

# TARTUFFE

## MOLIÈRE



A VERSE TRANSLATION BY  
CONSTANCE CONGDON

EDITED BY CONSTANCE CONGDON  
AND VIRGINIA SCOTT

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Molière  
TARTUFFE



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A VERSE TRANSLATION  
BACKGROUNDS AND SOURCES  
CRITICISM

*Verse Translation by*  
CONSTANCE CONGDON  
AMHERST COLLEGE

*Edited by*  
CONSTANCE CONGDON  
and  
VIRGINIA SCOTT  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS



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W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • *New York • London*

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Verse translation of *Tartuffe*:

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

The text of this book is composed in Fairfield Medium  
with the display set in Bernhard Modern.

Book design by Antonina Krass.

Composition by Binghamton Valley Composition.

Manufacturing by the Courier Companies—Westford division.

Production manager: Eric Pier-Hocking

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Molière, 1622–1673.

[*Tartuffe*. English]

*Tartuffe* : a verse translation, backgrounds and sources, criticism / Molière ;  
verse translation by Constance Congdon ; edited by Constance Congdon and  
Virginia Scott. p. cm. — (A Norton critical edition)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-393-93139-6

1. Molière, 1622–1673 *Tartuffe*. I. Congdon, Constance. II. Scott, Vir-  
ginia, 1934– III. Title.

PQ1842.A427 1984

842'.4—dc22

2008037319

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue,  
New York, N.Y. 10110  
[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House,  
75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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## Preface

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I have been a playwright for thirty years, and although many of my plays have been published, those playscripts exist to be produced in a theater. I never imagined that I would be doing a book to be used in a classroom, and although I love the idea that my plays are read and studied, I didn't write them to be read—I wrote them to be performed in front of an audience. Even my adaptations of classic plays are written for production and don't appear in print with contextual material. However, this particular play, *Tartuffe*, has such a fascinating history and still packs such a wallop that an acting edition of my new verse version, with no contextual material, didn't seem sufficient. I feel very fortunate to have had such a sterling publishing house as W. W. Norton ask for the volume you are about to read.

Luckily for me, translator and Molière scholar Virginia Scott agreed to do this volume with me. Virginia has spent a lifetime of scholarship on Molière: as a translator, she has completed translations of six of his plays; as a biographer, she published the most recent popular biography in English of Molière's life (*Molière: A Theatrical Life*, Cambridge University Press, 2000). She has spent her life in the theater, first as an actress in New York City, then as a scholar, teacher, and production dramaturg at the University of Massachusetts. We had done a very successful *Misanthrope*, commissioned by and produced at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, and it was with that production that we established our way of working.

Virginia produces a document that contains a "literal translation," in prose, of the play as well as the cultural and historical context of the text, frequently proposing variations of ambiguous or complex passages in the play. I read this document, usually with great enjoyment, and then sit down and begin writing the verse that will make up my playscript. Molière's plays, when in verse, were written in Alexandrine couplets, characterized by a built-in pause called a *caesura* after the sixth syllable of the twelve-syllable line. However, I chose iambic pentameter because that is the meter most English-speaking audiences are familiar with, and it's a meter that works well for English—in medieval and Renaissance poetry and mastered by Shakespeare and Marlowe and their contemporaries.

You have probably noticed that I put the phrase *literal translation* in quotation marks. This is my way of indicating that a literal translation, a word-by-word, line-by-line exact exchange from one language to another is rarely possible. Anyone able to speak another language knows the truth of this. Consider the catchphrase *Got milk?* In French, that is translated as “Lait obtenu?,” which translates back into English as “Milk obtained?” And, although that is a very close match, the difference in tone is marked. In fact, the purpose of the advertising catchphrase is undermined by the French version. In an example from *Tartuffe*, Dorine describes the title character as having “*un beau museau*.” Literally, *museau* means “muzzle” or “snout,” especially of an animal with a protruding nose and mouth. However, a *fine muzzle* in English can mean a restraining device that keeps a dog’s mouth shut to prevent the animal from biting. It also refers to the barrel of a rifle or pistol. *Museau* can also be a slang word for face, like *mug* or *kisser* is in English; but these, although clearer, both lack the really amusing reference to an animal. The solution: “He’s a dog,” a simple English phrase denoting someone who is very unattractive. It’s a compromise but, I think, captures the spirit of the French phrase, the comic idea of the moment, and the tone of Dorine in the conversation.

So the playscript I create is actually a re-creation, in that it is made up of many small choices, like the choice I just mentioned, but all in the service of bringing Molière’s original French playscript to English-speaking actors and audiences. This is why I call this *Tartuffe*, a new verse version. No matter how hard I try to get to the original play, I’m still writing a “version” of the play.

And the translation process doesn’t stop there. Another version of the script emerges in the production. To live on stage, the play must be translated into the language of the theater. I’m referring to the space (that is, the auditorium and the stage), the set, the props, the costumes, the sound, the lighting, even the makeup and hair the actors wear, and—the most important—the movement, the actors’ physicality and personae. This is why a playscript is sometimes referred to as a “blueprint,” a description that is irritating to many playwrights (because it sounds as though the script were just a schematic representation). As the daughter of someone who spent his life in the building trades, I know that a blueprint contains most of the information one needs to build the building, down to the size of the screws. My point is this: playscripts are different from paintings or sculptures, novels or poems in that a playscript is not in its true form until produced, until the building is built.

Converting Virginia’s prose document into verse is challenging but great fun. At times, it’s like a puzzle—how can I get everything into a couple of lines? And lines with end rhymes. French, as well as other

Romance languages, rhymes easily and fluidly, whereas rhymes in English call much more attention to themselves. The writers of rap lyrics know this and relish it, not only with couplets at the end of the lines but also in internal rhymes within the lines. Rap has brought rhyme back for the populace. (At the same time, modern poets have eschewed rhyme, with notable exceptions, like Richard Wilbur.) In spite of the power of many rap lyrics, there is a tendency among many actors for the English-speaking stage to bury those end rhymes, as if the rhyming couplets were an embarrassment and somehow detrimental to the emotional import of a speech or a moment on stage. (It's a little like Bill Murray's "lounge singer" doing an aria from a Mozart opera, but unintentionally ridiculous.)

However, plays cannot become themselves without actors and, in the case of rhymed Molière plays, actors who can do verse and meter. Having actors read aloud the first draft of any play is invaluable and essential, but even more so with playscripts in meter and verse. Thus I arranged a reading with actors so Virginia and I could hear what actors found (or didn't find) in the script. After the reading, I went back to work on the draft and rewrote, using notes from Virginia, notes to myself, and notes from the actors. These notes ranged from questions of meaning in word choice, to difficulties with the rhythm and meter of certain passages, to departures so far from the original in French as to be a misinterpretation and/or misrepresentation of Molière's play.

It is here that Molière had a great advantage over many playwrights—he wrote his plays for specific actors to play, including himself. As members of his company, the specific actors' voices and personae were the air he breathed. He also knew the dynamics that worked—for instance, that he was really good and really funny when his character was being irrational and irascible, and that Madeleine Béjart, who played Dorine in *Tartuffe*, as well as all the mouthy female servants, could always get a laugh by being smarter and more reasonable than her master, the role that Molière usually played.

Jean-Baptist Poquelin, sieur de Molière, was an actor first; and even after his theater became known for its playwright's works and had become a theater of the king, Molière remained the leading actor in the company. He created his last play, *The Imaginary Invalid*, as an acting vehicle for himself, by then a real invalid. His tuberculosis was so advanced that he coughed frequently and was often too weak to do the hard physical work of performing. But he missed performing, so he wrote a character who coughed frequently. This character is Argan (not Orgon in *Tartuffe*, but many of Molière's leading men are named versions of Argan or Orgon) and is, in fact, described by his wife, Béline, thus: "*sans cesse . . . mouchant, toussant, crachant*"—"always blowing his nose, coughing, spitting." Molière, the man, was

often too weak to stand, so he confined his character to a chair. (This chair can still be seen at the Comédie-Française, the theater that is the heir to Molière's theater.) There is the legend that he died sitting in the chair, on stage, during the last scene of the play. In fact, toward the end of the ceremony that ends the play, Molière experienced what has been called a "convulsion" but was probably the beginning of a tubercular hemorrhage. He was rushed to his home, where he died a few hours later. He had been a director, a function seen as separate only since the end of the nineteenth century; frequently a designer because companies did their own stage and costume design; and a producer because companies were their own producers. However, Molière was always an actor first. That was his identity. The rest of the functions he filled for the company were in service to that—he wrote roles for himself to play and he wrote roles for specific actors in his company to play.

After Molière's death, the Comédie-Française, the French national theater established in 1680 and still producing today as The House of Molière, believed that his plays could be handed down in their original translations into the language of the theater and that these exact replicas would preserve the original performances. The original actors would teach their successors, even down to the specific hand movements, tone of voice, and so on. However, each subsequent production, although in French, was still a pale replica of the original production, and fell short. Many would agree that they also fell short in other ways—instead of bringing the original to life, they created museum pieces that were static and dead. (In recent years, the Comédie-Française has changed its policy, and productions of Molière's plays are no longer hobbled to the conventions of the past.)

As a working playwright, I have had the opportunity, the terror, the joy of seeing multiple productions of many of my plays. I recently had the pleasure of seeing my verse version of *Tartuffe* produced—that is, translated for the stage, at Two River Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey. The director chose to set the play in Texas, in a McMansion, in a time contemporary with the production—2006. The text was in no way updated or reconceived, and I believe that Molière would have been pleased and horrified: pleased that the script, through the process of three translations (from the original French verse into English prose, from English prose into English verse, from written language to the language of the theater) still plays so well; horrified that its message is still so apt.

Constance Congdon  
Amherst, Massachusetts  
September 3, 2007

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The Text of  
TARTUFFE





## Cast List

[5w;7m]

MADAME PERNELLE <sup>1</sup>	mother of Orgon
ORGON <sup>2</sup>	husband of Elmire
ELMIRE <sup>3</sup>	wife of Orgon
DAMIS	son of Orgon
MARIANE	daughter of Orgon, in love with Valère
VALÈRE	in love with Mariane
CLÉANTE	Orgon's brother-in-law
TARTUFFE <sup>4</sup>	falsely devout
DORINE	Mariane's suivante <sup>5</sup>
MONSIEUR LOYAL	bailiff, or sheriff's officer
THE EXEMPT <sup>6</sup>	
FLIPOTE <sup>7</sup>	servant of Madame Pernelle

*The scene is Paris, in ORGON's house.*

## Act One\*

### Scene 1

MADAME PERNELLE, FLIPOTE, ELMIRE, MARIANE, DORINE,  
DAMIS, CLÉANTE

MADAME PERNELLE Flipote, come on! My visit here is through!

ELMIRE You walk so fast I can't keep up with you!

MADAME PERNELLE Then stop! That's your last step! Don't take another.

After all, I'm just your husband's mother.

5 ELMIRE And, as his wife, I have to see you out,

Agreed? Now, what is this about?

MADAME PERNELLE I cannot bear the way this house is run,  
As if I don't know how things should be done!

1. From *peronelle*, "a woman who talks too much in a peremptory manner."

2. From the Greek *orgé*, "anger."

3. From the Spanish *el mira*, "admirable one, beautiful and elegant."

4. The character name is now a common noun in French meaning "someone who is falsely pious, a hypocrite."

5. A lady's maid, in this case one who took over some of the functions of the mother when Orgon's first wife died.

6. An officer of the police, with the power to arrest.

7. From *flipot*, in cabinetry, "a little piece that covers up a flaw."

\* Line numbers have been included for the convenience of teachers and students, but do not correspond to the line numbers usually found in texts of *Tartuffe* published in French.

No one even thinks about my pleasure,  
 10 And, if I ask, I'm served at someone's leisure.  
 It's obvious—the values here aren't good  
 Or everyone would treat me as they should.  
 The Lord of Misrule<sup>8</sup> here has his dominion—

DORINE But—

MADAME PERNELLE See? A servant with an opinion.  
 15 You're the former nanny, nothing more.  
 Were I in charge here, you'd be out the door.

DAMIS If—

MADAME PERNELLE —You—be quiet. Now let Grandma spell  
 Her special word for you: "F-O-O-L."  
 Oh yes! Your dear grandmother tells you that,  
 20 Just as I told my son, "Your son's a brat.  
 He won't become a drunkard or a thief,  
 And yet, he'll be a lifetime full of grief."

MARIANE I think—

MADAME PERNELLE —Oh, don't do that, my dear grandchild.  
 You'll hurt your brain. You think that we're beguiled  
 25 By your quietude, you fragile flower,  
 But as they say, still waters do run sour.

ELMIRE But Mother—

MADAME PERNELLE —Daughter-in-law, please take this well—  
 Behavior such as yours leads straight to Hell.  
 You spend money like it grows on trees  
 30 Then wear it on your back in clothes like these.  
 Are you a princess? No? You're dressed like one!  
 One wonders whom you dress for, not my son.  
 Look to these children whom you have corrupted  
 When their mama's life was interrupted.  
 35 She spun in her grave when you were wed,  
 She's still a better mother, even dead.

CLÉANTE Madame, I do insist—

MADAME PERNELLE —You do? On what?  
 That we live life as you do, caring not  
 For morals? I hear each time you give that speech  
 40 Your sister memorizing what you teach.  
 I'd slam the door on you. Forgive my frankness.  
 That is how I am! And it is thankless.

DAMIS Tartuffe would, from the bottom of his heart,  
 If he had one, thank you.

MADAME PERNELLE Oh, now you start.  
 45 Grandson, it's "Monsieur Tartuffe," to you.

8. Reigns over a court in chaos.

And he's a man who should be listened to.  
If you provoke him with ungodly chat,  
I will not tolerate it, and that's that.

DAMIS Yet I should tolerate this trickster who

50 Has become the voice we answer to.  
And I'm to be as quiet as a mouse  
About this tyrant's power in our house?  
All the fun things lately we have planned,  
We couldn't do. And why? Because they're banned—

55 DORINE By him! Anything we take pleasure in  
Suddenly becomes a mortal sin.

MADAME PERNELLE Then he's here just in time is what I say!

Don't you see? He's showing you the way  
To Heaven! Yes! So follow where he leads!

60 My son knows he is just what this house needs.

DAMIS Now Grandmother, listen. Not Father, not you,  
No one can make me follow this man who  
Rules this house, yet came here as a peasant.  
I'll put him in his place. It won't be pleasant.

65 DORINE When he came here, he wasn't wearing shoes.  
But he's no village saint; it's all a ruse.  
There was no vow of poverty—he's poor!  
And he was just some beggar at the door  
Whom we should have tossed. He's a disaster!  
70 To think this street bum now plays the master.

MADAME PERNELLE May God have mercy on me. You're all blind.  
A nobler, kinder man you'll never find.

DORINE So you think he's a saint. That's what he wants.  
But he's a hypocrite and merely flaunts  
75 This so-called godliness.

MADAME PERNELLE Will you be quiet!?

DORINE And that man of his—I just don't buy it—  
He's supposed to be his servant? No.  
They're in cahoots, I bet.

MADAME PERNELLE How would you know?

When, clearly, you don't understand, in fact,

80 How a servant is supposed to act?  
This holy man you think of as uncouth,  
Tries to help by telling you the truth  
About yourself. But you can't hear it.  
He knows what Heaven wants and that you fear it.

85 DORINE So, "Heaven" hates these visits by our friends?  
I see! And that's why Tartuffe's gone to any ends  
To ruin our fun? But it is he who's zealous  
About "privacy" and why? He's jealous.

You can't miss it, whenever men come near—

90 He's lusting for our own Madame Elmire.

MADAME PERNELLE Since you, Dorine, have never understood  
Your place, or the concepts of "should"  
And "should not," one can't expect you to see,  
Tartuffe's awareness of propriety.

95 When these men visit, they bring noise and more—  
Valets and servants planted at the door,  
Carriages and horses, constant chatter.  
What must the neighbors think? These things matter.  
Is something going on? Well, I hope not.

100 You know you're being talked about a lot.

CLÉANTE Really, Madame, you think you can prevent  
Gossip? When most human beings are bent  
On rumor mongering and defamation,  
And gathering or faking information  
105 To make us all look bad—what can we do?  
The fools that gossip don't care what is true.  
You would force the whole world to be quiet?  
Impossible! And each new lie, deny it?  
Who in the world would want to live that way?

110 Let's live our lives. Let gossips have their say.

DORINE It's our neighbor, Daphne. I just know it.  
They don't like us. It's obvious—they show it  
In the way they watch us—she and her mate.  
I've seen them squinting at us, through their gate.  
115 It's true—those whose private conduct is the worst,  
Will mow each other down to be the first  
To weave some tale of lust, and hearts broken  
Out of a simple kiss that's just a token  
Between friends—just friends and nothing more.  
120 See—those whose trysts are kept behind a door  
Yet everyone finds out? Well, then, they need  
New stories for the gossip mill to feed  
To all who'll listen. So they must repaint  
The deeds of others, hoping that a taint  
125 Will color others' lives in darker tone  
And, by this process, lighten up their own.

MADAME PERNELLE Daphne and her mate are not the point.  
But when Orante says things are out of joint,  
There's a problem. She's a person who

130 Prays every day and should be listened to.

She condemns the mob who visits here.

DORINE This good woman shouldn't live so near

Those, like us, who run a bawdy house.  
I hear she lives as quiet as a mouse,  
135 Devout, though. Everyone applauds her zeal.  
She needed that when age stole her appeal.  
Her passion is policing—it's her duty  
And compensation for her loss of beauty.  
She's a reluctant prude. And now, her art,  
140 Once used so well to win a lover's heart,  
Is gone. Her eyes that used to flash with lust,  
Are steely from her piety. She must  
Have seen that it's too late to be a wife,  
And so she lives a plain and pious life.  
145 This is a strategy of old coquettes.  
It's how they manage once the world forgets  
Them. First, they wallow in a dark depression,  
Then see no recourse but in the profession  
Of a prude. They criticize the lives of everyone.  
150 They censure everything, and pardon none.  
It's envy. Pleasures that they are denied  
By time and age, now, they just can't abide.

MADAME PERNELLE You do go on and on.

[To ELMIRE]

My dear Elmire,

This is all your doing. It's so clear  
155 Because you let a servant give advice.  
Just be aware—I'm tired of being nice.  
It's obvious to anyone with eyes  
That what my son has done is more than wise  
In welcoming this man who's so devout,  
160 His very presence cast the devils out.  
Or most of them—that's why I hope you hear him.  
And I advise all of you to stay near him.  
You need his protection and advice.  
Your casual attention won't suffice.  
165 It's Heaven sent him here to fill a need,  
To save you from yourselves—oh yes, indeed.  
These visits from your friends you seem to want—  
Listen to yourselves! So nonchalant!  
As if no evil lurked in these events.  
170 And you were blind to what Satan invents.  
And dances! What are those but food for slander!  
It's to the worst desires these parties pander.  
I ask you now what purpose do they serve?  
Where gossip's passed around like an hors d'oeuvre.  
175 A thousand cackling hens, busy with what?



It takes a lot of noise to cover smut.  
 It truly is the tower of Babylon,<sup>9</sup>  
 Where people babble on and on and on.  
 Ah! Case in point—there stands Monsieur Cléante,  
 Sniggering and eyeing me askant,  
 As if this has nothing to do with him  
 And nothing that he does would God condemn.  
 And so, Elmire, my dear, I say farewell.  
 'Til when? When it is a fine day in Hell.  
 Farewell, all of you. When I pass through that door,  
 You won't have me to laugh at any more.  
 Flipote! Wake up! Have you heard nothing I have said?  
 I'll march you home and beat you till you're dead.  
 March, slut, march.

### Scene 2

DORINE, CLÉANTE

CLÉANTE I'm staying here. She's scary,  
 That old lady—

DORINE I know why you're wary.  
 Shall I call her back to hear you say,  
 "That *old* lady"? That would make her day.

5 CLÉANTE She's lost her mind, she's—now we have the proof—  
 Head over heels in love with whom? Tartuffe.

DORINE So here's what's worse and weird—so is her son.

What's more—it's obvious to everyone.  
 Before Tartuffe and he became entwined,  
 Orgon once ruled this house in his right mind.  
 In the troubled times, he backed the prince,<sup>1</sup>  
 And that took courage. We haven't seen it since.  
 He is intoxicated with Tartuffe—

A potion that exceeds a hundred proof.  
 15 It's put him in a trance, this Devil's brew.  
 And so he worships this imposter who  
 He calls "brother" and loves more than one—  
 This charlatan—more than daughter, wife, son.  
 This charlatan hears all our master's dreams,  
 20 And all his secrets. Every thought, it seems,

9. She intends to say the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). God considered the Tower of Babel to be an example of human arrogance and punished its builders by dividing them into different races that spoke different languages. Cléante laughs at her mistake.

1. Refers to the Fronde, an uprising against the young Louis XIV and his prime minister Cardinal Mazarin in 1648–53. Orgon took the king's side in the conflict.