Alceste's Return
Andrew Vorder Bruegge
Winthrop University, vorderbruegg@winthrop.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/cvpa_facpub

Part of the Playwriting Commons

Publisher Citation

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Visual and Performing Arts Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact bramed@winthrop.edu.
ALCESTE’S RETURN

A Comedy or Tragedy in Two Acts

Third Draft Revised @ October 2012
Cast of Characters

ALCESTE: thirty-something, a curmudgeon
CELIMENE: twenty-something, a wealthy, witty widow
PHILINTE: thirty-something, friend to Alceste
ELIANTE: thirty-something, Philinte’s spouse and Celimene’s cousin
ORONTE: fifty-something, an influential courtier
ARSINOE: forty-something, Oronte’s spouse and co-conspirator

Place
Celimene’s townhouse in Paris

Time
Spring 1670ish

Scenic Requirements: single set, interior
ACT I
Scene 1

Setting: a parlor in Celimene’s fashionable Louis XIV townhouse. Curtained French windows opening into the gardens line the upstage wall. The room includes a fireplace with a gentle fire burning, the appropriate chairs, side tables, writing desks, folding screens, sofas, lamps, chandeliers, mirrors, buffets, floral arrangements, etc. that such an elegant interior room would have. A door SL leads to her salon, where there is always a crowd of intelligentsia, literati, wags, wits, and witwoulds making the usual offstage crowd noises. There could also be music as part of the background noise.

At rise: Lights fade up along with crowd noise and music offstage left.

(Enter PHILINTE through French window from the garden.)

PHILINTE
Come along, my dear, dear friend. Don’t be shy. This is just her private parlor. Oh, really, you’re as bashful as a lad before the principal.

(ALCESTE enters slowly through French windows. He looks about the room.)

ALCESTE
I have to admit I didn’t possess the courage to come here on my own.

PHILINTE
Alceste, I’ve never seen you behave like this before.

ALCESTE
Like what?

PHILINTE
Nervous, fretful. And if any other man said these words to you, you’d blister him with a good tongue-lashing.

ALCESTE
That’s true, but I’ve been out of circulation.

PHILINTE
Three long years. We’ve all missed you. Your friends, your readers, your critics, your enemies have missed you. Even your editor has missed you.

ALCESTE
Good! I’m glad they’ve suffered.
PHILINTE
I know you’re just saying that. All those times I came to visit you, you pumped me for every jot of gossip.

ALCESTE
Yes, and all you ever talked about was my editor!

(They laugh.)
You’re a true, dear friend, Philinte. You defied my desire to see no one. I thank you.

PHILINTE
You’ve already thanked me by dedicating your new book to me.

ALCESTE
But I thank you again. Here, in person, face-to-face, with this embrace.

(They do so. ALCESTE then begins to pace nervously about the room.)

PHILINTE
As your most trusted friend, I can assure you that you have no reason to feel anxious.

ALCESTE
I can’t help it. No one else but you would have been able to drag me here.

PHILINTE
I’m just so glad to see you back among us! Your new book is a sensation. Your name is on everyone’s lips, and perhaps soon everyone will be putting your name together with . .

ALCESTE
You know I have allowed no one to utter it in my presence since she rejected me.

PHILINTE
Forgive me, dear friend.

ALCESTE
These three years have seemed like an eternity. My heart was aching with desire, and I tried to fight it. That’s why I wrote my book. It distracted me. I would stay up all night scratching furiously, then as the sky would begin to lighten before the dawn and little sparrows would begin their bright chirping, I’d look up from my draft. Usually, their singing would lull me to sleep right at my desk. If my mind was still buzzing with ideas, I’d continue on, sometimes right up till noon. Only then would nervous exhaustion drive me to bed. Once I finished my book, then I was confronted with my emotions again.

PHILINTE
Yes, I knew something was gnawing at your heart.
ALCESTE
When the book was finished it came to me clearly. I decided to stop denying it and act upon it. Yes, I love. Hopelessly, completely and passionately.

PHILINTE
But you loved before, didn’t you, with just as much intensity?

ALCESTE
I may have desired her before, but I didn’t truly love her. I thought that my principles were more important than my love for her, and it took me three years to recognize this ridiculous arrogance within me. Philinte, I’d better depart. I’m sure when she sees me again, she’ll spurn me, just as she did before.

(He heads US to exit.)

PHILINTE
(Detaining him.)
Alceste, my friend, why this dark mood? Usually, when a gentleman is about to meet the woman he adores, he smiles, he glows, he gushes endlessly. What is it that you fear?

ALCESTE (Sighs.)
I’ll tell you what it is. She brings out the very worst in me.

PHILINTE
No, surely not.

ALCESTE
Yes, it’s true. When I’m in her presence I’m jealous as a Turk, selfish for her attention. When she teases me or flirts with me, I become flustered. I never know how to respond to her, except to become vexed and irritable. Worst of all, I’m envious of her.

PHILINTE
You envy her? Nonsense!

ALCESTE
I envy her power over me. I desperately wish I could drive her insane with desire for me.

PHILINTE
Could any woman satisfy you with passion to match your own?

ALCESTE
She could! And why shouldn’t she? Am I not everything a woman finds admirable?

PHILINTE
I would think so, yes.
Am I not impeccably dressed?

A veritable fashion plate, my friend.

Do I not display the manners of a gentleman?

You are courteous to a fault.

Do I not make myself complaisant to all women?

Obliging and gallant when you choose to be.

Have I not proven my courage in the late wars? Do I not serve my king faithfully?

You are, without doubt, a true man of courage and daring.

Am I not prosperous, successful?

Your new book proves it.

Then how can she resist me?

Perhaps, because you woo her like a prosecutor badgering a hostile witness?

Pah! If only she had agreed to come with me, we would have been happy.

You don’t know why she refused you? Let’s try to reason that out, my friend. Is she not beautiful?

Helen reincarnate.
PHILINTE
Is she not well provided for?

ALCESTE
Her late husband left her everything, as well he should!

PHILINTE
Does she not possess shrewd wit and powerful intelligence?

ALCESTE
She is a daughter of Solomon.

PHILINTE
Is she not the most popular hostess in Paris?

ALCESTE
So you’ve reported to me.

PHILINTE
Is she not elegant, gracious and kind?

ALCESTE
No one is more so.

PHILINTE
And then there’s her irresistible charm.

ALCESTE
Yes, yes, yes!

PHILINTE
So, let me review this. She has wealth, youth, beauty, admiring friends, and all of Paris in her salon. Why would she run off to a remote, secluded exile with you?

ALCESTE
I wasn’t thinking so rationally three years ago! I believed that if she truly loved me, none of these things would have mattered.

PHILINTE
She loved you, my friend, and she still loves you now.

ALCESTE
Has she told you so?

PHILINTE
Well, she has dallied with one here and there, but . . .
Dallied?  With whom?

Perhaps, dallied is too strong a word. She has permitted one or two to escort her to the opera or take her on carriage rides, but she has looked at no man the way she used to look at you. I have seen her sitting at the table during a lively dinner party with her eyes staring off into the middle distance. And then a huge sigh wells up within her and spills out. It’s a sight to make any man weep with longing for such a forlorn angel.

And you attribute her sighs to her love for me?

Yes, I do. She loves you for all your virtues and talents and your well-deserved reputation among the literati. Those are the things that make you desirable in her eyes.

She could have loved me for those things in seclusion with me.

She wants all Paris to see that she alone has won your heart.

Why would she want that?

My friend, you understand nothing about the female heart. She wants to gloat!

Gloat? What a shameful, debased emotion!

Perhaps, but once you’re hers, she’ll delight in showing you off. The opera. Garden parties. Sermons. I can’t wait to see you at a dinner party next to your editor!

Blast it all! Do you think she’d make me do that?

What better way to gloat?

This could be far worse than the torments of hell. Standing at the top of the stairs, having to shake hands with simpering old crones and inane little whelps who fancy themselves
as poets. Having to talk about the weather, or clothes, or what the court is doing. Good heavens! I’d be clawing my eyes out and running into exile like a latter-day Oedipus.

PHILINTÉ
But you’d be at the side of the woman you adore.

ALCESTE
Ah, I love her, and so I must do anything for her. Well, anything that didn’t involve editors. Or sermons. If she expects that of me, then I’ll depart from her for good.

PHILINTÉ
Be warned, my friend. If you return to your retreat for any reason, you’ll not only forsake the woman you love, but you’ll say good-bye forever to your most faithful friend.

ALCESTE
What? You? You’re joking, aren’t you?

PHILINTÉ
Never. I remained loyal to you these last three years. You drained from me every ounce of patience that I have. I did my best to cajole you to return to society, and I’m gloriously happy for that. But if you slink back into your hermitage again, then don’t ever expect me to come visit you. Don’t expect me to defend your name and reputation against the wags who will abuse you. Our friendship will be at an end. Forever. And it will be your name that I will not allow to be spoken in my presence.

ALCESTE
My friend, your words are too cruel. You would punish me?

PHILINTÉ
Foolishness must be met with cruelty.

ALCESTE
But, my friend . . .

ACT I
Scene 2

(Enter ELIANTE and ORONTE from the garden US. ORONTE rushes forward to greet ALCESTE.)

ORONTE
Alceste! My old friend! Greetings, and welcome back to the world of the living! Ha, ha! I’m so pleased to see you here among the noblest minds in all of Paris.

ALCESTE
Thank you for your warm greetings.
ORONTE
I say, everyone, let’s drink a toast to Alceste’s return. Shall we do that?

PHILINTE
I’ll pour some champagne.

(He goes to the buffet to prepare the drinks.)

ORONTE
Splendid! Splendid!

ELIANTE
I’ll help you, my dear.

(She follows PHILINTE. Eventually, she will bring the glasses on a tray and circulate among them till everyone has a drink. PHILINTE will hover with the bottle to provide refills.)

PHILINTE
(Aside to ELIANTE.)

Do you suspect anything?

ELIANTE
(Aside to PHILINTE.)

Nothing in particular, but I’m sure he’ll grate on Alceste’s nerves.

ORONTE
My friend, what better time for you to make your grand entrance into society again? Just as your brilliant book has come out. Only you could write so brilliantly. It’s even being discussed at the highest levels at court. The highest levels, do you hear me? Why I was there only yesterday, and I overheard the old cardinal and an archbishop debating one of the finer points on the concept of love. It was fascinating. There I was in the presence chamber a little to the left-hand side of the room. I saw the two of them whispering intently up there near the front. My curiosity got the better of me. I mean, after all, the old cardinal is usually mute as an owl in public, but there he was chattering away. I edged around through the crowd as best as I could without drawing attention to myself. You know, the worst thing in the world is to draw attention to yourself in the presence chamber. Well, I finally brought myself within earshot of them, and I was amazed when I heard them repeating your name over and over as they whispered back and forth.

ALCESTE
I’m sure I’ll be getting a letter of admonition from the old coot any day now.
(To ELIANTE.)

Thank you, my dear.

ORONTE
Yes, that would be just like him. Nothing escapes him. You know, he reads everything and has the mind like a steel trap.

ELIANTE
You make me want to meet the old cardinal. He sounds like a dear.

PHILINTE
Perhaps Oronte or Arsinoe could introduce you. He’s in the next room, of course.

ALCESTE
I’m flattered to know that the old cardinal has read my book. Have you read it, too?

Read what?

ORONTE
My book.

ORONTE
Why, I was first in line at the bookseller’s to get my copy.

(He takes the book out of his coat pocket.)
Once it became the talk of the town, I went back and bought up every single copy he had left so that I could give them to my friends.

ALCESTE
And all your friends were impressed with it?

Heavens, yes! Absolutely!

ALCESTE
I’m sure your recommendation was what inclined them all to view it favorably.

ORONTE
Not at all! Oh, I have influence in certain circles, but your book stands on its own merits.

ALCESTE
Yes, well which of its merits most impressed you?
Why . . . er . . . uh, just like everyone else, I was amazed by all of it. You would do me the greatest honor if you would write some little dedication inside the cover.

(He hands to book to ALCESTE. PHILINTE brings pen and ink from the desk.)

ALCESTE
There aren’t any of the finer points you want to thrash out, like the old cardinal? I’m sure you debated about it every night for a week.
(Aside to PHILINTE.)
He hasn’t cracked its spine at all!

ORONTE
On the contrary, my friend, your logic marched forward in perfect step like the royal guard on parade.

ALCESTE
(Aside to PHILINTE as he writes.)
The lying oaf! He hasn’t even cut open the first page!
(Aloud.)
I’m glad I was able to cast my ideas to reach your lofty intellectual level.

ORONTE
Not at all, not at all. This is what I wanted to toast. My distinguished colleagues in the Academy are unanimous in their praise of you.

PHILINTE
Do you hear that, Alceste? You have impressed the Academy.

ORONTE
More importantly, I want you to join us as a member.

PHILINTE
What glorious news! My friend, I congratulate you with all my heart.

ORONTE
And I’m not alone. There’re any number of my colleagues who are ready to nominate you. So, let us toast our newest, brightest star in the firmament of genius. To Alceste.

(They all repeat “Alceste” and drink.)

ALCESTE
Thank you. And to you, Oronte, I say thank you for bringing me this wonderful news.

(He hands the book back to ORONTE after autographing it during the above lines.)
ORONTE

Ah! Thank you so much.

*(He reads the dedication.)*

“To my good friend, whose vision is miraculously penetrating.” You flatter me, sir. I’ll be the envy of everyone at court for having the only autographed copy of your book.

ALCESTE

Then I’m glad I could send some little bit of glory in your direction.

ORONTE

Speaking of glory, I’ve found a way to enhance yours even more. Shall I tell you how?

ALCESTE

I can’t imagine what greater honor could befall me, but, please, do go on.

ORONTE

Tomorrow, at the Academy’s first meeting of the session, I will stand up, I will approach the rostrum, I will ascend those steps to the podium and will nominate you with a speech.

ALCESTE

This is glory unimaginéd.

ORONTE

Not at all, not at all. Nothing was going to stop me from claiming the right to speak for you, my friend. And to think that there was a time when friction arose between us.

ALCESTE

I offer my apologies again, sir, for any offense I may have given.

ORONTE

No apology necessary, I assure you. It’s true that you severely criticized my poetic genius, but it all ended well.

ALCESTE

Do you mean, sir, that you gave up poetry as I advised?

ORONTE

Not at all. Quite the contrary. I sought opinion for a wide number of critics. The ladies at court, in particular held a view almost diametrically opposed to your own. So I forged ahead. Lands! I never slaved away at anything like I did to create sonnets for the court. Poetic composition can kill your brain!

ALCESTE

We’re all grateful that you didn’t take your own life with the effort.
ORONTE
Indeed. But the struggle was worth it. The Duchess of Orleans begged me to publish
them all, and then I received encouragement from sources even higher than the Duchess.
Higher, I tell you. So, I couldn’t decline to act at that point. I came out with a little book
of sonnets. I had it put out by the very same printer that handled your new book. I want
to mark this day of your return to society by presenting you with a signed copy of it.

(He extends the book to ALCESTE.)

ALCESTE
Your generosity overwhelms me.

ORONTE
(He forces it into ALCESTE’S hands.)
Look inside there. I autographed it for you, and I even included a little dedication.

ALCESTE
Yes, this is a most kind sentiment. I shall read this just as you read my book, sir, from
cover to cover.

ORONTE
Yes . . . er . . . uh, yes. And I can rest confident in my ability as a poet. I know not to
fear your severe opinion.

ALCESTE
How do you mean, sir?

ORONTE
Why, my good friend, your criticism of my poetry has been proven wrong. A chorus of
praise for my work ultimately drowned out your opinion. My book sold out, just like
yours. That copy I just gave to you was the very last one left in the bookseller’s shop.

ALCESTE
We should all take this as a lesson. Never contradict the crown or the masses.

PHILINTE
Truer words were never spoken.

ORONTE
Truth! That’s really what I wanted to speak to you about, anyway, sir. Since I will stand
before the Academy to support your nomination for membership, I must proclaim the
reasons why you’re worthy to be invited to join our august body. I have here a draft of
my oration. It’s prose, sir. Not poetry. Ha, ha! We don’t want to fall into that trap
again, do we, sir? Ha, ha! What harm could there be in a little prose, eh? But here it is.
I’d like to read it to you and get your opinion. More importantly, I want you to confirm
for me that what I intend to say about you is true.
ALCESTE
If you simply said that I am a man who loves his country, its people and the language we are honored to speak, then you will have spoken the truth in its purest form.

ORONTE
That is truly elegant in its simplicity. But that won’t do for this grand occasion. I will, nevertheless, work those noble words of yours into my text. Now, let me recite it to you. Here, sit down and relax, sir.

(He guides ALCESTE to a seat.)
Open your ears and your heart, sir. Relish the well-deserved acclaim I wish to give you.

(He prepares himself to speak by smoothing out his document, clearing his throat, etc.)

PHILINTE
(Sotto voce to ALCESTE.)
More champagne, my friend?

ALCESTE
(Likewise responding.)
Absolutely. Lubrication is the best antidote to loquacity.

ORONTE
I begin, of course, with the salutation.

ALCESTE
Of course.

ORONTE
I start by saying, “Your Eminence,” because, of course, the old cardinal will be there. He’s the Director of the Academy, you know, and has been for over a decade.

ALCESTE
Has it been that long? Please, continue your oration.

ORONTE
Yes, I begin by addressing his eminence. But what would you think if someone of even more exalted rank were to attend your nomination?

PHILINTE
Oronte, what do you mean?

ORONTE
Without boasting, I would like to say that I have some influence at court . . .
PHILINTE
Good heavens, Oronte, you don’t mean to say that his majesty would deign . . .

ORONTE
No, of course not. Such an occasion, as wonderful as it is, does remain beneath the royal
dignity. But I was thinking that I could, perhaps, persuade Monsieur to make an
appearance. Would you like me to beg Monsieur to attend, Alceste?

ALCESTE
I’m sure his presence would add gravitas to the occasion.

PHILINTE
Imagine! Being presented to Monsieur!

ORONTE
Then I will approach him.

ALCESTE
We’re all amazed, Oronte, at your active and devoted attendance upon the royal family.
Please, sir, continue your nomination speech.

ORONTE
Oh, yes, of course. After his eminence, I then name the archbishop by saying . . .

ALCESTE
Please, my friend, could you move ahead to your text. I wouldn’t want you to overstress
your voice on the salutation. Please, for my sake, sir.

ORONTE
Of course, sir. I will spare my voice for your sake.
(Clears his throat again.)
“We gather today to mark a great occasion. Great for a dear friend of mine. Great for
this noble body. Great for our glorious nation.” Do you note the repetition? The
alliteration? I model myself on the ancients.

ALCESTE
Horace and Seneca salute you, sir, as their most distinguished student.

ORONTE
And then I continue. “There is one among us whose light of genius has been too long
hidden under a bushel. What’s more, this great genius should be recognized as one of our
most esteemed leaders among the intelligentsia of our nation.” Do you think I should
catalogue your writings, Alceste? Or should I simply have them read into the record?
ELIANTE
My husband has copies of everything Alceste has ever published. You could present the whole stack as physical evidence.

ORONTE
An excellent suggestion!

ALCESTE
Do as you think best, Oronte.

ORONTE
And so I conclude. “Therefore, I, as a member of this body, support the nomination of Alceste, who I number among my friends,” Oh, you don’t think I’m making too personal an appeal there, do you?

ALCESTE
Most assuredly not.

ORONTE
Very well, then my last sentence closes with “as a candidate for induction into the Academy.” There! Short and simple and unadorned. I styled it that way as a tribute to you, sir, remembering your taste along those lines in things poetical.

ALCESTE
To be brief is to be clear.

ORONTE
Sir, this is a great day. Let’s go into the next room among all our friends and celebrate. I want to see everyone there raise a toast to you. Our newest member of the Academy!

(He leads ALCESTE into the salon. Giddy with excitement, PHILINTE constantly moves about, fidgeting, gesticulating, sitting down and leaping up again, etc.)

ACT 1
Scene 3

PHILINTE
Oh, Eliante, everything is working out perfectly. Alceste’s return to society is a complete triumph! I’m so happy.

(He kisses and embraces ELIANTE.)

ELIANTE
Believe me, I feel great pleasure at seeing him.
PHILINTE
Alceste’s book is praised everywhere. Everyone is welcoming him back enthusiastically.

ELIANTE
It’s not just his book that gets me enthusiastic, my dear husband.

PHILINTE
Oh, no, you’re absolutely right. We’ve all missed his brilliant wit and incisive mind. He’ll stir excitement wherever he goes.

ELIANTE
I’ve seen that happening already.

PHILINTE
He has Oronte’s full support! The thought of it just makes my heart glow.

ELIANTE
I know exactly what you mean, dear husband.

PHILINTE
And before long, I have no doubt, he’ll ascend to even greater acclaim once he’s in the Academy. Perhaps, someday he may become its director. Oh, imagine that!

ELIANTE
I can imagine Alceste doing many things.

PHILINTE
Eliante, we should host a ball for Alceste. What a grand occasion it’ll be. Everyone will be clamoring for an invitation. What do you think?

ELIANTE
To entertain Alceste would give me the most exquisite pleasure.

PHILINTE
Splendid! I knew you’d want to do this.

ELIANTE
I want to do anything that would please Alceste.

PHILINTE
What should it be? A dazzling midnight fête after the theatre? Dancing and banqueting amidst the blaze of thousands of candles till they gutter out at dawn? We can commission some new chamber pieces for the occasion. All the composers in town will want to submit their work. A competition! Yes, that’s what we’ll do. An international
competition for the most elegant selection. Popular acclaim will determine who is the finest in all the land! Now, what would be better for the occasion, opera or drama?

ELIANTE
I think Alceste would like comedy. Absurd comedy or farce.

PHILINTE
Comedy? Is that what’s called for? Then perhaps we should have a lovely summer evening somewhere in the country. Gentle dancing among the pines with crickets chirping in the background. Champagne flowing from a fountain that murmurs in echo to the soft breeze. A pastoral occasion like that would call for an exhibition of dance. Yes, wood nymphs, centaurs, shepherds, dairy maids. A ballet, telling a story of love, of course, set amongst the trees and streams. A prince in disguise who falls in love with a forest spirit. Yes, heart-breaking, impossible, unfulfilled love . . . but do you think that would be too indelicate a plot? After what Alceste has endured emotionally?

ELIANTE
If you present a pastoral ballet, shouldn’t it end happily?

PHILINTE
Of course! Let’s see, how can we resolve our little story? Yes, a magical reversal at the end where one or the other of the lovers is transformed. Do you think Alceste would like that? What would please him is what matters most to me.

ELIANTE
The best way to know is to ask him.

PHILINTE
Yes, right you are! I’ll go do that now. He’s probably there in Celimene’s salon being showered with invitations to every kind of festivity right now! Oh, my dear, you’re a genius! Thank you, thank you.

(He heads to the door of the salon, just as ALCESTE bursts through it onto the stage. ALCESTE shuts the door and leans against it with his eyes closed.)

ACT I
Scene 4

ALCESTE
Heavens! One more minute in there and I would have exploded. I’ve never seen such . . .

PHILINTE
(Going to him.)
What is it, dear friend? Are you ill? Here, come sit down.
(They move to a seat center stage.)

ELIANTE
(Moving to the buffet.)

I’ll get you a glass of lemonade.

ALCESTE

No, something stronger.

PHILINTE

Champagne?

ELIANTE

(Shes starts to pour a glass.)

Yes, of course. Champagne.

ALCESTE

No, stronger!

PHILINTE

Eliante, perhaps some brandy?

ALCESTE

Yes, brandy. An excellent suggestion.

(PHILINTE pours it and brings it to ALCESTE.)

PHILINTE

Yes, that will calm your nerves.

ALCESTE

I thank you, Eliante. You’re an angel of mercy come to a despairing soul.

PHILINTE

Despairing? My friend, let’s have none of this kind of talk.

ALCESTE

I despair because I am confronted on all sides by absurdity!
PHILINTE
Absurdity?

ALCESTE
Yes, absurdity. That salon is full of the most inane, vapid, overblown, superficial, ridiculous people I have ever seen! I’d laugh at it as if it were a farce, an enormously absurd comedy on the stage, if it weren’t so loathsome to endure.

ELIANTE
See? What did I tell you? He prefers farce.

PHILINTE
Alceste, next door are the most distinguished minds of the nation. The Director of the Academy and many of its worthy members, famous artists, theologians, diplomats . . .

ALCESTE
They, nevertheless, are a herd of braying jackals.

PHILINTE
What was so horrible? Why would you be angry at people who want to congratulate you and welcome you back among us and wish you success?

ALCESTE
Because they don’t mean it.

PHILINTE
How can you doubt someone’s sincerity?

ALCESTE
Because they say things I know they don’t mean. This one tells me he has missed me. Pah! No one in his family has spoken to me, written to me or called upon me for a decade! That one comes running up to me, grasps me with both arms, her fetid breath gags me because she is so close, and she goes on for endless minutes about the banquet she has announced in my honor. In my honor? Never in your life! She’s simply a social climber who wants to impress all her betters by making a trophy of me! Over there, another attempts to give a critique of my book in two hundred words or less. A fawning, gushing critique, simply intended to flatter rather than engage. It was disgusting!

PHILINTE
But, my friend, what harm can there be in a little flattery?

ALCESTE
When a wish of congratulation spills over into flattery, it becomes an evil force.
ELIANTE
Alceste, how can anyone’s congratulations to you be evil?

ALCESTE
Don’t you see? It’s a most insidious kind of inveigling. A person flatters another because he wants something in exchange for the false adulation. Flattery is selfish and it spreads the rot of deception to all who hear it. It corrupts human society because it is based on pride, the greatest sin.

PHILINTE
But those people in there would like to be your friends . . .

ALCESTE
In that room is a horde of loathsome flatterers who make me their idol today, and tomorrow they’ll be fawning over someone else.

PHILINTE
They all admire your book. You deserve . . .

ALCESTE
Most of the people in that salon haven’t read my book. Oh, the dolts!

ELIANTE
Alceste . . .

ALCESTE
(He mimes about the stage.)
This one minces up to me like this. Then says in a simpering voice,
(He speaks in an affected voice.)
“Your genius puts us all to shame. No one could surpass your handling of metaphysics.”
Pah! The word “metaphysics” never even appears in my book.

PHILINTE
Perhaps, you simply misunderstand . . .

ALCESTE
And that one grabs my coat and puts his face right up to mine and says in a mock whisper,
(He affects a hoarse whisper.)
“I’ve adored your consistent style, sir, over the years. I’ve never known anyone to write like you do. So forceful and persuasive.” Well, this old coot has been praising the style of my essays and pamphlets with the very same words ever since I’ve known her. But when I wrote my new book I chose to adopt the Platonic dialogue format, a style I have never used before in my life!
ELAINTE
Still, it was forceful and persuasive to my eye.

ALCESTE
Well, I forcefully persuaded her to unhand me and put her hands on my book at her earliest convenience.

(Again miming in movement and voice.)
And then another glides over to me, oozing like a garden slug, saying, “Your ideas are a great tribute to Saint Louis’ integrity as a truly good man.” I was left absolutely speechless by that. I’ve only been in town for a few hours, if that, and already I’m exhausted, infuriated, despairing, and completely sick of the mendacity of this world.

(He collapses on a seat center stage.)
I’d much rather sit here and brood, so please leave me in peace.

PHILINTE
Eliante, my dear, I think our friend needs more refreshment, if you please?

(She brings him another drink.)
Rest here, my friend. I will go and try to smooth all the ruffled feathers. Oh, dear.

(He takes ALCESTE’S drink, gulps down a mouthful, then hands the glass to ELIANTE on his way to the door to the salon. As PHILINTE exits, ELIANTE takes a gulp from ALCESTE’S drink.)

ACT I
Scene 5

ALCESTE
Eliante, forgive me. I’ve sunk into this reverie and ignored you completely. In my seclusion I seem to have forgotten my manners, madam.

ELIANTE
Madam? Such formality for one of your closest friends?

ALCESTE
It’s true. You’re very dear to me.

ELIANTE
You’re very dear to me, too.

(She grabs him and kisses him.)
Alceste, I desire you.
ALCESTE
(He moves away from her.)

Your affection overwhelms me.

ELIANTE
I just can’t believe that you’ve come back to society. Do you mean to stay?

ALCESTE
I hope so.

ELIANTE
(Moves to him.)

Good. I’ve missed you.

ALCESTE
I had no idea how much.

ELIANTE
I hope we’ll be seeing each other frequently.

ALCESTE
As you wish, madam.

ELIANTE
Good.

(She kisses him again.)

I’ve got something to look forward to. I’ll have plenty of opportunities to show you just how much I’ve missed you.

ALCESTE
(Attempting to break free of her.)

Madam, . . . I . . . it’s . . .

ELIANTE
You asked me to marry you three years ago and go off with you to your hermitage. I let my conscience get the better of me, and I’ve regretted it ever since.

ALCESTE
You’ve regretted your marriage to Philinte? He’s the gentlest, kindest man I know.

ELIANTE
And that’s the problem. His gentleness bores me to tears. You, however, aren’t . . .

ALCESTE
Eliante, how can you speak this way?
ELIANTE
You’ve always insisted that people speak the unvarnished truth to each other. I’m simply trying to practice what you’ve preached all these years. Does that shock you?

ALCESTE
No, it always requires great courage.

ELIANTE
I’ve come to realize that. Oh, heavens, I’ve been summoning up the courage to say these things to you, and I’m gloriously happy that I’ve finally given expression to my true desires. I’ve never felt so free or so bold in my life.

(She spins away from him.)

Look what you’ve inspired me to do!

ALCESTE
Yes, madam, that is the great reward that courage repays to us.

ELIANTE
Alceste, while my courage lasts, I want to tell you everything that I’m feeling inside. I desire you because of your passion. You’re on fire with it, like a biblical prophet. It flashes out of you with every gesture you make, every word you utter, every glance you give. Standing here before you, I can practically feel it radiating from you like enlivening heat from a crackling fire. I, too, have passion flowing through me like a river. The sight of you has sent my feelings roaring through me like a floodtide. My desire sweeps away everything—discretion, prudence, dignity, honor. I want us to share our passion. Spend it on each other. Let it consume us both.

ALCESTE
But, madam, as much as either of us would like to indulge our desires . . .

ELIANTE
So, you admit that you would want to take me as your lover?

ALCESTE
What gentleman would not? But if we were to act on our desires I would find it unbearable to deceive your husband. I don’t believe I could forgive myself.

ELIANTE
There’d really be nothing to forgive! Our marriage, for what it is, would remain secure. Philinte and I are companions, but there’re no strong emotional bonds involved. No jealousy, no resentment, no desire, no passion. We both know this. We accept our relationship for what it is, and I will not speak for Philinte on this, but whatever fulfillment our marriage does not provide, that fulfillment I find elsewhere.
ALCESTE
All this time you’ve preserved Philinte’s reputation? And yours?

ELIANTE
You underestimate my discretion as well as my courage, my dear sir.

ALCESTE
My sincere apologies, madam. I vow never to doubt you every again.

ELIANTE
Good.

(She attempts to kiss him again, but ALCESTE stops her.)

ALCESTE
I must confess, Eliante, that I have doubts about myself.

ELIANTE
(Kissing him.)
Alceste, you would deny me this fulfillment? Let me assuage all those inconvenient feelings of guilt and betrayal.

ALCESTE
I’m sure you could accomplish that easily. But it’s not just about my sense of loyalty to my friend.

(He moves away.)
My mind is clouded. My inclinations elsewhere . . .

ELIANTE
Listen to me! I know why you decided to come out of your hermitage. You’re the only man worthy of my cousin, and she’s more than worthy of you.

ALCESTE
Then, my dear, why are you trying to seduce me in the meantime?

ELIANTE
I knew I had to step in quickly and make a desperate lunge for your heart, your nobility, your passion before you gave it all to her. I want to have what I foolishly threw away three years ago. I want to experience true, genuine, overwhelming passion with you! I want to know it in my life at least once. Will you grant me this?

ALCESTE
Eliante, please don’t ask me to make a promise to you now.
ELIANTE
I can’t help it, Alceste. I hunger for you. Only you can wipe away my regrets.

(She tries to kiss him. He restrains her.)

ALCESTE
For now, unfortunately, I must think of the regrets in my heart. Otherwise, I’m sure that my eyes would be drawn to look upon you, and you alone, my dear Eliante.

(He kisses her gently and then moves to the salon.)

But for now, I must keep my promise to myself.

ELIANTE
Alceste, if she rejects you again, come to me for . . .

(He is gone.)

. . . consolation.

(She goes and makes herself a drink and knocks it back. She refills her glass and moves to sit in the chair where Alceste was sitting in at the beginning of the scene.)

Alceste, I’ll have you yet.

ACT I
Scene 6

ARSINOE
(Entering with CELEMINE from the garden.)

. . . and it was my husband who was standing there alone before the king in the presence chamber, explaining to his majesty about Alceste’s splendid new book, telling his majesty of Alceste’s decision to return to society and all the favorable discussion about his candidacy for the Academy.

CELIMEME
(Speaking to Eliante.)

Greetings, cousin.

ELIANTE
(Kissing Celemine.)

Cousin.
ARSINOE
Greetings, Eliante. And the king nodded his approval, then my husband bowed and retreated from the throne. It was all most elegantly done. So, everything is prepared for Alceste’s election to the Academy, thanks to my husband’s exertions for his old friend.

ELIANTE
Arsinoe, such high spirits.

ARSINOE
Yes, what with all the excitement about Alceste. But I’m sure Celimene is feeling even more lively than I because of it.

CELIMENE
I suppose.

ARSINOE
You suppose? You sound like an old dowager who’s been kept up past her bedtime.

ELIANTE
Yes, Celimene, haven’t you missed Alceste?

ARSINOE
Of course she has. All of us have missed him these past three years.

CELIMENE
Indeed? I had no idea he was such a favored gallant among the ladies.

ELIANTE
You must admit, cousin, that it’s always been a pleasure to gaze upon him.

ARSINOE
Yes, you positively must admit that, Celimene.

CELIMENE
There are any number of handsome gentlemen in the next room to feast your eyes upon.

ARSINOE
Oh, pooh! Don’t be so perverse, dear child. We all know of your liaison with him.

CELIMENE
There was no reason to conceal our friendship.

ARSINOE
Friendship? I think Alceste was more than a friend to you. He positively doted on you.
CELIMENE
He could be insanely jealous, too.

ARSINOE
How romantic that is, don’t you think, Eliante? To know that you, and you alone, can cause him to behave so uncontrollably.

ELIANTE
Romantic or not, it’s convenient to have a gentleman about who is easy to manipulate.

CELIMENE
I wouldn’t enjoy manipulating a gentleman, especially if it was easy to do. And if I admired a particular gentleman, it would be because he possessed enough strength of character to resist a woman’s manipulation. Alceste possessed such strength of character, and I admired him for it.

ARSINOE
Eliante, I see we are making headway. Celimene now acknowledges that Alceste is her friend, and that she admires him. Let’s press our advantage.

ELIANTE
Alceste is there in the salon now. Shall we go in to him?

CELIMENE
There’s time enough for greetings. I’m sure everyone is pressing forward to lavish congratulations and praise on him, and I’m sure he’s loathing every second of it.

ELIANTE
Is that his punishment for being jealous?

CELIMENE
It’s just his way, you know. When others show him affection, he immediately suspects hypocrisy. It’s obsessive with him.

ARSINOE
Since it’s his triumphant return into the world, he’ll be forgiven all his endearing little eccentricities today, my dear.

CELIMENE
Alceste puts me in a forgiving mood, for I once was strongly attracted to him.

ELIANTE
Arsinoe, she’s admitted an attraction to him. We’ll soon have it all out of her.
ARSINOE
Yes, the old cardinal can announce the banns any time now.

CELIMENE
Ladies, you’re constructing a fantasy world. I’m not sure I could align myself with a gentleman whose wrath was as ungovernable as Alceste’s. He becomes an absolute ogre when he gets carried away about the hypocrisy of society. I couldn’t possibly feel anything remotely like love for a man of such gross temperament.

ARSINOE
Is love so important in a relationship? Especially with one who has so many desirable qualities to enjoy?

CELIMENE
To me, anger on the scale of Alceste’s borders on vulgarity. His baseness would place him beneath my contempt.

ELIANTE
Strong words, cousin. You’re almost as unbending as he is.

CELIMENE
You’re wrong there, Eliante. I’m far more strong-willed than a dozen Alcestes.

ARSINOE
Then it seems we were completely wrong about your so-called friendship with him.

CELIMENE
So it seems.

ARSINOE
Then that makes him fair game, doesn’t it, Eliante?

ELIANTE
Alceste has always been fair game as far as I’m concerned.

CELIMENE
Then why did you refuse him when he asked you for your hand in marriage?

ARSINOE
Yes, Eliante, you could have had him all to yourself.

ELIANTE
Believe me, ladies, I was sorely tempted. There he was, begging me with those doleful eyes of his, but I couldn’t accept his offer of marriage. You refused him, Celimene, and he was only acting on impulse when he turned and made his offer to me. I pitied him in his miserable state. I couldn’t take advantage of him. It would have been criminal.
ARSINOE
A man like that usually makes a woman want to commit crimes, not prevent them.

CELIMENE
My dear Arsinoe, how right you are! Would you like to have a crack at him?

ARSINOE
Celimene, I’m a happily married woman. Besides, I don’t want to stir up scandal.

CELIMENE
Ah, scandal. Eliante, if he were to succumb to your charms today, would you risk the scandal?

ELIANTE
There would be no scandal. We’d be discreet. But I’d never do it. I respect your feelings too much, my dear Celimene.

CELIMENE
I’m very glad to know that.

(As she speaks, she moves to a desk where there is a perfume bottle. She applies some of it before the end of her speech.)

Well, he was yours for the taking three years ago, Eliante, and you’re both welcome to pursue him now. He would make a fine trophy, indeed, for either of you. Ah, look. Here he comes now. Let the games begin, ladies.

ACT I
Scene 7

(Enter ORONTE, PHILINTE and ALCESTE from the salon.)

ORONTE
There you are, madam. Here is Alceste who has come to pay his compliments to you, the most divine hostess in all of Paris.

PHILINTE
Ah, Oronte, there is your wife, Arsinoe. Madam, always a pleasure. Alceste, no one has been more eager to see you than Arsinoe. She’s been asking me about you for weeks.

ELIANTE
(Speaking aside to CELIMENE.)
Celimene, was it wise to encourage Arsinoe to pursue Alceste? She’s always plotting something and she’ll try anything.
CELIMENE
She arouses no jealousy in me.

ELIANTE
But why let it be known that you’re not interested in him? What if another woman . . .

CELIMENE
There is no woman whom I would fear as a rival except you.

(ALCESTE intrudes on the ladies’ conversation, making a show of ignoring CELIMENE.)

ALCESTE.
(Formally kissing her hand.)

Eliante, I greet you again

CELIMENE
See what I mean?

ALCESTE
(Pretending to just notice her.)

Ah, Celimene. What were you saying?

ELIANTE
A private joke, Alceste. About the differences between the men and women.

PHILINTE
Ah, the eternal war!

CELIMENE
No, the divine comedy. Eliante, you may remove your hand from Alceste’s, I think.

ORONTE
(Speaking aside to ARSINOE.)

She said this directly? You’ve given me just the encouragement I need.

PHILINTE
Oronte, I must tell you again how happy I am that you will speak on Alceste’s behalf at the Academy. He couldn’t hope for a stronger recommendation.

ORONTE
It will be a great day for the Academy when our friend is elected.

PHILINTE
Speaking of elections, sir, I heard it mentioned that you could be the next director.
ORONTE
Oh, it’s premature to discuss that subject. The old cardinal has always been an able and distinguished director.

PHILINTE
Yes, but he’ll retire soon enough. Come, let’s return to the salon, and you can hear what any number of your colleagues in the Academy are saying about it. You have strong support, so you should cultivate it. Come.

(PHILINTE has been moving ORONTE to the salon door during this speech. ARSINOE attaches herself to ALCESTE.)

ORONTE
(He waits at the exit to the salon.)
Very well, sir, Very well. I’m persuaded.

PHILINTE
(Speaking to ELIANTE.)
Madam, may I escort you into the salon?

ELIANTE
What? Were you speaking to me, husband?

PHILINTE
(Moving her to the salon door.)
We should leave these two in private.

ELIANTE
Arsinoe?
(No response.)
Arsinoe!

ARSINOE
Yes, Eliante?

ELIANTE
I must ask a favor of you. Please, come into the salon and introduce me to the old cardinal. I want ask him about his orangery.

ARSINOE
His orangery?

ELIANTE
Yes. I depend upon you to help me persuade him to give me some grafts from it.
ARSINOE

Very well.

(She reluctantly detaches herself from ALCHESTE and offers her hand for him to kiss. ALCHESTE does so. Arsinoe makes a show of enjoying his attentions. She then moves to exit through the salon door.)

It’s been quite some time since I’ve spoken to the old cardinal. He pretends to be deaf, but he’s not, so don’t shout at him.

(ELIANTE follows her out. ORONTE follows the ladies out.)

PHILINTE

We shall return later and insist upon your presence in the salon, madam.

(He exits into the salon.)

ACT I

Scene 8

ALCESTE

Celimene . . . I thought they’d never leave.

CELIMENE

You would revile the company of your bosom companion, Oronte?

ALCESTE

I’ve longed to speak with you.

CELIMENE

You’ve had three long years to develop your longing. What do you wish to say?

ALCESTE

Celimene . . .

(She smiles attentively and offers her hand to be kissed. He does so.)

Since I’ve secluded myself from the world, you’ve made your salon larger and more glittering than any in Paris. You attract all the greatest men and women. You stand, like a modern day Guinevere, at the center of an intellectual Camelot.

CELIMENE

You would prefer I live in a castle?

ALCESTE
No, madam. This new home of yours embodies everything about you that is admirable. Its proportions, the décor, the furnishings all proclaim your elegant taste and discriminating eye for timeless beauty.

CELIMENE

I’ll be sure to tell Philinte.

ALCESTE

I beg your pardon?

CELIMENE

Philinte. Your best friend in the whole world? He designed it all.

ALCESTE

He did? Oh. He never spoke of it.

CELIMENE

No, he wouldn’t have. He’s far too modest.

ALCESTE

Well, yes, he deserves all the praise in the world. I had no idea that he had such a flair for design within him. And it all is so perfectly complemented by the magnificent gardens you’ve cultivated here. I couldn’t resist the urge to stroll through them when I arrived. I marveled at the roses. Your greenhouses are exquisite. And I was delighted by the banqueting house at the end of the lawn. Such an unexpected touch of the exotic. Such a perfect little jewel! Along with all of Paris, I bow to . . .

CELIMENE

Eliante.

ALCESTE

I beg your pardon?

CELIMENE

Eliante. Spouse of your best friend in the whole world? She designed it all.

ALCESTE

She did? Oh. Well, yes, she deserves all the praise in the world.

CELIMENE

Are you going to stand there all day telling me how wonderful my house is, or are you going to let me welcome you here with a kiss.

ALCESTE

Nothing would give me greater pleasure . . .

(She takes his face into her hands and kisses
him on each cheek.)
Mmmm. I’d almost forgotten the smell of your perfume, but now I forget all the delightful smells of your garden. My soul is revived.

(CELIMENE moves US to the bottle of perfume on the desk. She holds it up to show him.)

CELIMENE
It’s the perfume that you gave me. I have not worn it until you returned today.

(He comes to her and takes the perfume bottle in his hand.)

ALCESTE
It’s a shame that you’ve not adorned yourself with it all these years.

CELIMENE
I had no reason to wear it. Until today.

ALCESTE
And why is that?

CELIMENE
I hope that it would be for the same reason you’re happy for this day.

ALCESTE
I’m delighted that I’ll be nominated into Academy. Is that the reason we’re both happy?

CELIMENE
Oh, stop behaving like a goose!
(She snatches the bottle from him and puts it on the desk.)
I know very well you came straight here as soon as you arrived in town. That tells me everything I need to know.

ALCESTE
And that makes you happy?

CELIMENE
Immensely so.
(They kiss.)
Are you really happy to be nominated to the Academy?
ALCESTE
Yes, who wouldn’t be pleased at such recognition? It’s the greatest honor anyone could hope for.

CELIMENE
I’m glad to see your abilities rewarded. But there’s no greater honor you hope to attain?

ALCESTE
I admit that I aspire to one other thing.

CELIMENE
And what would that be?

ALCESTE
To be adored by the one whom I adore.

CELIMENE
Is it your love that has driven you out of your isolation?

ALCESTE
Yes, madam, it is. Like a fool, I tried to deny it. My new book is the product of that denial. But when I finished writing it, my yearning for the one I love confronted me again, stronger than ever before.

CELIMENE
Who is this fortunate creature?

ALCESTE
Please, Celimene, no coy games. You know as well as I.

CELIMENE
But as a silly, sentimental, romantic, fluttering woman, I want to hear you say it.

ALCESTE
Madam, you’re mocking me!

CELIMENE
Yes, and I suppose I shouldn’t. Taunting you is so easy that there’s really no fun in it. Please, Alceste, speak to me from your heart.

ALCESTE
Celimene, I love you. I cannot live without you. I ask you to marry me.

CELIMENE
Speak to me of your love.
ALCESTE
What? I have asked you to marry me, madam. May I have an answer?

CELIMENE
I want to be courted first. Isn’t that usually how it’s done? The gentleman professes and proclaims his love with all his eloquence in order to persuade the young lady to consent.

ALCESTE
But you know how I love you, how insanely, how jealously, how passionately.

CELIMENE
(She giggles.)
Yes, I do. So profess and proclaim all the things you love about me.

ALCESTE
Just now I praised your elegance, your home, your garden . . .

CELIMENE
Make love to me, Alceste, not my greenhouses! If nothing else, there’s a book of poetry over there on the desk. Read some of that to me if you can’t think of anything to say.

ALCESTE
Madam, I need no other man’s words to articulate the wellspring of my passion for you.

Then you can begin any time.

CELIMENE
ALCESTE
Very well. Madam, three years ago you were a silly girl of twenty, self-absorbed and flighty. What a transformation! You’ve become the most sophisticated lady and society hostess of the age who attracts to her side all the noblest and finest minds of the nation.

CELIMENE
A lover who tells the object of his affection that she’s a silly girl. How romantic! Whom do you love more? The silly girl or the sophisticated lady?

ALCESTE
I loved you three years ago, and I love you all the more now.

CELIMENE
That’s more like it. Tell me more.

ALCESTE
Well, madam, as all can see, you are gracious in your hospitality. The finest wine, flowers everywhere, the finest musical entertainments to delight everyone.
CELIMENE
How do you know about all that? You’ve been off in isolation these past three years.

ALCESTE
Philinte kept me informed.

CELIMENE
You permitted him to intrude upon your self-imposed isolation?

ALCESTE
Even though I told him to leave me alone, he persisted until I accepted his visits as a regular part of my life. His sense of delicacy, however, prevented him from speaking about you directly or specifically.

CELIMENE
Yes, he has the temperament of a diplomat.

ALCESTE
Well, he cleverly found ways to insert oblique references about you into his conversation. It didn’t take long for me to feel a rush of excitement whenever he mentioned you. After a while, his visits were consumed almost completely with talk of you. Of your salon, your exalted position in society. The more I heard, the more I longed to see you. And as I stand here today, I see all his information confirmed with all my senses.

CELIMENE
What else do your senses tell you?

ALCESTE
That you are the most beautifully dressed lady in Paris, adorned with perfectly splendid jewelry, and exquisitely coiffed hair. A lady who would honor me if she were to stand at my side as my spouse.

CELIMENE
You could just as easily dress up a mannequin, if that’s what you prize most in a spouse.

ALCESTE
Madam, again you mock me, but that, too, is an allurement.

CELIMENE
So, you love me for my wit?

ALCESTE
Most certainly, dear lady.

CELIMENE
And nothing else? Didn’t you mutter something earlier about my charming vivacity?
ALCESTE
(Thinking.)

No, madam, I don’t believe I did.

CELIMENE

Well, then, you have your cue.

ALCESTE

Very well. Along with every other gentleman in Paris, I am captivated by your charming vivacity.

CELIMENE

Now, you’re mocking me. Well, touché. Please, continue. I grow weary playing the prompter to you.

ALCESTE

You make everyone who meets you fall in love with you.

CELIMENE

Does it inflame your jealousy to see me lavishing my charms upon others?

ALCESTE

You know it does, madam.

CELIMENE

Splendid. I hope I can always torment you so.

ALCESTE

And you can just as easily elevate me to celestial ecstasy by simply turning your smiling face upon me. Your love of life, the energetic zest in your voice, these all charm me.

(He takes her hand.)

I’ve always been able to see that sparkle in your eye that shows the delight you take in those whom you care about the most. I see it now as I look at you, and I’m . . .

CELIMENE

Alceste, are you about to behave impertinently?

ALCESTE

Certainly not, madam.

CELIMENE

What a pity! I was so hoping you would.
ALCESTE
Nothing could induce me to act impertinently with you. I would dishonor your dignity.

CELIMENE
Your fastidious delicacy is positively implacable. I do wish I had the power to provoke you to brashness, but, alas, the moment’s passed. Still, I would’ve appreciated at least some perfunctory allusions to my beautiful face or even a few mundanely stilted exclamations about my divine physical form.

ALCESTE
Madam, I will gladly retrieve that book of poetry if you wish to hear those kinds of words, but I would much rather have you look into my eyes now and see the burning desire that your beauty ignites in them. For these three long years I’ve hungered to look at you, only able to see you in my dreams.

CELIMENE
Are you sure these dreams weren’t just frivolous or disingenuous fancies?

ALCESTE
Madam, whenever I closed my eyes, your face, your form appeared. And every time I fell asleep, you would speak to me. You’d whisper sweet words of affection to me with that bewitching smile upon your lips, punctuated by that intoxicating trill of your laugh.

CELIMENE
And what color dress would I wear?

ALCESTE
The color of your dress? I don’t know.

CELIMENE
Could you smell my perfume? The perfume you gave me?

ALCESTE
I don’t remember.

CELIMENE
What did I say to you in your dreams? I want to make sure I’m being quoted correctly.

ALCESTE
That’s what made my dreams more like nightmares. I would wake up and not be able to remember what you said to me. And even worse than that, I never could find words to respond to you. You always spoke with sweetness and affection to me, but I remained dumb. It made me frantic. Desperately, I’d reach out for you, not knowing what else to do. I’d awaken myself with this, lunging from my pallet, dazed, sweating, desolate for having lost you again. Every time I fell asleep, it was like this. Every time for three years. The anguish has been unbearable.
CELIMENE

You slept on a pallet? On the ground?

ALCESTE

Yes, it’s more than I had on campaign.

CELIMENE

What else did you have? A desk? A chair?

ALCESTE

Yes, of course, until I broke the chair up for firewood last winter.

CELIMENE

How Bohemian! What about your clothes? Did you have an armoire for your hairshirts?

ALCESTE

I used my old trunk from when I was a student for my few clothes. Why . . .

CELIMENE

I just wanted to see in my mind your dank little hovel, you there lying on your seedy little pallet, flagellating yourself . . .

ALCESTE

It was most comfortable, I assure you, and there was no need for me to torture myself. That bundle of stuffing and burlap is dearer to me than any four-poster feather bed in the world. Stretched out on that pallet I would be transported into your presence, if only for a brief while, only to be tormented by your elusiveness. And now that I’m able to gaze upon you, I can hardly believe my eyes for the perfection of your . . .

CELIMENE

I think you just might become impertinent after all. You have the potential for gallantry. Perhaps brashness. I’m more than gratified to know that, I assure you. Your fiery passion just now almost makes me want to accept your offer of marriage.

ALCESTE

My dear Celimene, I am yours.

CELIMENE

I said “almost.” I haven’t yet given you my assent.

ALCESTE

Madam, I would do anything to have it.

CELIMENE

Then our happy union is inevitable. All it requires is that you meet one, small condition.
ALCESTE
(Kneeling.)
Anything. Name it. I will move heaven and earth to fulfill your wish.

CELIMENE
(She considers.)
I had no idea how much pleasure it would give me to hold you completely at my whim. Am I, perhaps, the one who’s dreaming at this very moment?

ALCESTE
Please, Celimene, tell me your condition for our marriage.

CELIMENE
Only if you get up from that ridiculous position.
(He does so.)
Well, now I don’t know. It was so nice to see you looking like an earnest little schoolboy. Maybe you should kneel again.

ALCESTE
Madam, kneeling or standing I don’t deserve to be abused like this, even by the woman whom I would allow anything and forgive everything.

(He turns to exit to the outside. She quickly goes after him and grabs his arm and turns him to face her.)

CELIMENE
Alceste, wait. Yes, you do indulge my reckless lightheartedness too much. But then you bring it out in me, so you must forgive me.
(Pause. ALCESTE relaxes.)
Here, sit down.
(He guides him to a seat CS.)
I will give you my condition for our marriage. Before I will consent, you must demonstrate to me that you can moderate your impatient wrath in good society. Yes, the world is shot through with mendacious falsity . . .

ALCESTE
(Rising.)
Indeed, madam, it is. I just now was in your salon . . .

CELIMENE
Calm yourself, my dear. Listen to me, now. No one among your friends ever disagreed with you on this touchy—and with you—explosive subject. Here you are about to launch into one of your uncontrollable tirades, even as I speak to you.
ALCESTE

I take your point, madam.

CELIMENE:

Just so.

(Gesturing for him to return to his seat.
He does so.)

As I was saying, we all know the world is imperfect. Rather than try to reform it single-handedly by railing at it, I ask you to tolerate it. Society would benefit far more from your example of good breeding and restraint than from scathing assaults.

ALCESTE

You are asking me, though, to change myself, change my nature. Change who I am.

CELIMENE

Yes, I am. Do you think that too demeaning to your integrity?

ALCESTE

I promised you that I’d meet any condition you named, so I will attempt it. Even so, I fear somehow that I might find myself diminished.

CELIMENE

No, Alceste, such a transformation will ennoble you beyond anything you’ve been before. You must trust me in this.

(She rises.)

Why, I stand here before you as proof of my belief. I’ve labored tirelessly to transform myself for you, if you’d care to take the time to notice. Where once I was a silly girl who was frivolous and insincere, I’m now a mature, elegant woman, am I not?

ALCESTE

I’ve said it already.

CELIMENE

You see how I’ve placed myself at the center of Parisian society, have you not?

ALCESTE

Yes, madam.

CELIMENE

You’ve seen that I’ve attracted to my salon the greatest minds in the land, haven’t you?

ALCESTE

Yes, I’ve seen it.

CELIMENE

You’ve admired my home, my gardens, my sense of fashion, etc., as well, haven’t you?
ALCESTE

You know I have.

CELIMENE

And you’re able to see how I have made myself more charming, elegant, and, of course, more beautiful than ever before, have you not?

(The music in the salon stops, followed by applause. ALCESTE pretends to be distracted by this noise.)

I am more beautiful, am I not?

ALCESTE

Ah, my dear Celimene, I cannot imagine what words could describe such perfection.

CELIMENE

Well, concentrate and try to think of some imperfect ones, my dear boy. If they come from you, they’ll be more than perfect to my ears. In the meantime, though, I must hear your answer. Will you meet my condition? Will you play your role in this comedy we call society and share the stage with that ugly, crass character called mendacity?

ALCESTE

Yes, madam, I will. Heartily.

(Goes to her.)

By giving away the end of the play, you’ve assured my success. We all know that comedies conclude with a wedding.

CELIMENE

Very well, but before the final scene is played, remember there’re many humiliating laughs to endure from the audience.

ALCESTE

The intensity of my love makes me deaf to them.

CELIMENE

I’m more interested in a love that will make you mute.

ALCESTE

Madam, I object. Just now you were begging me to speak whole strings of banalities.

CELIMENE

Save them. The curtain is now going up on what looks to be a most difficult scene.

ACT I
Scene 9

(ARSINOE approaches ALCESTE and
CELIMENE. ORONTE lurks upstage.)

ARSINOE
My dear Alceste. I’ve heard nothing but the most glorious words of praise for you.  
(Taking his arm.)
Come, sir, you must hear it.

CELIMENE
Madam, perhaps you would like some refreshment?

ARSINOE
Heavens, no. There’s plenty to drink in the salon. Oh, my dear sir, you need to receive the personal congratulations of the old cardinal. Come with me.

CELIMENE
What kinds of things are people saying about Alceste?

ARSINOE
Oh, all kinds of praise on every side. Your book, Alceste. Your brilliant wit. Your distinguished service in the war. Your discriminating taste. All your splendid attributes.

CELIMENE
Alceste, perhaps you’d like something to fortify you before you go in with Arsinoe?

ARSINOE
Oh, no, you don’t need anything. Nothing except my hand upon your arm. You see? I’ve abandoned my husband, proud as I am of him, to be seen in the company of Alceste. I can’t wait to show you off to everyone. Please, sir, escort me into the salon.

ALCESTE
Of course, madam. I am yours completely.

(They exit into the salon.)

ACT I
Scene 10

ORONTE
Madam . . .

CELIMENE
(Feigning surprise.)
Ah!

ORONTE
I am glad we’re alone now, because I’ve been longing to have a private word with you.
CELIMENE
Very well. There’s no time like the present. Will you join me in some refreshment?

ORONTE
Of course, of course. Please, whatever you are having.

CELIMENE
(Preparing two glasses of lemonade.)
Very well. You were saying?

ORONTE
I have enjoyed attending your salon. It is the most glittering in all of Paris. You attract all the great literati with your . . .

CELIMENE
Here you are. Some lemonade. I hope it’s not too tart for you. I never put any sugar in it. Don’t you hate things that are too sugared?

ORONTE
Thank you. As for sugar, I’m sure there’s no need of it. The dulcet tones of your voice give just that perfect touch of sweetness to everything about you.

CELIMENE
I’m most charmed by your compliment, sir. Won’t you sit down with me, sir?

ORONTE
(He sits next to her.)
With the greatest pleasure, I assure you, madame.

CELIMENE
Now, you were saying?

ORONTE
Yes, I was saying that you’re the darling of society. You’re our most dazzling hostess. No man here could praise your beauty and charm with greater voice than I . . .

(He begins to move closer to her.)

CELIMENE
How is your lemonade? Not too tart?

ORONTE
(He sips then nearly gags on the sour taste.)
It’s perfectly delicious.
CELIMENE

As the English say, “Bottoms up!”

(She drinks her lemonade down. ORONTE reluctantly chokes down his drink and sets his glass aside.)

Now, you were saying?

ORONTE

I was saying that no man could sing your praises more eloquently or passionately than I.

CELIMENE

Then do so.

Eh?

ORONTE

I should like to be praised, complimented and fawned over. Please.

CELIMENE

With pleasure. Madam, may I start by admiring your lustrous hair?

ORONTE

Start wherever you like.

CELIMENE

Just so. Your dark tresses, so thick and glowing, adorn your face like rippling clouds. One longs to stroke a hand through it and feel its silky strands flow through my fingers. And its essence, its perfumed odor is divine . . .

CELIMENE

Perfumed odor? I’m delighted you noticed that. It is a perfume. A special perfume . . .

ORONTE

(He moves closer.)

Special because it complements your sweet demeanor.

CELIMENE

Special because it was a gift to me. From Alceste.

ORONTE

(Rising and moving away.)

Alceste?

(Aside.)

Blast that despicable man!

(Aloud.)
But he has been in self-exile for three years.

CELIMENE
Three years, one month and six days, actually. He gave it to me before he disappeared from society. I’ve never worn it until today.

ORONTE
Such a romantic sentiment that is. I’m sure you’ve longed for him all this time?

CELIMENE
No more so than any of us have.

ORONTE
You were much attached to him, and he to you, weren’t you?

CELIMENE
(Rising and moving away.)
He asked for my hand in marriage and invited me to join him in his isolation. Ah! Such arrogance! To think that I’d give up my life here for him. I spurned his offer without a second thought. Does that tell you what you need to know about our attachment?

ORONTE
Yes, madam.

CELIMENE
(Aside.)
There! I’ve laid my bait for him now.
(Aloud.)
My hair, sir. You were saying?

ORONTE
Just so. Your hair and everything about you physical form, including your perfume, makes every man smile with delight. You inspire in every man’s heart . . .

CELIMENE
Do you need more lemonade?

ORONTE
No, thank you, madam. May I refill your glass?

CELIMENE
No. You were saying?

ORONTE
Yes, I was saying that no man admires your beauty and charm, your grace and elegance more than I. With your wit and probing discourse, you inspire all of us to the loftiest
heights of brilliance and imaginative genius. Any man who aspired to great achievements in the arts, the sciences, politics, or medicine would want to circulate among the great personages assembled in the next room. And any man would want to be a satellite, revolving around you, our radiant star . . .

CELIMENE
Goodness! The warmth of your flattering ardor is affecting me. Could you open the doors there to the garden. I’m sure some cool air will settle me.

ORONTE
(He moves to open the French window.)
I am honored to oblige you.

CELIMENE
While you do that, I’ll refill our glasses.
(She moves US.)
You were saying?

ORONTE
I was saying that you are the most beautiful woman in Paris, and you have created here the most glorious salon anywhere--outside of the royal court, of course.

CELIMENE
I thank you for those compliments. I’m grateful that you’re a regular in my salon.

ORONTE
You are?

CELIMENE
Of course. You’re a prominent man of letters and hold great sway at court.

ORONTE
Your praise of my abilities means all the world to me.

CELIMENE
You would cherish that more than your position in the Academy?

ORONTE
The Academy? Well, madam, in all honesty, I must answer yes and no.

CELIMENE
You equivocate? I take back all I said about your fervent flattery. Here, perhaps some more lemonade will reignite your flame.

(She refills his glass during the next few lines.)
ORONTE
Madam, may I open my heart to you frankly?

CELIMENE
I thought you were speaking the true feelings of your heart just a moment ago when you were praising my hair and my perfume that Alceste gave me.

ORONTE
Yes, of course I was. But you asked me about my position in the Academy, and so you touch upon my ambition.

CELIMENE
I know that ambition is important to any man.

ORONTE
I detect a note of disdain, madam. Is my hunger for success ignoble?

CELIMENE
Not necessarily. Tell me about your ambition, and I promise not to judge you harshly. Come, sir, unlock those secret compartments of your heart.

ORONTE
Very well. My efforts in the Academy have been directed at one, ultimate goal.

CELIMENE
What is this ultimate goal of yours?

ORONTE
Can’t you guess, madam? I hope to ascend to the directorship of the Academy. Our current director--that respected and brilliant man--will soon step down. The position only comes open once in a lifetime for anyone who would want it.

CELIMENE
You’d make an excellent director. Your colleagues can see this as well as I.

ORONTE
I cannot be so sanguine, madam. There are many who would compete for the position, all of whom possess honors, intelligence and experience equal to mine. I must bring to bear the influence of those whose opinion would win votes for my candidacy. This is the matter where I must open the innermost recesses of my heart and mind to you.

CELIMENE:
(Taking his hand.)

You have my undivided attention, sir.
ORONTE
If I may make a proposition to you, madam? I would ask you to speak favorably on my behalf to all those influential members of the Academy who regularly attend your salon.

CELIMENE
Yes, I’m sure I could incline any number of hearts to support you.

ORONTE
Madam, you could soften the cruelest of ogres with just one smile.

CELIMENE
(Shesmiles at him.)
If I had good reason, I’m sure I’d smile at any ogre, no matter how grotesque he may be.

ORONTE
More importantly, a woman of your wit and charm accumulates many debts.

CELIMENE
No, I don’t deny it.

ORONTE
I would like to ask you to call in your debts on my behalf.

CELIMENE
You’re asking quite a lot, sir. We’re negotiating a proposition, and so, sir, I must ask you what I could expect in return.

ORONTE
Indeed, madam. I promise you a world of gratification. I can arrange for you to have a formal introduction at court. That would quickly lead to a position as a lady-in-waiting.

CELIMENE
There’s no great gratification in that for me. You forget, Oronte, that I was schooled in the shadow of the palace. I saw plenty of royalty then, and I’m content with that.

ORONTE
Madam, I see you do not understand. When you were in school, you were a naïve girl, the offspring of insignificant gentry in a backwater province. Today you are one of the most magnificent women in France, the ideal product of St. Cyr. Once I have placed you at court, you’d have every member of the royal family, including the king himself, at your feet. You could become the most powerful woman in France. Or in all of Europe.

CELIMENE
(Rising and moving towards the salon door.)
Oronte, I’m afraid your proposition doesn’t interest me.
ORONTE
Let me offer you one last inducement to accept my proposition. You will have the pleasure of watching me destroy someone I know you detest.

CELIMENE
Now you have my attention, sir.

ORONTE
Just now you admitted that Alceste insulted you with his offer of marriage.

CELIMENE
I rejected him with disdain. His arrogance offended me, and I’ll never forget it.

ORONTE
And here he is making a much-heralded return to society, drawing the attention of all to himself. I’m sure you find his smug self-congratulatory behavior as difficult to endure as I do. I can crush him for you with a little scheme I have formulated.

CELIMENE
Go on.

ORONTE
I will support Alceste’s candidacy for admission to the Academy. When all seems aligned for his success, I will reveal evidence that Alceste is a plagiarist.

CELIMENE
You have such evidence?

ORONTE
Yes, I have arranged for some documents to be created that will ruin Alceste’s reputation. (He pulls the documents.) They are manuscript drafts done in the hand of Alceste’s great teacher, Doctor Rimbeau, of the University of Montpelier. These papers contain notes that very much resemble the ideas expressed in Alceste’s new book. It will appear that Alceste took his old professor’s ideas and presented them as his own. Before the Academy I will reveal these documents and, reluctantly, sadly, despondently ask that distinguished body to denounce this despicable fraud and reject Alceste’s membership. As Doctor Rimbeau has been dead these last ten years, there’s no way to refute the authenticity of the documents. (CELIMENE quickly takes the documents and examines them. Throughout the rest of the conversation, Oronte follows her, hoping to recover the documents.) Don’t worry, the hand resembles the old doctor’s hand well enough to convince anyone who knew him. Alceste will be vilified by one and all, and that will send him back to his sequestered retreat, probably forever. For you, that would serve as a sort of revenge upon him for his ridiculous claim to your hand.
CELIMENE: You have devised a magnificent plan. I’m sure you would succeed.

ORONTE
I’m pleased to know that you appreciate my ingenuity.

CELIMENE
Yes, I do. Your evil genius knows no bounds, it seems, and so would inspire awe in anyone. But I could never countenance it.

(She puts the documents in the fire.)

ORONTE
Madam, what is the meaning of this?

CELIMENE
It means I reject your proposition, and I scorn your vicious treachery.

ORONTE
It’s you who are treacherous, deceptive and false.

CELIMENE
So be it, Oronte, but I’ll not allow you to destroy a noble man’s reputation.

ORONTE
Alceste, a noble man? Pah! He insults me at every turn. Look here at this mocking inscription he wrote in his book.

(He brandishes the book before her.)

I’m sick of him.

(He throws the book down.)

As for you, you’ll regret your action here, madam. I promise you that. I’ll slash your reputation to shreds with tales of your past silliness and duplicitous behavior. I can bring the ire of court, town and church down upon your head. Madam, I will make you weep.

(He exits to the salon.)

CELIMENE
(She laughs.)

Go ahead, Oronte, do your worst!

(Laughs again. She sees Alceste’s book. She opens it and reads the inscription and laughs again.)

Oh, Alceste, I love you! You’re the only man I could ever possibly love!

(Fadeout. End of Act One.)
ACT II
Scene 1

Fadeup to the same setting. CELIMENE is in the same position as she was at the end of Act One. ELIANTE Enters from the salon.

ELIANTE
Celimene, you’re alone? With so many guests to attend to?

CELIMENE
I was enjoying some solitude after an exhausting interview with Oronte.

ELIANTE
Was he scheming something?

CELIMENE
Simply propositioning me.

ELIANTE
Then he must be up to something, if he was making love to you.

CELIMENE
I said he was propositioning me, not making love to me.

ELIANTE
Oh, I see. Still, it would be nice to be made love to occasionally, don’t you think?

CELIMENE
Well, cousin, I am made love to almost every day. It’s quite tiring.

ELIANTE
I could get used to it.

CELIMENE
No, you wouldn’t, Eliante. It’s the great disadvantage of my position. All the single men see me as a perfect match, and all the married men see me as a perfect mistress.

ELIANTE
When I was an unattached adolescent, I remembered it was great fun to be pursued.

CELIMENE
Well, I don’t enjoy being pursued. The men who do it seem vulgar to me in their greed on the one hand or their presumption on the other.

ELIANTE
Yes, all men are either one or the other, aren’t they?
CELIMENE
I don’t necessarily agree with you there. There very well could be a man who was worthy to claim my hand.

ELIANTE
What attributes would this ideal husband of yours possess to make him worthy of you?

CELIMENE
All the usual things—good breeding, wit, a lively interest in society and good conversation, and a pleasant disposition. Beyond that, though, I require a husband who is manly in demeanor and bearing, but who possesses a delicacy equal to that of our sex.

ELIANTE
Truly a god among men. Anything else?

CELIMENE
Well, yes, I’m hardly finished. Naturally, he must be beautiful.

Naturally.

CELIMENE
And he must own some land.

ELIANTE
In Burgundy, I should think. With a great house at its center?

CELIMENE
Heavens, no! I’d want to build that.

ELIANTE
Of course. But there’re any number of men who would be eligible based on all these qualities. What would make your man extraordinary?

CELIMENE
Here’s the most important thing. He would be a man of strong passion, firm convictions, unbending will, and courageous spirit. I would always depend on him to put up a fight.

ELIANTE
It’d be an eternal struggle. How exhausting!

CELIMENE
I would bend him to my will. I’d enjoy knowing that I alone could dominate him.
ELIANTE
And would love find a place in your marriage?

CELIMENE
Oh, yes. I would love him madly for giving me what he would give to no one else.

ELIANTE
You are a most demanding bride.

CELIMENE
I’m entitled to be so.

ELIANTE
Since I suspect that you’ll be a long time in finding this ideal husband, what about men of the presumptuous kind? Would you want to amuse yourself in the meantime?

CELIMENE
Take a lover? Some presumptuous ones can be most pleasing.

ELIANTE
You talk as if pleasure was not the greatest reward in a lover.

CELIMENE
The most important thing about an affair is to use it to gain something for yourself.

ELIANTE
If you will forgive me, that sounds a trifle vulgar.

CELIMENE
Call it what you will, but remember, Eliante, I have my salon to maintain. Lovers become pearls on a string that I can use to adorn myself so as to impress the world or pawn for the favors they can purchase for me.

ELIANTE
Your position in society seems to have become an all-encompassing obsession for you.

CELIMENE
I have labored to make my salon the most illustrious in Paris because it must hold at its center my ideal husband. In the meantime, I wait.

ELIANTE
And fleece presumptuous lovers?
CELIMENE
Why not? And if any of them might show any little capacity for putting up a fight, well, that would be an added attraction.

(Pause.)
Eliante, you seem wistful. Is married life making you restless again?

ELIANTE
I was thinking of having another affair, but you make it sound like a business transaction.

CELIMENE
Both involve shrewd calculation, and both involve enough risk to make them equally exciting pursuits. And in the case of gambling on the potential usefulness of this or that lover, you sometimes get lucky with the incidentals.

ELIANTE
Incidentals?

CELIMENE
Chancing upon a man who enjoys being a pleasing and generous lover for your sake.

ELIANTE
I haven’t had much luck in finding such a man.

CELIMENE
Good heavens, Eliante! If you have an affair because you want to be made love to, you’re wasting your time. What happens if you initiate an affair with a man who fails to please you? You’re stuck without a hope of salvaging anything from your investment.

ELIANTE
That’s the heart of the matter. So, advise me. To select a pleasing lover this time, what should I look for? I want this one to be a good, long, satisfying affair.

CELIMENE
It seems very simple to me. First, you must know what pleases you before you can look for it in someone else. Come now, I’ve told you about my ideal husband, tell me about your ideal lover.

ELIANTE
Naturally, all those fundamental things you mentioned about your ideal husband—good breeding, complaisance, delicacy, and wit.

CELIMENE
Naturally.

ELIANTE
And something else not so essential in a husband—discretion.
CELI MENE
That goes without saying.

ELIANTE
My ideal lover must be beautiful.

CELI MENE
Why not? Go on.

ELIANTE
He doesn’t need to have any money or land or great houses . . .

CELI MENE AND ELIANTE
(Together, laughing.)
But that would be nice!

CELI MENE
There must be something that draws you to one man as opposed to another.

ELIANTE
Your man with fight in him would appeal to me as a lover just as much as he attracts you as a spouse. You would want to break him. I would want him ravish me!

CELI MENE
It sounds as if your ideal lover offers little more than physical beauty offset by his presumptuousness. That’s not necessarily a bad combination by any means, I assure you.

ELIANTE
No doubt, no doubt. As a young, wealthy, beautiful widow, you’re the natural prey for such men. It’s almost instinctive for them, like falcons diving upon the lure.

CELI MENE
And like falcons, most of them handle their prey very roughly. I tell you, I’ve had some of my most treasured gowns positively ruined.

ELIANTE
I don’t think I’d mind a little rough treatment at the hands of a gentleman of spirit. But no true gentleman would never make gallant ovations to someone like me because he fears he might insult me—and my husband. So, if I am to have this affair with my ideal lover, then it falls unto me to seduce him, does it not?

CELI MENE
If he’s truly a man of spirit, you won’t need to exert yourself to the point of seduction.
ELIANTE
What should I do to catch the eye of my man of spirit?

CELIMENE
Let’s make that ideal lover less hypothetical. Let’s analyze a living example.

ELIANTE
I wouldn’t know whom to suggest.

CELIMENE
Allow me to do the suggesting. Let’s consider, just as an example, our friend, Alceste.

ELIANTE
Alceste!

CELIMENE
Yes, Alceste. Just as an example, mind you. I couldn’t think of a better one, could you?

ELIANTE
Well . . . I . . .

CELIMENE
Look at him. If he’s not a man with fight in him, then he is nothing. Don’t you agree?

ELIANTE
Yes . . . that is . . .

CELIMENE
He’s well-bred, courteous, brilliant, and charming—when he wants to be. Isn’t that so?

ELIANTE
No one could be more . . .

CELIMENE
And he possesses enough wealth to sustain himself without ostentation, and he doesn’t have a grand house in Burgundy, it’s well known, isn’t it?

ELIANTE
Yes, it is. But I . . .
CELIMENE
And he is the Adonis of this age. My God, when he walks into a room and turns those eyes upon you, it makes you weep, doesn’t it?

ELIANTE
Yes . . . well . . .

CELIMENE
You can positively see the flame that’s smoldering inside.

ELIANTE
Smoldering . . . ?

CELIMENE
Yes, that tiny little flame that could at any moment explode into a raging fire. And when he kisses your hand, you feel an ice-cold wave of sensation race from your fingers up your arm and all the way down to your toes, don’t you?

ELIANTE
Not so far as my toes . . .

CELIMENE
And you know him well, so you’d trust him to be discreet as the tomb, would you not?

ELIANTE
I know him, yes . . .

CELIMENE
Then, don’t you see why he’s a perfect case example for you?

ELIANTE
Yes . . . just an example . . . nothing more.

CELIMENE
Nothing more?

(ELIANTE does not answer.)

Eliante, you look pale, all of a sudden. Let me get you some lemonade.

(She prepares a glass of lemonade and brings it to ELIANTE.)

ELIANTE
(Aside.)

It’s as if she knew!

CELIMENE
Here, drink this. There. Is that better?
ELIANTE
Yes, it’s delicious. Strong, just as I like it.

CELIMENE
And they call us the weaker sex.

ELIANTE
What?

CELIMENE
Oh, nothing. I was just thinking of Oronte.

ELIANTE
Oronte? I thought you wanted to talk about Alceste.

CELIMENE
Did I? I thought you wanted to talk about him. He’s worth talking about, isn’t he?

ELIANTE
It seems as if that’s all people are doing these days.

CELIMENE
Indeed, and so it would take particular effort for a woman to attract his attention.

ELIANTE
Nonsense! I could name a dozen who could attract his attention with no effort at all.

CELIMENE
Then against so many competitors a woman would need to make a particular effort.

ELIANTE
But what should such a woman say and do to make a man such as Alceste, hypothetically speaking, of course, form a liaison?

CELIMENE
Let’s see. Because someone such as Alceste is abnormally discreet for a man, I should say that you would not want to put anything in writing to him.

ELIANTE
You’re probably correct, speaking hypothetically.

CELIMENE
And Alceste would find it distasteful if a woman were to prepare her toilette and dress in an obviously alluring fashion so as to inflame his desire.
ELIANTE
Yes, that would be hypothetically distasteful.

CELIMENE
I suspect that a man such as Alceste would be completely blind to any coquetry, flirtation, or simpering affectation. The poor boy, he’d probably think you weren’t right in the head if you layed in to him with any of these feminine wiles.

ELIANTE
No doubt.

CELIMENE
And if you were to orchestrate an accidental meeting with him—at a theatre box or in a private room attached to my salon—he’d think it all was simply a coincidence.

ELIANTE
That would probably be what he’d think.

CELIMENE
No, I think we both know that there would be only one way to attract Alceste’s attention. He loves simplicity, honesty and straightforward directness. Wouldn’t you agree?

ELIANTE
Completely.

CELIMENE
So, I think that if a woman wanted to attract his attention, if she wanted to be his lover, if she wanted Alceste to ravish her . . .

ELIANTE
Hypothetically speaking.

CELIMENE
Then she should approach him boldly, confident in all her womanly sensibilities . . .

ELIANTE
Yes?

CELIMENE
And say to Alceste . . .

ELIANTE
Or any such man like him.
CELIMENE

Yes, or any such man. She should say, “Alceste, I desire you!” Yes, she would certainly make him her lover if she wooed him this way. I know it wouldn’t be me. Oh, no, my courage would falter. I’m far too proud, Eliante. Eliante? Here I am babbling along about myself. What do you think?

ELIANTE

May I have another glass of lemonade?

CELIMENE

Of course, of course. I’m an abominable hostess once you get me distracted talking about men. Please, help yourself. You know everything in this house is yours.

ELIANTE

(Moving to the drink table.)

Thank you

CELIMENE

Well, almost everything.

ELIANTE

I understand, cousin.

(Aside.)

She most definitely knows!

CELIMENE

Ah, I hear Arsinoe approaching. I’ve been expecting her.

ELIANTE

Cooking up some devilish little scheme, no doubt.

CELIMENE

Let’s have some fun weaseling it out of her.

ACT II

Scene 2

ARSINOE

(Entering from salon.)

Hello, again, Eliante. I’m glad you’re. Hello, Celimene. I need your advice.

CELIMENE

Sit here between us.

ELIANTE

May I bring you some lemonade?
ARSINOE
Yes, that would be delightful. Thank you, thank you.

(ELIANTE prepares and serves lemonade all around.)

While you’re doing that, let me get right to the point.

CELIMENE
You have our undivided attention, Arsinoe.

ARSINOE
What? Yes, I’m sure. And so there should be no beating around the bush.

CELIMENE
I think you can depend on the two of us to speak frankly.

ELIANTE
Yes, if not us, then who?

ARSINOE
Why, of course. Now . . .

CELIMENE
Shouldn’t it be whom?

ARSINOE
What?

CELIMENE
Whom?

ELIANTE
Why?

CELIMENE
Because it sounds correct to say it that way.

ARSINOE
Say what?

ELIANTE
Whom. Celimene thinks it sounds correct. But no, it’s correct to say who.

ARSINOE
What?

ELIANTE
“If not us, then who?” That’s what I said, and it’s correct, I assure you both.

CELMENE

Very well.

(Pause.)

Arsinoe?

ARSINOE

Yes?

CELMENE

You said you wanted to speak with us about something.

I did?

CELMENE

More lemonade?

ARSINOE

No, no thank you, my dear.

CELMENE

Eliante, please refresh Arsinoe’s glass, and mine too, please.

(ELIANTE performs these actions.)

Now, tell us about your delicate matter, my dear.

ARSINOE

Yes, now I want to make sure that I have your word, your absolute word, mind you, that you’ll keep this conversation confidential and that you’ll give me your honest advice.

ELIANTE

Yes, we promise to give you our honest advice.

ARSINOE

Good. Now, we ladies all know what our lives are like once we’re married.

CELMENE

It’s been so long for me, I’ve quite forgotten. Eliante, what’s it like?
ELIANTE
It’s absolute heaven for me. Companionship, loyalty, respect, passion . . .

CELIMENE
Really? I don’t remember that.

ARSINOE
Oh, stop all this foolishness! Here’s what I mean. Our husbands take us for granted, and we forget what we were as alluring women, pursued by all the gallants. We grow rusty.

ELIANTE
Rusty at what?

ARSINOE
At making gentlemen desire us.

CELIMENE
You mean flirting?

ARSINOE
Yes, that’s what I mean.

CELIMENE
I don’t feel rusty. I’m at it every day with the gentlemen in my salon.

ARSINOE
Well, you’re not married anymore. Besides, you always were a flirt, Celimene.

ELIANTE
I don’t feel rusty. I’m at it every day with the gentlemen in her salon.

ARSINOE
Really? Whom have you flirted with lately?

CELIMENE
Shouldn’t it be who?

ARSINOE
What?

CELIMENE
Who.

ELIANTE
Why?
CELIMENE
Because it sounds correct to say who.

ARSINOE
Say what?

ELIANTE
Who?

CELIMENE
Yes.

ELIANTE
No, Arsinoe is correct. Whom.

CELIMENE
Very well. I defer to my elders in all things.

(Pause. ARSINOE and ELIANTE glare at her.)

What were we talking about?

ARSINOE
I asked if you’d flirted with anyone lately, Eliante, because I wanted to know what you did.

CELIMENE
Yes, Eliante. Do tell.

ELIANTE
I was flirting with the old cardinal earlier today.

ARSINOE
After I introduced you to him? I shouldn’t have left you alone with him. How dreadful!

CELIMENE
No, I think it’s delicious. I’m sure he was quite befuddled, the old dear.

ARSINOE
The old goat, you mean. My dear Eliante, he’s the last man you should tempt, for in his day, he was quite . . . well . . .

ELIANTE
Yes?

ARSINOE
Well, the only word for him is dangerous. I should know.
CELIMENE
Indeed? I never would have thought it, but again I defer to my elders.

ARSINOE
Let’s put the old cardinal aside for the moment.

ELIANTE
Very well. But tell me, why does a respectable woman like yourself need to flirt?

CELIMENE
Are you thinking about having an affair? Eliante, it must be something in the lemonade.

ELIANTE
No doubt.

ARSINOE
It’s quite the thing in court circles. You see, now that my husband and I are regularly among the elite there, it’s imperative that we live according to that society’s customs. Oh, I forgot that neither of you have been presented at court, so you wouldn’t know.

CELIMENE
Whom do you wish to flirt with? That’s what we want to know.

ARSINOE
Yes, here’s the delicate part.

CELIMENE
Yes, go on.

ARSINOE
There’s someone I want to seduce.

CELIMENE
Well, that’s easy enough.

ARSINOE
Easy? You may think so, situated as you are. But not for a respectably married woman.

ELIANTE
You’re right, Arsinoe. A respectably married woman forgets how it’s done.

CELIMENE
Please, Arsinoe, tell us who it is you wish to seduce. We cannot advise you about the best way to go about it unless we know that.
ARSINOE

Yes, well . . . you see . . .

CELIMENE

We can see this is uncomfortable for you, my dear Arsinoe. Maybe it’ll be easier if you let us guess who it is.

ELIANTE

Yes, guessing games are always fun.

CELIMENE

Is it someone at court?

ARSINOE

Oh, no, I mean, yes, of course.

ELIANTE

Yes, of course it is, Celimene. Remember, it’s all the thing at court.

CELIMENE

Yes, I forgot. Arsinoe, is it someone we know.

ARSINOE

Yes, he’s in your salon even as we speak.

ELIANTE

Ah, that narrows the field. Is he married?

ARSINOE

No.

CELIMENE

Ah, that narrows the field even more.

ELIANTE

Arsinoe, is there someone we know who is like the man you wish to seduce?

CELIMENE

Yes, is he like the old cardinal?

ARSINOE

Oh, far less bold.

CELIMENE

Is he like your husband?
ARSINOE

Not nearly as aristocratic as my husband.

ELIANTE

Is he like my husband?

ARSINOE

No, much brisker.

ELIANTE

We’re looking for someone who’s not like our husbands . . .

CELI

AREN’T WE ALL, LADIES, AREN’T WE ALL?

ELIANTE

Would this gentleman be anything like Celimene’s husband?

CELI

You mean lifeless?

ELIANTE

You’re being silly again, cousin.

ARSINOE

I hardly knew the man, God rest his soul, so it’s hard to say.

CELI

I know, would this gentleman you want to seduce be anything like . . .

ARSINOE

Yes?

CELI

Alceste?

ARSINOE AND ELIANTE

(Together.)

Alceste!

CELI

Yes, Alceste. Would he be like Alceste?
ARSINOE
Well . . . er . . . I . . . yes, he would be. But it’s not Alceste! It’s someone at court. I’ve
told you that already.

CELIMENE
Well, I think we can help you, Arsinoe. We both know Alceste very well, don’t we
Eliante?

ELIANTE
He’s always been a dear friend.

CELIMENE
And even though I haven’t spoken to him in over three years, I do think I know his
personality quite well.

ELIANTE
And you would know something about seducing a man like Alceste, wouldn’t you?

CELIMENE
Yes, better than anyone else in this room, I should think, my dear Eliante.

ARSINOE
Then how should I seduce this gentleman?

ELIANTE
Who is like Alceste?

ARSINOE
Yes, who is like Alceste.

CELIMENE
I’ll offer you some suggestions, Arsinoe, on one condition. We want to know why you
want to seduce this one particularly gentleman.

ELIANTE
Who is like Alceste.

ARSINOE
You want to know why? Oh, very well. I want to make sure that he gives his heartiest
recommendation that my husband should become the director of the Academy.

ELIANTE
You’d do this for your husband?

ARSINOE
Oh, yes. Now, advise me how to do it.
CELIMENE
Very well, here’s what would appeal to any gentleman who is like Alceste. First, always place yourself as close to him as you can and then stare directly into his eyes. Like this.

(She moves close to Arsinoe and looks at her with a bug-eyed stare.)

Now, you try it.

ELIANTE
Yes, pretend I am this gentleman who is like Alceste.

ARSINOÉ
Very well.

(She imitates Celimene.)

ELIANTE
(Turning away, hiding her urge to laugh.)

Oh, my goodness!

ARSINOÉ
Celimene, I made Eliante turn away from me. That can’t be an alluring device, can it?

ELIANTE
But it is, Arsinoe. I turned away because I was completely overwhelmed by your eyes.

ARSINOÉ
Are you sure?

ELIANTE
Positively. Look at him just as you did now. You’ll arouse feelings in him like he has never felt before.

CELIMENE
Yes, that’s all very well, but it’s only a start. You should make sure that you carry yourself with confidence as you walk towards him. Like this.

(Celimene walks about the room with exaggerated hip and shoulder motion.)

ARSINOÉ
(Imitates Celimene.)

Is this what you mean?
CELIMENE
Yes, that’s it. Now, you know how any gentleman enjoys seeing womanly beauty in all its flowering glory. So, make some few adjustments to your toilette, like this.

(She opens her own dress up at the neck to expose more of her bosom. ARSINOE imitates her.)

ARSINOE
Goodness, I feel a draught.

ELIANTE
Don’t worry. Things will be heating up very quickly, I’m sure.

CELIMENE
Now, when you’re close to a gentleman who is like Alceste, looking him in the eye and daring him to drop his gaze to that tempting expanse of luscious flesh, you may also want to bat your eyelashes at him like this.

(She blinks her eyes awkwardly.)

ARSINOE
Yes, I remember this flirtatious device from my youth.
(She imitates CELIMENE again, using ELIANTE as her practice target.)
It’s all coming back to me now.

CELIMENE
Good, good. Remember, appeal to his animal instincts. Summon the beast that’s in him.

ARSINOE
Yes, his most primal instincts. I see what you mean.

ELIANTE
Arsinoe, if I may, I believe you’ll make that all the more effective in seducing a man who is like Alceste if you would also smile sweetly as you do it. Like this.

(She blinks her eyes and grins with open mouth.)

ARSINOE
(She imitates ELIANTE.)
Ah, yes, a gentleman always appreciates an endearing smile.

CELIMENE
Did you use that on the old cardinal, Eliante? I’m sure that got his attention.
ELIANTE
Cousin, my smile has never failed me. If you smile like that, he will be yours, Arsinoe.

CELIMENE
And my dear Arsinoe, to let him know just how much you desire him—on that animal level—let him see the tip of your tongue there as you smile. Like this.

*(She wiggles her tongue between her smiling teeth.)*

ELIANTE
Yes, Arsinoe, we married ladies must give a gentleman who is like Alceste the clearest, most direct signals of invitation. I was just telling Celimene this earlier.

CELIMENE
Yes, a gentleman will ignore a married lady otherwise.

ELIANTE
You must show him that you possess instinctual, animal-like impulses that equal his.

ARSINOE
Gentlemen find it appealing when married ladies behave like animals?

CELIMENE
Yes. Let me see your tongue again.

ELIANTE
And now, here’s a device that will always bring you success with a man like Alceste. Use your fan to touch him here, or here, or here.

*(She demonstrates on CELIMENE.)*

ARSINOE
Like this?

*(She imitates ELIANTE with her fan.)*
CELIMENE
And when you sit down with him, be certain that you present to him a bit more of your legs than he is accustomed to seeing. Like this.

*(She sits causes the hem of her dress to rise substantially.)*

Here, you try it.

*(She gestures for ARSINOE to sit.)*

ARSINOE

Very well.

*(She imitates CELIMENE in sitting down and showing some leg.)*

CELIMENE

Yes, that’s it. Now, any man can always be charmed by girlish laughter. So, give a charming little gurgle of laughter to anything he might say to you. Like this.

*(She titters with a high-pitched, stuttering sound.)*

ARSINOE

I’ll try that.

*(She imitates CELIMENE, but it sounds worse, if possible.)*

ELIANTE

No, I don’t think you quite have it. You must catch that girlishness that Celimene mentioned. Can you make it a higher pitched laugh? Like this?

*(She makes a screeching laugh like a frightened bird.)*

ARSINOE

Higher pitch you say?

*(She tries her laugh at a higher pitch.)*

CELIMENE

Yes, much better. You’ll make yourself irresistible to Alceste.

ARSINOE

Now, how shall I bring the conversation around to the topic of love, so that I can put all these little devices to work?
CELIMENE
Oh, you don’t want any idle chit-chat. You want to launch yourself upon him. Shouldn’t she, Eliante?

ELIANTE
Yes, men usually like things uncomplicated.

CELIMENE
And if you need to talk, what gentleman is going to object to flattery? They’re always saying how vain we ladies are, but we know they’re far worse! Flatter him, my dear.

ARSINOE
Flatter him?

ELIANTE
Any gentleman likes to hear a beautiful woman tell him how wonderful he is.

CELIMENE
You can always compliment a man about his handsome face, his clothes, his cleverness, his manly strength, his bravery and all those kinds of things.

ELIANTE
And you can always talk to a gentleman like Alceste about his accomplishments. Always be thinking of him.

ARSINOE
Always be thinking about him. That’s a good maxim. I’ll remember it.

CELIMENE
Yes, now if you hope to seduce this mystery man at court, you’ll need to practice.

ARSINOE
Practice? Whatever do you mean?

ELIANTE
Arsinoe, it was you, yourself, who said that we respectably married ladies forget how to use our feminine charms.

CELIMENE
Yes, your very words, my dear lady. So, let’s arrange something for you. Alceste is in the next room. You could practice on him.

ELIANTE
An excellent idea. I’ll go call him in.

ARSINOE
But I’m not ready.

CELIMENE
Nonsense. This is the best moment. You’ve got everything fresh in your mind.

ARSINOE
But here? It would hardly be discreet. Of course, I’m thinking of his reputation.

ELIANTE
I’ll stay here near the door to the salon and prevent anyone from interrupting you.

(She moves to the salon door, opens it and looks into the salon for ALCESTE.)

CELIMENE
And I can hide myself up here, where I can give you signals. Eliante, call him in.

ELIANTE
Very well, all I need to do is catch his eye. I’ll send him in to you.

(She exits into the salon.)

ACT II
Scene 3

ARSINOE
My dear Celimene. I can’t possibly do this. I’m fully aware that you once loved Alceste.

CELIMENE
I told you already, I detest his arrogance and possessive jealousy.

(She closes the curtains on all the French windows.)

ARSINOE
But are you sure?

CELIMENE
He means nothing to me. Remember, you’re doing this for your husband. You want to be flawless as a temptress.

ARSINOE
Yes, I do.

CELIMENE
Now, in just a moment the handsomest man in Paris will walk through that door, and he’ll be yours to play with.
ARSINOE
You’re making this sound so exciting!

CELIMENE
It is exciting, my dear Arsinoe. Who knows? Even though you’re just practicing upon him, you just might make a conquest of him.

ARSINOE
Alceste? My lover?

CELIMENE
Yes, think of it. You’d make every woman in Paris sick with envy.

ARSINOE
Oh, there’s nothing like envy to make a woman happy, is there?

CELIMENE
He’ll be coming any moment now. Here, position yourself here, where you’ll be able to surprise him after he enters the room.

(CELIMENE guides ARSINOE UL.
CELIMENE notices her perfume bottle on the desk nearby.)
Oh, yes, here’s one other weapon of romance you should use. Perfume. For a man, the sense of smell is the decisive one.

(She applies perfume to ARSINOE liberally.)

ARSINOE
(She sneezes.)
This perfume is very . . . fragrant.

CELIMENE
Here, do you need my handkerchief?

(Gives ARSINOE her handkerchief and takes her hiding place US.)
I’ll be right here all the time. I’ll give you cues about what to do next. Don’t worry. You’ll have him on his knees in no time. Now smile.

(ARSINOE smiles and flutters her eyelashes as instructed earlier.)
Remember everything we told you.

ARSINOE
Celimene, you said I should appeal to the beast within him. Do you think I should growl at him? Like a tigress?
CELIMENE
Oh, my dear, dear, Arsinoe. Absolutely! I hear him coming!

(She hides, giggling. ALCESTE enters and moves CS.)

ACT II
Scene 4

ARSINOE
(Advancing DS directly behind ALCESTE.)
Alceste, my dear, I’m pleased to find myself alone with you at last.

ALCESTE
(Coughing from the heavy odor of the perfume.)
Madam, you caught me by surprise.

(As he continues to cough, ARSINOE looks US to CELIMENE who mimes smiling.)

ARSINOE
(Smiling with that oversized grin and bug-eyed eyelash fluttering.)
My friend, I hope you’re enjoying this day of triumph for you. No other gentleman in Paris can hope to match your genius.

(She moves close to ALCESTE and rubs her tongue along her teeth.)

ALCESTE
Pardon me, but is there something ailing you? Are you thirsty? Here, sit down. (He guides her to a seat CS.)
I’ll bring you a cool drink to refresh you.
(He moves to the buffet, pours some lemonade and brings it to ARSINOE. She has raised the hem of her dress and continues with her eyelash-fluttering and smiling.)
Here you are, madam. (He notices her leg and her facial expressions.)
This should quench your thirst.

ARSINOE
(Taking the drink.)
Perhaps it may, but what can I do about this raging hunger I feel?
ALCESTE
Pardon me, again, but have you caught a speck of dust in your eye?

ARSINOE
Will you look and see?

ALCESTE
(Sitting beside her and looking into her eye.)
Madam, I don’t see anything there

ARSINOE
Then, I’ll just look upon you, sir.

ALCESTE
(Rising and moving away.)
I don’t think there’s anything particularly significant to see.

(ARSINOE looks US to CELIMENE. CELIMENE mimes her seductive walk. She rises and walks in imitation of CELIMENE towards ALCESTE as she speaks.)

ARSINOE
My dear sir, I want to contradict you there. When I look at you there is plenty to see, and what’s more, there is plenty to desire.

(She has backed him up against a piece of furniture.)

ALCESTE
(Maneuvering from her grasp and moving across the room as he speaks.)
Madam, I’m not sure this is a seemly conversation for the two of us to be having. You are a respectably married woman.

(During ALCESTE’S line above, she looks US to CELIMENE. CELIMENE mimes opening up her dress to reveal more of her bosom. ARSINOE moves in her seductive walk CS to a seat.)

ARSINOE
Sir, my situation just adds that much more excitement to the game, doesn’t it? Please, bring me another glass of lemonade.

(ALCESTE complies. As he is refilling her glass, she opens up the top of her dress and raises the hem of her dress. ALCESTE)
brings the lemonade to her and sees her
posed with so much of her body revealed.)
Thank you, my dear sir. Won’t you drink anything? Or is it enough for you to drink of
me with your eyes?

ALCESTE
(Turning away.)
Madam, forgive my rudeness.

ARSINOE:
(Again she looks to CELIMENE, who mimes the fan business.)
Come, sir. I’ve upset you. Forgive me, I beg you. Here, sit next to me. I need your
advice, my dear Alceste.

ALCESTE:
(He sits next to ARSINOE.)
Very well, madam. I am at your service.

ARSINOE
Thank you, sir. Sitting intimately here, I feel I can trust you and speak sincerely to you.

ALCESTE
You know you can always depend on me to comply with any request made by a lady.

ARSINOE
Oh, always the gallant!
(She puts an arm around ALCESTE’S
shoulder and leans into him so that her
bosom is directly beneath his face. She
attempts the high-pitched laugh.)
I thank you, my dear. I knew you’d humor me.

ALCESTE
(Turning his head and body away from her.)
Speak your mind, madam.

ARSINOE
You may as well know, my dear Alceste, that I am madly in love with you.
(She uses her fan to turn his head towards
her, and she strokes his jaw line playfully
with it.)
When I look upon your face, I want to caress it and kiss your eyes, your cheeks, your lips.
(He tries to rise, but she holds him in place.)
I know that there’s a passionate heart beating in your breast.
(She now strokes his chest with her fan.)
I know that you have love to give to a woman, and I want you to give all of it to me. You would be glad you did, for I can love you with all of a woman’s passion and adoration. *(He tries to rise, but she restrains him.)*

I am ready to give myself completely to you, for you are the most beautiful, dashing, brilliant, and clever man in all of Paris. Just looking at you here stirs me to ecstasy, as I gaze upon your god-like face, your heavenly form, and your elegant clothes. Oh, such fine fabric!

*(She strokes his leg with her fan.)*

Can’t I hope to possess you? You’d make me the happiest woman in Paris.

**ALCESTE:**

*(Breaking away from her, rising and moving across the room.)*

Madam, I must say that your overtures move me in ways I’ve never known before.

**ARSINOE**

I’m glad to know that I’m so persuasive.

*(Rising and moving to him with her “seductive” walk that she learned from CELIMENE. ALCESTE frowns in horror.)*

**ALCESTE**

You’re very persuasive, madam. But I must tell you that I have no choice but to deny myself the pleasure of forming a liaison with you.

**ARSINOE**

Oh, nonsense, Alceste. You don’t have to be coy with me.

*(She laughs again.)*

Please, speak the true feelings in your heart to me.

**ALCESTE**

I will tell you in all honesty that my love is committed in another direction. While you affect me greatly with your compliments, I beg you to put this idea out of your mind.

**ARSINOE**

I reluctantly accept what you’re telling me, sir. But if your heart had not already been committed, would you not feel your passion inflamed by the softness of my bosom?

**ALCESTE**

Well, madam... I...

**ARSINOE**

Or by the eagerness of my smile?

**ALCESTE**

I... er... uh...
ARSINOE
Or the glow of desire in my eyes?

ALCESTE
I can only say no, madam.

ARSINOE
No?

ALCESTE
Precisely. I dare not allow myself to regard the alluring power of your eyes, your smile, or your... décolletage.

ARSINOE
But haven’t I appealed to your tastes with the most perfect feminine charms?

ALCESTE
My tastes incline me to prefer a lady whose charms are quite different than yours.

ARSINOE
What?

ALCESTE
I cannot offer your advances the passionate response they so deserve.

ARSINOE
There’s no need for such delicacy, sir. I think I understand your meaning.

ALCESTE
Yes?

ARSINOE
(Growling like a tigress.)

Grrrrrrr!

ALCESTE
Madam, you sound as if you’re contracting a cold. Perhaps, it’s best to protect yourself from the draught. Here, allow me.

(He goes to her and takes the handkerchief—the one CELIMENE had given her—and drapes it across her exposed bosom.)

ARSINOE
(Grabs and throws the handkerchief on the floor.)
I’ve never been so insulted in my life!

ALCESTE
I intended none, madam, believe me.

ARSINOE
That is too much, sir! Too much! I came here to you with the gift of my affection, and you dared to offend me. That I cannot endure. I will now apply all my efforts to make you regret the injury you’ve done me. Good day, sir.

(She exits into the salon.)

ACT II
Scene 5

ALCESTE
Your handkerchief, madam.

(He picks it up from the floor for her, but she is gone. After a moment he looks at it carefully.)

How very strange. This is Celimene’s handkerchief. There’s her embroidered device. And there’s her little initials.

(He takes a long, luxurious sniff of it.)

Even though Arsinoe touched it, this little token makes me long to embrace my dear, dear Celimene. Oh, how I’d sweep you up into my arms and kiss you a thousand times upon your eyes, your mouth, your ears, your neck, your shoulders, and your . . . and I’d improvise sonnets all the while, between each kiss. Oh, my Celimene, how I love you!

(He weeps into the handkerchief.

CELIMENE comes DS to ALCESTE, who stands immediately upon hearing her.)

CELIMENE
From now on, I expect a sonnet from you every day before I admit you into my presence. And then when you come to me, I will want to be kissed upon my eyes, my mouth, my ears, my neck, my shoulders, and my . . .

ALCESTE
Enough mockery, madam. If I were to write sonnets to you and kiss you with gentlest affection, I’m sure you’d still find some way to belittle my sincere expressions of love.

CELIMENE
If such ridicule would make you weep for love of me, then I’d mock you gladly. Your tears are your most potent charms to me. Here, let me taste them.

(She kisses him upon the eyes.)

Yes, they are intoxicating. I’d want to drink of them every day. It’s the most sublime pleasure to know that I can make Alceste weep with longing for me.
(She takes the handkerchief and gently wipes ALCESTE’S cheeks. She keeps the handkerchief.)

ALCESTE
I would weep, laugh, smile, frown, shout, or sing all day long if it would draw you to me.

CELIMENE
Oh, I don’t want you making faces at me all day long.

ALCESTE
Celimene, just know that I love you. Just now before you came upon me, I endured a most trying encounter, but I restrained my temper. I remembered your condition for our marriage. By moderating my behavior just now, I’ve fulfilled my promise to you.

CELIMENE
What was this trying encounter?

ALCESTE
It’s too embarrassing to name. Besides, the honor of a lady would be compromised.

CELIMENE
(She moves away from him.)

You ask me to trust you with some other woman? Remember, you raged at me three years ago because your possessive heart could not trust me with other men.

ALCESTE
Celimene, I ask your forgiveness for my past jealousies. I wanted to possess you so desperately that I couldn’t bear to see you pay attention to any other man. I still desire you, more so than ever before. But rather than feeling an overwhelming urge to possess you, I now simply wish to please you and do anything that would make you happy.

CELIMENE
I must confess, that pleases me immensely.

ALCESTE
(Taking her hand.)

Then, will you marry me and let me give you everything you could desire?

CELIMENE
Since you seem to have fulfilled my condition, I am inclined to say . . .

(Alceste begins to kneel.)
ELIANTE

(Entering briskly from the salon. ALCESTE immediately stands.)

Ah, there you are, cousin. I just saw Arsinoe come in to the salon, and she had a look of

great complaisance on her face.

CELIMENE

Complaisance? I never would have imagined that?

ELIANTE

Neither would I. We all know that face. It’s a mask covering some vicious stratagem

that’s at work in her heart. It made me suspicious, so Philinte and I followed her.

ALCESTE

What did she do, gobble like a turkey?

CELIMENE

Hush, Alceste! Please, Eliante, tell us what you saw her doing. This sounds serious.

ELIANTE

It seemed so to me. She nonchalantly glided about until she arrived at the side of her

husband. She and Oronte then casually retired just outside one of the garden doors. We

moved nearby where we could observe them. We saw Arsinoe speaking very rapidly and

very heatedly to her husband. They moved further into the garden, and it seemed as if

they were debating a course of action. They were too far away from us at that point to

hear anything. As they were headed back into the salon, though, they both were walking

with assurance and sly smiles on their faces. I knew then that they had contrived a

scheme of some sort, and so I sent Philinte over to them, and I came to warn you.

CELIMENE

I’m sure you’re correct in thinking they’re plotting something.

ALCESTE

Just a moment ago, there was a difference of opinion between myself and Arsinoe.

ELIANTE

(In mock horror.)

Merciful heavens, Alceste!

(Aside to CELIMENE.)

What happened?

CELIMENE

(Aside.)

Everything went according to our plan, or so I thought.
ELIANTE
(Aloud.)
They’ll probably strike soon. What will you do, Alceste?

CELIMENE
Eliante, please, return to the salon. Help Philinte stall them for a few minutes.
(Turning to ALCESTE.)
Alceste, we must prepare a counterattack.

(They confer silently.)

ELIANTE
(Aside as she is exiting into the salon.)
This little crisis could drive Alceste away from his darling Celimene. Well, I’ll just have to do what I can to console him.

(She exits smiling.)

ACT II
Scene 7

CELIMENE
Alceste, you must brace yourself to meet these two scheming devils. They’ll try to bait you into doing something you’ll regret.

ALCESTE
What do I have to fear from Arsinoe or Oronte? I’m determined to remain perfectly calm, just as you wished me to do.

CELIMENE
I suspect you’re acting a little overconfident in this case.

ALCESTE
What have I done to inspire their hatred? On the contrary, they have positively oozed all over me today, artificial though their behavior may have been.

CELIMENE
Alceste, I have a confession to make. I was secretly watching you and Arsinoe when you had your little disagreement.

ALCESTE
You heard and saw all of it?

CELIMENE
Yes, I had put her on to you.
ALCESTE
You told her to make advances upon me? This is certainly your worst little escapade!

CELIMENE
Eliante and I were in here conversing when Arsinoe came in to us. She immediately started asking us about how a woman should seduce a man. We were suspicious, so we played along with her, trying to find out what she was scheming. It didn’t take much work to get her to reveal her thinking. She wanted to seduce you.

ALCESTE
What made her think that she could possibly lure me into an affair with her?

CELIMENE
Of course, it seemed ridiculous. Well, my playful nature got the better of me, so I told her all kinds of silly ploys she should use on you. I say silly because everything I encouraged her to do were things I knew you’d detest.

ALCESTE
So, when she approached me with that expression on her face . . .

CELIMENE
Yes.

ALCESTE
And when she used her fan to . . .

CELIMENE
Yes.

ALCESTE
And the way she sat down and . . .

CELIMENE
Yes, yes, yes. I laughed so hard when I saw you recoiled in horror from her.

ALCESTE
And she was wearing the perfume I gave you. Its fragrance is now defiled for me.

CELIMENE
Oh . . . er . . . ah . . . That was Eliante’s idea. I’m sorry I let her do it, knowing now that it’s upset you so. Please forgive her, Alceste. Now, let’s say no more about it.

ALCESTE
Very well. But I did suppress my anger towards her. I had in mind my promise to you.
CELIMENE
Yes, that’s the other part that was so amusing. I knew you were tying yourself up in knots, trying to control your temper.

ALCESTE
And did Arsinoe know you were watching her performance?

CELIMENE
Oh, yes! That was part of the arrangement as well. That allowed me to give signals to her behind your back. She was a puppet on a string, acting under my full control.

ALCESTE
Yes, the humiliation she suffered would whip up her anger. But wouldn’t she want to take revenge on you more than on me?

CELIMENE
Well, no. You see, there’s something else I haven’t told you.

ALCESTE
Another confession? I’m rather enjoying myself watching you behave so contritely. You’ve had your fun, and now it’s my turn to observe you tying yourself up in knots.

CELIMENE
Oh, very well, you gloating beast! But you won’t be smiling after I’ve told you about the conversation I had with Oronte earlier today.

ALCESTE
Oronte? What did he want with you?

CELIMENE
I see that I’ve wiped that smug little smile off you face with that.

ALCESTE
Tell me! I’m positive it’s bad news.

CELIMENE
Well, he wanted something from me, and that immediately made me suspicious. So, just like with Arsinoe, I played along with him so that he’d show his hand to me.

ALCESTE
Well, what was he after?

CELIMENE
He had some forged documents that he intended to use as evidence against you.
ALCESTE
Against me?

CELIMENE
These forged documents would make it look as if you plagiarized in your new book.

ALCESTE
Preposterous! I’d never do such a thing! It’s unbelievable!

CELIMENE
He could have made people believe it. Concrete evidence is usually very damning.

ALCESTE
I’ll go right now and confront him.

CELIMENE
Wait, Alceste. You’ve nothing to fear about it.

ALCESTE
What do you mean?

CELIMENE
Oronte is as much a fool as Arsinoe. He actually let me examine his little bundle of forged documents. As soon as he let go of them, I walked right over to the fireplace and tossed them into the flames. They’re nothing but gray cinders now.

ALCESTE
Yes, well, thank you for such decisive action. But how did you draw this scheme out of him? Celimene, you didn’t sacrifice anything on my behalf?

CELIMENE
No, I assure you. But I’m charmed by your chivalrous concern. He’s not the first gentleman to make such a proposition to me, and he certainly won’t be the last.

ALCESTE
Proposition! That’s the most vulgar word you could use.

CELIMENE
Vulgar or not, it’s accurate. I led him to believe that resentment between you and me still lingered. He naturally assumed that I might want to rejoice in seeing your name injured.

ALCESTE
And in exchange for destroying me . . .
CELIMENE
He lusts for the position of director of the Academy. Many of its members attend my salon regularly. He wanted me to get their votes for him.

ALCESTE
Madam, I don’t know what to think of your intrigues and social maneuvering. I’m dismayed at these schemes that Oronte and Arsinoe have fomented against me and your hand in inflaming their resentment towards me. It almost seems as if you enjoy all this gamesmanship. I wonder if you possess anything of a genuine, loving heart.

CELIMENE
I’ve wondered the same thing about you ever since I’ve known you. Not another word, here’re Oronte and Arsinoe. Be careful.

ALCESTE
Madam, their ability to stir up my wrath are no match against the love I feel for you. I’ll laugh away their threats, no matter how dreadful they are.

ACT II
Scene 8

(ORONTE and ARSINOE enter from the salon with PHILINTE and ELIANTE following.)

ORONTE
Madam, I must raise a most unpleasant subject to this gentleman. Please forgive me.

CELIMENE
As you are my guest, I am obliged to forgive any unpleasantness you might cause, sir.

ORONTE
(Speaking to ALCESTE.)
Sir, earlier today I heartily supported your nomination to the Academy.

ALCESTE
Such a noble gesture of goodwill it was, sir.

ORONTE
Yes, well, I’ve decided to withdraw my support for you.

PHILINTE
Oronte, I’m sure that Alceste will greatly regret that you cannot speak on his behalf.
(Taking ALCESTE aside.)
Alceste, you have many admirers among the members of the Academy, enough, I’m sure, to gain your election. Don’t despair.
CELIMENE
Oronte, this is most certainly unpleasant news.

ORONTE
Madam, I have hardly broached the most unpleasant element of the subject at hand.

(To ALCESTE.)
Unless you, sir, make a full apology to us, I will have no choice but to oppose absolutely
your admission to the Academy.

ALCESTE
My behavior today has included nothing that would offend another or cause me regret. I
bid you all good day.

(He starts to exit to the outside. PHILINTE
quickly takes ALCESTE by the arm and
speaks to him in aside.)

PHILINTE
Alceste! What are you doing? Your nomination still has a chance, even with Oronte’s
opposition. He couldn’t possibly muster enough votes against you. Call his bluff, man!
Fight it out against him.

ALCESTE
(Aside to PHILINTE.)
This duplicitous oaf has influence at court, where final approval rests. It’s best that I
depart now before I say or do something I would regret. Remember, I made a promise to
Celimene, and I intend to keep it.

CELIMENE
Alceste, please stay a moment longer. I want to see this unpleasant subject brought to a
resolution with all parties present.

ALCESTE
Madam, of course I will remain at your request. No gentleman could refuse you.

(Aside to CELIMENE.)
Merciful heavens! I hope I don’t try to strangle him here under your roof.

CELIMENE
Oronte, you said you would oppose Alceste’s nomination if he did not apologize to you.

ORONTE
Yes, madam. And it must be a public apology.

CELIMENE
I see. If Alceste were to make his apology next door in my salon, would that suffice?
ORONTE
A declaration in your salon would be satisfactory.

CELIMENE
Alceste, we could step through the door right now and you could say a few words. The air would be cleared, then, would it not?

ARSINOE
But don’t you want to know what he’s done first?

ALCESTE
Madam, I haven’t done or said anything that would require an apology. I can’t help it if you’ve taken offense at something I’ve inadvertently done.

PHILINTE
Obviously, there’s been a misunderstanding of some sort. Oronte, I propose that we step outside to the garden to discuss this matter. I can serve as a mediator between you.

ORONTE
No, sir I will not. I’ll hear no placating words from you.

CELIMENE
Oronte, you must say what it is that Alceste has done to injure you.

ORONTE
Madam, you also played an indirect role in Alceste’s insidious stratagem, so you may very well wish to make an apology as well after you hear my accusation.

CELIMENE
I’ll gladly make an apology after I’ve heard the nature of the offense I’ve given you.

ORONTE
In good time.

(To ALCESTE.)
Just a little while ago, you, sir, attempted to seduce my beloved wife, Arsinoe.

PHILINTE
What?

ALCESTE
(He begins to laugh.)
Seduce your wife? That’s ludicrous!

CELIMENE
(She laughs.)
You’re joking! This is truly funny, sir!

*(ELIANTE joins in the laughter.)*

**ORONTE**
This is definitely no joke, madam. Nor should you be laughing, since you were in the room eavesdropping on the whole sordid scene.

**CELIMENE**
I was eavesdropping? Really? Arsinoe, how did you know I was in the room?

**ARSINOE**
I . . . er . . . uh . . . I could smell your perfume.

**CELIMENE**
Yes, I’m sure you could!

*(She and ELIANTE laugh even louder.)*

**ORONTE**
Mada...
(She indicates the neckline of her dress where she had been opening it up to expose more of her bosom to ALCESTE. She goes about the room showing it to everyone.)

CELIMENE
(Aside to Eliante.)
Please, God, don’t let me die of laughter!

(She turns US to conceal her convulsions of laughter. ALCESTE and ELIANTE respond in mock horror to ARSINOE.)

PHILINTE
(He takes ORONTE to one side.)
Oronte, I believe you’re trying to draw Alceste into a trap. If he proclaims that what you say is not true, then you will be within your rights to call him out. That can only bring about a disaster that none of us desires. If he doesn’t challenge your accusation, he would appear to all the world as a lecherous cad. Either way, his reputation would suffer a degradation from which he could never recover it.

ORONTE
I’m glad you comprehend things so perfectly, sir. No matter how Alceste responds to my accusations, I retain the upper hand.

PHILINTE
You treacherous dog!

ALCESTE
(Controlling his laughter.)
In spite of all this clever maneuvering, we all know the truth about the situation. Say what you will about me, sir, I care not. But leave the others out of it.

ORONTE
I am content to see you humbled.

ALCESTE
Then we will both obtain what our hearts desire.

PHILINTE
Alceste! You can’t let . . .

ALCESTE
Philinte, my friend, for the first time in my life, I’m going to act as you would act. I’m going to pursue a middle road. Oronte, I will not question your honesty in this accusation you make nor will I answer it with an apology. I say again, I’ve done nothing that should
give me a reason to apologize to anyone, nor have I done anything that I regret. Repeat these accusations to whomever you wish. I rest on my own integrity.

ORONTE

Very well, sir. Since you refuse to apologize, then I will speak against you when the Academy debates your candidacy. In the meantime, I see no alternative but to inform my colleagues here in Celimene’s salon of your despicable behavior.

(He departs with ARSINOE into the salon.)

PHILINTE

(Following them out the door.)

Oronte, one last time, I beg you to let me discuss this situation with you. On behalf of my wife, I ask forgiveness from both of you. There’s no reason for a friendship among all of us to collapse because of a misunderstanding.

(ELIANTE follows him, giggling.)

ACT II

Scene 9

ALCESTE

(Still laughing mildly.)

Never in my life have I heard such a tale! It’s beyond anything I’ve ever imagined.

CELIMENE

The world is full of Orontes who would say anything to preserve their dominance.

ALCESTE

And what kind of world do we live in that it is governed by such craven hypocrites?

CELIMENE

An imperfect one, but sometimes we win a small skirmish, and those little victories allow us to rejoice on occasion rather than living our entire lives in a perpetual state of rage.

ALCESTE

You’re right. It is rather useless for me to work myself up about it. After all, I did withstand all their insults without flying into a passion.

CELIMENE

Yes, I noted your submission.

ALCESTE

It makes me feel wonderfully free, now that it’s over and done with. So let them spread their lies and block my nomination to the Academy. I care not. I have done what you challenged me to do. I’ve restrained my anger in the face of mendacity.
(He begins to dance a jig.)
That’s what makes me so happy. Now I can ask you to marry me and I know that your answer has to be yes.

(He takes her in his arms and dances her about and dips her. He is kissing her all the while.)

So, I ask you again, happily, with the full flush of my love for you glowing in my heart, to be my wife.

CELIMENE
Alceste, stop. We must be serious for a moment. My own heart is now divided. I truly wish to see you admitted to the Academy. You certainly deserve the honor. As ridiculous as this trumped-up scandal is, you’d probably never be nominated again. I couldn’t bear to see that happen.

ALCESTE
(He continues his attempts to kiss her.)
Your sympathy gives me great comfort, madam.

CELIMENE
(She pulls away.)
Sympathy is easy enough for me to feel for you. But I don’t believe I could offer anything more to you.

ALCESTE
(He attempts to embrace her again.)
I ask for nothing more than . . .

CELIMENE
(Keeping him at arm’s length.)
Alceste, listen to me. How could I love any man unless he first earned my respect? Impossible. My own reputation demands it. Quite some time ago, I placed all hopes for the fulfillment of my love in your hands. I created and built the reputation of my salon for you. I wanted to create a world that was worthy for your wit and genius to inhabit. I wanted to have a place prepared for you when you returned to society.

ALCESTE
And such generosity reveals the depth of your respect and love for me.

CELIMENE
It’s not love. It’s cold calculation at work. I knew that my reputation and my salon’s popularity wouldn’t attain perfection without your presence. I needed you as its centerpiece, its crystal and golden chandelier. But my scheme wasn’t simply something to gratify myself. I wanted to see your brilliance burnished to its brightest glow by surrounding you with minds worthy to engage yours.
ALCESTE
You do me too much honor.

CELIMENE
I didn’t think so until now. If you were to allow your reputation to be destroyed by this ridiculously contrived scandal and throw away any opportunity to be admitted to the Academy, then, yes, I would be paying you too much of a compliment. How could I align myself with an Alceste who wouldn’t defend his own name?

ALCESTE
I’ve tried everything to earn your love.

CELIMENE
But you will lose my respect if you forget yourself. If you allow lesser men and women to trample on you, then I would despise you. No, I want the old, exasperating, ruthless, unbending, pedantic, relentless Alceste to stand up for himself. That’s the only man worthy of me, the only one I want, the only one worth having. But if you won’t fight to preserve your own name, then I’m ashamed for you. So, I ask you. Which Alceste are you? Which one stands before me? The one I would scorn or the one I would worship?

ALCESTE
(Pause.)
Pedantic?

CELIMENE
(She laughs.)
Yes, occasionally you are.

ALCESTE
Madam, this devastates me, coming from your lips.

CELIMENE
When you start preaching, you’re like a schoolboy reciting his verses. Oh, but it’s absolutely adorable.

ALCESTE
First, you humiliate me with the accusation of pedantry, and now, to think that the world might find anything about my behavior adorable . . . it makes me . . .

CELIMENE
Never fear. I doubt very much that the world finds anything about you adorable. It’s just one of the little things that makes my heart melt for you.

ALCESTE
Blast it, madam! How am I to win your hand and your heart? You tell me that I must moderate my passionate convictions and learn to tolerate the world’s duplicity. And I do
so, with great patience and meekness, even when I’m directly insulted by one of the biggest poltroons in all of Paris. I returned to society to say that I’m willing to abandon my principles for you. But then you overturn it all by telling me that my compromising attitude has made me unworthy of you. By giving up who I am for you, I lose you. The agony is unbearable! And now, to turn the paradox back on itself, you tell me that you want me to be exactly as you knew me before. To stand on my principles and let the devil take the hindmost! Because I am . . . adorable in your eyes. I should curse you to the devil for your cruelty. After I curse myself for allowing my heart to love you.

**CELIMENE**

You’ve mistaken cowardice for courtesy. You’ve allowed your honor to be stolen from you. That should be intolerable to you. It is to me.

**ALCESTE**

These are strong words, madam. Nothing, I assure you, is more intolerable.

**CELIMENE**

Yes, well let’s not quarrel. Instead, let me tantalize you with a possible wedding gift.

**ALCESTE**

A wedding gift? Do you mean . . . ?

**CELIMENE**

I said “possible” wedding gift.

**ALCESTE**

The gift of your affections is all I truly desire.

**CELIMENE**

Most flattering, but I’ll let that go. Here is the gift I have in mind for you. I can squelch Oronte and Arsinoe’s vicious little plan to discredit you. Would you let me do that for you? Your reputation would be preserved.

**ALCESTE**

How? You have no power against them.

**CELIMENE**

Remember, I was there as a witness. I can make her look ridiculous in the eyes of the world—including even the royal court—by telling the world my version of the events.

**ALCESTE**

How would you make your version of things known to the world?

**CELIMENE**

I can go into my salon and tell the truth to the old cardinal and any number of people who would then spread my words throughout society.
ALCESTE
Madam, I’m grateful for your defense of my name. But I know the world and its moral turpitude. The two stories will be weighed not in the scales of blind justice, but in the crooked scales of sordid, rumormongering scandal. Everyone believe the scandal.

CELIMENE
I have influence to tip the scale in your favor.

ALCESTE
But how can your influence counteract, much less silence, the green-eyed monster of gossip? No, madam, I don’t think your influence could save me.

CELIMENE
My influence ranges far beyond what you imagine.

(She goes to the salon door, opens it and stands by it. The noise from the salon swells while the door is open.)

Look there, Alceste. I have lured all the men here by casting my spell upon them.

(She closes the door. The noise subsides to the normally low rumble.)

Naturally, many of them have pursued me, and in some cases I didn’t discourage their interest, causing them to behave in ways that could compromise them.

What do you mean?

CELIMENE
The usual. Love letters. Notes of assignation. Poems. Gifts. I could create scandals from here to Bordeaux, if I chose to reveal them to your green-eyed monster.

(She opens a drawer in the writing desk and hold up a sheaf of papers.)

Do you think so many august members of the Academy, including its distinguished director, would allow that to happen?

ALCESTE
Celimene, I am shocked.

CELIMENE
Heavens, Alceste, are you really such a drearily prudish little bourgeois to think that I’d behave like a novice in a convent all these years while you were hiding away?

ALCESTE
No, madam. I’m shocked by your willingness to commit acts of treachery against people whom you call your friends. You would stoop to the kind of behavior that you say you loathe in Arsinoe or Oronte. Such dishonorable behavior only makes you as base as they.
CELIMENE
This obsession with honor is your greatest sin.

ALCESTE
And your indifference to honor is yours. By revealing the details of your relationships with any of these people, you’d be bringing scandal upon yourself. You’ve told me about your ambition to enhance the fame of your salon. I can’t believe you’d risk that.

CELIMENE
Alceste, these papers have been hidden away in this desk, and I’ve never imagined using them to manipulate anyone to gain something for myself. Don’t you see, Alceste? I would burn everything in this room, and I would raze this house and sow all the gardens around it with salt like another Carthage, if that would insure your success in the world. I want to intercede for you, because I love you.

ALCESTE
Madam . . . Celimene . . . I . . .

CELIMENE
Just say “yes.”

ALCESTE
Madam, I’m overjoyed to have earned your affections. But at what cost?

CELIMENE
Hopefully, only the cost of your unruly temper.

ALCESTE
No, madam, at the cost of your honor. That’s a price I would never pay.

CELIMENE
Well, sir, you don’t believe I can persuade the world with my telling of the truth, and you won’t allow my honor to be sacrificed, so that seems to bring things to an end.

ALCESTE
I fear that is so, madam. For people like ourselves, love and integrity work at cross purposes. Celimene, allow me to withdraw my proposal of marriage. I will return to my isolation where I will not be able to trouble you nor cause any trouble for myself.

ACT II
Scene 10

PHILINTE
(Entering hastily from the salon.)
Alceste! Arsinoe and Oronte are spreading their outrageous lies all . . .
CELIMENE
Yes, we know, Philinte. The damage is done.

PHILINTE
No, no, there must be something we can do. There’s too much at stake. I know a printer. A very good man. He trusts me completely, and he doesn’t fear the likes of Oronte. He’ll put out a pamphlet for me. Alceste, you can write it. I’ll get it distributed in a matter of hours. Everyone will remember how you outmaneuvered him before, and they’ll believe you now because of it.

CELIMENE
That’s a noble gesture, Philinte, but Alceste doesn’t need to take his case to the public.

PHILINTE
What do you mean?

CELIMENE
I proposed two possible courses of action to Alceste. First, I suggested that I could explain the truth about Arsinoe’s behavior to the old cardinal.

PHILINTE
Why would the director believe you?

CELIMENE
He’s a regular here in my salon, so I can call upon my friendship with him. He could stop Oronte right on the floor of the Academy. He could take a nomination from any one of the Academy’s members and refuse to recognize Oronte as a speaker. If Oronte can’t speak against Alceste, then he can’t prevent Alceste’s candidacy. And as for everyone else, I can simply tell all the members of the Academy who are next door the truth.

ALCESTE
I already told Celimene that this plan wouldn’t work. Once poisonous lies have been spread, the truth doesn’t stand a chance.

PHILINTE
I’m inclined to agree with Alceste, pessimistic though he is. What is your second idea, Celimene?

CELIMENE
I’m in possession of certain documents that could compromise the reputation of quite a number of the Academy’s members. I could create a scandal that the director could neither ignore nor tolerate.

ALCESTE
And I have forbidden Celimene to do this . . .
CELIMENE
Forbidden? You sound like a husband already.

ALCESTE
I have requested Celimene not to do this, for it would compromise her own honor.

PHILINTE
Yes, yes, I see.

CELIMENE
But do you also see how Alceste is allowing himself to be destroyed because he won’t allow anything to be done?

ALCESTE
I’d rather return to the serenity of my isolation where I’d not trouble anyone.

PHILINTE
Alceste, you’re talking like a fool! I would accuse you of something far more . . .

ALCESTE
You may say what you like, my friend. I’m being guided by my heart in this matter, not my pride. I love Celimene too much to allow anything to injure her name.

PHILINTE
That’s what makes you such a fool! Don’t throw away your chance to attain what your heart truly desires. Remember what I told you. If you retreat from society again, for whatever reason, then you lose me as a friend forever. I will never visit you there. I will never write to you. I will never speak your name again as long as I live.

CELIMENE
Philinte! You can’t mean this.

PHILINTE
I do mean it, and Alceste knows it. Think well on it, sir.

(To CELIMENE.)
Madam, if I were to have earned your regard as Alceste has done, nothing could ever drive me away from your side. Nothing.

(PHILINTE exits into the salon.)

ACT II
Scene 11

CELIMENE
Rarely have I seen Philinte so forceful, so adamant.
ALCESTE

Nor have I. It’s almost frightening.

CELI MENE

When did he give you this ultimatum?

ALCESTE

Earlier today, when we first arrived here. I didn’t believe him when he said it, because I know him too well. I believe the look I saw in his eyes just now, though. Philinte, of all people, is making me see the folly of my actions. If I retreat again into isolation I’d be cutting myself off from the one person who speaks to me with perfect honesty. I’d be miserable without Philinte’s company.

CELI MENE

There’s only one whose company you desire?

ALCESTE

Of course not. Celimene, you know I love you and long to be your husband, your lover, your friend, and your companion.

(She throws herself on him and kisses him.)

Celimene, if you wish, use your connections, your charms, your wit to preserve my reputation.

CELI MENE

With all my heart, Alceste. Nothing would make me happier.

ALCESTE

If you clear the way again for my nomination to the Academy, I promise you I’ll strive to become its most distinguished member. I will proudly escort you every day into your salon and remain there to engage your guests with my best conversation.

CELI MENE

Your words delight me, Alceste.

ALCESTE

Then, madam, I ask you once more to give me your hand in marriage.

(Kneels before her.)

CELI MENE

Very well, but first we must preserve your nomination to the Academy. Remember, I wanted that as a wedding gift for my husband-to-be? I shall speak to the old cardinal. And if it should prove necessary, I’ll also quietly remind a few distinguished persons about certain compromising documents that are in my possession.
ALCESTE

(Standing.)

Celimene!

CELIMENE

Alceste, don’t worry. I won’t show the documents to anyone or make any public declaration about them. It will be just a few individual cases of persuasion. What’s the point of having the reputation as the worst coquette in Paris if I don’t put it to work for myself? If you like—to make you feel better—I’ll promise to give back all these documents to their owners after you’re safely ensconced in the Academy. After that, they all will rest easy in the knowledge that I would have no further influence over them. I’ll also make it clear to them all that you are ignorant of my actions on your behalf. That way they won’t resent you or feel tempted to attack you in some way later on. In fact, they’re all such sentimental fools that they’ll probably feel inclined to favor you at every turn, knowing they conspired with a beautiful, charming lady to rescue your name from dishonor. I’ve thought of everything, now, haven’t I?

ALCESTE

Madam, you are a ruthless Machiavel.

CELIMENE

All this is for you, Alceste. Behold the limitless power of my love, dear sir.

(Shes kisses him.)

But the most unexpected twist has complicated things. Oronte and Arsinoe have required me to use all my hard-earned influence to save your name from ruin. So, I’ve placed you in my debt. I would never have intentionally contrived to place you in so uncomfortable a position. You know that, don’t you, my dear?

ALCESTE

Yes, I know it. Your respect for me is as perfect as your generosity.

CELIMENE

Well, before we agree on marriage, I want you to be absolutely sure of yourself. Is your heart truly ascendant over your masculine pride? Will you be able to live with yourself, knowing that I used methods that you might feel are dishonorable, and that I preserved your reputation when you could or would not?

ALCESTE

You’ve thrown me in doubt again, madam. Every time I’ve cleared away the obstacles, you put one more in my way.

CELIMENE

This is the obstacle that could bring us the most unhappiness. I don’t want you to resent me for saving your honor. So, in this your resolve must be perfect—to live a life dictated by love, not by principles. I love you as a god, and I want to be the one who is standing
at your side when you dazzle all here in my salon, and at the royal court, and when you become the director of the Academy.

ALCESTE
Madam, you make me believe that anything is possible.

CELIMENE
For you it is. I want you to burn with ambition, for I believe you will achieve all these things and more, because of your genius, your commitment to noble ideals and your love of the truth. Think on what I’ve laid out to you. While you do that, I’ll write a note to the old cardinal, asking him to give me a private interview. I’ll call Eliante and Philinte into the room to keep you company while I do that.

(She goes to the salon door and mimes the act of summoning them into the room while ALCESTE paces.)

ACT II
Scene 12

CELIMENE
Eliante, Philinte, please join us in here.

(They enter the room from the salon.)

Have some conversation with Alceste while I write a little note to the old cardinal.

PHILINTE
Then you’ve persuaded Alceste to agree to your plan? This is marvelous news.

CELIMENE
I might have persuaded him. Look at him arguing with himself. I’ll just be a moment.

(She goes to her writing desk.)

ELIANTE
(Aside.)

He certainly doesn’t look like a man who has won the hand of the woman he adores.

PHILINTE
(Aside.)

My friend, what troubles you? Celimene has arranged it all to perfection.

ALCESTE
I still cannot have complete faith in Celimene’s letter. Will she’ll be believed?

PHILINTE
Alceste, listen to me. If Celimene says that she can do something, then you can be certain that she will.
ELIANTE
(Moving to the other side of him.)
Yes, Alceste, you of all people are aware of the determination within a woman’s breast.

ALCESTE
But the old cardinal?

PHILINTE
Trust Celimene to convince him. And remember, sir, if you forsake Celimene again, if you forsake your place in society again, then you have lost me as your friend forever.

(He moves away from ALCESTE.)

ELIANTE
Husband, whatever are you talking about? Alceste, what does . . .

(She sees the look of determination on PHILINTE’S face.)

CELIMENE
(Coming downstage with the letter sealed.)
Here it is, sir. Now tell me what’s to be done. Allow this letter to be delivered to the old cardinal . . .

PHILINTE
I’ll deliver it! Gladly! Just say the word, my friend.

CELIMENE
Let Philinte deliver this letter and anticipate my plan’s success, your nomination to the Academy and our marriage, or burn this letter in the fireplace and allow your name to be dishonored and scuttle back to your little hole. It’s your decision to make.

(She extends the letter to ALCESTE. He slowly takes it and considers it. All characters freeze. Auditorium lights come up for the audience vote. The vote may be conducted by the house manager, a stage manager, a local personality/celebrity, or any other personage available. The vote may be conducted as a hand count, ballots may be distributed inside the program, or any other method suitable. After the vote, the performers use the appropriate ending—A or B. The designated personage comes forward to explain the voting process. Once this
explanation begins, the actors performing the roles of ORONTE and ARSINOE come onstage and all the actors relax and drop their characters. Stage hands may come onstage to offer them water or refresh their make up or adjust their costumes. The actors may participate in the vote collecting and/or counting process. If there is a tie, the designated personage flips a coin to decide. As part of the explanation to the audience about the voting process, the designated personage explains that the cast has prepared two conclusions to the play, and they will perform the one that gains the most votes from the audience. Ideally, the audience should not be aware of the outcome of the vote, but individual actors and the designated personage can react positively or negatively to the outcome as they wrap up the process and prepare to resume the action. Once the voting is completed, everything reverts to the situation after CELIMENE’S line above. The play resumes with Scene Thirteen A or B, as determined by the vote.)

ACT II
Scene 13A

PHILINTE
Alceste, may I deliver that letter for you?

CELIMENE
Yes, Alceste, we’re all wanting to know how well you know yourself and trust yourself.

ALCESTE
I don’t know how well I know myself, but I do know whom I can trust. Celimene, I thank you for writing this letter for me. I’m forever grateful to you. I can think of no greater expression of love than this. Philinte, please deliver this letter to the old cardinal.

(He places the letter in PHILINTE’S hand.)

PHILINTE
With pleasure, sir! I knew you’d make the right choice. I couldn’t be happier.

(He kisses ALCESTE.)
ALCESTE
Neither could I, my friend, neither could I. Naturally, any man would feel sublime ecstasy to earn Celimene’s affections. But I must confess to you that I couldn’t live without your companionship, dear Philinte.

(They embrace.)
Now go, sir, and put Celimene’s plan in motion.

PHILINTE
Yes, right away. It’s sure to bring things aright. Celimene, you’re a genius! I’ll build you a country manor tomorrow! A bucolic bower to sustain your wedded bliss forever!

(He kisses CELIMENE.)
We have our friends with us now, dearest Eliante! It’s all fallen out as we’d hoped!

(He kisses ELIANTE and hurries off to the salon.)
I’ll have this in the old cardinal’s hand before you can count to ten!

(ELIANTE follows him to the salon door where she watches the action in both rooms.)

ACT II
Scene 14A

CELIMENE
Alceste, did Philinte’s vow stir fear in your heart?

ALCESTE
Well, yes it did.

ELIANTE
So, Alceste, do you love my cousin as much as you fear my husband?

ALCESTE
I fear them both. And love them both.

ELIANTE
You are wise to fear Celimene.

CELIMENE
Thank you, cousin. I’m glad to have made my point.

ALCESTE
And now, my dear Celimene, I can ask you with all confidence now to be my spouse.

CELIMENE
Will you not propose to me with sweet words on bended knee? Or have you already become a presumptuous husband?
ALCESTE

(He kneels and takes her hand.)

Celimene, I am yours completely. All my happiness now and forever rests in you. Any gentleman in the world would want to love you and earn your love for himself. I am proud to have won your favor, and consider myself blessed with divine fortune to be the one who holds your hand thusly and asks you to become my spouse. No man could hope to have a wife more charming, more beautiful, more gracious, more loving, more noble, or more brilliant than you. I promise to worship you, to adore you, to love you perfectly until I take my last breath upon this earth. Celimene, will you marry me?

CELIMENE

Yes. Now stand up and kiss me, you heavenly lover, for I am wooed.

(ALCESTE rises. CELIMENE grabs him and kisses him passionately.)

Come, let’s announce our betrothal to all our acquaintances in the salon.

ALCESTE

After you, madam.

CELIMENE

No, we go in together, like this. With my hand around your arm. Your strong, noble arm. Eliante, if we go together like this, will every man in the room desire me and every woman in the room envy me?

ELIANTE

I’m sure of it. If you’ve finally made a conquest of Alceste, then you captured the heart of every gentleman in Paris long ago—including the old cardinal. And as for the women’s envy, I’m sure you’ll get it. I know that right now I positively hate you.

CELIMENE

Splendid. Let’s go in, my dear.

(ALCESTE and CELIMENE move towards the salon door. CELIMENE stops suddenly.)

Alceste, my dearest love, you must promise to do one more thing for me. To make my happiness complete.

ALCESTE

You impose yet another impediment to our marriage?

CELIMENE

No, it’s just a favor I ask of you. Please.

ALCESTE

Tell me what it is.
CELIMENE
That pretty little speech you made to me just now to woo me. Will you kneel and say it again to me? In front of everyone? Just this once?

ALCESTE
No, Madam, I will not. I’ll do it every day when I escort you on my arm into your salon.

ELIANTE
That will certainly make all the ladies hate you, cousin.

And their husbands, no doubt.

ALCESTE
Oh, I can’t wait. Come, husband.

(CELIMENE and ALCESTE exit into the salon.)

ACT II
Scene 15A

ELIANTE
(Aside.)
They deserve this happiness, but I’m curious about my husband now. I know Philinte loves Alceste deeply, so he was gambling everything when he made his threat to his beloved friend. Well, that shows some mettle. There just might be a gentleman of spirit buried somewhere deep inside him. I think I shall pursue that and encourage it within him. For my part, I have passion enough waiting to be unleashed. Perhaps we can transform our joyless little marriage into a deliciously blistering firestorm yet.

(She starts to exit to the salon, but stops. She goes to the desk and picks up the bottle of perfume. She applies a bit of it to herself.)

This is the spark I hope will ignite you, dear husband.

(She then chugs a glass of champagne.)

And this is the spark that will ignite me.

(She exits into the salon. Fadeout.)

END OF PLAY (Using Ending A)

ACT II
Scene 13B

PHILINTE
Alceste, may I deliver that letter for you?
CELIMENE
Yes, Alceste, we’re all wanting to know how well you know yourself and trust yourself.

ALCESTE
I don’t know how well I know myself, but I do know whom I can trust. Celimene, I thank you for writing this letter for me. I’m forever grateful to you. I can think of no greater expression of love than this. Philinte, please burn this letter in the fireplace.

(He places the letter in PHILINTE’S hand.)

ELIANTE
Can you really mean that, Alceste?

ALCESTE
Yes, I’m positive. Celimene, I trust your wisdom, even though it foretells a sordid vision. I can’t be sure that my pride would not get the better of me in a few years’ time. To think that I would come to resent you makes me shudder.

PHILINTE
Alceste, what about embracing the love you feel for each other now and risk the future?

ALCESTE
No, that’s not enough. Celimene demands perfect love, and rightfully so. I came close to attaining that perfection, but one corner of my soul still refuses to surrender. And it never will. Contentment felt today—no matter how exquisite—could never counterbalance the pain I would cause tomorrow. The shame would be unbearable. Celimene, you understand that, don’t you?

CELIMENE
Yes, our love, as it exists today, has attained perfection. It’s too pure and beautiful to be destroyed tomorrow.

ALCESTE
And so, farewell.

(He kisses her hand. CELIMENE uses her handkerchief to wipe away the his tears, kisses the handkerchief and gives it to him. ALCESTE moves to French windows.)

PHILINTE
(PHILINTE stops ALCESTE at the door.)
Alceste, wait! Perhaps, wait till morning to decide. It’s not too late.

CELIMENE
Philinte! Let him go.
PHILINTE

But, madam . . .

CELIMENE

You swore a vow, didn’t you?

(Pause.)

Didn’t you?

PHILINTE

Goodbye, friend.

(PHILINTE and ALCESTE shake hands.
ALCESTE exits US into the garden.
PHILINTE begins to cry.)

ACT II
Scene 14B

PHILINTE

(He moves to exit US.)
I shall miss him terribly. Ladies, my grief overwhelms me. Please, excuse me.

CELIMENE

Philinte, the letter. It must go in the fire.

PHILINTE

(He moves towards the fireplace.)
I’m too sad to do it. I can’t believe what’s happened. It can’t be true.

(He sits.)

CELIMENE

(She sits by PHILINTE.)
Well, it’s true. Brutally so.

ELIANTE

I’ll do it.

(She briskly takes the letter and strides over to the fireplace and burns the letter.)

CELIMENE

Thank you, Eliante. Clearly neither of us had the courage to do it. Well, I must break the news of Alceste’s departure to our friends next door in the salon.
ELIANTE
Cousin, must you say anything now? Can’t it wait?

PHILINTÉ
If everyone knows Alceste is gone, then Arsinoe and Oronte will be less likely to spread their lies about.

CELIMENE
I suspect it’s too late for that now.

PHILINTÉ
You’re no doubt right, my dear, but still it would be best to let the world know what’s happened. I would be honored to escort you into the salon, and I will stand by you.

CELIMENE
Thank you, my friend.

PHILINTÉ
Will you say anything about why Alceste has returned to his retreat?

CELIMENE
No.

PHILINTÉ
Don’t you want to tell the truth about him to the world?

CELIMENE
The world would never understand his nobility.

ELIANTE
But, cousin, Oronte’s lies will tarnish your salon’s popularity.

CELIMENE
It doesn’t matter anymore. Nothing matters anymore.

(She weeps. Her handkerchief is gone.
PHILINTÉ offers his.)

PHILINTÉ
Come, my dear friend. Take a deep breath, dry your eyes and let’s go in.

CELIMENE
No! I want everyone to know that Alceste is the cause of these tears.

(They start to exit into the salon. CELIMENE stops.)

Eliante, will you do something for me?
ELIANTE

If I can, what is it?

CELIMENE

Over there is the perfume Alceste gave me. When I return, I’d like it to be gone.

ELIANTE

Of course.

CELIMENE

Thank you. Philinte, let’s go in.

(CELIMENE takes PHILINTE’S arm and they exit into the salon.)

ACT II
Scene 15B

ELIANTE

Celimene threw away her chance to have the finest man in Paris. All she has left is my husband’s shoulder to cry upon. Well, you’re welcome to him, cousin.

(She pours herself a drink, thinking.)

I’ll go to Alceste in his hermitage. I’ll rouse his passion, his fighting spirit that Celimene found so alluring and I’ll have him all to myself.

(Setting the drink down, she sees the perfume bottle.)

Oh, yes, I’ll claim you for myself, too. Come, little elixir, you can work your magic for me.

(She takes the perfume bottle.)

Help me ignite Alceste’s fiery passions.

(She sprays some on herself.)

I want him to match my own desire. It may not be love, but it’ll be delicious.

(She pours a glass of champagne and gulps it down.)

That’s good enough for me.

(She exits to the outside. Fadeout.)

END OF PLAY (Using Ending B)