

THE REHEARSAL

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CHARACTERS:

Alceste a playwright

Philinte espresso bar attendant

Oronte an artist

Acaste a foreign guest

Clitandre an interpreter

Celimene an actress

Arsinoe an actress without a part

Eliante a journalist

There is a real espresso bar on the stage, which is also used by the audience before the performance and during the interval. In the bar there is an espresso maker that is out of order, a telephone and a vase. Next to the bar a door leads to an imaginary auditorium. The work of art referred to by the actors is supposedly on an invisible fourth wall. As for the costumes - Alceste is dressed casually, in a sweater or a jacket of a different colour to his trousers and no tie, Philinte is wearing an overall, Oronte, Acaste and Clitandre grey suits and ties, Eliante and Arsinoe light coats; Celimene changes her costumes. At the end of the play Eliante, Arsinoe and Philinte take off their coats and all of them, men and women alike, suddenly have grey suits and ties - with the exception of Alceste and Celimene.

PART ONE

1/

Philinte: *(During the introductory music he quietly works in the bar, carrying out the empty bottles and arranging full ones. He tries out the espresso maker, then dials a number on the telephone.)*

Hallo! Repairs? The espresso maker is out of order again! What? Wait three months? Well, if we've managed to wait for miracles all our lives, I suppose we can wait another three months. In that time I might mend it myself.

(Replaces the receiver and tries to mend the espresso maker.)

2/

Alceste: *(Enters and gazes at the audience. Gradually, however, the audience realises that he is in fact gazing at an invisible fourth wall and at something painted on it.)* Ugh! All those disgusting bodies! Have they got nothing better to do than float around together naked in the air? All those ridiculous figures reaching for the sun - but they don't care that what's below them is mire. Well, don't let me stop you! You just go on floating and reaching out, you disgusting naked creatures! That mire below you is rising faster than you are! In a while you'll be sipping your own filth!

Philinte: I can't see any mire in that picture.

Alceste: *(turning to Philinte)* You can't? It looks as if that fraud Oronte used mud to paint the whole of that disgusting daub. Everything's as it shouldn't be. The few good pictures a few painters have managed to paint are hidden in a few people's bedrooms. But here, in the foyer, where hundreds of people mingle every day - you get this! Ordinary

people always get the worst on offer!

Philinte: How do you know what ordinary people want – whether this is not what they chose themselves. (*In a whisper.*) Keep your thoughts to yourself, Alceste! Even painted walls have ears! (*Aloud.*) Not everything's as bad as you think.

Alceste: No? Then make me an espresso.

Philinte: The machine's not working again... But I can make you instant coffee.

Alceste: You see! Even your espresso maker's out of order. There's never anything to drink but instant coffee here! Instant coffee is bad for you. How can I be expected then to be satisfied with what I see? (*Waves a hand.*) Make me that instant coffee, then.

Philinte: (*makes Alceste's coffee*) I like you better than anyone else, Alceste, but if only you wouldn't swear at everyone.

Alceste: As if I'd never heard you swearing!

Philinte: I swear at people behind their backs, Alceste, and that's a different matter.

Alceste: It sure is. Fundamentally different. You should be ashamed of yourself.

Philinte: You see, I'm right. Now you're telling me off! By the way, the rehearsal of that new play of yours has already started.

Alceste: Has it? (*Makes for the door next to the bar.*)

Philinte: They're just going to try out that scene where Celimene kisses...

Alceste: (*Turns round and goes back to the bar.*) I'm not going in there.

Philinte: Why not?

Alceste: I don't want to see it.

Philinte: But it's you who wrote it! That kissing scene for Celimene was your idea! Why then...

Alceste: To show how depraved women are nowadays. But that doesn't mean I like seeing Celimene smooching with someone, you dimwit!

Philinte: You're cursing me again! What's eating you – have you got a tapeworm, or something in your insides?

Alceste: Nothing's eating me.

Philinte: Then you're probably being eaten up by the fact that nothing's eating you.

Alceste: Leave me alone!

Philinte: You can't blame me for knowing you so well, Alceste. We've been around together for years now. There were times you were so short of money you didn't even have enough to buy soup – who was it who put it on the slate?

Alceste: You. And I always paid you back three times over.

Philinte: Ah, well, when it comes to filching, that's my job! But it's also happened that you forgot to pay and I charged it to one of those older people who don't even know where their money comes from. We two always got on well together, so now...

Alceste: I'm fed up with you, too... Tell me, Philinte – how can you possibly bear to wait on anyone and everyone in this snack bar, whether it's an honest bloke or a bastard?

Philinte: The customer is always right, Alceste. A bar attendant must serve everyone... And what does it matter that on occasion you can't avoid serving a bastard, too?

Alceste: In my opinion, an honest man must avoid bastards!

Philinte: And in my opinion an honest man mustn't avoid bastards. Quite the opposite! In my opinion, an honest man must mingle with bastards and let them do their bastardly deeds however and whenever they wish. Believe me, Alceste, to mingle with bastards and not become a bastard yourself,

while not letting on that you aren't a bastard, that's an art in itself!... For one honest man there's a whole sea of bastards and the honest man must know how to swim in that sea! If you're honest, it's as if you were carrying a piece of gold in your mouth - and when you're swimming in that sea of bastards, you have to keep your mouth shut! You can't keep opening it, because that piece of gold could easily fall out into that sea of bastards and you'd never see it again!

Alceste: Yuk!

Philinte: Why yuk?

Alceste: Yuk, yuk, yuk!

Philinte: D' you mean to say you can think of something better?

Alceste: Something better than a shut mouth? You bet I can! Openness!

Philinte - if an honest man keeps his mouth shut, what makes him any different from the bastards? Nothing! Today the world's all topsy-turvy, Philinte - it's standing on its head! And the only people who can help it are those who speak their minds. Only they can snatch the world from the grasp of those decent rogues who have turned it on its head, only the outspoken can stand the world on its feet again.

Philinte: We'll have to wait a long time before that happens! Alceste, you said yourself that today's rogues are decent. Before, when rogues were still unshaven rascals with patches over one eye and daggers in their hands, who used to roar aloud as they went through the forest, so you could hear them from afar - it was easy to know how to deal with them! You either didn't go into the forest - or you went prepared. But how can you prepare yourself for a decent rogue? A decent rogue wears a nicely-ironed grey suit and an elegant tie - when would it occur to you to beware of such a smartlooking fellow? Only when he's strangling you with that tie of his! And then it's already too late. Then all you can do is rattle and give up the ghost. And just before you give it up, in that last moment of life you hear that decent rogue whisper in your ear: „Sorry, mate, but there was no alternative.“ No, Alceste, you mustn't play around with today's decent rogues. I'm telling you again - its wisest to mingle among them.

Alceste: Think what you're saying, Philinte! How do suppose you're going to mingle with those who are above you on the social ladder, not because they are more able than you, but because nowadays ability is the last thing that decides whether you go up or down? A decent rogue never burns his fingers, he's a smooth talker lying in wait behind his tie to see if anyone else burns their fingers, anyone honest, who takes risks, who fights, who cares about things - and the moment such a man yelps and withdraws his burnt fingers for a moment, the decent rogue grasps what that poor man has struggled to win and again he is climbing up on someone else's back to get a rung higher. It's easy for someone like that to treat you decently - when he's already snatched what was yours by right, what was your work, what you struggled to achieve, what you should have got the credit for - and if you don't watch out, he'll even snatch your injustice, your defeat, your burnt fingers! And when you come crawling home with your tail between your legs to lick your wounds, you'll find him in your bed with your wife! Hardly surprising he treats you decently when he always comes out better in every situation. And his decency gets him even further and even more. It's not enough

for him to have you under him all the time, he wants the distance between you to be even greater – and it's just thanks to that decency of his that he gets you where he wants you, he pacifies you with it, uses it to deprive you of your last weapon – your righteous anger! Don't you understand, Philinte? They're making fools of us! It's hardly surprising these decent rogues smile at us, if their smiles force us to approve in silence all the dishonest dealings they get up to before our very eyes, so that we can never say they did them without us. To pay back their cunning decency with your own honest decency – I tell you, as a businessman, Philinte, that's a bad deal! It's disgusting!

It's a betrayal!

Philinte: A betrayal? You can reproach me of anything – but not betrayal! I'm not aware that I'm guilty of betrayal. Who have I betrayed?

Alceste: You're betraying yourself! Unfortunately, few people nowadays realise that they are betraying the best in themselves. People are fools – they go against themselves.

But I'm sick of all the pretence around us today, those false emotions, those meaningless embraces, those slimy phrases, those compliments and awards that an absolute nobody can get nowadays. And even if on occasion, just for form's sake, they decorate someone who actually deserves it – of what use is that to him, when he can see that any good-for-nothing has been given exactly the same. If you've got a conscience at all, you mustn't care a damn about honours. They're only used to buy us. And there's no logic in it when a capable person sells for the same price as an incapable one. To hell with rewards and respect, if it's not only the deserving who get them. How on earth could we have got used to this inverted scale of values? That's what I blame everyone for and, although you're only a bartender, I blame you, too, for that. You can see this mess all around you and you pretend that all is in order. Accommodating people like you can even arrive in hell and before you know it, they're members of the devil's family!

Philinte: You're right there, for once! After three days in hell, I'd have an espresso bar like this one. And Lucifer wouldn't budge from the counter!

Alceste: But I won't come to the one you have in hell. No doubt your espresso maker won't work there either.

Philinte: Well – in hell, we'll see. And it's not my fault the machine doesn't work here.

Alceste: No, here nothing's anyone's fault. Everything's in hell and unfortunately there are only angels left up here on Earth.

Philinte: I know, Alceste. You'd like to live to see the whole world in perfect order. But, tell me, can anyone live to see anything like that? If you try too hard to promote a perfect world like that, the only thing you'll live to discover is that you are from a different world than everyone else. And the others will put their heads together and come up with a way to send you off to that other world without delay. Restrain yourself, Alceste! That's my advice, because I really do like you more than anyone else.

Alceste: But that's no reason for smiling at me in that silly way!

I thought you were only trading in coffee and vodka – and you seem to be trading emotions on the black market!

You're selling those smiles as well!

Philinte: I don't sell them, they're just free extras.

Alceste: They should lock you up for that, too. Everything's dishonest

- everything except what I regard as manly. As I see it, only those who say what they think can call themselves men. But very soon there won't be any men left here and the whole of our population will die out, because they're all weak women!

Philinte: Alceste! You can't mean to say that in the name of your openness a man should blurt out every silly thing that comes into his head? You can't expect me to tell everyone I don't like to get out of my sight before I spit at them?

Alceste: And why not?

Philinte: You won't tell them that either!

Alceste: Yes, I will. Heavens, I don't want any more compromises! Where are you, you bastards? Where are you, flatterers, tricksters, opportunists? Come here - I'll tell them all to their faces how I scorn them!

Philinte: Shh! I thought you were a greater philosopher - and not this raging lout! Forget it - as it is, people jeer at you behind your back - they say you must be off your rocker.

You're wasting time trying to put everyone right if no one takes you seriously.

Alceste: That's just what I like, Philinte. I find people nowadays repulsive. I'd think myself very suspicious if those very rogues I can no longer stand were to consider me a wise man.

Philinte: But don't tell me you can't think of at least one exception.

Alceste: Not in this country. All around us people are now saying what they really think. They've come to understand that no matter how unpleasant it may be, truth is healthier for society than lies. I recently received a book from abroad, written by someone of the name of Acaste - In Praise of the Unbridled Theatre. I had to agree with every word and I shed tears of envy that nothing like that is written here. If only I could meet him one day...

Philinte: What does someone called Acaste matter! Don't tell me that you can't find at least one exception among those you live with here and every day!

Alceste: No - I can't find one among them. I hate them all... the bastards, because they are bastards. And people like you, Philinte - because you forgive the bastards for what they do.

Philinte: You're right - I do forgive them. If no one else - then certainly you. Even though you curse me, I'll pay for a round.

(He pours out, clinks his glass against Alceste's and drinks.)

Alceste: *(also drinks)* But good, if it really is good, cannot tolerate evil.

Philinte: But evil doesn't forgive good, either, Alceste, don't forget that. If you're against them - you must count on them being against you, too. Until now - although you claim to be against mingling - until now you yourself have mingled with them in no small measure. You're still writing, they're still performing your plays, your new one is being rehearsed just now... Every now and then you get into a bit of trouble, but it's always smoothed out... They recognise your ability and respect you more than you think, more than they'd respect anyone else in your place, if they cursed them the way you curse them. But you keep cursing them more and more. And I'm really afraid they'll soon run out of patience. You haven't actually experienced for yourself what it is to be in real trouble - but I'm afraid you'll soon find out. If you don't lose an appetite for mixing with them, then they will, and they won't want you among them. They haven't summoned you before their committee

yet – but I'm afraid they will very soon. I know what that means. I was once its chairman. I wouldn't wish the same to happen to you as happened to many others. I wouldn't wish them to declare you a leper – then you really would have reason to curse, if you experienced a proper quarantine!

Alceste: How could I be declared a leper by someone who is more of a leper than I am?

Philinte: You said yourself that the world is upside down – so why does that surprise you?

Alceste: The world is upside down – but I'm not! Who on such a committee could have the right to decide about me?

Philinte: Anyone who managed to get a seat on that committee – plus a few onlookers.

Alceste: They can summon me a hundred times, I'd never appear before them!

Philinte: Wouldn't it be wiser – if my fears are right and you don't manage to avoid the committee – to try to find favour with one of them, to show some good will...

Alceste: That's repulsive! Even if your fears are right, I shan't do anything to save myself.

Philinte: That would be the stupidest thing you could ever do, Alceste!

It'd be as if Christ nailed himself to the cross – and before that even paid for the wood and the nails!

Aren't those who make gestures behind your back to show they think you're nuts right after all? I ask you, are you really normal?

Alceste: Only people who aren't normal are normal in a world that's not normal! *(Walks over to the door next to the bar and opens it. Looks for a while into the auditorium we sense is there and we listen with him to Celimene's laughter, then he closes the door again and returns to his place at the bar.)*

Philinte: Look here, Alceste – in fact you do make one exception, don't tell me you don't. You don't care a straw for any of us – but it's enough for you to hear Celimene's voice in the distance and you're carried away by her.

Alceste: I'm not carried away!

Philinte: Well, I'd say you were. You look at everyone's faults through a microscope – but you've never said an ill word against her. I'm not saying Celimene has any great faults. I'm just saying that if that pretty flower did have any, you wouldn't see them.

Alceste: Why not? She's got some great faults – and I can see them only too well!

Philinte: Such as?

Alceste: Men buzz around her like bees!

Philinte: You see – you're praising her! Beauty can't be counted as a fault.

Alceste: Even beauty can be a fault... That's because it can produce other faults. Why does Celimene open her arms to everyone who admires her? Why doesn't she at least pick and choose among them? When those smartly-dressed bastards admire her, she treats them the same as me? It's unprincipled! But I can see her lack of principle. I force myself to see it. Look at Celimene critically, Alceste – that's what I tell myself every morning when I come here. It's true, I don't always manage to. The more critical I want to be, the more I like her... Yes, she is beautiful... But I can see her faults beneath that beauty, I can see them, I can see them! But I'm convinced my love will cure her of those faults.

Philinte: You see – then why don't you love everyone? You could cure them all, just like Celimene!

3/

Oronte: (*Enters holding a bouquet, dressed in a grey suit and tie.*)

Good morning, Philinte! Hasn't the rehearsal of Alceste's new play begun yet? Ah, probably not, if you're still in the bar, Alceste.

Philinte: It has begun, Mr. Oronte.

Oronte: It has begun? And the author isn't sitting in the auditorium?...

Interesting... I've come... You see, I don't know if I'll be in town on the day of the premiere... I'm working on a monumental statue, somewhere at the other end of the country, it's an important order... from the government... and just when the premiere takes place I must be there, for a meeting with the investor... And so I'd at least like to see... Celimene invited me... But you know what?

Although it's already started, I needn't see the whole rehearsal, I'll come to a performance later and, if you'll allow me, I'll take advantage of this rare opportunity to tell you, Alceste, that I have long held you in high regard. Philinte, two vodkas and two espressos!

Philinte: The machine's not working.

Oronte: Instant, then. (*When Philinte has poured out the vodkas, Oronte raises his glass and clinks it against Alceste's.*)

I'd like us to get on well together, Alceste. Like friends, if you've got nothing against it... After all, maybe even you... I suppose you will accept the friendship I offer you... Are you listening to me?

Alceste: (*whose mind has wandered elsewhere, starts and accidentally spills the glass Oronte ordered for him*) Oh, yes!

Oronte: I had the impression you weren't.

Alceste: But I am listening, I am listening - what you said just took me a bit by surprise. We don't know each other that well... You're an official painter and you tend to move in circles which...

Oronte: And you think your name hasn't reached those circles?

Alceste: But...

Oronte: But I know you know that... And in my opinion it's a very good name, in spite of... No matter who I compare you with, I don't know where in this country we'd find a more remarkable man than you. And what you write, too...

Although it's true some people who read your latest text even before rehearsals began did say you were too outspoken...

that you yourself are a misanthrope in disguise, who is just cleverly hiding behind a theme of Molière's and, using seemingly timeless statements, you are trying to blacken our own era... But in my opinion this is a biased... much too biased interpretation... on the part of those people...

As an artist... you call me an official one... very well, I'll accept that as a compliment... but even as an official artist, I don't like it... I told them in the proper circles that you can't look at it like that... You can't approach art with a microscope... Fortunately they understood... It was hushed up and it was a good thing it was and that your play is being rehearsed... I, for one, am convinced that you aren't a misanthrope at all... Why would you be one these days? I can see that in this new play of yours you just want to give a vivid picture of the paradoxical past, when only a daring misanthropic attitude could put society on the right track. You want to show the road that led from the past to the present... And, of course, we all know that these are different times, this is a different situation and that you... all you wish to do is to show you agree with our present whatever.

Alceste: But...

Oronte: I'm not in the habit of deceiving. My offer of friendship really is sincere... Pour us another round.

Philinte: (*pours*)

Oronte: (*lifts his glass*) Cheers!

Alceste: (*drinks this time*) Cheers.

Oronte: Can I embrace you? I'm Andy (*hugs Alceste*).

Alceste: (*As they embrace, he catches sight of the bouquet, which is clearly intended for Celimene. It annoys Alceste and he frees himself from Oronte's embrace in disgust.*) But...

Oronte: Do you find my suggestion objectionable?

Alceste: Well... That is... Do you really think true friendship can arise so quickly? Don't you think such a tempo could give the impression we're making fun of friendship? After all, real friendship is always the result of a deliberate choice... People have to get to know each other well first... And when we two get to know each other better, who knows, whether later we might not regret that we'd rushed into friendship like that...

Oronte: Hahaha, very witty! But wise at the same time. Now could I call you by your...

Alceste: (*shakes his head*)

Oronte: Then I feel even greater respect for you than before. So, let's wait for our friendship to develop naturally. But so far as I'm concerned - I can't help it, I'm already yours for ever. Every little bit of me! Cheers! (*He finishes his drink and pays.*) If you need to arrange something with those up there - I'll do everything I can. (*Opens his arms.*)

Alceste: (*Almost falling into his embrace - but then noticing once more the bouquet in Oronte's hand, he steps back.*)

Oronte: (*gives up, but still speaks in a kindly tone*) Ah, by the way - what do you say to my new design for the foyer? (*He points towards the audience.*) Your opinion...

Alceste: My opinion? You can't go by that! I'm sorry, but...

Oronte: Oh, yes! I shall treasure your opinion more than all those praises I keep hearing...

Alceste: You see... I have one great fault... I tell everyone exactly what I think.

Oronte: That's just it! I wouldn't like you to say something you weren't sincere about. I like frankness, too. So - don't hide anything, I'd be glad if you told me your opinion straight from the shoulder, on the level, without wrapping it up. I've no doubt it will be very shrewd, you're bright, you are, Alceste! (*Waves the bouquet.*)

Alceste: Well, as you like - I'll tell you then.

Philinte: So will I! Ever since it's been in the foyer, I've enjoyed coming to the bar much more. Those naked women flying around in the air are painted in such a way that if I half close my eyes, they seem to be flying around my head. It's marvellous!

Alceste: You good-for-nothing, you should be ashamed of yourself!

Philinte: It's your guardian angel that's a good-for-nothing. He's dozing - and I have to keep an eye on you instead of him.

Oronte: I've painted better things, dear Philinte. But, on the other hand - yes, it is something that ordinary people can refer to. Although a subject like that might look better in a town square or...

Philinte: And why not in the theatre? I'm telling you, that when I half-close my eyes, I can feel those naked women touching me, especially those over there... (*He points in the direction of the audience.*) And then not only do I work better in the bar - the actors who stop here before the performance

act better, and when the audience pass through the foyer, they clap more enthusiastically...

Alceste: You make me sick.

Philinte: I'm saying this in your interests, Alceste. That man is dangerous, even when he's asleep!

Oronte: Thank you, Philinte. You are a simple man - yet I wish all those intelligent people had your powers of observation. But don't let us influence your opinion. We agreed that you would be quite frank - so please don't spare me!

Alceste: It's not easy to put it into words, to tell you the truth. When someone creates something, they always expect praise. (*His eye falls again on the bouquet.*) But I'll tell you what I once told another artist! A certain artist - his name's not important - once began discussing art with me and in the course of the discussion I told him that there's no point in forcing art to be cheerful and enthusiastic when enthusiasm is not what we feel when we look at what is outside art, in life, all around us.

Philinte: He's mad!

Oronte: Are you trying to say that I, as the designer of this foyer...

Alceste: I didn't say that! But I told that other artist that if, in spite of all we see around us, some artists are so enthusiastic - then they're probably enthusiastic above all about their fees and official honours, which are disproportionately high in comparison to the value of their creations.

Philinte: Suicide!

Oronte: Are you referring to this particular work of art of mine?

Alceste: I didn't say that. But I told that other artist that it's terrible if, out of gratitude for those fees and honours, such artists then silently - or even out loud - approve all the foul play they themselves witness. Yes, all those so-called positive attitudes are disgusting, everyone can see that no matter how they pretend that it's all for this or that ideal or good cause, in fact they are only concerned about themselves and their comfortable homes. In my opinion, you can tell if someone is really interested in a good cause by whether they're willing to take risks. When a lumberjack fells a tree for someone else, isn't he risking that it will crush him? Isn't a man catching fish in the sea for others taking risks? Or someone mining coal underground so that others can be warm? And an artist? His work is also said to be for others. Shouldn't he return at least a pinch of the risk they've taken for his good? Don't they deserve it? But no. The pseudo-artists I'm thinking of have never bothered themselves with something like being grateful to others. They only want to oblige themselves. And because they can only oblige themselves with the help of the authorities, they oblige the authorities - and there's no room for courage when you're trying to be so obliging! Keep your mouth shut and do as you're told is such people's principle, because they know that if they keep to that, favour and opportunities, money and honours, will automatically follow. These good-for-nothings steal them from those who deserve them far more than they do. Well, you see, I gave that other artist a real dressing down!

Oronte: Very wise, too! But now let's get round to me! I'd like to know what you think about my new artistic design for this foyer. Sure - it's also good, it's also enthusiastic, it's also anti-misanthropic - but I think, and I'm sure you'll agree with me, that there's enthusiasm and enthusiasm... there's cheap enthusiasm and there's enthusiasm for which the artist has to pay a high price, he has to struggle to

achieve it, suffer for it... I'm also against cheap enthusiasm, cheap optimism... But if we endeavour to achieve that true optimism, that we've had to endure to ... of course, there's still a lot that's not perfect... but that's what we're here for, not to let things stay the way they are... And no doubt you'll agree that hopeless misanthropy's not the way... both of us are seeking a different way... Upwards...! Out of these...! Yesterdays...! And that's just what I wanted to express... All of us, no matter what we're like... we reach out for the sun... the sun unites us... And in that wonderful union we are all in fact naked! Look... that wonderful nakedness... here or there... (*Points to the audience.*)

And just imagine if you could really... in the flesh... (*Whispers in Alceste's ear.*) Otherwise - I'll tell you a secret - the women who stood as models for me when I was painting these naked flying creatures, have in fact much more to show than I could allow myself to put into this, no doubt you'd agree, after all, people say you're also inclined that way... And you yourself know best how it is... those microscopes... some investors are unnecessarily prudish... and people in the audience are not all alike... they've all kinds of jobs... and they'll take a close look at it in the foyer and then they might begin to write anonymous letters, so... We can't... We're a lost generation... It's terrible.

Alceste: (*suddenly burning with jealousy*) Yes - terrible. It's painted terribly - did you paint it with mud? Not even the ugliest woman in the world can have so little charm as these naked creatures of yours flying up towards the sun! (*pointing*) And I'm sure not one of those women who acted as your models can be anyone I know - otherwise every time I met her I'd have to be ashamed I'd ever looked at your kitsch.

Oronte: Do you mind! But real beauty and artistic beauty...

Alceste: It's that artistic beauty I'm talking about! Have you got the cheek to claim that your work is seeking some way? For God's sake where to? Yes, all your statues, all the figures in your pictures and frescoes are flying towards the sun and you and frauds like you pretend you have very nearly reached it - but who believes you? Everyone knows it's not the sun you're reaching out for, but anything you can lay your hands on! And you'd lay your hands on the sun, too, if only you could! Fortunately - you'd burn your fingers. Because even the sun can see what you think no one can. Even the sun can see that an ordinary stain on a wall made by a passing dog is of greater value than these enthusiastic daubs of yours.

Oronte: Is that what you told that other painter?

Alceste: No, that's what I'm telling you now. Those poor women who acted as your models! Have they any idea they've fallen into the hands of a pimp? How many times have you sold each of them? In how many bars with broken espresso makers have you forced them to scramble naked after the sun? We know that you, pimps of art, paint and sell the same nothing a hundred times over!

Oronte: In that case I must object, because...

Alceste: Object, if you've the time and appetite. You wanted to hear my opinion of your monstrosity and I've told you it. I've nothing to add.

Oronte: And isn't it that you have too high an opinion of yourself? You seem to think no one's wiser than you.

Alceste: In your opinion it's only those who praise your abortions that are wise.

Oronte: I've no doubt I can do very well without your praise.

Alceste: You've no alternative, have you?

Oronte: If you think I'm going to put up with everything you...

Alceste: You'd put up with any amount of flattery, wouldn't you?
But I'm not the kind to give it.

Oronte: You hold your nose a bit too high in the air...

Alceste: In order to reach you, up there in your wheeler-dealer
heaven, you dung-beetle!

Philinte: Alceste!

Oronte: You'd like to be there yourself – but you'll never succeed in
getting there. You're wasting your time masking your real

self! You're wasting your time writing plays based on
Molie`re's themes! We know what you're getting at... We
don't need a microscope to take a closer look at you...

Even without a microscope we can see that you're an enemy
of the state... You don't like the fact that everything
works... You want to use your works to undermine, erode,
weaken... But you can't succeed, you, you, you – misanthrope!
We've settled accounts with misanthropy once and
for all and we'll never allow it to show its teeth again! (*The
telephone rings.*)

Philinte: (*answers it*) Yes... Mr. Oronte, it's for you.

Oronte: (*telephoning*) That's you? How did you find me here? Aha,
you knew where my heart leads me. So what is it? You
don't say!... By tomorrow? If I must, I must! (*Puts down
the receiver.*) The bill, Philinte.

Philinte: You've already paid.

Oronte: Have I? So much the better... I've no time to spare... We've
already wasted too much on pointless talk... I'd just like to
wish Miss Celimene a successful premiere, if there is one...

(*Laughs.*) But why shouldn't there be? I'm not revengeful.

I'm only sorry I shan't see it and I don't even know
whether I shall stay to the end of the rehearsal... By tomorrow
I have to work out my standpoint to the selection
of titles proposed for this year... You really are lucky!... If
someone else had been listening to you here today...
when... I shall try to forget what I heard. If for no other
reason than that it's Miss Celimene who is playing the
leading role in your play.

(*He leaves through the door next to the bar.*)

4/

Philinte: Well, you really have landed yourself in trouble, Alceste.
What good did that do?

Alceste: And what good does it do when that puffed-up peacock
follows Celimene around with bouquets of flowers?

Philinte: I only hope he really is just following her around! But flowers
are used to camouflage cannons, too, Alceste! What if
he came to check up on the dress rehearsal of your play?
He didn't even need to go in! Here in the bar he already
got a good idea of what's going through your head.

Alceste: Fortunately, he's a fool and he'll forget half of it.

Philinte: Even if he does – the other half will be enough to ensure
you get what you're in for! And, apart from that, Oronte
won't forget a thing! Oh, yes, even the maggots that'll eat
him after he's dead will remember! You've done yourself
a real good turn, Alceste, no doubt about that! You should
go and look in on the rehearsal, too, because I don't know
whether you'll ever see the premiere! Not even your worst
enemy could have contrived a better plan against you than
you have yourself.

Alceste: Not me! It was that devil god who thought up Celimene!
(*He opens the door next to the bar just a little and peers
through into the theatre, from where Celimene's laughter*

can be heard, then the sound of a kiss and Celimene's voice.)

Celimene voice:

A beautiful bouquet! Sir, that's so kind!

It's a rare occasion to my mind

When at a rehearsal...

Alceste: (*disgusted, opens the door*) She's even kissing that idiot!

5/

Celimene: (*Opens the door next to the bar, comes in, closes it behind her and walks over to the bar with the flowers in her hand.*)

Philinte, put these flowers in a vase, would you please, so they don't wilt before the rehearsal's over.

Alceste: It's you who should wilt!

Celimene: I certainly hope not! Alceste - you wouldn't enjoy looking at me then.

Alceste: I'd enjoy looking at you much more than I do now!

Celimene: Nonsense! Even now you hardly look at me anyway!

I'm rehearsing your play and all you do is sit in the bar and scowl! Don't you like the way I'm doing it?

Alceste: I don't like the way you let every big-headed fool cling to you!

Celimene: For heaven's sake - to me? Philinte, can you see anyone clinging to me? Alceste, surely you aren't going to be jealous simply because Oronte brought me a bunch of flowers?

Wasn't it kind of him to bring it to the rehearsal, as he can't bring it to the premiere? And, of course, that kiss I gave him was purely formal!

Alceste: Let's hope everything you gave him before was just as formal as that kiss. I didn't even know you knew him so well!

Don't you go picking flowers together at night, by any chance?

Celimene: Ah, Alceste! You're imagining things again! The things you read into one bouquet! There's nothing wrong with my being friends with Oronte!

Alceste: Nothing right with it either. You could choose better friends. That fellow is the essence of all I hate - and if you consider him good enough to be your friend, that means you don't care about me, that you couldn't give a damn for what I feel for you, and that all your assurances that you felt something for me were just lies!

Celimene: Alceste! For goodness' sake wake up and stop talking in your sleep! Can't you see that everything I do, I do for you?

The way you behave... the things you say... what you write... Can't you see you're putting yourself in danger and that when you put yourself in danger, you also put all those close to you in danger, too - those who respect you, who act in your plays, who are fond of you? I'm afraid, Alceste.

Alceste: For yourself.

Celimene: For myself, but for you, too! And I don't think it's a bad idea to get on well with Oronte. After all, he...

Alceste: ...can go to hell! And I suspect you can, too. Is that how you want to pay for ridding yourself of a fear which you don't even cause for? Is that how you want to rid me of a fear which I don't even have?

Celimene: Let's hope you won't have it when they run out of patience and they declare out loud that Alceste is a misanthrope.

Alceste: It's always better if they declare out loud that Alceste is a misanthrope, than if they declare out loud that Celimene is a ...

Philinte: Now, then, Alceste, restrain yourself, please! We all know very well that Celimene is an actress - and as she is an actress, don't make her stand here in the bar, when she should be on the stage.

Celimene: You see! You've fallen in love with an actress. So what are you complaining about? That that actress has fallen in love with you and not someone else? (*Kisses him passionately.*)
I'm not acting! (*She leaves through the door next to the bar.*)

6/

Alceste: Wow! She really isn't acting – or is she such a wonderful actor that she can act she's not acting? (*Leaves.*)
(*Musical interval.*)

7/

Acaste and Clitandre: (*Arrive, holding bunches of flowers. Clitandre draws Acaste's attention to the wall painting on the invisible fourth wall and whispers something jokingly to him. Then he turns to Philinte.*)

Clitandre: Good morning. Has the rehearsal started?

Philinte: And who are you? What makes you ask?

Clitandre: I'm Clitandre, an interpreter from the ministry – and this is a foreign guest I'm accompanying.

Acaste: Good morning.

Philinte: What did he say?

Clitandre: He said „Good evening“.

Philinte: But I thought he said „Good morning“.

Clitandre: The same words have different meanings in different languages. And anyway, don't interfere when I'm interpreting, because you might get into trouble if I interpret properly what you're saying.

Philinte: But I'm not saying anything. Just that it isn't evening yet, so...

Clitandre: It is evening.

Philinte: But in my opinion...

Clitandre: In your opinion it isn't, but in mine it is. Have you never heard of the time difference in different countries? Do we have to hammer that into your head? If everything was the same there as it is here, he needn't have worn his shoes out coming here in the first place...

Acaste: Yes, yes, shoes! Don't forget... We're going shopping this afternoon... (*Looking at a list.*) Shoes for grandma, shoes for...

Philinte: What's he saying?

Clitandre: You don't understand now, do you? A moment ago you were being so clever! He says he's here to study. Yesterday he saw a photograph in the papers of this play you're preparing and as he'd heard so much about Alceste's dramas, he showed an interest in seeing a rehearsal.

Philinte: I'm sorry, but the producer directed me not to let anyone in to the rehearsal.

Acaste: What did he say?

Clitandre: That you are very welcome.

Acaste: Tell him that I thank him warmly for his warm welcome and that I should like to ask him to arrange for me to meet Miss Celimene, whose photo I saw in the papers yesterday, taken during the rehearsal of a new play of some kind. You can tell him that when I saw that photo, I immediately fell in love with Celimene.

Philinte: What did he say?

Clitandre: He said that if you can't let us in, at least we'll have two espressos in your bar.

Philinte: The espresso maker's not working. I can only offer you instant.

Clitandre: Two instant coffees, then.

Philinte: (*prepares two instant coffees*)

Acaste: What did he say?

Clitandre: He said we should first try his instant coffee – he says it's excellent.

Acaste: But I can't bear to wait! Explain to him that if he makes us wait too long, these flowers I bought for Miss Celimene will wilt - these, which I shall give her and those, which you will give her - but as if from me, too. So tell him to forget the coffee and stop trying to keep us from her, wherever she is, or I can't answer for myself and I'll kill him, damn him!

Philinte: What did he say?

Clitandre: (*drinks one cup of coffee*) He says he's changed his mind about that coffee. If your espresso is not working - he doesn't drink instant. (*Drinks the other cup.*) And apart from that, under the contract for cultural cooperation, he's got permission direct from the ministry, to see anything that interest him, so kindly let us in. I'll explain it to the producer.

Philinte: And what are the bouquets of flowers for?

Clitandre: I bought them just in case we should chance to meet Miss Celimene, who I have long admired. I'll give her one and he the other - but also as if from me.

Philinte: In that case, I certainly can't let you in! I don't advise anyone to hang around Celimene today. The author of the play, Alceste, is jealous - don't you know that? And he's in there, too, in the auditorium. You might find yourselves in trouble. The ministry's neither here nor there - there's no way I'm letting you in!

Acaste: What did he say?

Clitandre: That we are to go in, Mr. Acaste. (*They leave through the door next to the bar.*)

8/

Philinte: Hey, wait! You're Mr. Acaste? I haven't said you can go in! Well, they're already there. But if it's Acaste, then he's just the foreigner Alceste wants to meet! So - Alceste will actually be glad to see him. Especially when he sees the bouquet he's holding. And the other one with the other...

9/

Eliante: (*Entering with a notebook and a little bunch of flowers.*)

Philinte: Miss Eliante! How lovely to see you! You've got a bouquet, too? It should be me who... (*During the whole of this scene he is making advances to Eliante, who keeps fending him off.*)

Eliante: Why you, Philinte? This little bunch of flowers is an expression of my warm admiration for Mr. Alceste's art.

I thought I would find him in the bar.

Philinte: He's at the rehearsal for a change.

Eliante: Mr. Alceste always says and does something different from other people. But that's just why I like him. He is so original, so creative. It's time the public knew this side of him, and that's why I have decided to interview him, so he'll have an opportunity to express his opinions. Providing my boss doesn't throw it out, we'll publish it on the day of the premiere of his new play. So I'll wait for him here and in the meantime I'll have an espresso.

Philinte: Only instant - the espresso's not working. (*Prepares an instant coffee.*) Your boss will throw it out and it's not at all certain there'll be a premiere either.

Eliante: Why shouldn't there be a premiere?

Philinte: Well, all kinds of things have been happening here in this bar today, if I were to tell you...

Eliante: What happened?

Philinte: Alceste heaped terrible insults on Oronte. It shouldn't have happened. Oronte came quite politely, he brought Celimene a bouquet...

Eliante: If he brought Celimene a bouquet, Mr. Alceste can't have regarded that as polite!

Philinte: That's just it. He was really furious when he went in... I only hope nothing worse happens...

Eliante: What worse? According to what you've said, nothing so terrible happened here in the bar! He insulted him - so what. With Alceste people don't take it that way, they know him...

Philinte: Not everyone is so high-minded as you! Oronte, for instance, is capable of getting him into real hot water before the premiere.

Eliante: But that would be awful... That'd harm not only Alceste, but the whole of our cultural scene as well... Surely he should understand that everything Mr. Alceste says, he only says out of jealousy over Celimene, who he loves with the purest love.

Philinte: You've got a wonderfully good heart, Eliante. Anyone else in your place would be as jealous over Alceste as he is over Celimene. And you patiently put up with the fact that he hasn't a moment for you, doesn't even notice you - and you write such songs of praise about him, even though the way he behaves, he really deserves a good spanking like a little boy.

Eliante: It's true... Mr. Alceste does behave rather strangely sometimes... He has his own manner... But then he is an artist.

Alceste has a right to be like that! I don't condemn him - I admire him! And that sincerity of his, which always does him harm - isn't there something touching about it? Isn't it courageous? Isn't it noble-minded? These days a character like that is really precious! If only there were more people like that!

Philinte: Well, I really don't know what there is to admire about him. He's more to be pitied for falling so terribly in love...

If there were prisons for people in love, he'd have been locked up long ago - he'd have a window with double bars. He and Celimene are not suited to each other at all.

Eliante: In love opposites attract one another, Mr. Philinte.

Philinte: You surely don't mean to say that if Celimene attracts Alceste, he attracts her, too?

Eliante: It needn't always be mutual - I'd have to know more about what's going on inside him and inside her, to be able to tell you...

Some people fall in love quickly, especially men - and women often gradually. Especially an artist like Celimene...

After all, her own heart is always new to her - how can you expect her to know exactly who she is in love with or even whether what she feels is love...

Philinte: Thank you very much. While our artist is discovering what's what and exactly when and who and how - Alceste really will suffer - and maybe he'll hang himself when he finds out that he has no better chance than a snowball in hell. If I were him - I'd know what to do and where to turn in order to be happy.

Eliante: Where would you turn, Mr. Philinte?

Philinte: In the direction where you're standing, of course, Miss Eliante. You wouldn't even have to write about me in the papers - we barmen don't care about being in the papers - even without that I'd know where I could expect love for love. That is, not me unfortunately, but Alceste - I'm just saying what I would do if I were him.

Eliante: Why should I make a secret of it - your powers of observation are very good and you can probably see that I'm in love with Alceste. Well, in such matters it's best to be frank.

I am in love with him. But I'm not jealous of Celimene. Quite the opposite. After all, I'm fond of him and so I wish with all my heart that his dreams may come true... In fact, if it depended on me, I'd gladly do whatever was necessary so that Alceste and Celimene could fall happily into each others arms.

Philinte: You are self-sacrifice itself! But you can't succeed in doing anything like that, because if that were about to happen, Alceste would be sure to do something to spoil it. It seems to me that even more than Celimene, he loves his own suffering.

Eliante: That's a remarkable idea, Mr. Philinte. But maybe it really only seems so to you, because we can't rule out that it's suffering that seeks out Mr. Alceste - just as suffering always seeks out souls agitated by pure emotions and a subconscious desire to suffer for them... But if with regard to Miss Celimene Alceste could really expect nothing but disappointment, if, for example, at a decisive moment someone should outrival him in her eyes - anything can happen, after all - then I don't say I would refuse him... If he should show an interest in me, of course.

Philinte: You're a real treasure, Miss Eliante! You deserve an altar! If only Alceste would be successful with Celimene, if only he'd marry her - and if only you remained free. Then I'd try to win you for myself.

Eliante: You're joking, Mr. Philinte.

Philinte: I'm serious. I love you, Eliante.

Eliante: You really mean that, Mr. Philinte?

Philinte: Why's that so surprising? You work with the press, I work with the espresso - I've long thought we two belonged to each other. My work with the espresso and your work with the press - neither's anything to be over the moon about, so why not make up for it on a honeymoon?

Eliante: Ah, Mr. Philinte! You're almost as witty as Alceste! You can see you spend your time in his company. He radiates such intelligence that it is absorbed by other people. I'd be happy, too, if I could be with him all the time.

Philinte: Yes... I with you and you with Alceste... I understand, Miss Eliante. All I can do is wait for you, while you wait for him... And you'll be waiting for Alceste for ever... Even if he kills someone now, even if he has to serve a sentence of life imprisonment...

Eliante: What are you saying... Why should he kill... why should he serve a sentence?

Philinte: Because he won't be able to control himself when he sees Celimene billing and cooing over those two bouquets!

Eliante: What two bouquets?

Philinte: Haven't I told you? With the two that just went in there. He's so jealous, he...

Eliante: He certainly is that! But, then, we must prevent what might happen! I'm going in there!

Philinte: Don't bother, Eliante. The producer's no fool and he won't want to see his place spattered with blood! *(Holds Eliante back, at last he has her in his arms.)*

10/

Celimene: *(Opens the door next to the bar and enters holding two bouquets.)*

A break! Philinte, put these in this vase for me.

Another two magnificent bouquets! And now at last I'll have a chance to drink a cup of espresso, too. Hi, Eliante!

Eliante: *(breaking away from Philinte's embrace)* Hi, Celimene.

Philinte: *(Reluctantly releases Eliante and puts the flowers in the vase.)* Only instant. *(Prepares the coffee.)*

11/

Alceste: (*rushes through the door beside the bar*) I'll kill you!

Celimene: Not until I've drunk this cup of coffee, darling. I had to repeat what you wrote so many times that my throat is quite dry. (*To Eliante.*) How are you?

Eliante: Okay.

Alceste: Blame the producer, not me! You can only blame me for loving you and for not being able to stand the way you behave.

Celimene: How do I behave?

Alceste: If I don't kill you, I'll have to kill myself! Don't you give a damn?

Celimene: But how do I behave?

Alceste: Or shall we break it off?

Celimene: I don't understand you - is this meant to be doping, or what? Is that how authors encourage the stars of their plays in other parts of the world?

Alceste: To hell with my play. Just tell me why you let so many men chat you up?

Celimene: For heaven's sake, the same thing over and over again! I received another two bouquets and in return I gave another two formal kisses, that's all. Is it my fault that men find me attractive? Should I pour sulphuric acid over myself? I don't even know where they sell it.

Alceste: I know you're an attractive woman, but that doesn't mean you immediately have to pick up every man who likes the look of you!

Celimene: And who do I pick up?

Alceste: Stop working so hard at it and there'll be fewer admirers in no time.

Celimene: You're beastly.

Alceste: Why beastly? I'm just saying that if you narrowed down your selection, the quality would improve. Why do you let yourself be chatted up not only by a bad lot like Oronte, but even by such ridiculous dummies as that foreigner and his interpreter?

Celimene: You see! They're ridiculous - and you're jealous of them! But if you could only see how repulsive you are when you're jealous.

Alceste: How can I not be jealous when I saw that foreigner telling you he loved you? He even knelt, so he could go straight to the point! And that interpreter of his interpreted in such a way that he was licking your ear!

Celimene: Occupational disease - interpreters always lick your ear. And don't you know foreigners? Don't you know how quickly they fall in love?

Alceste: Oh, and do they all have to fall in love with you? Do you know how many foreigners there are in the world? There are a billion Chinese for a start... Celimene, have done with them all! Just to see them all around you - that's more than I can bear and not...

Celimene: You couldn't bear it even if you saw twelve apostles around me.

Alceste: Yes - you're right. Why should you socialise with everyone?

Celimene: What's wrong with that? If I socialise with everyone - I'm not really socialising with anyone... I'm just being equally nice to everyone.

Alceste: That's just it! You're nice - to everyone!

Celimene: And should I be nice to just one of them? Particularly nice? That's when you'd begin to be really jealous!

Alceste: I'm jealous because the one you'd be particularly nice to wouldn't be me!

Celimene: What do you mean, it wouldn't be you? You're the only man I'm really fond of, even though you don't deserve it at

all! Don't you know that?

Alceste: How am I expected to know that?

Celimene: Well, I'm just telling you – and you? You don't even kiss me of your own accord – even though that foreigner Acaste and his interpreter would have done so at once, if I hadn't beaten them to it. And I guess I must beat you to it, too. *(Kisses him passionately.)*

Alceste: What was that you said, Celimene – that was Acaste?

Celimene: Yes, it was Acaste! The foreign thinker you so admire! And he's still thinking now he's here – and still about the same thing. You've told me so much about him. About his book... And now, when he's suddenly here, at the rehearsal of your play – you're capable of killing him by mistake! Instead of being glad that I showed him the respect you've taught me to have for him – you reproach me for being too nice to him! *(To Eliante.)* What do you say to that, Eliante, aren't I right?

Eliante: I don't know...

Alceste: I'm sorry, Celimene... I didn't know... So that is Acaste! I must talk to him! *(Leaves through the door next to the bar.)*

12/

Eliante: This'll be a good moment for my interview! I must go and join them.

(Leaves through the door next to the bar.)

13/

Alceste, Acaste, Clitandre and Eliante: *(A moment later the door opens again and they all come back into the bar.)*

Clitandre: Yes, this is Mr. Acaste and I'm his interpreter, Clitandre.

Alceste: I'm Alceste, the author of the play you've come to see rehearsed!

Clitandre: This is Mr. Alceste. The author of the play.

Acaste: Glad to meet you.

Clitandre: Mr. Alceste doesn't agree with you.

Alceste: What he says...

Clitandre: We are going our own way.

Alceste: ...has nothing to do with what he wrote!

Clitandre: And you shouldn't interfere with us.

Acaste: Oh, of course, I didn't want to offend him.

Clitandre: He's already tasted our national dish – sheep's cheese with potato dumplings.

Acaste: I'm a guest in your country and it is my duty to respect its special circumstances.

Clitandre: Sheep's whey as well.

Acaste: We'd better change the subject.

Clitandre: He'd taste our acidophilus milk, too, but you can't get it anywhere. But what he enjoyed most was the kiss he received from Celimene.

Alceste: Tell him I'm disappointed with our talk. And he should leave Celimene alone, or he might find himself in for something.

And you might, too, because you're no better!

Clitandre: Calm down, Alceste. I'm only doing my job. I'm sorry you don't like what Mr. Acaste is saying, but I can't interpret anything else. It's my duty to interpret exactly. *(Acaste and Clitandre leave through the door next to the bar, going back into the auditorium.)*

14/

Eliante: *(approaches Alceste with her notebook)* Marvellous! *(Makes a note.)* What you said about absolute frankness of opinion being the basic prerequisite for the creation of any form of art! *(Jots this down.)* As well as what you said about your conversation being a disappointment to you. I wanted to ask you for an interview just along those lines.

(Makes a note.)

Alceste: What was marvellous about my conversation with that man?

Nothing whatsoever! He really did disappoint me. Until I met him in person, I thought he must be as honest and courageous as the ideas in his book. But I can see he's just an ordinary sycophant, who writes one thing at home and says another here. Looking to others for support – what a waste of time and effort! What's marvellous about it when you suddenly discover that it really makes no difference whether you're among people or in the middle of a desert – you're always alone in the world with your own worries.

Eliante: *(makes a note of this)* Alone in the world. Marvellous!

Alceste: Why marvellous! Unfortunately, it's normal – and it's certainly not worth your writing about it.

Eliante: But it is marvellous, really! You speak so openly about everything – so consistently – that it's all the same whether you are talking about things public or things private.

Alceste: And why should there be any difference between the one and the other? What I say is – the more a person loves someone, the less they should flatter them, whether it's love for a woman or love of one's country. Real feeling is sincere feeling, and therefore it must include everything, regardless of whether it's pleasant or unpleasant for the country or the woman. To hell with hypocrisy, when the person who loves me only praises my faults and foibles, when – whether I'm a woman or a country – they adapt themselves without grumbling to every change in me...

Eliante: *(makes a note)* ... without grumbling to every change... Marvellous!

Alceste: ...and when, whether for them I'm a statesman or a someone they love, they applaud every bit of bullshit that comes out of my mouth!

Eliante: Marvellous! *(Claps, then hesitates before jotting it down.)*

Marvellous! The way you formulate things pins them down so precisely and at the same time can apply to different things... But if you'd allow me, because it's not just me who decides what appears in print, I'd like to devote more attention – even if it may seem rather one-sided – nevertheless, to the private aspect of your reflections... What you said about love, about a loved one... I'd like to direct your thoughts to one more aspect, so that we can really cover the whole spectrum of amorous feeling. When someone in love speaks sincerely about the one they love or directly to them, their observations may be predominantly positive – while these observations needn't be insincere. That's because a person in love sees the loved one as a kind of archetype... The transcending principle of mother or father ... And like an adoring child, they mark the loved one's minus points with a plus sign and in their verbal expression they subconsciously euphemise them. By observing people I've come to realise that a woman who is as pale as a ghost is quite sincerely described by the man who loves her as white as jasmine! Because that's how he sees her! *(Eliante poses, as if suggesting that she could be seen idealised like this.)* In the same way he calls a skinny whippet a slim doe, a fat belly a majestic creature, a dishevelled broom a child of nature, a stuck-up woman a regal figure and a stupid fool a good soul. In short, a man in love loves the woman he loves with all her shortcomings – as a whole. By this I don't want to correct your idea of unconditional sincerity, quite the opposite, I highly approve of it – you're marvellous! Go on! I have a feeling that this is going to be

an excellent, spontaneous interview!

Alceste: I suspect I've never in my whole life heard anyone talk so much nonsense in such a short time! (*Takes her notebook from her and runs an eye over what she has written.*) Miss Journalist, I won't allow you to publish any interview whatsoever with me. I can see that even in the case of love you'd apply that beautifying of ugliness which is the overriding approach of that paper of yours. I can see that anyone who wants to love you will be forced to apply the same principle in bed as well!

Eliante: No, no, why? I approve of your principle. True feeling is the same as sincerity. Even if unpleasant things have to be said... I, for instance, could bear all that from such a person as yourself and I'd still love him...

Alceste: Really? Unfortunately, it won't be easy to find a person who wants to love you and to tell you unpleasant things out of true feeling. Even if he happened to appear in your proximity, how would you notice he loves you through those bullet-proof glasses?

Eliante: With the eyes of the soul! I shall hear unpleasant things... And at the same time feel true feeling.

Alceste: Huh, I can see you might even misunderstand me! You're distorting what I said. Give me that! (*Tears up her notebook.*)

You're forgetting, Miss Eliante, that true love and true hate are sometimes as alike as sisters.

Eliante: Marvellous! (*Pulls another notebook out of her handbag and jots this down.*) ...alike as sisters.

Alceste: (*Waits until Eliante has finished writing and then tears up this second notebook.*)

Eliante: Marvellous!

(*Alceste leads Eliante out through the door next to the bar leading to the auditorium.*)

(*Musical interval.*)

15/

Celimene: Tell me, Philinte, is it normal for him to be so jealous? Has he any reason to be?

Philinte: I can't know that, Celimene. You'll have to ask Mrs Arsinoe. She just coming.

(*Tries to mend the espresso maker.*)

16/

Arsinoe: (*Approaches from the wings without noticing Philinte and Celimene. She walks along the front of the stage, looking at the invisible fourth wall.*)

Philinte: Good morning, Mrs Arsinoe.

Celimene: Arsinoe! I haven't seen you in a hundred years!

Arsinoe: I'm not that old yet. Good morning, Philinte.

Celimene: I've been telling myself I should pop in to see whether you're not ill... Have you come to watch the rehearsal?

We're just having a break. Come and have something.

Arsinoe: And what? The espresso is no doubt out of order again - and I make better instant at home. I've just come to have a look at the new decoration in the foyer...

Celimene: But it's almost two months since Oronte's wall was officially uncovered. Is it that long since you were last here?

Arsinoe: Are you trying to say that it's been that long since I was on the stage? Well, what can I do, darling? I'm so good they prefer not to give me a role, so I won't outshine the others.

I just come for my pay - and sometimes I even send someone else to collect that.

Philinte: I'd change places with you any day, Mrs. Arsinoe.

Arsinoe: Well, I'm not complaining, either... I've spent enough time standing on the stage. Now I've more time to concentrate

on other work – and let someone else enjoy the main roles.

For a season or two.

Celimene: It's hard for me to live up to your standard, Arsinoe. You were wonderful in all those roles I've taken over from you.

I used to be your great admirer when I was a child.

Arsinoe: Well, you were already a very well-developed child when you were still playing walk-on parts. But I'm glad the producers have noticed you at last. I never doubted they would in the end – after all, you put so much effort into it.

Celimene: Dear Arsinoe. You overestimate me. It happened by itself and I know very well that I can't take any credit for what nature gave me. The producers simply noticed that I'm younger than you.

Arsinoe: That's a fact. A whole five years. But even though you're so very young, I've no doubt you're sensible and that you will understand the well-intentioned advice of an older colleague.

Take a little more care, Celimene, of your good reputation.

Celimene: I do that, Arsinoe – after all, I had you as a shining example!

Arsinoe: It's not a question of the example I set you, darling, but of how you make sure you don't become a subject for gossip.

The other day I was with a group of people who spent the whole time talking about nothing else but you.

Celimene: I had no idea my popularity as an actress was growing so fast.

Arsinoe: They didn't even get on to the subject of the theatre – so much time was taken up with the information they had about your private life. They said your lovers couldn't be counted on the fingers of both hands. I assured them they must be exaggerating...

Celimene: Thank you.

Arsinoe: No need, I was only telling the truth. Where would you find that many lovers? But I found it harder to refute their claims that you inspired Oronte when he painted those naked bodies reaching out for the sun in our foyer... They say you could be found stark naked in his studio every day – they watched you through that big window of his – Oronte never draws the curtains on account of the light.

Celimene: How do you know that?

Arsinoe: That's what they say. I had to admit that I hadn't been here for ages and that I hadn't yet seen his work in the foyer. Today's the first time.

Celimene: And you think you can see me there? For goodness' sake, Arsinoe, do the people who claim I posed as a model for Oronte live in the nineteenth century? Nowadays when an artist paints a nude, he doesn't even need a model to sit for him – and certainly not for an allegory like this!

Arsinoe: These people live in the twentieth, my dear, and they know as well as you do that an undressed woman is still good inspiration for an artist, whether she's sitting, standing or lying down.

Celimene: Even if that were true – they'd have to want to very much to see anyone in particular in any of those bodies.

Arsinoe: The opposite happens, too, and someone sees something like that just when he's afraid he might and when he really doesn't want to see it. I wouldn't hesitate to say that if Alceste took a closer look at this work he'd have to realise that some details of some of the bodies look familiar.

Celimene: I don't undress in front of Alceste... so often as you think, dear Arsinoe... Or in front of Oronte! Alceste hasn't noticed any such thing about this picture – and I don't advise you to put that silly idea in his head. He doesn't like it

when someone slanders me.

Arsinoe: But he likes the truth, if I remember rightly. He likes speaking it and no doubt he's equally glad to hear it. So, even if I don't draw his attention to it, someone else is sure to...

Celimene: You're the only one who could, Arsinoe. None of us mixes with people who invent such silly suspicions. And so far as truth is concerned – don't imagine that the fact that Alceste likes to speak the truth means he's equally glad to hear it.

Arsinoe: That's a fact! I forgot that Alceste is very jealous – and if he heard anything like that, he might even kill you.

Celimene: Or himself – and he would have been killed by a lie! Fortunately, nothing like that will happen – you've always said you're religious – and if you drove someone to suicide, God wouldn't like it! And what's more, it's said that he who sees immorality everywhere around him is usually immoral himself! What would those people say who claim that your piousness is just a veil you use in an attempt to hide what everyone already knows: that you bring boys home for the night to teach them a thing or two! Believe me, though, that I always defend you when I hear something like that.

Arsinoe: Thank you.

Celimene: Don't mention it. After all, it's enough to look at you and it must be obvious to everyone that you don't know an awful lot that you could teach them.

Arsinoe: I know enough, darling, to be able to call you by your right name.

Celimene: Goodness me, don't get excited, it's not healthy at your age! You might even get a heart attack!

Arsinoe: Don't worry, I'll last out until Alceste arrives!

Celimene: You can spit out everything you have on your mind. The question is whether he will understand that you're telling him all that out of love... You used to chase after him, too, and I can remember how he used to run away from you and shout – „Don't do that, auntie!“ You never managed to hook him and I can see you haven't learned your lesson. You're going to try the wrong tactics on him again.

Arsinoe: Don't think so highly of yourself, you little snake! If I wanted to, I could snatch him away from you today!

Celimene: Really? Then don't hesitate to do it! Grab him – no doubt you have a chance! If nothing else, at least he'll take fright. But when you tell him what you're intending to about me, all you'll achieve is to make him more jealous over me than ever. And he'll love me even more. By the way, Oronte is here at the rehearsal today. And I'm not sure if he'd be glad to hear the gossip you're spreading about his studio – or whether you'd ever be given a chance to bark again.

17/

Alceste: (*enters through the door next to the bar*) Who's chatting you up this time?

Celimene: Now, now, Alceste! Control yourself! It's our dear friend Arsinoe. Well, I must hurry back to the stage... Arsinoe, dear, do you know what a stage is?... It's where plays are performed. Keep Alceste amused in the meantime. (*Kisses Arsinoe and leaves through the door next to the bar.*)

18/

Alceste: I'm not in the mood to be amused. You'll have a hell of a job to amuse me!

Arsinoe: But why, Alceste? Believe me I couldn't have been given a more pleasant task. I'll amuse you... To talk to someone

like you!... Your noble nature evokes not only deep respect – but even love... You have such personal charm. And your great work... When are those up there going to notice it at last and give you some title? You've deserved it ages ago.

Alceste: And what makes you think I want something like that, Arsinoe?

Arsinoe: Less remarkable people have got them...

Alceste: But there are better people than me who are worse off than I am...

Arsinoe: Who could be compared to you? Your deserts...

Alceste: Don't mention deserts to me. Even if I actually had any – it'd be nothing to be proud of! Deserts today are more something to be ashamed of... They won't be the deserts of tomorrow.

Arsinoe: But I mean those real deserts... They can be acquired at any time and no time can take them away from you... And if you held some office as well... I could help you in that respect...

Alceste: What have I done to deserve such a terrible idea! The higher the office you hold, the less free you are! I haven't got what it takes for something like that. I long for truth and openness – where do you think, in what official post are qualities like that desirable? If you don't know how to pretend, you shouldn't aim for such things – they'll let you in one door and kick you out through another. If you don't want to make a clown of yourself you must avoid all offices, all honours, all titles – after all, what could be a greater honour for a person in this world than the happiness of being oneself!

Arsinoe: Ah, happiness! You're right, we should allow ourselves that luxury. But for that, is it enough to avoid official posts and honours, if your private life is in a mess? Can someone be considered to be themselves if, in spite of not wishing to be a clown, they have unsuspectingly been made a clown anyway – not by those up there, who they successfully manage to avoid, but by those closer to them, who they come into contact with every day?

Alceste: Who are you thinking of?

Arsinoe: No one in particular. But you must always take into account that even the people nearest to you can deceive you.

Alceste: If you want to slander Celimene, you're talking to the wrong person. The fact that I love truth doesn't mean I like gossip!

Arsinoe: Did I mention her name? I don't like gossip, either – I always prefer evidence you can look at and then there's no need for words.

(She walks along the fourth wall again, looking at Oronte's work.)

Alceste: What evidence have you in mind? *(He, too, looks at Oronte's work.)*

Arsinoe: None. Did I say anything about any concrete evidence?

I was just thinking in general – after all, it's happened to a lot of people. They could bear all the public wrongs and blows of fate which came from above... from below... from left... from right... but they were ruined by what happened in their own homes and hearts, when they suddenly found out that the love they expected to draw strength from, was not love, and the being they adored was just their dream, from which they awoke to cruel betrayal...

Alceste: Who can see into the heart of another so they can warn of something like that?

Arsinoe: No one – and that's why I won't say anything more. Anyway, Alceste, you are quite a different case. Although you

aren't granted social acknowledgement, you're happy, because you are loved and loved sincerely... *(Strokes his hair.)*

Alceste: Above all, I love sincerely and I believe that my love is stronger than other people's faults... And although I am jealous...

Arsinoe: *(hugs him)* You needn't, Alceste... There are hearts so full of love for you there's not the tiniest bit of room left for betrayal.

Alceste: There aren't... And even if there were, maybe they wouldn't even attract me... But I know my jealousy is just something I have to bear, just as a labourer must put up with the tiredness and sweat his work involves... but the main thing is the work... the main thing is love, which overcomes betrayal... only such love is of any worth and it's with that kind that I love!

Arsinoe: Then you're not against learning things that hurt about the one you love?

Alceste: If they're not just filthy gossip - no! I want to know everything about the woman at whose feet I lay my whole life!

Arsinoe: Then take a better look at Oronte's work! Well, who do you think was among the naked models Oronte used to paint those bodies reaching for the sun?

Alceste: I've no idea.

Arsinoe: Don't you recognise a single feature of the face?

Alceste: No!

Arsinoe: Not one curve of the body?

Alceste: No!

Arsinoe: Not even the way this one holds her head?

Alceste: No!

Arsinoe: And don't you know who has wavy hair like this?

Alceste: No!

Arsinoe: And do you want to know? Should I tell you myself?

Alceste: Enough, enough, don't torment me any more!

Arsinoe: Should I tell you, Alceste?

Alceste: No!

19/

Celimene: *(Appears in the doorway next to the bar. Alceste doesn't see her, but Arsinoe catches sight of her.)*

Arsinoe: *(laughs)* It was me! I was in Oronte's studio stark naked, without a stitch on me. Look... Compare it, see for yourself!

Yes, I was in Oronte's studio stark naked! *(She laughs as she leaves, passing Celimene in the doorway next to the bar.)* Bye, little snake, take care!

(Leaves, closing the door behind her.)

20/

Celimene: You see, Alceste! It was her!

Alceste: No! It was you!

Celimene: Aren't you ever going to stop insulting me with your suspicions?

Alceste: I will - but for heaven's sake disprove them!

Celimene: And if you want to know - I've had enough of all this!

I'm tired of having to disprove something to you over and over again. Yes, it's me in that daub! And not just once! All those figures are painted according to me! Yes, I undressed in Oronte's studio! Yes, I was there stark naked, without a stitch on! Are you happy now?

Alceste: No, Celimene.

Celimene: Well, I am.

Philinte: That's enough, now! I don't want any scenes here! People will be coming in soon... The interval's beginning.

(Music.)

End of Part I

PART TWO

1/

Eliante: (*hurries in after the introductory music*)What's been going on between Celimene, Arsinoe and Mr. Alceste?

Philinte: Oh, nothing much, Miss Eliante.You can see for yourself, I still haven't managed to repair this espresso maker – and that instant coffee irritates everyone's gall bladder. Alceste's in particular. He's probably got gall stones, as he had a fit when Celimene confessed that Oronte had painted her in her birthday suit. Alceste then ran out of the building and is probably now running around the theatre, but no doubt he'll be back when he gets over his irritation.

Eliante: In my opinion, it's not right to call what's happening to Alceste ordinary irritation. The reason why Alceste expresses himself so passionately is that he's so sincere.

Philinte: Well, I don't know, I don't know whether the court will call it sincerity, if Alceste happens to tear Celimene's head off in that fit!

Eliante: I'm sure there's no danger of that! Alceste is someone who knows how to express everything so convincingly in words that he never needs to recourse to action. And if he does, then only to the kind every woman must understand.

2/

Alceste: (*rushes in*) Eliante! Your name is Eliante, isn't it? Good thing I've found you here.

Eliante: Mr. Alceste! You're looking for me?

Alceste: Yes.

Eliante: Heavens! I never hoped... Have you decided to give me that interview after all?

Alceste: Forget the interview! Anyway, I've already torn up your two notebooks.

Eliante: I've got a third! (*Pulls out a notebook.*)

Alceste: Damn it, Eliante, don't take it out or I shall tear that one up, too. Don't you understand? I'm boiling inside with emotions that can't be described. That...

Eliante: Pull yourself together, Alceste! Our language is rich. There are other words you could use.

Alceste: Eliante, shut up and try to understand me. I'm disappointed, cut up, wounded. She confessed to me! She undressed in that blackguard's studio. She allowed herself to be painted with nothing on! And I – fool that I am – even spared him when I was talking to him here! I went out of my way to pretend that what I said was about some other artist. I took pity on the blackguard that painted this trash – instead of grabbing and tearing to pieces!

Philinte: It's a good thing you didn't – they'd make you pay compensation. And you always say the price of such creations is terribly inflated.

Alceste: It's Oronte I meant I would tear to pieces – and he's absolutely worthless.

Philinte: Let's hope he doesn't tear you to pieces! Calm down!

Eliante: Philinte's right. You mustn't let yourself be carried away like that, Mr. Alceste. I think it's the duty of someone as well equipped intellectually as you not to let your emotions get the better of you in this situation, but to get your bearings and cope with it...

Alceste: (*controlling himself*)To cope with the situation is now your task, Miss Eliante.

Eliante: Mine?

Alceste: Yes, yours.You're the only one who can help me now!

Eliante: I'd like to help you. But I'm on the outside and I don't know exactly... I really don't know whether I can...

Alceste: You can't – you must!

Eliante: I must? Well, if I must... But how?

Alceste: I need satisfaction.

Eliante: Ah, I see! You'll let me have that interview after all and I...
(*Pulls out her notebook again.*)

Alceste: No interview! (*Tears up her notebook.*) Fuck me! (*Approaches her.*)

Philinte: Ah, mama mia!

Eliante: (*retreating*) I can understand you, Alceste. And I know, that although your proposition sounds vulgar, you mean it sincerely... But what if your decision is rather rash after all? After all, it may prove to be an optical illusion...

Alceste: An optical illusion? I've never seen you clearer than I do now, Eliante, and I know that when you take those headlights off ...

Eliante: I wasn't thinking of myself... I was thinking of an optical illusion as regards that work of art. No doubt you yourself know how alike human bodies look when their clothes are removed, while at other times they'd make it easy for us to distinguish between them...

Alceste: I tell you, she confessed!

Eliante: That could have been an acoustic illusion... You could have misunderstood her.

Alceste: Oh, those journalistic tricks of yours again! Varnishing things pink again. Or don't you love me?

Eliante: (*still retreating*) No, no, no, I didn't say that! I'm only afraid you don't love me... Or you love me only out of revenge. And I'm afraid that in a minute or two it'll become clear that you've revenged an innocent woman, who could then consider you guilty in turn... And I... And Celimene...

Alceste: Don't philosophise, Eliante, I know what I know! To kill her would be too kind! I never want to see her, feel her, hear her or anything about her again – and what I'm proposing to you has nothing to do with her, it only concerns you. Eliante, I love you! From now on you'll be the only one I'll be jealous over! From now on you'll be the only one I'll torment! Do you hear, Eliante? (*Shouts.*) Fuck me!

Eliante: You've left me... quite confused... I don't know... when I analyse it... If you...if you... and that sex... (*Falls into his arms.*)

3/

Celimene: (*appears in the doorway next to the bar*) What's going on here?

Alceste: (*without letting Eliante go*) You whore! You see?

Celimene: Oh! I certainly can see! He calls me bad names – and he's enjoying a good hug!

Alceste: I'm not enjoying a good hug – I'm just honestly taking my revenge, you whore of whores!

Celimene: Then concentrate, so your revenge proves successful, and leave me in peace. Eliante, where did you buy that nice skirt?

Eliante: In the shop opposite. They've still got plenty left, in various colours.

Alceste: So you're not put out, ha? For you making love is like drinking a cup of water, ha?

Celimene: Instead of being grateful that I tolerate your hugging – you even reproach me for not showering you with reproaches like you do me! When the rehearsal's over, I'll pop into that shop, too.

Eliante: If you don't have time, I can pop over there and get them to save one for you, I know the manager.

Alceste: Because this is proof of your depravity, you headless bitch,

who keeps her mind under her skirt!

Celimene: I doubt if anyone knows how to think up bigger compliments for women than you do! It's a good thing there are only two of us here - if there were more of us, we would have to fight over you. Thank you, Eliante, be so kind and pop over there.

Eliante: No trouble, I'll do it today.

Alceste: Look, that's how a whore jokes when an honest woman blushes! She confesses to depravity and then she's even surprised I can't see straight, so I don't even know what I'm doing. (*Continues to embrace Eliante.*) How you promised me! How you declared your love for me! You could have told me at once that you can't help it, but your sordid appetite can't be retrained by the straightjacket of love. But no - you kept that from me - and instead you always blamed me for losing my temper! And look what comes to light - I had every right to be bad-tempered, it wasn't without reason! Even when you lied perfectly, my sixth sense was working even more perfectly! It was sending signals to tell me what was still hidden from my five senses - but what they were soon to discover, too. I went off my head - I know, I know - but you can't blame me for that, it was all your fault! Now you must put up with the fit that grips me! (*Squeezes Eliante even tighter.*)

Celimene: Oh, for heaven's sake, as if it couldn't all have been said without getting excited. Eliante - have they got it in red, too?

Eliante: Both in one colour and combined with blue.

Alceste: Madmen don't talk calmly - and I've gone mad! I already went mad when I went mad over you! And I was even madder to think that you were mad over me, too!

Celimene: But I was mad over you. I was, you fool, I was madder over you than you were over me! And if you want to know, I still am!

Alceste: Eliante, don't let that bitch get the better of me again! Don't let me be taken in again! If you're so mad over me why have you let me down like this?

Celimene: I haven't let you down at all.

Alceste: How can you say you haven't let me down - you confessed to it yourself!

Celimene: I only said it to punish you for always being so suspicious. I made it all up - you believed me? Alceste!

Alceste: (*lets go of Eliante and embraces Celimene*) Forgive me, Celimene! I'm an idiot!

Celimene: How could you believe such a horrible thing, when I was only joking?

Alceste: (*kissing her*) That's my cursed lack of a sense of humour!

Celimene: How could you imagine I'd be capable of something like that if you love me? You do love me, don't you?

Alceste: Yes, I do love you! (*Kisses Celimene wildly.*)

Philinte: (*attempts to embrace Eliante*) Eliante! Will I live to see the day, too?

Eliante: (*breaks away from him*) No, Philinte! I have to pop out to that shop. Should I get them to keep a blue one for you, too, Celimene? Blue suits you.

Celimene: Get them to keep a blue one, too, you're a darling.

Eliante: (*Leaves through the wings.*)

(*The lights dim. Musical interval.*)

4/

Celimene: Darling, if I didn't know you, I wouldn't believe what mirages jealousy can conjure up before your eyes. But I don't blame you, maybe it really is just a coincidence that I look like some of those women in Oronte's painting.

Alceste: Nonsense! They're all so badly painted.
Celimene: Yet maybe - some curve of the body... Of one of them...
Alceste: They're all the same - he must have painted them from some medical book. You've a right to be offended - how could I ever have compared you to the women in that daub!
Celimene: Even so, you might still think I'd been in Oronte's studio. They say there's hardly a young woman in this town who hasn't put a foot in there at least once.
Alceste: But you're someone! You don't go where everyone goes.
Celimene: You've hit the nail on the head, darling, and I'm glad you believe me at last.
Alceste: I shall never suspect you again. I'll never be jealous again. I'll never torment you again!
Celimene: And I shall never again think up something that could upset you. I won't. It was you who was almost unfaithful to me! But I deserved it. I shall never accept any bouquets from anyone.
Alceste: What would people think? You must accept them - after all, it's just an innocent expression of the admiration you rightly deserve!
Celimene: How happy I am with you!
Alceste: And I with you. It was all just a bad dream, which is over now. I feel I've become another person today. Now I'd see it as only human if you really had let yourself be painted - after all, your beauty deserves it... Maybe Oronte would paint better if he had the chance to paint you at least once.
Celimene: Even if I had nothing on?
Alceste: So what? Beautiful nakedness is innocent... I think I could quite calmly accept the idea of you standing naked in his studio...
Celimene: No!
Alceste: Why not?
Celimene: I don't want to!
Alceste: But you can.
Celimene: You're a darling - I know I can, because you trust me, just as I trust you. But even so, I won't take advantage of your permission and I won't set foot in Oronte's studio. Anyway, you can't park properly in that yard. If you don't want to scratch the left door on the wall, you scratch the right one on the dustbin...
Alceste: (*lets go of her*) How do you know that? You must have been there after all!
Celimene: No, I haven't.
Alceste: You have, you whore!
Celimene: What, again? And you said you'd changed today!
Alceste: I'd be mad to change because of you, you whore of whores!
Celimene: Have you been there or not?
Celimene: If you want to know, I have! And he slept with me, too! Well, are you happy now? What else do you want to know, you sadist? A gutted fish is better off than I am with your love! What have I done to deserve this punishment?
Alceste: Not you - it's me the gods have punished with love for you and I don't even know what I'm serving time for! There's nothing I'd like better than to have done with you, you viper, why isn't it possible?
Celimene: Don't worry, it will be possible now!
Alceste: You've no idea how relieved I'd feel if we parted, you adder - but I love you, even though I'm trying to resist.
Celimene: Don't worry, you'll get over it.
Alceste: I won't get over it! I love you, you beast!
Celimene: I'm madly happy, as always when you declare you love me.
Alceste: Love's like that, what else do you want? Love is complicated.

Love is impossible to express in words. But I swear to you I really do love you so much that I could strangle you! (*Kisses her.*) You've been making it up again, haven't you?

Celimene: You deserved it again. (*Kisses him.*)

(*The lights dim. Musical interval.*)

Alceste: Celimene! Let's marry! Let's pack it in! I'll stop writing plays and you'll stop acting!

Celimene: And what are we going to live on?

Alceste: We'll make a living doing some simple work. I'll catch fish and you'll weave. Or we'll work in the fields and in the garden and we'll sell what we grow on the market... That'll keep us... We'll have a little house somewhere in the back of beyond, lots of children, men won't keep chasing you and I won't be bothered by...

Celimene: Oh, for goodness' sake, how many times have I told you that I'm afraid it's just then they might go after you! ...

Although you don't realise it, maybe the only thing that protects you is the fact that you live in the eyes of the public – if you were in some backwater, they'd trample you underfoot with far less consideration. And me, too... The theatre is everything to me. I'm an actress and I can hide a thousand times better on the stage than anywhere else... And don't be angry with me for telling you this again – but maybe just my getting on well with Oronte protects you and myself against...

Alceste: (*pushes her away*) Thank you very much for your protection!

Thank you very much for a hiding place like that! On the stage you're hidden like the ostrich that hides its head in the sand and doesn't want to know that anyone can grab its bare bottom. One moment it's Oronte... the next that foreigner... and even the foreigner's interpreter isn't left out... in fact he's waiting outside until it's his turn, as is his taxi-driver... and the porter in front of the hotel... the lift boy in the hotel foyer... and everyone can enjoy...

Celimene: But now I really have had enough of you! If up to now you've had no reason to be jealous, from now on I'll see to it that you can be jealous every day! Because you only want what you don't want and you don't want what you want! You see everything in a negative light – and all your philosophical wisdom, which everyone admires about you so much, adds up to you always saying just the opposite! If you by any chance happened to agree with anyone, you would consider yourself very ordinary. But your terrible nature has gnawed away at you so much that you can't even agree with yourself! And that's why you don't deserve my love, or my faithfulness.

Alceste: Heavens, forgive me and quickly tell me the truth! You're not serious, are you? You're making it up again, aren't you?

Celimene: I shan't tell you this time, Alceste.

Alceste: Celimene! Then at least tell me...

Celimene: No, I won't.

Alceste: Then at least explain to me...

Celimene: I shan't.

Alceste: Then at least help me to understand why I love you so much, but at the same time I seem to be living in the middle of chaos.

(*Music.*)

Celimene: (*Leaves through the door next to the bar; in the open doorway turns round and recites against the background of the music.*)

You've got it all wrong! You've got that chaos inside!

In short you're the type who casts happiness aside!
From within that chaos spreads all around.
Quite clearly, without you, it wouldn't be found.
If it's really as bad as you'd have it to be
Why have you not heard the worst yet from me?
Why should I try to keep under cover
That this or that man is really my lover
And I want you no more? Have I said anything so hateful?
Nothing but reproaches – is that why I'm faithful?
You're much more inclined to believe your own inventions
Than my sincere oaths and best of intentions.
Misanthrope! Your worst dreams should come true,
You deserve nothing more – it's really your due.
*(The music fades out, Celimene leaves through the door
next to the bar.)*

5/

(The telephone on the counter begins to ring.)

Alceste: If anyone rings, I'm not here. I don't want to hear from anyone today.

Philinte: *(lifts the receiver)* Hallo. The theatre... They're all here...

Alceste isn't here... I don't know... He should be here any minute... Yes, I'll tell him. *(Puts down the receiver.)*

Alceste: Who was calling?

Philinte: I don't know... He didn't introduce himself.

Alceste: What do you say to that?! Nowadays no one is even willing to telephone openly! I'm not going to talk to someone who doesn't introduce himself when he phones.

Philinte: You're right there.

Alceste: Then why did you talk to them? For almost an hour!

Philinte: This was an exception and just for a minute – and I think it might interest you what about.

Alceste: I'm not interested. What were you talking about?

Philinte: Alceste, you've been summoned to appear before the committee.

Alceste: When?

Philinte: This very day.

Alceste: Where? I'll go there and I'll tell them...

Philinte: You needn't go anywhere. They're coming to see you here.

But I think you needn't worry... Alceste, you make out you're a hero, but I've wanted to tell you for a long time that you really aren't such a hero... You see, it's not so bad here that you could be... The situation really isn't so terrible as you see it... Here everyone tries to protect everyone, that's our national temperament... and that's why, even though you don't realise it, they keep protecting someone like you... And even now, when you've got yourself into a new situation... worse, it's true, than what has been so far... we'll again find someone who'll protect you and...

Alceste: I'm not going to look for anyone! I don't want anyone to protect me! I don't care a damn about our national temperament! What use is it to us that we're so kind-hearted?

What use is it to us that everyone tries to protect everyone – when there's a price to pay for it and the person saved has to surrender their best opinions? What does it matter that everyone is saved, when all their thoughts die?

Philinte: Well, it's better to stay alive than...

Alceste: Nonsense, a man without thoughts is really a corpse.

Philinte: Then you at least should do something to save yourself!

Alceste: I've told you endless times that I won't do anything.

What's more, I shall abandon everything here and go away.

Philinte: Go away! But where to?

Alceste: That's it, where to? Away, away somewhere, where I shall

be completely alone, where I shall be able to keep my human dignity!

Philinte: Oh, you're at it again, you're thinking! I've read that it's in complete isolation that humans cease to be human. It was in the papers - a woman who was ashamed of giving birth to an illegitimate child hid it for four years in complete isolation and when they found it... I bet when it really comes to the point, Alceste, you won't go anywhere.

Alceste: Why don't you think so?

Philinte: You couldn't bring yourself to leave Celimene!

6/

Oronte: (*enters through the door next to the bar*) Well, the rehearsal is almost over, Mr. Alceste. I've seen enough to grasp what your new play is about.

Alceste: No one forced you to.

Oronte: I can't help it - but I'm not one of those artists who are so engrossed in themselves, I have a natural interest in my colleagues' work...

Alceste: Women colleagues included.

Oronte: Women colleagues included, of course. After all - why not? After all, Miss Celimene's work is of the highest standard, although, as I can see, you're not particularly interested in it and your personal relationship to Miss Celimene is also equivocal, so...

Alceste: So you can happily turn her into a whore in your studio. Is that what you meant?

Oronte: I didn't mean anything. Miss Celimene has never been in my studio - although, I admit, she would always be welcome. But as far as you're concerned, sir, I'd like to say a few words about your new play.

Alceste: I'm not interested.

Oronte: You needn't worry. I don't want to get my own back for your harsh condemnation of my work by condemning yours equally harshly. I'm above something like that - and apart from that, I admit that you are a greater artist than I am and therefore I have no choice but to praise you even if you criticise me.

Alceste: I'm afraid this time I really have written something awful if such an untalented fellow as you likes it.

Oronte: Dear Alceste, talent and taste are two different things. Even if I have little talent, I can still have great taste and my judgement is unerring when I say that what you have written - is a virtuoso literary achievement.

Alceste: I don't give a damn for virtuosity.

Oronte: In spite of that, you can't help yourself - nature has endowed you with it even against your own will.

Alceste: It's truth that matters to me!

Oronte: Strange - you don't give a damn about what nature gave you in abundance. And you throw all your effort into something for which you haven't the slightest qualifications.

Alceste: I'm not talking about qualifications, but about the truth!

Oronte: The truth is on the side of the winners, Alceste. And he who can't distinguish between the winner and the defeated is to a certain extent handicapped, crippled. What nature gave you more of in one respect, she took away in another. Don't stick your nose into politics, Alceste! You have no sense of smell!

Alceste: What's a sense of smell got to do with truth? Truth is not a stink! Truth is a wind!

Oronte: But the wind of your truth doesn't seem to blow.

Alceste: Even a wind takes time to gather force - and then fools think that the calm is proof that the wind has died. But

then, when it begins to blow, all the coats flap in its direction
– and all those sharp snouts of yours look ridiculous.

Oronte: Let's hope your wind doesn't take longer to gather strength
than you can last out. Human life is short and we only live
once. With all due respect, Alceste, I must warn you. The
era of anti-misanthropy we are living in will be a long
one... And I'll be frank with you – those misanthropic reflections
in your play... you can be glad I can't recite them
word for word at the moment... you mustn't be surprised,
Alceste, if you bring disfavour on yourself.

Alceste: At least I'll know where I stand at last – it won't be very
different from the apparent mercy I'm told I've been granted
up to now.

Oronte: Well, I don't know, I don't know what you'll say when they
summon you before the committee!

Alceste: They've just summoned me. They'll be here any minute. As
you see, I'm not running away – I'm waiting for them.

Oronte: Really? So it's reached them so quickly?... Well... *(Oronte
whispers something to Philinte, Philinte disappears through
the door next to the bar.)*

7/

Oronte: Do you know what? If only out of consideration for Miss
Celimene, who has the main role in your play... and so that
you know that although you rejected my friendship, that
hasn't made me your enemy... Now that you are in trouble,
we must put everything that divides us on one side and we
must think how to save you!

8/

Celimene: *(Enters with Philinte through the door next to the bar.)*

Alceste: I don't care – I don't want to be rescued.

Celimene: If you're offered a life-belt, Alceste, you must take it.

Alceste: Why? Just so as to confirm what you keep telling me? That
you get on well with Oronte just because it might help us
one day? And what's your getting on well with Oronte
mean? Have you used all your weapons in order to get on
well with him? Have you used all your charm, which enables
a woman like you to get whatever they want from
anyone they want? Have you used your body? And
I'm meant to be glad it's so obvious?! Why my rescue will
be proof of your betrayal! I don't want to be rescued at that
cost!

Celimene: I haven't betrayed you, Alceste, I swear it!

Alceste: But if I accept this offer to be saved, you'll have to thank
him and even if you didn't betray me yesterday, you will tomorrow!

Celimene: Alceste! You're reproaching me again! And you have no
reason to. What's wrong with me thinking of nothing else
but how to save you? If you don't want me to, go away
somewhere, Alceste. Save yourself by leaving and quickly
– and I'll go with you.

Alceste: You'll go away with me, Celimene?

Celimene: Yes, I'll go away with you, Alceste – will you believe me at
last? We'll go somewhere miles from anywhere... We'll work
in the fields. We'll have children...

Alceste: But I can't ask that of you! Your beauty could suffer like
that.

Celimene: What does beauty matter, Alceste! Every woman must one day
lose her beauty, and woe to her who can't accept the fact.

Alceste: But you are an actress... You're only safe on the stage...

Celimene: No, Alceste! I am only safe with you. Let's go away, let's go
away as soon as possible, even before that committee can
get here!

Alceste: No, Celimene dear. You mustn't sacrifice yourself like that.

Just the fact that you wanted to do it has proved to me your great love – and I'll prove mine to you. We won't go anywhere. We'll wait for the committee. And whatever happens to me, I can bear it if I'm with you.

(The telephone rings.)

Philinte: *(lifts the receiver)* Yes, he's here. For you, Mr. Oronte.

Oronte: *(telephones)* Oronte. Yes. Yes? You don't say! *(At first the news he hears seem to make him miserable, but he gradually cheers up.)* To tell you the truth, I did... though not so soon... but I had an idea... Yes? Well, that's marvellous! Of course! *(Puts down the receiver.)* What are you talking about, Alceste? What should happen to you? The committee that wants to talk to you is no criminal court!

Alceste: How do you know so much about it? You've never had to appear before it, nor will you have to – there'll be no reason.

Oronte: I hope so, too, but even if I don't have to appear before it, that doesn't mean that I've never had anything to do with it... I've just heard that they've appointed me the new chairman of the committee. And they've entrusted me with the task of talking to you.

Alceste: Just you?

Oronte: I didn't make myself clear, Alceste. What kind of a committee would it be if there was only one person on it?

Alceste: It would be unanimous.

Oronte: There'll be several of us talking to you. The new committee which will meet under my chairmanship will include, apart from me, Mrs Arsinoe to represent the theatre union, Miss Eliante for the press and Mr. Philinte as a representative of the working people. The work of the committee will be public. Observers from home and abroad will be allowed to be present – Mr. Clitandre and Mr. Acaste.

9/

All: *(Those who Oronte named arrive. Arsinoe and Philinte take off their coats, revealing grey suits and ties and underneath them. Oronte, Clitandre and Acaste are similarly dressed.)*

Alceste: This is a bad dream!

Oronte: You see, all decent people who you know very well – so you have no reason to suspect them of being biased.

Alceste: From decent people I know well, I always expect the worst. But never even in my worst dreams did it occur to me that you, Philinte – I can't have known you well, after all... you scoundrel!

Philinte: Alceste, it surprised me as much as you.

Eliante: It surprised me, too!

Celimene: You're the only one it no doubt didn't surprise, Arsinoe.

Arsinoe: You're wrong there. It surprised me, too. But I must admit, it was quite a pleasant surprise!

Oronte: It took all of us by surprise – but why these strong words, Alceste? In addition to telling me who was on the new committee and appointing me as its chairman, they also told me an important piece of news. While we've been spending our time at your rehearsal, life outside has been moving on... There are always new developments... Times change... I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that the period of anti-misanthropism has just ended. We're embarking on the era of misanthropization! Every honest misanthropic attitude is welcome. Society needs the truth – however sharp! After all, a scalpel is sharp and that's why we allow it to be used if our health requires it.

Alceste: And that's what you of all people say? You, who are just becoming...

Oronte: Yes, me of all people! Have you known me so far as a man

without understanding? Just let me finish what I'm saying, Alceste, the biggest surprise is yet to come. One of the first tasks we have to deal with at the meeting you've been invited to today is to put right an injustice that has been done to you for a long time, Alceste. I'm thinking of recognition for your merits! Yes, it's been your turn for a long time. Friends, in my opinion, as soon as possible, right here and now, we should submit a proposal that Alceste, for his lifelong, admittedly sometimes more successful, sometimes less, but always untiring creative quest, should be awarded a title. Who's in favour?

All: *(They vote.)*

Oronte: Passed unanimously.

Celimene: Did you hear that, Alceste?

Alceste: A bad dream! I can't believe my own ears! A bad dream!

Arsinoe: A bad dream? A good one, Alceste!

Oronte: What dream? Reality!

All: *(Congratulate Alceste and Eliante tries to give him her bouquet.)*

Alceste: This is a bad dream! *(Refuses the bouquet.)*

Oronte: Well, that's done. What next? Aha! So far as your new play is concerned, don't be angry, but if I think about it and compare it with the needs of the new situation - it's not...

Arsinoe: It's not that bad?

Oronte: It's not that good! It's pretty uninspiring.

Arsinoe: Uninspiring? Well, yes, that's just what I wanted to say.

Oronte: It's too...

Philinte: Too outspoken?

Oronte: Too tame! You talk about titles and that kind of thing there, which - as you have discovered for yourself - can be solved with a wave of the hand, such issues are already being solved, tomorrow they will be solved and who will go to see the play the day after tomorrow?

Arsinoe: Fewer...

Oronte: Fewer?

Philinte: Well, maybe more...

Oronte: No one! That's how it is, Alceste, your new play could ruin your reputation and so I suggest that the committee decides that in your own interests we should leave it out of the repertoire. I'll put that to the vote. Who's in favour of leaving out the play?

All: *(Gradually, unwillingly, but in the end they all raise their hands.)*

Oronte: Thank you. Unanimous. So you see, Alceste, they all are of the same opinion as me. And you can see that we do it purely for artistic reasons. It'll be better if we wait for you to write something new, better, really daring, really misanthropic.

Alceste: This is a nightmare! *(He pinches himself, touches the members of the committee, but can't believe what he feels.)*

Where am I, in the madhouse? I don't understand it at all.

Who are you talking to? Haven't you mistaken me for someone else? Aren't you talking to some other artist?

Oronte: *(whispers into his ear)* No! I'm talking to you, you dung beetle! *(The telephone rings.)*

Philinte: *(lifts it)* Hello? Mr. Clitandre, for you.

Clitandre: *(Very slowly walks over to the telephone and after taking a long time to summon up his courage, he speaks in a shaky voice).* Clitandre. *(A moment later his face lights up and his voice takes on its original sonorous tone.)* Mr. Acaste!

For you. *(Jovially returns to his seat and informs those around him.)* It's for Mr. Acaste.

Acaste: *(answers the phone in a jovial tone)* Yes, Acaste here.

What? Yes? Oh, oh, oh! (*His confident voice breaks.*) Well, I never... To tell you the truth, I did... although not so soon... but I did have an idea... Well, what shall I do now...

(*His voice suddenly becomes jovial.*) Yes? You don't say! Well that's marvellous, of course. (*Puts down the phone.*) I've just heard that new changes have taken place in my country. The misanthropic era has just ended - we have embarked on an era of anti-misanthropization. Tell Mr. Alceste, that everything I've said to him so far should be taken with a pinch of salt.

Oronte: What's this all about?

Clitandre: Mr. Acaste congratulated Mr. Alceste on being nominated for a title.

All: (*clap*)

Acaste: (*bows*) I, too, after considering the matter long and deeply, have come to the conclusion that misanthropism should be rejected. And I'm preparing a new book - In Praise of the Bridled Theatre.

Oronte: What's that?

Clitandre: And Mr. Acaste wishes us all much success in the era of misanthropization.

All: (*clap*)

Acaste: (*bows*)

Oronte: And now I suppose we could have a little break in our meeting for a cup of instant coffee.

Philinte: (*Eagerly hurries over to the counter, slips, hits his head on the espresso maker, the machine hisses and Philinte, at first astonished, realises that it now works.*) And why not espresso?

Oronte: But your espresso maker's out of order!

Philinte: It's not! I hit my head on it and it suddenly began to work!

Oronte: Well, look at that! In these new times even the espresso works! All that's needed is for everyone to use his own head and not wait for someone to come and do everything for them. Well, then, espresso for everyone.

Philinte: (*prepares the espresso coffee*)

Oronte: And even though it's not on the agenda of our meeting, while we're sitting here drinking espresso, I'll tell you another bit of news I've just received, which, although it concerns me personally - will in fact be of interest to you all. New times deserve a new artistic approach. In this very foyer. I have been commissioned to produce a new artistic design for it.

Alceste: You, again?

Oronte: Me, again.

Celimene: Will you use me as your model again?

Alceste: (*thrusts her away from him*) Now you've given yourself away! So, you did after all... You whore of whores!

Oronte: Unfortunately, not this time, darling - some other time.

I won't need any models this time - it's going to be abstract.

But if you like - this time I'll bathe you in champagne!

They've offered me a fat fee again.

Alceste: Oh, Lord, could anything be more cruel,

Pity me who fought a constant duel,

Willing to risk a hangman's rope,

And now they say I'm no misanthrope!

That instant coffee stirred too little gall,

While others were feeling fine withal.

Oronte: Well, we are feeling fine. We're drinking espresso.

Alceste: They just did as they were told,

And now they stride ahead,

While I can only lag behind

With no more truths to tell mankind -

They know them all.

(Leaves the stage through the auditorium.)

Eliante: *(Tries for the last time to give him the bouquet, but he crushes it.)*

Celimene: *(not knowing whether to hurry after him or not)* Alceste, where are you going? Forgive me! I want to go with you!

Alceste! He'll do something - don't let him! Please don't go far!

Alceste: Don't worry. *(Reciting.)*

You'll find me in the bar! *(Goes out.)*

10/

Oronte: In the bar! That's the only truth he's now capable of telling us! That the bar is not here on the stage - but there where it always was. As if we didn't know it. People can't stop worrying about the truth, it keeps them awake at night.

Philinte, make another cup of espresso for Celimene.

Philinte: *(tries to make another cup of espresso)* Only instant. The espresso maker is out of order again.

(Closing music.)

THE END