

# TARTUFFE

by Moliere



## THE AUTHOR

Moliere was the pen name of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622-1673), generally considered the greatest French comic playwright of all time. His father was one of eight court upholsterers to Louis XIV, and thus the young man had access to the best education of the day, study under the Jesuits at the College of Claremont. His mother died when he was twelve, his stepmother three years later. In early life, he enjoyed ridiculing the courtiers among whom he often spent his time; his skill at mimicry bore fruit in later years when he took to the stage.

Despite inheriting his father's position at court, he chose at the age of 21 to pursue a life in the theater. He had fallen in love with a young actress named Madeleine Bejart who became his mistress (he later married her daughter, and scandal-mongers spread the false rumor that she was his own child), and the two of them, along with a few other aspiring thespians, formed a theatrical troupe in 1643. At this point Poquelin adopted the stage name of Moliere in order to spare his family the embarrassment of having an actor in the clan. The troupe gained some attention for its early work, but failed miserably when they tried to charge admission for their shows; the company folded in 1645. Shortly thereafter he and Madeleine and their friends decided to tour the countryside. For the next fourteen years, they toured rural France, sharpening their skills and gaining a solid reputation. It was during this time that Moliere began to write for the troupe. The most successful of his works were his farces. In 1658, Moliere and his troupe returned to Paris to try their luck in the capital again. They gained an invitation to perform before the king, but chose to perform a tragedy, and were not well received. Moliere recognized his mistake and asked the king if they could perform one of their comedies as well; he agreed, and their fortunes were made.

For the rest of his career, Moliere and his company performed in the leading theaters of Paris under the patronage of leading nobles, and finally of the king himself. Moliere frequently found himself embroiled in controversy. Nobles opposed the frivolity of his themes and the pungency of his satire, the church opposed his irreverence, and the Jansenists, a powerful movement in seventeenth-century France, opposed the theater altogether. During his years in Paris, Moliere wrote his most famous works, including *The School for Husbands* (1661), *The School for Wives* (1662), *The Misanthrope* (1666), *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* (1666), *The*

*Miser* (1668), *The Would-Be Gentleman* (1669) and *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673). On February 17, 1673, he collapsed on stage while playing the lead in *The Imaginary Invalid*, and died later that same day. Priests refused to hear his confession or administer the last rites (all actors had been excommunicated by the Church), and he was refused burial in consecrated ground (though, with the king's approval, he was finally buried in a churchyard in the middle of the night).

*Tartuffe*, among the most popular of Moliere's comedies, was first performed before Louis XIV in 1664. The king liked the play, but courtiers and clergy alike objected to what they saw as a mockery of them. Moliere tried again in 1667, but the archbishop of Paris succeeded in having it banned a second time. Finally, under the direct patronage of the king, *Tartuffe* was performed in court in 1669, and soon gained a popularity it has never lost.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Orgon - A middle-class Frenchman who has been duped by Tartuffe, a con man posing as a pious religious advisor.
- Madame Pernelle - Orgon's mother, she is convinced until the last scene that Tartuffe is legitimate and will not hear a word spoken against him.
- Elmire - Orgon's second wife, she is young and beautiful. Tartuffe is in love with her and tries to seduce her.
- Mariane - Orgon's daughter by his first wife, she is in love with Valere, but Orgon is so smitten with Tartuffe that he tries to make her marry him.
- Damis - Orgon's son, he sees through Tartuffe from the very beginning, as do most of the other characters, but he is banished from the house and disinherited when he speaks against the holy man.
- Valere - Mariane's beloved, he plays a key role in the final unmasking of Tartuffe.
- Cleante - Elmire's brother, he is the voice of reason throughout the play, and the playwright's mouthpiece.
- Dorine - Orgon's maid, she is witty, direct, and plain-spoken.
- Tartuffe - A con artist posing as a holy man who induces Orgon to take him into his home, provide him with food and clothing, offer to marry him to his daughter, adopt him as his son and will him all his property, all while he is trying to seduce Elmire. He is revealed at the end of the play as a notorious criminal and is carted off to prison.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Oh, yes, she’s strict, devout, and has no taint  
Of worldliness; in short, she seems a saint.  
But it was time which taught her that disguise;  
She’s thus because she can’t be otherwise.  
So long as her attractions could enthrall,  
She flounced and flirted and enjoyed it all,  
But now that they’re no longer what they were  
She quits a world which fast is quitting her,  
And wears a veil of virtue to conceal  
Her bankrupt beauty and her lost appeal.” (Dorine, Ii)

“Yes, thanks to him I’m a changes man indeed.  
Under his tutelage my soul’s been freed  
From earthly loves, and every human tie:  
My mother, children, brother, and wife could die,  
And I’d not feel a single moment’s pain.” (Orgon, Iv)

“Yes, my dear son, speak out now: call me the chief  
Of sinners, a wretch, a murderer, a thief;  
Load me with all the names men most abhor;  
I’ll not complain; I’ve earned them all, and more;  
I’ll kneel here while you pour them on my head  
As a just punishment for the life I’ve led.” (Tartuffe, IIIvi)

“Get up! The mor you loathe the man, and dread him,  
The more ennobling it will be to wed him.  
Marry Tartuffe, and mortify your flesh!  
Enough; don’t start that whimpering afresh.” (Orgon, IViii)

“Ah, Sir, if that refusal made you smart,  
It’s little that you know of woman’s heart,  
Or what that heart is trying to convey  
When it resists in such a feeble way!  
Always, at first, our modesty prevents  
The frank avowal of tender sentiments;  
However high the passion which inflames us,  
Still, to confess its power somehow shames us.  
Thus we reluct, at first, yet in a tone  
Which tells you that our heart is overthrown,  
That what our lips deny, our pulse confesses,  
And that, in time, all noes will turn to yesses.” (Elmire, IVv)

“Madam, forget such fears, and be my pupil,  
And I shall teach you how to conquer scruple.  
Some joys, it’s true, are wrong in Heaven’s eyes;  
Yet Heaven is not averse to compromise;  
There is a science, lately formulated,  
Whereby one’s conscience may be liberated,  
And any wrongful act you care to mention  
May be redeemed by purity of intention.” (Tartuffe, IVv)

“If you’re still troubled, think of things this way:  
No one shall know our joys, save us alone,  
And there’s no evil till the act is known;  
It’s scandal, Madam, which makes it an offense,  
And it’s no sin to sin in confidence.” (Tartuffe, IVv)  
“Enough, by God! I’m through with pious men:  
Henceforth I’ll hate the whole false brotherhood,  
And persecute them worse than Satan could.” (Orgon, Vi)

“Come, just because one rascal made you swallow  
A show of zeal which turned out to be hollow,  
Shall you conclude that all men are deceivers,  
And that, today, there are no true believers?  
Let atheists make that foolish inference;  
Learn to distinguish virtue from pretense.” (Cleante, Vi)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - Madame Pernelle, Orgon’s mother, is ready to leave Orgon’s house, and on the way out the door criticizes everyone within earshot, claiming that Orgon’s children Mariane and Damis, Orgon’s second wife Elmire, and her brother Cleante are shallow and concerned with nothing but parties and gossip, while the maid Dorine is far too forward. She urges them to listen to Tartuffe, an alleged holy man Orgon has recently brought into his household. They all consider him a fraud and detest the way he has taken over the place.

**Act I, scene 2** - Cleante and Dorine talk about how Orgon has fallen under the spell of Tartuffe, describing their relationship in terms of infatuation and idolatry, while describing how Tartuffe has been taking advantage of Orgon by living in his house, gorging himself on his food, and taking his money.

**Act I, scene 3** - Damis asks Cleante to sound out Orgon about the proposed wedding between Mariane and Valere, to which Tartuffe has expressed his opposition. Damis wants the wedding to come off because he wants to marry Valere’s sister.

**Act I, scene 4** - Orgon, who has just returned from a trip, asks Dorine how things have been at home. She tells him that Elmire has been sick, but every time she begins to describe Elmire’s

illness and suffering, Orgon asks about Tartuffe, who has been stuffing himself on the family's food and sleeping extremely well. Orgon, meanwhile, ignores the account of his wife's suffering and responds "Poor fellow!" after every description of Tartuffe's remarkably robust health.

**Act I, scene 5** - In a conversation between Cleante and Orgon, the younger man warns the elder of being taken in by an obvious charlatan. Orgon, however, defends Tartuffe and describes the circumstances in which he met him - praying humbly in church, refusing gifts and giving half to the poor when they were pressed upon him. Since inviting him into his home, Orgon has given Tartuffe virtual control of the household, and the fraud seems to delight in paying specially close attention to the lovely young Elmire. Cleante then tries to explain the difference between hypocrisy and genuine piety and does a rather good job of doing so in biblical terms, though Orgon refuses to listen. When Cleante presses Orgon about his promise to sanction the marriage between Mariane and Valere, Orgon hedges, and Cleante smells trouble for his friend.

**Act II, scene 1** - Orgon tells Mariane that he intends for her to marry Tartuffe; she professes her love for her father, but it is clear that she does not enjoy the prospect of such a match.

**Act II, scene 2** - Dorine enters, having overheard the previous conversation, and tells Orgon that his idea is a foolish one, not only because Tartuffe is a hypocritical fraud, but also because he is patently unsuitable for a young woman like Mariane. She warns him that Mariane will undoubtedly be unfaithful to such a husband, and that if she does so, it will be Orgon's fault. He tries to silence her, but she keeps interrupting in comic fashion.

**Act II, scene 3** - Orgon leaves, and Dorine rebukes Mariane for not objecting to her father's plan. Mariane insists that she must obey her father, but Dorine tells her to get some backbone or else she will be trapped in a horrible marriage. Mariane asserts that she loves Valere, and insists she will kill herself if she has to marry Tartuffe. After teasing her about what life would be like with Tartuffe, Dorine finally agrees to help her plan some way of getting out of the marriage.

**Act II, scene 4** - Valere arrives; he has heard that Mariane is to marry Tartuffe and wonders what she is going to do about it. She asks his advice, and he sarcastically advises her to obey her father, but she thinks he is serious, and they proceed to quarrel in comic fashion. Dorine, finally having had enough of this foolishness, reconciles them and begins to devise a plan to stop the wedding. She advises Mariane to submit to her father but stall, continuing to put the wedding off for a variety of silly pretexts. Meanwhile, Valere is to get his friends to pressure Orgon to keep his word about the original marriage. Dorine will try to enlist Elmire in their little plot.

**Act III, scene 1** - In a conversation between Dorine and Damis, we find that Elmire has agreed to use her influence with Tartuffe to try to talk him out of the marriage with Mariane (Tartuffe, in fact, is smitten with Elmire and only wants to marry Mariane for her money). Damis insists on hearing the conversation, and hides himself when Tartuffe enters the room.

**Act III, scene 2** - Here, at almost the midpoint of the play, we finally meet Tartuffe in the flesh. He enters, speaking of hair shirt and scourges. When Dorine approaches him, he gives her a handkerchief to put over her bosom, which he claims is tempting him to think evil thoughts. She

tells him that Elmire wishes to speak with him, and the expression on his face confirms her belief that he is sweet on the lady of the house.

**Act III, scene 3** - Elmire and Tartuffe are alone in the room (with Damis hiding in a closet), and he immediately begins to flirt with her, and, telling her he has no interest in Mariane, finally propositions her. She threatens to tell her husband unless he agrees to do all in his power to advance the marriage of Mariane and Valere, but Tartuffe seems unalarmed by her threat; he is sure that Orgon will not believe any words spoken against him.

**Act III, scene 4** - Damis emerges from the closet and refuses, despite Elmire's pleading, to remain silent. He insists that he will reveal Tartuffe's perfidy to his father.

**Act III, scene 5** - Orgon enters and Damis tells him of Tartuffe's adulterous proposition. Elmire, insisting that he should have kept his tongue because she had the situation completely under control, leaves the room.

**Act III, scene 6** - Orgon confronts Tartuffe, who immediately admits to being the greatest of sinners, the worst wretch on the face of the earth, and deserving of any punishment Orgon cares to mete out. Orgon, of course, takes this as confirmation of Tartuffe's piety and humility and refuses to believe Damis. He becomes increasingly angry with his son, while Tartuffe begs him to forgive the poor boy. Orgon is now determined to defy his whole family, all of whom are clearly biased against his holy man, by giving him Mariane as his wife that very night. Damis protests, and Orgon throws him out of the house and disinherits him.

**Act III, scene 7** - Tartuffe, sorrowing over the persecution he is experiencing in Orgon's household, suggests that it might be best if he simply went away. Orgon won't hear of such a thing, and is determined to revenge himself on his ungrateful family by preferring Tartuffe more than ever. When Tartuffe advises that it would be best if he stayed away from Elmire, Orgon tells him to keep a closer eye on her than ever. He finally asserts that he will adopt Tartuffe and make him heir of all he possesses, and Tartuffe humbly accepts his offer.

**Act IV, scene 1** - Cleante meets Tartuffe and tries to persuade him to renounce Orgon's inheritance and work to restore Damis to his father's favor. Tartuffe gives a variety of pious excuses why he may not do so, and abruptly leaves.

**Act IV, scene 2** - Elmire, Mariane, and Dorine approach Cleante and try to draw him into the effort to disabuse Orgon concerning Tartuffe's true character before he forces Mariane to marry him.

**Act IV, scene 3** - Mariane begs Orgon not to force her to marry Tartuffe, even going so far as to offer to give Tartuffe her money as well and enter a convent, but Orgon cannot be moved. Elmire chastises him for his blindness and offers to prove the truth of their assertions about Tartuffe. Orgon reluctantly agrees to hide while Elmire and Tartuffe converse alone.

**Act IV, scene 4** - Elmire forces Orgon to hide under a table, and tells him that she will deliberately encourage Tartuffe's amorous advances until Orgon emerges to stop the charade. She begs him to come out in time to save her virtue.

**Act IV, scene 5** - Elmire, alone with Tartuffe, professes her love for him. He is surprised by the sudden change in her attitude, but she assures him that her denials were intended to pique his interest and that her opposition to his marriage with Mariane was because she wanted him for herself. Tartuffe remains skeptical, and asks her to prove that she is not deceiving him through some clear token of her affection. He then begins to move toward her; she coughs to get Orgon's attention, but he remains silent. Tartuffe continues to press her, and when she expresses concern that such a response on her part would be sin, he assures her that sinful actions may be redeemed by purity of intention. She keeps coughing and still gets no response from Orgon. Finally she agrees to give in to Tartuffe's demands, but asks him first to go out in the hallway and make sure her husband is nowhere to be seen.

**Act IV, scene 6** - While Tartuffe is in the hall, Orgon comes out from under the table, amazed at the man's brazenness. Elmire, meanwhile, sarcastically asks why he didn't wait a little longer until he had *really* concrete proof. As Tartuffe reenters the room, Orgon hides behind Elmire.

**Act IV, scene 7** - Tartuffe comes back and Orgon confronts him with the evidence of his hypocrisy. He orders Tartuffe to leave the house, but Tartuffe insists that he is the master of the situation and will punish Orgon for daring to try to throw him out.

**Act IV, scene 8** - After Tartuffe leaves the room, Orgon admits to Elmire that he had already written up and signed a deed of gift placing all his property in the hands of Tartuffe. He has one more trick up his sleeve, however, and goes upstairs in search of a certain strongbox.

**Act V, scene 1** - Cleante meets Orgon, who tells him that the strongbox contained some papers that implicated his friend Argas, and that he had entrusted the papers to Tartuffe, who now has them. Orgon insists that all holy men are scoundrels and that he will never trust a pious person again, but Cleante tells him that not all pious people are frauds, and that he needs to learn moderation.

**Act V, scene 2** - Damis, who has heard of Tartuffe's treachery, offers to kill him, but Cleante rebukes his youthful folly.

**Act V, scene 3** - Madame Pernelle, Mariane, Elmire, and Dorine enter. When told of what has transpired, Orgon's mother still refuses to believe anything bad about Tartuffe, insisting that Orgon must have misinterpreted what he saw. Meanwhile, we hear that Tartuffe intends to take Orgon to court in order to gain control of his property.

**Act V, scene 4** - M. Loyal, a bailiff, arrives representing Tartuffe, and serves Orgon with an eviction notice, ordering them to vacate the premises in twenty-four hours. Damis threatens him with violence and several others express their desire to do him bodily harm, but Cleante restrains them all and M. Loyal goes his way.

**Act V, scene 5** - The writ of eviction finally convinces Madame Pernelle. Elmire assures Orgon that public outrage will prevent Tartuffe from carrying out his scheme even though he has the law on his side.

**Act V, scene 6** - Valere arrives and informs Orgon that Tartuffe, with the strongbox with which Orgon had entrusted him, had denounced him to the King, and that there was now a warrant out for his arrest. Valere gives Orgon a thousand louis to facilitate his escape and prepares to load him into his carriage.

**Act V, scene 7** - Tartuffe arrives with the officer to have Orgon arrested, and claims that he is only doing his duty to his king. When Tartuffe orders the officer to take Orgon away, however, the officer arrests Tartuffe instead. Apparently Louis XIV recognized Tartuffe as a notorious criminal who had committed many offenses under other names, so he ordered his arrest. In the process, he nullified the deed of gift and pardoned Orgon for concealing the papers of a traitor. Orgon goes off to thank the king for his bounty, and declares that Valere shall marry Mariane forthwith.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Act I, scene 5 of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, Cleante tries to explain to Orgon the difference between false and true piety. Evaluate his explanation. Does it correspond to biblical teaching? Why or why not? Be specific.
2. Last year in your study of Church History, you learned about the casuistry of the Jesuits. In Act IV, scene 5 of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, Tartuffe tries to get Elmire to accede to his desires by arguing that "There is a science, lately formulated, / Whereby one's conscience may be liberated, / And any wrongful act you care to mention / May be redeemed by purity of intention." Relate the sophistry Moliere mocks in this scene to the argumentation techniques of the Jesuits (you might want to consult your Church History text). How does Tartuffe use Jesuitical tactics in the scene? How does Moliere effectively ridicule such forms of argument? Be specific.
3. Compare and contrast the flattery of the ruling monarch found in Moliere's *Tartuffe* and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Is what these playwrights do justifiable, or is it a prostitution of their art? Use examples from both plays to justify your conclusion.
4. In Moliere's *Tartuffe*, which character most consistently serves as the playwright's mouthpiece? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
5. Discuss the ending of Moliere's *Tartuffe*. The playwright makes use of what is called a *deus ex machina* ("god from the machine"), a technique whereby resolution is achieved by divine, or in this case royal, intervention in a convenient but unexpected way. In your opinion, does the ending detract from your enjoyment of the play? Why or why not? If you don't like Moliere's ending, what sort of ending would you have preferred?

6. After Moliere's *Tartuffe* was first performed before Louis XIV, leading clergy objected to what they perceived as an attack on religion and performance of the play was banned for the next five years. Do you agree with Moliere's critics? Is his play and attack on religion, or simply an attack on hypocrisy? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
7. When Moliere's *Tartuffe* became popular, competing religious groups viewed in in very different ways; Jesuits thought it an attack against the Jansenists, while Jansenists were convinced that the Jesuits were the target of Moliere's satire. The playwright, of course, did nothing to disabuse either group of their conflicting interpretations. From what you know about the Jesuits and the Jansenists, which group do you think Moliere was mocking? Is it possible that he was mocking both through different characters? Why do you think so? Support your arguments with details from the play.
8. In Moliere's *Tartuffe*, the title character is ridiculed, among other things, for the highly public nature of his piety. From a biblical perspective, is Moliere right to criticize Tartuffe for this, or would his outward behavior be acceptable if only it had matched his inner life? Support your arguments with specifics from Scripture and from the play.
9. In Moliere's *Tartuffe*, the title character is ridiculed, among other things, for his attitude toward material things. From a biblical perspective, is Moliere right to criticize Tartuffe for this, or would his outward behavior be acceptable if only it had matched his inner life? Support your arguments with specifics from Scripture and from the play.
10. In Moliere's *Tartuffe*, the title character is ridiculed, among other things, for the contradictions between his public pronouncements and his private behavior. From a biblical perspective, is Moliere right to criticize Tartuffe for this? How does Tartuffe show himself to be a hypocrite of the kind condemned by Christ in Scripture? Support your arguments with specifics from Scripture and from the play.
11. In Moliere's *Tartuffe*, what is there about Orgon that makes him such an easy target for a con man like Tartuffe? Discuss the aspects of his personality that Moliere is trying to satirize in his famous farce. Be sure to use specifics from the play to support your argument.
12. Compare the qualities of a good king presented in Moliere's *Tartuffe* with those pictured in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. To what extent do the two share the same view of monarchy? Use specifics from the plays to support your arguments.
13. The Stuart monarchs of England and the French Bourbon kings of the seventeenth century both strongly believed in the concept of Divine Right. How are these beliefs treated in Moliere's *Tartuffe* and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*? Do the two playwrights support the justification of monarchy that was popular in the age in which they lived, or do they simply give lip-service to what will please their patrons? Support your arguments with specifics from the two plays.

14. What character in Moliere's *Tartuffe* would you say is the most effective foil for Orgon? Why? Be sure to bring out relevant similarities and differences in the two characters that help shed light on Orgon's strengths and weaknesses.
15. Discuss the view of pleasure communicated by Moliere's *Tartuffe*. What ideas about pleasure does Moliere ridicule, and which ones does he advocate? Support your conclusions with details from the play.
16. Discuss the view of human nature communicated by Moliere's *Tartuffe*. What ideas about human nature does Moliere ridicule, and which ones does he advocate? Support your conclusions with details from the play.
17. Translator Richard Wilbur argues that Orgon in Moliere's *Tartuffe* is not a narrow-minded religious fanatic so much as he is a man fearful of losing his vigor and authority. In other words, he is going through a mid-life crisis. Do you agree or disagree? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
18. In seventeenth-century France, fathers were believed to be absolute rulers of their homes in the same way that kings were thought to be absolute rulers of their realms. Thus, some critics have argued, the pathetic dupe Orgon in Moliere's *Tartuffe* may be viewed as a model of bad kingship. What does the character of Orgon reveal about the traits of a bad ruler? Be sure to cite specifics in your argument.
19. Compare and contrast the characters of Tartuffe in Moliere's *Tartuffe* and Malvolio in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Are the playwrights caricaturing similar varieties of puritanical religion, or do they have different targets in mind? Why do you think so? Be sure to support your arguments with specifics from the two plays.
20. In Moliere's *Tartuffe*, what is the playwright's view of the biblical teachings of original sin and total depravity? Why does he oppose these ideas? Explain and evaluate his views with quotations from the play and from the Bible.
21. According to Moliere's *Tartuffe*, what is the best defense against hypocrisy? How can a person protect himself against confidence men and manipulators who would use his own noble desires against him? Evaluate the solution Moliere advocates, using details from the script to do so.