

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

CLEANTE*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Cléante (in Molière's *Tartuffe*) rational**

Overview Molière's *Tartuffe* (1764)—the hypocrite—is one of his most beloved and stinging satires on human foibles. The emphasis of the play is on the wiles of Mr. Tartuffe, the smartest and in the end most criminal of hypocrites, to worm his way into the center of the family of M. Orgon, and to get himself married to Orgon's daughter and her fortune. In the course of establishing this plot, Molière exhibits his skills at pillorying (complexly) a stock character, Cleante, who is intelligent, right on in his critiques, and yet annoying. The portrait illustrates Molière's perfect subtlety at characterization, and his ability to make his dialogue ring true.

Character Cléante is the brother in law of Orgon, a middle class property owner who has done well by the King, and who is ambitious for wealth and standing, without understanding his dependence on other people for such achievements. Cleante, Orgon's brother in law, is the intelligent but often simplistically wise consultant to Orgon. Cleante, among others, is full of platitudes (and good sense), philosophical truisms (which also make sense), and insights (into human nature) which sound as though they had been cribbed from some ancient Roman moralist like Seneca. Just when we are ready to proclaim Cleante an old fool—like Polonius the wise counselor in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—he strikes the nail on the head, as in his good sense attitude to the disgraced Tartuffe, at play's end, and we are glad to have him around.

Parallels Polonius, the father of Laertes and Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is a good parallel to Cléante. Each character is given to general wisdoms which he brings forth as advice. In *Hamlet* (Act 1, scene 3,) Polonius gives life-advice to his son, who is leaving for France: 'give thy thoughts no tongue'; 'be thou familiar but by no means vulgar'; 'give every man thine ear, but few thy voice.' The sum of these pieces of wisdom is fragmentary—though 'sensible'—and one comes away with little more than a smudgy sense of the importance of caution. Cléante offers little more, but no less.

Illustrative moments

Natural Cléante shares his wisdom with his brother in law, from the outset of *Tartuffe*. Seeing that Orgon is irrationally ambitious, and has lost all sense of his own good, Cleante reminds him that 'man's a strangely fashioned creature, who seldom is content to follow nature, but recklessly pursues his inclination...' It is Cleante's bent to raise truisms to a general level, and to philosophize about the condition of mankind. But in the present case, as usually, this kind of wisdom-purveying has its effect, and Orgon, who is ambitious but not hopelessly misdirected, modifies his thinking and reviews (even if only briefly) his relation to Tartuffe.

Innocent Mme. Pernelle, the mother of Orgon, is of all the family the most enraptured by the pretences and affectations of Tartuffe, the hypocrite. Until the end of the play, when everyone knows the truth about Tartuffe, she defends the guy; but it is Cleante who is best at trying to put her in the picture—in his rather pompous fashion. Mme. has complained that people's tongues wag when they want to put down the pretentious Tartuffe—but Cleante tells her to cool it with her complaints about backbiting. 'Against backbiting there is no defence, so let us try to live in innocence, to silly tattle pay no heed at all....'

Analytical Orgon carries on to Cléante, and the rest of the household, about what a great guy Tartuffe is—honest, pious, god-loving, faithful to church and clergy, perfect in his worship practice. At this, Cléante launches into his brother in law, charging him with inability to see below the surface, into the fake piety of Tartuffe. 'That is the usual strain of all your kind,' he says, 'they must have everyone as blind as they. They call you atheist if you have good eyes.' Pulling the

wool over Orgon's eyes is easy, for he believes what he wants to believe, and does not see what is in front of his face.

Truisms Cléante's points are often 'valid'—see above—but on occasion tip over into truisms, empty statements; Molière is a master at spotting and illustrating that tipping point. In a long peroration about fake and genuine behavior, in which Cleante tries to demystify Tartuffe for Orgon, Cleante tips over into a truism so bald it makes even Orgon squeal, and feel he is being talked down to: 'but this I know, says Cléante, 'that there's a difference twix't false and true.' The arrow is aimed at Tartuffe and other 'whitened sepulchres' who put on fine airs in church, but the comment turns Orgon off—Orgon is a nice guy and no fool, except when it comes to his blindness toward Tartuffe—and will at a certain point assert his personality.

Discussion questions

Is there a clear line between 'common sense' and 'truisms.' Is it possible to be sensible and at the same time fatuous?

What is Molière's attitude toward Cléante? Would you say that Cléante is a 'spokesman' for Molière, or does Molière refuse ever to go that far? Has Molière a spokesman in this play?

We have labelled Cléante 'rational.' Does he expound a 'philosophy of life' during Tartuffe, or does he simply spout wise statements?