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Theatre History II

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The Misanthrope and Tartuffe: Vessels of Satire

Moliere is arguable the most important playwright of the French Neoclassicism period. His biting satire was the cause of just as much praise as criticism during his time. Moliere's philosophy regarding satire is summed up well in this quote from Garreau, "...Moliere asserted that since nothing on Earth lies beyond the possibility of human corruption and since the force of ridicule is second to none in defining and correcting evil, no topic should be considered sacrosanct from satiric inspection." (Garreau 402). Two exemplary plays that display this are *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, which are two of his most popular works.

Before going into the plays themselves, it worth going through background information on the playwright and the France that he knew when he was writing his works. Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, or Moliere as he is more commonly known, had a tumultuous relationship with French politics and society as a whole. Throughout his life, he had plenty of opportunity to gain familiarity (and likely contempt) with the French Court, and the Church. In 1631, Moliere's father bought the title of Royal Upholsterer and thus became responsible for furnishing the King's bedchambers. His father's involvement would only be the beginning of his involvement with French high society. In 1641, Moliere would take over the position in accordance with his father's wishes, though this would not last for long as by 1643, he gave it up to begin his career in theatre (Garreau 398).

Moliere would take his troupe and tour the provinces for a time where they would gain, and then lose the patronage of the Prince of Conti (who Moliere had attended school with earlier in life) before returning to Paris 15 years later, under the patronage of Louis XIV (Garreau 399). Seemingly unending was Moliere's involvement with French high society. He would be involved in several court intrigues, most notably were instances of dramatic criticism that would devolve into vicious personal against the playwright. He would be shielded by King Louis XIV and eventually awarded the title of "comic poet" as well as a sizable royal pension (Garreau 400). All of this involvement with the French Court and high society would presumably give Moliere an intimate familiarity with its workings, material for his satire, and likely plenty of personal motivation to satirize it in the first place. Few other playwrights would be as qualified.

Moliere's dealings with the Church would begin with his education (as was the case with many in 17th century France). His education began with his enrollment at the parish grammar school where he would be taught French, Latin, reading, writing, arithmetic, plain song, ciphering, and unsurprisingly, religion (Garreau 398). Later, his father would send him to College de Clermont, a school run by the Jesuits, which was popular with the aristocracy of France. It was through his education that Moliere fostered a love for the dramatic arts. In addition to his initial exposure to theatre in grammar school, he was treated to productions of Seneca, Plautus, and Terence which were put on by the priests at College de Clermont (Garreau 398). Ironically enough, it was the Church, which would later be his biggest critic, that would first expose him to theatre.

Though Moliere and his company had the favor of King Louis XIV, which they secured with the aid of "Monsieur", the king's brother (Garreau 399), they would face difficulty due to a religious group known as the Jansenists which were gaining power at the time. As previously

stated, his troupe gained and then lost the patronage of the Prince of Conti. The reason for this was that the Prince converted to Jansenism in 1657, and years later, would even publicly accuse the playwright of atheism (Garreau 399). Jansenism was a religious movement at the time which believed that humans were inherently evil due to the original sin. Consequently, they rejected many aspects of French culture, including but not limited to art, dance, and of course, theatre (Strayer 1). The Jansenists also supported the idea of voluntary suffering. A subset of the group, known as the “convulsionnaires” were particularly brutal about this. Strayer elaborates on this in his text, *Suffering Saints and Convulsionnaires in France, 1640 – 1799*, “...their outdoor public seances in Paris’ Saint-Medard Cemetery often featured babbling in unknown tongues, writhing in convulsions, and alleged healing miracles. But after police repression drove them underground, their secours (secret meetings in homes grew progressively more brutal as attendees beat, pierced, cut, burned, and crucified willing participants,” (Strayer 1-2).

This group could rightly be described as fanatical and even violent. Unfortunately for Moliere, they also held a degree of political power. When *Tartuffe* first premiered in 1664, the Jansenists were appalled by its satirical take on the Church. This is why, despite King Louis XIV’s love for the show, he banned it. In 1667, the show would again be produced, but under the name of *L’Imposteur* with aid from the president of Parliament and from the King himself the play once again had to close due to riotous protests over its content. Due to this, the only extant version of the script is the version that was used when the play was once again put on in 1669 (Garreau 401-403). Throughout his life and professional career (and how closely it was intertwined with French culture and society), Moliere had dealings with the Church, which was another source for his satire.

The *Misanthrope* would end up being Moliere's scathing satire on French society and human nature. In the translator's own words, "In this play, society itself is indicted, and though Alceste's criticisms are indiscriminate, they are not unjustified. It is true that falseness and intrigue are everywhere on view; the conventions enforce a routine dishonesty, justice is subverted by influence, love is overwhelmed by calculation, and these things are accepted, even by the best as 'natural,' The cold vanity of Oronte, Acaste, and Clitandre, the malignant hypocrisy of Arsinoe, and the insincerity of Celimine, are to be taken as exemplary of the age, and Philinte's philosophic tolerance will not quite do in response to such a condition of things," (Wilbur 7). To summarize it, the play deals with stubbornness and honesty and their antagonistic relationship with society's hypocrisy. Alceste, the protagonist, is fixated on how false society is, a problem which is only amplified by an upcoming lawsuit (which he refuses to believe he will lose due to the notion that truth will overcome influence), and his unrequited love for Celemine who is leading him and several other suitors (including Oronte, Acaste, and Clitandre). Alceste tells Philinte (his friend and one of the more redeemable characters of the play that if Celemine does not love him, he will swear off society as a whole and live in seclusion.

Philinte tries to convince him to stay and make more compromises to live with the world. Oronte, another one of Celemine's suitors comes to Alceste for an opinion on his sonnet (which is to Celemine). While Philinte is polite, Alceste is as blunt as ever and implores Oronte to give up any hope of literary greatness. Eliante (Celemine's cousin, who Philinte loves) and Arsinoe (a religious hypocrite, a commonality the play shares with *Tartuffe*) are both attracted to Alceste, but he is blind to them and only has eyes for Celimene, Arsinoe reveals a letter to him that Celimene sent to another suitor which speaks ill of him. To retaliate, he proposes to Eliante, but luckily, she recognizes it for what it is and refuses.

Caught in her own duplicity, Celimene is confronted by Acaste and Clitandre (the two Marquesses) with letters that she sent to each of them, saying that she only loved them and none of the others. Thoroughly done with her, they cut ties, leaving Alceste whose ornery nature has only increased due to the loss of his lawsuit, and from being caught up in libelous claims made by Oronte. Now determined to make good on his promise to sequester himself, Alceste proposes to Celimene, who agrees to marriage, but not to leave society and monogamy. Ever the uncompromising, Alceste is determined to leave on his own and the play ends with the now betrothed Philinte and Eliante following to convince him to stay (Garreau 409-410).

Influences from Moliere's own frustrations with society can be seen throughout the play. Notably, the bumbling Marquesses with their shameless gossip and Oronte with his extreme response to insult are likely indicative of French High Society. In Act 2 Scene 5, Alceste states, "Men, Sir, are always wrong, and that's the reason
That righteous anger's never out of season;
All that I hear in all their conversation
Is flattering praise or reckless condemnation." (Moliere 67)

One might be able to believe that these are an echo of Moliere's own views and opinions. Furthermore in Act 2 Scene 3 Alceste states, "I see dear lady, that you could make a case
For putting up with the whole human race;
These friendships that you calculate so nicely" (Moliere 56)

This likely speaks to the shallow nature of society. At times, Moliere's frustrations seem to be shown through Alceste, while reason seems to be communicated mostly through Philinte, notably in this quote from Act 1 Scene 1,

“In certain cases it would be uncouth
And most absurd to speak the naked truth; with all respect for your exalted notions,
It’s often best to veil one’s true emotions.
Wouldn’t the social fabric come undone
If we were wholly frank with everyone?
Suppose you met with someone you couldn’t bear;
Would you inform him of it then and there?” (Moliere 19).

It may be no small coincidence that this line was written into a play after the highly controversial and satirical *Tartuffe*.

Tartuffe would be Moliere’s most controversial play due to its blatant satirical take on religious hypocrisy. To summarize, *Tartuffe* a hypocrite who has ingratiated himself to Orgon and Mme. Pernelle with his feigned piety and been taken into Orgon’s home with the belief that his “piety” will serve as a positive example for the family. However, the family all realize *Tartuffe* for what he is.

Much to the dismay of his brother-in-law Cleante and his son, Damis, Orgon decides that his daughter, Mariane (who is in love with Valere), should marry *Tartuffe*. Elmire, Orgon’s wife, finds *Tartuffe* to try to convince him to refuse the offer, but he makes unwanted advances and attempts to seduce her, further showing his true nature. This is witnessed by Damis, who denounces *Tartuffe*. Ever taking the unreasonable action, Orgon banishes his son and signs over all of his earthly possessions to *Tartuffe*.

Realizing her husband’s lack of reason, Elmire determines that she must show him *Tartuffe*’s hypocrisy and lecherous nature first-hand. Once this is witnessed, *Tartuffe* takes

advantage of his new inheritance and throws the family out. Luckily, in an infamous use of *deus ex machina*, a messenger of the king comes to arrest Tartuffe, ending the play (Garreau 408).

As previously stated, this play was highly controversial due to how it dealt with religion, which begs the question, why would one be offended by the depiction of religious hypocrisy if they were not the ones being depicted? From Arsinoe in *The Misanthrope* whose piety is only apparent when it is convenient for her to Tartuffe who only used false piety for the sake of personal gain. As Moliere often speaks through his characters, he does so as well through this speech from Cleante,

“So I’ve been told before by dupes like you:
 Being blind, you’d have all others blind as well;
 The clear-eyed man you call an infidel,
 And he who sees through humbug and pretense
 Is charged, by you, with want of reverence.
 Spare me your warnings, Brother; I have no fear
 Of speaking out, for you and Heaven to hear,
 Against affected zeal and pious knavery.
 There’s true and false in piety, as in bravery,
 And just as those whose courage shines the most
 In battle, are the least inclined to boast,
 So those whose hearts are truly pure and lowly
 Don’t make a flashy show of being holy.
 There’s a vast difference, so it seems to me,
 Between true piety and hypocrisy:

Ah, Brother, man's a strangely fashioned creature
 Who seldom is content to follow Nature,
 But recklessly pursues his inclination
 Beyond the narrow bounds of moderation,
 And often, by transgressing Reason's laws,
 Perverts a lofty aim or noble cause.
 A passing observation, but it applies...
 ... Brother, I don't pretend to be a sage,
 Nor have I all the wisdom of the age.
 There's just one insight I would dare to claim:
 I know that true and false are not the same;
 And just as there is nothing I more revere
 Than a soul whose faith is steadfast and sincere,
 Nothing that I more cherish and admire
 Than honest zeal and true religious fire,
 So there is nothing that I find more base
 Than specious piety's dishonest face..." (Moliere 189-190)

Through this speech one can see that Moliere is not resentful of religion itself, but of the way it is corrupted and used for personal gain.

In conclusion, Moliere's *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* were two prime examples of his potent satire. They pulled inspiration from his own experience with the French aristocracy and the Church and became vessels of his own views and frustrations.

Bibliography

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