



Tartuffe

By Molière

STUDY GUIDE
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POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early modern period of European History was one of considerable transformation. In politics, the era opens in 1600 with the Continent dominated by the Hapsburgs based in Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire. Political structures had changed from the feudal organization of Medieval Europe, as a result of power shifts, by the end of the century, France had emerged as the dominant power.

The 17th century is noted for being a period of extravagance and power for the French Monarchy. King Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu transformed France's feudal monarchy to an absolute monarchy. Louis XIV, however, is the French king most associated with this period. Also known as the Sun King, Louis strengthened his own power by keeping all the local princes and lords occupied with the elaborate court life at his palace at Versailles. This focus on court life kept the local princes and lords from focusing on trying to undermine Louis' power. This period is also known for the genius of the writers, architects, and musicians who were promoted by the royal court. Louis XIV operated as a patron of the arts, funding literary and cultural figures such as dramatist Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin), painter and print maker Charles Le Brun, and composer Jean-Baptiste Lully. Unfortunately, Louis' extravagance, in particular in waging expensive wars, left France in financial peril by the end of his reign. In 1685, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes leading to the persecution of the Jews and Huguenots (the members of the Protestant Reformed Church). The results are that thousands of merchants and skilled workers left France, further harming the economy.

In a climate of social and religious persecution, Molière created *Tartuffe*, a masterful satiric comedy dealing with hypocrisy and intolerance. The character Tartuffe is both a dangerous man and a complete buffoon. The entertainment value of the play softens what surely would have been a subject unacceptable to Molière's patron, Louis XIV.

Sources are from:

<http://www.westga.edu/~history/faculty/Love/HISTORY%204485-17th%20Century%20Europe.htm> (by Ronald S. Love)

<http://www.uncg.edu/rom/courses/dafein/civ/timeline.htm> (by David Michael Gallo)

http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery?method=4&dsid=2039&dekey=Louis14Fr&gwp=8&curtab=2039_1&linktext=Louis%20XIV

MOLIERE, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622-1673)

Just as French tragedy had achieved maturity with Racine, so French comedy was to reach its peak with Molière. Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, who assumed the name Molière, was the son of a prosperous upholsterer of Paris, one of the eight *valets de chambre tapissiers* who tended the king's furniture and upholstery. The young Poquelin received every advantage a boy could wish for. He was educated at the finest schools including the College of Clermont in Paris. He had access to the king's court. But even as a child, Molière found it infinitely more pleasant to poke fun at the aristocracy than to associate with them.

In 1643, at the age of twenty-one Molière decided to pursue a life in the theatre, a decision influenced by the fact that his father's shop was located near two important Parisian theatres—Pont-Neuf and Hotel de Bourgogne. Although his first venture, the Théâtre Illustre, failed, Molière and his companions toured the provinces of France from 1646 to 1658. During those years the group obviously learned much. When they returned to Paris, their popularity quickly grew until it was second only to the well-established Hôtel de Bourgogne troop.

Over the course of his professional career, Molière made enemies by using comedy to poke fun at powerful people and by dealing satirically with serious subjects. He presented a problem in French society for another reason. He was a favorite and under the protection of Louis XIV, but this was at a time when actors were considered to have very low social standing. His case was even more complicated by the fact that he had been excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church. In spite of his reputation as one of the greatest playwrights and actors of his time, at his death he was denied a burial place in consecrated ground.

Although Molière is noted today principally for his comedies of character and ideas, he wrote other kinds of plays as well. For plots, Molière borrowed from Plautus, Terence, and from Spanish and Italian contemporaries. Probably his greatest influence was Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Many of his plays are farces featuring the commedia character types. Molière's work has retained a more universal appeal than that of his contemporaries. His plays *The School for wives* (1662), *Tartuffe* (1664), *The Miser* (1668), *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* (1666), *The Would-Be Gentleman* (1671), and *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673) are still seen on the stages of almost every country, while those of his contemporaries, Corneille and Racine, are seldom produced outside of France.

ABOUT MOLIÈRE'S *Tartuffe*

Tartuffe, an odious hypocrite whose apparent piety has ingratiated him with the credulous Orgon and his mother Mme. Pernelle, has been taken into Orgon's home. Both Orgon and his mother believe that Tartuffe's pious example will be good for the other members of the family. But everyone else in the family, including even the outspoken servant Dorine, is perceptive enough to see through the impostor.

Despite the protestations of his sensible brother-in-law Cleante and his son Damis, Orgon determines that his daughter Mariane, who is in love with a young man named Valere, shall marry Tartuffe. When Orgon's wife Elmire seeks out Tartuffe to beg him to refuse Mariane's hand, he attempts to seduce her. Damis, who has overheard, denounces the impostor, but Orgon reacts by banishing his son rather than his guest and by signing over his entire property to Tartuffe.

Realizing the futility of reasoning with either Tartuffe or her husband, Elmire devises a way to expose the hypocrite to Orgon. She persuades Orgon to conceal himself under a table while she speaks to Tartuffe, and her husband is thus a witness to the impostor's advances to her.

Orgon's eyes are opened a little too late, for he has already assigned all he owns to Tartuffe. When Tartuffe realizes his hypocrisy has been discovered, he promptly turns the family out of the house. Then by reporting to the authorities that Orgon possesses a strongbox containing the papers of an exiled friend, Tartuffe contrives to have his former host arrested. But by order of the King, the arresting officer apprehends Tartuffe instead, and the impostor is hauled off to prison for his treacherous behavior toward his well-meaning if too-credulous host. The play ends as Damis is reconciled with his father and the wedding of Mariane and Valere is announced.

(Summary by Kevin Bergen at <http://moliere-in-english.com/tartuffe.html>)

CHARACTERS

MADAME PERNELLE, Orgon's mother, is totally deluded by Tartuffe until near the end of the play.

ORGON, husband of Elmire, son of Madame Pernelle, and father of Mariane and Damis, is the central character of the play and comes entirely under the influence of the hypocrite Tartuffe. Yet, whereas Tartuffe is the obvious hypocrite and scoundrel, Orgon is a much more complex character. Thus, Orgon's religious fanaticism seems more directly correlated to his basic nature, which is characterized by Cléante as being extravagant and uncontrolled in all respects. Thus, having once adopted a life of piety, Orgon tries to become the epitome of the pious person and goes to absurd extremes both in his words and deeds. In contrast, when he discovers the hypocrisy of Tartuffe, he reverses himself and determines to hate and persecute all pious men.

ELMIRE, Orgon's second wife, is reasonable and represents the opposite of her husband throughout most of the play.

DAMIS, Orgon's son and Elmire's stepson, uses his common sense to see through Tartuffe, but when he tries to prove him a hypocrite to his father, he is disinherited.

MARIANE, Orgon's daughter, is in love with Valère and is being forced by her father to marry Tartuffe.

VALÈRE, Mariane's suitor, is rejected by Orgon in favor of Tartuffe.

CLÉANTE, Orgon's brother-in-law, tries, usually unsuccessfully, to get everyone to view things with calm and reason.

TARTUFFE, a hypocrite, is a superb scoundrel who can don any pose and become a master of it. As a religious ascetic, he convinces Orgon and Madame Pernelle that he is a devoutly pious and humble man; his obvious hypocrisy, however, is apparent to the audience. Tartuffe's superiority lies in the fact that he can accurately analyze the weaknesses of his victims and then exploit these flaws for his own advantage. He is no simple or ignorant charlatan; instead, he is an alert and adept hypocrite who uses every means to bring about his success.

DORINE, Mariane's maid, is a stock character found in many of Molière's comedies and, in fact, has become a type found in comedies of all periods. She is the wise servant who sees through all pretense, and, while being the inferior in terms of social position, she is the superior in any contest of wits.

Sources from: www.bard.org, Utah Shakespearean Festival

STUDY QUESTIONS

Is the play in any way connected to the historical and political situation of Moliere's time? Do any of the characters in the play represent historical figures? Who might those be? In that sense, what might Molière be criticizing or addressing?

Are there characters in the play who stand for virtues or positive qualities? Who are they? What do they represent? How do those characters fit in with the values of the Enlightenment?

Aside from Tartuffe, are any other characters in the play criticized for their vices? If so, who are they and what are those vices? What is Orgon's problem? What does his name suggest? (think in French, if you can) Why does he admit Tartuffe into his home? What makes him vulnerable to the deceptions of Tartuffe? What does Orgon expect to gain from his association with Tartuffe?

Does Orgon change after meeting Tartuffe? Does Tartuffe make Orgon into a more pious or more Christian man? Why or why not? How does Orgon feel about others in his family? What does that indicate? Exactly what effects does Tartuffe have on Orgon? What are true piety and true Christianity according to Molière?

Are the family members successful in countering the schemes of Tartuffe? Why or why not? How do they propose to fight him? What are they fighting for? What saves them? Is it their own efforts? Do they deserve to be saved? Why is the ending of the play said to be problematic? What does the intervention of the king at the end represent? What does it suggest? Is the king a symbol? What does he stand for?

FOR FURTHER READING

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