**Tartuffe by Moliere**

**History:** *Tartuffe* was first performed in a private production for King Louis XIV of France in 1664. The play pleased the king, but it was banned from public performance because of strong objections by officials of the Catholic Church. Moliere protested, revised the play, and was permitted to produce it again in 1667 for the king. Again it was banned. After Moliere's third petition to the king, the ban was lifted in 1669, and the play was performed for the public.

**Type Characters:** This is a 17th century comedy. It is designed to make the audience laugh. Do not expect ordinary life to be reproduced in this play! Do not expect realistic characters. Most of the characters are what are called type characters; they are stock types found in many comedies. Sitcoms today also use typical comical characters. Perhaps some of Moliere's will be recognizable. There is the hypocrite (Tartuffe), the clever maid exceptionally willing to state her personal opinions (Dorine), the blustering young man (Damis), the foolish but tyrannical father (Orgon), and the naive, timid young girl (Mariane).

**Social Conventions of the Period:** During the time this play is set, the father of a family has absolute power over his daughter's choice of marriage partner; the father's will may not be avoided. The chastity of the father's wife is of utmost importance. A son's economic status is totally dependent on his father's will. The father of the family is much like the king at this time; this is relevant to the end of the play.

**Plot:** The plot of *Tartuffe* focuses on Orgon's desire to preserve control in his family. He feels powerful in his role of benevolent patron to Tartuffe, whom he has established in his home as a saintly person of high religious and moral stature. Orgon has been completely duped by Tartuffe, a hypocritically pious impostor posing as a religious' zealot. No one else has been fooled, by Tartuffe; however, Orgon has ordered his household to obey Tartuffe, and in so doing is seeking obedience for himself. Using his authority as her father, Orgon plans to force his daughter Mariane to marry Tartuffe, whom she despises. (She is also in love with Valere, and he with her.) Tartuffe attempts to seduce Orgon's virtuous wife, Elmire. Orgon refuses to believe her. She then feels compelled to reveal Tartuffe's true nature to Orgon by encouraging Tartuffe to repeat his passionate revelations while Orgon is hidden in the room. Her ploy succeeds, but apparently too late as Orgon has already signed papers giving his home and wealth to Tartuffe. Although the ending is contrived, all does end happily, which is the sole requirement for a comedy during the time period this one was written. The ending, incidentally, serves a useful purpose for Moliere by praising (and flattering) his patron, King Louis XIV.

**Setting:** The play is set in the mid-1660s in Paris at the luxurious home of Orgon. The opulence is overwhelming in our eyes today. Notice the palace-like surroundings, the silver table service, the furniture, and particularly the elaborate clothes. The men's dandified dress seems extremely unusual to us, with their long fancy coats with huge, decorated cuffs. And they wear long, curly wigs, though Orgon removes his frequently! Their shoes have fancy buckles and heels. The women's dresses are incredibly elaborate, and remember these are around-the-house clothes, worn for a family dinner.

**Serious Subject Matter:** Although this is a very funny comedy, it treats some extremely serious subjects. Among these are older people acting foolishly and excessively when they are no longer sure of themselves, the abuse- of power and money, the gullible and vulnerable who are blind to pretensions, and religious hypocrites whose pious facade masks evil. Do these folks people our world today?

**Look for Enlightenment Beliefs**: While reading passages from the text, notice the inclusion of basic beliefs of the Enlightenment, such as the praise of moderation and reason (by Cleante), rejection of passion and excess, women's lesser place, and the insistence on acceptable behavior and manners; all the characters except Tartuffe do what they should do, even when they don't want to do so.

## Play Summary

**Exposition**

Madame Pernelle, visiting her son Orgon's house, uses the opportunity to criticize all the members of the house and to praise their boarder, Tartuffe, because he is a man of such holiness and zeal. The others present offer objections to Tartuffe, maintaining that he is false and hypocritical, but Madame Pernelle will not entertain such thoughts. As she leaves, she admonishes everyone to follow Tartuffe's precepts. After Madame Pernelle's departure, Cléante and Dorine talk about Tartuffe and both agree that he has beguiled Orgon. Damis, Orgon's son, wonders whether his father will still allow Mariane to marry Valère; Damis must know Orgon's feelings because he wants to marry Valère's sister.

**Intitial Incident**

He asks Cléante to question Orgon about his promise to allow the marriage to take place.

**Rising Action**

Orgon arrives and seems much more concerned about the welfare of Tartuffe than he is about his wife's illness. Cléante tries to discuss Tartuffe with Orgon, but fails and discovers that Orgon is only interested in singing Tartuffe's praises. When Orgon is questioned about the intended wedding, he dodges the issues and refuses to give a direct answer. When his daughter arrives, Orgon tells her that he wants to ally Tartuffe with his house; this he can best do by Mariane's marrying Tartuffe. Mariane is so shocked that she cannot believe her ears.

After Orgon departs, Dorine, the maid, reprimands Mariane for not having refused to marry Tartuffe. Mariane's beloved, Valère, arrives and accuses her of consenting to the marriage. Dorine listens to them argue and then, after they are reconciled, she promises to help them expose Tartuffe's hypocrisy. Damis, incensed about Tartuffe, is also determined to reveal Tartuffe's hypocrisy, and, as he hears Tartuffe's approach, he hides in the closet. Elmire, Orgon's wife, arrives and Tartuffe, thinking that they are alone, makes some professions of love to Elmire and suggests that they become lovers. Having heard Tartuffe make such a proposition, Damis reveals himself and threatens to expose Tartuffe. When Orgon arrives, Damis tries to inform his father about Tartuffe's proposition, but Orgon is so blind that he thinks his own son is evil in trying to defame Tartuffe's good name and he immediately disinherits his son. Alone with Tartuffe, Orgon reveals that he plans to make Tartuffe his sole heir and also his son-in-law. They leave to execute this plan. Cléante later confronts Tartuffe and tries to reason with him, but Tartuffe will only respond in religious clichés, and as soon as the opportunity presents itself, he hastily excuses himself from the room. Orgon and Elmire arrive, and when she hears Orgon's plans, she extracts a promise from him to hide in some concealed place and observe Tartuffe's actions.

**Climax**

Orgon consents and Elmire sends for Tartuffe. When he arrives, he is accosted by Elmire, and soon he begins to make not only his declarations of love to Elmire but also derogatory comments about Orgon. Orgon now realizes Tartuffe is a hypocrite.

**Falling Action**

Finally convinced of Tartuffe's hypocrisy, Orgon emerges and orders him from the household. Tartuffe then reveals that legally he is now the owner of the house, since Orgon has signed over all his property. Alone with his wife, Orgon reveals that he is frightened because, earlier, he had entrusted some secret documents to Tartuffe's care — documents which could ruin Orgon's trusted position in the court.

**Denouement**

When Orgon's mother arrives, he cannot convince her that Tartuffe is a hypocrite; it is only when news arrives that Tartuffe is having the entire family evicted that Madame Pernelle is convinced.

**Conclusion**

Tartuffe brings with him officers of the court, but, as the family is about to be evicted, the officer reveals that the king has seen through the hypocrisy of Tartuffe and has ordered him to be imprisoned for this and for other crimes. The king has also restored to Orgon all of his rightful property.

**Characters with Descriptions of Their Attire:**

## Character List

**Orgon**

* The central character who comes under the influence of the hypocrite Tartuffe.
* *Description:* older, affluent head of household; curly wig, which he often removes

**Elmire**

* Orgon's virtuous second wife who represents a reasonable attitude toward life.
* *Description:* younger; reddish hair; pale gray dress with white collar

**Damis**

* Orgon's son and Elmire's stepson who tries to prove Tartuffe a hypocrite and succeeds only in having himself disinherited.
* *Description:* young man; dressed in gray suit

**Mariane**

* Orgon's daughter who is in love with Valère and who is being forced to marry Tartuffe.
* *Description:* Orgon's shy, timid daughter

**Madame Pernelle**

* Orgon's mother who is totally deluded by Tartuffe.
* *Description:* old; critical, dressed in dark gray and wearing a bonnet

**Valère**

* Mariane's suitor who is rejected by Orgon in favor of Tartuffe
* *Description:* lacking in self-confidence; in love with Mariane

**Cléante**

* Orgon's brother-in-law who tries to get everyone to view things with calm and reason.
* *Description:* reddish brown long straight hair, mustache; green suit

**Tartuffe**

* The religious hypocrite who weasels his way into Orgon's confidence and then betrays him.
* *Description:* young man with long, straight, unkept hair, wearing dark brown 17th century sweats

**Dorine**

* Mariane's maid who functions as a cunning manipulator and commentator on the actions of the play.
* *Description:* outspoken; witty; wearing pale blue dress and uplift bra(!)

**Flipote**

* Madame Pernelle's maid.
* *Description:* Wears an unassuming dress and bonnet

**M. Loyal**

* An officer of the law who serves Orgon's eviction papers.
* *Description:* Wears an officers outfit