
The Influence Of Religious Censorship From Molière's Tartuffe On The Misanthrope

Often times, authors and playwrights are ridiculed for their written works, which can lead to the banning of their literature. The practice of banning books, or other forms of printed works such as plays, is when the works are prohibited by law to the public. Banning literature is a form of censorship, and is usually because the work goes against political, social, moral, or religious norms. French actor and playwright Jean-Baptiste Poquelin de Molière was a victim of this censorship with his play Tartuffe, which led him to changing his approach to writing comedy, thus creating The Misanthrope. I believe that this censorship changed the way he wrote comedy for the following reasons: 1) the story of Tartuffe and the controversy that followed; 2) the Roman Catholic Church and the impact of religion on Tartuffe; and resulted in: 3) the creation of The Misanthrope; and 4) the aftermath of the two plays.

Tartuffe is a play about a man named Tartuffe, who is initially worshipped by the head of the house Orgon. According to Orgon and his mother Madame Pernelle, Tartuffe is an honest, trustworthy, church-going man. To the rest of the family, Tartuffe is nothing but a dishonest beggar. Orgon wants his already engaged daughter Mariane to marry Tartuffe, but no one else wants her to marry him, since they see through Tartuffe's lies. While alone, Tartuffe tries to seduce Orgon's wife, Elmire, as her son, Damis, watches through a closet. Damis tells Orgon about what had just happened, but he doesn't believe him. Instead, Orgon disinherits Damis and grants Tartuffe the rights to his estate. Elmire then takes matters into her own hands and decides to show Orgon the truth about Tartuffe by hiding him under the table to witness Tartuffe's seduction towards her. When Orgon witnesses this for himself, he realizes everyone was telling the truth about Tartuffe, and he demands him to leave the estate. However, Tartuffe has thought this out carefully. Tartuffe has the rights to Orgon's estate, and instead tells the family to leave. Tartuffe threatens Orgon by saying he'd release secret papers from the king if he didn't leave. As the police arrived to the estate, they wound up arresting Tartuffe instead because the king had seen through Tartuffe's lies, as he was also a well-known criminal. The story has a happy ending, as the family gets their estate back, the king's trust in Orgon is still in place, and Orgon's daughter Mariane and her fiancé Valère can finally be married.

The controversy that Tartuffe raises is tied with religion. In the beginning of the play, Orgon is obsessed with Tartuffe because he believes him to be an honest, church-going man. Orgon says to his brother Cléante, "He used to come into our church each day, / And humbly kneel nearby, and start to pray". Although Cléante knows that Tartuffe is just putting on an act and isn't actually a good man, Orgon refuses to listen to him. As soon as the second incident

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between Tartuffe and Elmire occurs, Orgon is able to see the truth about Tartuffe. Tartuffe used religion as a façade in order to get whatever he wanted (i.e., gifts, housing, the rights to the estate from Orgon). Tartuffe's mindset was that if he were to portray a humble, religious man, that he would be praised and rewarded, which is exactly what happened between he and Orgon. Now that Orgon is aware that he'd been manipulated and knows the truth about Tartuffe's deception, he defies religion by saying, "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, who was initially the most religious man in the play, is now so angry and emotional that he now claims he completely hates holy men. This scene ultimately leads into the controversy with the Roman Catholic Church and the questioning of religion in seventeenth century France.

Roman Catholicism is one of the three main branches of Christianity. Georgetown University defines Roman Catholicism as a religion whose followers "traditionally believes that Jesus of Nazareth entrusted the authority of his young church to his apostle Simon Peter (ca. 1 BC – 67 CE), who would become the first Bishop of Rome, an office now known as the papacy." The church, and Christianity as a whole, had become a significant factor in the lives of Europeans. It influenced politics, hospitals, and schools. Kings and queens were deemed fit to rule through divine right, the idea that God chose for them to rule. Thus, in 1643, King Louis XIV, also known as the Sun King, began his rule. Between the years of 1562 and 1598, France has experienced a period of time called the "Wars of Religion." The Wars of Religion were conflicts between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The religion of Calvinism was spread throughout France, which allowed for tolerance of Huguenots, or Protestants, resulting in the anger of Roman Catholics. Many people on both sides were murdered, which led to the War of Three Henrys. This war ultimately ended with the French King Henry's embrace of Roman Catholicism. As the seventeenth century was in its earlier years, France was still torn by the French Wars of Religion that had happened a century prior, so Louis XIV sought a solution. King Louis XIV was a devout Roman Catholic and believed it was essential to use this religion to maintain control over the people of France. He also persecuted anyone who followed other religions that went against what the Catholic Church preached. The Roman Catholic Church had so much power over the country that it makes you wonder who really ruled France – the king or the pope?

After reviewing the historical background of the time in which Molière produced Tartuffe, it clearly encapsulates why the play would be controversial. Molière finished his piece and performed it for King Louis XIV in 1664. Even though the king was a devout Roman Catholic, he very much favored the play. He understood that the play was not meant to be taken seriously, and that it was not encouraging anyone, directly, to defy religion. However, the production of the play did not go as smoothly with the Roman Catholic Church. The play had rather been banned from being performed publicly because, according to authoritative and influential church leaders, the play was an attack on the aspects of religion. The play, Tartuffe, exploited religious

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hypocrisy, and the church believed this would turn people away from following Roman Catholicism.

While the ban was still in effect, Molière decided he would create a new play that was more likeable to the church titled *Le Misanthrope*, or in English, *The Misanthrope*. The word “misanthrope” is defined as “a person who dislikes humankind and avoids human society.” *The Misanthrope* was written as a satiric comedy, performed in 1666, and published in 1667. *The Misanthrope* is about a man named Alceste, who does not like people, however is in love with a girl named Célimène. Alceste’s friend, Philinte is in love with Éliante, Célimène’s cousin. Éliante and Arsinoé are in love with Alceste, Oronte is in love with Célimène, as well as Acaste and Clitandre. Forget a love triangle, this is pretty much a love decahedron. Anyways, Oronte wants to be friends with Alceste, but Alceste insults his poetry. This infuriates Oronte, so he storms off, deciding to notify the police about this so-called “crime.” Meanwhile, Alceste is attempting to gain the love and affection of Célimène, however is interrupted by the men, Acaste and Clitandre, entering her home. They all were gossiping about people, and Alceste hated how superficial they were. Soon enough, Oronte brings police to come and arrest Alceste for insulting his poetry. Luckily, the police eventually release him. Arsinoé wants to talk to Célimène about her behavior, but Célimène starts to verbally rip Arsinoé apart as well by starting off with, “I’m very much obliged to you for this; / And I’ll at once discharge you the obligation, / by telling you about your reputation”. When Alceste and Arsinoé are alone, she tries to flirt with him, but he doesn’t care since he is in love with Célimène. Philinte makes the decision to talk to Éliante, and confesses his love for her. Then, Alceste finds a love letter from Célimène, however, it is not addressed to him. We find out that Célimène is a bit of a sleaze, but Alceste is still in love with her. The police wind up showing up once again for Alceste and he is forced to pay a large fine. Meanwhile, Célimène is being humiliated by Acaste and Clitandre because they found out that she’d been playing them, and being a ‘runaround sue.’ Acaste states, “Madame, I’ll make you no farewell oration; / No, you’re not worthy of my indignation”, thus bidding Célimène a humiliating farewell after learning about the love letters to other suitors. After everything that happened, Alceste is still in love with her and asks her to run away with him, yet she declines, and Alceste runs away by himself. In the end, Éliante and Philinte are together and try their best to aid Alceste.

The shift that was made between *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope* was the type of criticism that was portrayed throughout both plays. *Tartuffe* was written as a type of social criticism. Social criticism focuses on sociological or cultural issues in modern day society, that usually deals with injustices. In *Tartuffe*’s case, it criticized religious hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic Church. In the case of *The Misanthrope*, it was a self-criticism. *The Misanthrope* was more or less an autobiography of Molière, as his life is almost parallel with that of Alceste’s. Molière is thought to be a misanthrope, perhaps because he was discouraged by the banning of his *Tartuffe*. In *The Misanthrope*, Molière decided to experiment with new styles of writing his plays, and took a

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more serious approach than that of *Tartuffe*. Although he still puts in his two cents about French aristocracy, the satire of the play is overshadowed by Molière bringing attention to human flaws that are relatable to everyday citizens. The style that Molière uses in *The Misanthrope* allows readers, or viewers, to become more emotionally attached to the characters, and since there is less movement in the visual representation of the play, the audience can pay more attention to the storyline, which made it more appealing to the church and the French people.

While Molière was writing and performing *The Misanthrope*, he was still rewriting and revising *Tartuffe* so that it would be accepted by the church, and so that it would be allowed to be performed in public. Even though performing the play was prohibited, Molière actually continued to perform it at private events. The scandal of the controversy that had risen because of the play had increased the popularity of it. In 1667, Molière had attempted to resubmit the play to the public, but unfortunately it was once again banned. Molière spent years on countless revisions to his play so that the church would allow him to perform it, and in 1669, the ban was lifted. Molière was able to perform his work and gained huge success, with *Tartuffe* becoming one of his most victorious masterpieces. The banning of written works is usually caused by many factors, which can often influence an author's style of writing. The censorship of Molière's *Tartuffe* allowed for Molière to experiment with new styles of writing plays, which resulted in one of his most famous performances, *Le Misanthrope*. The time period and place in which Molière lived allowed for restrictions on his freedom of speech. The Roman Catholic Church disapproved of *Tartuffe* and ultimately banned it for years. Religion and religious leaders held a significantly high authority in seventeenth century Europe, often times higher than the king, which resulted in the banning of texts that exploited religious hypocrisy, or anything anti-Roman Catholicism. However, even though the play was banned initially, *Tartuffe* went down in history as one of Molière's most famous and successful plays, along with *Le Misanthrope*.

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