en n’approuvant rien des Ouvrages du Temps,
Il se met au-dessus de tous les autres Gens. (1: 677)

The wordplay is telling, since Damis not only claims to find faults in everything, but subtly desires to do so. It is perhaps significant that this portrait causes Alceste, hitherto a tacit observer, to break his silence and interrupt the social game. Célimène’s critique of Damis comes too close to the mark, particularly in the way that it associates criticism and a desire for superiority. Let us not forget that Alceste’s misanthropic “je veux qu’on me distingue” (1: 649) contains paradoxically both a desire to be separate and the need for a crowd from which to be distinguished, or even to grant the distinction.⁸ Authorship parallels this, representing a triumphant self-contained subjectivity that must in turn be recognized by a community in order to be legitimate.⁹ It is why

8. In his excellent study *The Public Mirror: Molière and the Social Commerce of Depiction*, Larry Norman examines in greater detail the complex social dynamics of Alceste’s (and Célimène’s) satire, including the ways in which it is in turn subverted and reinforced by Molière’s own satirizing of the characters (153–56, 192–93). See also Christopher Braider’s reading of *L’École des femmes*, which contains an important study of the role of the Other in identity formation (205–57).

9. Discussing Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital in the similar instance of a court setting, William Earle points out the need for group recognition of such “consecrations,” noting, “Prestige in court society is no more arbitrary, in the sense of creatable *ad libitum* or *ex nihilo*, than authority or credibility within a particular scientific field” (184).

authorship in general is threatening to Alceste—it represents the *distinction* of someone other than himself. For Alceste, the only good author is a dead one, or, even better, an anonymous one. The “vieille Chanson” (1: 664) that he sets in opposition to Oronte’s sonnet has one principal merit beyond its (arguable) expression of true passion: it has no author. The first-person pronouns of the song, like the positive authorial image that it creates, have no real antecedents. Praising it consequently does not equate to praising someone.

Alceste excuses his harsh critique of Oronte’s sonnet by claiming that he does not possess “l’Art de feindre” (1: 665), a phrase that describes Alceste’s perspective on both contemporary mores and current literary style. This art of feigning in its twin manifestations creates engaging parallels with the play’s opening scene: Alceste’s violent overreaction to Philinte’s “complaisant” social behavior is matched by his blunt critique of Oronte’s poem that degenerates into an actual dispute that has to be regulated by the *maréchaux*. The “haines vigoureuses” that, as Alceste explains, “doit donner le Vice aux Ames vertueuses” (1: 652) spill over into the literary domain, and it becomes a point of honor to hate current literary fashion as much as current social vices, both criticized under the notion of artificiality. Bad manners and bad writing become, for Alceste, capital crimes. As he states to Philinte in the opening scene: “Et si, par un malheur, j’en avais fait autant, / Je m’irais, de regret, pendre tout à l’instant” (1: 648), a punishment echoed in his later continued condemnation of Oronte’s verses: “Je soutiendrai, toujours, morbleu, qu’ils sont mauvais, / Et qu’un Homme est pendable, après les avoir faits” (1: 683).

Of course, if Alceste considers Oronte “pendable,” Oronte himself tries to implicate Alceste with writing that is, in a very real sense, incriminating. After losing his case to his unnamed adversary, Alceste exclaims at the opening of act five:

Et non content, encor, du Tort que l’on me fait,
 Il court, parmi le Monde, un Livre abominable,
 Et de qui la lecture est, même, condamnable !
 Un Livre à mériter la dernière Rigueur,
 Dont le Fourbe a le front de me faire l’Auteur !
 Et, là-dessus, on voit Oronte qui murmure,
 Et tâche, méchamment, d’appuyer l’Imposture ! (1: 713)

The scene recalls Foucault’s claim that “les textes, les livres, les discours ont commencé à avoir réellement des auteurs (autres que des personnages mythiques, autres que de grandes figures sacralisées et sacralisantes) dans la mesure où l’auteur pouvait être puni, c’est-à-dire dans la mesure où les

discours pouvaient être transgressifs” (84).¹⁰ In the France of Louis XIV, certain authors were indeed “pendables,” and Molière himself, during the aftermath of *Tartuffe*, had been labeled worthy of “un dernier supplice exemplaire et public, et le feu même, avant-coureur de celui de l’Enfer, pour expier un crime si grief de lèse-Majesté divine” (2: 1166).

The episode of the “livre abominable” reinforces and nuances the authorial mechanism at work with Oronte’s poem. The sonnet achieved its function only to the extent that it was “authorized,” that is, to the extent that it became Oronte’s sonnet. The “bad book” demonstrates that such authorization does not necessarily imply the actual composition of the text in question, and Alceste’s unnamed adversary, working with Oronte, exhibits a remarkably subtle, if perfidious, awareness of this slippage. “Alceste” becomes a mutable name that can be attached to a set of writings regardless of the individual’s actual relationship to the text. Alceste does not have to initiate the publication of the text to be its author, nor even be the source—popular opinion (bated in this case by Oronte) can forge the link between the two. And in this era of the birth of the author as attributable and potentially culpable subject, Alceste runs a real risk of incurring punishment if Oronte and his anonymous collaborator can indeed make the charges stick. This, however, appears unlikely, as Philinte points out to Alceste:

Ce que votre Partie ose vous imputer,
N’a point eu le crédit de vous faire arrêter ;
On voit son faux Rapport, lui-même, se détruire,
Et c’est une Action qui pourraient bien lui nuire. (1: 713)

What Philinte asserts in this passage is that authorship, similar in this respect to theatrical roles, is as much a question of *vraisemblance* as of *bienséance*. While it unquestionably would be inappropriate, and even criminal, for someone of Alceste’s standing to have written the “livre abominable,” the community of readers brings to the problem of attribution notions of likelihood, implying a measuring and estimation of character and text not unlike Nehamas’s retroactive construction of the author as “a plausible historical variant of the writer” (109). Is Alceste the kind of person who could conceivably produce this sort of book? If the question of disputed authorship employs on the one hand an archaic sense of writing as a direct reflection of

10. Foucault’s statement, however, needs to be read in light of Roger Chartier’s observation regarding early modern attempts at suppressing “bad books”: “Dans la répression, toutefois, la responsabilité de l’auteur d’un livre censuré ne semble pas considérée comme plus grande que celle de l’imprimeur qui l’a publié, du libraire ou du colporteur qui le vend, ou du lecteur qui le possède. Tous peuvent être conduits au bûcher s’ils sont convaincus d’avoir proféré ou diffusé des opinions hérétiques” (58).

authorial character, it nevertheless also demonstrates a certain sophistication in the distance and ambiguity that it places between authors and books. While not allowing for egregious disjunctions between the author's social and literary personae, the ongoing inquiry and debate that Philinte describes casts authorship as a negotiation. The blind spot in this argumentation, which *Le Misanthrope*'s conclusion brilliantly exploits, is the notion of the hypocritical author, the deliberate disjunction of Nehamas's writer (the actual individual who composes the text, with her real opinions and biases) and author (the individual implied by the text).

Circulation and Publication (or Faithful Proofs of Authorial Infidelity)

Such a disjunction is at the heart of the most important examples of writing in *Le Misanthrope*: Célimène's letters. The problem of Célimène's writing, along with the notions of attribution and authorship that it presents, assumes increasing importance as the play progresses. The second act is dominated by the witty orality of Célimène's salon (and chiefly of Célimène herself), but act three increasingly revolves around literary objects, beginning with the agreement in the opening scene between Acaste and Clitandre that they will exchange the letters that they have received from Célimène. Célimène's correspondence is reemphasized in scene four, when it furnishes her with an excuse to end the barbed repartees that she has been exchanging with Arsinoé, leaving the prude in the company of the newly arrived Alceste: "Alceste, il faut que j'aie écrit un mot de Lettre, / Que, sans me faire tort, je ne saurais remettre" (1: 693). Célimène's announced writing project, however, takes on sinister overtones as Arsinoé, upon Célimène's departure, promises to furnish Alceste "une preuve fidèle" (1: 697) of Célimène's unfaithfulness in the form of a love letter.

Alceste and Célimène's subsequent argument over the letter unquestionably serves to prepare the play's dénouement, but it also helps to reinforce the modalities of authorship at work in the world of the play. The altercation revolves around two points. The first, and most certain, is that of the author. Alceste is convinced of the letter's authenticity because it is in Célimène's handwriting. As Alceste exclaims to Philinte and Éliante:

C'est de sa Trahison n'être que trop certain,
 Que l'avoir, dans ma poche, écrite de sa main.
 Oui, Madame, une Lettre écrite pour Oronte,
 A produit, à mes yeux, ma disgrâce, et sa honte. (1: 701)

Recognizable in Alceste's cry of despair is an alleged connection between Célimène and her writing, rendered all the more apparent here by the dual sense of "main" as both body part and handwriting. Alceste knows that

Célimène has written the letter because it bears her distinctive mark in the visual formulation of the letters. And in a scene that recalls Agnès's letter to Horace in *L'École des femmes*, albeit in a pseudo-tragic register (and the scene is borrowed from Molière's early serious play *Dom Garcie de Navarre*), Célimène's writing reveals the character of its author. Confronting Célimène with the proof of her "perfidie," Alceste trumpets, "Jetez ici les yeux, et connaissez vos Traits" (1: 704), signaling again through the polysemous "traits" the link between writing and author—Célimène is ostensibly to recognize in the letter both her own handwriting and her own true self, her features, as the letter makes them clear. Just as Horace discerned Agnès's "naturel" in her missive accompanying the rock, and just as Oronte's gallant sonnet was an apt representation of his own social posturing, Alceste claims to see in Célimène's letter the key to understanding her true character.

For Alceste, the first issue—that of authorship, verifiable by the characteristic writing of Célimène's hand—leads to a second: that of the addressee. In this respect, though, Célimène initially strives to take advantage of the lone possibility afforded her to contradict Alceste's "témoin convaincant." The letter does not state its intended recipient, and Célimène accordingly suggests (while taking pains not to affirm it) that if the letter were written to a woman, then Alceste would have no grounds for complaint. When this fails, she pulls out her final trick. In a comic reversal not unlike Tartuffe's brilliant self-incrimination *cum* exculpation, Célimène acknowledges her authorship of the letter and its supposed addressee, creating an authorial and cognitive dissonance that Alceste finds unbearable. Capable of recognizing Célimène's handwriting and undoubtedly the recipient of his own stash of love letters (to whom has Célimène not sent them?), Alceste is unwilling or unable to jettison his beloved image of the author, asking instead for Célimène to present any sort of justification that would allow him to maintain a degree of consistency:

Rendez-moi, s'il se peut, ce Billet innocent,
 A vous prêter les mains ma Tendresse consent ;
 Efforcez-vous, ici, de paraître fidèle,
 Et je m'efforcerai, moi, de vous croire telle. (1: 707)

It will take the concluding act's indisputable proof to convince all of the suitors together that the portraits of the author that they had individually forged are mutually exclusive.

Célimène's crimes are not so much of the heart as of the pen. Her principal mistake consists of choosing a poor genre for her literary talents. Her epistolary output is essentially a literary continuation of the oral satirical portraits that form the pastime of her salon. As Alceste points out, these portraits rely on their targets' absence:

Allons, ferme, poussez, mes bons Amis de Cour,
 Vous n'en épargnez point, et chacun a son tour.
 Cependant, aucun d'eux, à vos yeux, ne se montre,
 Qu'on ne vous voie, en hâte, aller à sa rencontre,
 Lui présenter la main, et d'un baiser flatteur
 Appuyer les Serments d'être son Serviteur. (1: 677)

For Alceste, the courtiers' chief flaw lies in this behavioral duplicity between presence and absence, as Philinte demonstrated at the very beginning of the play. However, the acknowledgment of this duplicity also creates a complicity between Célimène and her audience: it is understood that in her series of portraits she drops polite social pretense, thus presumably lending to her words an aura of sincerity and truth, telling her true opinion of the individuals suggested by her entourage. Such an act of verbal sincerity assumes a tacit pact among the interlocutors that what is stated in Célimène's salon must stay in Célimène's salon. Célimène's own about-face behavior upon the entrance of Arsinoé shows how consistently the social game must be played even in the evident mutual loathing of the two interlocutors.

Célimène's literary genre of choice, though, creates a disjunction that ultimately leads to the author's downfall. The verbal portraits are dialogical, conceived and conveyed in a setting where speaker and listener are both physically present and where the satire leaves no physical trace: in the absence of the satirical target, the satire evaporates in the burst of laughter that it provokes. While gossip may circulate regarding the verbal criticism pronounced in the private salons—Arsinoé and Célimène both claim (insincerely) to be providing each other a service by reporting directly to the person the statements and satires currently in circulation about them—the verbal nature of this communication causes it to remain removed and potentially untrustworthy. Célimène hears from Arsinoé that several people of exemplary virtue have criticized her; however, the source is not the alleged speakers themselves but Arsinoé, whose sincerity is suspect.¹¹ The inevitable refractions and distortions in this verbal relay allow the ego ample material for self-defense.

This is precisely why letters become problematic. Célimène's earlier dispute with Alceste had already revealed some of the genre's troubling characteristics. In the first place, a personal letter (unlike, significantly, a theater play) is more straightforwardly univocal, with an identified (or identifiable) author and—generally—an identified addressee. Célimène could argue about the real

11. See Larry Norman's analysis of the exchange (196–206). While Norman does not focus on the textual/verbal dynamics at work in the play, his reading of this scene is crucial for a broader consideration of satire and interpretive reception in Molière's theater.

recipient of the alleged letter to Oronte; she could not, however, dispute that she was the author. Nor could she hide behind the pretense of a narrator or a fictional persona. As a genre closely tied to orality, letters present themselves as the written transcription of conversations that would or could have taken place in person if the individuals were present. As such, letters become a vehicle for the author's presence, vouchsafed by her handwriting and presumably conveying her thought transparently and without impediment.

It is this authorial guarantee, the notion that writing conveys the author's author-ity, that dooms Célimène. As the reified record of personal conversations, Célimène's letters demonstrate an unacceptable duplicity. The personal, confessional voice that writes to Acaste and Clitandre turns out to be nothing more than a constructed fiction, adapting the content of the letter to fit the recipient, rather than remaining monolithically unified. The letters create a temporal disjunction as well. Where the rules of polite society demand that uncomfortable truths be silenced in the presence of the satirical target—as Célimène's reception of Arsinoé exemplifies—the letters preserve these satirical portraits. It is as if Célimène's evanescent critique of Arsinoé remained preserved in the air like Rabelaisian *paroles gelées*, still audible and resounding as Arsinoé enters the room.

In addition, the transformation of verbal portraits into written letters creates physical objects that can circulate in unpredictable, and uncontrollable, ways.¹² The transfer of letters from their privileged addressee, seen in the letters to the marquis as well as the letter allegedly to Oronte that Arsinoé has procured, corresponds reputedly to a parallel flightiness in Célimène's character. As Oronte reproaches her, "Et votre Cœur paré de beaux Semblants d'Amour, / A tout le Genre Humain se promet tour à tour !" (1: 722). The intimate couple forged by the writing and reading of a letter here takes on the sense of a romantic relationship, and Célimène's various letters become so many amorous adventures. The "publishing" of Célimène's correspondence, in the more archaic sense of "making public," has as its aim the portrayal of Célimène as "publique," providing evidence for Arsinoé's earlier venomous assertions:

Hélas ! et croyez-vous que l'on se mette en peine
De ce nombre d'Amants dont vous faites la vaine :
Et qu'il ne nous soit pas fort aisé de juger,
A quel prix, aujourd'hui, l'on peut les engager ? (1: 692)

12. Christopher Braider's insightful reading of *L'École des femmes* makes a similar point regarding Agnès's letter: "Because it is a letter, physically circulating beyond her reach, the author cannot control the reading" (251). From this perspective, Agnès's careful and self-conscious prose (see Braider 251–57) forms an interesting counterpart to Célimène's epistolary fictions.

The price, at least for a while, is merely the cost of paper and ink. But as Célimène's individual readers begin to compare notes, no amount of wit and style can assuage their anger and disappointment. Blaise Pascal described being "tout étonné et ravi" when, as a reader, he "s'attendait de voir un auteur" and found instead "un homme" (370; Hammond 63). Célimène's readers thought that they had found a woman; they had really found an author.

Dénouement

Given Molière's own dealings with the Parisian book industry in 1666, it is no surprise that *Le Misanthrope* stages the escape of written works from their creators' control. The passage from orality to literacy and the resultant implications for the author are as much at play on the stage as in the physical conditions surrounding *Le Misanthrope*'s printing. At the exact historical moment that Célimène must listen powerlessly as Acaste and Clitandre announce: "Nous allons l'un, et l'autre, en tous Lieux, / Montrer, de votre Cœur, le Portrait glorieux" (1: 722), Molière was watching his own authorial portrait circulate without his consent (and possibly as a result of his own flightiness in choosing *libraires*) in the frontispiece of the 1666 *Œuvres*. While certainly no "livre abominable," the edition was ample proof of the ability for works to take on a life of their own.

While Molière's earlier publication history—the near-theft of *Les Précieuses ridicules*, the pirate edition of *Sganarelle*—had introduced the playwright to such vagaries, *Le Misanthrope* adds a new layer to these now-familiar problems by highlighting the ways in which an author's persona is constituted (or invalidated) by the bringing together of disparate texts. The 1666 *Œuvres* creates a new composite picture of Molière just as Célimène's collected letters produce an authorial portrait that differs radically from that of the individual letters taken separately. Reputation, authenticity, and the dangers of reception are not merely concepts that Molière's characters must navigate in the heavily literary world of the play—they are issues with which Molière himself was wrestling in the wider arena of the Parisian *champ littéraire*. This helps explain why *Le Misanthrope* so noticeably brings to the issue of interpretive reception (already centrally important beginning with *Les Précieuses ridicules* and extending to *L'École des femmes* and the plays of the *querelle*) the problem of medium: Célimène's satires, passing from oral performances to written texts, constitute one of the most significant moments in Molière's theater in which the actor/author meditates on the vexed theatrical transition from stage to page.¹³

13. This connection is furthered by Larry Norman's exploration of the many ways in which Célimène can figure as a double for the playwright (169–80).

A sonnet to be printed, a book in search of an author, and “published” private letters: in each of these three cases, *Le Misanthrope* explores the nuanced triangulations of writer, text, and audience. All three of these objects, however, are read or interpreted with one objective in mind: ascertaining the character of the author. With the assumption that writing conveys something of the writer’s authentic self, every work becomes potentially another instantiation of Montaigne’s *Essais*: “Icy, nous allons conformément et tout d’un trein, mon livre et moy. Ailleurs, on peut recommander et accuser l’ouvrage à part de l’ouvrier ; icy, non : qui touche l’un, touche l’autre” (3: 806). The book becomes essentially a metonym of its writer.

But such a concept is far removed from the Protean world of the stage. The allusion to Molière’s prior stage works in the opening scene of *Le Misanthrope* (“ces deux Frères que peint *L’École des maris*” [1: 651]) draws deliberate attention to this notion, playing off the fact that, despite the visual resemblances between Sganarelle and Alceste, Molière is now acting a different role. What is permissible in performance becomes transgression on paper, however, and readers (or at least recipients of *billets doux*) demand more consistency than spectators. Their demand is nothing less than Alceste’s insistence for immutability, that an author remain as unalterable as the word on the page that she has written, as if fixed eternally in the readers’ presence like an engraved frontispiece.

Theater’s dual existence as performance and as printed text finds itself replicated in *Le Misanthrope*’s deliberate juxtaposition of orality and literacy. However, as Célimène moves across this boundary, her parallel declarations of affection (both oral and written) reveal a significant and idiosyncratic hierarchy: Célimène expects her spoken profession of love to carry more weight than a letter. When Alceste worries about the presence of so many other suitors and asks for proof that he is loved, Célimène responds, “Je pense qu’ayant pris le soin de vous le dire, / Un aveu de la sorte, a de quoi vous suffire” (1: 669). The play’s dénouement proves such a rejoinder to be laughably inadequate. Célimène may have individually reversed usual communicative associations, making impermanent speech the vehicle for sincerity while fixing in writing nothing more than an assumed pose, but her interlocutors cannot accept this. In Célimène’s salon, text has the last (and lasting) laugh.

Le Misanthrope’s emphasis on text and reception marks a significant change for Molière. The quarrel surrounding *L’École des femmes* had seen the playwright actively fight to define his authorial image in a struggle with rival actors and authors. *Le Misanthrope* displaces this struggle, as if Molière realized that the missing term in this argument was perhaps the most important one: the publishers, or the owners of the very texts in which the debate was taking place. Just as Acaste and Clitandre now control the “portrait” of Célimène, Molière’s own image is controlled to a significant extent by the

owners of his prior plays. All evidence indicates that from the publication of *L'École des maris* onward, Molière had viewed the ownership and publication of his plays with relative disinterest, using *libraires* as a way of distributing his work and keeping it out of the hands of pirates, but without investing any greater degree of attention in the process. *Le Misanthrope* therefore marks the moment when Molière came to realize (and explore) the deeper implications of the split between authorship and ownership in seventeenth-century France. His subsequent innovative publication strategies—such as his self-publication of his works beginning in 1670 and his 1671 general privilege—can be seen as further experiments continuing the reflections signaled by *Le Misanthrope*.

It appears almost inevitable that *Le Misanthrope* itself should participate in the same authorial dynamics of identity and disjunction that it analyzes. A lone but notable example will have to suffice: in 1674, a year after Molière's death, Boileau will recommend in his *Art poétique* that writers of comedy imitate Molière in certain points but avoid his farcical tendencies, adding: "Dans ce sac ridicule où Scapin s'enveloppe, / Je ne reconnois plus l'auteur du Misanthrope" (181). Authorship and *Le Misanthrope* are here explicitly linked—for Boileau, the play, with its literary style and subject matter, is what makes Molière an author, employed in its strictest and most lofty sense. But multiple plays, like Célièmène's multiple letters, disrupt this unified authorial illusion. The implied author of the lone work does not correlate to the implied author of the body of works. The cognitive dissonance for Boileau created by disparate plays of Molière causes his preferred authorial image of the playwright to disappear from view, eclipsed by the eminently theatrical Scapin, consummate actor and master of a thousand roles. Or, to place it in the terms of *Le Misanthrope*, Alceste's quixotic dream of exalted and authentic unity here cedes the stage to Célièmène, author of countless letters and, consequently, of countless Célièmènes. But if Boileau had read *Le Misanthrope* more carefully, he would have known that his public criticism of Molière's authorial "inconstancy" was in the end unnecessary—Molière had already staged it.

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