

TARTUFFE

Moliere

Overview Molière (1622-1673) was a French playwright and actor, whose comedies -- *Tartuffe*, *The Miser*, *The Imaginary Invalid*--epitomize the sharp wit and social canniness of 'le grand siècle,' that mid-seventeenth century dominated by the monarchy of Louis XIV and his culturally brilliant court at Versailles. Through extensive experience as a stage actor, and high connections at court, Molière built himself into the perfect analyst of the foibles of his new bourgeois/pretentious culture, and though making many enemies—among the church hierarchy and the medical profession—he prevailed as one of France's most beloved dramatists/social critics.

Story Orgon, a prominent but gullible Parisian gentleman, is impressed by the manners and claims of his guest Tartuffe, whom he has invited into his home with great naivety, and with little regard to the views of the remainder of Orgon's family. The visitor, who is constantly spewing religious platitudes, though they totally belie his own behavior, impresses Orgon by precisely these fine sentiments about love and piety. So great is Tartuffe's influence over Orgon, that Orgon's mother, Mme. Pernelle, is drawn into admiration for the faker, who however exercises no charm over the remainder of the family.

So great is Orgon's delight, in the views and presence of the hypocrite Tartuffe, that he decides to marry his daughter to Tartuffe, even though the girl is already engaged. For the family this is the last straw, and they determine on a trap to set for Tartuffe and Orgon, that will show the latter just how disgusting his guest is. The trap involves Orgon's wife, Elmire, whom Tartuffe lusts after. If Tartuffe can make a fool of himself with Elmire, in the presence of Orgon, that will surely be strong evidence for Orgon to kick the guy out.

The complexities of family plotting set in. An effort to entrap Tartuffe fails because Damis, Orgon's son, fails to interpret the event, and believes Tartuffe is guilty of treachery. Tartuffe typically turns this misunderstanding to his advantage; he claims to be the one who is maligned. (As a consequence, Orgon stupidly blames his son for the misunderstanding, and tells the boy that he is a 'blight on the family.')

The second entrapment event works better, for this time Orgon hears Tartuffe, through the wall, attempting to seduce Elmire. Orgon is furious, at last, but he is not yet free of his noxious guest. Tartuffe is in possession of papers that show that Orgon formally turned the house over to him, and accordingly Tartuffe orders Orgon and his family to leave the house. At this point, however, a messenger arrives from the King, and arrests Tartuffe for his various misdeeds. The court invalidates the house papers Tartuffe is holding, and the family once more occupies their own home. Tartuffe, who it turns out is a well known criminal, is arrested.

The puzzler in this fast moving, ironic social tale is: exactly what kind of satire is it? Is Tartuffe first and foremost a crook or is he an example of a religious hypocrite? Although his hypocrisy talk is all about his high flown sentiments, and his church connections, they are a very light covering over the power take over he so willingly unpackages---papers of house ownership, expulsion of the residents of the house—and Tartuffe emerges in the end largely in the guise of a crook. In the new bourgeois age of 17th century France, when the middle class is everywhere attempting to establish legitimate credentials, it is Orgon who most represents the loss of moral compass. Fooled by Tartuffe, unable to hear the good sense of his family, ready to banish his son, he lines up with the army of easily duped lovers of the status quo.

Themes

Hypocrisy Everyone in Orgon's family, except him, sees through Tartuffe, and thus he makes himself more a fool than his guest is. Why is Orgon taken in by this intruding 'holy man'? It is because he simply believes what he hears, rather than looking around himself at what he sees, his family's unanimous disapproval of Tartuffe. Isn't Orgon a deeper study than Tartuffe himself, in the fascination of deception?

Family The high flying duplicity of Tartuffe is thwarted by Orgon's family, in which a young woman is about to be married, to someone she loves, and a mother is about to be seduced. Orgon is a weak leader, in this network of ardent values, and is accordingly marginalized.

Characters

Tartuffe is a hypocrite, says one thing and means another, but we have to question whether he is serving Moliere as a mockery of religion or a mockery of the human talent to deceive. Is Moliere making the point that religion is easily abused? Is Tartuffe interested in religion enough to want to abuse it?

Orgon, the nouveau riche business figure of a society which was once 'aristocracy' based, is infatuated by what he takes to be the heightened spirituality of the holy man, Tartuffe, whom he has welcomed into his home. He is blinded by his ingenuousness, loses the hard way, but in the end sees the light.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

TARTUFFE (Unconscientious)

Character In *Tartuffe*—first performed in 1664--we come up against a 'religious hypocrite.' He seems to have moved into the house of an upscale bourgeois, M. Orgon, who has become his dupe, and whose wife and pocketbook both attract Tartuffe compellingly. Tartuffe's constant expressions of religious piety, and of fake humility, contrast with his cynical behavior, and, because he was in fact clad in clerical garb, in the first performances of the play, he seemed at first a clearcut example of the corruption of the church. In the end, the target of Moliere's critique is religiosity, not religion, and tolerance toward the fool in Tartuffe seems the way to read the text. Rarely in literature do we meet so perfect a blend of lechery with pretense.

Illustrative moments

False From his first appearance, Tartuffe is the essence of fake religiosity, over the top in piety. 'Laurent, you may put away my hair-shirt and my scourge,' he says to his man, 'and pray that heaven may light your every step.' To which he adds that if anyone comes looking for him, he will be visiting prisoners, where he will be giving away the small sums he himself receives as charity. Dorine, maid to Mariane, Orgon's daughter, calls Tartuffe a 'brass-faced, hypocritical....' Tartuffe pretends to be mystified, and asks her what she wants.

Pretending Instead of responding to Dorine's harsh words, Tartuffe removes a pocket handkerchief from his jacket, and begs Dorine to cover her bosom with it. 'Such sights offend the purest soul, for they prompt sinful thoughts.' Dorine replies that her presence in the room was intended simply to give a message, that Orgon's wife, Elmire, would soon be down to talk with him. Dorine's additional remark, that if Tartuffe were standing stark naked before her, she wouldn't even notice him, barely deflects his determination to establish his reputation as a powerful warrior against the flesh.

Adulation The lady of the house, Elmire, descends to speak with Tartuffe. Upon her entrance into the room Tartuffe deluges her with exaggerated blessings: 'may Heaven, in its infinite goodness, ever grant you health of mind and body, and shower you with as many blessings as...divine love...could wish.' In the following passage, Tartuffe blocks Elmire's efforts to explain her mission; he continues smothering her with heavenly adulation. When she says she has a special favor to ask him, he replies that he too has a special favor to ask. Will she forgive him for having implied, in previous conversation, that he notices the considerable influence her beauty has on other men?

Flirting Tartuffe gradually moves in on this ineffable lady. He squeezes her fingertips, in fact forces a cry from her—too hard, she says, ouch! Tartuffe, of course, launches his passes in a state of distraction, as though Elmire is so beautiful he cannot quite accept the actuality of her body. 'I was carried away by my devotion.' The closet drama thickens, and in the same distracted fashion, Tartuffe puts his hand on her knee; 'the material is so soft.' Even though she insists she is dreadfully ticklish, he advances closer. 'My word, how fine this lace is,' he expostulates distractedly, and he squeezes her knee.

Discussion questions

Do the people who interact with Tartuffe simply mock him, in his self-serving moves, or are they taken in by him?

Do you think Moliere is satirizing the Church, through Tartuffe, or simply a familiar kind of abuse—hypocrisy—of the Church's teachings?

Do Tartuffe's two main vices—hypocrisy and lechery—make a natural pair? Does the one vice support the other, in Tartuffe?

Cléante (rational)

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?