

Delusion and demise: the obsessions of moliere's alceste and monsieur jourdain



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Moliere, who built his reputation writing plays that satirize late 17th French society, develops two title characters in his dramas "The Would-Be Gentleman" and "The Misanthrope," the former, Monsieur Jourdain who attempts to recreate his self image in order to be accepted into high society, and the latter, Alceste, who tries desperately and single mindedly to destroy such artificial constructs that bind society. The efforts of these two men quickly become obsessions, which inevitably replace any authentic response to life, thus causing delusion. One can easily see that delusion, in any form, prevents truth, and thus such efforts, be they foolish and satirical, or deliberate and, one could even say, more noble and goal worthy, are doomed to end in defeat for they continually prove to be unreasonable and unreal. The story of Monsieur Jourdain is the classic story of a man who wants to rise above his station in life. He is merely a merchant - a member of the middle class, and his family neither dresses in the manner, nor partakes in the activities, of the higher social class. Nor are they interested in studying dance, fencing, music, or philosophy. Monsieur Jourdain, however, has his mind set on higher social standing. He wishes to surround himself with people who have already achieved that status, such as the count, Dorante, and goes so far as to model their behavior. It soon becomes apparent that Monsieur Jourdain's efforts to do so are nothing short of foolish, and in the end produce foolish results. While working with his music master, he finds the songs too dismal, and decides to make a suggestion of his own: "Jenny was methought / As sweet as she was fair / Jenny was methought / as gentle as a lamb" (189). Needless to say, this is a song that the higher social class would laugh at. While the music and dancing masters continue to school Monsieur Jourdain for the money, they would greatly appreciate it if he had "

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a little more understanding of what [they] lay on him" (186). His inability to understand crosses over to his fencing lessons, when after being taught, he still does not understand how one " can be sure of killing his man and not being killed himself" (195). Also, Monsieur Jourdain's education is so incredibly lacking that his philosophy master, instead of teaching his philosophy, ends up teaching him the letters of the alphabet and the sounds that each one makes. It soon becomes obvious that not only are Monsieur Jourdain's efforts foolish, but they are also false. He not only is unable to understand what is being taught to him, but he has no interest in understanding it. He is merely seeking to have the appearance of one of high social standing. As long as he appears to do what the " quality" do, then there is nothing else of importance. For example, his dancing master and music master are preparing a ballet for him, and he reminds them that this ballet is " for when the lady I'm going to all this bother for will be doing me the honour of dining here" (193). He is even prepared to employ the music master for more hours because, in the words of the music master himself, " a gentleman such as [himself], living in style, with a taste for fine things, ought really to be holding musical at-homes every Wednesday or Thursday" (193). The only reassurance he needs before consenting is to know that this is " what the quality do" (193). Monsieur Jourdain's obsession quickly progresses from the trivial matters of dress and entertainment, to the more serious matter of money lending. When his wife questions his relationship with Dorante, Monsieur Jourdain replies: " If I hob-nob with the gentry, at least I show good taste. It's better than hanging around with your middle class crowd" (210). He is so wrapped in raising his social status that he is unable to see the true character of Dorante, which those around him easily

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discover. Madame Jourdain admits to her husband that Dorante is indeed good to him and shows him “such kindness,” yet she is quick to add that he also “borrows [her husband’s] money,” and that his kindness is simply Dorante’s “way of getting around her husband” (211). However, Monsieur Jourdain’s obsession with his social status leaves him unable to respond to life in an authentic manner; he is too delusional to see what is quite obvious to others – that Dorante is “milking [him] like a cow” and will not “be satisfied until he’s ruined” him (213). Not only has Dorante tricked Monsieur Jourdain into “lending” him money, but he has also tricked him into believing that he is helping him to win the affections of Dorimene, when in fact he is after her himself. The “diamond ring that [he] entrusted to [Dorante] to give her as a present from [him]” is indeed given to her, but as a gift from Dorante himself (215). At this point, due to his obsession, Monsieur Jourdain is so completely deluded that he will believe anything, no matter how outrageous or obviously deceitful, as long as it is promised to lead to the elevation of his social status. Monsieur Jourdain reaches the very bottom when he allows his obsession with social status to compromise his daughter Lucile’s happiness. When Cleonte asks for Lucile’s hand in marriage, Monsieur Jourdain does not ask him to say that he loves his daughter and will care for her now and always, but rather states: “Before I give you my answer sir, I ask you to tell me if you are of noble birth” (225). Not only does Cleonte honestly tell him that he “is not nobly born,” but he states that “it is an act of cowardice to conceal the estate to which it has pleased heaven too call [one], to appear in the eyes of the world decked out in a borrowed title and pretend to be what [one is] not,” which is exactly what Monsieur Jourdain has been doing (225). When his wife mentions the fact that his

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father was merely in business, he brushes her comment aside, going on to vow that his daughter will be a marquise “ even if the whole world turns against [him]” (227). He is willing to sacrifice all of his relationships, even his relationship with his daughter; he is willing to sacrifice his daughter’s happiness for the sake of a noble title. It is at this point, when Monsieur Jourdain has gone beyond simply embarrassing his family, that Cleonte and his servant, Covielle, decide to take matters into their own hands. Their plan is to convince Monsieur Jourdain that the son of a Grand Turk, who in actuality is Cleonte himself, wishes to marry his daughter. Given his current state of delusion, Monsieur Jourdain goes along with the charade without even the slightest bit of persuasion being necessary. It is because of this delusion caused by his obsession with social status that Covielle remarks, “ if there’s a bigger fool than him anywhere on earth, I’ll shout it from the rooftops!” (252). Unlike the Alceste’s efforts, which can be labeled as more noble, Monsieur Jourdain is satirical to the core. What else can one make the man whose efforts, prior discussed, are nothing short of foolish? Monsieur Jourdain becomes so obsessed with achieving higher social standing that he becomes deluded and is unable to see the truth of what it would actually require for him to raise his social status. As a result, he goes about it the wrong way, and his foolish efforts fail him miserably in the end, as he is tricked into condoning a marriage that he truly condemns. His efforts reflect on the society that has created such a man, as well as the individual who recreated his life based on such artificial principles. It is because of this that Monsieur Jourdain is precisely the type of man that Alceste would be disgusted by, as we can see from the very beginning of Moliere’s “ The Misanthrope” when he is speaking to his friend, Philante: You should be <https://assignbuster.com/delusion-and-demise-the-obsessions-of-molieres-alceste-and-monsieur-jourdain/>

mortally ashamed of yourself. What you did was absolutely inexcusable, and utterly shocking to any honourable man. I see you loading a man with every mark of affection, professing every concern for his welfare . . . And then when he's gone . . . Your enthusiasm dies with your parting and to me you speak of him as though he mattered nothing to you . . . If ever I had had the misfortune to do such a thing I'd go and hang myself on the spot out of sheer disgust . . . I expect you to be sincere and as an honourable man never to utter a single word that you don't really mean. (95) Alceste is shocked that his own friend would participate in the upholding of "the foolish manners of the age," which Alceste is so adamant of ridding from society (96). He is obsessed with truth, and the artificial constructs present in society cannot support truth, and thus he cannot support society. He refuses to listen to Philante, who insists that "the world [will not] change its ways on account of anything" Alceste does (99). He simply brushes him aside when Philante explains these defects that Alceste finds in society as "inseparable from human nature," and likens the idea to "vultures ravenous for carrion" (99). However, Alceste is soon to become an example supporting this very idea. Philante points out that the woman Alceste loves, Celimene, embodies the very characteristics that he loathes; "her coquettishness and love of scandal seem to chime so well with the manners of the age" (100). Yet, he loves her in spite of her faults. He supposedly has no control over whether or not he loves her; he "sees her faults, but it makes no difference" (100). However, later on in his conversation with Philante, he admits that he would not love her if he did not believe that she loved him as well. With this statement Alceste is claiming that human nature does not have a hold on him, and he can love whom he pleases. If so, why does he love someone who possesses

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the very characteristics that he vows to spend his life fighting against? Alceste is fighting against the hypocrites of society while he himself is one. Alceste's obsession with correcting the "flaws" of society only deepens as time goes on. He progresses from mere hypocrisy regarding his love for Celimene, to risking his own well being for the sake of his beliefs. After making demeaning comments regarding a sonnet of Oronte's, who pleaded for his opinion, Alceste has been criminally charged and faces arrest. Even then, Alceste states that "nothing will make [him] go back on what [he has] said" (133). He goes so far as to say that he "will have nothing to do with mankind," for "justice was on [his] side but he lost his case" (133-134). Yet instead of fighting the wrong that he believes has been done to him, he wishes to let the verdict stand as "a notorious instance, a notable testimony, of the wickedness of [his] generation" (135). One moment he wants to change society and the next he simply wants to point out its wrongdoing so that he will have the "right to denounce the iniquity of human nature and cherish an undying hatred of it" (135). Due to his obsession, Alceste no longer cares to do the noble thing and attempt to right society. Rather, he wishes to withdraw from society. Alceste is disgusted with human nature, and wishes to "never [be] included among [its] number as long as [he] live[s]" (134). What he fails to realize in his state of delusion is that he himself remains human, and thus is subject to the very human nature which he abhors. Thus, while Alceste begins by fighting for a noble principle, his obsession with overcoming the artificial constructs of the hypocritical society in which he lives leads to the same delusional demise that Monsieur Jourdain falls victim to. Alceste's goal, and even Monsieur Jourdain's goal of raising his social status, while far-fetched, seem somewhat noble. However, their efforts

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to reach their goals quickly become obsessions, which replace any authentic response to life that they might have, causing them to become delusional. This leads to both men making decisions that prevent them from reaching their goals. Works Cited Moliere. "The Misanthrope." *The Misanthrope and Other Plays*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. pp 95-142. Moliere. "The Would-Be Gentleman." *The Misanthrope and Other Plays*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. pp 186-252.