Molière's *Le Misanthrope* and Martin Crimp's *The Misanthrope*: a Translator's View

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This paper aims at showing, with particular reference to my translation of *Le Misanthrope*, first, some of the problems that face a translator in trying to produce a faithful yet readable text. Secondly, it explores the difference between faithful translation and what is normally called "adaptation", in which the translator takes enormous liberties with a text in order to produce a modern, updated play. I show that, for all its potential to energise and refresh a perhaps too well-known work, updating can be a dangerous process. Seemingly trivial changes to an original play can transform it in unexpected ways, and can have a huge impact on the text as a whole. These two points are illustrated through a particular speech from Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, compared to my own translation and to Martin Crimp's in his second version of the play.

Keywords: adaptation; *Le Misanthrope;* stylistics; translation.

As an academic with a particular interest in theatre, I have translated two volumes of plays. My aim as a translator is to convey the 'feel' of the original as closely as possible, in a natural-sounding English version. I propose in this paper, with particular reference to my translation of *Le Misanthrope*, to show, first, some of the problems that face a translator in trying to produce a faithful yet readable text. Secondly, I want to explore the difference between faithful translation and what is normally called "adaptation", in which the translator takes enormous liberties with a text in order to produce a modern, updated play. I want to show that, for all its potential to energise and refresh a perhaps too well-known work, updating can be a dangerous process. Making small, seemingly trivial changes to the original play

can transform it in unexpected ways, and can have a huge impact on the text as a whole. To illustrate these two points, I have taken a single speech from Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, and compared my own translation with the same speech from Martin Crimp's in his second and definitive version of the play. I will go on to explore what effect this speech has had on the rest of Molière's play in the course of Crimp's seriously free adaptation.

The second adaptation of *Le Misanthrope* by Martin Crimp was performed in London's West End in 2009. It was a prestigious production, with two famous film stars, Keira Knightley and Damian Lewis, playing the leading roles. Every performance was sold out. The curtain went up to reveal a very modern room in a smart London hotel, with steel and glass furniture. Two men in casual modern clothes are quarrelling. One of them is the hero, Alceste, a part first played by Molière himself. In the original French, Alceste's first words are: "Laissez-moi, je vous prie. […] Laissez-moi là, vous dis-je, et courez vous cacher." (Act I, scene 1, lines 1-3). In my translation of *Le Misanthrope* I chose the following opening: "Leave me alone. Go away. […] Oh, leave me here, I said. Go, run away and hide." Here are the first words of Crimp's Alceste: "Please leave me alone. […] Just leave me alone – I'd be eternally fucking grateful." Crimp has chosen to replace Alceste's petulance with an obscenity calculated to shock the audience and command their attention. Alceste's four-letter word also signals to them that they must expect a racy, irreverent updating of the play.

In translating this play, Martin Crimp and I chose radically different approaches, and the difference is obvious from the outset. It is clear that translators of plays have to take important decisions and make crucial choices from the very beginning. The first question to ask when translating theatre is: who is to be your audience? In my case, as my translations were more likely to be read than performed, I was definitely not aiming for a free, fanciful translation, or wanting to update my text with modern vocabulary and anachronistic references to present-day life. I was aiming for a neutral vocabulary without any blatant anachronisms, and trying to reproduce as much as possible of the witty elegance of Molière's writing. In addition, I chose to keep

something of the "French" quality of the text. My characters call each other "Monsieur" and "Madame", for example. But I avoided references which a modern reader might not understand, and I kept the footnotes to a minimum: as my version was also a performance text, it was important for an audience to be able to follow what was going on without footnotes.

A tricky problem faced by the close translator of Molière into English is what rhyme form to use, since, unlike French, English does not have a strong tradition of rhyming verse theatre. This is not to deny that there are some very fine modern English verse plays; but they are extremely rare. This means that the presence of verse is much more striking in English than in French. It draws attention to itself, and gives the play a special, rather un-English, character. So most translators of Molière either use prose or blank verse. They avoid the alexandrine used by Molière, which in English is generally regarded as a rigid verse form and subject to complicated and detailed rules. A flexible version is of course available, but only rarely used by English poets, hence Alexander Pope's scathing comment: "A needless alexandrine ends the song / that like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along" (Pope: 356-7). Instead, some verse translators of Molière favour the 10-syllable iambic pentameter beloved of Shakespeare. Others, and in particular adaptors, offer free verse, taking advantage of the striking effect of occasional rhymes without the bother of a regular metre. In Martin Crimp's version of *Le Misanthrope* there is intermittent rhyme but no regular rhythm or metre, so that he sometimes lets the audience forget that his play is in verse, but then reminds them with an outrageously daring rhyme, as in this couplet: "Perhaps you don't find it *odd he*'s / always staring at some part of a woman's *body*?" (28, my italics). Crimp gets a laugh, but I can't help feeling that the laughter will not be what Molière's contemporaries (and perhaps Molière himself) felt was special in this play: "[le] rire dans l'âme" (Donneau de Visé 1667).

I do not mean to give the impression that I disapprove of this free approach to rhyme, though my own choice has been completely different. Alone of all the published translators (as far as I know), I

chose to keep the original metre and translate into alexandrines. I did this for two reasons. First, I felt that only this way would I give the readers or audience a faithful impression of what Molière was like in the original. Secondly, I confess that in my head I hear Molière's verse spoken in this metre; it comes more naturally to me than any other form, and in using it I was simply following my instinct.

All these practical decisions, register, versification, how far to "English" the text and so on, are what the working translator has to bear in mind. But in reality, an ideal theoretical approach will tend to take second place to the instinct that takes over during the actual process of translating.

To give a detailed example, here is a short passage from Act II of *Le Misanthrope*, in which the hero Alceste criticizes his lady-love Célimène for flirting with another man. It occurs the first time that the two of them are seen together.

> Mais au moins dites-moi, Madame, par quel sort
> Votre Clitandre a l'heur de vous plaire si fort?
> Sur quel fonds de mérite et de vertu sublime
> Appuyez-vous en lui l'honneur de votre estime?
> Est-ce par l'ongle long qu'il porte au petit doigt
> Qu'il s'est acquis chez vous l'estime où on le voit?
> Vous êtes-vous rendue, avec tout le beau monde,
> Au mérite éclatant de sa perruque blonde?
> Sont-ce ses grands canons qui vous le font aimer?
> L'amas de ses rubans a-t-il su vous charmer?
> Est-ce par les appas de sa vaste rhingrave
> Qu'il a gagné votre âme en faisant votre esclave?
> Ou sa façon de rire et son ton de fausset
> Ont-ils de vous toucher su trouver le secret? (*Le Misanthrope* Act II, sc. 1, 30-43)

My translation goes as follows:

> But at the very least, I wish you'd let me know
> How young Clitandre ever gets to please you so?
> Is it his qualities that make him reign supreme?

Is that why you have honoured him with your esteem?
Is it the fact that he's got one long fingernail
That makes him such a catch, his charms can never fail?
Are you impressed by his prestige, that idle sprig,
And totally won over by his fine blonde wig?
Or do you love him for his legs, all frilled with lace?
Or is it all those ribbons he shows off with grace?
Is it the ample breeches that he wears, that gave
You cause to love a man who claimed to be your slave?
Or can it be his laugh, and high falsetto voice,
That won your heart, made him the lover of your choice? (226)

Although I stuck as closely as I could to the original French here, I still had to take a number of decisions. First, I felt that some of the technical terms used by Molière to describe Clitandre's extravagant clothes would be incomprehensible today, even to a French audience, for example "sa vaste rhingrave". So I tried to preserve something of the meaning, but in more neutral terms. "Canons" become "lace frills", and "rhingrave" becomes "ample breeches". I did leave in a reference to Clitandre's one long fingernail because having seen them myself, in Greece, where having a long nail shows that you are too rich for manual work, I thought that many modern readers would understand what Molière meant by it. I updated the language in this passage, but very discreetly, toning down the courtly elegance of Molière's French, so where he refers to Clitandre winning "l'honneur de votre estime" and suggests to Célimène: "il a gagné votre âme", I ask if Clitandre is "a catch", and if she "loves" him. I also toned down some of the original sentiments, which I felt would be unacceptable to a modern reader. For example, I left out Molière's ironic reference to Clitandre's "vertu sublime", which would have come across as too grandiose, and used the more discreet word "qualities". To Molière's contemporaries, it would have been clear that Alceste is using icy politeness to convey his anger and jealousy; but I felt that his tone of courtly irony would seem exaggerated and pompous to a modern reader, so made him speak more simply.

Martin Crimp, in adapting his first version of *Le Misanthrope* as a performance text, had a very different brief from mine. His version was destined for a theatre audience in London's West End. It was to be a modern, updated Molière. The more it surprised and even shocked the audience, the more controversial the notices, the better. He himself described his attitude to Molière with characteristic lack of reverence in an article for *The Guardian* about his new adaptation, from which I quote a few lines:

> "Monsieur de Molière […] makes his way, in 2009, out of the Eurostar terminal […] He has a sickening thought: what if his play has become irrelevant?" A week later, I'm sitting opposite a transformed Molière: he's got rid of his wig and mastered the coffee machine. "OK," he says, "here's the pitch. Let's make Alceste fall in love with Jennifer, an American film star [… *He gives details, and concludes:*] The fact is, Martin, I'm starting to enjoy *[modern London]*. I like consumer goods and fashion and texting my friends…" (Crimp 2009)

I was fascinated by the life and energy that Crimp's modern adaptation brought to this familiar text. But when I came to think about it more carefully, I realised that making free with updating a famous classic can have unexpected consequences, as can be seen from Crimp's version of Alceste's same speech, and the choices he has made. We should note that this speech is crucial for the development of the play, since we are for the first time witnessing the effect of Alceste's jealousy on Célimène. The audience will be keen to discover the nature of their relationship, which will be established in this scene.

> ALCESTE: Perhaps you'd like to explain
> for example why again and again
> I find Alexander here. I have great difficulty seeing
> why you think he's such a wonderful human being.
> Unless that year-round orange tan
> is something you find appealing, is it, in a man?
> Perhaps you don't find it odd he's
> always staring at some part of a woman's body?
> I suppose his loft in Covent Garden
> is a real come on:

not only has he got those sharks in tanks he's
also invested heavily in Banksys –
gets girls to appreciate his kitsch effects –
then drags them off for unprotected sex." (28)

Crimp makes no attempt to translate any of the references to Clitandre's fancy, fussy clothes, which are prominent in Molière's original. Conversely, Molière makes no mention of Clitandre's house, but Crimp describes Alexander's fashionable London loft apartment, with a shark in a tank (clearly a well-known piece by the conceptual artist Damian Hearst), and wall pictures by the famous British graffiti artist Banksy. These references place Crimp's version squarely in the London of 2009. Today, in 2018, Crimp's 2009 version is already starting to seem dated. For example, nowadays Damien Hearst and Banksy are no longer controversial young artists, but astronomically expensive establishment figures. The trendy place for Londoners to have their lofts might be Hoxton or Marylebone or Shoreditch, not Covent Garden. And, more crucially, the suggestion that Alexander can with impunity drag girls off "for unprotected sex" would cause him to be regarded in 2018, with #MeToo in the news, as scandalous and probably criminal.

But more important than these amusing anachronisms is the fact that here Crimp gives his Clitandre quite a different personality from the original. In Molière's theatre the name Clitandre was several times given to a young, not very forceful lover, sometimes in a farcical play,[1] but Crimp's new name, Alexander, marks the character out as a potential conqueror – in this case of women. Crimp leaves out Clitandre's foppish fingernail, and instead gives Alexander a suntan, which he deliberately works on to make himself more sexy (incidentally a strictly modern approach, since in Molière's day pale skin was favoured and dark skin was thought to make you look like a peasant). But the most important change made by Crimp is this: where Molière's Clitandre seems in this speech to be an admirer, no more, of the heroine (and actually seems more interested in his own appearance than in women), Crimp's Alexander expects to have "unprotected sex" with his female friends. Molière's character is transformed from a harmless, ridiculous dandy to an experienced and dangerous sexual predator.

At this point it is interesting to bring in the fact that Crimp had already produced a previous adaptation of *Le Misanthrope*, which had been staged in 1996. In this earlier version, Alexander was a seedy old would-be womaniser with a "stringy grey pony-tail" and a fondness for slathering himself in greasy moisturiser, whose sexual advances to girls sound repellent (He "likes girls to wear bobby socks, / and have sex watched by a dead sheep in a glass box" says Alceste). One wonders how many girls would be willing partners. The 2009 Crimp, however, paints a portrait of a far more powerful character, a predatory womaniser. This is the only major character-change made by Crimp in updating his play, which mostly remains as originally conceived in 1998.[2]

The introduction of a new, different Alexander in this speech, which occurs at the first meeting between Alceste and his girlfriend onstage, has far-reaching implications. Indeed, it changes the whole point and the whole dynamic of Molière's play. This assertion needs explaining. An audience hearing this speech in Molière's original play will find the speaker, Alceste, ridiculous. Why is Alceste so jealous of a dandy like Clitandre, who is absurd and self-absorbed, the sort of elegant fop whom no woman can take seriously? Throughout *Le Misanthrope* Molière continues in the same vein, mocking at Alceste's jealousy, and presenting the girl he loves, Célimène, as a lively, deliciously attractive charmer. Admittedly, she is both flirtatious and malicious, but we forgive her because she is so very witty, because she is only 20 years old, and, most importantly, because her flirtations with men like Clitandre are not to be taken seriously – we believe that the only man she loves is Alceste, and that he has "le bonheur de savoir que vous êtes aimé" (Act II, sc. 1, 503). She is young, beautiful, alone and unsupported (a widow, she is the only marriageable young woman in Molière to be in control of her own destiny, and Molière emphasises her vulnerability by reminding us repeatedly how young she is). Throughout the play Molière shows how Célimène is under attack from all sides, with only her quick wit to save her, for example in her verbal duel with the spiteful Arsinoë, who accuses her of scandalous behaviour, and to whom she wittily gives a taste of her own medicine; or in the scene where Alceste accuses her of writing a love letter to an-

other man, only for her to retort that it was just an affectionate message to a woman friend. She cleverly and disarmingly deflects every criticism and every attack, every time. It is not until almost the end of the play, in Act V scene 2, that we finally begin to wonder if she is less innocent that she seems. Molière makes her the centre of a scene structured exactly like one in *Dom Juan Act* II scene 4, which his audiences would have been likely to remember, if they had seen it in one of its 15 performances, a year before *Le Misanthrope.* Dom Juan tries to fob off two amorous peasant girls, to whom he has previously made overtures, without committing himself to either, and gets in a comical tangle in his attempts to play them off against each other. Célimène is the centre of exactly the same scene, with Alceste and his enemy Oronte both trying to force her to come clean about which of them she really loves. It is immediately after this that the audience is shown that Célimène has been leading all her admirers on and pretending she loves each one of them best. At last we realise that she does not deserve Alceste's love. He finally earns our respect for the dignified way in which he forgives her and is willing to commit himself to her in spite of everything. He rejects her only when he realises that she is not prepared to make sacrifices for love.

The result is that the play's ending proves much more complex and interesting than we were expecting – Alceste is not merely an unreasonable, paranoid misanthrope, he is also the victim of a shameless manipulator and when he announces that he is leaving Paris and going off to live alone in a "desert", we may well feel sympathy for him. Célimène, too, changes at the end and becomes a more complex and ambiguous character. She has at last been shown up as a heartless flirt, but Molière makes her apologise and offer to marry Alceste. When Alceste rejects her for refusing to abandon society, she leaves the stage in silence: we never know finally whether she really cared for him and is speechless with disappointment and even despair, or whether she brazens it out till the end and flounces off angrily. It is up to the actress playing the part to decide.

In Crimp's version the situation is completely different, and this difference is made plain if we look again at the speech I am examin-

ing. As soon as we meet her for the first time, we are made to realise that Célimène (who has been renamed Jennifer), has been choosing to spend time alone in his flat with a notorious, dangerous seducer. This piece of bad behaviour will be likely to make the audience feel doubtful about her from the moment she first appears. It is perfectly understandable for Alceste to be angry and jealous of a rake like Alexander, and Jennifer's excuse that Alexander is her Agent is scarcely satisfactory.

The change in the personality of Alexander is reinforced later in the text. In Act III Scene 1, Crimp's Alexander lays an outrageous bet with another admirer of Jennifer:

> Listen: you're a betting man
> aren't you. Yes? OK, then here's the plan:
> prove to me you've had her – your word is sufficient –
> and I'll waive my next six months' commission.
> *But*, if you're the loser
> and I seduce her,
> then I pay my next six months' rent
> by taking an additional ten per cent. (49)

In the 1998 version, this seems like a mere sleazy fantasy by this old *roué* with his grey pony-tail, but the new, predatory Alexander of the 2009 version is perfectly capable of winning this sordid bet. And right at the end of Act V, Crimp makes a further small change in the text, so that whereas the 1998 Alex dumbly forgives Jennifer for betraying him, the 2009 Alex is far more forceful, saying "never, never, never" before half-humorously relenting (93). With this transformation of Alex, Crimp has created a new situation. In the original, Célimène's tolerance of the foppish Clitandre seemed perfectly innocent; but this is not so in Crimp's 2009 version. From the moment she appears we can see that Jennifer is playing with fire, encouraging a dangerous seducer. As a result, while Molière's audience would tend to side with his heroine almost throughout the play, Crimp's audience must see from the very start that Alceste's jealousy is perfectly well-founded. Crimp's new scenario has less dramatic potential. The characters now seem much more static and one-sided, since we may disapprove of Crimp's

heroine from the moment she first appears, and carry on disapproving of her till the end. The surprise impact of Molière's ending to his play, when, in a sudden twist, the girl is unmasked as a liar and a cheat, and at last loses our sympathy, is gone. When I saw Crimp's 2009 version I was surprised by Keira Knightley's failure to charm. It was not until afterwards, when I focused on Alceste's first speech to her, that I realised that it was not the actress's fault that she lost our sympathy. From the start the audience was almost forced into suspecting her.

This simple example is enough to make it clear how taking liberties even with a single speech can have unexpected and far-reaching consequences. The Crimp version, for all its inventiveness, its liveliness and its bold linguistic pyrotechnics, skews the balance between the two main characters, alters the careful structure of the whole play, and lessens the impact of the last act. For me at least, Molière's most charismatic heroine is transformed by Crimp from the start into a tough cynical woman, prepared to play along with a sexual predator to further her career. One can understand the verdict of the critic Michael Billington in *The Guardian:* "Crimp's version, for all its topical zest, was a shadow of the original."[3]

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1 In *L'Amour médecin, George Dandin* and *Les Femmes savantes.*

2 Other rewritten passages in the 2009 version reflect changes in social mores since 1998 (for example, in 1998 a character was ridiculed for loathing smoking, but in 2009 he becomes a food faddist who rejects gluten, dairy etc.) Elsewhere, changes in the political situation are reflected. Where in 1998 a mention of a politician's mistress was taboo, in 2009 it is his links with unacceptable foreign regimes that shock. A third series of changes flesh out the text and make it more lively.

3 *The Guardian*, December 18, 2009.