

Excerpts from Misanthrope II with corresponding passages from Le Misanthrope

Foreword

This mistranslation was inspired by a letter from Radio 3 which held out the tantalising possibility of a commission to adapt one of the French classics.

I decided to begin an English verse translation of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*. Within minutes I felt a strong urge to interfere with the action. I began to wonder whether Philinte was content to be a mere foil to Alceste. It occurred to me that he might try to change Alceste's behaviour. This was to be the formative idea for *Misanthrope II*.

So began Philinte's subversion of the action, using Molière's opening scene to launch a sustained attack on Alceste's misanthropy. Philinte's impertinence only served to make Alceste more emphatic in his self-expression. He began to throw his weight around with a remarkable language, complex, alliterative and assonant, while adhering rigidly to classical hexameters. Philinte refused to submit to Alceste's bullying, matching his usage polysyllable for polysyllable, but essentially in trimeter, which made him more fleet of foot and able to weave his way deftly among Alceste's rhymes and rhythms. Philinte acquired a facility for subverting the text given him by Molière yet always managing to furnish Alceste with Molière's cue. Alceste, infuriated, took occasional opportunities to elaborate his theme without significantly altering Molière's drift.

These initial ideas were immensely pleasing and inspirational. By the time Oronte appeared, I had decided that he would speak entirely in sonnet form. Alceste would adhere rigidly to his own system of rhymes and rhythms, even stopping in mid-line when interrupted, and resuming the same mid-line later. In the second act, Célimène developed her own metrical scheme, very freely drawn in honour of her libertine character. Philinte acquired further schemes for different circumstances, and so on.

I allowed Philinte's subversion to find its own way. His attempts to suborn the other characters to mutiny were largely unsuccessful. (Only in the third act did it become apparent that the others' reluctance was motivated by fear, when it occurred to me that Alceste was both actor and impresario: *He Who Must Be Obeyed*.) Meanwhile Philinte, having already burned his boats, must become increasingly subversive,

interfering with minor characters and props (Molière's Garde at the end of the second act, Du Bois at the end of the fourth and the letters in the fourth and fifth acts). Only Éliante responded overtly to Philinte's persuasion, thereby enabling Philinte to illuminate Alceste's character further for our benefit (notably at the beginning of the fourth act).

Philinte was to fight to the very end. The subversion that was ostensibly his last—the destruction of the damning letter in the closing scene—was to send all the characters scuttling to Alceste's approved hexameters in fearful flight. Only Philinte refused, resolutely expressing himself in pentameters to the very last lines of the play.

Paddy Gormley

Misanthrope II

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**FROM ACT 1, SCENE 1:
PHILINTE REBUKES ALCESTE**

PHILINTE: Has not humanity got some redeeming features?

ALCESTE: Not a whit! I hate all men, from witless witterers
who whittle wit with their wit-mongering, to fritterers
whose filibustering filigrees of falsehood foul
the fount of faithfulness. See how that hateful, howling
hypocrite that I'm at law with feigns humility
yet treats all men with such unscrupulous scurrility.
Behind the mask the traitor's plainly to be seen.
The cringing cur whose cataleptic Mr Clean
conceit contrives to controvert the baseness branded
bold upon his brow is by his colleagues candidly
acknowledged as a cheat, and yet they smile
upon him and receive him as if vicious vileness
were a virtue. How it galls me to inhabit
such a world, where lives and lies are rivet-rabbeted
so resolutely. How I sometimes long to flee
this world and be
far, far from thee,
humanity.

PHILINTE: Oh, do stop talking rot.
You know full well you'd not
survive your quarantine
one day. Your overweening
enmity would lose
its edge as soon as you
succumbed to solitude.
You'd soon know how much you'd
depended on those people
you despise to keep alive

PHILINTE: Tous les pauvres mortels, sans nulle exception,
Seront enveloppés dans cette aversion?
Encore en est-il bien, dans le siècle où nous sommes...

ALCESTE: Non: elle est générale, et je hais tous les hommes:
Les uns, parce qu'ils sont méchants et malfaisants,
Et les autres, pour être aux méchants complaisants,
Et n'avoir pas pour eux ces haines vigoureuses
Que doit donner le vice aux âmes vertueuses.
De cette complaisance on voit l'injuste excès
Pour le franc scélérat avec qui j'ai procès:
Au travers de son masque on voit à plein le traître;
Partout il est connu pour tout ce qu'il peut être;
Et ses roulements d'yeux et son ton radouci
N'imposent qu'à des gens qui ne sont point d'ici.
On sait que ce pied plat, digne qu'on le confonde,
Par de sales emplois s'est poussé dans le monde,
Et que par eux son sort de splendeur revêtu
Fait gronder le mérite et rougir la vertu.
Quelques titres honteux qu'en tous lieux on lui donne,
Son misérable honneur ne voit pour lui personne;
Nommez-le fourbe, infâme et scélérat maudit,
Tout le monde en convient, et nul n'y contredit.
Cependant sa grimace est partout bienvenue:
On l'accueille, on lui rit, partout il s'insinue;
Et s'il est, par la brigade, un rang à disputer,
Sur le plus honnête homme on le voit l'emporter.
Têtebleu! Ce me sont de mortelles blessures,
De voir qu'avec le vice on garde des mesures;
Et parfois il me prend des mouvements soudains
De fuir dans un désert l'approche des humains.

PHILINTE: Mon Dieu, des mœurs du temps mettons-nous moins en peine,
Et faisons un peu grâce à la nature humaine.

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the very rage
that helps you to assuage
your own self-hatred. Let
us try not to forget,
however much we rail
at other people's frailty,
that we are not numina,
but merely human,
and we should pre-empt
our feelings of contempt
for others till we're sure
we are ourselves as pure
as we would have them be.
Is your misanthropy
a virtue? Not at all.
It is a very thrall
that brands you a pariah
incapable of dialogue
or give and take.
I think for your own sake
it's time you learned to live
and let live, and forgive
all minor indiscretion.
Enough of this obsession
with your own rectitude.
Give up this futile feud,
this inert indignation,
this clanking confrontation,
and shine out as a light
that gives all men true sight.
Admit for once some anthropoidal anthroposophy
to fillip your philosophasterous philosophy.

ALCESTE: Your rhetoric is like your reasoning: too clever,
Sir, by half. ...

Ne l'examinons point dans la grande rigueur,
Et voyons ses défauts avec quelque douceur.
Il faut, parmi le monde, une vertu traitable;
À force de sagesse, on peut être blâmable;
La parfaite raison fuit toute extrémité,
Et veut que l'on soit sage avec sobriété.
Cette grande raideur des vertus des vieux âges
Heurte trop notre siècle et les communs usages;
Elle veut aux mortels trop de perfection:
Il faut fléchir au temps sans obstination;
Et c'est une folie à nulle autre seconde
De vouloir se mêler de corriger le monde.
J'observe, comme vous, cent choses tous les jours,
Qui pourraient mieux aller, prenant un autre cours;
Mais quoi qu'à chaque pas je puisse voir paraître,
En courroux, comme vous, on ne me voit point être;
Je prends tout doucement les hommes comme ils sont,
J'accoutume mon âme à souffrir ce qu'ils font;
Et je crois qu'à la cour, de même qu'à la ville,
Mon flegme est philosophe autant que votre bile.

ALCESTE: Mais ce flegme, Monsieur, qui raisonnez si bien,
Ce flegme pourra-t-il ne s'échauffer de rien? ...

**FROM ACT 2, SCENE 4:
CÉLIMÈNE HOLDS COURT**

CLITANDRE: Timante's nearer the mark.
Is he not a bright spark?

CÉLIMÈNE: He is a most quizzical
fellow, so busy
with nothing to do,
who communicates through
a bizarre combination
of strange exclamation
and gesticulation:
complete obfuscation
of meaning, sensationalism.
He tries
to look so worldly-wise
and appear as if he
has some great mystery
to impart. He goes "Psst!"
and then cups that great fist
of his up to your ear
so that no one can hear
but yourself. You think "Hey,
what is he going to say?",
then he whispers "Good day!",
winks and goes on his way.

ACASTE: And Géralde, Madam?

CÉLIMÈNE: What?
That insufferable clot!
He so obsessed with rank that he turns up his nose
at all mankind, excepting, of course, only those
supreme of station in the social pecking order -
dukes and princes. Viscounts lie beyond the border

CLITANDRE: Timante encor, Madame, est un bon caractère.

CÉLIMÈNE: C'est de la tête aux pieds un homme tout mystère,
Qui vous jette en passant un coup d'œil égaré,
Et, sans aucune affaire, est toujours affairé.
Tout ce qu'il vous débite en grimaces abonde;
À force de façons, il assomme le monde;
Sans cesse il a, tout bas, pour rompre l'entretien,
Un secret à vous dire, et ce secret n'est rien;
De la moindre vétille il fait une merveille,
Et jusques au bonjour, il dit tout à l'oreille.

ACASTE: Et Géralde, Madame?

CÉLIMÈNE: Ô l'ennuyeux conteur!
Jamais on ne le voit sortir du grand seigneur;
Dans le brillant commerce il se mêle sans cesse,
Et ne cite jamais que duc, prince ou princesse:
La qualité l'entête; et tous ses entretiens

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of his consciousness, and all of his discourse
is his blue-blooded family and dogs and horses
and hunting. And since he so freely addresses
the highest nobility - princes, princesses -
by first names, a commonly used anonym
such as “Madam” or “Sir” would mean nothing to him.

CLITANDRE: But I have heard that he’s
on good terms with Bélise.

CÉLIMÈNE: Just his type! She’s moronic.
Her vapid, laconical
nothingness irritates me.
I feel something like apoplexy
when she comes on a visit.
I wonder how is it
that she’s so sterile.
I’ve not once seen her smile.
Conversation’s a long uphill battle:
each sentence all struggle and strife.
And whether one tells tittle-tattle
or asks the true meaning of life
her response is the same:
a disinterested, lame
little *[imitating her]* “yes”.
If you press
her for detail she might
yawn and mutter “you’re right”.

Or if you try frightfully
hard to incite
her to speech she’ll say “oh?”
as if that were to throw
the ball back in your court.
You try every assortment
of ploys to engage
her. No use! She’s outrageously
stupid, as thick
as a half ton of bricks.

Ne sont que de chevaux, d’équipage et de chiens;
Il tutaye en parlant ceux du plus haut étage,
Et le nom de Monsieur est chez lui hors d’usage.

CLITANDRE: On dit qu’avec Bélise il est du dernier bien.

CÉLIMÈNE: Le pauvre esprit de femme, et le sec entretien!
Lorsqu’elle vient me voir, je souffre le martyre:
Il faut suer sans cesse à chercher que lui dire,
Et la stérilité se son expression
Fait mourir à tous coups la conversation.
En vain, pour attaquer son stupide silence,
De tous les lieux communs vous prenez l’assistance:
Le beau temps et la pluie, et le froid et le chaud
Sont des fonds qu’avec elle on épuise bientôt.
Cependant sa visite, assez insupportable,
Traîne en une longueur encore épouvantable;
Et l’on demande l’heure, et l’on bâille vingt fois,
Qu’elle s’émeut autant qu’une pièce de bois.

**FROM ACT 4, SCENE 3:
CÉLIMÈNE MOCKS ALCESTE**

ALCESTE: Oh heaven! May I not control my emotions!

CÉLIMÈNE: Good grief! What a stony-faced look!
For a moment I almost mistook
you for some great gargoyle,
till I noticed the boiling
red veins standing out
on your roof-gutter spout.

ALCESTE: The plumb of your deceit is deeper than the ocean.
All the lexicon of criminology
has no words that do justice to your treachery.
The very pit of Hell, the devil and his pestilential
angels cannot match your loathsomeness.

CÉLIMÈNE: Was ever such amorous speech?
Come, love me some more, I beseech.

ALCESTE: Enough of idle jokes. This is no time to jest.
More fitting if you blushed to think of your detestable
behaviour. I have proof of your mendacity.
At last my prescience is given perspicacity.
At last I comprehend my erstwhile discommodiousness.
Through my persistent search, which you construed as odiousness,
I found that I was justified in my dubiety.
Despite your efforts to conceal your impropriety
the light of truth beamed brightly on your culpability
till it shone out in palpable verisimilarity.
But don't imagine I may be humiliated
and not assert myself. I will be vindicated.
I know that one's desires are out of one's control,
that love is born not in the mind but in the soul,
that hearts may not be won by storming at the door,

ALCESTE: Ô Ciel! de mes transports puis-je être ici le maître?

CÉLIMÈNE: Ouais! Quel est donc le trouble où je vous vois paraître?
Et que me veulent dire et ces soupirs poussés,
Et ces sombres regards que sur moi vous lancez?

ALCESTE: Que toutes les horreurs dont une âme est capable
À vos déloyautés n'ont rien de comparable;
Que le sort, les démons, et le Ciel en courroux
N'ont jamais rien produit de si méchant que vous.

CÉLIMÈNE: Voilà certainement des douceurs que j'admire.

ALCESTE: Ah! ne plaisantez point, il n'est pas temps de rire:
Rougissez bien plutôt, vous en avez raison;
Et j'ai de sûrs témoins de votre trahison.
Voilà ce que marquaient les troubles de mon âme:
Ce n'était pas en vain que s'alarmait ma flamme;
Par ces fréquents soupçons, qu'on trouvait odieux,
Je cherchais le malheur qu'ont rencontré mes yeux;
Et malgré tous vos soins et votre adresse à feindre,
Mon astre me disait ce que j'avais à craindre.
Mais ne présumez pas que, sans être vengé,
Je souffre le dépit de me voir outragé.
Je sais que sur les vœux on n'a point de puissance,
Que l'amour veut partout naître sans dépendance,
Que jamais par la force on n'entra dans un cœur,
Et que toute âme est libre à nommer son vainqueur.
Aussi ne trouverais-je aucun sujet de plainte,
Si pour moi votre bouche avait parlé sans feinte;
Et, rejetant mes vœux dès le premier abord,

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that everyone is free to choose their conqueror
in love. But you would not have caused me such offence
if you had spoken from the first without pretence.
If you'd rejected my advances from the start
I would not feel this piercing pain within my heart.
To lead me on in this way, though, with such ostensible
attachment: that is absolutely indefensible.
It warrants punishment of the utmost severity.
It stirs in me a truly termagant temerity.
Well may you fear the upshot of your gross iniquity.
I am adjured to adjurgatory obliquity.
Here is your callous, culpable caliginosity
illumed by my incendiary ignigenosity.
You are unconscionable. I am inconsolable
and my remunerative rage is uncontrollable.

CÉLIMÈNE: What's up? Are you having a fit?
Have you finally flipped? Is that it?

ALCESTE: Yes, yes, I have, since drinking from the poisoned chalice
I took for a loving cup, since finding malice
meanly masquerading as sincerity,
since waking from the heartless spell you cast on me.

Mon cœur n'aurait eu droit de s'en prendre qu'au sort.
Mais d'un aveu trompeur voir ma flamme applaudie,
C'est une trahison, c'est une perfidie,
Qui ne saurait trouver de trop grands châtiments,
Et je puis tout permettre à mes ressentiments.
Oui, oui, redoutez tout après un tel outrage;
Je ne suis plus à moi, je suis tout à la rage:
Percé du coup mortel dont vous m'assassinez,
Mes sens par la raison ne sont plus gouvernés,
Je cède aux mouvements d'une juste colère,
Et je ne réponds pas de ce que je puis faire.

CÉLIMÈNE: D'où vient donc, je vous prie, un tel emportement?
Avez-vous, dites-moi, perdu le jugement?

ALCESTE: Oui, oui, je l'ai perdu, lorsque dans votre vue
J'ai pris, pour mon malheur, le poison qui me tue,
Et que j'ai cru trouver quelque sincérité
Dans les traîtres appas dont je fus enchanté.