

Célimène's Last Word

by
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“Go!,” says Alceste, “I reject your hand, and disenthral/ My heart from your enchantments, once for all” (Wilbur 150):

Allez, je vous refuse, et ce sensible outrage
De vos indignes fers pour jamais me dégage.
(Molière V.iv.1753-54)

And Célimène does go, without speaking. This, to my mind, is the most puzzling moment of this very puzzling play, and the smaller puzzle is the key to the larger one. Célimène, I think, is not expecting this response from Alceste, nor is the audience; and her reaction to it, which is certainly of importance to us, would be the final comment -- Célimène's last word -- on their relationship. But she says nothing, and that comment is therefore missing from the text.

It is not, however, missing from the performance, because the actress playing Célimène has to find a way to get off stage. This is no simple matter, nor is it trivial. Her body language as she makes the exit will say a great deal about her state of mind: is she crushed, humiliated, amused, angered, relieved, even perversely triumphant?

We may be uncertain, but we can be sure that Molière was not. In the original performance, which was the only one he was concerned about, he played Alceste, his wife played Célimène, and the manner of her exit was part of his artistic plan. If that did not find its way into the printed book, the omission proves only what we should already know: that Molière was, in the first instance, creating not literature but theatre, and the text is only the residue of performance.

Célimène's silent exit is all the more striking in the context of the way the last scene is choreographed. The disastrous reading of the letters is followed by a series of exits, by inverse order of the characters' importance. Clitandre, Acaste, and Oronte have had their egos bruised, and as they leave, each uses his exit speech to try to regain the upper hand. Clitandre, the least important character, is the first to go and has the simplest speech: in four lines he threatens to spread the news of Célimène's treachery. Acaste, in another four-line speech that is only slightly less childish, says that he can get other girls:

Et je vous ferai voir que les petits marquis
Ont, pour se consoler, des cœurs de plus haut prix.
(1697-98)

Oronte has eight lines directed to Célimène in which he declares that she, not he, is the one who has lost:

J'y profite d'un cœur qu'ainsi vous me rendez,
Et trouve ma vengeance en ce que vous perdez.
(1705-6)

This is followed by a couplet to Alceste bestowing Célimène upon him, as if it were in his power to do so.

Monsieur, je ne fais plus d'obstacle à votre flamme,
Et vous pouvez conclure affaire avec Madame.
(1707-8)

Still more complex is Arsinoé's turn in the spotlight. She gloats over Célimène and praises Alceste, who sees where she is headed and cuts her off by saying, with striking but justified, and even enjoyable, brutality, that if he wants another woman, it won't be her.

Et ce n'est pas à vous que je pourrai songer,
Si par un autre choix je cherche à me venger.
(1721-22)

So now it is Arsinoé who has lost face and must recover it in her ten-line exit speech, this time directed to Alceste, in which she echoes the techniques of both Acaste and Oronte.

Hé! croyez-vous, Monsieur, qu'on ait cette pensée,
Et que de vous avoir on soit tant empressée?

[...]

Vous ferez bien encor de soupirer pour elle,
Et je brûle de voir une union si belle.

(1723-24, 1731-32)

Four characters have left, four remain. Now comes the scene in which Alceste demands that Célimène retreat with him to his château in the country, she makes the counteroffer of Paris and marriage, and he sandbags her with his refusal. She is the fifth person to be humiliated in this scene, and the other four managed to find words that turned their exits into some appearance of triumph. Is it too much to expect that Célimène could do the same? She certainly has the skill, more than any of the others. The obvious, and possibly correct, answer is that unlike the others, she has suffered a wound to her heart, not just her vanity. But that interpretation commits us to the idea that Célimène has a heart, and there is a long tradition of productions that, rightly or wrongly, deny this idea.

On the other hand (and with this play there is always another hand), we could say that the four exit speeches that were just delivered were all transparent failures, and anything that Célimène said in this situation would be received the same way. Her silence then could be seen as a tactical choice to rise above the battle, to not dignify Alceste's rejection with an answer.

Placing these questions of content on hold for the moment, the immediate issue is one of form. Molière has set up a pattern, repeated four times, of humiliation, face-saving speech, and exit. With Célimène he breaks the pattern by eliminating the middle element; and this change, this silence, serves to focus attention even more on the attitudes expressed by her carriage and movement as she leaves.

Mlle Mars, called “la Célimène la plus accomplie que le Théâtre-Français ait jamais connue,” displayed in this moment

toute la fierté de la coquette, qui n'avouera jamais sa blessure . . . Dès le premier mot d'Alceste, elle préparait sa retraite, commençant une révérence qui s'achevait avec le dernier vers. En sortant, elle reprenait un air de défi ; elle avait un coup d'éventail par-dessus l'épaule qui voulait beaucoup dire et lui donnait l'air de congédier qui la quittait. (Descotes 122-24)

This was exactly the same effect in gesture that Oronte and Arsinoé were striving for in words.

Cécile Sorel, in 1912, surprised the critics by displaying a clear preference for Alceste (which shows how entrenched the idea had become that the *grande coquette* had no feelings at all): “Elle observait un instant son amant avec tendresse et, comme il demeurait impassible, elle sortait avec un geste qui signifiait : ‘Il reviendra.’” (Descotes 127) (It is wonderful to know what the gesture signified, but it would have been useful if the critic had described the gesture itself.)

In a Comédie-Française production of 1977, Béatrice Agenin, after the refusal, made a long cross to Alceste more than halfway along the front of the stage from right to left; placed her left hand on his left breast, while he stared stonily straight ahead; inclined her head briefly on his shoulder, her face averted from his and from the audience; then, the picture of dejection, continued a long, slow, painful progress back to the right, diagonally upstage and off to the side. There was no way the exit could have been staged to drag it out more or make her walk a greater distance. It was a beautiful exit; it made no sense, but it was beautiful, and the audience was, reliably, in tears (Herzel 350).

When we look at the play with the realistic sensibility of Antoinette and Arnavon, it can seem a little excessive to allow Alceste

to throw Célimène out of her own living room, and some directors have changed the setting between Acts IV and V so that she will have some place to retreat to. Of course, with the technology and conventions of the modern theatre it is possible to avoid having her exit at all. In the National Theatre production of 1975, Diana Rigg sent the *Newsweek* critic into this rhapsody:

In the final scene after Alceste has left her [note the reversal], she moves upstage to a window as the stage darkens, until finally she is caught in a web of light and shadow like a painting by Molière's contemporary, Georges de la Tour. The centuries merge in a timeless twilight, and Célimène is the fatal angel of beauty that even Molière could not laugh away. (Kroll)

In 1986 the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis took an opposite and even more extreme view of the ending. The play was set on the eve of the Revolution, and the final stage picture was this: "At the end of the play, her glass doors shattered by rocks from the street, she remained alone, caught in a merciless spotlight like Marie Antoinette, humbly yet vainly kneeling for mercy."

In short, Molière's decision not to provide a final speech for Célimène created a void at the end of the play that is much more apparent in performance than on the printed page: a void that every director and actress, starting of course with Molière himself and his wife, has needed to fill. Some of the stage effects may seem excessively showy, and some are certainly misguided; but the showiness itself makes the point that any interpretation of the play, good or bad, must hinge on the staging of Célimène's final silence - a moment crucial enough to justify the use of whatever technical means are available to the director.

Molière, of course, did not have controllable lighting at his disposal. He did not even have the option of ending the play with the final picture of Célimène forlornly, or defiantly, alone on stage as the curtain slowly fell, because there was no curtain. The only way he had of ending the play was to have all the actors leave the stage.

But strong effects can be achieved by simple means, especially when they clash with a well-established set of audience expectations, as *Célimène's* silent exit certainly did. An exit without a covering line is not only a shock in the immediate context of the last scene; it is very rare in Molière's plays generally.

Furthermore, it is fair to say that an exit without a line violated a kind of stage protocol that was seen as a completely natural extension of the art of acting before the realism of the late nineteenth century changed our perceptions of what "naturalness" in the theatre was all about. There is a world of sheer performance in pre-Chekhov, pre-Antoine theatre that was very rich and that we tend to miss when we read these plays with modern ideas of stage decorum in mind.

Consider Shakespeare. The actors may have been speaking blank verse or prose, but when the time comes for one of them to leave, he will break into rhyme, with an especially snappy couplet to propel him through the door:

I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

This pattern is most common at the end of scenes, when the stage is cleared, but also occurs frequently within scenes, when one important character leaves and others are left behind. The frequency of the pattern may be due in part to the structure of the Elizabethan stage, on which the exit doors were far upstage and in full view of the audience. The actor performing downstage, close to the audience, would either have a long walk to make at the end of the speech, or would have to work his way to the door during it, ending with the verbal flourish that might signify nothing more than "the speech is over." But even in eighteenth-century English comedy, in which the actors are much closer to the exits, the tradition continues to be strong.

A variation of the same pattern occurred in seventeenth-century English opera: a singer, at the end of particularly triumphant piece

of vocal display, would obligatorily make an exit, whether the dramatic sense of the scene called for it or not. My own reading of this custom is that by leaving the stage the singer made it possible for the audience's applause to call him back, blushing modestly. The whole ritual is still an essential part of contemporary ballet performance.

As late as 1885, in Pougin's *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*, we find this entry for "coups de talon":

Les coups de talon étaient fameux jadis, à l'époque où le drame et le mélodrame étaient en pleine efflorescence et passionnaient le public des théâtres de boulevards. Certains acteurs de ces théâtres avaient pris l'habitude, pour forcer l'effet et enlever les applaudissements, de donner, sur la dernière phrase d'une longue tirade, un violent coup de talon sur le plancher. Ce moyen assez singulier d'accentuer la péroraison de la tirade et de montrer qu'elle était finie manquait rarement son but, et l'acteur était effectivement couvert de bravos.
(I, 251)

Pulling applause: a grave breach of decorum in the modern theatre, in which the audience has been trained to hold its applause until the end of the act or, increasingly, the end of the play. But this modern inhibition is out of the mainstream of theatrical history. Molière mocks the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne for pulling applause, but his point is not that the audience shouldn't applaud but that the actors shouldn't beg for it so transparently. Applause was for many centuries a perfectly natural way for the audience to acknowledge the skill of the actor at a high point, not after but during a performance, even in the most serious moments of tragedy, as an eyewitness account of David Garrick's acting makes clear:

. . . the ghost goes off the stage. Hamlet still remains motionless, his sword held out so as to make him keep his distance, and at length, when the spectator can no longer

see the ghost, he begins slowly to follow him, now standing still and then going on, with sword still upon guard, eyes fixed on the ghost, hair disordered, and out of breath, until he too is lost to sight. You can well imagine what loud applause accompanies this exit. It begins as soon as the ghost goes off the stage and lasts until Hamlet also disappears. (Lichtenberg 161)

Such protracted and self-indulgent bits of stage business were of course exceptional, but only in degree: they are extreme examples of an utterly routine and necessary system, which on a more commonplace level included Shakespeare's ending couplets, of sending signals to the audience. These signals alerted the audience to the fact that not only the character, but the actor was about to leave; and the applause helped carry him to the door.

Clitandre, Acaste, Oronte, and Arsinoé are brilliantly written characters; but they are also roles that were written to elicit brilliant performances from the members of Molière's troupe. As each actor left the stage for what was clearly the last time, it was right and natural for the audience to reward them with its applause, for which the exit line serves as cue. But what of Célimène, who has no exit line? Should we assume that the audience, deprived of its cue, was so Pavlovian that it failed to give Mlle Molière the applause which she clearly had earned? This would be a hard fate indeed; it would cheat both the actress and the audience. I can only conclude that Mlle Molière made her final statement about Célimène, and that Célimène made her final statement about Alceste, through mime that was expressive, clear, and a recognizably skilful piece of performance. If only Molière had found a way to write it down, we would have much less to argue about in *le Mis-anthrope*.

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