An Introduction To Molière's "Tartuffe"

Posted on October 23, 2019

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/an-introduction-to-molieres-tartuffe/

Molière's *Tartuffe* is a comedy about religious hypocrisy, self-deception, household authority, and the danger of trusting appearances more than evidence. First performed at Versailles in 1664, the play became controversial because its central impostor uses religious devotion as a disguise for greed, sexual desire, and social ambition. After restrictions and revision, the authorized public version appeared in 1669. The play's target is not sincere faith but counterfeit piety. Tartuffe is dangerous because he understands how moral language can create authority, but he would remain comparatively powerless without Orgon, whose desire for certainty leads him to distrust his own family. The comedy therefore examines both the fraud and the conditions that allow fraud to become effective. Its lasting importance comes from the way it links private gullibility with broader questions about evidence, reputation, patriarchal power, law, and institutional judgment, showing that deception succeeds most easily when powerful people prefer reassuring appearances to inconvenient truth.

Hypocrisy as Performance and Orgon's Need to Believe

Tartuffe dominates the household before he ever appears onstage. Madame Pernelle praises him, Orgon defends him, and other family members describe his behavior, so the audience encounters competing interpretations before seeing the man himself. When Tartuffe finally enters, his power is immediately recognizable as performance: modest clothing, lowered eyes, moral warnings, exaggerated self-accusation, and religious language create an image of humility that Orgon desperately wants to accept. His most effective technique is to turn suspicion into proof of virtue. When accused, he describes himself as a terrible sinner and allows Orgon to interpret that confession as evidence of holiness. The strategy works because Tartuffe understands that Orgon is not evaluating conduct objectively; he is protecting an identity in which he sees himself as spiritually serious and superior to ordinary attachments. Tartuffe's hypocrisy therefore succeeds through a partnership between calculated performance and motivated belief.

Orgon is not merely a passive victim of deception because his authority drives the crisis. He ignores his wife's illness, tries to force Mariane into an unwanted marriage, expels Damis, and transfers property to Tartuffe despite repeated warnings from people who know the household better than the outsider he idolizes. His attraction to Tartuffe reflects more than stupidity. Tartuffe offers a simple moral order in a family full of disagreement, affection, negotiation, humor, and competing desires.

Orgon mistakes submission to an external moral authority for genuine spiritual seriousness and begins to treat family loyalty as a form of weakness. The comedy therefore criticizes not only the impostor but also the appetite for certainty that makes impostors attractive. Fraud becomes socially dangerous when a powerful person interprets disagreement as disobedience and uses authority to shield preferred beliefs from correction.

Elmire, Dorine, and the Evidence Orgon Rejects

Elmire and Dorine represent forms of intelligence that the patriarchal household initially undervalues. Elmire responds to Tartuffe's advances calmly and practically, trying first to contain the situation without turning it into public scandal. When Damis interrupts and denounces Tartuffe, Orgon still refuses to believe the accusation, which demonstrates that the problem is no longer lack of information. Elmire therefore constructs an experiment: Orgon hides under a table while Tartuffe speaks freely and reveals his desire directly. The scene is comic, but its deeper importance concerns knowledge. Orgon must hear and see what testimony alone could not persuade him to accept, and even then he delays emerging. His hesitation shows how difficult it is to surrender a preferred interpretation after facts become undeniable. Molière uses comedy to expose a process now often associated with confirmation bias: people can possess accurate information and still resist it because accepting it threatens pride, identity, or authority.

Dorine reaches truth through a different route. As a servant, she has less formal power than Orgon but better practical judgment, and her wit allows her to challenge decisions that others are expected to obey. She mocks inflated language, opposes the plan to marry Mariane to Tartuffe, and repeatedly keeps conversation tied to ordinary motives rather than abstract moral posturing. Her role demonstrates that intelligence and rank are not the same thing. A household that gives one man final authority while silencing women and servants loses access to corrective knowledge. The problem is therefore institutional as well as personal: Elmire, Dorine, Cléante, Damis, and Mariane all recognize parts of the danger, yet Orgon can ignore them because the structure of the family allows him to define disagreement as insubordination. Through these characters, Molière shows that protected dissent is a safeguard against deception.

Marriage, Property, and the Expansion of Private Error

Orgon's attempt to marry Mariane to Tartuffe transforms religious deception into control over another person's future. Mariane loves Valère but struggles to resist her father directly because paternal authority gives her wishes less weight than Orgon's plan. Dorine must help the young couple state clearly what they want, making the subplot comic while exposing the seriousness of forced dependence. Orgon treats marriage as an instrument for rewarding Tartuffe and demonstrating his own spiritual commitment, reducing his daughter's future to evidence of his devotion. The same

pattern appears when he disinherits Damis and dismisses Elmire's judgment. His private certainty becomes dangerous because it is backed by social and legal power. Molière therefore does more than portray an eccentric man making bad decisions; he shows how mistaken belief can become coercive when one person has the authority to convert personal conviction into family law.

The danger becomes even greater when Orgon gives Tartuffe property and entrusts him with politically sensitive papers. Tartuffe then moves from moral performance to institutional power, using legal procedure rather than physical force. His attempt to evict the family is especially revealing because he presents self-interest as obedience to law and proper order. Hypocrisy has now moved beyond private religion into contracts, ownership, and bureaucracy. This development shows that valid documents and procedures do not automatically produce just outcomes; judgment is still required because formal mechanisms can be used by people acting in bad faith. Orgon's late recognition cannot instantly reverse the consequences of his earlier decisions. The play thus connects personal gullibility with public risk, demonstrating that the cost of refusing evidence increases when money, property, and legal authority have already been transferred.

Religion, Moral Judgment, and the Political Ending

Tartuffe repeatedly distinguishes sincere religion from theatrical extremism. Cléante performs this function most clearly because he rejects both Tartuffe's false holiness and Orgon's tendency to move from one absolute position to another. After the deception is exposed, Orgon briefly becomes ready to condemn religious people in general, but Cléante reminds him that replacing credulity with universal suspicion is not wisdom. The play's moral argument therefore depends on discrimination in the intellectual sense: learning to distinguish genuine conduct from public display, humility from manipulation, and devotion from self-interest. Tartuffe's seduction of Elmire makes this distinction especially clear because he uses theological language to rationalize desire and secrecy. His wrongdoing is not ordinary human weakness; it is the deliberate use of moral vocabulary as a tool for obtaining sex, money, status, and control.

The royal officer's intervention at the end restores property and prevents the family's destruction by revealing that the king has recognized Tartuffe's criminal history. Modern readers sometimes find the ending artificial or flattering to Louis XIV, and it certainly reflects Molière's political environment after years of controversy surrounding the play. Yet its artificiality strengthens an important point: the household survives only because an exceptionally discerning external authority corrects consequences that Orgon allowed to become legally serious. The ending restores comic order, but it does not erase the warning that evidence was available long before power accepted it. A society cannot depend on perfect rulers to repair every failure of private judgment. The more durable lesson is that authority should be tested through conduct, consistency, accountability, and evidence rather than reputation or moral performance.

Conclusion

Molière's *Tartuffe* is more than a satire of one fraudulent religious man. It is a study of how hypocrisy gains influence when people in positions of authority want to believe in it. Tartuffe supplies the performance, but Orgon supplies property, legitimacy, and protection. Elmire and Dorine reveal forms of intelligence the household initially undervalues, while Mariane's threatened marriage shows how one person's obsession can control another person's future. The play ultimately defends sincere morality by exposing its counterfeit and showing that the appearance of virtue is not the same as virtue itself. Its comedy remains relevant because people still confuse confidence with truth, reputation with character, and moral language with moral conduct. Molière's strongest warning is therefore not simply to beware of hypocrites; it is to build habits and institutions in which evidence can challenge authority before deception becomes powerful enough to govern other people's lives.

Works Cited

Gaines, James F. *Social Structures in Molière's Theater*. Ohio State University Press, 1984.

Hall, H. Gaston. *Comedy in Context: Essays on Molière*. University Press of Mississippi, 1984.

Molière. *Tartuffe*. 1669.