

MODERN IDENTITY AND THE SOCIABLE SELF IN THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

LARRY F. NORMAN

From the mid-seventeenth century through much of the next one, to identify oneself as ‘modern’ was to identify oneself as sociable. And, according to the period’s thinkers – both those that adored and those that scorned modernity – there is one single word that best defines the contemporary paradigm of felicitous social exchange: *gallantry*. By the time that David Hume composed his 1742 essay ‘Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences’, he could, with little controversy, sum up what was more or less the consensus on this issue: ‘If the superiority in politeness should be allowed to modern times, the modern notions of gallantry, the natural produce of courts and monarchies, will probably be assigned as the causes of this refinement’.¹ Despite the hypothetical ‘if’, Hume leaves little doubt that he does consider ‘modern notions of gallantry’ a considerable advantage over past ages – even if, for the ever-sceptical philosopher, ‘no advantages in this world are pure and unmixed’ (p. 89). According to Hume’s uncontroversial definition, gallantry is born first and foremost of a certain domestication of heterosexual relations, and in particular a ‘respect’ and ‘deference’ on the part of the male that ‘softens the affections of the sexes towards each other’ (p. 89). But the domain of gallantry extends much further than this delimited realm of sexual relations. It refines all ‘intercourse of minds’ (p. 90) and increases social harmony by extending the notion of deference to all partners in social exchange. Its precepts grant the privileges of the ‘highest civility’ not only to women, but to social inferiors, to the physically weak, and to unprotected ‘strangers and foreigners’ (p. 90).

Of course, such a broadly defined quality may sound less like a historically specific characteristic than a universal and timeless virtue. But for Hume it is not. The ‘modern notions of gallantry’ are indeed ‘modern’. They were in fact largely unknown to the past, even to the most illustrious ages of classical antiquity. The unsocialized directness of the ancients, what he calls their ‘rusticity [...], scurrility and obscenity’, ‘is quite shocking’ to modern sensibilities (p. 89, 86). Hume summarizes:

I shall [...] be bold to affirm that among the ancients, there was not much delicacy of breeding, or that polite deference and respect, which civility obliges us either to express or counterfeit towards the persons with whom we converse (p. 87).

1 David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) p. 89.

In identifying modernity with sociability and Antiquity with incivility, Hume is of course reflecting on one of the key topics of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns that raged from the second half of the seventeenth century through the early eighteenth century, and whose issues still echoed in the high Enlightenment. Though the Quarrel was quickly imported from France to England in the early 1690s, Hume's francophilia granted him considerable familiarity with the French side of the Quarrel, as his references to Fontenelle, Perrault, Boileau and Racine demonstrate.² And it is indeed to that French debate that I will be turning here. But Hume's analysis of the 'modern notions of gallantry' offers us a revealingly critical review of the key issues of identity, both collective and personal, that emerged more than a half-century earlier as the Quarrel was brewing. It demonstrates first the degree to which a shared historical identity is constructed around the notion of gallant sociability, as well as the relegation of those outside its bounds into the realm of profound otherness: the ungallant are the non-moderns. As usual, identity is constructed through a certain rejection of alterity. And in this case, we will see just how exclusive the historical identity proves to be.

But Hume's remarks concerning the identification of modernity with sociability have some further implications that beg our attention. Gallantry's demand for a 'studied deference and complaisance', for the placing of the social partner before oneself, necessarily requires a kind of continual sacrifice of the desire to assert one's self – whether that sacrifice be sincere, or, as the wily Hume phrases it, convincingly 'counterfeited'. In a state of nature, and in less developed societies, men are 'commonly proud and selfish, and apt to assume the preference above others'. But the advanced 'polite man learns to behave with deference towards his companions, and to yield the superiority to them'. (p. 90). The motto of modern sociable identity, Hume repeatedly affirms, is this: '*you* first!' In sharp contrast, '*me* first!' is the cry of the non-modern, of those rejected from the contemporary civilized community as abhorrent ancients, detestable barbarians, or risible rustics.

Hence this paradox of collective and personal identity: it is only the *suppression* of the self in the service of sociability that permits the personal *assertion* of the truly modern civilized self. Naturally enough, however, few, even among the most 'modern', manage to fully suppress their 'selfishness' and effectively 'yield the superiority' to others, as Hume phrased it. This inevitable failure, I hope to show in my concluding section, leads to a comic bind, one that was richly mined by a playwright working at the very moment when the identification of the modern with sociable self-deferral was being solidified: Molière. In his satiric universe, humans seem most often destined to embrace one

2 See Peter Jones, *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982).

of two equally ridiculous options when faced with the conflicting demands of collective and personal identity. First, there is the transparent pretence of the ‘counterfeiter’ whose *amour-propre* oozes from each oily attempt at polite deference, from each farcically feigned erasure of the self. Such characters’ ostentatious efforts to identify themselves as sociable moderns provide a rich storehouse for comic hypocrisy. And second is the self-marginalization of those anachronistic contrarians who assert the personal ‘self’ by refusing to identify themselves with modern gallantry, and by embracing in its stead a defunct past. Their efforts are equally ludicrous, but even more revealing for the issue at hand. But before exploring the comic mechanisms of personal identification with a temporal and collective ideal, let me first adumbrate the key elements (political, social and philosophical) of the collective identity in question.

Identifying the modern as sociable

From the 1660s, the identification of modern France with gallant sociability creates a series of heated exchanges engaging such players in the future Quarrel as Boileau and Racine (for the Ancients), and Perrault (for the Moderns). But a full elaboration of the issue will have to wait until after the official inauguration of the Quarrel in 1687. Naturally enough, the most illuminating text in this regard is also the longest: Charles Perrault’s *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* – and in particular the second and third tomes, from the early 1690s. By the time of their publication, few would argue with Perrault’s triumphal claim that the age of Louis XIV was, among historical epochs, ‘le plus poli et le plus délicat de tous’³ (indeed, the Ancient partisans eagerly cede this ground to the Moderns, preferring to vaunt instead the somewhat crude, but sublimely heroic, ‘simplicity’ of ancient times). The *Parallèle* perfectly ‘brands’ modernity as the age of gallantry: the identifying mark of the age of Louis XIV is its refined civility and sophisticated understanding of human emotions. So it is that Perrault offers this capacious definition of *galanterie*:

Elle comprend toutes les manieres fines et delicates dont on parle de toutes choses avec un enjouement libre et agreable; en un mot c’est ce qui distingue le beau monde et les honnestes gens d’avec le menu peuple; ce que l’Elegance Grecque et l’Urbanité Romaine ont commencé et que la politesse des derniers temps a porté à un plus haut degré de perfection. (III. 286)

Although the passage demonstrates Perrault’s willingness to concede to the pagan past the first baby steps of social progress, his true intention here is of course to damn ancient ‘elegance’ and ‘urbanity’ with faint praise, in order to better celebrate the modern world’s unique ‘perfection’. Indeed in other passages,

3 *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* (Paris: Coignard, 4 vols, 1688-97), II. 276.

Perrault, like Hume, sees the ancients not as forerunners in the continuous evolution of sociability, but instead as profoundly alien in this regard, almost of another species: ‘l’honnesteté, la civilité et la déférence pour le beau sexe [étaient des] vertus presque inconnues aux Anciens’ (II. 33).⁴

But why did sociability attain ‘perfection’ just then? Let me briefly suggest two ways that for Perrault contemporary politeness is deeply tied to a specifically national and contemporary French identity: the first political, the second philosophical, or more broadly intellectual. As for the political dimensions, nothing better reveals the centrality of the freshly triumphant absolute regime to Perrault’s conception of modernity than the title of his opening shot in the Quarrel, *Le Siècle de Louis le Grand*. Perhaps most revelatory are Perrault’s repeated references here (and in the *Parallèle*) to the new palace and gardens of Versailles as the ideal *locus amoenus* for polite social exchange. In this sense, Perrault certainly appears to agree with Hume that sociable gallantry is a ‘natural produce of courts and monarchies’, and rarely if ever advances under other regimes.⁵ And, for Perrault, the perfection of the monarchical system is naturally represented by the contemporary France of the Sun King, just as his archetypical ‘modern’ is identified as a court creature in contradistinction to ‘le menu peuple’. The collective identity of the ‘modern’ is thus a class identity.

The unique state of modern politeness arises, however, not just from advantageous socio-economic conditions, but also from intellectual and philosophical advances. Speaking of the deference and civility that now reign in heterosexual love, Perrault asserts, ‘ces raffinemens sont des preuves assurées du progrès qu’on a fait dans la connoissance de cette passion, et par consequent dans la connoissance de toutes les autres passions’ (II. 33). This is part of a larger celebration of the new rationalist philosophy of the century, one that Perrault, like his ally Fontenelle, sees as having a particularly French source in the figure of Descartes. So it is that in a stunning passage, Perrault creates a parallel between the advances of modern sciences, such as astronomy and anatomy, and those of what would later be called psychology:

Ce n’a esté que dans ces derniers temps que l’on a fait et dans l’Astronomie et dans la Morale, ainsi qu’en mille autres choses, ces belles et curieuses découvertes: En un mot, comme l’Anatomie a trouvé dans le cœur des conduits des valvules, des fibres, des mouvemens et des symptomes qui ont échappé à la connoissance des Anciens, la Morale y a aussi trouvé des inclinations, des aversions, des désirs, et des dégoûts, que les mesmes Anciens n’ont jamais connus. (II. 29-30)

- 4 An assertion repeated in the *Parallèle*, see also II. 282; III. 189 and 289. For the limited seventeenth-century interest in a certain ‘Antiquité galante’, see Delphine Denis, *Le Parnasse galant: institution d’une catégorie littéraire au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2001), pp. 289-304.
- 5 All in all, the Modern party seems to elaborate a first draft of Norbert Elias’s court-centred paradigm of a civilizing process culminating in absolutism.

It is only left to the social actor to place into daily practice this extensive body of modern moral knowledge. Perrault thus compares the polite modern to a meticulous and learned surgeon, carefully dissecting his interlocutors with a scalpel in order to better adapt to their least inclinations, while the ancient goes at social commerce like a butcher with a conversational cleaver (II. 37-38). The collective identity of the 'modern' is thus an intellectual identity.

Gallant self-deferral

Both the political and philosophical underpinnings of modern sociability highlight the importance of the suppression of the self, whether it be in submission to the monarch, or in self-effacing attention to the 'exact anatomy of the least movements' of one's peers. In order to better understand the role of self-discipline, indeed self-effacement, in this conception of modern sociability, let me return to the basic paradigm for advanced social exchange: heterosexual gallantry. We have seen Perrault's 'parallel' between ancient cleavers and modern scalpels; consider now this one between ancient hatchets and modern lyres:

Rien ne marque davantage le peu de politesse des siècles d'Alexandre et d'Auguste que la manière brutale dont ils traitoient l'amour. Toutes les délicatesses qu'on y a trouvées depuis leur estoient inconnues, vous ne trouverez peut-estre pas un seul Amant dans tous les livres des Anciens qui dise n'avoir osé déclarer sa passion par respect, et de peur d'offencer celle qu'il aime. Un amant sortoit le soir avec une bonne hache pour enfoncer la porte de sa Maistresse si elle ne la luy ouvroit pas assés promptement, c'estoit la mode, et mesme une hache estoit une piece de l'équipage d'un Amant plus essentielle qu'une Lyre [...]. Est-ce que l'honnesteté, la civilité, et la deference pour le beau sexe, vertus presque inconnuës aux Anciens, et qui ont esté portées si loin par les Modernes, ne sont pas quelque chose de beau et de loüable? (II. 32-33)

As opposed to the hatchet of self-assertion identifying the barbaric ancient, the modern is all deference: respect for the female interlocutor demands either silence or artfully disguised pleading through the song of the lyre. For Perrault, this model of chivalric submission to the beloved is the germ from which all other modes of social adaptation and self-restraint arise. Even in the modern world, the male who refuses the refining effects of female company reverts quickly to savage monstrosity, as Perrault's 'Apologie des femmes' forcefully suggests:

Regarde un peu de près celui qui, Loup garou,
Loin du Sexe a vécu, renfermé dans son trou,
Tu le verras crasseux, maladroït et sauvage,
Farouche dans ses mœurs, rude dans son langage.⁶

6 Cited in Marc Soriano, *Les Contes de Perrault* (Paris, Gallimard, 1977), p. 313.

Such passages suggest something of the complex interrelations between modern identity and gender identity. It has been argued, by Joan DeJean among others, that Perrault's defence of women makes the Modern camp something of a feminist avant-garde at the time.⁷ In regard to the question before us, I would simply say that the feminism in question here is hardly the radical kind, based on fundamental equality of the sexes, which was being formulated at the time by Poulain de la Barre. Instead, what Perrault vaunts in what he generally calls the 'fair sex' ('beau sexe') is just that: a kind of fairness, a softness, even a fundamental weakness, in comparison to men. Perrault's vision of feminine nature is perhaps best conveyed in his verse tale *Griselidis*, the exemplary story of a woman whose unrelenting 'submission' to a tyrannical husband illustrates Perrault's idea of 'une vertu si belle, si séante au beau sexe'.⁸

Perrault's conception of gender identity is thus profoundly essentialist and remarkably traditional. What is more interesting is his promotion of this essentially pliable character not just for women, but for men. He hopes that through proper social exchange female softness will prove contagious, and transform, at least partially, male identity. Heterosexuality lies at the core of this fertilization of male civility and deferential 'submission'. But that is just a first step. The larger non-sexual interactions between the sexes – facilitated by those heterosocial spaces unique to contemporary court and salon society – permit a further extension of the domain of sociability. The homosocial 'werewolf in his hole' is of course excluded, and all the more so is banished the homosexual, a creature of antiquity for which Perrault reserves some special scorn.⁹ The collective identity of the 'modern' is a gendered and sexual identity.

Identification and exclusion

We can now better understand just how few can identify themselves as truly modern. In terms of historical time, the ancients (and indeed almost all pre-contemporaries) are of course banished to profound alterity. In terms of geography, the ancients' surviving cultural cousins, the savages and barbarians outside of France, and even the rustics of its own provinces, are likewise rejected. In terms of social class, the 'humble people', as we saw above, are relegated to an equally foreign world of crudity.¹⁰ And, finally, the homosexual and homosocial

7 *Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 167.

8 *Contes*, edited by Gilbert Rouger (Paris: Garnier, 1967), pp. 40, 46. On the conservatism of Perrault's 'feminism', see Soriano, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

9 See Perrault's acid mockery of ancient philosophers' 'tendresse pour les jeunes garçons' (*Parallèle*, II. 110-11).

10 For the parallel between Greco-Roman ancients and the 'savages' of the New World, see François Hartog, *Anciens, modernes, sauvages* (Paris: Galaaade, 2005). For social class, see Jean-Christophe Abramovici, *Obscénité et classicisme* (Paris: PUF, 2003), p. 64.

are excluded. And just as modern identity is tightly restrictive, the physical realm in which it operates is likewise of starkly delimited circumference, centred on the Versailles where the conversation of the *Parallèle* takes place, and extending only to its privileged satellite salons in town.

Nevertheless, the presence at Versailles of an outspoken defender of uncouth Antiquity – Perrault’s fictional pedant in the *Parallèle*, the ‘Président’ – is a reminder that certain aliens may penetrate even the inner sanctum. And Perrault’s Président knows that he has other allies in his cause, a fifth column, so to speak, subverting modern sociability from within. It is not surprising, then, that the conversation turns to one of the most famous of these anti-modern agents, Alceste, the eponymous misanthrope of Molière’s comedy. After the Président denounces contemporary ‘gallant’ discourse, the Chevalier compares him to Molière’s hero in the celebrated scene in which he attacks the false sophistication of a peer’s sonnet and expresses his preference for the direct expressions of passion found in the primitive language of an old ballad. And just in case the Président foolishly thinks himself flattered by being identified with one of Molière’s most famous characters, the Modern partisan Abbé reminds him: ‘Vous remarquerez que c’est un Misanthrope qui parle, c’est à dire, un homme qui affecte d’être d’un sentiment contraire à tous les autres. Si Molière avoit parlé de son chef il se seroit expliqué autrement’ (III. 288). Perrault asserts that Molière’s misanthrope, by refusing to submit to contemporary social codes, ‘affects’ a kind of anachronistic difference, a temporal breach between himself and his contemporaries. And the Abbé is careful to place France’s most famous comic playwright, now almost twenty years dead, on the side of modern sociability here: Molière, according to Perrault, is mocking Alceste’s self-aggrandizing refusal to adopt an appropriate contemporary identity.

The terrain is already prepared here for Rousseau, more than a half-century later in his *Lettre à d’Alembert*, to, like Perrault’s ‘Président’, identify himself fully with Alceste’s character, with his unsociable directness and his non-negotiable fidelity to self. Alceste is the lone outsider, the melancholic ‘werewolf’ (as Perrault would say), who refuses the ‘counterfeited’ (as Hume would say) play-acting of modern gallantry. Rousseau, the great champion of deep interiority, of profound selfhood, the devotee of ancient republican self-reliance, sees in Alceste the single man ready to combat the artifice and self-disguise of court society. And, despite what respect he may have elsewhere for Molière, Rousseau disapprovingly identifies Molière as a sociable modern, placing the playwright in the camp of the gallant audience upon whose approval he depends for applause.

Molière’s circle

Let me take then one final regressive step, from Hume back to Perrault and now to Molière, to consider the playwright’s comedies as a laboratory testing the

viability of the modern identification with the sociable, and of the self-effacement it requires. It is certainly no accident that his work became such a key reference in the future debates around the topic. The period of Molière's Parisian career, after all, saw the great heralding of gallant sociability, as well as the sharply negative reaction to it from such figures as Boileau, Racine and Saint-Evremond.¹¹

In this regard, Perrault's Abbé – like Rousseau – is certainly right on one point: there is no doubt that for Molière gallant sociability defined modernity, and that those who refused its laws bore the sign of a risible mania for the alterity of the past. Furthermore, the figures that dominate Molière's comic menagerie of self-asserting outcasts seem to perfectly reflect the court-centred presentism embraced by Perrault. These mocked characters tend to be easily classed as geographical, socio-economic or temporal outliers. Geographical, because they come so often from the as yet half-civilized provinces: either those peasants, wealthy or not, who reject the refinements of sociability (for example, George Dandin), or those provincials of superior class whose awkward self-consciousness prevents the effective counterfeiting of self-deferral (the *précieuses ridicules*, the Comtesse d'Escarbagnas). Social and economic, because they are frequently the bourgeois who have not yet identified themselves with the new modern order, the bourgeois who are still, sometimes despite their best efforts, profoundly bourgeois: the Arnolphes, the *bourgeois gentilshommes*, those who oscillate between crude assertions of virile selfhood and failed attempts at gallant submission to the object of their desire. And finally, temporal: they are the pedants whose refusal of sociability is grounded in the authority of the classical past.

This last case is best illustrated in *Le Malade imaginaire*, by the character of Thomas Diafoirus, a dull and bookish university student whose graceless Latin name reveals all. As he ludicrously vies for the affections of the young and elegant heroine, Angélique, against his rival – an up-to-date sociable young man – he uses, in ancient style, the direct attack. Consider the scene, beginning with Angélique's protest.

ANGÉLIQUE [...] Le mariage est une chaîne où l'on ne doit jamais soumettre un coeur par force; et si Monsieur est honnête homme, il ne doit point vouloir accepter une personne qui serait à lui par contrainte [...]. C'est un méchant moyen de se faire aimer de quelqu'un que de lui faire violence.

DIAFOIRUS Nous lisons des anciens, Mademoiselle, que leur coutume était d'enlever par force de la maison des pères les filles qu'on menait marier, afin qu'il ne semblât pas que ce fût de leur consentement qu'elles convoiaient dans les bras d'un homme.

ANGÉLIQUE Les anciens, Monsieur, sont les anciens, et nous sommes les gens de maintenant. (II. 6)¹²

- 11 Among the most famous attacks on *l'esprit galant* in the 1660s: consider Boileau's *Dialogue des héros de roman* (c. 1666), Racine's preface to *Andromaque* (1667), or Saint-Evremond's *Dissertation sur le Grand Alexandre* (1668).
- 12 All Molière references are to the Georges Couton edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade', 1971).

Diafoirus's threat of abduction cannot but recall Perrault's caricature of the ancient hatchet-bearing lover breaking down doors. And indeed the resonance with Perrault's remark is even stronger here when we consider that Diafoirus's gallant rival, the one naturally preferred by Angélique, enters the stage disguised as a music teacher. He is indeed the lyre to Diafoirus's hatchet. And like Perrault's opposition between violent abduction and circumlocutory lyrics, between ancient self-assertion and modern deference, Angélique's quip also deploys a profoundly exclusive definition of collective self-identity. 'We are the people of today'; 'today' is the time of gallant refinement; and those who reject its precepts are not 'us', they are 'them'.

It should be added that *Le Malade imaginaire* premiered posthumously at Versailles in 1674, the very year that an opening skirmish in the future Quarrel gives occasion to Perrault's first Modern manifesto. The controversy arises over two wildly different modern adaptations of Euripidean subjects: Racine's *Iphigénie* and Quinault and Lully's *Alceste*. Perrault's entry into the polemical fray takes the form of a critique of Euripides' original *Alcestis*, which he claims, has been felicitously modernized in Quinault and Lully's gallant opera adaptation. Perrault in particular mocks Euripides' heroes' lack of deference to women and their 'brutalité'. Indeed, Perrault would seem to have cribbed his criticism of the ancients from Angélique when he remarks that when Euripides' hero Admetus places his own life above that of his wife, his self-centred action was 'bonne chez les Anciens; mais n'est pas assurément au goust de nostre Siecle'.¹³ The ancients are the ancients and we are the people of today, Perrault in effect says, and he leaves no doubt as to where his preference lies.

It might also appear that Angélique's little quip leaves little doubt about Molière's own position, which seems clearly aligned with Angélique's proud identification with modern gallantry, and with the applauding audiences' approval of it. But let us now confront the obvious. Molière's satiric comedies hardly constitute an apology for contemporary sociability. For if he mocks all those outsiders who fail to meet the standards of modern sociability, the playwright reserves his harshest ridicule for the insiders, for those who identify themselves most ostentatiously with the contemporary gallant model. To catalogue instances of such biting satire, one might turn to plays such as *La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes*, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, or *Les Femmes savantes*. But no doubt the most representative cast of ludicrous moderns is found in the play that attracted Perrault's, and Rousseau's, greatest attention: *Le Misanthrope*. The most common type of lampooned social being is of course the self-complaisant fop, the *petit*

13 From the *Critique de l'Opéra*, in *Alceste, suivi de La Querelle d'Alceste, Anciens et Modernes avant 1680*, edited by William Brooks, Buford Norman and Jeanne Morgan Zarucchi (Geneva: Droz, 1994), pp. 89-91. For the context of the *querelle d'Alceste*, see the introduction to the above and Marc Fumaroli's introduction to *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, edited by Anne-Marie Lecoq (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp. 163-78.

marquis, whose voracious self-regard nearly always disrupts even the most cultivated attempts at deferential self-effacement. The most interesting case here is no doubt the selfsame Oronte whose gallant verse unleashes Alceste's protest, for his reaction to the misanthrope's critique rudely reveals the hungry, and fundamentally unsociable, vanity at his core. But self-regard takes other forms than gallant fatuity. The wounded self-obsession of the prude, here played by Arsinoé, is another species of the failed insider of sociability. Under the supposed banner of polite decorum and refined sensibility, this character type repeatedly unleashes egoistical envy to cast sticks in the gears of social exchange. Finally, there is the most complex case, that of Célimène, the very archetype of sociability – and a character who consciously uses its precepts to impede all of Alceste's attempts at ungallant, and self-asserting, declarations of love. But the very quality that makes her the centre of the circle leads to her banishment from it: her genius at sly and witty verbal portraiture. Of course, the pleasure it affords others depends on the juicy detail, the personal bite – and the naming of names. And there she falls into one of the famous unsocial and ungallant vices associated with antiquity: direct satire or *médiançe*. Célimène, the most contemporary of contemporaries, reveals herself to be an Aristophanes, a practitioner of the Old Comedy, in what is supposed to be a new age of politeness. She is, at her core, an ancient Other.¹⁴

This catalogue of characters demonstrates, I hope, the degree to which for Molière the practice of effectively 'counterfeiting' self-effacement proves nearly impossible. It is not that Molière would deny that an adroitly disguised vanity might produce some form of felicitous social harmony. He might very well believe, along with other French moralists, that such a virtuous collective outcome could be rooted in the effective utilization of *amour-propre* itself. The problem is that almost no one seems capable of subduing their self-regard long enough or well enough (even in outward appearance alone) to truly be identified as sociable.

The failure of modern polite sociability in Molière's world would certainly seem to make considerably more sympathetic those outspoken naysayers who first appear as perfect targets for ridicule. Here lies, at least in part, the 'humanity' of such characters. In their quixotic refusal of modern manners and their crude assertions of impregnable personal identity, they say something that rings true, even while being wrong. Alceste is certainly the most remarkable of their kind, and a fitting concluding point for this analysis. No character, not only in Molière but perhaps in early-modern comedy, so fetishizes his sense of self. Inasmuch as this is simply a fidelity to self, a refusal to 'trahir son âme' (I. 1. 26), there is little problem: in his dreamed-of 'desert' Alceste might be an outcast among outcasts, an anachronism living deep in the anachronistic provinces. But the irony is that Alceste carries his mission of rude self-assertion into the heart of the modern

14 See Perrault on direct satire as an identifying trait of the ancients' lack of civility (*Parallèle*, III. 232-34).

world, the salons of Paris frequented by the courtiers of Versailles. He wants not just to assert his self-identity, but for everyone to recognize him as the unique self he is: 'je veux qu'on me distingue' (I. 1. 63). His ideal of unrestrained sincerity, of speaking one's mind without regard to sensibilities, needs to be put into practice even in the most exalted realms of politeness: 'Je veux [...] qu'en toute rencontre | Le fond de notre cœur dans nos discours se montre' (I. 1. 69-70). And naturally enough for a man who bears the cleaver of self-expression and not the lyre of self-deferral, he seeks to carry off the loved object far from the world of social exchange, to isolate her in the name of a perfect intimacy of inner selves, to flee to the 'desert' where Célimène can, as he says to her, 'trouver tout en moi, comme moi tout en vous' (V. 4. 1782). One need not rehearse here the many ways in which Alceste's fixation on his selfhood would be viewed at the time as illusory or vicious. Nevertheless, his self-obsession proves at least to be honest compared with those around him. If this self-obsession is, as I have suggested, fundamentally an anachronistic failing – the mark of a man nourished on the stoic grandeur of ancient heroes *à la* Corneille, and on the unvarnished frankness of antiquated ballads – then Molière does all to show that the anachronism is universal in a world dominated by ineffectively cloaked egoism.

By fundamentally undermining the viable identification of modern times with gallant self-effacement, Molière offers a radical third perspective to complete the range examined here. We have seen Perrault's vaunting of the happy sociability that distinguishes the moderns, even if reserved for a happy few. We have also seen Hume's much more moderately sceptical vision of a modern world defined by polite deference to the other – one that Hume eyes for its advantages *and* its disadvantages. But on Molière's satiric stage, the idea of a modern identity based on successful self-effacement, or the adroit counterfeiting of it, proves close to impossible. None of us, apparently, can identify ourselves as truly 'modern' in Perrault's privileged sense. 'Me first' always seems to win, and when it wins, the 'me' in question is no longer part of the collective 'us' of modernity, but instead the 'they' of ancients, or provincials, or the lower orders. Thus the emptying of the stage, one character starkly exposed after another, which ends *Le Misanthrope*. The utopian salon of modern *mondanité* is deserted as each wounded ego retreats to lick its wounds, as each inner 'werewolf' returns to its 'hole'. Even the two sole beings capable of effective self-effacement, Philinte and Eliante, must retreat as well, bound by ties to their fleeing fellows. We might prefer at times Perrault's optimism, or Hume's elegantly balanced impartiality, but it is hard not to feel at times the punch of Molière's comic debunking: contemporary sociable harmony is but a masquerade in which the masks inevitably drop, one by one, revealing an invincible self-regard that can be identified as neither gallant nor modern.