



WORLD LITERATURE II (ENG 252)

Tartuffe Study Guide

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WHY READ *TARTUFFE*?

Tartuffe is a delightful play from France's Golden Age. Not only is *Tartuffe* a great classic, it is fun to read or to see (there are excellent films of *Tartuffe* available; it is also performed fairly often). It deals with family troubles, struggles between the generations, thwarted young love, reasonable folks who are ignored, pompous fools who cause great trouble, and a truly evil villain, the hypocrite, Tartuffe. *Tartuffe* also offers a solid basis for comparison and contrast with later works you will be reading, including *Candide* (varieties of fools), *Faust* (two sorts of evil leaders), and *Hedda Gabler* (women's conditions and behavior).

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LOUIS XIV

Louis XIV, the Sun King, reigned in France from 1643-1715. He was an absolute monarch who ruled by divine right and was considered God's vicar on earth. The court he ruled over was incredibly elaborate, with complex public ceremonies for every moment of the day and night, including a very public dressing ceremony, where the King would be surrounded by increasing crowds of courtiers as he went through the process of getting dressed each morning.

Early in Louis' reign (1648-49), there had been a brief, but violent civil war, the Fronde; this is the uprising that Orgon's friend was involved in; his papers nearly got Orgon arrested.

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RELIGION

Religion was a very serious issue in 17th century Europe. In the early 17th c., there had been bitter, violent religious wars between Catholics and Huguenots. This was followed by a period of intense religious fervour during Louis' reign.

One powerful group in France was the Company of the Holy Sacrament -- an extreme, influential Catholic organization, which enforced strict religious practices among its members. They emphasized good deeds and a puritanical code of behavior. They also encouraged placing spiritual directors into people's homes, so one can understand why they felt particularly attacked by the character of Tartuffe, an evil spiritual director in the home of a fool. This group was very hostile towards *Tartuffe*.

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LITERARY GOLDEN AGE

French literature under Louis XIV enjoyed one of the rare "golden ages," like those of Shakespearean England and Classical Greece. French writers drew on the Greek and Latin classics as sources for many of their stories and plays. They greatly admired the restraint, formal excellence and power of these classics. But, this was not a period of hollow imitation--brilliant new literature was created out of these ancient sources. The French classicists of this period venerated reason and good sense, not formal logic. Cleante, in *Tartuffe*, is a fine example of this ideal. He is a reasonable man, a pious man, but not a dry academic. He exhibits good sense, not rigid logic. Of course, within the comic world of the play, no one pays any attention to his reasonable suggestions, and that is part of the fun of *Tartuffe*.

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MOLIERE

Moliere's primary goal was to entertain, "A...very spoiled, and generally well-educated public... the middle and upper-middle classes of the city, the aristocrats and officials at court, the royal family and...the Sun King himself, who was obsessed with the theater." (Mander, 18)

Louis XIV loved Moliere's satires, so long as they did not make fun of kings. Louis' favor was especially important when Moliere wrote *Tartuffe*, in which the villain is a despicable hypocrite who took advantage of the powerful religious feelings of the age. Moliere created *Tartuffe* as a satirical attack on religious hypocrisy, not religion. The Church, however, saw *Tartuffe* as an attack on its spiritual directors, and "...though Louis XIV took a saner view [of *Tartuffe*] he was pressed by his advisers to prevent a public performance...." (Maland, 258)

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SOURCES OF MOLIERE'S CHARACTERS

From old French farce, Moliere learned about "... knock-about clowning...stumbling drunks and bewildered cuckolds." From the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* he learned "how to improvise on stock situations according to the nature of each audience; like them he often performed with a mask or floured face..." (Maland, 173)

Moliere first developed his characters from the Italian mask, a kind of comedy which used a set of stock characters who wore masks. These "masks" or stock characters included the "...Captain [who] is no more than vanity and cowardice; Scaramouche, roguery and impudence... Harlequin, the naïve and awkward valet...and Pantaloon [who] is melancholy old age, miserly and foolish." (Lanson, 23)

"For Molière a character is a person who is powerfully unified by the domination of a passion or vice that destroys or subdues all other likes and dislikes of his soul, and this quality becomes the motivating force of all his thought and action." (Lanson, 22)

Moliere's comic fools and villains "...retain the ...fixity of characters...of Italian *masks*....the only purpose of the action is...to bring forth inexhaustibly, by different acts and under different light, that feeling which is the single mainspring of the character." Because these characters are changeless, "...their comedy has no denouement, because they have to be as they are from start to finish..." (Lanson, 25)

Thus, when Orgon realizes that Tartuffe has deceived him, he immediately switches from loving religion to hating religion without a pause in the middle to be reasonable. The king may save the day, but nothing will enlighten Orgon and make him into a reasonable man.

The opposition of "...the fool and the villain, the dupe and the intriguer...." is an ancient comic pattern.

"Moliere's...comedies...follow this...pattern.... The victim never learns from experience: ridiculous characters are incapable of learning in this manner, for one of their weaknesses is always unreasonableness, lack of insight, and unresponsiveness in the face of attempts to persuade them of their folly...." (Mander, 32-33)

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THE STORY OF TARTUFFE

ACT I

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| Scene 1 | Mme. Pernelle leaves--Orgon's family is not pure enough for her. |
| Scene 2 | Dorine tells about Orgon's obsession with Tartuffe. |
| Scene 3 | We hear worries about the proposed wedding of Mariane, Orgon's daughter, and Valere. |
| Scene 4 | Orgon interviews Dorine about "poor" Tartuffe. |
| Scene 5 | Cleante tries to give Orgon good advice; he's ignored. |

ACT II

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| Scene 1 | Orgon tells Mariane she must marry Tartuffe. |
| Scene 2 | Dorine tries to help Mariane by arguing with Orgon. |
| Scene 3 | Dorine tries to talk sense into Mariane. |
| Scene 4 | Valere and Mariane spat over Orgon wanting her to marry Tartuffe. Dorine intervenes. |

ACT III

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| Scene 1 | Damis, Orgon's son, is furious about Tartuffe and wants to tell him off. Dorine tries to calm him down. |
| Scene 2 | Tartuffe enters with talk of his hair shirt. |
| Scene 3 | Tartuffe woos Elmire; she tries to get him to agree not to marry Mariane. |
| Scene 4 | Damis enters from hiding place and has a fit; Elmire tries to calm him. |
| Scene 5 | Enter Orgon; Damis tells about Tartuffe's wooing of Elmire. |
| Scene 6 | Enter Tartuffe who confesses to all things awful; Orgon feels sorry for him and disinherits Damis! |
| Scene 7 | Orgon tells Tartuffe to spite everyone by spending all his time with Elmire; he makes Tartuffe his heir and will force Mariane to marry him. |

ACT IV

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| Scene 1 | Cleante tries talking reason to Tartuffe; no luck. |
| Scene 2 | Dorine asks Cleante to help Mariane. |
| Scene 3 | Orgon brings the marriage contract. Mariane begs him not to force her to marry Tartuffe; she'd rather die. Cleante tries to intervene but Orgon rejects his good advice. Elmire offers to <u>show</u> Orgon Tartuffe's treachery. |
| Scene 4 | Elmire hides Orgon under the table and tells him to stop matters when he's convinced. |
| Scene 5 | Tartuffe makes love to Elmire; Orgon stays quiet under the table as Elmire nearly gets raped. |
| Scene 6 | Orgon comes out, horrified at Tartuffe. |
| Scene 7 | Orgon confronts Tartuffe and tells him to leave; Tartuffe tells Orgon to leave <u>his</u> house. |
| Scene 8 | Orgon tells Elmire about the deed of gift and the strong box. |

ACT V

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| Scene 1 | Orgon tells Cleante about the strong box; now Orgon hates all religious people. |
| Scene 2 | Hothead Damis offers to kill Tartuffe. |
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| Scene 3 | Mme Pernelle won't believe Orgon's tale of Tartuffe's treachery. |
| Scene 4 | M. Loyal brings the eviction notice. |
| Scene 5 | Mme Pernelle now believes in Tartuffe's treachery. |
| Scene 6 | Valere offers to help Orgon escape; offers coach and money. |
| Scene 7 | Officer and Tartuffe arrive to arrest Orgon, but officer arrests Tartuffe instead. Speech about how the King recognized Tartuffe as a criminal and forgives Orgon because he had helped him during the civil war. Happy ending. |

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CHARACTERS IN TARTUFFE

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| All Good & All Knowing | Louis XIV |
| Reasonable Characters | King's Officer, Cleante, Elmire, Dorine |
| Unreasonable Characters | Orgon, Mme. Pernelle, Mariane, Damis, Valere |
| All Evil and Knows Quite a Bit | Tartuffe |

- Tartuffe is the villain; he is a hypocrite who pretends to be pious, but uses his religious appearance to harm others.
- Orgon is a fool and an authoritarian bully who would sacrifice his daughter to please his whims. "...Orgon is bent on using Tartuffe as much as Tartuffe is bent on using him....Orgon sets himself up *against* society as the only true Christian in it. " (Gossman, 73)
- Madame Pernelle, Orgon's mother, is another fool and bully.
- Elmire is a sensible, sophisticated lady in control of her own emotions. She tries to keep matters calm and comfortable and not to make a fuss unless it is absolutely necessary.
- Dorine is clever, loyal, amazingly outspoken, and clearly has her heart and her good sense on the right side, protecting the rights of women and of the young.
- Cleante represents the ideal of the reasonable man, His advice is excellent, but Orgon does not listen to reason or common sense. Impassioned fools never do.
- Mariane, Damis and Valere, the young people, are naive, emotional, vulnerable, and very much at the mercy of the authoritarian adults.
- The king, Louis XIV, although not involved in the action, knows all and judges all fairly and reasonably. His reason is like Cleante's, but it is accompanied by real power, so that he is able to enforce his will, which Cleante is not.

His royal soul, though generous and human,
Views all things with discernment and acumen;
His sovereign reason is not lightly swayed,
And all his judgments are discreetly weighed.
He honors righteous men of every kind,
And yet his zeal for virtue is not blind,
Nor does his love of piety numb his wits
And make him tolerant of hypocrites.

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WWW SITES FOR 17TH CENTURY FRANCE

I have collected a number of interesting WWW sites that deal with 17th century French culture. This site is actually designed for studying another French playwright, Racine, a contemporary of Moliere. However, it links to many fascinating sites that offer background in 17th century French culture, so it is equally useful for gathering background information on Moliere. To get there, click on [Racine Web Site](#).

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