
Mannerist Comedy Portrayed Through Orgon's Character

Comedy of Manners was a theatrical genre that flourished during the time of the British Restoration of the 17th century. These plays sought to deride the upper social classes by exaggerating their manners and customs. Comedy of Manners used stock characters who were representative of their social class in order to satirize their behavior. Many times, the people watching these plays were the same people being satirized (Cash); furthermore, these performances were known for their sophisticated intellectual wit and heavy use of dialogue. One of the most famous of these plays to appear in France, *Tartuffe*, poked fun at the upper French aristocrats and their willingness to submit themselves to the Roman Catholic Church. The comedy in the play comes from the character Orgon's complete and total obliviousness to the scheming yet pious-seeming Tartuffe's plans to steal all of his wealth (Baker). The play *Tartuffe* is one of the greatest examples of Comedy of Manners in theatrical history, and when the character Orgon's actions and role in the play are examined, a brilliant and satirical representation of the aristocracy's religious hypocrisy and blind trust in the Roman Catholic church is revealed.

In *Tartuffe*, Orgon plays the role of the oblivious yet extremely wealthy patron to the obviously and hilariously corrupt Tartuffe. Orgon's endless gullibility in the face of shameless corruption is the main comedic point of the play. Orgon foolishly allows the wicked Tartuffe to stay in his family's home, seduce his wife, and appropriate his fortunes while hopelessly deceiving himself as to the righteousness of his own actions. The characters around Orgon find this behavior to be quite at odds with his past self. The character Dorine describes Orgon as having "Served his king with wise and loyal heart, But he's quite lost his senses since he fell Beneath Tartuffe's infatuating spell" (*Tartuffe* Act 1 Scene II Verse 4). Orgon only falls under Tartuffe's spell after reaching middle age, in the hope that he can gain some kind of divine favor (Baker).

This need to find redemption at such a late point in his life leads Orgon to become a crazed religious fanatic overnight. He says about his family, "My mother, children, brother, and wife could die, And I'd not feel a single moment's pain" (*Tartuffe* Act 1 Scene VI v. 21-22). This irrational behavior causes Orgon to overlook the crimes of Tartuffe in order to gain merit in the afterlife. When Dorine tells Orgon of the sickness of his wife, Orgon Responds, "Ah. And Tartuffe?". Dorine replies, "Tartuffe? Why, he's round and red, bursting with health, and excellently fed" (*Tartuffe* Scene 1 Act V v. 12-15). Orgon responds by saying, "Poor fellow." This exchange is supposed to shock the audience, as Orgon is so under Tartuffe's spell that the sickness of his own wife is meaningless to him.

Tartuffe takes advantage of Orgon's willful blindness by both attempting to seduce his wife and

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attempting to seize all of his possessions upon his death. Orgon is vaguely aware that Tartuffe lusts after his wife, as he says, "He (Tartuffe) even takes great interest in my wife; He lets me know who ogles her, and seems six times as jealous as I am myself" (*Tartuffe* Act 1 Scene VI v. 46-48). Even when Orgon catches Tartuffe red handed trying to seduce his wife, and Tartuffe confesses, "Yes Brother, I'm a wicked man, I fear: a wretched sinner, all depraved and twisted, the greatest villain that has ever existed," (*Tartuffe* Act III Scene VI v. 97) he still does not believe him. Instead he blames his son Damis for the transgression, not willing to believe his very eyes and Tartuffe's own confession about what occurred. Instead he says to his son, "Well go quickly then. I disinherit you; an empty purse is all you'll get from me – except my curse" (*Tartuffe* Act III Scene VI v. 102). It is not until Orgon sees with his own two eyes Tartuffe violating his wife that he is able to say, "That man's a perfect monster, I must admit! I'm simply stunned. I can't get over it" (*Tartuffe* Act IV Scene VI v. 1-2). Yet to the audience this is hardly surprising, as Tartuffe has been corrupt since his introduction.

Of course, Comedy of Manners takes common customs and behaviors of a social class and amplify and exaggerate them to the point of ridiculousness. The character of Orgon in the play pokes fun at two common behaviors within the French aristocracy, the miraculous conversion to faith in middle age and the brazen corruption of the Roman Catholic Church (Taibi). During the playwright Moliere's time it was common (as it is today) for those reaching middle age to finally open their eyes and find religion. After serving the King for many years and retiring to his estate, the character Orgon feels the weight of middle age, which leads him to finding "true faith." The comedy comes in that he hasn't truly converted, but merely pretends to in order to get into heaven. The unscrupulous Tartuffe represents the corrupt Catholic Church that is more than willing to prey on the gullible convert's need to find redemption. Thus, the play can be seen as critical of the French aristocracy and Roman Catholic Church's religious hypocrisy.

Orgon's religious hypocrisy in following the obviously corrupt Tartuffe is what makes the play a brilliant Comedy of Manners. No matter how corrupt or evil Tartuffe appears, Orgon is willing to explain everything away in order to assure his access to the afterlife. The play poked fun at the aristocracy for trying to find religion late in life after having lived a completely irreligious life, and also poked fun at the Roman Catholic Church's readiness to take advantage of such individuals. The people who watched *Tartuffe* be performed in the 17th century were well aware of the common occurrence of such religious hypocrisy, and this is what made the play both loved by the aristocracy and hated by the clergy.

Sources:

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