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Molière's TARTUFFE

The religious controversy that ensued over *Tartuffe* (1669) in its day may seem to be a mere fact of history to us nearly 350 years later. Yet truly how distant is this controversy from a world that has seen a long-standing conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, not to speak of continuing politico-religious (or ethno-political) struggles in the Middle East, the Far East, and Eastern Europe? I refer not only to the play's treatment of Catholicism, but also to the historical background that produced the intensity of the reaction against it. That intensity, as well as the religious zealotry of *Tartuffe*'s two major characters, cannot be understood without an accompanying understanding of the events that preceded it in seventeenth-century France. We must recall that, in the mid-seventeenth century, France had just barely emerged from a period of bloody religious strife.

Persecution of Protestants—or Huguenots, as they were known in France—had begun about 1540 but did not assume major proportions until 1572, when thousands of Protestants were murdered in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. The amnesty and tolerance extended to the Huguenots in the first part of the seventeenth century as a result of Henry VI's 1598 Edict of Nantes were jeopardized by warfare during the Frondes from 1648 to 1653, when religious groups sided with various noblemen struggling for power against—or on the side of—Louis XIV. Specifically, this rebellion or revolt (literally, a *fronde* is a sling, as in *slingshot*) during the minority of Louis XIV consisted of the Fronde of the Parliament (1648–49) and the Fronde of the Princes (1650–53), each of which was a failed attempt to undermine the absoluteness of Louis's monarchy.

Despite the monarchy's imposing facade, the French were imperfectly and precariously united in the mid-seventeenth century, and they were also deeply split in matters of faith after long years of war (1540–1652) between Roman Catholics and Protestants. After the failure of the Frondes, increasing pressure was put on all segments of society to conform and serve a central (Catholic) government, which was being built by Cardinal Richelieu. Religion and politics were thus inextricably bound together at this time—so much so that, after putting down the rebellion of the two Frondes and consolidating his Catholic monarchy, Louis, together with his chief minister, Mazarin (who replaced Richelieu), proceeded to look the other way as Protestants were persecuted, suppressed, and exiled, until the king finally abandoned

any pretense of allowing religious liberty and revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (see Walker).

In such an atmosphere of "spiritual correctness," there was little room for independent thinking, and the main danger to national unity was believed to be heresy. Heresy, moreover, could be defined as a mild and tractable view of Christian morality that benignly regarded human passions and values as one small part of God's large creation—as opposed to an austere, puritanical view of the same morality, which brutally condemned all instinct, pleasure, and worldliness (particularly the growing popularity of the stage) as evil. This latter position led in many instances to a police-state mentality, exemplified above all by the major Catholic lay brotherhood, La Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement (the Company or Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament), formed in 1627 to enforce Catholic morality. Although the company was officially suppressed by the Paris Parliament in 1660, it remained strong as a secret "benevolent" society. Benevolence for this company of men consisted of service in French families as lay "directors of conscience"—service that was sometimes performed, on behalf of the Brotherhood, by actual priests but that was most often given to lay brothers who otherwise had no ordained duties (Bradby and Calder 219–20). Indeed, when Molière created the character of Tartuffe, he quite possibly had in mind the case of one such layman, Charpy de Sainte-Croix, who took advantage of the faith of his patron to seduce the man's wife (Orwen 612–13).

This leads us to a consideration of the major dramatic question of this play, which is "Why does Orgon worship, flatter, and bribe Tartuffe so?" Why does this Parisian bourgeois force his family to accept the presence, and irritant, of the supposedly pious Tartuffe in their midst? Furthermore, why does Orgon go as far—despite the protestations of his sensible brother-in-law, Cléante; his impetuous son, Damis (as immoderate, from a reverse angle, as his father); his outspoken servant, Dorine, and his loyal wife, Elmire—as to promise his daughter Mariane (who is in love with a young man named Valère) in marriage to Tartuffe, as a way of making the latter a permanent member of his family and of engineering the fate of one of his children? Even further, why does this father then banish his son and turn over the whole of his estate to his houseguest, despite mounting evidence that Tartuffe is no more than a sensual parasite? There are some obvious, and not-so-obvious, answers to these questions.

The obvious answer is that Orgon, an aging man with a domineering mother, grown children, and a younger (second) wife, is seeking a way to preserve control in his household. According to this interpretation, he is obsessed less with piety than with the desire to achieve a kind of absolute power and total autonomy in the realm of his home. The instrument of Orgon's will or desire, of course, is Tartuffe, but the ludicrous irony here is that, insofar as Tartuffe

is invested with superior authority and complete independence by Orgon, the latter sacrifices his own sovereignty. Connected with this answer to the play's major dramatic question is the one of heterosexuality, according to which Orgon has the panic of middle age in relation to a younger wife, needs a reason to reject worldliness (read "sex"), and finds that reason in Tartuffe. When Orgon's wife finally proves Tartuffe's lechery and opens her husband's eyes, she is really proving her love for her husband and erasing his doubts about his manliness.

But, from another point of view, Tartuffe, in attempting to seduce Elmire, is rejecting Orgon—in other words, he is renouncing a homosexual relationship, or the possibility of one, with his patron. This interpretation of their dealings helps to explain, for example, why the husband waits so long to stop Tartuffe's near-rape of his wife: Orgon's reaction shows less of an angry interruption of what Tartuffe is doing to Elmire than a shocked contemplation of what this impostor is doing to Orgon himself. Moreover, this interpretation of Tartuffe and Orgon's relationship was dramatized in 1962 by the French director Roger Planchon, who argued that, in his actions toward Tartuffe, "Orgon is not stupid, but profoundly homosexual. It's obvious that he doesn't know it—the play would fall apart if he were conscious of it, if he simply tried to sleep with Tartuffe" (193). Molière could conceivably have envisioned Orgon as a latent homosexual of whose tendency Tartuffe takes advantage, for homosexuality certainly existed in the court circles of seventeenth-century France. In fact, the man who brought the playwright and his troupe to the attention of Louis XIV was "Monsieur," the king's younger—and gay—brother, whose wife became Louis's mistress without strong registrations of protest from Monsieur (see Barker; see also Merrick and Ragan). Nonetheless, homosexuality, latent or otherwise, is far from the only explanation for the close attachment between Orgon and Tartuffe.

Yet another interpretation of that attachment—and by no means one which excludes the others—is related to the historical context I supplied at the start of this essay. Surprisingly, it has escaped critics, although all of them duly note Tartuffe's two references to the Frondes, in which Orgon "played an able part / And served his king with wise and loyal heart" (1.2.13–14). I would argue that, subsequent to the Frondes, Orgon continued to serve Louis XIV "with wise and loyal heart" both by installing what he believed to be a genuine "director of conscience" in his home, in order to ensure its conformity to Catholic doctrine and thus to avoid the charge of Protestant heresy, Huguenot infidelity, or religious incorrectness, and by mimicking the king's political absolutism with a kind of domestic absolutism, in which Orgon plays the role of a comic, bourgeois Louis with the purportedly pious Tartuffe as his chief minister (fittingly, Richelieu was a prelate and Mazarin a cardinal). The latter analogy helps to explain Orgon's disloyal harboring of secret documents

belonging to a political fugitive named Argas; in so behaving, this *père de famille* not only uncharacteristically betrayed Louis XIV, but he also arrogated unto himself a power or authority reserved exclusively for the "Sun King." Louis beneficently reclaims that authority at the end of the play, of course, both by seeing through the impostor Tartuffe (to whom Orgon had entrusted Argas's papers) and by pardoning Orgon for his grave offense in aiding an exiled enemy of the crown.

This conclusion satisfies our sense of justice and restores order, for Tartuffe has been arrested and judged; Orgon and Elmire have had their eyes opened to his depravity, while the family has had its property and wealth returned; Mariane will be allowed to marry the spouse of her choice (as will Damis, whose marriage to Valère's sister depended on Mariane's to Valère); and the king's power has been reasserted as well as reacknowledged. Comic action is often seen as showing the social disorder created by one or more eccentric characters who deviate from such reasonable values as moderation, sensibility, tolerance, and flexibility, as well as social intelligence and good nature. It also is seen as finally affirming the well-being of society (the smaller society of family as well as the larger one of state) against the havoc wrought by these types of unnatural behavior. Surely, then, *Tartuffe* qualifies as a (neo)classical comedy. But here as elsewhere in Molière's work, the perpetrators of havoc themselves do not share in society's reformation, and the ostensibly arbitrary or contrived device of royal intervention only underscores their intractability. In other words, Orgon is still the same Orgon at the end of the play as he was at the beginning: a *père de famille* who would be *roi*.

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KEYWORDS

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