MOLIERE'S The Misanthrope

ENGLISH VERSE TRANSLATION BY RICHARD WILBUR

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"This world is a comedy to those that think; a tragedy to those that feel."

Horace Walpole, 1776

Moliere is probably the greatest and best-loved French author, and comic author, who ever lived. To the reader as well as the spectator, today as well as three centuries ago, the appeal of his plays is immediate and durable; they are both instantly accessible and inexhaustible. His rich resources make it hard to decide, much less to agree, on the secret of his greatness.

His inventiveness is extraordinary. As actor/manager/director and playwright all in one, he knew and loved the stage as few have done, and wrote with it and his playgoing public always in mind. He drew on the widest imaginable range, from the broadest slapstick to the subtlest irony. Working usually under great pressure of time, he took his materials where he found them in the life of the Court around him, eventually writing 32 full-length plays.

Portrait of Moliere

The fabric of his plays is rich in many ways: in the intense life he infuses into his characters; in his constant preoccupation with the comic mask, which makes most of his protagonists themselves--consciously or unconsciously--play a part; and leads to rich comedy when their nature forces them to drop the mask; and in the weight of seriousness and even poignancy that he dares to include in his comic vision. Again and again he leads us from the enjoyable but shallow reaction of laughing at a fool to recognizing in that fool others whom we know, and ultimately ourselves; which is the truest and deepest comic purpose.

Typically, Moliere focuses his comic vision on a positive character, dominated by a passion, a vice, a conviction, or even an ideal. This character is at odds with society, with normalcy. The humor lies in the conflict, and in the revenge which normalcy takes upon the exceptional person. In *The Misanthrope*, Alceste sins by excess of virtue. He is concerned with speaking the truth (of course *his* truth) beyond all bounds of reason--he refuses to believe the old maxim "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all" which is often a great rule to follow in getting along in society. Alceste's excessive frankness elicits our sympathy and also forms the basis for the comedy. But in Alceste we find something of Moliere himself: a sincere and sensitive man who rightfully protested against the falsities of his age. It is to his good credit that he turned this protest into a vehicle for comedy which is still effective over three hundred years later. •

The Hall of Mirrors at Versailles

Moliere in the Court of the Sun King

Jean Baptiste Poquelin (stage name: Moliere) lived in one of the most lavish societies known to man: in the Court of Louis XIV, France's great Sun King. During his 72-year reign, Louis XIV established a court at Versailles which has come to epitomize the very concept of monarchy: a lavish palace with thousands of servants, beautiful ladies-in-waiting, idle courtiers, ornate dress, glorious entertainment and fabulous artwork. And Moliere, as the court-appointed comic playwright, was at the center of it all.

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MISANTHROPE

one who hates mankind

In ***The Misanthrope***, Moliere presents a picture of the "best society" of his time, and his characters are courtiers and women of fashion, frequenters of the Louvre and Versailles, claiming acquaintance with King Louis XIV himself. The play takes place in the drawing room of Celimene, a young widow who has a host of admirers and who seems to be on the point of accepting Alceste (the misanthrope of the title), in spite of the fact that he condemns the affectations of the company in which she shines. In the very first scene we see Alceste holding forth to his friend, Philinte--Philinte is accepting and tolerant of all people; Alceste is plain-spoken to the point of rudeness and sincere almost to absurdity. When Oronte, another of Celimene's suitors, chances in, and asks his opinion of a newly written sonnet, Alceste is frank to the verge of brutality, insisting on the worthlessness of the harmless little poem. Oronte is outraged by this direct discourtesy and threatens Alceste with a lawsuit. Alceste accepts this threat rather gleefully, but the ever-reasonable Philinte advises Alceste to consider ways to avert this legal catastrophe.

Finally the celebrated Celimene appears and Alceste begins instantly to protest that she encourages the attention of too many admirers--just then two are announced (Acaste and Clitandre) and in the collected company (which includes Alceste, Philinte and Eliante, Celimene's honest cousin) Celimene indulges in a gossipy conversation in which she wittily criticizes a good many people who are not present to the delight of those present. Alceste, of course, is less than delighted at Celimene's malicious behavior but is unexpectedly called to court to answer Oronte's legal accusation of slander. Meanwhile, Celimene's company retires, leaving the field open for another visitor, Arsinoe, a jeolous prude who is in love with Alceste and determined to discredit Celimene. Each woman proceeds to unfold a scathing story of what they have heard people say about the other, while claiming that all their criticisms are motivated by loving concern. When Alceste returns, Celimene leaves him alone with Arsinoe, who promptly informs him that she can prove that Celimene is deceiving him, and she carries him off to get the letter which will prove her accusation.

Shortly we learn, from Eliante and Philinte, that Alceste's appearance in court was inconclusively ended by yet another disagreement with Oronte. Eliante professes her admiration for Alceste's well-meaning honesty, but Philinte offers her his own hand should Alceste succeed in marrying Celimene. Then Alceste comes back, furious over the letter of Celimene's which Arsinoe has given him. He confronts Celimene with the written evidence and rather that deny it, she freely admits that she has written it. Just as Alceste is about to launch into another jealous tirade his servant arrives, disguised, saying that Alceste has been sent some legal documents which must be answered promptly. Alceste departs, vowing to return and get to the bottom of Celimene's capricious affections.

When we see Alceste next he is lamenting to Philinte over the loss of his lawsuit with Oronte--because he has refused to comply with the corrupt custom of bribing the judges, Oronte has won a verdict of slander against Alceste which will result in a sizable fine. Philinte urges Alceste to appeal the case, but Alceste prefers to suffer, and to condemn the society which fosters such injustice. Suddenly Oronte himself appears, demanding that Celimene decide, once and for all, between him and Alceste. Alceste too welcomes this challenge but Celimene refuses to declare herself. Just at this moment Acaste and Clitandre arrive with Arsinoe in tow: they have got possession of yet another letter of Celimene's, in which her satiric wit has led her to hold all her admirers up to ridicule, one after another, including even Alceste. The insulted men depart never to return, except for Alceste, who agrees to forgive Celimene on one condition--if she will give up society and come with him to live in a desert far from the insincerity of the fashionable world. In spite of her genuine love for Alceste--she agrees to marry him if only he won't make her leave society--but she must refuse his proposal to live a solitary life with him. Alceste, in despair, rushes away, vowing to live far away from the spectacle of human meanness. But the trustworthy Philinte and Eliante, who have now chosen each other, go to Alceste's rescue, with every hope of persuading him to return. Humanity may not be perfect but it must be lived with. •

Translating Moliere

For three hundred years, France's best comic playwright's work lay locked in the obscurity of classical French. Moliere's brilliant comic verse, so delightfully rhythmic when spoken in its native tongue, seemed to be the sole property of the Comedie Francaise, the great French acting troupe which Moliere himself founded and which is still in existence today. The major reason why Moliere's plays were rarely produced in this country (outside academic settings) was because they were so difficult to translate into suitable modern English. This puzzle remained largely unsolved until Richard Wilbur, our country's poet laureate, tried his hand at translating *The Misanthrope* in 1954 and brought the wonderful cadences of Moliere's comedy to life.

Verse of any kind is rarely used by contemporary playwrights: our 20th century tastes run more toward natural vernacular speech (prose) as a vehicle for stage expression. But in Moliere's age, verse was the only medium of stage speech, so poet and playwright were virtually synonymous. But Moliere was not merely a poet/playwright: he was principally an actor, perhaps the greatest comic actor of his age. Consequently, he wrote dramatic poetry that fairly skipped off the tongue. He knew first hand the necessity for verse that was not dry and pedantic, but lively and speakable on the stage.

Prior to Wilbur's translation, Moliere had been translated variously into English prose and English blank verse. An English prose translation of Moliere's verse seeks to transmit only a literal meaning of the lines without the rhythm of the original. The effect of this is very like telling the story of a limerick without using the rhythmic language: something is definitely lost in the translation! Take, for example, a brief comparison between the original French and a literal prose translation by a French writer of a speech from *The Misanthrope*:

ALCESTE:

Allons, ferme, poussez, mes bons amis de cour!
Vous n'en epargnez point, et chacun a son tour:
Cependant aucun d'eux a vos yeux ne se montre.
Qu'on ne vous voie en hate aller a sa rencontre,
Lui presenter la main, et d'un baiser flatteur
Appuyer les serments d'etre son serviteur.

ALCESTE:

Well go on, my fine courtly friends! You spare no one, and every one will have his turn. Nevertheless, let but any one of those persons appear, and we shall see you rush to meet him, offer him your hand, and, with a flattering kiss, give weight to your protestations of being his servant.

The rhythm of the original French is completely absent from the prose translation, which is clumsy and stiff. But French verse is quite difficult to translate into English verse: the greatest stumbling block is that the two languages have very different rhythms: French, a Romance language, naturally falls into hexameter verse formation (six stresses per line); English, an Anglo-Saxon/Germanic language, naturally falls into pentameter verse formation (five stresses per line). A transposition from hexameter to pentameter which preserves the literal meaning and the rhythm is extremely difficult to achieve. Here is one attempt to accomplish this on the same speech, by translator Morris Bishop:

ALCESTE:

Now thrust and stab my worthy courtly friends!
No one is spared, everyone has his turn.
And yet if one of them should show himself,
We'd see you all hurry to welcome him,
Hold out your hands and take him in your arms,
Swearing you are his very humble servants.

While this verse transcript mirrors some of the rhythmic vitality of Moliere's original speech, it misses one essential ingredient: Moliere wrote in rhymed couplets, which means that the last word in every two-line pair rhymes. This adds a very distinctive signature to Moliere's language--it's what truly characterizes it and brings the winning linguistic sparkle to his plays. Richard Wilbur's innovative translations introduced this playful rhyme scheme into English: no other translator prior to Wilbur had attempted to convert Moliere's classic French, rhymed couplet hexameter into English rhymed couplet pentameter. Wilbur's amazing success with this is evidenced in his translation of the sample speech:

ALCESTE:

How bravely, Sirs, you cut and thrust at all
These absent fools, till one by one they fall:
But let one come in sight, and you'll at once
Embrace the man you lately called a dunce,
Telling him in a tone sincere and fervent
How proud you are to be his humble servant.

His success at preserving all three of the major components of Moliere's language—the content, the verse *and* the rhymed couplets—has essentially reclaimed Moliere's work for English-speaking audiences. It is not coincidental that productions of Moliere plays are much more frequently seen since Wilbur's translations began to appear (to date, he has translated only three: *The Misanthrope, Tartuffe,* and *School for Wives*). He has also made valuable contributions to dramatic literature by translating Racine's *Andromache* and *Phedre.*

The fact that Wilbur is himself a poet significantly contributes to the impact of his translations. In a recent interview with the Washington Post he said that he came to translation not intending to make a speciality of it, but as a respite after a failed attempt to write his own verse play. "I think lyric poetry is considerably less social in nature, less grown up in nature, you might say, than some other forms of writing. The lyric poet can, as Yeats said, know nothing but his blind, stupefied heart. We don't go to the theatre to see that—we want someone who's grown up enough to imagine and understand other people, to understand how the society works."

Having just seen an excellent production of Moliere's *The Misanthrope*, he decided to attempt a translation, thinking, "I'll learn something about writing poetic plays by translating *The*

Bust of Louis XIV

Translating Moliere Cont.

Misanthrope, but, more than that, I'll pay tribute to a play I love and claim it for our language."

In Wilbur's preface to his translations of *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, he explains something of his approach to the language of the plays:

There is no question that words, when dancing within such patterns, are not their prosaic selves, but have a wholly different mood and meaning. . . . Moliere's logic loses all its baroque exuberance in prose; it sounds lawyerish, without rhyme and obscure, not crystalline and followable as it should be.

The fun that Wilbur plays with the poetic rhyme scheme works beautifully onstage. There can be no doubt that much of the appeal of Moliere productions is due to this linguistic exuberance—it is delightful to listen to the playfulness of the verse and predict where the rhymes will lead. We, along with many other theatre practitioners, owe a great debt to our poet laureate, Richard Wilbur, for bringing us a Moliere which is as inventively comic in English as it is in French.

Moliere and the World of Louis XIV

1622 Jean Baptiste Poquelin (Moliere) is born in Paris

1631 His father becomes *valet de chambre* to the King. Jean Baptiste is educated by the Jesuits of the College of Clermont.

1638 Louis XIV is born.

1640 Jean Baptiste meets the famous Italian actor, Scaramouche, and Madeleine Bejart, an actress.

1642 Jean Baptiste accompanies Louis XIII to Narbonne as his *valet de chambre*, a position he inherits from his father.

1643 Louis XIII dies and the crown goes to his five-year-old son, Louis XIV. Jean Baptiste decides to work in the theatre and renounces the right of succession to his father's court position. He founds the Illustre-Theatre with the Bejart family.

1644 He adopts the stage name "Moliere."

1645 Moliere and the Bejarts tour the provinces until 1658.

1658 His troupe plays before Louis XIV in the guardroom of the Louvre. Moliere's **The Doctor In Love** is well received, and the king's brother becomes their patron.

1660 The Louvre is remodeled and the king allows Moliere's company to perform in the Palais Royal where they present Moliere's **Sganarelle.**

1662 Louis XIV initiates the construction of a palace at Versailles. Moliere married Armande Bejart. **The School for Wives** is staged and creates a scandal. Moliere's **The Versailles Impromptu** is performed for the king.

1664 A son is born to Moliere and Armande and the king acts as godfather (the child dies in infancy). Moliere's troupe performs **Tartuffe** for the king at Versailles. The Catholic Church condemns the play as "godless" and further performances are prohibited.

1665 Moliere writes **Don Juan**; it creates a scandal at the Court and he is forced to close it. Louis XIV takes over as patron of Moliere's troupe, granting him a pension.

1666 Moliere's troupe performs **The Misanthrope** with the playwright as Alceste and Armande as Celimene.

1667 **Tartuffe** is produced while the king is with his army, but after one performance it is banned by the President of the Police. The archbishop threatens the playwright with excommunication.

1668 Moliere's **The Miser** is performed but meets with little success. Armande and Moliere become estranged and his health declines. He writes **George Dandin.**

1672 The playwright quarrels with his rival, Lully, who has secretly attacked him at the Court in order to obtain the exclusive right to stage all ballet and music festivals.

1673 Lully continues his campaign against Moliere, and the playwright's last work, **The Imaginary Invalid**, is not performed at Court as he loses favor with the king. Nevertheless, it is produced in public with Moliere in the title role. He collapses on stage from exhaustion. His request to see a priest is denied, and he dies. The Church forbids his burial in consecrated ground because he was an actor. The king intercedes and

Yards of silk, silver and gold:
The excesses of opulence

The Misanthrope had to have taken place in 1666. Not 1665 and not 1667, according to set and costume designer G.W. Mercier. And the designs must be executed accordingly.

"So much of the humor of *The Misanthrope* depends on the social setting of that very year," Mercier discovered as he researched paintings and historical treatises on the period. And so much of the social setting had to do with clothing and furniture, he pointed out during a telephone interview in the midst of buying ribbons and trim for the production in his home city of New York.

Moliere's brilliant satirical verse comedy, Mercier believes, needs all the draping, ribbons and shining gold the court of Louis XIV might require.

In 17th-century France, only rich courtiers could afford to trim their garments in real gold, yards of it. The practice continued until enough of them got so wealthy that the emperor had to compete. The elite were then restricted from the lustrous decorations and had to replace their gold with cloth ribbons and braid, sometimes as much as 330 yards of it.

In the Tom Haas/G.W. Mercier version, the gold and silver will be retained. "We wanted to have fun with some of the conventions of the day, so we're playing with the rules a bit," Mercier explained. "We're giving back to the courtiers their gold," he laughed.

Add to the gold the draping silk brocades and damask in regal whites, golds and pastels; the towering wigs and the ridiculous high heels and the effect, Mercier hopes, will evoke disbelief in Alceste and, ultimately, the audience.

"We want people to ask themselves, 'can you believe these guys dressed and acted this way?'"

Mercier has likened the whole "court dress code" to what he now sees on Wall Street—or at Union Station, for that matter.

"Look around you: everyone, to a great degree, looks and dresses alike," he says, "There are unspoken rules, depending on the look President Reagan and his cabinet dictate. Even down to the tones of the Wall Street business suit; the way the hem hits the shoe; and the cut of the jacket."

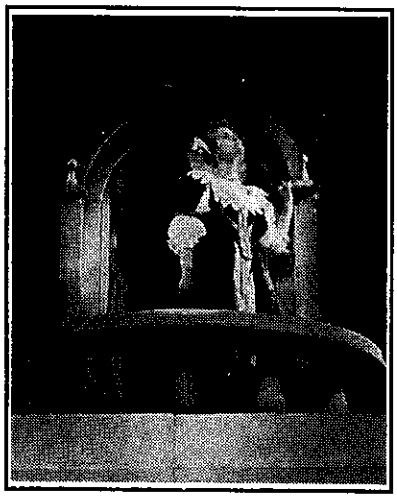
In 17th-century France, the king's tailor held much of the design power; "He could make a fortune altering the king's silhouette and duplicating the designs for the members of the court," Mercier said.

The sets have to echo the opulent dress, Mercier said. As he studied interiors of the great French palaces like Louis XIV's Versailles, he saw that the decoration and the color palettes were the same whites and pastels trimmed with shining gold. A reflective floor covering will complete the glittering world Moliere satirizes.

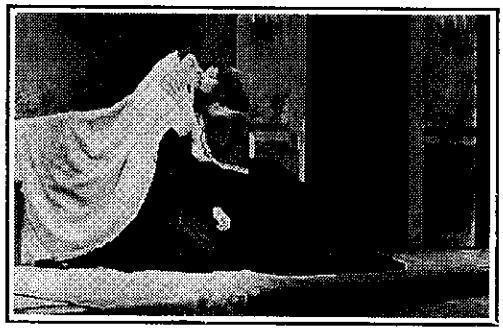
Costume sketch by G.W. Mercier

IRT produces the plays of Moliere: A photo retrospective

Moliere's *The Scamp (Scapin)*, produced in IRT's 1972-73 season, with Ross Bickell, David Hall and A. P. Johnson



Moliere's *The School for Wives*, produced in IRT's 1984-85 season, with Karen Nelson



Moliere's *Tartuffe*, produced in IRT's 1982-83 season, with Lowry Miller and Prsicilla Lindsay

Continued from front page

Moliere was particularly fortunate to have gained the favor of the King, for it was only through his express approval that plays of any kind could be produced. In fact, the reason that Moliere turned to writing and performing comedies was because the King found Moliere to be a fine comic actor and a boring actor of tragic roles (which Moliere himself favored). Moliere owed everything about his livelihood to the King: Louis provided Moliere with a theatre to perform in, commissions upon which to write plays, and a pension to support Moliere's family. Louis even served as godfather to Moliere's oldest child, who unfortunately died in infancy. Louis also protected Moliere from the condemnation of the church: the Church of England had succeeded in banning theatre altogether from their country, and the French Catholic bishops were trying hard to follow suit by making theatrical pursuits illegal (they did succeed in disqualifying actors from church burial).

Oddly enough, Moliere wrote comedies that criticized life at Court, and that dramatized the courtiers as hypocritical, back-stabbing, competitive, shallow and completely self-serving. Comedy is a social art: it is always concerned with showing man's social foibles, and Moliere found ripe examples all around him. It is greatly to Louis XIV's credit that he allowed his court jester to poke fun at the very conventions that Louis himself worked so hard to maintain.

The glamour of Versailles which bred such shallow thinking in the courtiers was the direct result of Louis's desire to retain control over his world. Louis had become king at age five, which bred a deep sense of anarchy in the French nobility, all of whom seemed to believe that they could personally control the young king. This had led, when Louis was still a youth, to a short-lived civil war in France, in which Louis's own life was threatened. As an adult, he vowed to exert total control over the nobility and rein them in to serve him. He believed that if he placed himself at the center of all social life and concerns, that if social and economic advancement was possible only by asking his favor, that he could keep control of the rebellious nobility. Louis sought a situation where he could completely deny the nobility a voice in the government but in order to do that he had to give them something else to do. Instead, he methodically went about shifting the emphasis of life away from political power and onto manners and decorum.

Therefore, Louis built a palace at Versailles that could house thousands of people and made it law that anyone of noble status had to live at Versailles where he could literally keep an eye on them. From this came a society in which every aspect of life was set up for the total glorification of the monarch: social prestige was based on drawing the King's attention. Louis regulated every aspect of daily life: who could wear what clothes, who could walk how many paces behind him, who could eat with him, who could play cards at what time of day--everything was regimented to keep Louis at the center of attention. The Sun King was lavish in his patronage but, to catch the royal eye, attendance at his entertainments was mandatory and high fashion was more than simply chic: it was survival. This naturally led to absurd levels of competition among the noblemen and the courtiers beneath them who sought their places at court. And it is just this atmosphere that provided the world for *The Misanthrope*.