“My dear, appearances are oft deceiving,
And seeing shouldn’t always be believing.”

TARTUFFE

By Molière, translated into English verse by Richard Wilbur
Directed by Lynne Collins
Study Guide by Nathan Jones

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adame Pernelle arrives at her son Orgon’s house. In her opinion, everyone in the family has slipped into depravity and decadence. Her son, Orgon, has recently taken in a holy man named Tartuffe, and she implores the family to model their behavior after him. The family thinks Tartuffe is a hypocritical con artist and laments that Orgon has fallen under his spell.

Orgon returns home, and his brother-in-law, Cléante, begs him to stop acting like an idiot. Orgon ignores him, claiming that Tartuffe is a great and admirable man. We also find out that Orgon has postponed his daughter Mariane’s wedding to Valère for mysterious reasons.

Orgon calls Mariane in to have a father and daughter talk. He asks her opinion of Tartuffe. She is surprised by his question, and when she struggles to answer, he commands her to say that she respects Tartuffe, is fond of him, and will marry him. As Mariane is shocked into silence, her servant, Dorine, comes to her aid. She mocks Orgon, calling his idea ridiculous and keeps him from pursuing the matter with Mariane further.

Dorine chastises Mariane for failing to stand up to her father but finally agrees to help her. Valère arrives, having heard that Mariane is betrothed to Tartuffe, and soon the two are in a lover’s quarrel. Dorine interjects and tells Mariane to stall the wedding to Tartuffe and urges Valère to spread the news of Orgon’s plan all over town.

Orgon’s son, Damis, hears about the wedding plans and tells Dorine that he will fight Tartuffe. Dorine tries to get rid of Damis since she has arranged a meeting between Tartuffe and Orgon’s wife, Elmire. But Damis hides in a closet to spy on their conversation. Tartuffe shows his true nature and tries to seduce Orgon’s wife. Elmire strikes a bargain with Tartuffe; he will refuse to marry Mariane, and she won’t tell Orgon about his behavior, but Damis bursts in and goes to tell Orgon what he has just witnessed. Orgon refuses to believe his son and disinherit him, giving his whole estate to Tartuffe instead.

Cléante tries to intercede on Damis’ behalf, but Tartuffe will not be moved. Meanwhile Orgon shows up with a marriage contract in hand. Everyone pleads with him to reconsider the marriage, but he stubbornly refuses. Elmire promises she will show Orgon the truth about Tartuffe and has him hide under a table while Tartuffe is summoned.

Elmire tries to seduce Tartuffe, but he is wary and demands “concrete” proof of her affection. Elmire struggles to keep Tartuffe at bay, and finally, Orgon bursts out and furiously confronts Tartuffe. He is put in his place when he is reminded that he has handed over the deed to his property to Tartuffe. Tartuffe then threatens to blackmail Orgon with documents that connect Orgon to a crime. Damis arrives, once again ready to fight, but is interrupted by the arrival of Madame Pernelle. She has heard rumors about Tartuffe but won’t believe they are true. A messenger arrives and serves Orgon with an eviction notice, and Valère returns to inform him that Tartuffe has turned the documents over to the courts, so Orgon must flee the country.

Tartuffe returns with a police officer and demands that Orgon be arrested. Instead, the officer arrests Tartuffe, saying that the court was never fooled by Tartuffe’s scheming and lying. Orgon receives a full pardon, and Mariane will finally be allowed to marry Valère.
Character Relationships
(or, Who’s Who And What They’re Up To)

Adapted from: https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/t/tartuffe/character-map
Molière

The Playwright

Born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin in 1622 to prosperous middle class parents, Molière would forgo a career in law and become one of the great comedic playwrights of all time. Shortly after attaining his law degree, he formed a theatre company called L’Illustre Théâtre. The theatre struggled financially, and he began using the name Molière to avoid creditors. He spent ten years acting with another company and became known as a great comedic actor as well as a director and manager.

His first play, *The Romantic Ladies*, satirized the social elite and set the stage for what he would face throughout his career, criticism for shining a satirical light on the rich and powerful. For the rest of his career he would deal with people trying to ban or censor his work.

In 1658, his company was invited to perform for Louis XIV, and he won favor with the crown. He was granted the use of lavish theatres and donations to finance his productions. During this time the name of his troupe was *Troupe du Roi*, or The King’s Troupe. Over the course of his career he wrote over thirty plays. Some of his most popular works include: *Tartuffe*, *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, *The Miser*, *The Misanthrope*, and *Scapin*. Though religious leaders, medical professionals, and conventional thinkers often criticized his work, he was immensely popular with the public. People began to copy his style in Britain and France, making him one of the fathers of French Comedy.

In 1673 Molière was performing his new play, *The Imaginary Invalid*, and complained of feeling ill. He had been suffering from tuberculosis and collapsed on stage several times, but he refused to stop the show. He was taken home, and several priests refused to give him last rites. He died without them, and this, paired with the fact that actors were not allowed to be buried on sacred ground, meant that his widow had to appeal to the King so that he would be allowed a proper burial. The King agreed, and one of the greatest French playwrights of all time was laid to rest in the section of the graveyard reserved for unbaptized infants.

“It’s a strange enterprise to make respectable people laugh.” — Molière
Context
(or, Why Should I Care?)

When Tartuffe was first performed, the Catholic Church in France declared that it was a sacrilegious attack on faith and the Church and demanded it be banned. Molière revised the play several times and appealed to the King, who finally lifted the ban after five years.

As centuries have passed, the way that we understand and analyze this play has shifted. Although, at first glance, it may seem Tartuffe is skewering people of faith, it is really highlighting hypocrisy. Tartuffe is not really a holy man. He is simply a confidence man who is trying to swindle others. Orgon has genuine faith, but his gullibility allows Tartuffe to assume control of his household. Cléante acts as the voice of reason and lets us know what true religious belief looks like.

So what does this mean to us today? A recent poll asked people who believe in God the reasons that they don’t attend church; 72% said they don’t go because of how many hypocrites they encounter. Molière’s portrayal of religious manipulation and hypocrisy is clearly an issue in our world today.

And hypocrisy and dishonesty are not unique to religion; we see them in every area of society: the role-model athlete who takes performance enhancing drugs, the talented singer who lip syncs or uses auto-tune, the politician who speaks about family values but is caught behaving to the contrary. As we prepare for this presidential election, our exposure to hypocrisy will rise, and our tolerance for it will wane. Part of the rise of Trump and why people were “feeling the Bern” is distrust of politicians whom we see as being disingenuous or not speaking truthfully.

In our digital age, hypocrites are exposed at a faster rate than ever before. We live in a time when people can carefully craft the version of themselves that is presented to the world. Keeping up appearances on social media is now a big part of how we present an image of ourselves to the world, but it also has made it easier for that image to come crashing down. Tartuffe lets his guard down in front of Elmire, and it results in his downfall, but when a similar event happens to someone now, it goes viral in a matter of hours, and one finds oneself on John Oliver, Tosh.0, or trending on Twitter.

If there’s one thing we can’t stand, it’s fake people, yet we all must realize that a little bit of Tartuffe exists in all of us. Sometimes we are disingenuous, manipulate others to get what we want, or present an insincere version of ourselves. Our motives can vary from the sinister to the silly, false bravado, or a desire for social acceptance. Using humor and satire, Molière holds up a mirror to our society that reflects back on us just as brightly today as it did to the French almost 400 years ago.

Activities

• Choose a character from the play and create a “social media” profile for him or her. What types of façade would that character present to the world? What types of posts, articles, and tweets would he or she make? Who would his or her friend list consist of? Include something that might show us a glimpse of his or her “true nature.”

• Write: How honest are we required to be online? What are the risks involved if we are 100% honest or 100% dishonest?

• Is there another character who uses his or her appearance or station to manipulate others throughout the play besides Tartuffe? If so, discuss what aspects of his or her character are hidden or highlighted for others to see.

Themes
(or, What Are We Talking About?)

HYPOCRISY – The primary theme of Tartuffe is hypocrisy. We are told in the very beginning of the play that Tartuffe is not a genuine character, and we see it become more and more obvious as the play unfolds. While some know exactly what Tartuffe is, Orgon and Madame Pernelle are blind to his hypocrisy. His hypocritical behavior calls the behavior of all the other characters into question, creating an unstable environment where the truth becomes harder and harder to find.

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Questions
• Are there any other characters who are guilty of being hypocritical because of Tartuffe or in reaction to his behavior?
• Is hypocrisy easy to detect in people? Why or why not?
• Some of our favorite characters are ones who are blatantly, unapologetically, and gleefully evil such as The Joker, Hanibal Lecter, Alex DeLarge from A Clockwork Orange, or Hans Landa from Inglorious Basterds What about evil characters makes us uncomfortable? What makes them so enjoyable? How do you feel as you watch characters behave this way?

FOOLISHNESS – Orgon is obviously quite foolish in his infatuation with Tartuffe, but this play has many characters behaving quite incomprehensibly. Mariane and Valère are completely smitten, but are incredibly immature in how they speak with each other, Damis exhibits bouts of foolish anger, which cloud his judgment. Even Tartuffe lets his foolish lust get in the way of his objective.

Questions
• Besides foolishness, why does Orgon allow himself to be swayed by Tartuffe?
• What is the difference between being trusting and being foolish?
• What makes it so difficult to turn back from foolish behavior even after we have been shown the error of our decision making?

WOMEN AND FEMININITY – Molière uses unconventional female characters to drive the plot of Tartuffe. During the time of the play, women were expected to obey their husbands and fathers and had very little say in things such as marriage or finances. However, the female characters, Elmire and Dorine, use their wits and cleverness to push back against Tartuffe’s schemes. While the men protest and bluster about how best to handle Tartuffe, the female characters are the ones who seem capable of taking him on.

Questions
• Why is Dorine able to be more proactive, given her status as a servant, yet Mariane seems unable to do anything to help herself in her situation?
• Why is having male and female characters who are evenly matched more interesting and entertaining?
• What does the juxtaposition of gender roles tell us about the role of women in Molière’s time compared to the present?

LIES AND DECEIT – Throughout the play we see Tartuffe lie and scheme behind Orgon’s back. Ultimately, to defeat him the other characters have to make some difficult ethical choices. Elmire and Dorine scheme against Tartuffe and are able to beat him at his own game. Meanwhile, Damis tells the truth and creates more problems. This serves to highlight that once we start lying, getting back to the truth becomes more and more difficult, but that truth-telling can also have its price. Molière brings to light that most of us have to live in a moral gray area, making constant choices about whether to tell the truth, part of the truth, or an outright lie. The motivations behind these choices are not always bad ones, but they can often lead to unintended repercussions.

Questions
• Is it ethical to use deceit and lies to combat the misdeeds of others?
• When is it acceptable to lie? How do we make these distinctions?
• Can lies be used to do good, and can the truth backfire?

MARRIAGE – In Tartuffe marriage is one of the main drivers of the plot and is shown in two different lights. We see it serve the function of a tool to advance men’s objectives and also as an arrangement that springs from genuine love. Watching the characters navigate this juxtaposition creates tension throughout the play.

Questions
• Should marriage ever be practical? Why or why not?
• Marrying for love is now common. In what ways does this make marriage more difficult or challenging?
• Does marryng for love make marriage more difficult to maintain as opposed to marrying for political or practical reasons?
Production Design
(or, How We See The Play)

When a director and designers begin to work on a production, the conversation begins with general impressions of the world of the play. Who are these characters? What drives them to do what they do? Where and when does the play take place? How do we want to explore and reveal the play’s themes? As we started work on Tartuffe, we soon saw that its conflicts and themes are both timely and timeless. At any time, questions about how and why people are fooled by charismatic charlatans are interesting, but an election year brings those questions to center stage. Like Tartuffe, our political candidates can prey on our hopes and fears and often leave us feeling betrayed. Since we are in a presidential election season, it seems particularly interesting to bring the play into our modern world, so we have chosen a design that mixes elements of the play’s 17th Century roots and our own world.

The chaos that Tartuffe has brought into this family’s life is mirrored in the under construction elements of the scenic, lighting and sound designs. This family’s world is being renovated (or demolished) by Tartuffe, and the chaos of a home under construction seems like a perfect metaphor for this.

Finally, this play is a comedy, so in all of our choices of setting, lighting, costumes and sound, we hope to encourage audiences to have fun just as we have had in creating our production of Tartuffe.

—Lynne Collins

Activities

• Costumes often help define and highlight the traits of a character. Think about how the costume design of each character does this. Choose a character from Tartuffe and describe how his or her costume helped you understand him or her.
• Choose a character in a play, movie, TV show, or play that you like. Design a new costume that highlights elements of his or her personality, goals, strengths, and flaws.

cont.
• This production uses a lot of modern day technology to highlight the nature of our characters and how they navigate through the world of the play. Choose two characters from the play. Create a text conversation between them that shows the conflict, love, frustration, or lies that exist in their relationship. Bonus points for emojis!

Additional Activities
• Tartuffe is a hypocritical character who is still relevant in our world today. Choose a prominent figure—an athlete, movie star, musician, politician, etc. Write an essay that highlights the ways that Tartuffe’s character traits can be found in this person.
• Imagine that the court does not come to Orgon’s rescue at the end of the play. Craft a new ending that allows the plot to unfold without interruption. How would it resolve, and who would emerge triumphant?

• The play uses a very specific rhyming pattern and rhythm. Select a portion of the text, and rewrite it to reflect modern speech patterns, slang, and references. Try to keep the intent and motivation of the lines the same.
• Choose the character of Mariane or Damis. Write a letter directly to Orgon as a last ditch attempt to convince him of his folly. Keep the character’s personal goals, characteristics, and motivations in mind.
• Choose a character that uses deception in the play. Write an entry from his or her personal diary or journal. Include details from the plot, but include thoughts and opinions that were not necessarily spoken aloud. What are the character’s true thoughts about the events unfolding in Orgon’s household?