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Molière's *Le Misanthrope*

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2013

Honors Capstone Project in French

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Abstract

My Capstone project is a French-to-English translation of about 1,100 lines of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*. I chose that play because I was interested in exploring translation theory and the act of translating — not because I wanted to contribute some revolutionary new work to the numerous translations of it that already exist. I had never tried to translate, so I wanted the project to be an exercise in the work.

I began by selecting the parts of the play I thought to be most significant and helpful in giving a feel for what the play means. The plot was less important than larger themes and showcasing the complexity of the language — if I had wanted it to come through clearly, I would have translated the whole play. I typed out all the chosen parts, partly because I wanted to have a closer feel for the original text, and partly because I wanted the original and my translation to sit next to one another in the final product.

The method I used to translate the text was relatively straightforward. I worked line by line, translating as literally as possible. That is, I looked for English equivalents to the French text rather than reinterpreting it entirely, as most professional translators do. I worked that way because, as I mentioned, I was more interested in the act of translating than in constructing something especially innovative.

I used primarily two period dictionaries, both available online: the 1st and 4th editions of l'Académie Française's dictionary. Researching French words in French before looking up synonyms in English helped me to create a better idea of what certain phrases — and also individual words whose meanings have changed since the 17th century — meant in the mind and native language of their author. When I got stuck on a phrase, I often turned to Google's online translator. It would give me the basic idea behind the phrase's structure, acting as a jump-start.

I translated into a sort of unrhymed verse, though I gave myself no syllable or meter restrictions. The greatest English *Misanthrope* translation, by Richard Wilbur, is in rhymed verse, and other versions exist in both unrhymed verse and prose. I chose simplicity and literalness, again, because I wanted an experience in basic translation, not full-blown reinterpretation.

I also chose not to look at other translations while I was working on mine. I did consult Wilbur's at the end of my project, but only to compare and to clean up a few lines with which I had struggled considerably. I wanted my translation to be purely my own, and I knew that consulting others' works while creating mine would certainly have led me to borrow ideas from theirs to make mine easier. Because I had no previous experience in translation, I preferred to make my first journey alone so I could draw my own conclusions on what translation theory and the act of translating meant to me. I succeeded in that, finishing with a much deeper understanding of both the text and translation. Ideas — not words — are key in a good translation, though no matter how much work goes into it, a translation will never perfectly reflect its mother text.

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Acknowledgements, Gratitude, and More

I give deep gratitude to my parents for keeping me steeped in other languages and cultures throughout my childhood. Many thanks to Professor Hope Glidden for getting me hooked on Molière. Thanks also to Kate Calleri for helping me to realize the importance of understanding the ideas behind the language — not just the language itself.

Most importantly, I must thank Professor Amy Wyngaard for all her guidance, patience, and advice. She taught me the beauty and subtlety of Molière in French, and encouraged me to pursue translating his work. Thank you for reading and re-reading all my drafts, for answering emails with unparalleled timeliness and fervor, and for understanding how important schedule flexibility can be to procrastination-prone college students.

**Notes on *Le Misanthrope*:
A Brief Venture in Translation and its Theory**

Why *Le Misanthrope*?

Translating a world-famous play from 1666 may seem redundant. A basic search on an Internet bookshop brings ten different translators who have published an English version of *Le Misanthrope*. The beauty of translation, however, is that no matter how many times one text is translated, the result will always be unique.

Le Misanthrope is the most interesting of Molière's plays that I've read. I first encountered it in the fall of my sophomore year in a general French literature course, and again the next semester in a course on Molière, in which I read *Le Misanthrope* and four of the writer's other plays. As my final project in that second course, I translated *Le Misanthrope*'s first scene. At the time I figured that it would be easier than doing some other, more "creative," project, not anticipating all the complexities that make up translation.

For me, *Le Misanthrope* embodies Molière's modernity, as measured both now and when he lived. The ideas and the social criticism that he presented were highly radical for his time. He had more than one run-in with the Church and its censors for blows he leveled at its role in society, and he often walked a fine line between jokes and barbs, when they weren't one and the same. But his themes — especially those in *Le Misanthrope* — also carry great weight today.

Joan DeJean, a leading Molière scholar and a professor of French at the University of Pennsylvania, attributes the playwright's modernity — which she defines more as the characteristics of his position as an author — to his understanding of three things: "the new ways in which the contemporary book

trade was becoming profitable, the inevitability of a systematized institution of censorship, and the appearance of a new kind of transgressive literature.” (DeJean 27) That is, Molière, when he broached what DeJean describes as “obscene” topics — sex, heresy, and criticism of the social elite — helped to reinvent the very idea of obscenity and its censorship in modern literature.

Before Molière, DeJean writes, censorship of obscenity meant to undermine a writer’s authority and his place in history. But Molière, thanks in part to his relationship with the king of France, who for some years sponsored the writer, “forced Louis XIV and Colbert finally to make censorship ... a systematic, bureaucratic institution. ... Then, once his display of the scandal of obscenity had attracted the attention of some of the earliest French print journalists, obscenity and censorship combined made Molière the first true precursor of the celebrity author of our own media-obsessed age.” (DeJean 85)

Le Misanthrope sits with two other plays by Molière, *Le Tartuffe*, published in 1664, and *Dom Juan, ou le Festin de Pierre*, published in 1665. That group comprised Molière’s venture into dark humor, scandal, and his sharpest and most direct criticisms of social institutions. *Tartuffe* tells the story of a cheating, lying holy man. An impostor, Tartuffe feigns virtue with the hope of conning an unsuspecting man into giving up his property and his daughter. The play outraged the Church, and was immediately censored. In the following years, Molière spent considerable energy fighting that censorship. *Dom Juan* continued in *Tartuffe*’s impious vein. It showed the audience a nobleman, supposedly the epitome of distinction and propriety, who debauched women, broke laws, and hurled

unthinkable blasphemies at whatever interrupted his quest for earthly pleasure. The horrified censors struck again, this time allowing a version of the play that showed Don Juan cast into the fires of hell as punishment for his behavior.

Le Misanthrope, though it doesn't go after the Church, takes on a similarly powerful entity — the king and the French nobles who frequented salons — in a different sort of balancing act. The king, Louis XIV, financed Molière's troupe and his playwriting. So as much as Louis XIV might have enjoyed laughing at himself or his own kind, Molière still faced a difficult task in poking fun at the hand that fed him, especially when he despised the idea of a small moneyed aristocracy living on a plane superior to that of all other French people.

The play attacks the in-vogue culture of insincerity and false flattery in which nobility participated: it's hypocrisy, seethes Alceste, the "misanthrope" after which the play is named. He hates everyone who participates in "this disgraceful exchange of feigned amity," who "disguise themselves behind vain compliments." (Molière, trans. Carlino 4–5) Nobles refused to address any issue or person directly, reverting instead to criticisms couched in compliments, stab-in-the-back gossip, and a vicious, predatory social attitude.

These themes echo an earlier, one-act play by Molière, *Les Précieuses Ridicules*. The work, his first big success, "was a natural exaggeration of France's seventeenth-century quest of elegance and refinement." (Molière, trans. Frame 19) Those in the provinces mock the play's *précieuses*, or precious ladies, for their urban pretensions, and Parisians deride their naiveté as they tried to act like refined ladies in various salons. Preciosity is absolutely unnatural and

unaristocratic, revealing only the desire to be exclusive and superior, and it's the biggest vice of the antagonists in *Le Misanthrope*. (Stanton 28)

The play, it seems, could have been written in 1666 or 2013. Whereas nobles visited each other's salons to pay false homage to their adversaries, we post hollow congratulations and calls for getting together on each other's social media profiles. Célimène and her followers were mean girls who sported corsets and bonnets instead of leggings and Ugg boots. Alceste, who calls for an end to white lies and insincere compliments, is just as marginalized in his time as he would be now. His companions, on the other hand, tell him to let people be people, and that a little flattery never hurt anyone.

Other Translations

As I mention at the beginning of the essay, at least ten different translators have published English versions of *Le Misanthrope*. A deeper search would very likely uncover more, but one name seems to appear more frequently and to more praise than others: Richard Wilbur. I studied translations by Wilbur and John Wood, but only after I finished my own. I did so because I was interested in what I could learn about translation by myself, without outside influences that might pull my own work in a different direction.

Wilbur's, it seems, is the more complex — it certainly has more flourish. He translated the play into English verse, and though his lines don't reflect Molière's word for word, he captures the feelings and ideas behind the original text with his own distinct, driving voice. Wood, on the other hand, translated into

prose, avoiding the limitations of both line length and rhyming. His text retains less power than Wilbur's, and lacks the theatricality of rhyme that gives Wilbur's a feel of authenticity. However, "[the] translator is always in the text, for the text always has to pass through the translator who is ever present as the constraining and enabling filter," write translators Jean Boase-Beier and Michael Holman.

(Boase-Beier, Jean, and Michael Holman 9) Here is a comparison of the two — the same lines from the first act of the first scene — in which Alceste begins to describe his quarrel with mankind.

Alceste:

My God, you ought to die of self-disgust.
 I call your conduct inexcusable, Sir,
 And every man of honor will concur.
 I see you almost hug a man to death,
 Exclaim for joy until you're out of breath,
 And supplement these loving demonstrations
 With endless offers, vows, and protestations;
 Then when I ask you "Who was that?", I find
 That you can barely bring his name to mind!
 Once the man's back is turned, you cease to love him,
 And speak with absolute indifference of him!
 By God, I say it's base and scandalous
 To falsify the heart's affections thus;
 If I caught myself behaving in such a way,
 I'd hang myself for shame, without delay. (I, i)
 (Molière, trans. Wilbur 6)

Alceste:

You ought to be mortally ashamed of yourself. What you did was beyond all possible excuse, absolutely shocking to any honourable man. I see you loading a fellow with every mark of affection, professing the tenderest concern for his welfare, overwhelming him with assurances, protestations, and offers of service and when he's gone and I ask who he is — you can scarcely tell me his name! Your enthusiasm dies with your parting. Once we are alone you show that you care nothing about him. Gad! What a base, degrading, infamous thing it is to stop to betraying one's integrity like that. If ever I had had the misfortune to do such a thing I'd go and hang myself on the spot in sheer self-disgust. (I, i)

(Molière, trans. Wood 25)

Deciding which of the previous examples is “better” likely depends on personal preference. Clear, however, is the higher skill and craft level that Wilbur’s translation reflects. He worked within two very constraining structures, verse and rhyme, and managed to create a very clear, vigorous, and witty text. Wood’s, because it has no verses, seems to drag and lacks immediacy.

I find it very interesting that none of the translations I’ve studied include French versions of the text. A translated text is, of course, entirely the work of the translator. How much of that text still belongs to its original author, or how that author should be acknowledged, may be debated. But to leave out the original text says to me that the translator has taken complete artistic ownership of the translated version — that it shouldn’t be compared to the original because it’s meant to stand on its own. That makes sense, as a translated text should not aim to mimic its predecessor. Rather, the translation should reinterpret the original so as to express its ideas and feelings as accurately as possible in a foreign language.¹

I placed my translation next to the original text because I was, in creating the project, less concerned with achieving artistic expression than with beginning to understand the act of translation. Translation is re-imagination, and a translator’s work, though based on someone else’s, is entirely his or her own. Because mine reflected my interest in the act of translating more than an interest

¹ I use “foreign” here on purpose. To promote cultural awareness, languages other than English are now presented in schools as just that — “other than English” — rather than “foreign,” which connotes otherness and deviance from what’s normal. In this case, however, whatever language the translation is in is, to me, foreign. No matter how the new text is written, it can never fully express all the ideas, feelings, and nuances that the original text’s language can.

in creatively expressing the ideas behind *Le Misanthrope* — though it's important to note that the two are always linked — I chose to show both versions of the text, mine and the original. That should make whoever reads my text consciously aware of the fact that it is a translation, and that there is a very tangible relationship between the two texts.

It's important to note, however, that no translator is entirely removed from the original text; a translator “is a rewriter who determines the implied meanings of the [target language] text, and who also, in the act of rewriting, redetermines the meaning of the original (Álvarez and Vidal 1996:4).” (Boase-Beier, Jean, and Michael Holman 14) Translation is a creative process entirely separate from writing an original text; the translator's choice is how creative to be.

The Project in the Context of Translation Theory

The approach I took in my project corresponds to a limited translation theory. It assumes that translation, at its core, is taking words in one language and divining their equivalent in another language — that is, that it's almost exclusively textual work. I studied the play's words in French, and then looked for words of equal or similar meaning in English. A deeper approach would have included more study of the history and culture surrounding the text, as well as today's culture. “No matter how the translator tries,” write Boase-Beier, Jean, and Michael Holman, “no single work can stand for a whole culture, and compromises always have to be found.” (Boase-Beier, Jean, and Michael Holman 12) It also would have resulted in more flexibility, and word and structural choices that

didn't so closely mirror the play's original text. I would have expressed the ideas more in my own style than in Molière's.

The choice to take that approach was only partly a conscious one. Some of it came from simply not knowing enough about translation or translation theory to delve too deeply into the work. I also recognized early on that even working full-time, I could have spent years refining and perfecting my text. My goal in this project was simply to scratch the surface of translation. I came into it knowing almost nothing about both theory and practice.

Just before this semester's spring break I attended a seminar and discussion on translation that featured a Cornell professor, Dr. Brett de Bary, who specializes in Asian studies, comparative literature, Japanese literature, and translation. Though the seminar focused on the politics of globalization — a relatively modern issue — de Bary presented some general theories on translation that apply well to this project.

Language, she said, doesn't equal meaning. Likewise, text can never be reduced to an original meaning. The battle of translation begins the moment we encounter any text, as we're already removed from it because we can't possibly understand how its own author interpreted it. Translation itself, then, is intralingual first. If you can't find an equivalent word or description for an idea in its original language, then that idea is flawed even before it's translated. When working interlingually, Boase-Beier, Jean, and Michael Holman note, "[there] will always be compromise between faithfulness and freedom, between the need

to be true to one's own and the author's voice." (Boase-Beier, Jean, and Michael Holman 10)

I would like to work as an editor for a magazine or publisher after I graduate. When I edit, a question I often ask myself or my writer is: What do you really mean when you write "X"? That is, explain to me the essence of the idea you want to convey. Simplify. Often that leads to clearer, more powerful, and more concise writing.

That same question came in very handy when I translated. Before writing anything in English, I often tried to break down and understand the play's passages in French. I looked for synonyms of obscure words, different ways of phrasing things in French. When I had those, turning ideas into English became much easier. Sometimes I would get a feeling or a general idea of what a phrase meant, but nothing more. That would then force me to start at the very beginning in either English or French — whichever came easier at the moment — and lay out basics — one, two, three words at a time to find the essence of that idea. When I had that, I could rework it, eventually looking for words in English that mirrored the French text.

Explaining ideas in English proved to be both informative and discouraging, though, as I often found myself explaining a three- or four-word French phrase with ten or eleven words in English.

De Bary also mentioned a roadblock that many, if not all, translators face, which I hit early and often while working on my project: the fear of translation. The problem stems from the battle of translation she had mentioned earlier in the

seminar. Any translation of a text from one language into another is necessarily incorrect, because no two words in different languages are equivalent. No one word perfectly defines the idea to which it is assigned, so a translation of that word is even less accurate. Every time I sat down to work, the doubt crept back into my mind. I knew that no matter what I did or thought I accomplished, the end result would never be absolutely “correct.” Still, translating brought me closer to both the text of *Le Misanthrope* and the French language than most other exercises could have.

In working on my project, I also had to choose whether to read other English-language translations of the play. I didn't. Looking at other translations might have helped my understanding certain complex phrases better, as well as my solving how best to express complicated or seemingly untranslatable ideas. I think, however, that I didn't have enough experience with translation and its theory to have really benefited from other texts on a level higher than simply finding different solutions to a textual problem I faced. I may look at different translations now that I've finished my project, but to look at them during my work would have impacted how fast I finished my translation more than it would have my understanding of translation theory or practice.

Word Choice and Semiotics

Roman Jakobson, in a 1959 essay titled “On linguistic Aspects of Translation,” begins his analysis of translation theory with a quote from Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher. “[N]o one can understand the word ‘cheese’ unless

he has a nonlinguistic acquaintance with cheese,” Russell had written. Jakobson continues:

If, however, we follow Russell’s fundamental precept and place our “emphasis upon the linguistic aspects of traditional philosophical problems,” then we are obliged to state that no one can understand the word “cheese” unless he has an acquaintance with the meaning assigned to this word in the lexical code of English. Any representative of a cheese-less culinary culture will understand the English word “cheese” if he is aware that in this language it means “food made of pressed curds” and if he has at least a linguistic acquaintance with “curds.” (Jakobson 113)

He goes on to distinguish intralingual translation from interlingual and intersemiotic translation. Intersemiotic translation is interpreting what Jakobson calls “verbal signs,” or words, “by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.” (Jakobson 114) For example, if the words “sunrise” and “sunset” don’t exist, the ideas they represent still appear if we generate an image of the earth rotating and orbiting the sun.

I approached my work interlingually, looking for more or less synonymous words in English for the French text. My translation involves two different messages in two different languages, connected only by the fact that one is supposed to represent the other. My word choices, therefore, were particularly important. Of course, as de Bary noted, no translation is ever equivalent to its original text, and inexact interpretations on both sides obscure a text’s true meaning. Jakobson’s essay cites a linguist who compares that gradual loss of meaning to “a circular series of unfavorable currency transactions.” (Jakobson 117)

Even relatively common words can carry very different histories and contexts. Each line I translated represents an attempt to summarize both French words and French ideas and history in different English words.

Le Misanthrope, because of how French society functioned when it was written, has some unique examples of words that require extra information to make full sense of their translation. Here are two examples that most define the play's message, along with brief explanations of how they should be understood.

“*Honnête homme*” translates literally as “distinguished man” or “honest man.” An *honnête homme* is “polite, modest, natural, reflects such expressed values of the age of Louis XIV as reasonableness, discretion, decorum.” (Stanton 7) The model for the *honnête homme* comes from Greek philosophers, “the incarnation of virtue, of the golden mean, and the source of such fundamental notions as human sociability.” (Stanton 14) He's a man of the world, gracefully composed and charmingly eloquent.

Molière enjoyed skewering the noble class in his plays. Much of *Le Misanthrope* is dedicated to sharply criticizing noble attitudes toward relationships and the courtly class's seeming need to excessively praise, flatter, and speak in euphemisms rather than ever address anything directly.

That class, cries Alceste, has corrupted the *honnête homme*, turning him into a dandy. He has become a hyper-polite gentleman who wouldn't dare say anything remotely offensive to anyone else, who lives his life visiting salons and gossiping, and who cares deeply about following social and fashion trends. He is precious, as are Molière's *précieuses*, and he disciplines himself only to put on a

better show for those whom he wishes to dupe into accepting him as a true aristocrat.

In *Le Misanthrope*, Oronte is the primary example of an *honnête homme*. He prides himself on being a poet, though his writing is awful. He brags about being in the king's inner circle, and he expertly speaks in feigned flattery. Indeed, he acts as though he and Alceste are dear friends upon their first meeting:

Oronte:

...

I came to say, without exaggeration,
That I hold you in the vastest admiration,
And that it's always been my dearest desire
To be the friend of one I so admire.
I hope to see my love of merit requited,
And you and I in friendship's bond united.
I'm sure you won't refuse—if I may be frank—
A friend of my devotedness—and rank.

...

By heaven! You're sagacious to the core;
This speech has made me admire you even more.
Let time, then, bring us closer day by day;
Meanwhile, I shall be yours in every way.
If, for example, there should be anything
You wish at court, I'll mention it to the King.
I have his ear, of course; it's quite well known
That I am much in favor with the throne. (II, i)
(Molière, trans. Wilbur 23)²

Alceste hates this. He thinks people like Oronte and others who spend their days in salons have corrupted the true meaning of being gentlemanly. The theme of *honnêteté* corrupted and turned into dandyism reappears a few years after *Le Misanthrope* in Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. In that play, M. Jourdain, a

² I use Wilbur's text to give examples because to show effectively what I want, I need a translation clearer and better formed than my own. I would use my own, but I don't think it embodies well enough Molière's subtleties and complexities to serve as an example of what I was actually trying to translate.

hapless bourgeois, fumbles comically as he tries to turn himself into a nobleman by extravagant clothing, art and music lessons, and writing — or at least attempting to write, just like Oronte.

“*Complaisance*” translates literally as complacency. The primary definition of complacency does apply here, but the word’s meaning goes much deeper. It can be read as encouragement. The word in *Le Misanthrope* exists in relation to noble society and its culture of flattery and insincerity. An exchange between Alceste and Philinte in the first scene highlights the debate surrounding the word in the play.

Alceste:

No, I include all men in one dim view:
Some men I hate for being rogues; the others
I hate because they treat the rogues like brothers,
And, lacking a virtuous scorn for what is vile,
Receive the villain with a complaisant smile. ...

Philinte:

Come, let’s forget the follies of the times
And pardon mankind for its petty crimes;
Let’s have an end of rantings and of railings,
And show some leniency toward human failings.
This world requires a pliant rectitude;
Too stern a virtue makes one stiff and rude;
Good sense views all extremes with detestation,
And bids us to be noble in moderation.

...

I take men as they are, or let them be,
And teach my soul to bear their frailty;
And whether in court or town, whatever the scene,
My phlegm’s as philosophic as your spleen.

Alceste:

This phlegm which you so eloquently commend,
Does nothing ever rile it up, my friend?
Suppose some man you trust should treacherously
Conspire to rob you of your property,

And do his best to wreck your reputation?
Wouldn't you feel a certain indignation?

Philinte:

Why, no. These faults of which you so complain
Are part of human nature, I maintain,
And it's no more a matter for disgust
That men are knavish, selfish and unjust,
Than that the vulture dines upon the dead,
And wolves are furious, and apes ill-bred. (I, i)
(Molière, trans. Wilbur, 13–14)

When Alceste accuses Philinte and others of being complacent, he's implying that they're doing nothing to stop the growth of that culture that he hates, and, therefore, that they're necessarily encouraging it. *Complaisance* implies complicity. To Alceste, complicity is a vile act that deserves severe punishment.

Dictionaries

I used mainly three dictionaries for my project. All are online, and one, WordReference.com, I used for French-to-English translations. The other, and for me sometimes the more fulfilling, was the 1st edition of l'Académie Française's dictionary, published in 1694, 28 years after *Le Misanthrope*. A searchable online version is available through the University of Chicago's ARTFL project. I also worked with the Centre Nationale des Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (CNRTL), a French site that collects linguistic resources. There I found a searchable version of the 4th edition of l'Académie Française's dictionary, published in 1762, 96 years after *Le Misanthrope*.

It was important to use period dictionaries for the translation, because languages never stop changing. I needed some concrete guide to show me a

variety of secondary and tertiary word definitions that came with the time period, as well as how words were used in speech and idiomatically then. Otherwise, I would have been lost.

When working with words or phrases I didn't completely understand, I used the ARTFL and CNRTL French-French dictionaries before looking at the French-English version. Doing so reflects the idea that translation happens even within a single language. By looking up French synonyms for a French word, or finding examples of it used in other French texts, I gained a better understanding of that word's original meaning and the context that surrounded it. From there, I would search for a word or phrase in English that accurately described that context, not just the concrete meaning of the French word.

WordReference.com, especially when paired with an online translator like Google's, worked on a more basic level. A quick search of a word I knew but couldn't remember would help me get through a line, or an online translation of a particularly complex construction could show me in which direction I should take my own.

Language: Old or New?

Translating required a conscious choice about what style my version of the text would be written in. I had to choose among more antiquated language, language reflecting modern speech, or some mix of the two. I also had to work around Molière's sentence structures. Because the French play is written in rhyming verse, sentences and phrases are often rearranged to fit their assigned

rhythm. When translating, I had to choose whether to leave my words jumbled or to give them more modern, readable grammatical structure. Those decisions, in any translation, help the reader understand how the translator interprets the original text, and what he or she wants to say about that text by way of the translation.

The style in my English comes in part from my overall approach. I translated more literally, more word-for-word, rather than simply taking Molière's ideas and rewriting them completely, as some translators do. As I mentioned, I took that approach because I was interested more in experiencing translation than creating some definitive new work on *Le Misanthrope*. As a result, my text reads as more antiquated, mainly because I often left phrases with their original jumbled structure, and because I tried to recreate Molière's words rather than make my own. A comparison of my translation to another shows just that:

Célimène:

Madame, j'ai beaucoup de grâces à vous rendre,
 Un tel avis m'oblige, et loin de le mal prendre,
 J'en prétends reconnaître, à l'instant, la faveur,
 Pour un avis, aussi, qui touche votre honneur ;
 Et, comme je vous vois vous montrer mon amie,
 En m'apprenant les bruits que de moi l'on publie,
 Je veux suivre, à mon tour, en exemple si doux,
 En vous avertissant de ce qu'on dit de vous.
 En un lieu, l'autre jour, où je faisais visite,
 Je trouvai quelques gens, d'un très rare mérite,
 Qui, parlant des vrais soins d'une âme qui vit bien,
 Firent tomber, sur vous, Madame, l'entretien. (III, iv)
 (Molière 2010, 92–93)

Célimène:

Madame, I have many thanks to give you,
 Such an opinion obliges me, and far from taking it poorly,
 I claim to see, right now, the favor,
 Of an opinion, also, that touches your honor;

And, as I see you showing yourself to be my friend,
 In bringing me the rumors that one spreads about me,
 I want to follow, in my turn, in friendly form,
 In bringing to your attention some of what is said of you.
 In a place, the other day, where I was visiting,
 I found some people of a very rare quality,
 Who, speaking of the true cares of a soul that lives well,
 Let fall, on you, Madame, the conversation. (III, iv)
 (Molière, trans. Carlino, 34)

Célimène:
 Madam, I haven't taken you amiss;
 I'm very much obliged to you for this;
 And I'll at once discharge the obligation
 By telling you about *your* reputation.
 You've been so friendly as to let me know
 What certain people say of me, and so
 I mean to follow your benign example
 By offering you a somewhat similar sample.
 The other day, I went to an affair
 And found some most distinguished people there
 Discussing piety, both false and true.
 The conversation soon came round to you. (III, v)³
 (Molière, trans. Wilbur, 79–80)

You see in this particular example how my writing is more disjointed and fractured by commas than Wilbur's. The same ideas are in both, though — his phrases just express them in a more linear fashion. Lines five through eight show that well. Whereas Wilbur's text flows and feels natural, mine makes its points in a more hobbled, roundabout way. He writes: "You've been so friendly as to let me know / What certain people say of me, and so / I mean to follow your benign example / By offering you a somewhat similar sample." (Molière, trans. Wilbur 79) That sounds like natural speech; it's clean, concise, and direct. Mine reads: "And, as I see you showing yourself to be my friend, / In bringing me the rumors

³ The scene numbers in Wilbur's translation sometimes differ from those in the French text I used. It seems that he merged some short, three- or four-line transition scenes into their larger successors.

that one spreads about me, / I want to follow, in my turn, in friendly form, / In bringing to your attention some of what is said of you.” (Molière, trans. Carlino 34) There, the text is broken up into fragments, which muddle its message or meaning.

Molière’s language, however, is also relatively modern. Writing plays requires a high level of conciseness and directness, but even after setting those qualities aside, I found his texts, *Le Misanthrope* included, to be very readable, considering when they were written.

Rhyme and Verse

Le Misanthrope’s rhyming, along with its uniquely deft and witty language, helps to define the play. The rhyme is a quality built directly into the text of the play, and to avoid rhyming in a translation may seem to be a big mistake.

The first scene of my project does, for the most part, rhyme. When I created it as a final project for a course I had more time and less material to work with, making my job considerably more manageable. Creating a rhyming translation, however, is very difficult, as it usually requires a complete reinterpretation of how the translated text will look. The translator must rethink ideas in a different language, rather than just looking up synonyms in that language and patching together something that looks similar to the original text.

After I took on most of the rest of *Le Misanthrope* as my Capstone, however, I soon realized that I would have to choose between rhyming my lines

and actually finishing the project within the guidelines I had set for myself. I chose not to rhyme, though if a rhyme appeared by chance as I translated, I of course kept it.

Had I rhymed, I would have had to move significantly away from the more literal approach I took, in part because French rhymes more easily than English. That literal approach was part of my broader goal of better understanding the act of translating. I was also wary of changing the text too much, again because rhyming often requires that the meaning of entire ideas, which usually span multiple lines, be reimagined. I wanted to stay literal and I wanted to keep close to the text for simplicity's sake, and because I was only just beginning to explore what translating really is and means.

Molière translator Donald M. Frame calls Richard Wilbur's English rhymed verse versions of *Tartuffe* and *Le Misanthrope* "the best Molière we have in English." (Molière, trans. Frame xiii) In Wilbur's *Misanthrope*, however, Frame misses "the accents of Molière. ... As, for one example, when Alceste's 'Non, elle est générale, et je hais tous les hommes' (l. 118) becomes "No, I include all men in one dim view...." (Molière, trans. Frame xiii; xiii fn. 3) Still, Frame stresses the importance of rhyme, though he says the question of whether to translate foreign rhyme into English remains debatable. Rhyme "seems almost necessary for Molière," and specific effects that the writer intended the text to have require it: "[Rhyme] affects what Molière says as well as the way he says it enough to make it worthwhile to use it in English." (Molière, trans. Frame xiii)

As I mention earlier in this essay, I believe a text written in verse holds a driving immediacy and clarity that brings it to life. For that reason, though I did constrain myself in doing so, I chose to write my translation in verse. I could more accurately describe the end result, however, as a sort of faux-verse, because I followed no syllable count or meter. I set aside those limitations for the same reason that I chose not to rhyme — I was more interested in the act of translating and in a more literal translation of the text. Frame notes:

Fidelity in meter ... seems clearly to mean putting Molière's alexandrines into English iambic pentameter.... However, this reduction in length, while translating (which normally lengthens) even from French into English (which normally shortens), often forces the translator to choose between Molière's ever-recurring initial "and's" (and occasional "but's") and some key word in the same line. (Molière, trans. Frame xiv)

On Translating the Characters in a Play

I would translate in three- to four-hour chunks. About halfway through the project, I began to notice that my normal ebb and flow of productivity became more pronounced when I worked on *Le Misanthrope*. The play's characters caused it.

A play's text, of course, is almost exclusively dialogue. It has no author interjecting to set a scene or to discuss context or background information. That brought me to a much deeper understanding of the play than I would have had if I had only read the text. Translating required me to understand the characters, to think as they thought so I could help them express themselves in my language.

Célimène was undoubtedly the most difficult to translate. She has razor-sharp wit and intellect, and the complexity of her language — both in vocabulary

and construction — reflects that. Indeed, her entire character is based on disingenuousness and feigned flattery, so it makes sense that her words twist, turn, and double back rather than move clearly and present her unfiltered opinions. A clear example of that comes in Act III, scene v, when she tangles with Arsinoé, her main rival.

Célimène:
 The other day, I went to an affair
 And found some most distinguished people there
 Discussing piety, both false and true.
 The conversation soon came round to you.
 Alas! Your prudery and bustling zeal
 Appeared to have a very slight appeal.
 Your affectation of a grave demeanor,
 Your endless talk of virtue and of honor,
 The aptitude of your suspicious mind
 For finding sin where there is none to find,
 ...
 Of course, I said to everybody there
 That they were being viciously unfair;
 ...
 Madam, you're too intelligent, I'm sure,
 To think my motives anything but pure
 In offering you this counsel—which I do
 Out of a zealous interest in you. (III, v)
 (Molière, trans. Wilbur 80–81)

In these lines, Célimène takes all the vicious criticisms that she would throw at Arsinoé and puts them in others' mouths. The tactic, of course, is entirely transparent, as Arsinoé does the same thing. The two go back and forth in such a manner, each spitting daggers through smiling, clenched teeth. At the end of the scene, however, it's Arsinoé, clearly bested, who must abort the conversation.

Arsinoé presented a simpler — though still challenging — task. She works in flattery and allusion, but her ideas move at a slightly slower pace. The

difference between the two is most marked when they're speaking with one another.

Arsinoé:

You give your age in such a gloating tone
That one would think I was an ancient crone;
We're not so far apart, in sober truth,
That you can mock me with a boast of youth!
Madam, you baffle me. I wish I knew
What moves you to provoke me as you do.

Célimène:

For my part, Madam, I should like to know
Why you abuse me everywhere you go.
Is it my fault, dear lady, that your hand
Is not, alas, in very great demand?
If men admire me, if they pay me court
And daily make me offers of the sort
You'd dearly love to have them make to you,
How can I help it? What would you have me do?
If what you want is lovers, please feel free
To take as many as you can from me.

Arsinoé:

Oh, come. D'you think the world is losing sleep
Over that flock of lovers which you keep,
Or that we find it difficult to guess
What price you pay for their devotedness?
Surely you don't expect us to suppose
Mere merit could attract so many beaux?
It's not your virtue that they're dazzled by;
Nor is it virtuous love for which they sigh.
You're fooling no one, Madam; the world's not blind;.... (III, v)
(Molière, trans. Wilbur 82–83)

As they argue, Célimène keeps her demeanor calm, always backing away so that she may provoke Arsinoé, who takes the bait. Also important is the setting and context: the two are in Célimène's salon, and Arsinoé began the war of words. She criticized Célimène using the same pattern I showed above, putting words in others' mouths. Célimène, though, had the presence of mind to throw that back at

Arsinoé and draw her out, as the preceding quote shows. Arsinoé's criticisms are still sharp and well-spoken, but they lack Célimène's subtlety, and she quickly resorts to admitting them plainly rather than trying to hide them in slick rhetoric.

Philinte, by comparison, is basic. His main role in the play is the voice of reason. He's not quite an apologist for the society Alceste has set himself against, but he does try to explain to his friend how he thinks it best to accept people for who they are, regardless of whether they feign kindness and friendship.

Alceste:

Why? What can you possibly say?
 Don't argue, Sir; your labor's thrown away.
 Do you propose to offer lame excuses
 For men's behavior and the times' abuses?

Philinte:

No, all you say I'll readily concede:
 This is a low, conniving age indeed;
 Nothing but trickery prospers nowadays,
 And people ought to mend their shabby ways.
 Yes, man's a beastly creature; but must we then
 Abandon the society of men?
 Here in the world, each human frailty
 Provides occasion for philosophy,
 And that is virtue's noblest exercise;
 If honesty shone forth from all men's eyes,
 If every heart were frank and kind and just,
 What could our virtues do but gather dust
 (Since their employment is to help us bear
 The villainies of men without despair)?
 A heart well-armed with virtue can endure. ... (V, i)
 (Molière, trans. Wilbur 120)

I think that that role required a straightforward character. Philinte is open, honest, and plainspoken. Still, he's eloquent and a good reasoner, as this quote shows. He wants what's best for Alceste, and though he participates in the *complaisance* that Alceste despises, he doesn't revel in deviousness or trickery like Célimène and

the other members of the court do. Because of that, he speaks directly and mildly, making him easier both to understand and to translate.

Alceste's language is somewhere in the middle, though it has a rash, almost crude edge to it. Alceste has a one-track mind, and his potent anger keeps him focused on attacking a few subjects — namely the *complaisance* of the people around him and the culture of flattery that he thinks corrupts society. That anger also leads to very direct, damningly clear speech. He often grows frustrated and lashes out at other characters, telling them to stop with their ceaseless flattery and double-speak.

Alceste:

No, no, this formula you'd have me follow,
 However fashionable, is false and hollow,
 And I despise the frenzied operations
 Of all these barterers of protestations,
 These lavishers of meaningless embraces,
 These utterers of obliging commonplaces,
 Who court and flatter everyone on earth
 And praise the fool no less than the man of worth. ... (I, i)

Alceste:

No, no, don't waste your breath in argument;
 Nothing you say will alter my intent;
 This age is vile, and I've made up my mind
 To have no further commerce with mankind.
 Did not truth, honor, decency, and the laws
 Oppose my enemy and approve my cause?
 My claims were justified in all men's sight;
 I put my trust in equity and right;
 Yet, to my horror and the world's disgrace,
 Justice is mocked, and I have lost my case! (V, i)
 (Molière, trans. Wilbur 7–8; 117)

As these quotes suggest, Alceste's predictability makes him easier to translate, though his arguments often shift slightly in their focus, requiring certain nuances in the translation to reflect the context surrounding his protestations. He's

also less involved in actual dialogue than the other characters. Alceste speaks mostly in tirades, and if he is addressing another character, he's usually berating him or her for being untrue and unjust. Because of that, characters affect Alceste's own speech less, again adding to his predictability and simplicity. Both these quotes show that, as they both begin with him denying something and laying out his own plan rather than engaging with Philinte.

Translation in Culture

We encounter translation everywhere, especially in popular literature and film. The newest film version of *Les Misérables* is a perfect example, but of how not to translate.

I grew up listening to *Les Misérables* once in a while, but my house had only the original French version of the musical. As my French improved, so did my understanding of the lyrics, and my appreciation for their depth and intensity grew. I heard the songs' translated English counterparts only when I saw the film, which came out in December 2012. Quite frankly, the English lyrics ruined the film for me. It seems as though their translators took too many liberties with the original text, and spent too little time trying to capture the power behind the French lyrics. I do understand, after having translated Molière, how difficult the task is, but the English songs, to me, seemed laughable at times. I'll give one brief example.

The song *À La Volonté Du Peuple* appears near the middle of the musical, and it functions as a call to revolution. Some of its original lyrics read:

À la volonté du peuple
 Et à la santé du progress,
 Remplis ton cœur d'un vin rebelle
 Et à demain, ami fidèle.
 Nous voulons faire la lumière
 Malgré le masque de la nuit
 Pour illuminer notre terre
 Et changer la vie.

Il faut gagner à la guerre
 Notre sillon à labourer,
 Déblayer la misère
 Pour les blonds épis de la paix
 Qui danseront de joie
 Au grand vent de la liberté. (Sardou)

Here are the same verses in English:

Do you hear the people sing?
 Singing a song of angry men?
 It is the music of a people
 Who will not be slaves again!
 When the beating of your heart
 Echoes the beating of the drums
 There is a life about to start
 When tomorrow comes!

Will you join in our crusade?
 Who will be strong and stand with me?
 Beyond the barricade
 Is there a world you long to see?
 Then join in the fight
 That will give you the right to be free! (Burt)

Even if done by someone who can't understand the original text, the English lyrics, after a few read-throughs, must seem silly. Yes, they rhyme, but they have no spirit, no force, no keen edge. They speak of singing people, angry men, and a world beyond a barricade. The French lyrics, by contrast, invoke the will of the people ("la volonté du peuple"), shining light to illuminate the world in spite of night's dark mask ("faire la lumière / Malgré le masque de la nuit / Pour illuminer

notre terre”), and clearing away misery to make way for golden strands of peace that will dance with joy in the winds of liberty (“les blonds épis de la paix / Qui danseront de joie / Au grand vent de la liberté”). Even those rough translations that come from me essentially off the cuff give a better sense of the grand, beautiful power behind the French lyrics against which the English lyrics simply can’t stand.

The process of translating the musical’s original French text into English led to a considerable loss of meaning and potency in its lyrics. Whole concepts and emotions go lost, leaving an interpretation — as all translations are — but not a transmission of ideas. Unfortunately, those who don’t speak French won’t ever quite understand that, and a cultural icon will remain misunderstood because of poor translation.

That problem highlights the importance of translation — especially of the good kind — in all our lives. It’s more than a pastime for stuffy academics holed up in their offices and theorists wandering about inside their own heads. It contributes to our understanding of the world and cultures around us, but only when done well.

Learning by Doing: A Conclusion of Sorts

I probably could have discovered all the conclusions I came to during this project in a variety of books and papers. And I could have written a book or three on what I learned about translation theory and the problems translation poses. But that would have been boring. My goal in translating a majority of *Le Misanthrope*

was to discover on my own terms what translation means, and what it means to translate. I found an infinitely complex craft. Though I originally thought my being literal in translating meant I wasn't being creative at all, I came to realize that all translation is creative activity — it's reinvention.

I finished with a deeper and more satisfying understanding of *Le Misanthrope*, too, for to keep its ideas and exchange languages, I needed fluency in the ideas themselves. I found that fluency, as well as a doorway into entirely new perspective on languages and their relations to one another.

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Capstone Project Summary

My Capstone project is a French-to-English translation of about 1,100 lines of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*. I chose that play because I was interested in exploring translation theory and the act of translating — not because I wanted to contribute some revolutionary new work to the numerous translations of it that already exist. I had never tried to translate, so I wanted the project to be an exercise in the work.

I began by selecting the parts of the play I thought to be most significant and helpful in giving a feel for what the play means. The plot was less important than larger themes and showcasing the complexity of the language — if I had wanted it to come through clearly, I would have translated the whole play. The plot itself revolves around Alceste, a misanthrope who hates the in-vogue culture of insincerity and false flattery in which the nobility of Molière's time participated.

That idea of false flattery attracted me because of how applicable it is to today's Internet culture. Self-centeredness is just as popular today as it apparently was among the nobility in 1666, except today we post photos of ourselves — and passive-aggressive or outright aggressive jabs at other people — knowing that they'll elicit the compliments we need to sustain our egos. In *Le Misanthrope*, characters shower compliments on one another, but then turn to verbally crucify their rivals and those whom they dislike.

The method I used to translate the text was relatively straightforward. I worked line by line, translating as literally as possible. That is, I looked for

English equivalents to the French text rather than reinterpreting it entirely, as most professional translators do. I worked that way because, as I mentioned, I was more interested in the act of translating than in constructing something especially innovative.

I typed out all the chosen parts, partly because I wanted to have a closer feel for the original text, and partly because I wanted the original and my translation to sit next to one another in the final product. That comparison of the two texts again removes my work from the framework of a traditional translation. In most cases, translations stand alone. Their writers take the original text and distilled the ideas behind it. They then reword those ideas in their own language, using the text's original words only as cues for their own.

Translation is re-imagination, and a translator's work, though based on someone else's, is entirely his or her own. Because mine reflected my interest in the act of translating more than an interest in creatively expressing the ideas behind *Le Misanthrope* — though it's important to note that the two are always linked — I chose to show both versions of the text, mine and the original. That should make whoever reads my text consciously aware of the fact that it is a translation, and that there is a very tangible relationship between the two texts.

I used primarily two period dictionaries, both available online: the 1st and 4th editions of l'Académie Française's dictionary. Researching French words in French before looking up synonyms in English helped me to create a better idea of what certain phrases — and also individual words whose meanings have

changed since the 17th century — meant in the mind and native language of their author.

The older dictionaries often gave me secondary or tertiary meanings of words, as well as examples of usage and colloquialisms. Those details, usually buried deeper down the webpage, often helped immensely in my trying to understand phrases that simply didn't make sense when read as modern French.

Written French can become very complex. Even more complex is French rhymed verse, which, so that it rhymes, often involves jumbled phrases, back-and-forth syntax, and too many commas. When I got stuck on a phrase, I often turned to Google's online translator. It would give me the basic idea behind the phrase's structure, acting as a jump-start.

Complicated structures also required me to make more decisions about how to translate them. I tried, for the most part, to leave my translated phrases more jumbled, or with less clear syntax. To me, less clear text sounded more antiquated and authentic. Move phrases and words around too much, and I risked remaking the text in my voice, which, as I've mentioned, I wanted to avoid.

I translated into a sort of unrhymed verse, though I gave myself no syllable or meter restrictions. The greatest English *Misanthrope* translation, by Richard Wilbur, is in rhymed verse, and other versions exist in both unrhymed verse and prose. I chose simplicity and literalness, again, because I wanted an experience in basic translation, not full-blown reinterpretation.

I also chose not to look at other translations while I was working on mine. I did consult Wilbur's at the end of my project, but only to compare and to clean

up a few lines with which I had struggled considerably. I wanted my translation to be purely my own, and I knew that consulting others' works while creating mine would certainly have lead me to borrow ideas from theirs to make mine easier.

Because I had no previous experience in translation, I preferred to make my first journey alone so I could draw my own conclusions on what translation theory and the act of translating meant to me. I succeeded in that, finishing with a much deeper understanding of both the text and translation. Ideas — not words — are key in a good translation, though no matter how much work goes into it, a translation will never perfectly reflect its mother text.