

A HARVEST BOOK

Molière

TARTUFFE



TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH VERSE AND INTRODUCED BY
RICHARD WILBUR

JEAN BAPTISTE POQUELIN DE

Molière

TARTUFFE

COMEDY IN FIVE ACTS, 1669

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A HARVEST BOOK
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For my brother Lawrence

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A Note to the Harvest Edition

There are one or two things I should like to say to those who will be using this edition of *Tartuffe* as a script. This translation has had the good luck to be performed, a number of times, in New York, regional, and university theaters, and also on the radio. The best of the stage productions have repeatedly proved what the fact of radio production would suggest: the verbal sufficiency of Molière's serious comedy. What such a play as *Tartuffe* is about, what the characters think, feel, and do, is clearly and amply presented in the dialogue, so that a mere reading-aloud of the lines, without any effort at performance, can provide a complete, if austere, experience of the work.

I do not mean to say that there are no open questions in the play. To what extent does Cléante, in his reasonable yet ineffectual speeches, express the playwright's view of things? Is it possible that Tartuffe possesses, in his real and underlying nature, a kind of balked religious yearning? And what on earth does Elmire see in Orgon? These are questions that director and actor may, and indeed must, decide; but it will be found that Molière's comedy, because it is so thoroughly "written," resists the overextension of any thesis. The actor or director who insists on a stimulatingly freakish interpretation will find himself engaged in deliberate misreading and willful distortion, and the audience will not be deceived.

In short, trust the words. Trust the words to convey the point and persons of the comedy, and trust them also to be sufficiently entertaining. A fussy anxiety on the part of the director, whereby the dialogue is hurried, cut, or swamped in farcical action, is the commonest cause of failure in productions of Molière. To such want of confidence in the text we owe the occasional disastrous transformation of Tartuffe's two interviews with Elmire into a couple of wrestling bouts. A real

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quality of Tartuffe's—his lustfulness—is emphasized by such treatment, but at the cost of making his great speeches seem redundant and pointlessly nuanced. The cost is too great, and the audience, though it may consent to laugh, will not be satisfied.

The introduction to the original edition still says what I think, and I shall let it stand. Were I to revise it, I would explicitly and gratefully refer to the criticism of Jacques Guicharnaud, and would also somewhat qualify my claim to accuracy. In translating *Tartuffe*, I did not always capture Madame Pernelle's way of slipping into old-fashioned and inelegant speech, or Mariane's of parroting the rhetoric of artificial romances. My excuse for these deficiencies is that, while echoes of an unchanging scripture or liturgy are readily duplicated, as in the speeches of Tartuffe, a translation that seeks to avoid a "period" diction cannot easily find equivalents for such quirks and fads of language as I have mentioned.

R. W.

INTRODUCTION

There may be people who deny comedy the right to be serious, and think it improper for any but trivial themes to consort with laughter. It would take people of that kind to find in *Tartuffe* anything offensive to religion. The warped characters of the play express an obviously warped religious attitude, which is corrected by the reasonable orthodoxy of Cléante, the wholesomeness of Dorine, and the entire testimony of the action. The play is not a satire on religion, as those held who kept it off the boards for five years. Is it, then, a satire on religious hypocrisy, as Molière claimed in his polemical preface of 1669?

The play speaks often of religious hypocrisy, displays it in action, and sometimes seems to be gesturing toward its practitioners in seventeenth-century French society. *Tartuffe* is made to recommend, more than once, those Jesuitical techniques for easing the conscience which Pascal attacked in the *Provincial Letters*. Cléante makes a long speech against people who feign piety for the sake of preferment or political advantage. And yet no one in the play can be said to be a religious hypocrite in any representative sense. *Tartuffe* may at times suggest or symbolize the slippery casuist, or the sort of hypocrite denounced by Cléante, but he is not himself such a person. He is a versatile parasite or confidence man, with a very long criminal record, and to pose as a holy man is not his only *modus operandi*: we see him, in the last act, shifting easily from the role of saint to that of hundred-percenter. As for the other major characters who might qualify, Madame Pernelle is simply a nasty bigot, while the religious attitudes of her son Orgon are, for all their underlying corruption, quite sincere.

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Tartuffe is only incidentally satiric; what we experience in reading or seeing it, as several modern critics have argued, is not a satire but a "deep" comedy in which (1) a knave tries to control life by cold chicanery, (2) a fool tries to oppress life by unconscious misuse of the highest values, and (3) life, happily, will not have it.

Orgon, the central character of the play, is a rich bourgeois of middle age, with two grown children by his first wife. His second wife, Elmire, is attractive, young, and socially clever. We gather from the maid Dorine that Orgon has until lately seemed a good and sensible man, but the Orgon whom we meet in Act I, Scene 4 has become a fool. What has happened to him? It appears that he, like many another middle-aged man, has been alarmed by a sense of failing powers and failing authority, and that he has compensated by adopting an extreme religious severity. In this he is comparable to the aging coquette described by Dorine, who "quits a world which fast is quitting her," and saves face by becoming a censorious prude.

Orgon's resort to bigotry has coincided with his discovery of Tartuffe, a wily opportunist who imposes upon him by a pretense of sanctity, and is soon established in Orgon's house as honored guest, spiritual guide, and moral censor. Tartuffe's attitude toward Orgon is perfectly simple: he regards his benefactor as a dupe, and proposes to swindle him as badly as he can. Orgon's attitude toward Tartuffe is more complex and far less conscious. It consists, in part, of an unnatural fondness or "crush" about which the clear-sighted Dorine is explicit:

*He pets and pampers him with love more tender
Than any pretty mistress could engender. . . .*

It also involves, in the strict sense of the word, idolatry: Orgon's febrile religious emotions are all related to Tartuffe

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and appear to terminate in him. Finally, and least consciously, Orgon cherishes Tartuffe because, with the sanction of the latter's austere precepts, he can tyrannize over his family and punish them for possessing what he feels himself to be losing: youth, gaiety, strong natural desires. This punitive motive comes to the surface, looking like plain sadism, when Orgon orders his daughter to

Marry Tartuffe, and mortify your flesh!

Orgon is thus both Tartuffe's victim and his unconscious exploiter; once we apprehend this, we can better understand Orgon's stubborn refusal to see Tartuffe for the fraud that he is.

When Orgon says to Cléante,

*My mother, children, brother and wife could die,
And I'd not feel a single moment's pain,*

he is parodying or perverting a Christian idea which derives from the Gospels and rings out purely in Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God":

*Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also. . . .*

The trouble with Orgon's high spirituality is that one cannot obey the first commandment without obeying the second also. Orgon has withdrawn all proper feeling from those about him, and his vicious fatuity creates an atmosphere which is the comic equivalent of *King Lear's*. All natural bonds of love and trust are strained or broken; evil is taken for good; truth must to kennel. Cléante's reasonings, the rebellious protests of Damis, the entreaties of Mariane, and the mockeries of Dorine are ineffectual against Orgon's folly; he must see Tartuffe paw at his wife, and hear Tartuffe speak contemptuously of him, before he is willing to

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part with the sponsor of his spiteful piety. How little "religion" there has been in Orgon's behavior, how much it has arisen from infatuation and bitterness, we may judge by his indiscriminate outburst in the fifth act:

*Enough, by God! I'm through with pious men!
Henceforth I'll hate the whole false brotherhood,
And persecute them worse than Satan could.*

By the time Orgon is made to see Tartuffe's duplicity, the latter has accomplished his swindle, and is in a position to bring about Orgon's material ruin. It takes Louis XIV himself to save the day, in a conclusion which may seem both forced and flattering, but which serves to contrast a judicious, humane and forgiving ruler with the domestic tyrant Orgon. The King's moral insight is Tartuffe's final undoing; nevertheless there is an earlier scene in which we are given better assurance of the invincibility of the natural and sane. I refer to Tartuffe's first conversation with Elmire, in which passion compels the hypocrite recklessly to abandon his role. What comes out of Tartuffe in that scene is an expression of helpless lust, couched in an appalling mixture of the languages of gallantry and devotion. It is not attractive; and yet one is profoundly satisfied to discover that, as W. G. Moore puts it, "Tartuffe's human nature escapes his calculation." To be flawlessly monstrous is, thank heaven, not easy.

In translating *Tartuffe* I have tried, as with *The Misanthrope* some years ago, to reproduce with all possible fidelity both Molière's words and his poetic form. The necessity of keeping verse and rhyme, in such plays as these, was argued at some length in an introduction to the earlier translation, and I shall not repeat all those arguments here. It is true that *Tartuffe* presents an upper-bourgeois rather than a courtly milieu; there is less deliberate wit and ele-

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gance than in the dialogue of *The Misanthrope*, and consequently there is less call for the couplet as a conveyor of epigrammatic effects. Yet there are such effects in *Tartuffe*, and rhyme and verse are required here for other good reasons: to pay out the long speeches with clarifying emphasis, and at an assimilable rate; to couple farcical sequences to passages of greater weight and resonance; and to give a purely formal pleasure, as when balancing verse-patterns support the “ballet” movement of the close of Act II. My convictions being what they are, I am happy to report what a number of productions of the *Misanthrope* translation have shown: that contemporary audiences are quite willing to put up with rhymed verse on the stage.

I thank Messrs. Jacques Barzun and Eric Bentley for encouraging me to undertake this translation; Messrs. Harry Levin, Frederic Musser and Edward Williamson for suggesting improvements in the text; and the Ford and Philadelphia Community Foundations for their support of the project.

Richard Wilbur

Portland, Connecticut
February, 1963

TARTUFFE

CHARACTERS

MME PERNELLE, Orgon's mother

ORGON, Elmire's husband

ELMIRE, Orgon's wife

DAMIS, Orgon's son, Elmire's stepson

MARIANE, Orgon's daughter, Elmire's stepdaughter,
in love with Valère

VALÈRE, in love with Mariane

CLÉANTE, Orgon's brother-in-law

TARTUFFE, a hypocrite

DORINE, Mariane's lady's-maid

M. LOYAL, a bailiff

A POLICE OFFICER

FLIPOTE, Mme Pernelle's maid

The scene throughout: Orgon's house in Paris

ACT 1

