Rich Erlich, English 495
<StGd *Tartuffe*> 9/VII/00, 15/X/00

Study Guide for Molière's *Tartuffe* (1664/1669)

Date of Production: Two dates for the play; the first is initial performance in three acts at court; the second is a public performance. Between 1664 and 1669, Church pressure was sufficient to keep *Tartuffe* suppressed.

Theme/Method/Genre:

In his introduction to his translation of Eight Plays by Molière for the Modern Library College Edition (1957), Morris Bishop says that Molière's typical method is to present "a positive character, dominated by a passion, a vice, a conviction, or even an ideal. This character is an odds with society, convention, normalcy. The revelation, and the humor, lie in the conflict, and in the revenge which normalcy takes upon the exceptional person." Which was a relevant theme ca. 1957 and may be relevant again in an America moving into the 21st century. "In the farce, the exceptional character is grotesque; in the comedy, he is realistic." In Molière's *Misanthrope*, the main character, Alceste, "sins by excess of virtue," an excess that makes him a misanthrope among so many who are not virtuous. Bishop finds a constant moral: "that nature has given common men a racial wisdom," which you can take to mean something like common sense, "an instinctive virtue leading to happiness within the group, and the excessive person tampers at his peril with the profound imperatives of humanity" (viii).

Combining the old French farce with new (in France) Italian *commedia dell' arte*, Molière, Bishop writes, followed the conventions of his time in depicting "universal types rather than particular individuals" (x-xii). So Molière works within a model that fits well with conservative satire, with "conservative" in the preRomantic, pre-USA sense that valued community over individuals, types over unique instances. The nonconformist is to be converted to common sense, or expelled.

Tartuffe has some farcical elements in the quarrels and threats of (mild) violence, and it has something of a form of a romantic comedy: Tartuffe as the unsuitable Father's choice for the daughter, coming between her and her True Love (cf. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and its tragic analog, *Romeo and Juliet*). It is satiric drama insofar as we are interested not so much in the Young Lovers as the Block to their love: Tartuffe and the Father he misguides, Orgon. And insofar as what Tartuffe and Orgon represents is satirized. Hypocrisy and stupidity may be just one set of targets.

Tartuffe:

The language of the play presents Tartuffe as a hypocrite, and the French Church should have had no problems with the exposure and punishment of a hypocrite: "Woe to thee, Scribes and Pharisees!" Jesus said, not because they were scribes and rabbis—"Rabbi" is what some of his followers call Jesus—but because they were "Hypocrites!" (to finish the rest of the formula). Bishop takes seriously that the Church got the play suppressed for five years, and that "[...] every spokesman for the Church in the seventeenth century condemned the play as dangerous to true religion." Even accepting the condemnation of Tartuffe as a hypocrite, we see "the practice of religion represented by a hypocrite [Tartuffe], a dupe [Orgon], and a fool [Madame Pernelle, I assume]." And the other actors burlesque piety. Bishop points out that "The more competent a hypocrite is, the less can his visible behavior be distinguished from the real thing," and he asks the subversive question, "is Tartuffe really a hypocrite?" Tartuffe never admits to hypocrisy, and what we *see* is "a bigoted, avaricious sensualist—which is a very different thing from being a hypocrite" (152).

Alternatively formulated, Tartuffe may sincerely believe, and betray his beliefs to get what he wants (make a pass at a married woman, con a dupe out of his wealth); and he uses his beliefs to make other people miserable. In addition, there may be a more serious satiric undertone with Tartuffe and Orgon, one pointing at a conflict between extreme piety of any sort and ordinary life, and between extreme Christian piety and family life.

To recycle a point from Shakespeare's "Problem Play" *Measure for Measure*" (1604):

> Whatever Isabella has to learn of the spirit of Christian theology, she has much of the letter right. For all the recent to-do about Christian family values, both Jesus and his Church have pretty consistently placed love and duty to God superior to what one owes one's family. The English version of Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" includes the lines "Let goods and kindred go, / This mortal life also," and Cousin and Kindred prove unfaithful to Everyman in the late Medieval/early Modern play by that name (ca. 1500). More importantly, consider Jesus's teachings in the Gospel According to Matthew, cited in Eric Hoffer's The True Believer (I quote the Geneva version): "And another of his disciples said unto him, 'Master, suffer me first to go and bury my father. But Jesus said unto him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead.'" The Geneva editors annotate this with "No duty or love is to be preferred to God's calling; therefore Jesus calleth them dead which are hindered [by] . . . any worldly thing . . . [from following] Christ" (8.21-22). Families will be torn by the persecution of Christians and by Christian witness, "And the brother will betray the brother to death and the father the son, and the children shall rise against their parents and shall cause them to die" (10.16-21). "For I am come to set a man at variance against his father and the daughter against her mother and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's enemies shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (10.35-37). See also Matthew 12.47-49: Christ's mother and "brothers" (kin anyway) as less important than his

> followers, since, as the Geneva editors note "Christ prefereth the spiritual kindred to the carnal."

Indeed, there may be family problems in the whole Judeo-Christian (and Islamic?) tradition. Jesus cites as "The Great Commandment" given to Moses "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength" and cites as "second unto that, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Nothing there about families or romantic love. Hoffer notes in this regard that the Confucian scholars who opposed Christianity based part of their opposition on the argument that doctrines privileging "the brotherhood of man" (or siblinghood of people[s]) necessarily deny the centrality of families.

Hoffer argues that *all* mass movements in their "active phase" attack and undermine the family, but that those mass movements that succeed make their peace with the present, the world, and very definitely with the family, coming to celebrate the family as a bulwark of the societies the leaders of the movements now wish to preserve. Christianity, however, goes through periodic "Revivals"; the hierarchy of the French Church in the 1660, Bishop notes, was "in a Puritan phase" and "condemned out of hand the theatre, professional players, offensive passages in [Molière's] *School for Wives*, and Molière's person," with one writer saying Molière "should be burned alive" (151). So there was a revival going on, and Tartuffe may represent the zealots who attacked Molière, and no more. Or, I'm suggesting here, the Tartuffe/Orgon relationship *may* suggest that the respectable French middle class is bringing into their figurative houses deep enemies of their respectable, bourgeois, family lives.

So are the targets of satire in *Tartuffe* "professional confidence men, who use religion as a cloak? Or did he criticize by implication a group, the *Compagnie du Saint-Scarement*, the [sect of the] Jansenists, the Jesuits? Or, despite all his disclaimers, was he mocking the practice of Catholicism, of all religion?" (Bishop 152). Or, was he implying, in Bishop's earlier clause, "timidly and even cryptically, that nature is a better guide than authority" (xiii)? I'm asking if Molière might have implied (perhaps unconsciously) that the commonsensical peace the Church made with the world and, pre-eminently, with the family was and is a good idea and is to be supported against excess of even truly Christian zeal. *That* question is still relevant, even among nonCatholics, nonChristians, or other people who have forgotten or never knew who might be the *Compagnie du Saint-Scarement*, the Jansenists, or even the Jesuits.

> Jansenists (from *Ency. of Religion*): "A movement in the Roman Catholic Church names after Cornelius Jansen (Bishop of Ypres 1636-8) whose posthumous *Augustinus* (1640) revived extreme Augustinian positions on predestination and grace. Jansenism was associated with rigorist ethics, especially in France […]." The movement lost steam and was finally condemned in 1713 by Pope Clement XI, in the bull *Unigenitus*.
>
> > {Extreme Augustinian argument (after the Calvinists): "By faith and faith alone shall you be saved." But who can have true Faith? By God's irresistible Grace only, can you have the Faith to be saved. And when does God decide to give or withhold Grace? When God decides anything: in eternity, which to our limited human minds was before/at the creation of the universe. What can I do to affect God's will? God's will is sovereign, not relative to anything, and certainly not relative to anything *you* can do. Therefore at the beginning of time God decided to save or damn you, and your salvation or damnation is *reflected* in your actions. QED Logically rigorous Puritans called for rigorous enforcement of moral codes for the damned and therefore immoral majority, so the damned wouldn't annoy the Elect as they passed through life to Glory. (But prospered in this life as a sign of Election. [See the 1999 film ELECTION.]) The less logically rigorous called for rigorous enforcement of moral codes for everyone, usually stressing sexual prohibitions from Leviticus and elsewhere in Hebrew Scripture (while, their critics sometimes said, claiming Christian freedom from most of the rest of Mosaic teaching.)

Structure of *Tartuffe*

Time: Does *Tartuffe* observe what the French neoClassical critics called "unity of time"? I.e., does the action take "one day" (8-24 hours)? (The Italian neoClassical critics talked of "*economy* of time [place, action].") In any event the running-time for a performance of *Tartuffe* isn't radically different from the fictive time of the action (unlike Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, which covers some 17 years).

Place: Unity of place observed, "the salon of Orgon's house," Paris, a nice neighborhood outside. "The furnishings are those of a well-to-do bourgeois" (Bishop 153).

Action: Orgon, father of the Mariane, tries to back out on his agreement that she should wed Valère so that she can marry Tartuffe; Tartuffe tries to seduce Elmire, wife to Orgon, and step-mother to Mariane, and milk Orgon for all he can get out of him. The movement of the play is, of course, getting the appropriate couple of Mariane and Valère together, Elmire remaining true to her marriage vows, and, somehow, the discomfiting of Tartuffe. (Note well how difficult that last part proves.)

Act I: We see the main characters (but *not* Tartuffe), and get exposition. Note Madame Pernelle, mother of Orgon. She turns out to be more than just an opportunity for exposition. Note also how much we *hear* of Tartuffe, and of theories of what causes piety.

Note dialog between Orgon (the "Old Man" of Roman comedy, made younger and somewhat brighter) and Dorine (the "Clever Servant"): Dorine tries to tell Orgon of Elmire's illness; Orgon only wants to hear about Tartuffe and sympathizes only with Tartuffe. The bit is silly, but it has a serious point, especially if Elmire looked still somewhat ill when we saw her. Tartuffe is a home-wrecker, and Orgon is becoming a bad husband, deaf to the needs of his wife. This dialog is followed by a dialog between Orgon and Elmire's brother, Cléante, wherein Cléante is The Man of Sense and Orgon is a comic figure living the irony of trying to impress a listener and only making the listener think ill of him: "Good Lord [...] I think you're crazy! / Or are you trying to make a fool of me?" (Bishop 163).

Act II: Complication of the plot with Orgon's scheme to marry Mariane to Tartuffe—but still no Tartuffe.

Orgon calls attention to the cupboard as a place an eavesdropper could lurk. The idea is nicely ludicrous: Orgon is what we'd call a bit paranoid. Note later how the joke is, in part, on us (and Orgon may be too trusting).

Agones:

1. Argument between Orgon and Dorine over Orgon's scheme for Mariane. Madame Pernelle had earlier told Dorine to be quiet and tried to put Dorine in her place as a dependent. Her son Orgon goes farther in treating her as/like a servant; take seriously his threat to hit her. Note also the comedy of the incongruity between his Christian intentions and attempt to be rational in the marriage scheme—as opposed to the ethical problems of breaking his word and forcing a marriage, plus the admitted sin of Wrath (anger). And it's funny that Mariane is *such* a twerp; in comedies, at least, heroines were expected to be a tad more heroic. The Woman of Sense is Dorine here (Elmire is the upper-middle-class version of the Type).

2. Lovers' quarrel between Mariane and Valère, reconciled by Dorine. It's not very funny in translation, but it does serve to delay the action—necessary if you don't want a 20-minute play—and to make a point about the necessity of the Good Guys to stick together.

Act III:

Damis/Dorine open: Damis as hot-blooded Young Man (but with a good heart), held in check by the smarter, more prudent Dorine. Note upshots of Damis's stubbornness and zeal.

Ê*Enter Tartuffe*. We've been waiting, and a good actor will deliver: he enters calling upon a servant to put away his "hair shirt" and "flagellator" (whip for self-flagellation): devices to tame the flesh. Servant? Maybe, even the somewhat poor had them. Still .... And suspicions about "Holier than thou," especially when piety is implemented masochistically, have long been strong. As we've heard earlier, Tartuffe is actually pretty kind to his flesh. We're being set up for a standard complaint about the ultra-pious: they sometimes think the sex rules are for everyone else.

Damis in cupboard: Farcical bit, but we have been prepared. Try to tease out all the ways this bit might be funny. Orgon's suspecting someone will eavesdrop from the cupboard is stupid—by real-world standards; except nothing is more likely, in a farce, than that people will be spied upon at important moments; but *we* know Orgon is a character in a play, something Orgon can't know; so it turns out Orgon was right in terms of our view, as we see when Damis goes into the cupboard, but .... Such complexities can yield laughs.

Tartuffe/Elmire: Note how Elmire handles the seduction attempt, and how she plans to put things right with the marriage of Valère and Mariane. Contrast would-be Hero, Damis. Mariane and Damis may be appropriate kids of Orgon: to start with, romantics, after their fashion, and not too bright. I'm certain Molière wants us to accept Elmire here as a Woman of Sense and a norm. How do you respond to her plan to keep quiet about Tartuffe's advances and just use them to blackmail him into decent behavior?

Tartuffe/Orgon/Damis: It seems that we Americans are not the only people who will gleefully forgive the tearful penitent: Tartuffe is a pre-existing satire of some of our televangelists caught in scandals.

Orgon will have wedding of Tartuffe and Mariane "This very evening," allowing for *unity of time* for the play.

Note physical threats by Orgon to Damis; note well Orgon's Pride: "Oh I defy you all! And I will teach you / You'll have to obey me! I'm the master here" (Bishop 193). As the old Church teaching has it, *Radix malorum Superbia est*: Pride is the root of all evils.

End of Scene: Orgon will disinherit his family and make Tartuffe his heir. "A good friend, whom I make my son-in-law, / Is dearer to me than my wife and my children." See above on Tartuffe as a threat to the family, but note that the formulation here is in terms of the classical (pagan) ideal of friendship.

Act IV:

A kind of imbroglio: Mariane is to wed Tartuffe, Damis is banished from the house, Tartuffe is to become Orgon's heir. How could things get worse? (See end of act.)

Note moment earlier in the Act of Mariane's kneeling to her father and Orgon's aside "Courage, my heart! Down with this human weakness!" Work out the implications of our wanting Orgon to be "weak" and to yield to his human affections for his family.

Revelation Scene: Orgon under table, Tartuffe trying to make it with Elmire, probably *on* the table, Orgon very, incredibly slow to respond.

Production question (1): How would you stage this scene to maximize laughs.

Production question (2): What "subtext" would you give the actor playing Tartuffe for his lines on "there is an art of removing scruples" a "science / Of loosening the bonds of human conscience"? *Is* he a hypocrite, or is it even funnier (and more instructive?) if he really believes that "the evil of an action" can be rectified by "the purity of our intention"?

> Note George Carlin on (1950s) Church doctrine, "By your *intentions* shall you be judged!" Alternatively—if with less immediate justification in the text—note the joke used by Henry Fielding in the 18th c. of claiming at Judgment, «Lord, 'tis true I disobeyed your commandments; but I *believed* in all of them.» Tartuffe may demonstrate a perversion of doctrine, or a flaw, in terms of common sense, in some Christian doctrine. (Still, if the doctrine is True, common sense be damned, and will be.)

Act V:

Opening: Things can always get worse. Mariane, Damis, and Valère may now be free from the threat of Dad, but now Dad is in trouble, and the youngster's inheritance is at stake; and Orgon may be about to get into big, big trouble. The strongbox is introduced late, but it may still be a kind of "macguffin": a physical prop the characters care about a whole lot, but which may not be to the point of their story.

Orgon/Cléante: Ever the moderate, Cléante condemns Orgon's excess in condemning by way of Tartuffe all the pious. Cléante as a Norm (= Normative Character) should've also kept Molière out of trouble. (Textual question: Were these speeches in original 3-act version of the play? If they were, the clerical censors may've demonstrated the denseness of many censors. On the other hand, sometimes censors are sensitive critics.)

Note the family coming together in the last act. That's good and necessary to resist evils such as those represented by Tartuffe. Is unity, though, *sufficient*? (Not in this play.)

Orgon/Madame Pernelle: Subtle it ain't, but there is the nice comedy here—and satiric if not poetic justice—of Orgon's mother inflicting upon him what he inflicted upon his family. She just won't listen. (This joke is used in a psychologically more sophisticated manner for the conversion of the anti-hero in Frederik Pohl's and C. M. Kornbluth's great 1950s satire, *The Space Merchants*.)

Climax, resolution, and denouement (tying up): OK, the King plays *deus ex machina* here. Literally, that means "god from the machine" and refers to the possibility in ancient Athenian staging of just lowering a god down in a basket so that he's in the world of the play but still above it. Then the god resolves irresolvable problems. The term became a figure of speech for bringing in some outside force at the last minute to resolve irresolvable problems. Usually, it's the device of a desperate hack trying to get a happy ending for a plot that shouldn't have one. But at least as early as Euripides's *Philoctetes* in ancient Athens, the "deus ex" was used to thematic effect.

> The logic of the play has demonstrated that Philoctetes should *not* return to Troy to win the war for the Greeks, but Herakles as deified jock comes down to tell him to haul-ass to Troy 'cause that's what's fated and what the gods want, so screw ethics and prudence.

What do you make of the King's intervention in *Tartuffe*?

- "Deus ex"

in the pejorative sense? Molière needed that happy ending?

- King as a kind of secular god, or God's parallel as "primate" among humans

(in Great Chain of Being theory) enacting an analog of Grace?

- Molière thanking his real-life King for protecting him?
- Molière appealing to his King to end the Tartufferie raging in France?
- All/None of the Above? Other?