

Characters in Moliere

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.

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?