

An Introduction To Molière's "Tartuffe"

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Introduction

Molière's *Tartuffe* is a comedy about religious hypocrisy, self-deception, household authority, and the dangerous power of appearances. The play was first performed at Versailles in 1664, but controversy over its treatment of false devotion led to restrictions and revision before the authorized public version appeared in 1669. The original essay rightly argues that Molière attacks hypocrisy rather than sincere religion. It can be strengthened by examining why Orgon is as important as Tartuffe, how the women and servants expose the deception, why performance and language matter, and how the ending reflects the political world of Louis XIV. Tartuffe succeeds not because everyone is foolish, but because one powerful man values the image of holiness more than evidence supplied by his own family.

Historical Background and Censorship

Molière wrote for a society in which theater, court patronage, religious authority, and public reputation were closely connected. The 1664 version prompted opposition from religious groups that feared audiences would confuse satire of false piety with criticism of devotion itself. A revised version titled *The Impostor* appeared in 1667 but was also prohibited. The version generally performed today was authorized in 1669. (Molière)

The controversy is central to interpretation. Molière had to distinguish the hypocrite from the genuinely devout person. The play repeatedly makes that distinction through characters who respect religion but condemn manipulation. The satire does not depend on denying faith. It depends on showing how religious language can be converted into social authority by someone who does not live according to the principles he publicly performs.

Tartuffe as a Performer

Tartuffe enters the stage relatively late, but he dominates the household before audiences see him. Madame Pernelle praises him, Orgon reports his supposed wisdom, and other characters describe his behavior. This delay creates a gap between reputation and reality. By the time Tartuffe appears, the audience has heard incompatible versions of him and is prepared to test the evidence.

His power depends on performance. He uses modest clothing, lowered eyes, moral warnings, self-accusation, and religious vocabulary to create credibility. When caught, he does not initially defend

himself through facts. He declares himself the worst of sinners, knowing that exaggerated humility will make Orgon defend him. The tactic turns accusation into proof of holiness. Tartuffe understands that a successful performance gives the audience a role: Orgon wants to see himself as the protector of a persecuted holy man.

Orgon's Responsibility

It is easy to treat Orgon as a passive victim, but his conduct drives the crisis. He ignores his wife's illness, breaks his promise concerning Mariane's marriage, disinherits his son, and transfers property to Tartuffe. He possesses social and legal authority within the household, and his refusal to listen harms people who depend on him. Tartuffe exploits Orgon, but Orgon repeatedly chooses certainty over evidence.

His attachment to Tartuffe may reflect a desire for moral order and control. A household contains disagreement, desire, humor, and negotiation; Tartuffe offers rules and absolute judgments. Orgon mistakes submission to an external authority for spiritual seriousness. The comedy therefore criticizes not only impostors but also the appetite that creates them. Fraud succeeds when powerful people prefer flattery and simple answers to difficult observation.

Elmire and the Test of Evidence

Elmire responds to Tartuffe with calm intelligence. When he makes sexual advances, she initially offers to remain silent if he stops interfering with Mariane's marriage. Her approach is practical rather than theatrical. Damis interrupts and denounces Tartuffe, but his anger allows the hypocrite to manipulate Orgon again.

Elmire then creates an experiment. She hides Orgon under a table and invites Tartuffe to speak freely. This scene is comic, uncomfortable, and epistemologically important: Orgon must hear and see what testimony could not persuade him to believe. Elmire controls the performance so that hypocrisy produces its own evidence. Her coughing signals discomfort and warns Orgon, but he delays emerging. The delay shows how difficult it is to surrender a cherished illusion even after contradictory facts become undeniable.

Dorine and Comic Reason

Dorine, the maid, has less formal authority than Orgon but often has better judgment. She challenges his plan to marry Mariane to Tartuffe, mocks inflated language, and keeps conversations tied to ordinary motives. Her wit is not decorative. It exposes how status can separate power from intelligence.

Comedy gives Dorine a freedom of speech that social hierarchy would normally restrict. She interrupts, imitates, exaggerates, and turns solemn claims into absurdity. Her verbal energy protects Mariane when obedience prevents the daughter from speaking effectively for herself. Through Dorine, Molière suggests that truth may be found outside official rank. A household that silences servants and women also deprives itself of information. (Hall)

Mariane, Valère, and Arranged Marriage

Orgon's decision to marry Mariane to Tartuffe turns religious deception into control over a young woman's future. Mariane loves Valère but struggles to oppose her father directly. Their quarrel after the announcement is comic because each fears rejection and responds with wounded pride. Dorine forces them to acknowledge what they actually want.

The subplot reveals the limits of individual choice within patriarchal family structures. Orgon treats marriage as an instrument for rewarding Tartuffe and demonstrating his own authority. Mariane's emotional future becomes secondary to her father's obsession. The play does not present romantic love as automatically wise, but it criticizes marriage imposed for irrational or self-serving reasons. (Gaines)

Religious Language and Casuistry

Tartuffe's seduction of Elmire displays his most disturbing manipulation of religion. He does not merely admit human weakness. He constructs arguments that separate hidden conduct from public reputation and promises to manage sin through secrecy. His reasoning resembles corrupt casuistry: moral language is used to excuse what desire has already chosen.

Molière's satire depends on the difference between moral complexity and deliberate rationalization. Human beings can fail without being hypocrites. Tartuffe's distinctive wrong is that he converts piety into a technology for obtaining money, intimacy, and control. He invokes heaven when it protects him and abandons mercy when he gains legal advantage.

Property, Documents, and Political Danger

After Orgon recognizes the deception, the problem becomes larger than an embarrassing household conflict. He has given Tartuffe control of property and entrusted him with politically sensitive papers. The hypocrite uses legal and administrative mechanisms rather than physical force. This development shows that private credulity can create public danger.

Tartuffe's attempt to evict the family is especially revealing. He adopts the language of law and duty, presenting self-interest as obedience to proper order. Hypocrisy is therefore not limited to religious

display; it can inhabit legal procedure and bureaucratic power. Institutions require judgment because a valid document can be used for an unjust purpose.

The King and the Ending

The royal officer's intervention reverses the expected arrest and announces that the king has recognized Tartuffe's criminal history. Modern readers sometimes regard this ending as artificial or flattering to Louis XIV. It certainly reflects Molière's dependence on royal authorization after years of controversy. The king appears as the ideal judge who sees through appearances when Orgon cannot.

Yet the ending does not erase the play's warning. The family survives through exceptional intervention after Orgon has repeatedly endangered it. A society cannot rely on a perfectly discerning ruler to correct every private failure. The conclusion restores comic order, but it also reveals how close deception came to acquiring permanent legal force.

Appearance, Knowledge, and Self-Deception

The familiar lesson that appearances deceive is only the beginning. Most characters recognize Tartuffe's performance. Orgon's problem is motivated perception: he interprets evidence according to what he wants to believe. He treats criticism as persecution, humility as innocence, and family loyalty as rebellion.

The play therefore anticipates modern concerns about confirmation bias and charismatic authority. People do not accept fraud only because information is unavailable. They may reject accurate information when it threatens identity, pride, or belonging. Molière makes this process comic so that audiences can recognize it without standing outside it.

Why the Play Remains Relevant

Tartuffe remains relevant because moral performance still creates trust in politics, business, religion, and social media. Public displays of virtue can coexist with private exploitation, while followers may treat criticism as proof that a leader is courageous. The play does not teach suspicion of every religious or moral claim. Universal suspicion would make cooperation impossible. It teaches that authority should be tested through conduct, consistency, accountability, and evidence.

It also shows that institutions need protected disagreement. Elmire, Dorine, Cléante, Damis, and Mariane identify different parts of the problem, but Orgon's authority allows him to ignore them. Diversity of perspective becomes valuable only when power is willing to listen.

Conclusion

Molière's *Tartuffe* is not merely a portrait of one fraudulent religious man. It is a study of the social conditions that allow hypocrisy to become powerful. Tartuffe performs piety, but Orgon supplies property, authority, and belief. Elmire and Dorine demonstrate forms of intelligence that the patriarchal household initially undervalues, while Mariane's threatened marriage reveals the personal cost of Orgon's obsession. The royal ending restores order but cannot undo the lesson that evidence was available long before power accepted it.

The play defends sincere morality by exposing its counterfeit. Its comedy remains enduring because audiences recognize the temptation to mistake confidence for truth, reputation for character, and moral language for moral conduct.

Works Cited

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