

# Menander's *Old Cantankerous* and Moliere's *The Misanthrope*: Comedy as the Restorer of Social Order

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Moliere's *The Misanthrope* fits into the same comic tradition as Menander's *Old Cantankerous*. We can categorize these two comedies first of all as comedies of character since it is the central characters (Knemon in *Old Cantankerous* and Alceste in *The Misanthrope*) that propel the plot of the plays. Both plays derive their comic or farcical impact from the absurdity or inflexibility of the stock character type of their protagonists. Both deal with a loner who is incapable of fitting into society and eventually isolates himself from society.

Moliere's *The Misanthrope* can also fit into the category of a satiric comedy because the dramatist adds a dimension of social criticism into his play. *The Misanthrope*, taking a step further from a pure entertainment as in Menander's comedy, is a "hard comedy with edge" (Charney p. 130) as Maurice Charney puts it. Moliere, while maintaining a farcical element, combines a comedy of character with a satiric comedy. By alienating Alceste from the mainstream society and making him a social outcast, Moliere succeeds in having his audience laugh at their own falseness.

Since the social element is quite prominent in these two comedies, both indirectly, as in the case of Menander's **Old Cantankerous**, and directly, as in the case of Moliere's **The Misanthrope**, I find Feibleman's theory of comedy an appropriate approach to these two plays. These two comedies confirm Feibleman's theoretical point of view that comedy functions as a restorer of social norms and reaffirms the logical order of actuality through the indirect derogation of that order. In the last part of my article, I try to demonstrate how Feibleman's theory is an appropriate analytical approach to these two comedies.

As comedies of character, these two plays share many similarities. The protagonist, Knemon and Alceste, are both outsiders in their society. But their being outsiders is not exactly the same. Whereas Knemon is a physical outsider, (he practically lives as a hermit outside society) Alceste is a mental outsider. He is an outsider despite his living in society.

Though writing for different types of audience, Menander and Moliere capitalize on the farcical element of their protagonists. It is rather the Bergsonian "raideur" than the Aristotelian "laideur" that characterizes Knemon and Alceste. Both characters are excessively absurd in their inflexibility, their inability and unwillingness to adjust to the social norms and human society. Knemon strongly hates fellow human beings and shuns any possibility of coming across a human soul. He, like Alceste, once lived in society like other normal human beings, but for some obscure reasons, he exiles himself and lives like a hermit on a desolate farm. As a matter of fact, Knemon could be a version of an exiled Alceste if Alceste ever really wanted to realize his exile. It should be noted that Knemon's misanthropy is simple and not so complicated as Alceste's. Alceste's hatred of human society stems from his intolerance of hypocrisy and falseness of civilized society. Yet paradoxically, his hatred of human society cannot possibly exist outside human society.

Emphasizing the central role of the protagonists, both comedies disregard any suspense in the plot development. Moliere's **The Misanthrope** is a plotless comedy of argumentation, and though Menander puts a great deal of farcical actions in **Old Cantankerous**, he is not really interested in the plot

development of this play. Menander opens his comedy with the prologue of Pan which serves as an exposition revealing the plot outline of the whole play. As is the convention of the classical comedy, the audience seems to know what to expect from the plot of the comedy. They have in mind that they are going to watch a youth falling in love with a beautiful girl, but his love is expected to be impeded by the girl's father. They also know that eventually the youth will be able to overcome the obstacle and the play will definitely end with love, marriage and celebration. Hence, what they come to watch is the hilarious farce of Old Cantankerous' absurd behaviors. Pan's opening prologue defines the characterization of the protagonist and brings the audience to the action of the play.

This farm here on my right is where Knemon lives: he's a real hermit of a man, who snarls at everyone and hates company—"company" isn't the word: he's getting on now, and he's never addressed a civil word to anyone in his life! (**Old Cantankerous** p. 23)

Worth noticing is that Old Cantankerous appears on stage as a stock character. Menander does not bother to explain the cause of Knemon's misanthropy.

Moliere's **The Misanthrope** opens with the dialogue between Alceste and his best friend, Philinte. Functioning in the same manner as Pan's prologue, this dialogue summarizes the plot of the play. Moreover, it reveals the main theme of the play which is Alceste's inability to adjust to society. It also demonstrates the motivation behind Alceste's misanthropy. Most importantly, the dialogue reveals the conflict between the non-conformist and the conformist. Representing the "bon sens" or the commonsensical social norm, Philinte is a ruler against which Alceste's excessive inflexibility is measured. The play opens with Alceste's irascibility over Philinte compromising social behavior.

Alceste: No, I cannot endure this fawning guile  
Employed by nearly all your men of style.  
There's nothing I so loathe as the gyrations  
Of all these great makers of protestations,  
These lavishers of frivolous embraces,  
These utterers of empty commonplaces,  
Who in civilities won't be outdone,  
And treat the good man and the fool as one.

Most comical is that Alceste's tantrum stems from minor things that most people like Philinte accept as normal social behaviors.

Philinte: But one who travels in society  
Must show some semblance of civility.

(*The Misanthrope* p. 238)

Fascinatingly, Moliere does not allow us to identify with either Alceste or Philinte. We feel that both points of view carry weight. We agree when Alceste says that:

A man should be a man, and let his speech  
At every turn reveal his heart to each;  
His own true self should speak; own sentiments  
Should never hide beneath vain compliments.

Yet we also agree with Philinte that total frankness is impossible in society.

But utter frankness would, in many a case,  
Become ridiculous and out of place.

(*The Misanthrope* p. 239)

It is true, Alceste's inability to accept minor social fact makes him an exaggeratedly comical character that we cannot help identifying with.

Moreover, love plays an important role in the plot of Menander and Moliere's comedies. Despite Alceste's intolerance of social falseness and hypocrisy, he is paradoxically drawn to Celimene, the social coquette. Whereas Alceste hates the social etiquette, Celimene's reason for existence is society. She is a social being, she feeds on compliments and admirations from her male admirers. Alceste's attraction to a woman of a nature so opposite to his like Celimene, demonstrates quite well the paradoxical nature in his character. One might say that Alceste's love for Celimene can be one of the keys to the understanding of this play. Alceste wants to win Celimene because, in winning her, he will also gain admiration from society. The winning of Celimene confirms his vanity. Hence, his rejection of social values is only a pretext to gain social recognition.

We can see that in **The Misanthrope** Alceste is not the blocking character as Knemon is in **Old Cantankerous**. He is on the contrary the "blocked" character. One of the reasons that he cannot fulfill his love is his inflexibility. He wants Celimene to follow his rules, not the society's rules, whereas Knemon, in **Old Cantankerous**, is a typical blocking character. In classical comedies, it is the father who is the obstacle of love. Knemon here impedes the youth's love because of his misanthropic nature. Menander makes it quite obvious that he suffers from a social abnormality that everybody must get rid of in order to be happy.

Moreover, Menander attempts to show us that Knemon must learn the lesson that he belongs to human society. No man can be an island unto himself. When Knemon falls into the well, he needs help from other people. He learns an expensive lesson that almost costs his life. Menander emphasizes in this play that Knemon is an absurd character that must be purged so that society can be restored to its harmonious order. As Moliere uses Philinte as a representative of a common sense character, Menander employs Sikon, the cook, as the voice of social norm. Worth mentioning is that Moliere's **The Misanthrope** lacks the moralistic overtone of Menander's **Old Cantankerous**.

Sikon's statement suggests quite well a moral/social lesson.

Sikon: There is a God, there really is! You wouldn't lend cook-pans to worshippers, you miserly old heathen. Now that you've fallen in, drink the well dry, and then you won't have a drop of water to offer anyone either. Now the Nymphs have given me my revenge—quite right too.

**(Old Cantankerous p. 40)**

Needless to say, the cook's speech serves as a porte-parole of the dramatist. Knemon eventually learns that he must behave nicely toward his fellow human beings.

Knemon: Don't worry, Knemon will never trouble any of you again, ever. ( p. 41 )

In **The Misanthrope**, Moliere adds a social dimension to his comedy. Even though farce plays a prominent role in Moliere's comedy, Moliere's **The Misanthrope** is not only a pure entertainment but also a satiric comedy as mentioned earlier. In his comedy, Moliere portrays the existing values and social manners in his society. One can see that his characters are social beings. They are portrayed as social types and are nothing without their social roles. They all are playing roles in society, even Alceste, who always considers himself as above the social rules. Philinte understands the importance of adjusting to social rules. Oronte finds it necessary that his sonnet be accepted by others. Acaste is proud of his pedigree and his being the king's favorite. And as Celimene feeds on the admiration of society, Arsinoe scavenges on the gossip of society people. Alceste's "admired" misanthropy will be of no use without society.

The striking difference of Moliere's **The Misanthrope** from its ancient analogue confirms different conceptions of comedy in these two comic writers.

Verging on the realm of dark comedy, Moliere's **The Misanthrope** does not end with the fulfillment of love, marriage and celebration like its prototype. **The Misanthrope** ends with disappointment, the frustration of love and the protagonist's self-exile.

Alceste: May both of you forever feel like this,  
And thus experience true wedded bliss!  
While I, betrayed, and overwhelmed with wrong,  
Leave an abyss where vices are too strong,  
And seek some solitary place on earth  
Where one is free to be a man of worth.

(**The Misanthrope** p. 293)

In this play, there is no obvious element of dreamlike wish-fulfillment, as typical in classical comedy. Moliere's comedy, with its realistic social portrayal, is very close to reality. As one does not identify with Knemon in **Old Cantankerous**, one does not totally identify with Alceste, either. Even though we want to be able to do like him, our common sense tells us to follow Philinte.

I think Feibleman's theoretical view of comedy seems to be the most promising approach to these two comedies because of the highly social elements in **Old Cantankerous** and **The Misanthrope**. First of all, Moliere's play demonstrates quite well the social theme in its setting, characterization and dialogue while Menander's **Old Cantankerous** does not talk about any particular social issues, it indirectly confirms the existing social norms of the society in which the play belongs.

In his essay, "The Meaning of Comedy", Feibleman states that:

Thus comedy ridicules new customs, new institutions, for being insufficiently inclusive; but even more effectively makes fun of old ones which have outlived their usefulness and have come to stand in the way of further progress. A constant

reminder of the existence of the logical order as the perfect goal of actuality, comedy continually insists upon the limitations of all experience and of all actuality. The business of comedy is to dramatize and thus make more vivid and immediate the fact that contradictions in actuality must prove insupportable. It thus admonishes against the easy acceptance of interim limitations and calls for the persistent advance toward the logical order and the final elimination of limitations.

And most importantly,

Comedy, then, consists in the indirect affirmation of the ideal logical order by means of the derogation of the limited orders of actuality.

( Feibleman p. 461-2 )

I think Menander's **Old Cantankerous** exemplifies best this statement of Feibleman. As I have discussed in the previous part of this article, Menander produces the farcical impact of his comedy by the exaggeration of his protagonist, Knemon. Being a social abnormality, he transcends the social norms. In other words, we can call Knemon a grotesque character. Feibleman also points out the grotesque as one comic technique. He says:

Our familiar form of exaggeration is the grotesque. The grotesque is that form of exaggeration which occurs under the species of the ugly; and it works by combining the most unlike parts into a single whole. “

( Feibleman p. 463-4 )

Alceste also can be a grotesque character in excessive, exaggerated inflexibility. This absurd exaggeration in the characterization of Knemon and

Alceste does not only generate a comic effect, but also is a reaffirmation of the social norm. We certainly cannot pinpoint someone or something as absurd or abnormal if we do not know what is normal.

Hence, we can see that comic dramatists like Menander and Moliere use the technique of compare and contrast. In their characterization, Menander and Moliere indirectly reaffirm the logical order of actuality by contrasting the absurdity of their protagonists to the normal characters. In **Old Cantankerous**, Knemon is portrayed against a decent character like Gorgias or the public voice like Sikon, the cook. Menander allows various “normal” characters to voice how Knemon transcends the normal behaviors of ordinary people.

Pyrrhias: Away from this door here, as far as possible. He's a real son of pain, a man possessed, a lunatic,...

(**Old Cantankerous** p. 25)

In Moliere's **The Misanthrope**, since Act I, 1, Moliere projects Alceste, the inflexible Misanthrope, in contrast to various characters. He is rendered in, especially, sharp contrast to Philinte, the normal character with common sense. As a matter of fact, Alceste never leaves the social circle like Knemon. One doubts whether Alceste would ever fulfill his self-exile since without society Alceste would not have his *raison d'être* which is his irascible attack of social falseness. Hence, Alceste also exemplifies best Feibleman's theory that “comedy is an indirect affirmation of the ideal logical order.” Alceste's rejection of society strongly confirms his need for society in order to exist. One might say that Alceste plays his role as a misanthrope. Without society, without an audience to witness, to admire his acts, Alceste would not be able to exist. Moliere portrays in the play how Alceste, in spite of his tantrums is admired and sought after in the social circle.

This idea also holds true for Knemon. One can see that Knemon cannot be a social abnormality in his exile. His absurdity becomes prominent and strong whenever one tries to bring him back to society. He is judged, measured

according to the restoring power of the social norm. The dramatist makes it clear that Knemon cannot live in exile. He has to come back to live in society as a normal person or else he will be punished in one way or another. Hence, the grotesque absurdity in the character of Knemon is nothing but the affirmation of the social norm and logical order as Feibleman states.

Moreover, Feibleman states that “the contemporaneity of comedy is one of its essential features.” Both **Old Cantankerous** and **The Misanthrope** demonstrate their contemporaneity since both comedies reflect the prevalent, existing values of their society. As a satiric comedy, **The Misanthrope** especially mirrors the social customs, manners and values of the aristocratic society in the seventeenth century France. However, by alienating Alceste, his protagonist, from the contemporaneity of the society that he portrays, Moliere is more successful than Menander in both confirming and criticizing the existing values of his society. And this renders Moliere’s **The Misanthrope** richly universal as well as topical.

## References

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