

The Visionaries (Les Visionnaires)

by Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin,
translated by Richard Hillman

« Introduction to *The Visionaries* » by Michel Bitot

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Introduction to *The Visionaries*

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The Visionaries of Desmarests... achieved such extraordinary success that all the fine wits of Desmarests's time named it the inimitable comedy. (Voltaire¹)

The Visionaries (*Les Visionnaires*) was first performed in 1637, when its author was just over forty, by Molière's company at the fashionable Théâtre du Marais in Paris. Celebrated though it would become, as is attested by re-editions and revivals over the better part of a century, its success was not immediate, and Desmarests reacted by expressing a contempt for the vulgar public that is likely, for students of the English drama, to recall Ben Jonson. The introductory Argument to the first edition concludes with the following defence of the obscure verse of his "poète extravagant", Amidor:

il importe fort peu que les ignorants l'entendent ou non, puisque cela n'a pas été apprêté pour eux. C'est être bien déraisonnable, d'accuser d'obscurité celui

¹ "Les Visionnaires de Desmarests . . . avaient eü un succès si prodigieux que tous les beaux esprits du temps de Desmarests l'appelaient *l'inimitable comédie*" ("Vie de Molière avec de petits sommaires de ses pièces" (1739), *Mélanges II, Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, online at http://www.voltaire-integral.com/Html/23/08Vie_Moliere.html accessed 7 July 2011).

qui dans la bouche du poète s'est voulu moquer de l'obscurité des anciennes poésies [it matters very little whether the ignorant understand him or not, since it was not intended for them. It is unreasonable indeed to accuse of obscurity one who, through the mouth of the poet, has wished to mock the obscurity of former poetical styles].

*Ce n'est pas pour toi que j'écris,
Indocte et stupide vulgaire:
J'écris pour les nobles esprits,
Je serais marri de te plaire.*

[It is not for you I write,
unlearned and stupid vulgar.
I write for noble wits.
I should be very sorry to please you.]²

The irony is that, in thus defending his creation, the ridiculous Amidor, Desmaret's produces a distinct echo of that creation's own language and attitudes, including Amidor's complaint that his learning is unappreciated ("Ah, times are hard for devotees of learning!" [IV.iii.1356]). And it makes a double irony that, when Amidor dismisses "Those dullards whose Muse is content to feed / The appetites of minds of common breed" (I.iv.549-50), he is scorning those who compose comedy as opposed to tragedy.

The changeability of literary values and judgements is precisely Voltaire's point, although his view remains narrow, if not perverse, from our own vantage point. In fact, he is using Desmaret's comedy to condemn the unenlightened tastes of that author's age, which preceded the supposed discovery of "nature" (*la nature*), of "truth" (*le vrai*), hence of the "beautiful" (*le beau*), as he finds these to be exemplified in the work of Molière.³ Hence, he reports, *The Visionaries*, with its exaggerated and heteroclitic characters, failed miserably when revived in the neo-classically con-

2 Jean Desmaret's de Saint-Sorlin, *Les Visionnaires, comédie, Théâtre du XVII^e siècle II*, ed. Jacques Scherer and Jacques Truchet, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 407-8 (*Argument*). On the piece's reception and Desmaret's attitude, see Truchet's Notice in this edition (pp. 1358-59) and H. Gaston Hall, ed., *Les Visionnaires, comédie: Texte de la première édition*, Société des Textes Français Modernes (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1963), pp. lxx-lxxiv, who notes that Desmaret envisaged from the first a coterie audience capable of appreciating his satire and, especially, his parody (p. lxx). All who write about the work of Desmaret owe a large debt to Hall's thorough and meticulous editorial labours; these are generally reflected throughout the present introduction, which is intended for readers who are not specialists in the French drama of the period.

3 A modern perspective is far more open to what Desmaret and Molière have in common—indeed, to the direct influence of the former on the latter; see Truchet, Notice, p. 1363.

ditioned early eighteenth century. (Significantly, Voltaire makes this point without reference to the topical satire which today is sometimes cited to account for the play's popular appeal in its own time.) It is tempting to imagine, given the mockery built into his own portrait of poetic styles and dramatic fashions (through the characters of both Amidor and Sestiane, the latter "in love with Comedy"), that Desmarets would have greeted Voltaire's earnest declarations with a knowing smile. In any case, regardless of the indeterminate question of last laughs, he would surely have been gratified by the renewed appreciation of his comedy by audiences and theatre professionals over the last fifteen years or so.⁴

The long life of Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin (1595-1676) included prolific literary activity (as poet and controversialist, as well as dramatist), the holding of important public offices and, for his final thirty years or so, an intense religious devotion combining mysticism and monarchism—to the point where his enemies ridiculed him as having joined his own collection of "visionnaires".⁵ What chiefly concerns us here, however, is his earlier close connection with Cardinal Richelieu (d. 1642), whom he first served, it seems, as a literary adviser, beginning in 1634,⁶ before producing plays on command (initially tragedies, sometimes in collaboration with the Cardinal himself). Hence, he was a natural choice to become the first chancellor of the Académie Française, founded by Richelieu in 1635. It has long been recognised that *The Visionaries* is intimately bound up with the Cardinal's patronage of Desmarets, who is generally taken to be producing, in the extraordinary description by Phalante at the very core of the play (Act Three), a flattering portrait of the Cardinal's own chateau, then still under construction.⁷ The fact is, however, that Phalante is finally exposed as a sham, "his" chateau standing finally as a monument to his own folly and, beyond that, to human vanity at large. This double vision may be taken as the key to a double-edged irony

4 Witness productions by the Théâtre du Nord-ouest (Paris) in spring, 2007 (dir. Coralie Salonne), and by the Théâtre National Populaire (Villeurbanne, Lyons) in October of the same year (dir. Christian Schiaretti, who had already mounted the play in 1999 with students of the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques du Théâtre).

5 See Truchet, "Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin", p. 1356.

6 See, Hall, ed., pp. xvii-xxii, who has most convincingly established the chronology of Desmarets's relations with the Cardinal.

7 See Henry Carrington Lancaster, "The Chateau de Richelieu and Desmarets's *Visionnaires*", *Modern Language Notes* 60.3 (1945):167-72.

which, beginning with the play's title, has an ultimately disturbing tendency to turn back upon its most heartily laughing spectators.

I

Lysander, the “raisonneur”⁸ in *The Visionaries*, delivers what sounds like the play's message in his commentary on what had promised to be spectacular and eventful concluding action, but which, in the event, falls flat and goes nowhere—unless it is back to the beginning:

Children, pursue your follies as you started.
Maintain your humours, happier by far
Than this world's wise men, kings or princes are. (V.ix.2010-12)

This comment proves essential for the understanding of a profoundly extravagant play, striking for its almost relentless dramatic and verbal inventiveness, as being also extravagantly profound. “Follies”, “humours”—the latter term alluding to contemporary humour theory—are at the core of *The Visionaries*, whose title itself, in the French of Desmarets's time, evokes the mentally imbalanced. And these follies hold the stage to the end, impervious to the spokesman for reason, who himself, moreover, is at least momentarily thrown off-balance. The reminiscence of Ben Jonson's somewhat earlier “comedy of humours” is apt, to the point of highlighting a common theatrical (and, of course, scientific) heritage.

The dramatic framework within which this heritage is displayed is highly conventional. *The Visionaries* may, at first sight, be taken as presenting a common seventeenth-century comic situation, grounded on a straightforward moral premise. Folly, whether mild or severe, but always considered as the obverse of a supposed sanity or wisdom—in short, the dialectic between folly and reason—was a classic preoccupation of early modern drama, in France as in other countries of Europe. One of the standard ingredients of the genre is the traditional father-child conflict, which, in *The Visionaries* as elsewhere, centres on marriage. A distinctive feature of Desmarets's comedy, however, is that the common clash of perceptions between a “reasonable” father and a “foolish” daughter, when it comes to the choice of a husband, issues in an indecisive, if not ambiguous, conclusion. Although we are

⁸ This term, associated particularly with Molière, usually refers to a secondary character who, through his moral and rational stability, serves as a foil to the divagations of the protagonist.

apprised, from the start, of the father's wish to marry off his three daughters, none of them actually marries in the end, and this is directly contrary to convention. This is so because the young women are not driven by ordinary romantic love, which at least has the potential to justify itself by proving less foolish than stage fathers tend to imagine, but rather are obsessed by "visions", quite unable to step out of their closed, imaginary world of phantasms to enter into real relations with others. And so are their putative suitors. Even as it flirts with the conventions of a comedy of love, therefore, *The Visionaries* flouts those conventions by refocusing the reason / folly dichotomy on the inconsistencies and absurdities—and finally the inescapability—of forms of self-loving.

Desmarets's "visionaries" are benignly lunacy-ridden: as stated in the playwright's *Argument*, theirs are "follies for which no one is locked up".⁹ Yet in the years 1630-50, the French stage featured a number of urban comedies by Pierre Corneille and others which staged characters affected, not only by visions and chimeras, but even by outright madness. Indeed, Jacques Truchet situates Desmarets's comedy within what he terms the "theatre of extravagance"—"extravagance" being, like the "vision" of "visionnaire", another synonym for a delusory mental state.¹⁰ He singles out a few such plays, whose very titles suggest an attraction for the spectacle of insanity, in ballet as well as in drama: among them are Corneille's *La place Royale ou l'Amoureux extravagant* and Charles Beys's *L'Hôpital des fous*.¹¹ Here, too, one may draw a parallel with one thematic strand of early modern English drama. There are reminiscences of Shakespeare's treatment of lunacy, real or pretended, even "politic"—or again, closer to Desmarets's time, of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622), whose action is in part situated in an asylum.¹² Desmarets, however, makes a claim in the *Argument* of the play for his "visionary" or "extravagant" characters as being in no way disconnected from his contemporaries' everyday reality:

9 "[...] de ces folies pour lesquelles on ne renferme personne" (Scherer and Truchet, eds., p. 405 [*Argument*]).

10 Truchet, Notice, p. 1360.

11 See also Hall, ed., pp. xlvi-lx, who stresses the influence of Beys on Desmarets.

12 For perspectives on English dramatic treatments of the subject, see, e.g., Robert Rentoul Reed, *Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage* (1952; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1970); Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Ken Jackson, *Separate Theaters: Bethlehem ("Bedlam") Hospital and the Shakespearean Stage* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

every day we see such characters among us, who at the least think such extravagant thoughts, even if they do not speak them.

[tous les jours nous voyons parmi nous des esprits semblables, qui pensent pour le moins d'aussi grandes extravagances, s'ils ne les disent]¹³

This point is perhaps easiest for modern audiences to grasp as it is embodied in the play by Phalante, designated in the *Dramatis Personae* as “rich in his imagination” (*riche imaginaire*). The portrayal he produces at great length of the chateau he supposedly owns is obviously inflated beyond any reality (witness the thousands of orange trees, the statues in virtual motion), yet it intersects substantially with that imagined, then physically projected upon reality, by Desmarets’s patron, whose *eminence* conspicuously consisted in forms of worldly wealth and power. The Cardinal’s chateau, built between 1624 and c. 1640 at Richelieu in what was then termed “Poitou”,¹⁴ was by all accounts genuinely astounding, having been designed to equal France’s most renowned princely places, including Fontainebleau. Regarded by contemporaries as one of France’s architectural “wonders”, it was famous for its size and architectural magnificence, but especially, as Phalante’s description reflects, for the profusion of statues, either genuinely antique or based on antique models—such as the celebrated Venus and Bacchus—which ornamented its facade and gardens. Jean de la Fontaine wrote an extensive account of Richelieu in his *Relation d’un voyage de Paris en Limousin*, yet also deferred to the descriptions offered by Desmarets—this time, however, in the latter’s much later and non-fictional *Promenades*.¹⁵ For Desmarets returned from another perspective, as will be seen more clearly below, to this eminently real “extravagance”, where the great Cardinal hardly lived at all, and which was to be demolished (except for a few minor buildings) in the nineteenth century.

13 Scherer and Truchet, eds., p. 405 [*Argument*].

14 Richelieu is now considered as part of the southern extremity of Touraine and is situated within the *département* of Indre-et-Loire.

15 “vous aurez recours à ce que M. Desmarets a dit de cette maison : c’est un grand maître en fait de descriptions. Je me garderais bien de particulariser aucun des endroits où il a pris plaisir à s’étendre, si ce n’était que la manière dont je vous écris ces choses n’a rien de commun avec celle de ses *Promenades* [you will have recourse to what Monsieur Desmarets has said about this house: he is a grand master of description. I would refrain from giving the details concerning any of the places on which he has chosen to expatiate, were it not that the manner in which I write these things to you has nothing in common with that of his *Promenades*]” (Jean de La Fontaine, *Lettres de La Fontaine à sa femme ou Relation d’un voyage de Paris en Limousin*, ed. Ange-Marie Caudal [Paris : Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1966], Letter dated 12 September 1653). The reference is to Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, *Les promenades de Richelieu, ou les Vertus chrestiennes* (Paris: Henry Le Gras, 1653).

II

No one would doubt that *The Visionaries* is a self-consciously literary, auto-referential construct, a play fundamentally about acting and role-playing. It is worth extending that concept of self-consciousness to its own structure and use of conventions. The debate between Amidor and Sestiane about the neo-classical unities of time, place and action (I.iv.561-628), which spoofs aesthetic issues taken with the utmost seriousness by contemporaries, resonates with elements signalled within the “non-literary” dialogue. For instance, in keeping with the “rule” about time, we are explicitly dealing with a single day’s action, as we are made aware from the start:

ALCIDON

Before the day is out, I vow to find
Suitors who suit me—and not change my mind.

LYSANDER

A full day’s work! (I.vii.341-43)

Even if there are three matches to make, and even if the task proves to be complicated (not to say unbalanced) by the presence of four suitors, the rule is thereby put in place.

Still, though the resolution occurs, classically (if not in classical form), at the end of the day, when, as has been pre-arranged, all the characters arrive at Alcidon’s house for the finale, the notion of time in the play may be regarded as highly flexible, if one takes into account the range and variety of temporal references throughout. The time of the main action proper—the business of choosing the suitors, the unexpected conclusion to the quest—may be opposed to what could be termed virtual temporality. The basic time scheme is, indeed, an illustration of the classical rules, yet the playwright freely departs from them—not least in Amidor and Sestiane’s long exchange on the subject, which concludes with Amidor’s clear rejection of strictures he considers “austere” (I.iv.566). Is the poetaster here again, ironically, serving as the poet’s spokesman? (Let us note that Molière himself, especially with his *Dom Juan* [1665], later proved averse to the three “unities”, in the name of verisimilitude.)

The aesthetics of *The Visionaries*—as in some of Corneille’s comedies, particularly *L’Illusion comique* (1635)—are characterized not only by the free play of illusionistic devices, but also by a movement towards expansion, or excess—a drive to proliferate imaginative schemes, characters and eccentricities. The first

“visionary” to appear in the play, Artabaze, the *miles gloriosus* (who bears close comparison with Matamore in Corneille’s *L’Illusion comique*), is a case in point. His declamatory raving about his supposed terrorizing of the whole world allows him to span vast historical periods, giddily taking us through Antiquity and its gods to the present time, with a fantastic detour via the Creation. Artabaze, with the encouragement of Alcidon’s gullibility (IV. viii), proves more than ready to “out-Alexander” Alexander. He boasts, not only of far greater triumphs than the Greek conqueror could ever claim, but even of having killed his rival for glory—and now, momentarily, for love (IV.ii.1282).¹⁶ Artabaze finds a female counterpart in Mélisse, succinctly labelled in the list of *dramatis personae* as “in love with Alexander the Great”—the hero who, for her, can never die. The mad meeting of the two is one of the high points of this comedy, with both characters nursing their own delirious “visions” and exchanging their personal discourses when no real exchange is possible: to the very end of the play, these stereotypes will run their autonomous courses regardless of each other, parallel lines that will never intersect. That in itself is a measure of their a-temporality.

An additional blurring of the nominal time scheme of *The Visionaries* is produced by two dramatic inserts. The debate on the unities between Sestiane and Amidor issues in the generation of an imaginary play—an extravagant romantic tragicomedy—which explodes all the conventions. Moreover, the deferral of closure characteristic of romance narrative is self-reflexively reinforced, twice, by the father’s interruptions. “Some day, Amidor, I’ll finish narrating” (I.iv.662), declares Sestiane hopefully, but of course she never does. In another play-within-the play (IV. ii), Mélisse vainly tries to engage Artabaze in the role of Alexander, momentarily effecting a division within his fictional identity—and thereby renewing amorously the threat he perceives in the creative/destructive “sorcery” of Amidor. (It is a threat that he can finally defeat only by grandiosely reaffirming his unity in the form of self-love.) These tendencies towards expansion and development of a baroque kind, whereby time, space, and identity are parenthetically suspended, entail the creation of imaginative areas in which the classical rules do not obtain.

A double departure from the unity of time may arguably be detected in the fantasies of Phalante. His extraordinary *ekphrasis* of over 180 lines (III.ii) not only

16 This fantasy is first mentioned as part of his self-presentation (I.i.39-44).

takes both on- and off-stage audience out of the flow of action and into a dream-like state, but introduces distinctly trans-historical properties, as, mirroring the Cardinal's antiquarianism, he effectively brings the pagan past into the present. This is where the later perspective of the *Promenades*, a long pious poem written more than ten years after the Cardinal's death, when Desmarets was engaged in a theological polemic with the Jansenists, may be helpful. For even as his poetic evocation of the chateau displays an unmistakable nostalgia, it practises a resounding rejection of mundane concerns. In his meditation on faith ("De la Foy"), the poet again pictures the mythological and pagan figures, the rich statuary and architectural graces of Richelieu's chateau, where he had lived for some years, but only to turn away from them:

*Je te laisse, Palais de pompeuse structure,
Pour les simples beautez de la riche Nature.
Pour les œuvres de Dieu laissons celles de l'art,
Où les mortelles mains prétendent trop de part.*

[I leave you, Palace of pompous form,
for the simple beauties of rich Nature.
For the works of God let us leave those of art,
in which mortal hands claim too great a share.]¹⁷

In the retrospective light of such spiritual devotion, it is easier to see that the intuition of material vanity attached to Phalante's fantasy of possession already extends, by implication, to the extravagant chateau itself, across the pointed compliment that Desmarets is most obviously paying to his patron. And to the extent that Richelieu's ambitions as a collector of the relics of Antiquity are specifically evoked, the revival of mythological narratives through the vivid descriptions of Phalante, as he imaginatively sets in motion the stories of Arethusa (III.v.1061 ff.) and the Danaïdes (1145 ff.), is pregnant with ironic intimations of a false—pagan—claim to eternity by comparison with the Christian truth. Phalante's (and Richelieu's?) arrogation of power over time, highlighted by the violation of the dramatic unity, thus becomes functional in a didactic way, as do the mercenary overtones of the final exchange between Alcidon ("Your hope lies in the death of your relations?" [V.viii.1958]) and a Phalante who has been brought somewhat down to earth ("We might well see it happen any minute" [1959]). If Desmarets

17 Desmarets, *Les Promenades*, "De la Foy", p. 3.

obviously knew by 1653 that Cardinal Richelieu had scarcely ever sojourned in the costly palace and the adjacent utopian city that he had conceived, the fact is uncannily anticipated in 1637.

III

The perception that Phalante's vision involves the projection of space beyond time leads to the realisation that the notion of space in *The Visionaries* is dual: there is the domestic space of the house and household, on the one hand, the construction of imaginary, oneiric or mythological areas, on the other. The central *locus* is Alcidon's townhouse and the adjacent streets, in keeping with the centrality of his resolve to have his three daughters matched by the end of the day. Accordingly, all the protagonists, daughters and "suitors" unite in Alcidon's house for what promises to be the hectic resolution of the dramatic scheme. The sense of interiority is reinforced by references to the world outside, beginning with "the next street" (V.ii.1714), where Lysander has witnessed the crowd and quarrel. From that world the suitors will arrive one by one. But the daughters who are summoned from within the house to hear Alcidon's will pointedly defy their father by successively reiterating their imaginary spaces: Mélisse's summary of Alexander's combats (V.iii.1777-80), Hespérie's vision of a world depopulated by lovers' suicides (V.iv.1811-22), Sestiane's evocation of the theatre (V.v.1853-72), which she can attend because "you for pleasure let me leave the house" (1868).

In Desmarests's theatre, the shift from Alcidon's house to the mythological or cosmic spheres evoked by Artabaze, for instance, or by Amidor's and Filidan's bouts of poetic furor, might be supported by exterior sets suggesting pastoral or antique scenes: rocks, caves.¹⁸ But the characters also carry their imaginary spaces with them when they arrive for the resolution. And undoubtedly the most spectacular setting in the play, Phalante's chimeric chateau, whose effect depends on the conspicuous absence of any onstage correlative, is given special attention. The denouement of the play occurs when Phalante is gradually made to confess—though he still does not fully *see*—that his ownership of this prize is a figment of his imagination. Lysander then ruefully recognises the ruin of his own vision of a place of comfort and luxury, admitting that even he, the play's rational centre of gravity, had fallen prey to vain desire: "O lovely spot, whose

18 See Hall, ed., pp. xxxiii-xxxvii.

hope was our delight, / Your marvels suddenly have taken flight” (V.viii.1975-76). As for Alcidon, his sarcasm at this point proves that, unlike his daughters and their “suitors”, he is capable of disillusion, hence of learning from his multiple misapprehensions: “Great thanks, O truly self-made millionaire, / For the *thoughtful* honour you seek to share” (1977-78).

Both Alcidon and Lysander, moreover, effectively acknowledge their own susceptibility, their participation in fallible humanity, by finally accepting, if not exactly condoning, the visionaries’ follies, at least in a general sense. After all, those follies have proved to be infectious, as they certainly are theatrically, providing even the relatively sober and rational characters with their ration of dream and fantasised power. This comedy, then, in the general manner of Corneille’s *L’Illusion comique*—but without its magic tricks—comments fundamentally, and from multiple angles, on the attraction and dangers of illusion. Even those characters who seem to be free from the epidemical “follies” of the play do not escape the pitfalls of delusion and credulity. They are snared into belief by tales of riches, luxury and power, lured—quite literally—by the mirage of a castle in the air, because such mirages mirror their own attraction to wealth and the good life.

IV

Desmarets’s 1653 evocation of the past splendour of the “chateau”, with its opposition (as opposed to Phalante’s fusing) of Art and Nature, finally induces a reflexion upon the playwright’s artistry and artifice in the play, and upon its self-consciousness. Along with Corneille, Desmarets belongs to a theatrical trend in the 1630’s whereby a mastery of theatrical techniques, designed most immediately to display brilliant acting and stagecraft, incorporates a serious reflexion upon the medium. Like *L’Illusion comique*, Desmarets’s comedy is striking for its virtuoso combination of dramatic elements which partake of apparently divergent genres and styles: love-comedy, the pseudo-heroic, the burlesque.

Yet the relentless exploitation of his characters’ extravagant follies makes for a distinctive enrichment of Desmarets’s reflection on his craft. As the dramatic sequences that mark the progression of Alcidon’s quest for ideal suitors alternate with long passages of lyrical or heroic verse expounding one folly or another, the author achieves a compound of freedom and convention. He flirts with comedic conventions, while overtly indulging in varied forms of rant and oratory, rhetoric calculated to disorient, and therefore charm, the educated audience he was

addressing. The attendant subversions of the unities thus comment wryly on his own art. Through the inset narrative, in particular, in which Sestiane composes her play for Amidor's appreciative benefit, we are offered a kind of draft, a play in the making, where imagination (or folly?) is conspicuously given free rein in terms of time, place and action. This fanciful plot, never to be performed, shows Desmarets engaged with one of the main aesthetic issues of his time, not necessarily taking a firm position,¹⁹ but playfully staking a claim for his own powers of invention. Yet the fascinating mixture of narrative and dramatic elements thereby goes beyond theatrical game-playing, so as to call in question the limits of invention and experiment, the power of illusion and delusion, in an era when the neo-classical rules could matter a great deal.

In the final analysis, much comes down to the play's language—or, rather, languages. The proven ability of *The Visionaries* to engage audiences—in our time and its own—owes much to the variety of its (mad) discourses, and it must be admitted that, without this element, Desmarets's comedy would not amount to much. The discourse holds the various comedic ingredients together, not least by its very diversity. Indeed, *The Visionaries* might be described as a sort of airy nothing worked up into a magnificent show, thanks principally to the dramatist's linguistic virtuosity.

This dominant aspect of the play weighs decisively against reductive readings in terms of topical satire. It might be argued that Desmarets, through the creation of an avowedly mad theatrical world, could risk presenting not merely social types but even recognisable personages of his own time, because the very excess and general extravagance of *The Visionaries* would forestall censorship. Yet while social climbing and the thirst for riches are obvious targets (and fairly safe ones in the abstract), the social game as played in the comedy seems unlikely to have been aimed at particular contemporary figures. Doubtless, it reflects the manners and forms of language to be found in those circles which Desmarets and his audience were familiar with. The prevailing and final impression, however, is of a pure pleasure compounded of words begging for performance, a kind of homage paid ultimately to the professional actors who created the roles.

19 This is the impression given, even if Desmarets in his *Argument* defends the “true rules” (“véritables règles”) and dismisses “these two extravagant persons” (“ces deux extravagantes personnes”) (Scherer and Truchet, eds., p. 406). Cf. p. 1369, n. 2 to p. 430. Truchet may insist too strongly on the play's own fidelity to the unity of time (Notice, p. 1359).

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NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

In the interest of reproducing, as far as is possible, not only meaning and tone, but also the stage-worthiness that the comedy has proven that it still possesses, the Alexandrines of the original have been replaced by pentameter couplets, which have a lighter effect in English. The division into acts and scenes follows the neo-classical practice of the early texts, in which all the characters participating in a scene are listed at the beginning. Line numbers are continuous throughout and follow those in the text of the Pléiade edition, *Théâtre du XVII^e siècle II*, ed. Jacques Scherer and Jacques Truchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), which has served as the basis for the translation. There are no stage directions in the original, and while the action is generally easy to follow, the entrances and exits usually quite evident, a few basic directions have been added for clarity (in brackets and italics).

The notes to the translation make no attempt to indicate the numerous literary allusions, mainly to contemporary French texts, that have been signalled by modern scholars; for these, interested readers are invited to consult, especially, the ample and learned annotations in the edition of H. Gaston Hall, Société des Textes Français Modernes (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1963).

CHARACTERS

ARTABAZE (*miles gloriosus*¹)

AMIDOR (an extravagant² poet)

FILIDAN (in love with the Idea of Beauty³)

PHALANTE (rich in his imagination)

MÉLISSE (in love with Alexander the Great)

HESPÉRIE (believes herself beloved by all)

SESTIANE (in love with Comedy⁴)

ALCIDON (father of these three girls)

LYSANDER (kinsman of Alcidon)

1 Desmarest's designation is simply "capitan". The name Artabaze is that of a Persian general who at first resisted Alexander on behalf of Darius Codomannus, then, at the death of that king (336 B.C.E.), entered into the service of the conqueror, from whom he received a satrapy. The purely fantastic character is thereby ready-made to fit into the fantasy-world of the historically obsessed Mélisse (see IV.ii.1290-91).

2 "Poète extravagant": "extravagant" is equivalent here to "visionnaire", in the sense of someone possessed by madness, even if in the mild version stipulated by Desmarest, which English usage tends to relegate to the category of "folly".

3 The Platonic vocabulary is mockingly associated with Filidan throughout.

4 Comedy: used, as often (as in the Comédie Française), to stand for the drama generally, though there is a play on the sense of comic genre later on (V.v.1842).

ACT I

SCENE I (ARTABAZE)

ARTABAZE

1 Heaven's darling am I – to wordlings, thunder;
The terror of peace, a warrior-wonder.
Bliss I bring the lady, fear to her lord,
And at my beck and call fell fire and sword.
5 By Mars on a savage Amazon sired,
To nurse me a dread lioness was hired.
Famed as the feats of Hercules may be,
Two serpents defeated while still a baby,
Does that match me? My sucking satiated,
10 My own nurse, on a whim, I suffocated!
My mother, however, far from me thanking,
Caught me by a ruse to give me a spanking,
But craven tricks are my abomination:
At once I wiped out the Amazon nation.
15 My father sought to stop me in that course,
Blocked a few blows, would have imposed his force,
But fearing my valour, dread in the sight
Of the gods themselves, to heaven took flight.
The sun, which sees all, saw with no increase
20 Of pains I'd tame the sky – and made a peace.
For me Mars's power he trimmed in girth,
Made him Mars of heaven, and me of earth.
Now, to reward this decision so cunning,
Seeing the sun was incessantly running,
25 I ended forever his need to roam
And granted heaven's centre as his home;⁵
I bade him at rest his light to pour out,
While the earth and the sky roll round about;
Thus by my strength, in this adventure strange,

5 This is, of course, according to Ptolemaic cosmography.

30 Did Nature its whole order rearrange;
My power alone in the firmament
Gave motion to the densest element.
(Hence those great dialogues all stem from me –
And latest theories – in astronomy.⁶)
35 Since then my wars I've so proliferated
Mankind at large I'd have annihilated,
But that, with one sex craving my good will,
In pity I replace all that I kill.
Where now are all those mighty conquerors,
40 Scourges of men and famous warriors?
Achilles and Hercules, Alexander,
Cyrus? Those who made Rome's empire grander?
Whose cold steel so many sent to their death?
My valour alone deprived them of breath.
45 Where are the thick walls of that Babylon,
Nineveh, Athens, and Lacadaemon,
Argos and Thebes, storied Carthage, great Troy?
(Examples by millions I could employ.)
Reduced to dust, those cities of renown:
50 I took them by storm, then battered them down.
But nothing more seems to oppose my might,
No warrior dares come within my sight.
What then? Idle? Such a sluggard to fight
That my arm receives the slightest respite?
55 O gods, let from some dreary cave appear
Appalling giant or monster of fear!
If one day my valour rests sedentary,
I'll make of the world a vast cemetery.

⁶ Artabaze not only reshapes the divine creation but inspires the theories of Copernicus and Galileo. The term "dialogues" in l. 33 probably refers to a specific contemporary work (Scherer and Truchet, eds., p. 1365, n. 2 to p. 409).

SCENE II (AMIDOR, ARTABAZE)

AMIDOR

60 I rise from Mount Parnassus' dark recesses,
Where great Jove's son (the one with golden tresses),⁷
In verse-forging spirit spawns dithyramb,
Epode, antistrophe, tragic iamb.

ARTABAZE

What prodigy is this? What consternation!

AMIDOR

65 Profane one, begone! I feel inspiration.
*Iach, iach, évoé!*⁸

ARTABAZE

A case of possession!
Sole remedy – my better part: discretion. *[Runs away.]*

SCENE III (AMIDOR)

70 Endless descriptions my brain overspread,
As the fumes of new wine go to one's head.
Come, then, let's represent a bacchanal,
Storm, fair weather, in verse heroical,
Packed with puffed word and potent epithet.
All tired expressions let us forget.
Already I spy all round the brigades
Of goat-footed gods and mad Maenad maids,
75 Come orgiastically to celebrate

7 I.e., Apollo, the *sobriquet* which Lysander sardonically accords Amidor at the conclusion (V.vii.1911). The poet's fondness for recondite, if not obscurely learned, allusions and hyperbole (cf. V.vii.1926–32) gives him power, of different kinds, over the gullible Filidan and Artabaze, if not necessarily over Atropos.

8 The traditional cry of the Maenads (or Bacchae) in their frenzied worship of Dionysus/Bacchus. Amidor's "inspiration" leads him to imagine such a scene.

And fête father Bromios in due state.⁹
 There's the thigh-born one! Good Silenus follows,
 His gullet reeking of the wine he swallows;
 His ass among the Mimallons now blends,
 80 As, thyrsus in hand, through vales the throng wends.
 But whither strays that troupe? It's seen no more
 On lap-lapping¹⁰ Nereus' lonely shore.
 Nothing do I spy but cavernous rocks.
 A far-off whirling wind my ear now shocks.
 85 Sacred hosts of heaven, what tempest dread,
 What veil of darkness be-curtains my head?
 Aeolus has freed his foaming fast horses,
 Who ply on the moist sea-furrows their courses.
 The torch-bearing sky wraps itself in black;
 90 A lone lightning flash opens it a crack:
 What swirling fires give us back the day?
 But the night as swiftly takes it away.
 The threatening roar of that stormy thunder
 The world's very frame will soon shake asunder.
 95 This tumult makes an elemental jumble;
 Jove will soon cause the universe to tumble;
 That blow struck Taenarus,¹¹ splitting the earth,
 And will move Nature to some monstrous birth.

SCENE IV (FILIDAN, AMIDOR)

FILIDAN

Here is my dear friend, that great genius;

9 The point is not merely to depict the orgiastic rites of Dionysus (a common contemporary motif) but to show up Amidor's predilection for far-fetched epithets (Bromios for Dionysus, Mimallons for Maenads, Nereus as metonymic for the sea – especially the Aegean).

10 I.e., “floflotant”, an established onomatopoeic coinage; cf. Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611): “Floating, flowing, surging; sounding like waues, or billowes”. Amidor's language here, as elsewhere, is notably old-fashioned: the expression “floflotant Nérée” is taken from Du Bartas (Scherer and Truchets, eds., p. 1366, n. 2 to p. 411).

11 The traditional entrance to the underworld, located in Laconia.

AMIDOR
100 Let's find some rocky height to shelter us
 Against the storm.

FILIDAN
 Ah, no doubt he composes
 Or speaks to some god from the *Metamorphoses*.¹²

AMIDOR
I spy one who adores my noble verse
But all whose judgements are perverse.
105 Baffle his wits, he's lost in admiration;
 I'll give it a try: I feel like some fun.
 To continue. The storm stills, the air clears;
 The winds that break ships soften on the ears.
 Calm, to the sailors' waves returning, chases
110 Their fearful pallor from sea-faring faces;
 The cloud takes flight; the sky becomes more pure,
 And joyously puts on her robe of azure.

FILIDAN
 Is this a crime? Dare I hope to excuse
 Disrupting your dialogue with your Muse?

AMIDOR
115 Filidan, let me in these transports divine
 Describe the Beauty whose image was mine.
 (I will catch him out!) A heavenly beauty
 Possessed my eyes with wonder suddenly.¹³
 One body joining such gems in profusion

12 Ovid's enormously popular and influential poem is also marked as a rudiment of learning by Sestiane in IV.iv.1436.

13 The anti-petrarchism of Amidor's "heavenly beauty" may be traceable especially to Du Bellay (Hall, ed., p. lxii), but the parodic principle was well established.

120 Struck me dumb, my senses into confusion;
A thousand arrows pierced me through and through:
Her coral eyes, her mouth of azure blue,
Her gleaming complexion, her silver hair,
Her teeth of ebony to make one swear
125 Devotion, her fixed stare with no spark lit,
Each fair tapered breast tucked under an armpit
From which a long and spindly arm proceeds;
Two fleshless thighs, or rather flimsy reeds;
The large size of her feet, her stunted height,
130 Within my heart provoked a desperate fight.¹⁴

FILIDAN

Ah, ye gods! What Beauty! O king of wit,
All this you saw? Ah, I'm ravished by it.
Recount me what she did, content my soul,
Whose secret flame I scarcely can control.

AMIDOR

135 (Now to invent some absolute nonsense.)
These charms she uttered, fraught with reverence:
"Apollo's minion, whose ecstatic verve
Excites the soul along a tingling nerve
And sparks such vivid visionary pleasure
140 That noblest desires spread beyond measure,
Learn to hold in awe this gift of destiny,
Adorable figure of my modesty."

FILIDAN

O wondrous speech, O words of solemn weight,
Able to curb the most audacious state.
145 Gods, how that Beauty charms in every sense;
I burn for her with zealous vehemence.
My friend, besides that, what else did she say?

¹⁴ Thanks to Filidan's gullability, the technique of anti-blason can be pushed to an extreme – indeed, thrown into relief self-consciously (cf. below, III.i.742-51).

AMIDOR

She said good-bye, and then she went away.

FILIDAN

150 That Beauty divine enraptures my mind;
She surely must be of heavenly kind.
I die, Amidor, with thirst for her sight.
When shall that joy be mine?

AMIDOR

Perhaps at twilight,
When by raven-haired Night, her veils outspread,
In the heavens the stars' great dance is led.

FILIDAN

155 O marvellous effect of her rare beauties!
Peerless matching of noble qualities!
Already my soul is bound beyond freeing:
Wounded by hearing, I will die from seeing.
Prepare yourself, heart, for a thousand throes.

AMIDOR

160 Farewell – on this theme I will now compose.

FILIDAN

How you will oblige me! Thanks, Amidor.
Meanwhile, to solace the excess of my furor,
The heat of my love I will go sigh out
And move to pity all points round about.

SCENE V (FILIDAN)

FILIDAN

165 Gods! How by Beauty perfectly recited
Are passions of love in our souls excited!

And how a poem casts a potent spell
Our minds to gain, our senses to compel!
By an order of words stately and pleasant
170 It renders objects to our eyes so present
That one seems to know and see them as real,
And the hardest heart may be moved to feel.
Strange also that my soul it can inspire
Spontaneously with amorous fire,
175 That a mere tale of Beauty without fault
Can jolt my spirits to a sudden halt.
But then, I test and probe my every part
Each morning, and detect a wounded heart
(Although my torment's cause remains in doubt);
180 So once I leave the house, the flame breaks out.
The very first beauty who meets my sight
And shows herself in an attractive light,
Will run me through with a touch of her eye,
And cause a merely bleeding heart to die.
185 Even if I spy none that suit my taste,
Let a friend just say, approaching in haste,
"I have just seen eyes that will be my death",
At once I perish, get all out of breath
And run from wherever I am to worship
190 A stranger's eyes, my soul within their grip.
But never was I so moved to revere:
I was bound to his discourse by the ear,
And my soul, with imbibing such sweet charms,
Fell innocently into Beauty's arms.
195 O form of thousand sweetnesses arrayed,
Which sweetly in my heart a Muse portrayed!
Work without equal, delightful tableau
Of the fairest gift Nature could bestow –
Exquisite copy, whose original
200 Is sheer gold and azure, ebony, coral,
With treasures enough my soul to confuse
Discovered in awe from that learned Muse.

Gods! - how dear you are, and in loving zeal
Delightful flames consuming me I feel.
205 But, Beauty to whose Idea I thus succumb,
To whom I've surrendered my former freedom,
What happy place on land or in the skies
Enjoys the fair sight of your darling eyes?
Lend yourself to pity's solicitation –
210 Soothe your lover, grant a manifestation.
Beauty, I will die awaiting your sight;
How can my pining endure until night?
I can no more, Beauty whose form I bear;
My fierce desire will rage in despair.
215 I faint, I die – O celestial Beauty,
What pain you cause me in extremity!

SCENE VI (HESPÉRIE, FILIDAN)

HESPÉRIE

That lover no sooner saw me than swooned.
With dread charms the gods my beauty festooned!
I cannot take a single step outside
220 But my eyes strike home, and someone has died.
On my own case, what advice would I give?
The world is doomed, if I'm allowed to live.
Gods, what a menace! What beneath the skies
More fatal to mankind than my two eyes?
225 Nature, when I was born, good sense eschewing,
Conceived a masterpiece – and her undoing.
One might sooner count the leaves on the trees,
The sands of the ocean, the ears of Ceres,
The flowers that the spring as garlands wears,
230 Winter's icicles, the grapes autumn bears,
The lamps which nightly on the moon attend,
Than the lovers to whom I've put an end.
This one will die: shall I his doom repeal?
I could with one word; some pity I feel.

FILIDAN

235 Fair azure, fair coral, features supreme!

HESPÉRIE

He's not dead yet; my beauties make him dream.
Shall I rescue him? The whim pleases me,
But those who saw would die of jealousy.
How hard is my fate! I do only ill,
240 For, to do good, a rival I must kill.
To open my eye causes injury;
Each step consigns a soul to agony.
If, fleeing these evils, homeward I turn,
The fainting servants become my concern.
245 The fire within they cannot extinguish
And tremble before me in awe and anguish;
They can't help adoring when I walk by,
Nor say a single word without a sigh.
They lower their lips (their passion is such)
250 To plant a kiss on whatever I touch.
Yet my beauty such perfect rapture brings
That when they serve me they think themselves kings.
At meals, for dread of love-potions I shrink,
Or that one will give me his tears to drink;
255 I fear some lover will give up the ghost
And have his heart served instead of a roast:
At this thought I often quake when I eat,
Lest someone disguise and season my meat,
And thus within me after death contrive
260 To place that which he could not when alive.
Lovers are clever when they've lost their senses,
Ingenious even at their own expenses.
They daily set for me a hundred snares.
My wary father, too, bestows his cares,
265 Glories in having me, feels like a god,
Sometimes, enthralled by a wonder so odd,

Asks am I his or did the heavens spawn me?¹⁵
At home incessantly all eyes are on me –
He with awe, my sisters with envy rife,
270 The rest love-struck: a rare but a sad life!
Is there good cause such beauty to desire?
But I spy my father. I must retire.

SCENE VII (LYSANDER, ALCIDON, FILIDAN)

LYSANDER

Provide for your daughters: it's overdue;
All three are virtuous, and gentle too,
275 Of age to marry; then, you've wealth enough.
To keep them makes no sense; don't put it off.

ALCIDON

No doubt, Lysander, but of sons-in-law
The choice is so great that I stand in awe.
Then, it's my humour to be pleased by each.
280 Not one, as I rate them, can I impeach.
If old, with wealth his household will be eased.
If young, my daughter will be better pleased.
If handsome, "Beauty has no price", I say;
If ugly, then, "At night all cats are grey".
285 If merry, that he'll cheer up my old age,
And, if serious, that he'll make a sage.
If gracious: "He must come of noble race";
If arrogant: "He well upholds his place".
If spirited: "His nature will be doing".
290 If cautious: "He knows when a storm is brewing".
If rash: "All may be lost by hesitating".
If slow: "Success requires meditating".
If he fears the gods: "They grace those that pray".

¹⁵ Hall, ed., p. lxxviii, points out that this idea is part of the legend of Alexander, hence a point of contact between the universal conqueror of hearts and Mélisse; the latter refers to her hero's divine birth in IV.i.1228. Cf. also below, Liv.529-30.

295 If he cheats to win: “He’ll make his own way”.
So, in each suitor occasion has lent me,
I’ve managed to find something to content me.

LYSANDER

Then, Alcidon, why not make greater haste,
If everywhere there’s someone to your taste?

ALCIDON

300 When I choose one, another happens by
With gifts that drive the former from my eye:
If then a third one joins the candidates,
Something in him I find that captivates.

LYSANDER

305 But to ensure that sound judgement prevails,
Put two or three together in the scales,
Those whose worth seems the greatest weight to bear:
Take their measure objectively, compare.

ALCIDON

I simply can’t – nor pretend otherwise.
It’s always the last one that takes the prize.

LYSANDER

A strange turn of mind.

FILIDAN

O my life’s dear bane...

ALCIDON

310 Gods, what’s that?

LYSANDER

Some lover sighing in pain.

ALCIDON

His fast-fading eye scarcely sees the light.

FILIDAN

Friend, is it you, father of my delight?

ALCIDON

Surely one of my girls has gained his love.

FILIDAN

315 Wonder of our times, gleaming star above
In Beauty's heaven, show yourself to me;
Do I lack faith or ardour? – look and see!
Appear to my eyes, come solace my pain.
Why should you wish to be called inhumane?
Pity my torment (you cannot not know –
320 Gods know all), or see my death here below.
Do you doubt I'm burning? Hear in what fashion –

ALCIDON

Lysander, in truth I'm moved by his passion.
With pity for his love I'm wholly seized;
There's nothing like fervour to make one pleased!

LYSANDER

325 [*aside*] He's won!

ALCIDON

The son-in-law of my ideal
Is one who'll bring his wife such tender zeal,
Not one who possesses infinite treasure
And charms of mind and body beyond measure.
Knowledge and wealth, if the flame isn't there,
330 Can never make a happy married pair.¹⁶

¹⁶ These lines gain ironically from the fact that there is truth in them, although Filidan's fervour relates to no terrestrial object and Alcidon will soon find more attractive the qualities he devalues here.

FILIDAN

Cease, my dear friends, my misery to flatter,
Or rather soothe my pain with hopeful matter.

ALCIDON

335 Console yourself, my son, be of good hope.
To reward devotion of such rare scope
I undertake to extinguish your burning:
You'll have today the object of your yearning.

FILIDAN

Can you really offer me such elation?
Ah, not just my father, but my salvation!

ALCIDON

Trust me, I'll content you this evening.

LYSANDER

340 To the next comer you'll say the same thing.

ALCIDON

Before the day is out, I vow to find
Suitors who suit me – and not change my mind.

LYSANDER

A full day's work!

FILIDAN

Will you grant me her sight?

ALCIDON

Yes, now take heart. Farewell until tonight.

FILIDAN

345 How waiting to view her heavenly charms
Will cause me further sighs and tearful harms!

ACT II

SCENE I (PHALANTE, MÉLISSE)

PHALANTE

Merciless Mélisse, for whom in suspense
Waits your proud heart, so quick to take offence?

MÉLISSE

For none in this world, Phalante, that I see.

PHALANTE

350 Will love always prompt your hostility?

MÉLISSE

No, but the best of men would love in vain,
Could hope for nothing from me but disdain.

PHALANTE

But why that humour?

MÉLISSE

I'll tell you the story.

355 I read of Alexander in his glory,
Whose godlike valour tamed the universe,
His feats so many, rapid, and diverse,
Fair, courtly, generous, prompt, learned, wise,
No danger greater than his courage in size,
Who stopped his empire where day begins –
360 Since then, no lesser man my favour wins.
It's he keeps my soul in bondage well earned,
It's for him my amorous flame has burned;
What wonder if he, that subdued each part
Of the whole wide world, could subdue my heart?

PHALANTE

365 But your love is founded on a chimera:
 What good's a lover from a bygone era?

MÉLISSE

 Chimera! So you call a perfect hero?
 Ye gods! Such effrontery is *de trop!*

PHALANTE

370 Please, dearest Mélisse, don't get in a snit;
 Just answer me one question: how is it
 You love one unknown, not perceivable,
 The thought of whom is scarce conceivable?

MÉLISSE

375 Do you call him unknown when history
 Records the feats that radiate his glory?
 Whose renown to every region flies,
 Covers all the earth, reaches to the skies?
 Such lack of reason is quite risible.

PHALANTE

 I call unknown what is not visible.

MÉLISSE

380 I know him well enough: every day
 The homage of my love in words I pay.

PHALANTE

 What! You speak to him?

MÉLISSE

 To what takes his place:
 The perfect image of his charming face.

PHALANTE

No image, to my mind, can charm the view.

MÉLISSE

In images the gods are worshipped, too.

PHALANTE

385 Where did you find it?

MÉLISSE

 A volume of Plutarch
Gave me the portrait of that godlike monarch.¹⁷
To cherish it more, it's close to my breast.

PHALANTE

390 Fairest, cease to be so strangely obsessed.
 This brave Alexander, pleasing Mélisse,
 Lacks any power to render you service.

MÉLISSE

What, have so great a king at my command,
Whose law is revered in every land?
Phalante, he was born to world domination.

PHALANTE

395 You love with a love that's second to none.
 But you would better be advised to choose
 A lover whose devotion you could use,
 A man like me, whose material treasures
 Can delight your youth with a thousand pleasures.

¹⁷ Contemporary editions of Plutarch's *Lives* in Jacques Amyot's translation – e.g., the 2-volume octavo edition published in Paris by François Gueffier in 1609 (BnF 8-Z R ROLLAND-1284r) – featured an image at the beginning of each Life. Mélisse's later evocation of Alexander's exploits also draws, however, on the biography by Quintus Curtius, and perhaps on the account in Plutarch's *Moralia*: see below, IV.i and n. 60.

MÉLISSE

400 Do you think this charm my mind will suborn?
Abandon that vain hope: your wealth I scorn.
Dare you compare some paltry legacy,
Some wretched field you got as part grantee,
To that great victor's store splendiferous,
Who spent the wealth of odoriferous
405 Persia and India, often to princes
As trifling presents granting provinces?

PHALANTE

But where are those treasures? Here now to touch?

MÉLISSE

He held them in contempt – I do as much.

PHALANTE

410 [*aside*] I waste my time here. She's preoccupied
By that mad love her head has got inside.
Her parents, now, will treat me otherwise;
My wealth will make me pleasing in their eyes.
No cure without them would I undertake.
[*to Mélisse*] Farewell for now – for Alexander's sake.

MÉLISSE

415 Farewell, frail mortal, who presume to vie
With that brave hero you should glorify.

SCENE II (HESPÉRIE, MÉLISSE)

HESPÉRIE

Sister, be honest: what did Phalante say?

MÉLISSE

He spoke to me of love.

HESPÉRIE

That's a shrewd way!

420 So he turns to you, choosing to evade me,
To put on you the duty to persuade me?

MÉLISSE

Don't flatter yourself, sister, in this fashion.
It's for me that Phalante spoke of his passion,
That if my hard heart yielded to his pleas,
His wealth would put me in a state of ease.
425 But really, sister, judge in all candour
Whether I could love him, loving Alexander.

HESPÉRIE

That feigning speech is part of your sly art
The better to implant him in my heart.
But sister, believe me, you try in vain:
430 No point in saying I am inhumane
And should have pity on his sufferings.
A hundred times a day I hear such things.
Always a thousand lovers importune:
Such, by Heaven's decree, is my hard fortune.
435 Someone informs me: "Lysis¹⁸ gasps for breath;
With a glance, at least, come save him from death.
- Eurylas has succumbed to melancholy.
- The love of Lycidas has turned to folly.
- Periander plans to take you away.
440 - Shiploads of lovers have entered the bay.
- If Corylas lives, he barely will do.
- A king has sent an embassy for you.
- At an altar Thyrsis worships your face.

¹⁸ Hespérie's list of names here, like those in Amidor's poems in III.iv, spoofs the common practice of resorting to classical, or classical-sounding, pseudonyms in amatory contexts. See Hall, ed., n. to ll. 435-43.

- For you this morning a duel took place.”
445 Of my portraits, a cornucopia;
And now – the king of Ethiopia!¹⁹
Yesterday three hurt by the merest glance,
A hundred struck dead when I looked askance.
I feel, when addressed, that my breath can scorch;
450 Those who don’t dare speak bear a secret torch.
Daily new thousands grovel at my feet.
I sense the air with whirling hearts replete,
A whistling incessant of sighs and pleas,
A thousand vows buzzing round me like bees.
455 Where I stand the ground flows with floods of tears,
The wails of the dying filling my ears,
A lament, a languishing voice, a sob,
A cry of despair at a painful throb.
Here “I burn with love”, there “I die”, one stammers.
460 At night I can’t sleep because of the clamours
Attempting to touch some pitiful nerve.
See, dear sister, what pity I deserve!

MÉLISSE

It’s not the case, sister. Don’t be deceived.
That new lover, the one I just received,
465 Who is determined some girl to endow...

HESPÉRIE

What? Speak to me of Phalante even now?
How cruel you are!

MÉLISSE

But wait for the rest.
I’m trying to say, this lover, the latest,...

19 A reference to an Ethiopian prince who lived in France for three years before his death in 1638 and had a connection with Richelieu. See Hall, ed., n. to l. 446, who cites a mocking epitaph by Desmarets on the death of “the self-styled King of Ethiopia” (“qui se disoit Roy d’Ethiopie”), in which, as the playwright does here, he rhymes “Ethiopie” with “copie”.

HESPÉRIE

470 Gods! Nothing but lovers! Give me some peace.
 Will this prating of lovers never cease?

MÉLISSE

 But let me just tell you.

HESPÉRIE

 Oh gods, just spare me.
 For the sake of any friendship you bear me,
 Let me catch my breath – of love not a word.

MÉLISSE

 My message, sister, you still haven't heard.

HESPÉRIE

475 All speeches of such lovers well I know –
 That he burns, dying, languishing in woe;
 That never was a soul so sorely pained;
 So to you for succour he has complained,
 That pity for him you might beg of me,
480 A glance, at least, to soothe his agony.

MÉLISSE

 You've got it wrong.

HESPÉRIE

 Then something of that kind.

MÉLISSE

 Love not for you but for me fills his mind.

HESPÉRIE

Ah, sister, what artifice you employ!

MÉLISSE

How could such plain speech be some sort of ploy?

HESPÉRIE

485 You think to trick me by this subtle game,
Relating his ordeal in your own name.

SCENE III (SESTIANE, MÉLISSE, HESPÉRIE)

SESTIANE

May one be told what your quarrel's about?

MÉLISSE

490 You know that Phalante came and sought me out.
He spoke of love; my sister, fond believer,
Says it was for her, and that I deceive her.

HESPÉRIE

What does it serve you the truth to deny,
For his sake to seek out fashions to lie?

MÉLISSE

Your love's your dream, whatever one may say.

SESTIANE

495 What a good subject for a comic play!
And if one gave it to the reigning wits,
I think they'd find the matter neatly fits.
Often great wits want plots, and need a loan.

MÉLISSE

But could it make a play quite on its own?

SESTIANE

500 Only tack on a bit from some romance,
 Or from history some fine circumstance;
 Thus filled up, it would need no supplement
 To be esteemed a great accomplishment.

MÉLISSE

505 The theatre of France in glory to raise,
 And with a work that all its rules obeys,²⁰
 Splendid, divine, one could stage nothing grander
 Than, in one day, the feats of Alexander.

SESTIANE

 Much combat, little love makes a poor rhyme.
 Myself, I scorn the Unity of Time.

HESPÉRIE

510 My life would make an admirable play
 If abundant love would carry the day.
 For you may judge, you readers of romances,
 If fair Angélique as many entrances.²¹

SESTIANE

 Here's that fine and thrusting wit – just the one
 To join in our theatrical discussion.

SCENE IV (SESTIANE, AMIDOR, MÉLISSE, HESPÉRIE)

SESTIANE

515 I learnt this morning a new compliment
 Let me reply.

20 The first of a number of references to the contemporary debate about the importance of the (neo-)classical “rules”, especially the Unities, in dramatic composition. See esp. IV.ii.561-628.

21 Angélique (Angelica): the heroine of Ariosto's immensely popular *Orlando Furioso*, for whom the eponymous hero runs mad.

AMIDOR

Let all homage be lent
To the triple sisters, the three fair Graces.

SESTIANE

At your merit's feet we place our fair faces.

AMIDOR

On what were your verse-loving wits conversing?

SESTIANE

520 Divers subjects just now we were rehearsing.

MÉLISSE

Valiant Alexander's exploits in war.

AMIDOR

525 That great king who kindled a hundred more?
He who appeared the God of Thunder's child?
That warlike torrent flowing proud and wild?
That Mars beyond all storms inspiring dreads?
That arm which dashed a hundred million heads?

MÉLISSE

I love you, Amidor, so well you've praised!

HESPÉRIE

530 But do you know another theme we raised?
We spoke of one whose beauty might command her
Easily more captives than Alexander.

AMIDOR

Then I should call her Cyprian,²² heart-taming,
Who, her sharp shaft (but gentle) deftly aiming,

22 A title of Venus, derived from her association with the island of Cyprus.

With the sugared poison of one sweet glance,
In the onlookers' breasts love-sickness plants.

HESPÉRIE

535 Which one of us is she, would you construe?

AMIDOR

I cannot, for fear of the wrath of two.
By judging so, the fair shepherd of Troy
Caused Argive torches his town to destroy.²³
Let's pass no judgements on great Deities
540 (As I may term your celestial beauties).

SESTIANE

Ye gods, what brilliance! But I wish to mention,
Our talk had a theatrical dimension –
For that is my passion.

AMIDOR

It's the charm of the age.
But so few of those who write for the stage
545 Know how to raise their song to lofty height
And show the tragic buskin in best light.
Myself, I am inspired by great themes;
I leave base wits to deal with comic schemes,
Those dullards whose Muse is content to feed
550 The appetites of minds of common breed;
Then, I perceive that plots perplex the brain:
True novelty's so rare in that domain,
Inventing them impossibility,
Like courting shipwreck on the open sea.
555 But learned lively minds of bold intent
At all times love a tragic accident

23 The Judgement of Paris, whose fatal consequence was the Trojan war, was a perennially popular subject in art and literature. Cf. below, ll. 1465-66 and n. 68.

And to the Muse's spring have no recourse –
Euripides or Sophocles their source.

SESTIANE

Nevertheless, the comic, well designed,
560 With proper treatment, can ravish the mind.
Say, do you approve of those critics' rules,
Which they attribute to the antique schools:
That unity of time, of place and action?

AMIDOR

Such absolutes amount to mere distraction.
565 Why be tied to the grotesque fantasies
Of those whose austere rules preclude their ease?
Afraid to wait for Phoebus to return,
All blooms but those that last one day they spurn.
All must be abandoned; for with a fable,
570 Or aspects of true stories, is one able
To present in one day, as this law holds,
A subject that over a month unfolds?
How work it so that, in one stage's space,
Corinth and Athens lie in the same place?
575 As for the third rule, what a fine invention!
One act with one action – that's their intention!

SESTIANE

Still, these strictly critical intellects
Have reasons, too, which should have their effects:
One must fix the day and place one would choose;
580 Once interrupted, all pleasure you lose;
Each change destroys the dream in which you've glided,
Breaks the slim thread by which your soul is guided.
If one sees an event exceed one day,
"The author", one says, "has led me astray;
585 He's made me pass whole nights without a rest;
Excuse the poor man; his mind is hard-pressed;

Our spirit divided – pleasure farewell.”
If the place is changed, that happens as well.
One says of the author: “He did me wrong,
590 Stole me to Carthage – at Rome I belong;
Sing, then, and draw the curtain if you please;
You can’t dupe me – I’ve never crossed the seas.”
They likewise preach that one with firm endeavour
Should follow the main action, swerving never.
595 When two ideas are mingled, each takes flight,
As when two hares pursued flee out of sight.
These are their reasons, if memory serves;
Tell me what credence their thesis deserves.

AMIDOR

These laws imposed, the mind can never rise;
600 Diversity delights us with surprise.
When into view a hundred charms are brought,
The mind is made to swarm with varied thought.²⁴
Thus, far out at sea, a girl we discover
Seized by a rival in sight of her lover;
605 Her father’s palace resounds with his moan;
On a bare isle the fair one sighs her own;
On land again, the lover, in a wood,
With dying voice makes his grief understood,
Then arms a hundred ships, sets free his princess,
610 In triumph leads back both rival and mistress;
Still, the king dies; he is duly interred:
On leaving the ship, they get the sad word.
The realm leaderless, the region unquiet,
The country’s elite convene in a diet;
615 Their discord fills the palace, would increase;
The princess arrives, restores them to peace,
And, wiping her eyes, as queen she ordains

²⁴ Amidor and Sestiane make extravagant advocates of tragicomedy, which remained a popular form until the mid-seventeenth century.

That her true love take the crown for his pains.
Could you conceive that string of great events
620 Which might employ the fairest ornaments –
Three voyages at sea, the throes of war,
A king who dies of grief, buried and mourned for,
Their sailing home, a tomb in splendour decked,
Law-makers poised the new king to elect,
625 The princess in black who causes surprise –
Reduced to fit one day's, one place's size?
Would you forgo just one of those rich themes?

SESTIANE

In that case, you'd have few good plots, it seems.
I feel the wish to give you one now seize me.

AMIDOR

630 Go on, it's mine – if it should chance to please me.

SESTIANE

A child is exposed in a wilderness,
Sustained, for a time, by milk of a tigress;
The tigress strays off, is hurt in the chase,
Bleeds her life away; they follow the trace,
635 Find her and the child, who's brought to the king:
Handsome, steady in gaze and fearing nothing.
The king loves and brings him up, his pride and joy;
All exercises show a brilliant boy.
That is the first act. Now, then, in the second,
640 He flees, and having sailed where the wind beckoned,
He lands on an island during a war,
Falls like lightning in the midst of the furor,
Joins, and heartens, the party hard beset,
Is called to a king whose crown's in his debt,
645 Who seeks to share it, such aid to requite:
His daughter is struck with love at first sight.
A hideous giant among their foes

650 Sends out a challenge, of which he soon knows;
He takes the field, kills him to end their bout;
Thus the luck of the enemy runs out.
You see why this act would need some fine verse
To set out his loves and combats diverse.

AMIDOR

Nice work! Such stately charm – magnificent!
A plot, I judge, of tragicomic bent.

SESTIANE

655 The princess, in the next act, with her flame
Is deep in the woods...

AMIDOR

Lisimant his name,
And Cloris hers, to help the understanding.

SESTIANE

Well, Cloris, then, gives way to his demanding:
She bears and in secret raises twin boys –

MÉLISSE

660 Father's here, sister.

SESTIANE

Ah, how that annoys!
It's the best part!

AMIDOR

His coming's irritating.

SESTIANE

Some day, Amidor, I'll finish narrating.

SCENE V (ALCIDON, SESTIANE)

ALCIDON

I've looked high and low, girls – what's this I see?
Ye gods! Get out of here! What liberty!
665 You've got no business talking with men.

SESTIANE

Note the spot, at least, where we left off then.

ALCIDON

It's for me to see them and to decide;
Come, for all three of you I'll soon provide.
[The three girls retire; Amidor remains.]

SCENE VI (AMIDOR, ALCIDON)

AMIDOR

No choice but to love one of those fair three.

ALCIDON

670 Do you have one in mind particularly?

AMIDOR

That marvellous mount in Sicily found,²⁵
Where Enceladus, wretch, groans underground,
Vomiting coals from his blazing-hot gorge –
Empedocles' tomb, which holds Vulcan's forge
675 (As nimble Brontes, that smoke-breathing demon,
Aids Steropes and naked Pyracmon) –
Its sulphurous womb never bore such fires

²⁵ Amidor draws on the mythology of the volcanic Mount Etna, under which the defeated Titan, Enceladus, was imprisoned and where the Cyclops (here Brontes, Steropes and Pyracmon) forged thunderbolts for the use of Jupiter. With these “fables” the impressionable Alcidon seems to credit him with mixing the “truth” (I.vi.680) that the philosopher Empedocles met his death by leaping into Etna's flames. Amongst other influences, Hall detects that of Christian demonology (Hall, ed., p. lxxv).

As one of those beauties in me inspires.

ALCIDON

680 What classical learning that man displays,
Mingling fable with truth in clever ways!
He knows the secrets of philosophy
And even understands cosmography.
You are in love? What does love signify?

AMIDOR

685 Engendering God, who shows us the sky,
Who pierced the welter of the primal storm,
Caused light to shine and chaos to take form;
Assigned its dwelling to each element,
To the blue-tinted stars imparted movement,
Made all the plants to teem with fertile seed,
690 The whole world embryonically to breed.²⁶

ALCIDON

695 His mind, his learning sweep me off the ground.
O gods, how subtle, solid and profound!
Nothing appeals like wondrous erudition –
Riches above a mere wealthy condition.
One must defer to such heavenly fire.
Here – I approve; you shall have your desire.
My daughter is your own. Come round tonight.
Some day you'll make my family shine bright.

AMIDOR

700 Farewell, great guardian of three rare beauties.
May Heaven load you with felicities,

²⁶ The identification of Love with the divine principle of creation, setting in orderly place and motion the discordant elements, is a commonplace of Christian neo-platonism – hardly the profound insight that Alcidon takes it for. A concise and convenient parallel may be found in John Davies, “Orchestra, or, A Poem on Dancing”, stanzas 17 ff. For contemporaries of Desmarts, there would be a reminiscence of the creation according to Du Bartas (Hall, ed., n. to l. 690).

Clotho with golden silk spin out your years,
Dread Atropos long tarry with her shears!²⁷

ACT III

SCENE I (FILIDAN, ARTABAZE)

FILIDAN

May I see you, Beauty I idolise?
O when? – in that longing I agonise!

ARTABAZE

705 Poor man, I hear your constant sighs of pain:
 You do nothing but despair and complain.
 I am the terror of the fiercest foe,
 But know I am the hope of those brought low.²⁸
 Is there some tyrant you must hold in awe,
710 Who keeps you oppressed with his unjust law?
 Great Jove can keep his thunderbolts unhurled –
 I tame those brutes and purge them from the world.
 Are your possessions purloined by some thief?
 Wherever he hides, he'll find no relief:
715 I climb all mountains, explore each abyss,
 My punishment no criminals can miss.

FILIDAN

That's not at all my woe.

²⁷ Clotho and Atropos: two of the three Fates, or Parcae. It is perhaps a comic twist that Amidor's lavish benediction leaves out Lachesis, who, as the one who measures the thread of life, is actually determinant.

²⁸ Such generosity is a hallmark of romance heroes – see Hall, ed., note to ll. 707–16.

ARTABAZE

Some sad event
Has caused you to be doomed to banishment?
I'll see that you regain your prince's grace,
720 Or my just wrath will devastate the place!

FILIDAN

That's far from it – mine's a worse situation.

ARTABAZE

Are you mourning a close and dear relation?
If that's why life feels like the rack to you,
I'll go to Hell, and bring him back to you.

FILIDAN

725 Great hero, my pain's something quite apart.

ARTABAZE

A malady?

FILIDAN

Yes, one close to my heart.

ARTABAZE

Ah, then it's been caught,²⁹ if it's a disease!
I wipe out ills with my weapon's mere breeze;
But in special forms it must be applied –
730 The feint of a thrust or a blow broadside,
To suit the case.

FILIDAN

A power to astound!

29 The translation preserves what certainly looks like a pun, although the application of “attracter” to catching illness does not seem to be attested before 1694.

ARTABAZE

So what is your ill?

FILIDAN

It comes from a compound:
Ebony, gold, silver, coral and azure.³⁰

ARTABAZE

735 That mixture would bring illness, not a cure!
Didn't they put a dash of root-juice in it?
(Such powder will choke you unless you thin it.)

FILIDAN

King of conquerors, you don't comprehend.

ARTABAZE

That's a nice title.

FILIDAN

I'm nearing my end,
Thanks to a love potion drunk through the ear.

ARTABAZE

740 Really, you recount something strange to hear –
A potion through the ear?

FILIDAN

For God's sake, listen!
This tale charmed me: eyes that like coral glisten,
The azure of a mouth...

³⁰ The parody of Petrarchism is mingled with contemporary pharmaceutical practice, which included the use of coral in powder form (Hall, ed., n. to ll. 732-34).

ARTABAZE

Ye gods, I'll burst!
You meant azure eyes – you've got it reversed –
745 A mouth's fair coral.

FILIDAN

Could I have misquoted?
It's one or the other.

ARTABAZE

So you're devoted
To azure eyes, an ivory complexion?

FILIDAN

No ivory there, to my recollection.
But it was such a medley of perfect beauties,
750 Of infinite treasures, rare qualities,
That to see them fierce desire implores me.

ARTABAZE

He must have in mind the nymph who adores me.

FILIDAN

What, you know her?

ARTABAZE

Know her? Ah, understand
She worships me, and is at my command.

FILIDAN

755 What pain has seized my soul with piercing throes!
Must jealousy be added to my woes?
Wasn't it hard enough to lack her sight?

ARTABAZE

I can draw others to me with my might.
I promised I would find a way to ease you;
760 I rue your plight – take her, if that will please you.

FILIDAN

O prince generous, gracious, liberal,
Shall I gain through you that azure, that coral?
Heaven give you glory, bliss that endures!
Let me embrace your feet.

ARTABAZE

Come now, she's yours.

SCENE II (ARTABAZE, FILIDAN, AMIDOR)

ARTABAZE

765 That man is mad, let's get away from here.

FILIDAN

How comes it that he fills you with such fear?

ARTABAZE

When I saw him before he threw a fit.

FILIDAN

The gentlest kind of reverie's more like it.

ARTABAZE

770 Well, out of the depth of his lungs he spat
Epode, Antistrophe, demons like that.

FILIDAN

Banish that fear from your imagination;
His furor comes from poetic creation.

ARTABAZE

It's my sole fault; I fear the furious.

FILIDAN

Fear? With that arm ever victorious?

ARTABAZE

775 I'm fleeing.

FILIDAN

No, stay here.

ARTABAZE

You see him brood.

FILIDAN

What scares you, then?

ARTABAZE

His rage may be renewed.

FILIDAN

Be reassured, he's meditating verse
To spread your name throughout the universe.
[addressing Amidor] Leave, Amidor, those Muses you
adore;

780 Come pay homage to this wonder of war.

ARTABAZE

You're sure he's safe?

FILIDAN

The hero of our time.

AMIDOR

All praises, vessel of terror sublime,
Who move a hundred kings to jealousy.

ARTABAZE

785 So – he has moments of lucidity!
Say, do you often to furor incline?
Could you at least give us some warning sign?

AMIDOR

790 Apollo’s furor serves glorious heros,
Adds to their numbered days infinite zeros,
Sets valiant men in their most splendid dress;
For instance, recount me some of your prowess:
You’ll see what my furor does with the facts.

ARTABAZE

I’ll willingly describe my daring acts –
But please, no furor.

FILIDAN

No cause for alarm.

AMIDOR

Never did this furor do any harm.

ARTABAZE

795 Then know my name is Artabaze the Fierce,
Who sometimes, on Pegasus’ back, will pierce
Above the clouds to scan the universe
And seek employment in places diverse.
Then back and forth, for some hours’ diversion,
800 Between the poles I soar on an excursion.

AMIDOR

His style thrasonical³¹ thrills verbally –
Grave utterance, full of hyperbole!³²

³¹ “Thrasonical” translates “thrasonic” – a word scarcely attested in French, though the English is Shakespearean, in comic contexts: see *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, V.i.12, and *As You Like It*, V.i.31 (*The Riverside Shakespeare*, G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin, gen. eds., 2nd ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997]). The epithet derives from the name of the boasting soldier in *The Eunuch*, by Terence.

³² Amidor, as will be resoundingly confirmed, is in love with hyperbole.

ARTABAZE

One day from on high two armies I spied
Fighting with equal heat on either side.
805 For a while I found this display amusing
And waited to join the force that was losing.
Yet still the victory remained in doubt:
My valour felt shamed, my patience wore out;
Frustrated ardour drove me to descend,
810 Like an eagle on swans that fear their end.
On all sides, I split heads, arms, legs and thighs,
My great blows appal like bolts from the skies.
Countless missiles are aimed to strike me down;
Those that come nearest I foil with a frown.³³
815 So, in the end (as is hard to believe),
Two victories in one did I achieve.

AMIDOR

A mammoth exploit, truly marvellous!

ARTABAZE

Could you depict that fight so perilous?

AMIDOR

Polymni', Erato, Terpsichore³⁴ . . .

ARTABAZE

820 That furor will seize him again – let's flee!

33 “Mais d'un de mes regards j'abats les plus osés”: the referent of “osés [daring]” is ambiguous. It makes more obvious sense to take it as referring to enemy soldiers, but there is no such specific antecedent within easy range, and the idea of knocking down missiles with a glance is scarcely alien to someone whose sword-strokes can defeat diseases (III.i.728-31) or who rearranged the cosmos to suit himself (I.i.23-32). There is a parallel with Hespérie's death-dealing glances (IV.vi.1484-94). At the same time, several characters on the receiving end of “foolish” thoughts and words give credence to their quasi-material power: witness Filidan, Alcidon, even (over Phalant's chateau) Lysander.

34 Polymnia (also Polyhymnia), Erato, Terpsichore: usually considered as the Muses, respectively, of sacred poetry and mimetic art, lyric poetry and dance.

ARTABAZE

Then farewell, poor lover. Heaven relieve you!

SCENE III (AMIDOR, ARTABAZE)

AMIDOR

Warrior, no champion need you dread:
I see that you march with majestic tread;
And from your eye such warlike looks are hurled
840 As Mars would show if he lived in this world;
Your way of speaking is grave, sharp, resounding,
As if with Jupiter's thunder abounding.

ARTABAZE

Quite true.

AMIDOR

I have produced a prodigy,
A bold surge of spirit, a tragedy
845 To put poets galore in jealous mind.
My great need is that a man of your kind
(To set this fine work off to best advantage)
Agree to play the central personage.

ARTABAZE

Yes, if he is worthy of me, I'm willing.

AMIDOR

850 It's great Alexander.³⁵

ARTABAZE

Yes – that great king,
When Asia he reduced to slavery,

35 Confirmation that Alexander is a point of convergence for several of the “visionaries”.

Had some slight notion of my bravery.

AMIDOR

The role's in my pocket, with fury grim –
For I make him kill those dearest to him.³⁶

ARTABAZE

855 Then it's a demon, some terrible beast –
Ah, don't take it out!

AMIDOR

Why, not in the least.
It's just writing.

ARTABAZE

You deal death when you write?
So you're a sorcerer?

AMIDOR

Don't take such fright.

ARTABAZE

860 Oh gods, I'm lost! Neither valour nor my arms,
I regret to say, are proof against charms.

AMIDOR

They're only verses.

ARTABAZE

That's what frightens me.

AMIDOR

The script, you mean? I'll speak from memory.

³⁶ Alexander's killing, in drunken anger, of Cleitus, who had saved his life, was a standard moral *exemplum*. Cf. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.vii.34–39 (Evans and Tobin, gen. eds.).

Let's see if you are a quick understander.

ARTABAZE

All right.

AMIDOR

Repeat, "I am that Alexander" –

ARTABAZE

865 "I am that Alexander" –

AMIDOR

"Terror of the universe".

ARTABAZE

That's my title!

AMIDOR

Ye gods, just speak the verse.

ARTABAZE

I'm not such a fool as to say the rest;
To use that language goes against my interest.

AMIDOR

Bizarre!

ARTABAZE

870 My lofty title, by that ruse,
Would be impossible for me to use.
I'd give it away and be left a bystander:
I shall just say, "I am that Alexander".

AMIDOR

Who'll say the other part?

ARTABAZE

You simply must agree

To give those words to someone besides me.

875

Then I can carry on.

AMIDOR

What a silly game!

Two actors will appear with the same name.

ARTABAZE

That's as you like. Otherwise I can't do it.

AMIDOR

You'll say it, I swear – I'll see to it.

ARTABAZE

What, you threaten me? Your brain's sprung a sprocket!

AMIDOR

880

Then I'll just bring my script out of my pocket.

ARTABAZE

O gods, help me! Save me from the sorcerer. [*flees*]

AMIDOR

Adieu, heart of valour, bold conqueror!

SCENE IV (PHALANTE, AMIDOR)

PHALANTE

What so amuses Amidor?

AMIDOR

That "hero".

PHALANTE

885 Friend, I need your skill (I've looked high and low)
To conquer a beauty who's seized my heart:
Love-spells are the sphere of adepts in art;
There's nothing can daunt a resistant strain
Like a poem painting amorous pain.

AMIDOR

890 If that fair one has a fondness for verse,
I've lots ready-made on subjects diverse:³⁷
Some on a rebuff, on absence's pain,
Some on ill-speaking, as well as disdain,
On eyes, a fit of temper, laughter too;
There's Silvie's Return, Cloris's Adieu,
895 One dream of Bérénice, one woeful plea
To – Cassandra (you choose the name you fancy).

PHALANTE

That plea to Cassandra would do the trick.

AMIDOR

It's erudite with lofty rhetoric.

PHALANTE

That's what I want.

AMIDOR

900 They're stanzas, too, presenting
Profusion of rich terms, of grave lamenting.

PHALANTE

As rich as the style will I seem to be.

37 The subjects were indeed commonplace; see Hall, ed., n. to ll. 891-95.

AMIDOR

Would I have the luck to have them with me?

PHALANTE

There?

AMIDOR

No.

PHALANTE

What's that, then?

AMIDOR

A Pindaric ode.

PHALANTE

And that?

AMIDOR

Verse to match some musical mode.

PHALANTE

905 Perhaps this one here?

AMIDOR

The Adieu for Cloris.³⁸

PHALANTE

Or here?

AMIDOR

The shepherdess weeping (she's Iris).

PHALANTE

There?

38 Desmarests had actually composed an "Adieu pour Cloris" (Hall, ed., n. to l. 905).

AMIDOR

Anagram half-lines, switched round about.

PHALANTE

This?

AMIDOR

Acrostic sonnet, the sense spelt out.
No, this one's a wish for Phyllis – correction.

PHALANTE

910 Not this, I guess?

AMIDOR

On a lily complexion.

PHALANTE

Then is this it?

AMIDOR

A hymn.

PHALANTE

Or here?

AMIDOR

An eclogue.

PHALANTE

Here?

AMIDOR

It's an epitaph.

PHALANTE

Well, here?

AMIDOR

A prologue.

PHALANTE

Oh, what wretched luck!

AMIDOR

Wait, I think it's there.

PHALANTE

The gods be praised!

AMIDOR

But no, that's on a care.

PHALANTE

915 Then that's...?

AMIDOR

An epigram – of wit the sum!

PHALANTE

So it's there.

AMIDOR

An epithalamium.

PHALANTE

It will be the last.

AMIDOR

Finally, I see it.

PHALANTE

Gods!

AMIDOR

“Plea to Cassandra”.

PHALANTE

Friend, give me it!

I love reading verses. I’m just ecstatic!

AMIDOR

920 Your style won’t be sufficiently emphatic.

[reads *THE STANZAS*³⁹]

So, cruel Cassandra,⁴⁰ the lashes

Of your eyes, at once tame and savage,

With glancing blows that ravage,

Will surely smash me into ashes.

925 And yet, among my ardour’s thrills,

Your varied countervailing chills

Provoke an antiperistasis:⁴¹

Thus ’twixt life and death my place is;

My ravished sense affords slim basis

930 For even knowing what my case is.

My heart was seized with trepidation

When first your beauty struck my eye;

Your Scythian⁴² cruelty is why

My fainting soul needs medication.

39 The translation of Amidor's Stanzas preserves line length and rhyme scheme, but does not always follow the sense (such as it is) line-by-line.

40 The best-known Cassandra in recent literary history was Cassandra Salviata, the addressee of a sequence of love poems by Pierre de Ronsard. The allusion helps to direct the parody of the Stanzas toward the outmoded style, and especially the vocabulary, of the poets of the previous century (notably including Ronsard and Du Bartas). See Hall, ed., n. to l. 922 and, for a more general assessment of Amidor, pp. lvii-lxvi. Cf. Truchet, Notice, p. 1362.

41 Antiperistasis (orig. “antipéristase”): a learned philosophical term for a counter-reaction.

42 Scythia was conventionally metonymic for extreme barbarity.

935 When in love's Euripos⁴³ I strive,
 I seem the most wretched man alive
 Dragging beneath the lunar sphere;⁴⁴
 But then I find my joys transporting
 Spirit and mind to spaces clear
 940 Of all but pleasure's blithe cavorting.
 Your book of love apocryphal
 Inscribes you for our century
 As, of diseased inconstancy,
 The symbol hieroglyphical.
 945 The cankered manifestations
 Of my unhinged hallucinations
 On you erect their whole condition,
 And caught in my calamities,
 I pray that you may feel contrition
 950 For all your cold neutralities.

 If not, the metamorphosis
 Of my content into such woes
 Leaves me no hope amidst my throes
 But that of metempsychosis.
 955 A lover's catastrophic fall
 Meets with no sentiment at all
 Within your paralytic soul.
 Must you, then, wayward, fickle beauty,
 Yourself make the antarctic pole
 960 To amorous humanity?

 So, sing to me a palinode,⁴⁵
 Dear paradox of my sensations,
 And range my symptoms' perturbations

43 I.e., in the straits of Euripos (in the Aegean sea, between the island of Euboea and Boeotia on the Greek mainland), notorious for strong tidal (hence reversing) currents. Aristotle is popularly supposed to have drowned there, in despair at not being able to explain the phenomenon.

44 Beneath the lunar sphere: i.e., subject to mutability and mortality.

45 Orig.: "Chante donc la palinodie" – i.e., issue a poetical retraction.

Orderly in measured mode.
965 So may the stars in heaven gleaming
Pour a thousand blessings streaming
In perpendicularity
Directly down upon your head,
And Sol relume, before you're dead,
970 A hundred times his clarity.

PHALANTE

Ah, I'm ravished – muse marvellous and rare!

AMIDOR

You like the style?

PHALANTE

Simply beyond compare!
But what astounds me most is the profusion
Of wayward humour, whim and mere delusion
975 Filling those verses, so that all the more
They seem designed for her whom I adore.

AMIDOR

She's prey to fancies, then?

PHALANTE

Her reason's blurred
By love for Alexander.

AMIDOR

That's absurd!
980 The great Alexander? On dreams she's feeding.
That's just what comes of historical reading
In young minds, and of romances, which seize
The heart with strong but empty fantasies

When the sense of some story's fresh and new.⁴⁶
That humour will change.

PHILIDAN

So I believe, too.
985 And those splendid verses make a strong charm
Against letting her reason come to harm.

AMIDOR

Then, at the start, where "Cruel Cassandra"'s said,
Put "Lover of Alexander" instead.
That dart will prick her.

PHILIDAN

What dazzling finesse!
990 A brilliant stroke!

AMIDOR

A gift that I possess.

PHILIDAN

By sheer largesse I might prevail at last,
If riches could please her; my wealth is vast.
But that charm works best on her family.
There, now, one prominent kinsman I see;
995 He's pledged his aid. Alcidon, too, I spy.

AMIDOR

I'm off, in any case, to versify.
Twenty per couplet makes a hundred francs...

PHALANTE

Go on, you'll get a new suit for your thanks.

⁴⁶ A commonplace critique, of course, and theme for drama, as in Molière; see Hall, ed., n. to l. 980-84.

SCENE V (LYSANDER, ALCIDON, PHALANTE)

LYSANDER

1000 Worthy Alcidon, here, now, is Phalante,
Most fittingly my fair kinswoman's servant
(I mean your daughter Mélisse), for his income
Out-values all we own.

ALCIDON

 You're very welcome.
With riches are you really overflowing?

PHALANTE

1005 Thank God, I have what to my rank is owing,
Some in the city, some in the country found:
With a hundred ploughs I furrow the ground;
I've meadows, forests, fens, and water-courses,
Mines, forges, herds, and farms for breeding horses;
1010 Villages, chateaux, furnishings untold:
Sacks, in my dwelling, of silver and gold.

ALCIDON

 There's none as rich as you beneath the sun!
Of all your houses, which is the main one?

PHALANTE

1015 A place in which my ancestors delighted;
On earth, I think, none fairer could be cited.
Shall I evoke its image in your mind?⁴⁷

ALCIDON

 That's just what I wish, if you'd be so kind.

⁴⁷ There follows, as a central inset piece, a description largely derived from the enormous and lavish chateau constructed in Touraine by Cardinal Richelieu, the patron of Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin. Behind the obvious flattery lurks, it seems, an ironic moral concerning human vanity, since the chateau is Phalante's only in his imagination.

PHALANTE

It might be called the dwelling-place of pleasures,
Where nature and art show beauteous treasures.
A long avenue, as one is approaching,
1020 Boasts four rows of trees on the clouds encroaching;
A meadow on each side with flowers teems
And with a hundred vivid colours gleams,
While many a softly murmuring brook
Enhances the verdure's radiant look.

ALCIDON

1025 How pleasant the approach!

Lysander

One may divine
From this the house itself is very fine.

PHALANTE

A grand portal looms from far down the road,
Closer, shows Tuscan order, rustic mode.⁴⁸
That portal opens on a spacious court,
1030 Young elms all round, a stream that runs athwart;
Proud peacocks, pretty pigeons, fill the place,
Thousands crossing the lawns with stately pace;
A central fountain's jet is seen to rise
Where, sprawling on his back, a Triton lies,
1035 From whose curved horn the water heaven seeks,
Then falls upon his nose and bathes his cheeks.
Two base-courts⁴⁹ from the main court's sides extend,
On which the chateau's food supplies depend:

48 Orig.: "l'ordre est toscan, et l'ouvrage rustique": the terms, referring to Renaissance classical architecture, in keeping with the Cardinal's Italianate tastes, evoke, respectively, a simple standard form ("order") of columns and the technique of "rustication" by which stone surfaces were given a textured appearance.

49 Base-court: English borrows this technical term from French "basse-cour", now especially associated with poultry raising and egg production; see *OED*.

Stables, with all required, on one hand;
1040 Then, what serves to raise sheep and plough the land.
Behind the court that dwelling is located
Where Armida might have incarcerated
Her Rinaldo, glad to repose his arms,
With no need to rely upon her charms.⁵⁰
1045 Beneath a terrace, pristine waters flow,
Deep in a ditch, fish-filled, round the chateau,
Sufficient any climbers to dissuade,
The height encircled by a balustrade.

ALCIDON

A handsome entrance!

PHALANTE

Next, the drawbridge down
1050 Displays a sight deserving of renown:
Three gates with jasper rich, and porphyry,
Worthy a trophied arch of victory.
One finds a court two hundred paces wide,
Where that art which compass and rule provide
1055 (I mean refined and noble architecture)
Seems on every side to outdo nature:
The living quarters raised, the wings less high;
Four structures which at the four corners lie;
The ground floor Doric columns⁵¹ decorate,
1060 Which with a hundred statues alternate.

ALCIDON

Ye gods!

⁵⁰ In *Jerusalem Delivered*, the late-sixteenth century romantic epic by Torquato Tasso, the Saracen sorceress, Armida, who is charged with thwarting Rinaldo's mission as a crusader, becomes amorous and keeps him bound by love-spells within a garden. The story was immensely popular, the motif is commonplace, but in the context it may not be far-fetched to detect a sly suggestion of opposition between the Cardinal's palace of pleasures and Christian duty.

⁵¹ The simplest of the classical orders, even more so than the Tuscan mentioned above; see above, n. 48.

PHALANTE

In the midst of the court you see
Arethusa portrayed; she seems to flee,
With god-like courage and vigour lending aid;
Her amorous pursuer gains; afraid,
1065 Diana she invokes; then, by Fate's rule,
There wells up at her feet a crystal pool
In which her mortal body must be drowned,
Whose wet touch shocks her as it spreads around.⁵²
Each building holds a cluster of apartments
1070 Offering, in due season, residence,
As summer, winter, spring, and fall dispose,
According as warm weather comes and goes.
The ornate floors and wooden panelling
Gleam preciously with gold enamelling;
1075 At the building's far end two galleries
To show the painter's learned reveries;
Rich furnishings so dazzling and diverse
It looks as if through all the universe
The costliest creations had been sought
1080 And to that happy place in homage brought.

ALCIDON

What a fairy palace your fine words draw!

LYSANDER

Listen!

PHALANTE

The gardens strike you next with awe.
First, one perceives a vast extent of ground

52 The sculptor's realisation of the transformation of the Nymph, Arethusa, into a fountain (located in Ortygia, near Syracuse), in attempting to escape the river-god Alpheus, is modelled on the vivid account in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, V.572 ff.

Where pleasures to ravish the eye abound.
1085 In floral shapes a thousand beds outlined;
Around them flowers of every kind;
A great central fountain with mighty force
Casts high a spout from its nurturing source.
The theme is antique: a bronze Neptune wields
1090 His trident, and a savage seahorse yields;
The monster's nose sends water upwards soaring,
Which falls in droplets, noisily down-pouring;
His beard and his great trident inundated,
The god's unfazed, his ardour unabated.

ALCIDON

1095 Such splendid water-works!

PHALANTE

Of a fair mermaid
Is each of the four corner fountains made,
Their fonts alike and burbling the same sound.
Three broad channels encircle all the ground.
The site – a sculpted mountain, by its shape –
1100 On the right-hand side reveals a rich landscape:
A wood, a river, and every beauty
Which makes innocent eyes' felicity;
The great park crossed by lovely matching lanes,
On which my wealthy forbears lavished pains.
1105 The trees are lofty, straight, with verdure crowned;
Joining their branches high above the ground,
They speak in murmurings, like brothers greet,
Shield us, like tutelary gods, from heat.
A long green carpet forms the middle way,
1110 Half-glimpsed by the sun with a trembling ray;
Two brooks at the sides bathe the orchard walls,
Cascading through myriad waterfalls.
The walks lead to a spot from which one spies
A round pond, set back, of astounding size.

1115 Diane stands in the midst, with air irate,
As Niobe takes on her stony state.⁵³
The queen, for tears, pours forth great streams of
water,
Embraced with dying arms by her young daughter.
Her other children's wounds, in life-like show,
1120 Not with their blood, but with fountains flow.
Draining those channels in its vast extent,
The marsh seems ever to sound their lament.

ALCIDON

That round pond delights me.

PHALANTE

Each wall possesses
A hundred Naiads⁵⁴ in hollow recesses,
1125 Each from a marble vase casting high up
Water that arches towards a broad cup:
Admirers of those lovely humid spaces
Beneath such liquid vaults direct their paces.

ALCIDON

Bliss, ye gods!

PHALANTE

Far off, a garden whose scent
1130 Announces it before the eyes assent.⁵⁵
A thousand tall orange trees, row by row,
With fruit and flower in abundance grow;
They seem proud to show the treasure they hold:
Blossoms of silver, oranges of gold.

53 Niobe, turned to stone but eternally weeping for her slain children in the form of a spring on Mount Sipylus, was punished by the gods for boasting about her progeny. She was often figured in painting and sculpture.

54 Naiads: the nymphs associated with fountains, wells and water-courses.

55 The orangery is one of the only buildings still standing on the site of the chateau of Richelieu; its modest proportions seem out of keeping with the grandeur of Phalante's description.

1135 And each tree sports, to make itself less plain,
 Myrtle of Venus or jasmine of Spain.

ALCIDON

 How these fine gardens with their charms entrance!

PHALANTE

 Beyond that there appears a vast expanse:
 The sides with twenty moist grottoes are lined;
1140 Between them, the Danaides' lake we find;⁵⁶
 Small boats, enclosed by a balustrade, dance
 On wavelets their azure and white enhance:
 There sometimes, free from fear of fatal harms,
 Are witnessed innocent exploits of arms.
1145 Where, in the midst, great rocky masses jut,
 The fifty sisters, in white marble cut,
 Are justly for their crime forever pained,
 When with their husbands' blood their hands they
 stained,
 And, tortured by toil that can know no end,
1150 Seem to and fro incessantly to wend.
 Above, three sisters, each with a jar upended,
 Pour floods into a leaky tub, unmended;
 The water, through its holes, is dissipated,
 The rock beneath on all sides inundated.
1155 Below, one fills her jar with head down-bent;
 One shows hers fallen, begins to lament.
 One climbing is helped, her load hard to bear,
 By one going down the slippery stair;
 One starts to pour, one stays for breath awhile.
1160 The eye that sees them shares in their trial;
 The water, pained by such futility,

56 Danaides: in Greek myth, the fifty daughters of Danaus, who married the fifty sons of his brother Aegyptus, King of Egypt, and, as ordered by their father, killed their husbands on their wedding night. The Danaides were condemned in the underworld to some version of the ordeal described in the following lines.

Seems to accuse the gods' unjust decree,
Repeating, as it streams down with a groan,
"Why must I thus purge a fault not my own?"
1165 That sound, that travail, your spirits so capture
That memory fails and gives way to rapture.

ALCIDON

O gods, say no more, with marvels I'm sated;
By the ears I feel myself captivated.

LYSANDER

All day long I could hear him discourse so.

ALCIDON

1170 I'm strolling still in that splendid chateau.
Truly, wealth stands out as the best of things:
All joys dwell in the happiness it brings.
A poor man's but a fool. Here – you're just right!
See you come round and visit me tonight.
1175 My daughter's yours; I hope her love is, too;
This union of yours is a dream come true!

PHALANTE

Some quirks in her heart require correction,
If she is to respond to my affection.

ALCIDON

1180 Could such stupendous error seize Mélisse?
Enough, Phalante – you have my word in this.

LYSANDER

At least, when I visit that pleasure-dome,
You'll lodge me?⁵⁷

PHALANTE

You can make yourself at home!

57 The question is a clear signal that even Lysander has been seduced by Phalante's imaginary wealth.

ACT IV

SCENE I (MÉLISSE)

You tireless warrior, who won the East,
No conqueror your rival in the least;
1185 A thunderbolt to blast all enemies,
The subject of a hundred eulogies,
Whose thousand combats gained you an empire –
You're all my adoration and desire.
Whether I contemplate the younger you,⁵⁸
1190 When in the astonished courtiers' view,
With deftness unequalled, the furious
Bounding you tamed of wild Bucephalus;
Or when first your warrior's hands you tried
On Athens' forces and the Thebans' pride;
1195 Or when your youthful boldness dared outface
Illyria, the frozen Danube, Thrace –
I said, when your early exploits I saw
As far as Germany impose your law,
“What will this torrent do in its full course,
1200 If it bursts through its banks so near the source?”
And putting Hellespont behind it now,
I see in little time your noble brow
Adorned with timeless palms of victory:
Granicus, Issus – Arbela makes three.
1205 And when I see the captive satraps streaming
After your chariot, and the bright gleaming
Of camels charged with gold, rich furnishings –

58 The account of Alexander's first exploits draws on Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* – see *Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 7 (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), esp. 6 (pp. 237-39), 11 (pp. 253-55), 16 (pp. 263-69), 24 (p. 291), 37.4, 7 (pp. 335-37), although Plutarch here states that “the great battle against Dareius was not fought at Arbela, as most writers state, but at Gaugamela” (31.6 [p. 317]); but cf. Plutarch, *Moralia*, “On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander”, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 4 (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), pp. 379-487, 2.13 (pp. 453, 465).

Treasures amassed by countless Persian kings –
 Or see you on that dazzling throne installed,
 1210 Which held the eyes of all the Greeks enthralled,
 And savouring the fruits of victory,
 “What victor”, I say then, “can match such glory”?
 But when I see excessive courage press
 You to risk your life at the Malli fortress⁵⁹
 1215 (That wretched place presuming it could mark
 Your tomb, unworthy such a worthy monarch),
 I tremble, seeing you mount first of all:
 The ladders break, you’re left upon the wall
 Alone to strike with your sword, as your shield
 1220 Blocks all shafts those barbarous bows can yield.
 But terror grips me, thrilling to the bone,
 When you hurtle into their midst alone,
 Sole to sustain the hard-hitting attacks
 Launched by the most desperate Oxydrachs.
 1225 It’s there, since help was late to reach your side,
 That, if your frame were mortal, you’d have died.
 Your essence, then, was far from mortal earth;
 The mightiest of gods contrived your birth.
 Never did mortal deeds so glorious,
 1230 Or bore so far his arm victorious.
 More truly divine than Hercules, Bacchus –
 Might you be dead? The thought’s ridiculous!
 The precious scent your holy limbs gave out

59 Hall, ed., nn. to ll. 1217–20 and 1222–24, privileges Quintus Curtius’ *Life of Alexander* as a source for this episode. But one should perhaps not neglect Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Babbitt, 2.13 (pp. 479–81), where Alexander’s impetuous single-handed attack on the Oxydrachae (another name for the Malli or Mallians) is described, with appropriate emotions evoked; the point is made that the Mallians came close to killing him, hence to having his tomb, of which they were unworthy; cf. also Plutarch’s *Life* 63.3 (trans. Perrin, p. 403). While Desmarests could certainly have read Quintus Curtius in the original – I have found no trace of a French translation prior to that of Vaugelas in 1646 – it seems possible that his audience might have expected Méliſse to rely on accounts available in French, as both works of Plutarch certainly were.

1235 Puts your celestial standing beyond doubt.⁶⁰
 No, you're in the sky (for by some strange case
 Another in your tomb fills up your place).
 But I dream you whisked by some magic hand
 To a charming palace in fairyland,
 1240 Where the courage, beauty, strength of your prime
 Remain in safe shelter from death and time;
 And what is the hope of my loving heart? –
 That one day from that fair place you'll depart:
 Both land and sea you'll overspread with fear,
 Pursuing your world-conquering career.
 1245 Oh, it would be rapture second to none
 To look on you before my days are done!
 Already I seem forced by love's duress
 To seek you out in this Amazon dress.⁶¹
 O hope of my love, my dear Alexander,
 1250 A few days at my side won't you meander,
 To make a baby of valorous breed
 (For loving you makes me feel brave indeed)?

SCENE II (MÉLISSE, ARTABAZE)

MÉLISSE

When, O my heart, may I taste such delight,
Alexander?

ARTABAZE

Who ravishes my sight
1255 And names Alexander in that bold way?

⁶⁰ This detail is taken from Plutarch's *Life*, 4.4 (trans. Perrin, p. 233).

⁶¹ She is, then, wearing such a costume here – seemingly for the first time, as her allusion would suggest, so as to mark the progression of her fantasy. Her warrior-dress is implicitly part of her attraction for Artabaze, as is ironically hinted at (perhaps along with Alcidon's embarrassment) in IV.vii.1641-43. Indeed, at least for the audience, it recalls his mother: see his account of his heritage and first feats of heroism (I.i.5-14).

Now, then, I have it: it must be that play
The weird fellow spoke of; that was a verse.

MÉLISSE

I'll seek him, yea, through all the universe.
But what dashing hero is this bystander?

ARTABAZE

1260 One must reply, "I am that Alexander..."

MÉLISSE

1265 Are you Alexander? O happy eyes,
 You have my heart's desire as your prize!
 Your feet I embrace, great prince I adore;
 Pain, my heart, will consume you no more.
 I see him – great king, hero without peer,
 Under the sun the greatest to appear.
 Scion of Jupiter, fearless and mighty.

ARTABAZE

 That girl has got her role down to a "t"!

MÉLISSE

1270 You are Alexander? No more to say?
 Speak further.

ARTABAZE

 I wasn't born yesterday!

MÉLISSE

 Then speak, dear one, who hold my soul in thrall.

ARTABAZE

 "I am that Alexander". That is all.

MÉLISSE

 True, all I need is the joy of your sight.
 To make you speak, I hardly have the right,

1275 Terror of the universe – that’s too much.

ARTABAZE

Do you call me or Alexander such?

MÉLISSE

Now I don’t follow you.

ARTABAZE

 If you mean me,
I claim that title as my property.
I say it’s false, if it’s for Alexander.

MÉLISSE

1280 Strange words! Make me a better understander.
 You are Alexander, but then you’re not?

ARTABAZE

To kill that Alexander was my lot.⁶²

MÉLISSE

1285 So you are and aren’t? Then Alexander –
 To call him ash-born Phoenix is no slander,
 For he lives again, but he’s no more he ...?
 I scarcely grasp such ambiguity.
 O dear Alexander, my princely flame –

ARTABAZE

Let’s drop the play – Artabaze is my name,
More feared than the winds, than thunder and lightning.

MÉLISSE

1290 Artabaze was Darius’ underling,
 Then yours,⁶³ for heaven’s sake, don’t take a blander
 For that resplendent name of Alexander!

62 So he claimed in I.i.39-43, without providing any more details than he does here.

63 Mélisse has studied her history thoroughly; see above, n. 1.

ARTABAZE

As Artabaze that great hero's renowned
Whose brow with myriad laurels is crowned.

MÉLISSE

1295 Help me to see: does metamorphosis
Make you Alexander? Metempsychosis?

ARTABAZE

What? You speak that sorcerer's language also?
The tragedy-maker?

MÉLISSE

1300 Mightiest hero,
We thought you dead from charm or malady,
But a sorcerer made that tragedy?

ARTABAZE

It is true that from fear I thought I'd die:
Have you heard what terror made me so fly?

MÉLISSE

He frightened you, O valour without peer?

ARTABAZE

From all men's sight he made me disappear.

MÉLISSE

1305 A potent charm made you disappear, then?

ARTABAZE

With words that could frighten a hundred men,
And with some demon his pocket conceals.

MÉLISSE

Gods!

ARTABAZE

Never did death so dog a man's heels.

MÉLISSE

After that happened, what fighting occurred!

ARTABAZE

1310 There has been fighting?

MÉLISSE

But haven't you heard?

ARTABAZE

Fight without me? I'm wild, I'll lose my head.

MÉLISSE

That was after your chiefs distributed
All those great countries you'd won by your pains.

ARTABAZE

1315 I'll have them all hanged now: where are those villains?
They're sharing my gains?

MÉLISSE

Since they breathed their last,
Two thousand years, or thereabouts, have passed.

ARTABAZE

The gods, who saw my righteous indignation,
Have granted that space for their preservation.

MÉLISSE

Why run now?

ARTABAZE

My spell-casting countermander!

MÉLISSE

1320 I'll go where you go, my dear Alexander!

SCENE III (FILIDAN, AMIDOR)

FILIDAN

[*glimpsing Mélisse*] I see her, that Beauty, still now I
do!

Cruel, heartless, where are you running to?
Naughty as she is, nonetheless I spied her,
But the ingrate scampered at once to hide her,
1325 Depriving my sight of such divine pleasure
To make my desire mount beyond measure.
Amidor, I saw her.

AMIDOR

What, with your eye?

FILIDAN

Like lightning her cruel beauty flashed by.
But didn't you see? Of what were you dreaming?

AMIDOR

1330 Of how worthy men are doomed to misdeeming –
That in this era of scant erudition
Great authors lack esteem and recognition.

FILIDAN

1335 Thus it is that sometimes in obscure places
Human eyes can glimpse celestial graces.
One sees and sees them not, deathless and fair,
Filled with both cruelty and gentle care.

AMIDOR

1340 Ungrateful age! Once Sophocles was made
The isle of Samos' governor, so paid
For a tragedy, as the records state:⁶⁴
A king, at least, should I be, at that rate.

FILIDAN

Gods, she's left me with such ardent desire
Her loveliness at leisure to admire!

AMIDOR

Who ever swelled as I do verbally,
Or has surpassed me in hyperbole?

SCENE IV (FILIDAN, HESPÉRIE, AMIDOR, SESTIANE)

FILIDAN

1345 Since her exalted Beauty's known to you,
Dear friend, with my new flame, is it your view
That my faith may ever enough impress her
To soften those harsh humours that possess her?

HESPÉRIE [*overhearing*]

[*to Sestiane*] Hear, dear sister, that poor lover who
feigns
1350 Not to see me, so he may voice his pains.

AMIDOR

The great may grant the means, from day to day,
For life which accidents may snatch away;

64 Amidor is thinking wishfully; Sophocles was named one of the generals accompanying Pericles in his campaign against Samos in 440 B.C.E., and the legend (stemming ultimately from Aristophanes of Byzantium) that this was in recompense for *Antigone* is now little credited (see *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*). Desmarests got his information from a sixteenth-century Latin edition of Sophocles (Hall, ed., n. to 1337-39).

My potent verses, like the Deity,
Can underwrite their immortality.

FILIDAN
1355 Ah, but she's hard on one for her so burning!

AMIDOR
Ah, times are hard for devotees of learning!

FILIDAN
Fair one, if you knew how my heart-ache hurts!

AMIDOR
Age, if you knew how great are my deserts!

FILIDAN
In your love I'd have a genuine share!

AMIDOR
1360 I'd have a statue in the public square!

HESPÉRIE
I pity their lamenting symmetry:
One bemoans the times, the other my beauty.

SESTIANE
No, it's dialogue: Amidor must mean
To work it up into some comic scene.

HESPÉRIE
1365 Ah, don't think it. Those two, respectively,
Are discontent with the times and with me;
You see their reveries; the cause we'll find:
[to *Filidan*] So you complain of a mistress unkind?

FILIDAN
If any pity stirring in your marrow,

1370 Seeing me stricken, asks me by what arrow,
 Know from an eye my soul adores, it came.

HESPÉRIE

 You see he's deft in showing me his flame.
 Who is the beauty, then, that brings you torment?

FILIDAN

 She whom I just beheld this very moment.

HESPÉRIE

1375 Then it's my sister for whom your heart sighs?⁶⁵

FILIDAN

 No.

HESPÉRIE

 Sister, how to say in shrewder wise
 It's me he loves, since it's one of the two?
 Respectful lover, your vows are repaid you.
 She you revere from me gives you assurance
1380 That she pities your anguished heart's endurance
 In selfless worship of her qualities.

FILIDAN

 Solace how sweet for a soul on its knees!
 Let me kiss your hands for the joyful tiding
 My goddess sends one in love's faith abiding.

HESPÉRIE

1385 [*to Amidor*] But you, whose mind by so much noble verse
 With that nymph's fame has filled the universe,
 Leave your displeasures, for in recognition
 Know that she awards you ample commission.

⁶⁵ Hespérie obviously means Sestiane, who is with her, and is not thinking of Mélisse, whom Filidan briefly caught sight of; see below, l. 1377.

FILIDAN

Indeed, by him my passion was awoken.

AMIDOR

1390 Of such greatness, what makes a worthy token?

HESPÉRIE

You will become the world's most wealthy man.

AMIDOR

Alas, such hope's a mere flash in the pan!

HESPÉRIE

1395 Untold thousands of lovers she can count
Who suffer, in thralldom, a huge amount.
She'll make it known that, to relieve their pain,
It's enough to give poems in your vein.
You'll see flooding in, from climates diverse,
Poor languishing souls who, to have your verse,
Will proffer presents of infinite worth:
1400 One month, and you'll be the richest on earth!

AMIDOR

Ye gods! Voyagers to India's shores
Have never amassed such fabulous stores!
With what triumphant chants, what panegyrics,
Will I reward her financial heroics!

FILIDAN

1405 Gods, what largesse she shows, and how that Beauty
Puts to good use her liberality!

SESTIANE

I'm fond of Amidor, but I foretell
That once grown rich, he'll bid the stage farewell.

1410 For he'll no longer give his brain the care
Of more than an epigram or an air.

AMIDOR

Far from it, Sestiane – I'll have more leisure;
I'll do it for my glory and my pleasure.
But if I'm to enjoy such affluence,
I'll have to rent a spacious residence.
1415 For my room is minuscule, scarcely able
To hold within it a bed, bench and table.

SESTIANE

Before those vast riches are yours to use,
I'd like to beg a favour of your Muse.

AMIDOR

Just say the word.

SESTIANE

1420 Then, would she please compose
On the theme that I began to propose?

AMIDOR

Yes, it's a promise! The subject delights
And needs a mind that can rise to its heights.
A lovely premise, fine development –
I die with longing to know the event.
1425 We'd reached the point of those little twin creatures
That Cloris was raising.

SESTIANE

Both had fair features,
But most amazing was their close resemblance.
Cloris's father was in ignorance,
For they were nurtured in strict isolation.
1430 Now grown, they're bathed in female adulation.

The fact that each one looks so like his brother
 Gives constant rise to some droll scheme or other.
 That act's errors will keep the crowd amused,
 Though some muted outbursts may be infused.

AMIDOR

1435 What skill you possess!

SESTIANE

More than one supposes:

I've read romances, the *Metamorphoses* . . .

In Act Four – but heavens, dear Amidor,

I hear someone coming, just as before.

Let's find a quiet spot, but Hespérie,

1440 Whoever may arrive, please keep him busy.

The rest of it elsewhere I'll have to tell.

AMIDOR

Come, my Melpomene!⁶⁶ [*to Hespérie*] You, nymph, farewell!

SESTIANE

You'll see if there was ever such an ending.

HESPÉRIE

What, alone with him?

SESTIANE

Yes, without offending.

We are pure mind, and if alone somewhere,

1445 Base flesh has no part in the love we share.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Melpomene: the Muse of tragedy.

⁶⁷ The (commonplace enough) idea of a neo-platonising love that transcends the physical seems actually to match views propounded by Desmarests elsewhere (Hall, ed., n. to ll. 1445-46), so its expression by the “extravagant” Sestiane sheds interesting light on the author's sometimes equivocal attitude towards his visionaries.

SCENE V (ARTABAZE, MÉLISSE, FILIDAN, HESPÉRIE)

[Enter Artabaze, followed by Mélisse.]

ARTABAZE

O save me, ye gods, from female attraction!
I cannot give all of them satisfaction!

MÉLISSE

Dear Alexander, from me now a flier?
Alexand... Artabaze, appease your ire!

ARTABAZE

I450 I've too much love elsewhere. (I just can't stand her!)

MÉLISSE

I'll follow everywhere, dear Alexander. [Exeunt Artabaze
and Mélisse.]

FILIDAN

That beauteous lightning flashed over there.
Stay, cruel one; stay, O source of my care! [Exit.]

SCENE VI (ALCIDON, HESPÉRIE)

ALCIDON

What noise did I hear?

HESPÉRIE

Oh, my misery!

ALCIDON

I455 What have you got to cry for?

HESPÉRIE

Ah, so guilty!

ALCIDON

What, then? I'm confused. She says she's done wrong.
I put off her marriage a little too long;
I knew that she'd prove hard to supervise.
What have you done?

HESPÉRIE

O beauty I despise!

ALCIDON

1460 [aside] The wicked girl has doubtless lost her honour.
I'll strangle the cad who prevailed upon her!
[to Hespérie] What is your fault?

HESPÉRIE

Can you believe the story?
I thought I'd crown your life with joy and glory,
But I'm your shame, the fatal brand employed
1465 To see your whole house by fire destroyed!⁶⁸

ALCIDON

My body teeters with horror and dread!

HESPÉRIE

Woe unto you that such beauty you bred!

ALCIDON

Render, at least, my unhappiness clear!

HESPÉRIE

1470 What a spectacle, gods, I've witnessed here!
O my criminal eyes, let your tears stream
On these beauties and charms that coldly gleam.
It's you, my dear treasures, who cause these woes!

68 She compares herself with Helen of Troy, as is noted by Hall, ed., n. to ll. 1464-66.

ALCIDON

At least, to speak to me, abate these throes.

HESPÉRIE

If you insist. I'm ashamed, I confess:
1475 I must praise myself to tell our distress.
When first I opened my eyes to the light,
I opened them, too, men's love to excite.
All doted who saw me in infancy –
At least, held my charms in expectancy.
1480 In my youthful pastimes each claimed his due,
Their passion growing as my beauty grew.
Grown up at last, as the world I explore,
My eyes to all hearts sound a call to war:
One says, "I'm wounded", another, "I'm gone";
1485 One thinks, at first, a bold front to put on;
By a livelier glance my first is doubled:
Then the complexion pales, the eye is troubled.
The fame of my beauty spreads round about –
All dwell on those dread blows my eyes deal out;
1490 Report to their fair flames new lovers brings
By thousands, doomed like moths to singe their wings.
All over I meet with features turned pale,
Eyes proffering vows to their lovely bale;
Trailed like a wonder on every side,
1495 By Envy itself I can't be denied.
Finally, all lovers beneath the skies
Fall victim to the power of my eyes.
Such then is our glory (I should say our shame!):
While other beauties are allowed no fame,
1500 All suitors turn to me: not one defaulter
Offers his incense on another altar.
Thus my poor sisters... ! Ah, I die of grief,
Speech fails...

ALCIDON

Please, daughter, finish and be brief.

HESPÉRIE

1505 So my poor sisters see themselves rejected,
 Their welcoming glances in vain effected;
 At last, they stoop to tricks debasing them:
 Instead of tempting men, they're chasing them!
 One, who an interest in verses professes,
1510 Pursues a poet, and in dark recesses
 Concealed from my eyes, angles for his soul.
 The other's reduced to the shameful role
 Of some captain's baggage, dragged any place,
 Any time, in full view.

ALCIDON

God, what disgrace!

HESPÉRIE

1515 She calls him her heart, her dear Alexander.
 What hope awaits them, her sister *and* her?
 It's only for me one writes so much verse,
 While the other has crossed the universe,
 Compelled a hundred by land and by sea
 To recognise the world's fairest as me.
1520 Judge if I have cause to let my tears flow,
 To blame my beauty, the source of our woe,
 Which brings, instead of glory, shame enduring.
 Father, why did you make me so alluring?

ALCIDON

1525 Do they dare, good gods, give ardour free rein?
 Has their decency gone right down the drain?
 But isn't it self-love, too, on your part,
 To dream sometimes that you've conquered a heart?
 It's news to me that you've many a wooer.

HESPÉRIE

We'd be much happier if I had fewer!

ALCIDON

1530 But are your sisters really so inclined?

HESPÉRIE

Here comes the captain – make up your own mind.

ALCIDON

I wish to talk with him; leave us alone.

I shall have the fact of the matter known. [*Exit
Hespérie*]

SCENE VII (ARTABAZE, ALCIDON)

ARTABAZE

Good fellow, approach; come pay me due homage.

ALCIDON

1535 Valorous son of Mars, his living image,
Your far-famed grandeur I humbly adore,
Dazzled by your resplendent deeds of war.

ARTABAZE

1540 He's winning my heart – his humility charms me:
That's what turns me gentle; that's what disarms me.
You've a daughter?

ALCIDON

Three, great hero, not one.

ARTABAZE

Marriage might make me many a king's son.
I'll crown you with bliss, for that's my fancy.
A hundred kings would die of jealousy.

ALCIDON

1545 Of two girls of mine, if reports are true,
 You pursue one, another pursues you.

ARTABAZE

 What? *I* pursue? A dream of the first water!

ALCIDON

 You're not in love with Hespérie, my daughter?

ARTABAZE

1550 Who is that Hespérie? Gods, can that belle
 So far allow her vanity to swell?
 Brazen conceit worthy torture and pain,
 Which I'd scarce let an empress entertain! –
 I for whom a thousand beauties compete,
 Who have them always trailing at my feet,
 Who need only nod, when one takes my eye,
1555 To say, "Come on, it's you I'll satisfy".
 Here, now, the ardent assiduity
 Of one who dotes on me would move your pity:
 She calls me her all – and dear Alexander.

ALCIDON

 My daughter!

ARTABAZE

1560 So rumour's breeze has fanned her.
 Now, while she's second to none in these parts,
 And may well deserve some glance my eye darts,
 Judge with what deep delusion she's imbued:
 Having learnt what countries my sword subdued,
 And heard some my feats of glory rehearse,
1565 Which made me master of the universe,
 Her poor brain from all better knowledge banned her,

And she took me for a new Alexander.
That title rankled as a paltry thing,
Because, though he was valiant, a great king,
1570 One quarter of the world contained his war,
While, as for me, I overcame all four.

ALCIDON

Really! Your story I've not read about.
Can I buy the book?

ARTABAZE

It never came out.
The author along on that famous trek,
1575 Perished, with all his writings, in a shipwreck.
I disabused your girl – the task was long –
Said I'm called Artabaze and she was wrong
When she supposed that I was Alexander:
It was quite a hard truth with which to land her,
1580 So muddled was her mind's capacity;
But she showed sudden perspicacity:
To gain my love by exercise of wit,
She feigned at once to have an angry fit.
She even dared to speak disdainfully;
1585 Her ruse paid off: I felt love painfully.
The noble frankness of my heart was hers,
For scorners I love and flee my pursuers.
No higher ambition could one assume
Than to dare to exceed what I presume –
1590 A high stroke bringing boldness to the fore;
And so for that trait I love her the more.
One day will surely find her by me bearing
One of the greatest fighters and most daring,
One who shall appear by land and by sea
1595 Fit to hold the world's empire from me.

ALCIDON
An emperor?

ARTABAZE
I've the power to be.

ALCIDON
Respect, then, must be shown to your degree.

ARTABAZE
Be covered, these forms are mere tyrannies,
I take no pleasure in such ceremonies.

ALCIDON
1600 No doubt you're followed by a goodly train
In that capacity.

ARTABAZE
That would be vain.
To my entourage my states I confide,
Served – it's enough – by the sword at my side.

ALCIDON
1605 Please do me a favour and let me know
Where all of those now are that you've laid low.
Are they dead or captive, those kings and princes?

ARTABAZE
No, I pardoned them: they're in their provinces.
Only they've fallen somewhat in their honours:
They are no longer kings, but governors.

ALCIDON
1610 How long did conquest of the earth take you?

ARTABAZE

In roughly a month, the fighting was through.
Four days for Europe, in my memory;
Maintaining, then, the thrust of victory,
For Asia I sailed, through Bosphorus went,
1615 In six days tamed those of the Orient.
Two more saw me back from those distant lands:
I passed the Red Sea and the burning sands;
All Africa took less than eight to seize;
From there, I traversed the Atlantic seas,
1620 Made myself master of each new-found clime –
And all the universe in one month's time.

ALCIDON

Ye gods, but valour is a splendid thing!
What virtue could ever such glory bring?
Terror and death it carries in its course,
1625 All bends to its laws, all yields to its force;
Both wealth and life it gives or takes away
And places everything beneath its sway.

ARTABAZE

It's true, of virtues valour is the crown:
Nothing's so great that it cannot strike down.

ALCIDON

1630 From it comes peace, and prosperity flows;
From it comes grandeur, and nobleness grows:
Bright gem of great houses, the country's mainstay,
So profitable in every way.
I'm honoured – thrilled – you'll be my son-in-law;
1635 Of glory like yours I've just stood in awe.

ARTABAZE

I'll make you happy.

ALCIDON

Oh, excess of bounty
Sprung from the greatness of Your Majesty!

ARTABAZE

His Greatness is well pleased.

ALCIDON

My house lies there.
Come round – give us an hour to prepare.
1640 I'll go and see my daughter, so she knows
To deck herself out in her finest clothes.

ARTABAZE

Even her normal dress gives me content.
But the shock of a fierce temperament –
A man of horror, of murder, of bloodshed,
1645 Whose merciless glances inspire dread . . .

ALCIDON

Just let a little touch of softness show.

ARTABAZE

All right. Farewell, good fellow.

ALCIDON

Farewell, hero.

ACT V

SCENE I (ALCIDON)

ALCIDON

Riches, passion, valour, intelligence;
Passion, learning, bravery, opulence.
1650 I need only three – they seem to be four.
I must count up on my fingers once more...
Loving friendship, courage, possessions, knowledge:
Good gods! To all four I've given a pledge!
I've just three daughters (if I count *them* right⁶⁹),
1655 But four sons-in-law are coming tonight.
Whom must I turn away, whom satisfy?
Which of four do I dare *not* gratify?
I'll make an enemy, I have no illusion:
Gods! What a kettle of fish, what confusion!
1660 Let's see which of the four I could say no to;
Let's choose the easiest to be a foe to.
The one who manifests excessive passion
Appeals to me by stirring my compassion;
It makes, too, for the rarest delectation
1665 When love has honesty as its foundation.
Still, I could wish my heart were hard enough
To see that poor lover meet a rebuff.
Of weeping and wailing he'd have his fill,
While we'd endure countless speakers of ill:
1670 "For that poor wretch", they'll say, "my pity's strong,
But in leading him on the girl did wrong:
It seems that without favour in high places
His hope could have rested on little basis".
I couldn't bear that version of events –
1675 Or to frustrate such tender sentiments.
But – refuse him whose learning seems to shine

69 I deliberately add the expression in parentheses.

Like a brilliant beam of wisdom divine?
I've always held scholars in reverence,
And if I disdain him, he'll take offence;
1680 Stories aimed dead against me he'll compose,
Some vast compendium of hostile prose.
The anger of the erudite strikes terror:
To court such misery would be gross error.
Yet, can mine be the hand that rudely pitches
1685 *You* out of doors, O venerable riches,
Nurse of humanity – dear, potent saviour?
I'd merit forever by such behaviour
Torment to think that at my feet awaits
The horrid precipice of dire straits.
1690 Then, disappoint that man of influence –
His wealth could serve to baffle innocence:
A rich accuser leaves one little say;
He could avenge himself in some strange way,
Impute to me some crime, forge testimony,
1695 Strip me at least of honour, patrimony,
And, if the death sentence is not mandated,
By hired thugs have me assassinated.
Gods! I have not yet so shrunken a brain
As to show so rich a lover disdain.
1700 But yet – do I dare scorn the valiant urge
Wretches to succour, their wrongers to scourge?
If he ever knew I'd ventured to doubt
Whether to give consent or rule him out,
A mere single glance, as when lightning flashes,
1705 Would have the force to reduce me to ashes.
Doubtless he might, with some right on his side,
Despoil my house, if cruelly denied.
What a sad pass – each thought's my reprimander
And charmer! Which to trust? But here's Lysander.

SCENE II (ALCIDON, LYSANDER)

ALCIDON

1710 To what may one your merriment impute?

LYSANDER

I've just resolved an amusing dispute.
Running from all directions came a crowd
To the next street, the quarrel was so loud;
A great poet and soldier made the fray:
1715 The soldier calls "sorcerer", flees away,
The poet on his heels, in full recital,
Declaims "captain of cowards" as his title.
"Come on", I told them, "I'll fix what's amiss".
I said, then, to the soldier, "Tell me this:
1720 All those who march to the beat of your drum,
Are they not merely cowards, craven scum,
If they are measured by your excellence?
You are the chief of cowards in that sense.
That's how he meant it". "All right", he replied.
1725 "Apollo's darling, you are glorified
When for your verses "sorcerer" you're called:
They ravish us, spell-bound, our sense enthralled;
That's why he declares that you deal in charms".
The Muses shook hands with the Man of Arms.

ALCIDON

1730 Would that you could so well relieve my cares
And ease the torment caused by my affairs.

LYSANDER

Torment?

ALCIDON

Listen: it's a fix worse than any –
I've found myself one son-in-law too many.

LYSANDER

Really? How did you get them on your hook?

ALCIDON

1735 I wanted only three, but I mistook.
Now four have my promise, as good as signed;
There's the torment that afflicts my mind.
They're all on their way; soon they'll arrive.

LYSANDER

Who?

ALCIDON

1740 You know, that lover barely alive,
And the one of whose vast riches we heard,
To whom, in front of you, I gave my word.
An hour before his grand disquisition,
I had engaged myself for erudition;
1745 Since then, because of the rumours that ran,
I couldn't refuse the world's bravest man.
There they all are, then, the four that I've taken,
Soon to be enemies, if they're forsaken.
Each seems to me an equally good catch;
For none, if he's spurned, would I be a match.

LYSANDER

1750 O well, this trouble comes as no surprise.

ALCIDON

How does it look, Lysander, to your eyes?
For my part, I'm bewildered.

LYSANDER

You poor soul!
In contracts one can always find a hole.
One man may be refused yet not made angry.

ALCIDON
1755 Such cunning subtlety is quite beyond me.
 Advise me, give me refuge – I won't budge:
 I put it in your hands; you be the judge.

LYSANDER
 If you like. Then let the meeting occur.
 Meanwhile, let's see Mélisse and speak with her.

ALCIDON
1760 Heavens, you're doing me a kindly service!
 I'll just go and call her. Come here, Mélisse.

LYSANDER
 What does she want? We must first find that out.

ALCIDON
 She'll do as I wish – of that I've no doubt.

SCENE III (LYSANDER, MÉLISSE, ALCIDON)

LYSANDER
 Mélisse, can you imagine why we call you?

MÉLISSE
1765 No.

LYSANDER
 To tell you good fortune will befall you.
 Your father's made your match.

MÉLISSE
 That's your good news?
 I'd rather die!

LYSANDER

Calm down! What a short fuse!

MÉLISSE

1770 Could I consent to some saucy demander
 After what I've read of brave Alexander?
 Could my heart, used to lofty adoration,
 Succumb to some vile passion's degradation?
 A thousand blows would pierce this heart unkind
 If it erased his image there enshrined.

ALCIDON

Alas, my daughter's mad!

MÉLISSE

1775 That's far from true!
 A husband just as valiant is my due,
 One who'd by thirty won a hundred fights,
 Who hurtled alone from the ramparts' heights,
 Besieging a town thick with enemies,
 Who brought a hundred peoples to their knees.

ALCIDON

1780 Yes, I've found your man.

MÉLISSE

One such here below?

ALCIDON

Just what you need, a great warrior fellow,
Beyond Alexander: in one month's time,
He made himself obeyed in every clime.

LYSANDER

What great hero? You're stringing her along.

ALCIDON
1785 No, he just told me – I can't have it wrong.

LYSANDER
 Gods, you're mad too: you swallow what he utters?

MÉLISSE
 Not Artabaze?

ALCIDON
 Yes.

MÉLISSE
 The non-pareil of nutters!
 Could one ever meet a more craven mind?
 Father, what use is more talk of this kind?
1790 For me these wedding tales can have no sequel
 But Alexander, or at least his equal.⁷⁰

ALCIDON
 Ye gods!

LYSANDER
 What can we do? She's quite obsessed.
 Let's not lose time. Call Hespérie – that's best.
 She'll be more sensible.

ALCIDON
 Alas, what pain!
1795 Her madness yields me yet another bane.

⁷⁰ As is confirmed by the list of characters heading each scene, the daughters retire, one by one, after their interviews but remain visible, to be joined successively by their "suitors", beginning with Filidan, who finally has a good look at them all at V.vi.1896-97.

SCENE IV (LYSANDER, HESPÉRIE, ALCIDON, MÉLISSE)

LYSANDER

Well now, Hespérie, your most loving parent
Makes your match today. Thoughts obedient
He hopes for in return. You must decide.

HESPÉRIE

1800 Alas, too well I know; I'm sorely tried!
In truth, among thousands I might well choose,
But woeful bounty, to gain and to lose!
To make choice of one's a barbarous part:
I'd stab all the others right to the heart!

LYSANDER

You're too inclined to think yourself adored.

HESPÉRIE

1805 Ah, what blindness! What proof must one afford?
Would you publish the news that I'll decide,
To measure my lovers' mass suicide?
Ah, father, such a proof would devastate!
Would you place on me such criminal weight?
1810 When they saw the happy choice of my eyes,
That blessed lover favoured by the skies,
The others, now doomed to grief, in despair,
With horrible howling would fill the air.
Some would find water to drown their lost hope,
1815 Others go seek their solace in a rope,
Still others hurl themselves from some great height;
Bloody sacrifices would greet my sight
Of others whose hands put an end to anguish,
And the rest to death would simply languish.
1820 What lavish cruelty my soul would spread
To render, for one man, all others dead!

ALCIDON
Stark madness!

HESPÉRIE
One lover in bliss you'd save,
And merely consign the rest to a grave?
No, I'm not having that; my courage has fled:
1825 I choose to remain forever unwed.

ALCIDON
See how they follow my will absolute!

LYSANDER
You see, Alcidon, how she's resolute.
Her wayward fancy you'll never control.

ALCIDON
1830 My torment is mounting – it's gripping my soul.
Gods! All those lovers! How shall I explain?

HESPÉRIE
Instead of dying, let them live in pain.

ALCIDON
She misses no chance her mad thought to seize on.
But here is Sestiane – now *she'll* see reason.

SCENE V (LYSANDER, SESTIANE, ALCIDON, HESPÉRIE, MÉLISSE)

LYSANDER
Here, young cousin, your marriage is in view.

SESTIANE
1835 No question for me. But I've come to ask you:
If one of my sisters gets married today,
At least after supper let's have a play.

I'll choose it for you, to do you a favour;
I know a new one that you're bound to savour.

LYSANDER

1840 For my part, if nothing's done, I foresee
These weddings ending in a comedy.⁷¹

ALCIDON

But I wish tonight to make your match also.

SESTIANE

On my case you need no such care bestow.
The last thing I would want to do is marry.
1845 I'd find a household's cares too much to carry.
Then, I'd surely be plagued by some strange humour,
Which through the house would cause to spread a rumour,
When I felt like seeing some comedy.
I hate it when someone says no to me.
1850 When he forbade it, I'd tell him, "I want to" –
And if he gave a blow I'd give back two!
Should one in certain gatherings partake,
At once the heads of husbands start to ache.
They think it's there a gallant comes in view,
1855 Looks are exchanged, and melting billets-doux.
And on those luscious evenings, what is played,
With love the only theme, makes them afraid.
"Do you think", they say, "we grant you the right
To sleep all day and gad about at night?"
1860 What bothers them most is easy to know:
Their heads in such places they dare not show.
One says at once, "Such jealousy is foul.
He trails her everywhere", and like some owl,⁷²
Hateful to gentle birds, feared by the weak,

71 A metadramatic joke, which depends on the convention that comedies end in weddings.

72 The term was applied, according to Hall, ed., n. to l. 1864, to antisocial persons.

1865 He draws sly pecking from each hostile beak.
I wish no censor, father, as a spouse.
Since you for pleasure let me leave the house –
The innocent pleasures the theatres give –
Would I take the risk otherwise to live?
1870 Then, what about the children to take care of?
And at the theatre? A thing to beware of!
Soon childbirth, pregnancy or malady
Would say forever, “Farewell, comedy!”
I’m not such a fool, I give you my word:
1875 That’s why I’ll stay single till I’m interred.

LYSANDER

To judge from such talking, the ablest man
Could scarcely master her.

ALCIDON

O my vain plan
For suitable suitors – now to be spurned,
Since all my girls against marriage have turned.
1880 I’d thought myself by one man too well-off,
But now, good gods, I’ve got four to sell off!
Daughters, is this the respect I deserve?

LYSANDER

Already one keen suitor I observe.
Take care, Alcidon; I think it’s the lover.

ALCIDON

1885 What can I tell him? I’m shaking all over.

SCENE VI (FILIDAN, LYSANDRE, ALCIDON, HESPÉRIE, MÉLISSE, SESTIANE)

FILIDAN

Now, eyes, prepare to dazzle with delight.

LYSANDER

Which do you love?

FILIDAN

She's never met my sight.
I don't know which she is.

LYSANDER

I can't believe my ears!
Is this the love that causes all those tears?

FILIDAN

1890 Just show me that Beauty of rarest kind
Whose picture in words enchanted my mind.
You promised, and I can't wait any more.
Reveal to me the Beauty I adore!
You put me off till the end of today.

ALCIDON

1895 Look at them, then: which do you love? Now say.

FILIDAN

The jewel I worship – isn't there, in fact.

HESPÉRIE

Not dare to name me? What exquisite tact!

SCENE VII (FILIDAN, AMIDOR, ALCIDON, LYSANDER, MÉLISSE, HESPÉRIE, SESTIANE)

FILIDAN

I *have* to see – you mock me for your pleasure! –
Gold, azure, coral – that alluring treasure.

AMIDOR

1900 An Idea speaks from his imagination
With nothing but my words as its foundation.
A mere fantastic product of my muse

In vain that poor lover seeks and pursues.

FILIDAN

1905 Well, I don't care: my soul is in its power.
I'll love you, fair Idea, till my last hour.

ALCIDON

What madness, gods!

LYSANDER

He's content with his lot.
See, that's already one less that you've got!⁷³

ALCIDON

The scholar's here!

LYSANDER

1910 My poet, after all!
I'll deal with him: he's headed for a fall.
How now, great Apollo, what brings you here?

AMIDOR

1915 I've come, Alcidon, to make matters clear.
A while ago, when taken by surprise,
I claimed one of these beauties as my prize
In reckless speech, before I could recover.
Then, a poet must feign to be a lover.
But, truth to tell, not one amorous dart
Since I was born has enkindled my heart,
My only love exalted Helicon,
Its *off-spring* when the winged horse trod thereon.⁷⁴

⁷³ Again, the prospective husbands “collect” in the visible interior of the house, where they can be (literally) enumerated at the end.

⁷⁴ I attempt to capture Amidor's self-consciously recondite poeticism: “l'eau fille du pied de l'emplumé cheval”. The reference is to the fountain of Hippocrene, which sprang forth at the touch of the hoof of Pegasus, considered as the horse of the Muses.

1920 I love the woods, the meadows, the dark cave;
Poesy I love, tropes learned and grave.
At first blush, in the April of my days,
Rich Metaphor reaped all my loving praise;
I loved Antithesis, my school-days past.
1925 Now for Hyperbole I sigh my last:
The lofty ornament of soaring verse,
Able with ease to span the universe.
To heaven, even now, I see her bound
Filling the mind with thought, the mouth with sound.
1930 Hyperbole, Hyperbole *chérie*,
O'er Atropos you'll bring me victory!

SCENE VIII

(LYSANDRE, ALCIDON, PHALANTE, FILIDAN, AMIDOR, MÉLISSE, HESPÉRIE, SESTIANE)

LYSANDER

To see you happy is all that we want.
But here comes another.

ALCIDON

Gods, it's Phalante,

Whose fabulous wealth is second to none.
1935 By his beautiful home my heart was won.
Mélisse would flout her own felicity
If she disdains this opportunity.

LYSANDER

I'll have him enumerate his possessions:
That might just give Mélisse some new impressions.
1940 [*to Phalante*] For a marriage contract to be conceded,
A meeting with your father will be needed.

PHALANTE

He's dead, my mother too.

LYSANDER

Heavens! What joy!

Then all that property you now enjoy?

PHALANTE

I've almost none. My uncles pay my rent.

LYSANDER

1945 So those who own that property at present
 Are childless, meaning it will go to you?

PHALANTE

 Children? In fact, they've all got quite a few,
 But all unhealthy: they won't get far;
 Weak lungs will kill them, dropsy or catarrh –
1950 At least, they look as if they're so inclined.
 And then, what other ills afflict mankind?
 It needs only plague, war – one act of God –
 To put those relatives beneath the sod.
 I'll truly be rich then – and you well know
1955 How quickly many heads may be laid low.

LYSANDER

So that treasure abounds – in your orations?

ALCIDON

Your hope lies in the death of your relations?

PHALANTE

We might well see it happen any minute.

LYSANDER

1960 That house! And I'd promised myself within it
 Lodgings of such luxury, just for fun!
 But who's the owner?

PHALANTE

There are four, not one.

LYSANDER

No heirs in prospect?

PHALANTE

Children on all sides.

LYSANDER

1965 Fair house, grand arches – away it all glides!
Adieu, court and fore-court, broad avenue,
You fountains mounting to the clouds, adieu;
Adieu, gilt panels, lavish furnishings,
Apartments to suit what each season brings!
Adieu, Doric columns in formal row;⁷⁵
Adieu, antique figures in stately show;
1970 Adieu, wide canals, fair gardens that enrapture;
Adieu, rich park, all our senses to capture.
Adieu, fair Niobe, watery vaults,
Orange trees, Danaides who purge your faults!
O lovely spot, whose hope was our delight,
1975 Your marvels suddenly have taken flight.

ALCIDON

Great thanks, O truly self-made millionaire,
For the *thoughtful* honour you seek to share.

PHALANTE

The wealth I hope for shields me from all grief.

LYSANDER

What's more, you'll never need to fear a thief.

75 As observed by Hall, ed., n. to l. 1964, echoed here are the successive “adieux” conventional in contemporary pastorals.

ALCIDON
1980 Now, this one I fear!

LYSANDER

 What? My man of war?
I know his valour's not worth quaking for.

**FINAL SCENE [IX] (ARTABAZE, LYSANDRE, ALCIDON, FILIDAN, AMIDOR, PHALANTE,
MÉLISSE, HESPÉRIE, SESTIANE)**

ARTABAZE

 So, my good friends, you've agreed to assemble –
 To receive me, of course. I think you tremble;
1985 My savage glances must thrill you with fear;
 Milder, for your sake, I'll make them appear.
 Never could I, without such mitigation,
 With mortals hold a moment's conversation.

LYSANDER
 What great favour!

ARTABAZE

 It's not granted to all.
1990 Know then, my friends, that your fortunes must fall.
 You face a tumble from joy's greatest height.
 Honour, good man, I brought within your sight –
 An honour such as Jove would hold in awe:
 To lodge me with you as your son-in-law.
1995 I've come to warn you that it is my pastime
 Fathers to fill with bliss from time to time
 And make them dream of glory so immense.
 But I take pity on your innocence:
 Not to let you flounder in hopeful waters –
 I never did love any of your daughters.
2000 There, fellow, bear the pain-of-pains itself:
 For I'm the lover only of myself.

LYSANDER

Far from distressed, great hero, if you're pleased,
I see none here that isn't likewise eased.
Few, then, set sail for marriage as their mark:
2005 You're not so mad – it's folly to embark.
There, Alcidon, you see, your mind's relieved,
They all take their own leaves, most *un*-aggrieved.
My pretty girls, I trust you're all light-hearted.
Children, pursue your follies as you started.
2010 Maintain your humours, happier by far
Than this world's wise men, kings or princes are.
Let one girl dote on her brave Alexander,
Another reign as every heart's commander.
This one will laugh at life's harshest exaction,
2015 For she loves her Comedy to distraction.
Let suitor ONE⁷⁶ chase Ideas out of reach;
TWO make mad love to a figure of speech;
THREE ever *dwell* on his kindred's decease;
And – in bliss unknown to spoilers of peace –
2020 Let FOUR with valour make full his own heart,
In love with himself, till death do him part.

END

⁷⁶ So designating them numerically is the translator's enhancement, in keeping with the recurrent counting motif; the original simply repeats the structure ("one", "another" . . .) just used for the daughters.