

MOLIERE AND THE CHURCH

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: Molière's relationship with the Church and its followers will be examined. We shall discuss the accusations of immorality and impiety that were levelled by modern and contemporary critics against the playwright and his plays. The comments of these critics will serve to reveal the religious criticism that was made against the writer and his three plays, L'Ecole des femmes, Le Tartuffe, and Dom Juan. We shall try to determine whether Molière's main pre-occupation when he wrote his plays was to attack religion and religious people or not. An attempt will be made to give an answer to the question after studying the works mentioned above.

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## INTRODUCTION

Molière's works have been considered by many as presenting a coherent attitude on such questions as the education of women, the role of doctors and the role of religion. Contemporary and modern critics have attributed a specific trend of thought and even a moral intention to Molière's theatre; they have accused him of irreligion and immorality. This study will attempt to examine the writer's views on religion and the Church.

Bossuet, like many of his contemporaries, was hostile to comedy and the theatre in general. In his lettre au Père Caffaro (1694) he writes:

Songez seulement si vous oserez soutenir à la face du ciel des pièces où la vertu et la piété sont toujours ridicules, la corruption toujours défendue et toujours plaisante, et la pudeur toujours offensée ou toujours en crainte d'être violée par les derniers attentats...<sup>1</sup>

In the same year, this contemporary of Molière published his Maximes et Réflexions sur la Comédie in which he argues that the theatre attacks the ridiculous things of the world only to cause all its corruption. He reproaches Molière in particular at one point in this treatise in which

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<sup>1</sup> L. Thoorens, J. Anouilh et autres, Le dossier Molière (Verviers: Editions Gerard et Cie., 1964), p. 231.

he says that posterity will judge:

Ce poète comédien qui, en jouant son Malade Imaginaire ou son Médecin par force, reçut la dernière atteinte de la maladie dont il mourut peu d'heures après, et passa des plaisanteries du théâtre, parmi lesquelles il rendit presque le dernier soupir, au tribunal de celui qui dit: Malheur à vous qui riez, car vous pleurerez...<sup>2</sup>

In Bourdaloue's opinion, Molière's comedies are the expression of the devil's evil doings. According to him, they are:

Damnables inventions pour humilier les gens de bien, pour les rendre tous suspects, pour leur ôter la liberté de se déclarer en faveur de la vertu, tandis que le vice et le libertinage triomphaient; car ce sont là, chrétiens, les stratagèmes et les ruses dont le démon s'est prévalu...<sup>3</sup>

He says further that the aims of Molière when he wrote Le Tartuffe were destructive although the author claims that he is attacking hypocrisy.

In 1686, the Jansenist, Baillet, attacked Molière on moral grounds. He declared:

M. de Molière est un des plus dangereux ennemis que le siècle ou le monde ait suscités à l'Eglise de Jésus-Christ, et il est d'autant plus redoutable qu'il fait encore après sa mort le même ravage dans le coeur de ses lecteurs qu'il avait fait de son vivant dans celui de ses spectateurs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 232.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 230.

<sup>4</sup>R. Bray, Molière, homme de théâtre (France: Mercure de France, 1954), p. 25.

Some modern critics like Brunetière, for example, have adopted a categorical position about Molière's intentions:

Il avait son opinion à lui, persistante et tranchante, aisée à connaître, sur toutes les questions qu'il souleva.<sup>5</sup>

This critic maintains that once the comic author undertakes a piece of work that touches on social institutions like the Church and religion, for example, or the relationship between an old man and a young girl, he is making a judgment on these issues:

Du moment, en effet, que l'art se mêle à la vie pour la décrire, -- au lieu de s'en séparer pour l'interpréter, pour l'embellir ou pour la satiriser, -- il ne saurait s'empêcher longtemps de la juger et, par conséquent, de prétendre à la diriger....<sup>6</sup>

Monseigneur Calvet claims that around Molière's time there existed a conflict between religious devotion and society:

La dévotion tendant à dominer le monde et le monde tendant à éliminer la religion de la vie sociale."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>m. Brunetière, Les Époques du théâtre français (1636-1850) (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie., 1896), p. 102.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>7</sup>J. Calvet, Molière est-il chrétien? (Paris: Lanore, 1950), p. 57.



He goes on to say:

Cette question religieuse qui s'impose à lui, Molière se décide à l'étudier, et comme il est homme de théâtre, à la porter au théâtre.<sup>8</sup>

He, like Brunetière, is of the opinion that Molière's religious works possess the author's personal views.

All the critics that we have cited so far see Molière's plays principally as works that are written rather to be read than to be performed. However, there are modern critics like René Bray and W. G. Moore who contend that the system of reading the plays and drawing conclusions from them about the author's secret thoughts is suspicious. They theorise that Molière should be considered as a comic dramatist first and foremost rather than as a social critic or philosopher. Bray, for example, writes:

Celui qui veut rencontrer Molière ne doit pas le chercher là où il chercherait Racine ou Boileau. Il ne doit pas le transformer en moraliste, bien moins en philosophe, c'est-à-dire lui imputer des soucis altérant la création dramatique.<sup>9</sup>

Molière wrote la Critique de L'École des femmes to defend the religious implications that arose in his play, L'École des femmes. But this did not settle the moral issue of the play. He then wrote another reply on the invitation of the King, L'Impromptu de Versailles, which was

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>9</sup> Bray, p. 42.

more of a counter-attack against his enemies than a defense of his play. Molière realised that the religious issues were instigated mainly by his literary counter-parts at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the 'great comedians', who were envious of the immense success of L'École des femmes (1662). In the meantime, the relationship between Molière and the religionists had deteriorated so much that upon publication of Le Tartuffe in 1669, and even before then, some requested the suppression of the entire play condemning it as dangerous to the welfare of the Church, while others like Father Roullé, parish-priest of Saint Barthélemy, demanded that it be burned.

The debate had literally turned from a religious one to a political one. Molière had beckoned the support of the King to add weight to his resistance against the criticism of his enemies; it became a question of who had more authority to suppress the play --- the King or the devout. Finally, Le Tartuffe was performed in public in 1669, not before Molière had written three placets to the King and a preface to the final edition of the play. The other controversial play was Don Juan (1665) which was withdrawn by the author after its fifteenth performance due to constant attacks from the religious people. After these years of continuous harassment from his enemies, Molière then abandoned writing comedies on religious themes.

The quarrel between the Church and Molière originated as early as 1643, when the writer became a member of Madeleine Béjart's troupe, L'illustre Théâtre. They settled in the district called Saint-Germain

which had the reputation of being the centre of perversity:

Des historiens... nous disent qu'il était alors  
la sentine de la capitale et le refuge de tous  
les vices du royaume...<sup>10</sup>

This district was under the jurisdiction of the parish-priest of Saint-Germain. In 1643, M. Olier, an ardent promoter of the Catholic Reform, became the parish priest and he decided "d' épurer le quartier et d' en réformer les moeurs."<sup>11</sup> During this period, comedians were theoretically excommunicated from the Church. In fact, the ecclesiastics did not tolerate comedians nor actors. It is felt that Molière's initial hostility to the Church began when he became suspicious of priests and their religious followers who took part in the Catholic Reform. For Monseigneur Calvet:

C'est justement à tout cet extérieur de la Réforme  
Catholique que s'en prend Molière, sûr d'avance  
d'avoir les rieurs pour lui...<sup>12</sup>

He maintains that the mockery of the devouts started in L' École des Maris where Molière ridicules the programme of the Catholic Reform. The following dialogue reveals Sganarelle as a "réformé", Ariste as a "mondain"; it is supposed to be a conversation on the conduct of married women and on customs that the devouts desired to abolish:

<sup>10</sup> Calvet, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 43.

Ariste

Y voit-on quelque chose où l'honneur soit blessé?

Sganarelle

Quoi? si vous l'épousez, elle pourra prétendre  
Les mêmes libertés que fille on lui voit prendre?

Ariste

Pourquoi non?

Sganarelle

Vos désirs lui seront complaisans,  
Jusques à lui laisser et mouches et rubans?

Ariste

Sans doute.

Sganarelle

A lui souffrir, en cervelle troublée,  
De courir tous les bals et les lieux d'assemblée?

Ariste

Oui, vraiment.

Sganarelle

Et chez vous iront les damoiseaux?

Ariste

Et quoi donc?

Sganarelle

Qui joueront et donneront cadeaux?

Ariste

D'accord.

Sganarelle

Et votre femme entendra les fleurettes?

Ariste

Fort bien.

Sganarelle

Et vous verrez ces visites muguettes  
D'un oeil à témoigner de n'en être point sot?

Ariste

Cela s'entend.

Sganarelle

Allez, vous êtes un vieux fou.<sup>13</sup>

(I, ii, 221-230)

The devouts were said to be concerned about the liberality of a  
worldly life:

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<sup>13</sup> Molière, *Oeuvres complètes*, éd. R. Jouanny (Paris: Garnier  
Frères, 1962), ii, pp. 325-326.

Les mondains s'amusaient et les dévots, inquiets,  
se demandaient jusqu' où irait l'audace du  
nouveau venu.<sup>14</sup>

It was not too long afterwards that the religious battle between Molière and the pious began when they imagined a true declaration of war in L'École des femmes (1662).

Many students of Molière prefer not to regard him as a moralist professing certain fixed ethics and, even less, as the proponent of a consistent philosophy towards religion and the Church. They see his religious works as dramatic creations and masterpieces of the imagination. Molière, it is argued by many, is "un homme de théâtre"; when he composes a play, he chooses the subject matter and subject matter that will please the public. He then takes the material and produces comic effects by distorting the serious and the dangerous sides of the theme. Molière exploited stock situations in matters of religion, nature and marriage to cause laughter. His personal outlook on these matters cannot be pin-pointed with as much precision as his attitude to the ignorant doctors of his time.

In Chapter 1, we shall examine Molière's religious attitude, by making a study of his libertine associations and discussing his rapport with the Church. In Chapters 2, 3 and 4, respectively, the religious elements that appear in L'École des femmes, Le Tartuffe and Don Juan are

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<sup>14</sup>Calvet, p. 44.

mentioned. We analyse the accusations levelled at Molière and each of the plays, confronting the textual evidence and the author's self-defenses with the arguments of contemporary and modern critics. We then offer our own ideas and interpretation on the issues that are raised.

## CHAPTER I

### MOLIÈRE'S RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES

#### Molière and his libertine associations:

It is the conviction of some that Molière was a libertine. One of the arguments in support of this claim is the fact that he frequented friends who were considered to be free-thinkers and militant against the Church. These same critics have searched Molière's works minutely to conclude that the writer had a consistent philosophy.

Defenders of this thesis point out that "son meilleur ami est Chapelle, libertin notoire et un peu voyant."<sup>1</sup> According to Grimarest, it was at the College of Clermont that Chapelle and Molière became acquainted. Chapelle's father, François Lhuillier, was the friend of Des Barreaux, a philosopher and atheist, who was acclaimed the prince of the libertines. Chapelle himself was four years younger than Molière and his father, M. Lhuillier, chose as his son's tutor, Gassendi, a known epicurean, "qui, ayant remarqué dans Molière toute la docilité et toute la pénétration nécessaires pour prendre les connaissances de la philosophie, se fit un plaisir de la lui enseigner en même temps..."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J. Cairncross, Molière bourgeois et libertin (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1963), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>G. Michaut, La Jeunesse de Molière (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1922), p. 60.

John Cairncross, who believes that Molière is unquestionably a "libertin" points out that "il fréquente la Mothe le Vayer qui est en possession d'une solide réputation d'athéisme."<sup>3</sup> Mongrédien remarks that this "jeune abbé de ruelles, très répandu parmi les poètes, amateur de bonne chère, amoureux d'ailleurs de sa cousine, et familier des logis de comédiennes, avait l'esprit satirique."<sup>4</sup> The Abbé la Mothe le Vayer and his father, also a sceptic, both shared the opinion that "la Sceptique se peut nommer une parfaite introduction au Christianisme!"<sup>5</sup>

Ninon de Lenclos whom Molière knew personally and often visited, lived near "la rue Traversante" where la Mothe le Vayer resided. She was condemned by the "Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" as being a "célèbre prostituée."<sup>6</sup> She, like Molière, had to undergo persecutions from the devots and the Society for allegedly promoting immorality.

It is maintained that Molière's libertinage was encouraged by the support of Louis XIV who was in no way a devout; he is quoted as saying to his brother that "il ne voulait pas faire l'hypocrite."<sup>7</sup> The King was said to be a man who tolerated no forces within his kingdom that he considered a threat to his prestige. The "Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" and

<sup>3</sup>Cairncross, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>G. Mongrédien, la Vie Privée de Molière (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1950), p. 145.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 355.

<sup>6</sup>Jean Gaumont and L. Chouville, "Ninon, Molière et les dévots " in Mercure de France, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1922), 1 janvier - 1 février 1922, Tome CLIII, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup>Cairncross, p. 12.



even the Church itself were believed to be oppressive elements:

Il détestait les prédicateurs austères qui lui reprochaient ses amours nombreuses et en particulier il était résolu à écraser la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement qui contrecarrait sa politique étrangère et s'érigeait en Etat dans Etat. Il refusait de tolérer l'existence de forces privilégiées dans le royaume, y compris l'Eglise...<sup>8</sup>

Molière is accused of taking advantage of this period of liberalism from 1661 on when Louis XIV succeeded formally to the throne.

Many of Molière's contemporaries regarded him as a notorious libertine whose purpose was to antagonise the devout. Father Pierre Roullé, parish priest of Saint-Barthélemy, denounced Molière in his pamphlet Le Roi glorieux au monde as "un homme, ou plutôt un démon vêtu de chair et habillé en homme, et le plus signalé impie et libertin qui fût jamais dans les siècles passés,..."<sup>9</sup>

Bourdaloue declared in his treatise De l'hypocrisie (1670) which he wrote as an objection to Molière's Le Tartuffe but which in fact was a general commentary on his works:

Et voilà, chrétiens, ce qui est arrivé, lorsque des esprits profanes, et bien éloignés de vouloir entrer dans les intérêts de Dieu, ont entrepris de censurer l'hypocrisie, non point pour en réformer l'abus, ce qui n'est pas de leur ressort, mais pour faire une

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>9</sup> Thoorens, p. 151.

espèce de diversion dont le libertinage pût profiter en concevant et faisant concevoir d'injustes soupçons de la vraie piété par de malignes représentations de la fausse.<sup>10</sup>

Molière frequented sceptics and libertines and he is placed in this category of "esprits libres" by his enemies. It is natural, Molière's censors claim, that the friend of la Mothe le Vayer, of Chapelle and of Ninon de Lanclos wrote plays like le Tartuffe and Don Juan where he displayed his free thought. The "Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" and offended Christians were implacable in their hostility to Molière because "on connaît trop bien ses attaches philosophiques."<sup>11</sup>

But can we really say that we know much of Molière's philosophical libertine associations? It is almost impossible to say something definite on this question on account of the lack of biographical data and documents. It must be pointed out also that the reproaches of libertinage made against Molière originate from the long-standing quarrel between the Church and the theatre. All plays with some religious references that won the support of the public inevitably incurred the criticism of the Church. Molière's three plays, l'École des femmes, le Tartuffe and Don Juan were successful. This is a fact that his enemies could not deny. This could be as good a reason as any for their attacks against his plays. They could not justifiably prove that the moral intention in Molière's works was to promote libertine thoughts in his works.

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<sup>10</sup> Thoorens, p. 230.

<sup>11</sup> G. Mongrédien, la Vie littéraire au dixseptième siècle (Paris: librairie Hachette, 1944), p. 332.

In addition, the argument of Molière's attackers is that in spite of the fact that there is an absence of written evidence which could enlighten us on the thoughts of the man, one way of getting information is to question and examine the personal attitude of his friends. It is true that by definition the ideas and sentiments of a group are to some degree fixed in the personalities of the members. Therefore, support of these norms may be counted on to some extent. However, it is quite probable that the influence from Molière's more orthodox friends may have weakened the libertine influence on him. "Indeed," affirms Terence K. Hopkins in his book, The Exercise of Influence in small groups, "...for any one group the other memberships of its participants, and their other commitments, contribute indirectly to its tendency towards a state of anomie."<sup>12</sup> (Anomie is the sociological term that is used to describe a state of society (or a group in this case) in which normative standards of conduct and belief have weakened or disappeared.) It can be taken for granted, then, that no member within any one group (for example, Molière in his libertine group) totally adheres subjectively to the group's norms. We are assured by the sociologist Hopkins that "not only is each likely to lack a moral or motivational commitment to at least some of the ideas or sentiments that are normative for most, but in addition, the salience of the commitments to any one member as an

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<sup>12</sup>T. K. Hopkins, The Exercise of Influence in small groups (Totowa, N. J.: The Bedminster Press, 1964), p. 33.

individual is almost always lower on the average than is their salience to the members collectively."<sup>13</sup>

The argument, "Molière-libertin", can only have some weight if a methodical approach is adopted to the issue. Those who uphold this view would have to get measurements of group opinion between two or more points in the course of time and the activities of members within that time must be observed. It is only when this information is obtained that "degrees of influence could be attributed to the participants, according to the observed changes in group opinion, the ideas and sentiments each held, and the ideas and sentiments each exemplified or expressed in his actions."<sup>14</sup> Molière therefore should not be merely labelled a libertine on the evidence we possess at present.

#### Molière's rapport with the Church

Although we do not have much data concerning the religious practices of Molière, we are told that he observed the principles of his faith. He was baptised on January 15th, 1622 at Saint-Eustache, he was a god-father about ten times, had the children baptised and is said to have once made his Easter duty receiving communion from Father Bernard of the parish of Saint-Eustache:

...parrain, une dizaine de fois, dans diverses églises de Paris et de province, faisant baptiser

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 38.

ses enfants, communiant à Pâques, en avril 1672, et pourvu à cette époque d'un confesseur attitré, "M. Bernard, prêtre habitué en l'église Saint-Germain (l'Auxerrois)"....<sup>15</sup>

But in spite of the fact that Molière was thought to be a good Christian, the Church contended that he was too liberal in his religious outlook. In addition, the devouts were suspicious of the author's association with sceptics and libertines. The ambivalent attitude of the Church to Molière was eventually expressed at the death of the author. He died without receiving the Sacrament of Extreme Unction.

It is said that Molière insisted on having the last rites administered to him by a priest and he sent his valet and his maid many times to Saint-Eustache Church:

Lesquels s'adressèrent à MM. l'enfant et le chat, deux prêtres habitués de ladite paroisse, qui refusèrent plusieurs fois de venir, ce qui obligea le sieur Jean Aubry (beau-frère de Molière) d'y aller lui-même pour en faire venir, et de fait fit lever le nommé Paysant, aussi prêtre habitué dudit lieu; et comme toutes ces allées et venues tardèrent plus d'une heure et demie, pendant lequel temps le dit feu Molière décéda et le dit sieur Paysant arriva comme il venait d'expirer.<sup>16</sup>

Molière died without the blessings of the Church and it was for this reason that he was buried without religious obsequies. The Archbishop ordered that the burial of Molière's body be done at night and the ceremony to Saint-Joseph's cemetery was rather simple:

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<sup>15</sup>H. D'Alméras, Le Tartuffe de Molière (Amiens: Edgar Malfère, 1928), p. 90.

<sup>16</sup>G. Mongrédien, la Vie Privée de Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1950), p. 225.

Mardy 21 février 1673, sur les neuf heures du soir, l'on a fait le convoi de Jean-Baptiste Poquelin-Molière, tapissier valet de chambre, illustre comédien, sans autre pompe sinon de trois ecclésiastiques (l'archevêque n'en avait autorisé que deux), quatre prêtres ont porté le corps dans une bière de bois, couverte du poêle des tapissiers; six enfants bleus portant six cierges dans six chandeliers d'argent; plusieurs laquais portant des **flambeaux** de cire blanche allumés.<sup>17</sup>

The adverse attitude of the Church to Molière stems from the enmity of the clergy to comedians and actors in general. The devout and the ecclesiastic authorities thought that comedians should have no connection with the Church, and so, they were excommunicated. According to the rules of the Church at that time, priests were forbidden to give communion to "personnes publiquement indignes, tels que sont les excommuniés, interdits et manifestement infâmes, comme prostituées, concubinaires, comédiens, usuriers, **sorciers**."<sup>18</sup> Comedians could not receive Extreme Unction unless they renounced the practice of their profession.

The comedian contends that any satire that is found in his work is not meant to attack institutions; he is attacking a corruption which has found its way into the organisation. When, for example, Molière proposes to reveal the religious hypocrisy of the impostor in Le Tartuffe, he claims that his intention was not to throw light on religion itself.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 232.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 225.

Yet the effect of the play seemed to many people really destructive; the attack on hypocrisy appeared somehow in the eyes of religious rigorists as an insidious attack on religion itself. This accusation caused Molière to write an apologia. However, by writing comedies where religious implications are found, Molière's relation to the devout unavoidably became problematic, no matter how innocent his private thoughts were.

As far as the playwright's attitude is concerned, we can say that the question of religion was not a major preoccupation. The attacks from the enemies of comedy have been bitter; the attacks against Molière and his plays have been impetuous. The writer never appeared to be as opposed to the Church and religion as their supporters were to him. Molière had no **scruples** about dealing with religious subjects in his works but this does not make him anti-religious.

## CHAPTER II

### L'ÉCOLE DES FEMMES

Molière's adversaries attacked his play, L'École des femmes (1662), on both aesthetic and moral grounds. They maintained that the play was lacking in action, that the character of Arnolphe himself is not consistent for he acts like an "honnête homme" sometimes, for example, when he lends money to Horace yet he acts grotesquely on other occasions. His opponents accused him of sullyng the dignity and decency of women and of tarnishing moral and religious righteousness. In fact, they denounced the play as being an impertinent and scandalous piece of work.

The main moral arguments were concentrated on the implications of Angès' convent education, the immoral nature of Arnolphe's sermon of Act III, Scene ii, and the question of the irreligion of the "Maximes du mariage".

Arnolphe has had Agnès brought up in a convent from the age of four, the moment when he became her tutor and guardian. He wanted her to grow up in complete ignorance of the facts of life, with the aim of eventually marrying her. Speaking to Chrysalde, he says:

Dans un petit couvent, loin de toute pratique,  
Je la fis élever selon ma politique,  
C'est-à-dire ordonnant quels soins on emploiroit  
Pour la rendre idiote autant qu'il se pourroit.  
Dieu merci, le succès a suivi mon attente:  
Et grande, je l'ai vue à tel point innocente,  
Que j'ai béni le Ciel d'avoir trouvé mon fait,  
Pour me faire une femme au gré de mon souhait.

(I, i, 135-142)



He gives her a sermon and lets her know that her duty as a woman is only to obey. If Agnès were to fail in her duties towards him as her husband, he threatened her by saying: "qu'il est aux enfers des chaudières bouillantes/Où l'on plonge à jamais les femmes mal vivantes".

Monseigneur Calvet has offered an interpretation of the religious allusions that were made in L'École des femmes. He refers us to Act III, Scene ii, where he contends that Molière is attacking the religious traditionalists and the Christian education given to young bourgeois girls in a convent. He maintains that the writer is saying openly that the result of such an education is the exact opposite of the intention of its administrators, namely that of preserving the innocence of the young girl. He puts forward the following thesis which he claims is evident and pronounced in the play:

Molière s'attaquait à la formation chrétienne, donnée alors à la jeune fille de la bourgeoisie, et il prétendait démontrer que cette éducation des couvents, sans air et sans horizon, qui était destinée à protéger son innocence, la préparait au contraire et la poussait aux inconséquences les plus osées .... Ce programme était celui de la société chrétienne et Molière l'attaquait ouvertement ...<sup>1</sup>

The same critic goes on to say that Molière has declared an open, direct attack against "l'esprit de la Réforme Catholique". He makes reference to the question of marriage in the play and in particular to Act III, Scene ii, where Arnolphe, seated, gives his sermon to Agnès,

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<sup>1</sup>J. Calvet, Molière est-il chrétien? (Paris: Lanore, 1950), p. 45.

standing. According to the reverend father, it was in this same fashion that the officiating priest spoke to the married woman on the day of her marriage. He firmly believes that Molière has isolated this occasion and is making fun of the religiosity of it. "Or", he writes;

. . . c'est à cela que Molière s'en prenait dans la cérémonie préparatoire au mariage d'Agnès, dans la scène ii de l'acte III . . . elle [cette scène] a été voulue par Molière, comme une chose plaisante à souhait, conforme à la tradition gauloise, qui aime bouffonner au sujet du mariage, et comme une occasion de se gausser de la littérature édifiante et des métaphores pieuses des sermons d'église . . . Arnolphe, le futur mari, y joue en même temps le rôle de l'officiant, qui adresse à la future "le discours d'usage".<sup>2</sup>

"La Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" which was the official and the most effective organ of the "dévots" of the time attacked the play. The devouts contended that Molière was parodying the custom of the Cabal of instilling fear in married women. They mention the horrifying sermon that Arnolphe gives Agnès to keep her in idiocy:

Et vous devez du coeur dévorer ces leçons.  
Si votre âme les suit, et fuit d'être coquette,  
Elle sera toujours, comme un lis, blanche et nette;  
Mais s'il faut qu'à l'honneur elle fasse un faux bond,  
Elle deviendra lors noire comme un charbon;  
Vous paroîtrez à tous un objet effroyable,  
Et vous irez un jour, vrai partage du diable,  
Bouillir dans les enfers à toute éternité: . . .

(III, ii, 730-737)

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 49.

The Cabal saw in this discourse a parody of their attitude to married women:

De l'enfer souvent parleras  
Pour lui troubler l'entendement.<sup>3</sup>

M. Calvet claims that the ten maxims resembled the ones that were found in the booklet circulated by the Church at this time: "ce formulaire versifié en 10 maximes comme par hasard ressemble à s'y méprendre à L'Institution à Olympia, de saint Grégoire de Nysse, que Desmarets de Saint-Sorlen venait de traduire . . . et qui était répandue par les dévots comme brochure d'église."<sup>4</sup> His Grace takes up the question seriously and denounces what he terms the parody that Molière makes of religion; for him, a religious man, this play could not be allowed to get by without being criticised. He argues that some people can find fun in L'École des femmes but not Christians. "Tout cela", he says, referring to the supposed mockery of religion in the play, "adroitement dosé et gorgé de bonne humeur, est fort amusant pour un public qui ne songe qu'à s'esbaudir. Mais aux yeux des chrétiens, le jeu est une parodie . . . "<sup>5</sup>

Three contemporaries of Molière -- Donneau de Visé, Boursault and Robinet were vehement attackers of L'École des femmes. De Visé considered the sermon and the maxims on marriage as impious. He wrote

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<sup>3</sup>Francis Bauman, Tartuffe et ses Avatars (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1925), p. 162.

<sup>4</sup>Calvet, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 51.

Zélinde ou la véritable critique de l'Ecole des femmes in which it was said that the religious suggestion of each episode "choque nos mystères" and that "tout le monde en murmure hautement." (iii, 20).<sup>6</sup>

Boursault was the next to provide opposition by publishing his comedy Le Portrait du Peintre. In this work, he insists more than De Visé on the anti-religiousness of Molière's play:

Outre qu'un satirique est un homme suspect,  
 Au seul nom de sermon nous devons du respect,  
 C'est une vérité qu'on ne peut contredire.  
 Un sermon touche l'âme et jamais ne fait rire;  
 De qui croit le contraire on doit se défier  
 Et qui veut qu'on en rie en a ri le premier. . . .  
 Votre ami du sermon nous a fait la satire  
 Et, de quelque façon que le sens en soit pris,  
 Pour ce que l'on respecte on n'a point de mépris.<sup>7</sup>

(I, viii)

Robinet, too, participated in the polemic with his Panégryrique de l'Ecole des femmes, in which he made the following remark: "cette Ecole est pleine d'impiétés dans les maximes qu'on destine à l'instruction d'Agnès et dans les prônes qu'on lui fait".<sup>8</sup> (v, 49).

Molière was literally pressured into defending himself publicly from the multiplicity of attacks and the persistence with which they came. He was urged to write in an attempt to justify his position, not plays as such but replies which found expression in La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes, then in L'Impromptu de Versailles. La Critique was performed in

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<sup>6</sup>G. Michaut, Les Débuts de Molière (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1923), p. 195.

<sup>7</sup>Michaut, p. 195.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 195.

June 1663 and was dedicated to the Queen Mother, Anne of Austria. She was a pious woman who stood behind the "dévots" in whatever they did. Hence, to dedicate a play which was a defense of his L'École des femmes that was criticised for being contrary to morals and religion to such a religious person as Anne can be considered a brilliant manoeuvre by Molière. In his dedication of the play to her, he says:

Elle, Madame, qui prouve si bien que la véritable  
dévotion n'est point contraire aux honnêtes  
divertissements; qui, de ses hautes pensées et de ses  
importantes occupations, descend si humainement dans  
le plaisir de nos spectacles et ne dédaigne pas de  
rire de cette même bouche dont Elle prie si bien Dieu.<sup>9</sup>

Molière was sure that the "dévots" did not attempt to get involved in the issue voluntarily and perhaps he deliberately made the choice to offer his work to Anne to show publicly that he had good intentions as far as the Church was concerned.

In La Critique, the religious aspect of the attack was brought up. We recall that in L'École des femmes allusions to religion were made. Agnès, for example, has spent most of her life in a convent; Arnolphe praises Heaven when he discovers that the nuns have obeyed him and thus have complied with their customary role as educators. But these were only slight objections that the religious sector had. Their greatest reproaches were levelled at Arnolphe's sermon with its religious implications and the "Maximes du mariage". Lysidas, in La Critique, who has been likened to

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<sup>9</sup>Molière, Oeuvres complètes, éd. R. Jouanny (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1962), I, p. 480.

Boursault and has been considered a mouth-piece by the author for all pious people, including the devouts of "la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement", summarises the crux of the religious problem when he says in the play: "le sermon et les Maximes ne sont-elles pas des choses ridicules, et qui choquent même le respect que l'on doit à nos mystères?" (Scene VI). But Molière's reply to this was that many pious people were not scandalised by the religious elements of the play. Dorante, who is oftentimes considered the mouth-piece of Molière in La Critique, says: "Pour le discours moral que vous appelez un sermon, il est certain que de vrais dévots qui l'ont ouï n'ont pas trouvé qu'il choquât ce que vous dites; et sans doute que ces paroles d'enfer et de chaudières bouillantes sont assez justifiées par l'extravagance d'Arnolphe et par l'innocence de celle à qui il parle." (Scene VI).

La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes did not put an end to the controversy. It aggravated the situation. Many devouts were of the opinion that they were treated as being prudish and as hypocrites. The King then called upon Molière to reply to the continued antagonism from the religious critics. He defended himself with another small play, L'Impromptu de Versailles.

The "great comedians" came in for bitter criticism by the writer; they were in the forefront of the battle; it was they, in fact, who urged on the religious faction against the religious connotations of L'Ecole des femmes --- intolerable religious insinuations they might have pretty well considered them. In L'Impromptu which Molière presented to the King in October 1663, he makes fun of his counterparts by parodying them and he

personally attacked Boursault, rather Boursaut as he referred to him:

"Le beau sujet à divertir la cour que Monsieur Boursaut! . . . C'est un homme qui n'a rien à perdre, et les comédiens ne me l'ont déchaîné que pour m'engager à une sottie guerre, et me détourner, par cet artifice, des autres ouvrages que j'ai à faire; . . . Mais enfin j'en ferai ma déclaration publiquement." (Scene V). In truth, there are two comedies by the comedians in Molière's play: the one that Molière outlines against the comedians of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the other that he puts on by showing his own troupe. One would imagine that Molière, by staging two plays to justify his position, would put an end to the quarrel. But this was not the case; L'Impromptu de Versailles hardly quelled the vengeance of Molière's oppressors. The King's attempt to help the author out of his predicament by volunteering to be the god-father of his first child did not avail Molière. This spontaneous action by the King might appear ordinary and of little consequence at first, but putting such an offer in the light of the circumstances that prevailed at the time, it could have been meaningful. Support from the King, however, did not silence Molière's censors.

The presentation of these two plays, La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes and L'Impromptu de Versailles, proves the immense reputation and the repercussions of Molière's former work, L'École des femmes. The attacks of "la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" were not as vehement as the attacks from De Visé, Boursault and Robinet. The obvious question which follows is why did it take people like these critics to throw the gauntlet to

Molière? The only answer to this question is that it was done through jealousy. We know that L'École des femmes had a resounding success with total receipt of 1.518 livres when it was performed in the town in December 1662, and it had every support from the King when it was staged in court in January 1663. Molière's literary foes could not stand the popularity and the backing the play and its author enjoyed. They evidently became envious and their envy got hardly any sympathy, for their accusations were founded on bad faith. Rigal puts this idea well when he says: "la plupart [des reproches que les ennemis de Molière lui ont adressés] s'expliquent, soit par la mauvaise foi, soit par l'inintelligence."<sup>10</sup>

The "grands comédiens" thought that their prestige was threatened by Molière and his troupe's presentation of the well-received L'École des femmes. They offered opposition to Molière. They decided to put on comedies in addition to the serious plays that they had been staging: "on vit tout à coup ces comédiens graves devenir bouffons", says Guéret, "et leurs poètes héroïques se jeter dans le goguenard. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

We can see why Molière's play was attacked. Relatively speaking, little opposition came from direct religious quarters, namely, "la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement." Vehement attacks came from the literary critics, namely, the "grands comédiens" and their criticisms were

<sup>10</sup> E. Rigal, Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1908), I, p. 179.

<sup>11</sup> P. Chapman, The Spirit of Molière (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1965), pp. 156-157.



motivated by envy. The theses proposed by M. Calvet in support of his argument that Molière is attacking religion are true from a historical and factual point of view.

However, concerning the first contention that Molière is attacking the traditional religious educators and that he is parodying the intentions of such a convent education, we should point out that what the writer does in L'École des femmes is to take a stock situation by which he can create laughter, he does not invent new matter for his purpose. He chooses as subject matter, an innocent little girl, Agnès, and he has made the old man, Arnolphe, the person who aspires to win her hand in marriage. By doing this, Molière was able to bring young and old into conflict. This had been a traditional theme for comedy. Molière makes use of it here in his L'École des femmes, a play which is characteristic of those comedies from which the only lesson that may be drawn is: "on n'attrape pas les mouches avec du vinaigre."<sup>12</sup> In other words, Arnolphe the jealous old man cannot win the favour of young Agnès by ill-treating her.

Nothing is more natural than for a man like Arnolphe to terrify the young Agnès by means of a sermon like the one he gave her in Act III, Scene ii. He talks to her about "l'enfer" and of "chaudières bouillantes" but, again, this is only what is expected because Arnolphe wants her to

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<sup>12</sup>E. Rigal, Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1908), I, p. 168.

"remain a child" and having left her in a convent for so many years it was inevitable that he had to try to take advantage of Agnès' infantile respect for religion. We have to remember too that Arnolphe is trying to achieve his aim, namely that of winning the young girl's hand and assuring himself of her submission by a method that can succeed; at least he thinks so. Arnolphe then is the man of tactics; he plays on the innocence and naïveté of Agnès. By opposing artifice and simple-mindedness, Molière was able dramatically to "bring out the lifeless in the one and the lively in the other".<sup>13</sup> This is the significance of Arnolphe's religious sermon.

The same dramatic technique is used by the writer in the maxims on marriage that Arnolphe has Agnès read. The reciting of these maxims is another piece of calculation that the old man used to ensure the favour of Agnès or at least he intended it to be. Arnolphe gradually falls in love and in proportion as he does so, his mask keeps dropping little by little until the natural comes to the surface. In the final Act of the play, we find him belying all his calculated reckonings and becoming more and more ridiculous but more and more the natural man. He sums in one declaration he makes to Agnès the impact of his "Maximes": "Tout comme tu voudras tu pourras te conduire" (V, iv, 1596). Arnolphe comes out as the beaten pedant; the human and the natural finally show themselves. Therefore, the treatment of religious themes in L'École des femmes

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<sup>13</sup>W. G. Moore, Molière, A New Criticism (6th ed.; London: Oxford, 1949), p. 107.

serves much more as a means for Molière to achieve his aims as a dramatist than as an attack on religion. It is a question of aesthetics and drama in the play and W. G. Moore gets our support when he declares that: "the aesthetic pleasure derives from, and the dramatic intervention consists in, this opposition of living and lifeless at such intensity that the artificial yields to the natural."<sup>14</sup>

We have to make a distinction between superstition and religion and not try to equate the two, which apparently is what the religious faction did. They seemed to fail to realise that mention of "chaudières bouillantes de l'enfer" is only one of those malicious manoeuvres used to terrify the naïve and the ignorant. The public laughed without thinking in terms of the situation as being a mockery of religion but, yet, Molière's enemies could not stand the promotion of laughter in such events. "On en riait peut-être", surmises Bénichou, "sans arrière-pensée, et pourtant les ennemis de Molière ne jugeaient pas inutile de dénoncer comme sacrilège l'encouragement donné à cette sorte de rire."<sup>15</sup>

The fact that the Church did not want to promote laughter in religious matters accounts for the hostility that was displayed in their attacks on L'École des femmes. The invidiousness of Molière's literary critics did little to help the cause of religious fanatics. Therefore, Molière's antagonists were unjustified in their accusations of immorality

<sup>14</sup> Moore, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> P. Benichou, Morales du grand siècle (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1963), p. 204.

and impiety in the play. Molière is not a "libertin" in his use of religious language and religious subjects. He is the genius of comedy whose works often provoke polemic among many people. His L'École des femmes was simply composed to be acted and the Church and its followers appeared to be more inimical to Molière than he was to the Church and religion. In this same play, Molière did not seem to be interested in discussing religion itself, nor in dealing with the concept of Hell in itself. Arnolphe's desire was to be Agnès' master and in order to achieve his aim, he made her read devoutly "les maximes du mariage ou les devoirs de la femme mariée, avec son exercice journalier" and frightened her with the horrors of Hell. Molière was rather concerned with people like Arnolphe in their relationship with young girls like Agnès; he treated such situation in a comic light. The playwright intended to please the public and he himself was happy that his intention was realised:

Bien des gens ont frondé d'abord cette comédie; mais les rieurs ont été pour elle, et tout le mal qu'on en a pu dire n'a pu faire qu'elle n'ait eu un succès dont je me contente. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Molière, Oeuvres complètes, éd., R. Jouanny, I, p. 407.

### CHAPTER III

#### LE TARTUFFE

There are three versions of Le Tartuffe: the one of 1664 which is called Tartuffe ou l'Hypocrite; Panulphe ou l'Imposteur of 1667; and Le Tartuffe ou l'Imposteur which appeared in 1669. The first version consists of three acts which were performed for the King and his guests. In the play of 1664, the main character is presented not in the dress of a priest but in a black gown which made him look somewhat ecclesiastical. He wore "un costume à demi-ecclésiastique, habit noir, long manteau..."<sup>1</sup> The "Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" immediately became concerned about the religious ideas in the play and on April 17th, before the fêtes of Versailles the "Compagnie" had met to suppress the performance of the play. According to their secretary, d'Argenson:

On parla fort ce jour-là de travailler à procurer la suppression de la méchante comédie de Tartuffe. Chacun se chargea d'en parler à ses amis qui avaient quelque crédit à la cour pour empêcher sa représentation et, en effet, elle fut différée assez longtemps...."

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<sup>1</sup>H. D'Alméras, Le Tartuffe de Molière (Amiens: Edgar Malfère, 1928), p. 49.

...Dans l'assemblée du 27<sup>e</sup> de mai, on rapporta que le roi, bien informé par M. de Péréfixe, archevêque de Paris, du mauvais effet que pouvait produire la comédie de Tartuffe, l'avait défendue; mais, dans la suite, malgré tous les soins qu'on en pût prendre, elle fut permise et jouée publiquement.<sup>2</sup>

Molière thought it necessary to change the title of his play for the performance of 1667. He called it Panulphe ou l'Imposteur and it was a five-act play. He changed the costume of the hypocrite: "laïcisé sous le nom de Panulphe, il se transforme en dévot que son costume très simple, très sobre, ne distingue pas d'un bourgeois de Paris."<sup>3</sup> By doing this, he attempted to appease the hostility of the devout who could not readily identify themselves with the religious hypocrite.

In 1669, the writer obtained the permission of the King for a public presentation of the play which he called Tartuffe ou l'Imposteur and the hypocrite wore the same dress as he did at first:

Il reprend, avec la permission du roi, son premier nom et son premier costume, comme la pièce reprend son premier titre...<sup>4</sup>

Molière had to undergo severe criticism from religious people. He was accused of attacking specific pious persons and certain practices

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<sup>2</sup>G. Michaut, Les luttes de Molière (Paris: Hachette, 1925), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>D'Alméras, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup>D'Alméras, p. 49.

of "la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement". The accusations being of a moral and religious nature, raised the question of Molière's own ideas on religion.

The veteran critic Brunetière is of the opinion that Le Tartuffe is full of attacks against devotion and he says:

...la satire sociale redevient, avec Tartuffe, la matière, le support, et l'âme de la comédie...et il s'y attaque à la fois à des personnes et à des idées. <sup>5</sup>

Many people have attempted to prove that Molière had members of "la Compagnie" in mind when he wrote his play. It is said that he had been away in the provinces for too long to have been really able to observe each member of the organisation:

Les traits de l'imposteur étaient si exactement dessinés qu'ils devaient fatalement ressembler à ceux des Confrères que Molière, trop nouvellement Parisien, n'avait pas eu le loisir d'observer individuellement. <sup>6</sup>

Molière was literally "trop nouvellement Parisien" because it was around this time that "les Confrères" made a determined effort to prevent plays with religious elements from being performed on stage. Persecution from the devouts was the main reason why Molière decided not to present his plays in Paris: "Molière attendit en province la

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<sup>5</sup>F. Brunetière, Conférences de l'Odéon (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1896), p. 140.

<sup>6</sup>P. Emard, Tartuffe: sa vie, son milieu et la comédie de Molière (Paris: Droz, 1932), p. 200.

mort du curé de Saint-Sulpice pour rentrer à Paris."<sup>7</sup>

It is argued by Paul Enard that Molière is directly criticising Charpy de Sainte-Croix. This critic maintains that the author was acquainted with Charpy and his whereabouts. This abbé of Sainte-Croix was once welcomed in a home as Tartuffe was in Orgon's and he is said to have seduced his host's wife as Tartuffe did:

L'extraordinaire Charpy, abbé de Sainte-Croix, faussaire et auteur mystique, avait été accueilli dans une famille comme Tartuffe, il avait séduit la femme de son hôte, comme Tartuffe encore, et sans réussir à troubler la quiétude d'un mari débonnaire.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, he was able to attribute the qualities of the man to Tartuffe because:

Il faut que Molière qui a demeuré dans la même rue et probablement dans la même maison que Charpy, il faut qu'il l'ait connu autrement que par une banale rencontre d'escalier, de rue ou d'antichambre royale, et que son attention ait été excitée au point qu'il réussit à créer l'Hypocrite dont le type complet se rapproche si singulièrement du personnage réel que fut Charpy de Sainte-Croix.<sup>9</sup>

He seems to be quite sure of his accusation when he draws this analogy.

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<sup>7</sup>J. Gaument and L. Chouville, "Ninon, Molière et les dévots", Mercure de France, CLII, (1922), p. 36.

<sup>8</sup>A. Adam, Histoire de la littérature française au XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle (Paris: Domat, 1961), III, p. 299.

<sup>9</sup>Enard, p. 221.



Emard affirms that there is a parallel between the dedication of Charpy's Catéchisme Eucharistique and Tartuffe's passionate talk to Elmire in Act III, Scene iii. The dedication was offered to Mme Henriette-Adélaïde, Princess Royal of Savoie and it was said to be "une dédicace enflammée du même feu dont brûle l'amoureux d'Elmire..."<sup>10</sup> as the following extract reveals:

C'est par la grâce corporelle de Jésus-Christ, Madame, que la beauté corporelle, qui a semblé de votre enfance estre parfaite en vous, est devenue un charme universel, non pour faire naître en nos coeurs des désirs criminels, mais pour les élever à l'admiration du divin Exemple, dont on voyoit et dont on voit en vous une si vive et si touchante expression. Cet assemblage incomparable d'agrémens que brillent en Votre Altesse et dans toutes ses actions et en toutes ses paroles, en ravissant l'esprit de tous ceux qui la voyent, n'a pas enflé le vostre et vous avez toujours bien ménagé votre vertu entre l'éclat de vos beautés sensibles et le devoir de votre âme chrestienne...<sup>11</sup>

He makes a comparison of these lines with the following from Le Tartuffe and asks, "peut-on s'empêcher d'adorer un tel assemblage de perfections, autant que Tartuffe d'être charmé?"<sup>12</sup>

Des ouvrages parfaits que le ciel a formés,  
Ses attraits réfléchis brillent dans vos pareilles;  
Mais il étale en vous ses plus rares merveilles:  
Il a sur votre face épanché des beautés

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<sup>10</sup> Emard, p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 225.

Dont les yeux sont surpris, et les coeurs transportés,  
 Et je n'ai pu vous voir, parfaite créature,  
 Sans admirer en vous l'auteur de la nature,  
 Et d'une ardente amour sentir mon coeur atteint,  
 Au plus beau des portraits où lui-même il s'est peint.

(III, iii, 935-944)

He eventually attempts to convince us that Molière has taken this verse from Charpy's work and embroidered on the theme of the love of God to suit his purpose of bringing out the sensual aspect of the "dédicace du Catéchisme Eucharistique".

Certain ideas and characteristics of the society of the Holy Sacrament were seen in Le Tartuffe which led many contemporaries of Molière and modern critics to believe that the writer was censuring religion. Public opinion had it that religious bigots interfered in the private affairs of people, especially in the relationship between husband and wife, in the same way that Tartuffe meddled in the family life of Orgon. A similar view was held of members of the "Compagnie du Saint -Sacrement" who, it is claimed, had small secretive groups within the organisation assigned to carry out the function of 'spying'. Dr. Guy Patin, a contemporary of Molière observed:

Il y avait ici de certaines gens qui faisaient des assemblées clandestines, sous le nom de Congrégation du Saint-Sacrement, ces Messieurs se mêlaient de diverses affaires et ne faisaient jamais leurs assemblées deux fois en un même endroit; ils mettaient le nez dans le gouvernement des grandes maisons, ils avertissaient les maris

de quelques débauches de leurs femmes: un mari s'est fâché de cet avis, s'en est plaint et les a poussés à bout, après avoir découvert la cabale... 13

The members of the Cabal were considered "directeurs de conscience". Tartuffe has posed as one of these spiritual directors who supposedly will teach Orgon how to get to Heaven. Indeed one of the duties of the members of the organisation was to work "à la conversion des hérétiques et à la propagation de la foi dans toutes les parties du monde, à empêcher tous les scandales, toutes les impiétés."<sup>14</sup> Orgon puts his faith and confidence in Tartuffe, his "directeur de conscience". On the advice of the latter, he entrusts his money-chest and the papers that it contains to Tartuffe and one of the rules of the society to its 'daughters' was:

Chaque Compagnie aura un coffret pour mettre ses registres et ses papiers. On y collera cet écriteau: ce coffret et tout ce qui est dedans appartient à M. N..., qui en a la clef et qui me l'a donnée en dépôt. 15

Those who hold the opinion that in the play Molière is ridiculing certain practices and convictions of the "Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" refer to the visits that Tartuffe purports to make to

<sup>13</sup>J. Cairncross, Molière, bourgeois et libertin (Paris: Nizet, 1963), p. 167.

<sup>14</sup>D'Alméras, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup>J. Calvet, Molière est-il chrétien? (Paris: Lanore, 1950), p. 233.

prisoners to support their claim. This practice was considered a form of charity by the confrères. Tartuffe, speaking to Dorine, tells her that:

Si l'on vient pour me voir, je vais aux prisonniers  
Des aumônes que j'ai partager les deniers.

(III, ii, 855-856)

This custom can be identified with that of the "Compagnie" which "travaillait non seulement aux oeuvres ordinaires des pauvres, des malades, des prisonniers, des affligés, mais aux missions, aux séminaires..."<sup>16</sup> The devouts, therefore, pictured themselves in Tartuffe.

Many religious critics observe that the King's intervention at the dénouement of the play is symbolic. Tartuffe's predicament at the end of the comedy reminds them of the destruction of the Cabal by the King:

Ajoutons que le roi écrase à la fin Tartuffe, comme  
il venait d'écraser la cabale.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, it is pointed out to us that the "Compagnie" was often referred to as "la cabale des dévots" and the very word "cabale" is used in Le Tartuffe. Actually the word is found twice here, and for some, this is proof that Molière had the devouts in mind. In Act I,

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<sup>16</sup>D'Alméras, p. 108.

<sup>17</sup>Calvet, p. 233.

Scene v, Cléante talks of "point de cabale en eux, point d'intrigues à suivre." (397). Later on in Act V, Scene iii, he says:

Et sur moins que cela, le poids d'une cabale  
Embarrasse les gens dans un fâcheux dédale.  
(1705-1706)

The repetition of the word "cabale" has in the opinion of rigorous religion fanatics symbolic importance, that is that Molière intended to attack religion.

The devouts were concerned with morality and religion in Le Tartuffe. They addressed their complaints of impiety in the comedy to the King, whose support Molière always had. They called the play sacrilegious because they felt that the playwright was working towards the destruction of the Roman Catholic faith. The devouts detested in particular what they considered Molière's unflattering portrayal of their most holy and pious practice, namely that of being responsible for training and giving direction to souls and families. They felt that these were obligations that were carried out by wise and holy spiritual directors and that such practices ought not to be performed publicly. Molière was thus regarded as:

... un démon vêtu de chair et habillé en homme,  
et le plus signalé impie ou libertin qui fût jamais  
dans les siècles passés, [qui] avait eu assez d'  
impiété et d'abomination pour faire sortir de son  
esprit diabolique une pièce toute prête d'être  
rendue publique, en la faisant exécuter sur le  
théâtre, à la dérision de toute l'Eglise et au  
mépris du caractère le plus sacré et de la fonction

la plus divine, et au mépris de ce qu'il y a de plus saint dans l'Eglise ordonnée du Sauveur pour la sanctification des âmes, à dessein d'en rendre l'usage ridicule, contemptible, odieux.<sup>18</sup>

It is seen from these lines of this pamphlet how embittered the pious brothers were at the "méchante comédie". The attack on Molière's work was so violent that in 1667 Louis XIV found it necessary to order the suppression of the play.

The Archbishop of Paris at that time, Hardouin, thought it would be dangerous to tolerate true piety depicted in such a scandalous piece of work as Le Tartuffe. According to his proclamation, Molière's play is:

Une comédie très dangereuse et qui est d'autant plus capable de nuire à la religion que, sous prétexte de condamner l'hypocrisie ou la fausse dévotion, elle donne lieu d'en accuser tous ceux qui font profession de la plus solide piété, et les expose par ce moyen aux railleries et aux calomnies continuelles des libertins, de sorte que, pour arrêter le cours d'un si grand mal, qui pourrait séduire les âmes faibles et les détourner du chemin de la vertu, notre dit promoteur nous aurait requis de faire défense à toute personne de notre diocèse de représenter, sous quelque nom que ce soit, la susdite comédie, de la lire ou entendre réciter, soit en public, soit en particulier, sous peine d'excommunication.<sup>19</sup>

The Archbishop considered the problem a grave one, so serious that offenders of his order should be made to sever all ties with the Church.

<sup>18</sup>D'Alméras, p. 88.

<sup>19</sup>D'Alméras, p. 156.

He felt that he did this in the interest of the people and he even suggested that it was in their welfare not only to refrain from attending the performance of Molière's Le Tartuffe but also from attending similar comedies.

Some devouts advocated the suppression of Le Tartuffe, others the burning of the entire play. The work was thought irreligious and the language used that of a licentious and libertine author. The parish priest of Saint-Barthélemy, Father Roullé, petitioned the King to take the necessary action, that of burning the work; this request was actually the gist of his pamphlet "le Roy Glorieux au monde..." in which he referred to Molière's play as "si indigne et infamant...si injurieux à Dieu et outrageant l'Eglise, la religion, les sacrements et les officiers les plus nécessaires au salut."<sup>20</sup>

It was to this violent pamphlet of Father Roullé that Molière replied in his first placet to the King which was actually written in 1664 but which the author did not make public before June 1669. In this petition, Molière appealed to the sense of justice of Louis XIV. He felt that the religious supporters were going too far in their attacks against him and his play. He insisted that the condemnation was undue and that many of his attackers tried to suppress his comedy "sans l'avoir vue". He said that he depicted hypocrisy in his work because it was one of the most common evils of the time: "...un des

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<sup>20</sup> F. Bauma1, Tartuffe et ses avatars (Paris: Emile Neurry, 1925), p. 204.

plus en usage, des plus incommodes et du plus dangereux." By writing a comedy which centred around the theme of hypocrisy, Molière claimed that he was doing a good deed to the "honnêtes gens" of the kingdom. He pointed out that he handled the subject with all the care and caution that was needed; "je l'ai faite, Sire, cette comédie, avec tout le soin, comme je crois, et toutes les circonspections que pouvait demander la délicatesse de la matière...", he says in his address to the King, "bien que ce m'eût été un coup sensible que la suppression de cet ouvrage, mon malheur, pourtant était adouci, par la manière dont Votre Majesté s'était expliquée sur ce sujet; et j'ai cru, Sire, qu'elle m'ôtait tout lieu de me plaindre, ayant eu la bonté de déclarer qu'elle ne trouvait rien à dire dans cette comédie qu'elle me défendait de produire en public." And so, Molière maintained in the first placet that he attempted only to allude to the false devouts. He was therefore certain that others who criticised him wanted to recognise themselves in the play.

The tone of the second placet is more serious than that of the first one. The question for Molière was no longer moral and religious but political. He appealed to the authority of the King, through what might well have been an act of prudence in order to add weight to his cause and to obtain permission for the representation of his play.

The King then gave permission for its performance and the Cabal prevented it. According to the suggestions made by Molière in the petition, there was a conflict of powers, but the King is always indeed "le souverain



juge et le maître de toutes choses." He insinuated that it was the impostors that he meant to describe and if "les tartuffes avaient l'avantage" he felt there was no point any longer for him to think of writing comedies. Molière mentioned in this placet, comedies which attacked piety and religion and which were allowed to be performed. He thought that the devouts were too harsh in their accusations and unjustifiably severe with him and his play.

Molière defended himself again in the preface which preceded Le Tartuffe before it was presented in March 1669 by the permission of the King. His reply to the accusation that he did not oppose a true devout with a false one was that he had put in the play a "véritable homme de bien" by whom he most likely meant Cléante although this is not too explicit here. He said: "il (Tartuffe) ne dit pas un mot, il ne fait pas une action, qui ne peigne aux spectateurs le caractère d'un méchant homme, et ne fasse éclater celui du véritable homme de bien que je lui oppose." He affirmed that in satirising hypocrisy he had to put words of piety in the impostor's mouth. He could not do otherwise. But he asserted that, in so doing, he had much respect for true piety. He pointed out too that his innocent intentions about religion were revealed by the fact that his scoundrel did not appear till the third Act.

The writer knew that the Church thought it immoral and anti-religious to depict religious practices and ideas in a comedy. To this Molière had an answer in defense of Le Tartuffe. He reminded his pious

adversaries that religion was already a traditional theme which originated from the ancients and so he did not search for new material to write his play: "la comédie, chez les anciens, a pris son origine de la religion, et faisait partie de leurs mystères; que les Espagnols, nos voisins, ne célèbrent guère de fêtes où la comédie ne soit mêlée, et que même, parmi nous, elle doit sa naissance aux soins d'une confrérie (les Confrères de la Passion) à qui appartient encore aujourd'hui l'hôtel de Bourgogne; que c'est un lieu qui fut donné pour y représenter les plus importants mystères de notre foi..." He then alluded to a comedy which was allowed to be performed without being attacked by the Church. The name of the play was Scaramouche ermite.<sup>21</sup> It was played two or three months before his, in May 1667, before the Court and as the King was leaving, he said to Prince Condé: "Je voudrais bien savoir pourquoi les gens qui se scandalisent si fort de la comédie de Molière ne disent mot de celle de Scaramouche." Where upon the Prince replied: "la raison de cela, c'est que la comédie de Scaramouche joue le ciel et la religion, dont ces messieurs-là ne se soucient point; mais celle de Molière les joue eux-mêmes; c'est ce qu'ils ne peuvent souffrir." This was the problem with which Molière was confronted, namely that it was alleged that he attacked true devouts in his attempt to satirise the hypocrisy of insincere clerics.

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<sup>21</sup>Scaramouche ermite, performed by the Italian comedians, was thought to be a licentious play in which a hermit dressed as a monk, climbs during the night up a ladder to the window of a married woman and goes there from time to time saying: Questo e per mortificare la carne (this is to mortify the flesh.)

Opposition came from the religious sector this time rather than from Molière's literary foes who stirred up action among contemporary critics of L'École des femmes. The devouts insisted that Molière's comedy, Le Tartuffe, raised suspicions of their holy order, that the author put their religious practices in jeopardy in the eyes of the public, that in fact he was mockingly attacking religion and the Church itself. Their accusations lost a lot of impetus with the death of Anne of Austria in 1666 and, indeed, Molière's implacable enemy, "la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement", was dying a slow death itself upon the loss of a supporter as ardent as Anne.

But the questions which remain to be solved are, is the play immoral? Is Molière attacking any religious person or is it the Church and religion that he is attacking? An examination of some characters of the play would help us discover Molière's attitude.

The central figure of the play is Orgon; the comedy is primarily about a dupe, not about an impostor. It may be asked, why is the title of the play, Le Tartuffe? It is evidently Tartuffe's hypocrisy which raises the most bitter criticism. Tartuffe is a scoundrel from the beginning to the end of the play and Molière makes this point clear by the constant and total condemnation of the hypocrite by characters like Cléante, Elmire, and Damis. However, if we count the number of scenes in which Orgon appears, we shall see that he is present in twenty scenes out of a total of thirty-one. Cléante figures in fifteen scenes; Tartuffe makes his appearance in ten scenes. These calculations, never-

theless, ought not to be taken literally for it does not necessarily mean, for example, that Tartuffe's rôle is half as important as Orgon's. It is only when these figures are replaced by an interpretation which will determine how and why these characters are there that we can understand the dramatic importance of each character.

These three characters --- Orgon, Cléante and Tartuffe --- are the only ones who by their actions and words are closely connected with the problem of religious hypocrisy that arises in Le Tartuffe. Madame Pernelle ideologically repeats the ideas of Orgon. The others do not seem to have religious conflicts for they conveniently accommodate the ethics of "honnêtes gens" to religious exigencies.

The dramatic importance of Orgon's rôle is evident. The action of the play revolves around the blind confidence of Orgon in Tartuffe; this faith in the hypocrite allows the impostor himself to develop his manoeuvres. Cléante finds himself in the midst of the religious problem. His rôle is so developed to give him many Christian values. He occupies from the beginning a rational position which permits him to explain in length to Orgon the difference between true and false devotion:

Je sais comme je parle, et le Ciel voit mon coeur,  
De tous vos faconniers on n'est point les esclaves.  
Il est de faux dévots ainsi que de faux braves;  
Et comme on ne voit pas qu'où l'honneur les conduit  
Les vrais braves soient ceux qui font beaucoup de bruit,  
Les bons et vrais dévots, qu'on doit suivre à la trace,

Ne sont pas ceux aussi qui font tant de grimace....

(I, v, 324-330)

He summarises in these words the basis of his judgment:

Mais, en un mot, je sais, pour toute ma science,  
Du faux avec le vrai faire la différence.

(I, v, 353-354)

But Orgon is blind to false devotion and he cannot make a distinction between the false and true. He evades the objections that Cléante makes about the insincerity of Tartuffe, by saying: "ce discours sent le libertinage." (I, v, 314).

Cléante is right even when opposed by the religious hypocrite, Tartuffe. In Act IV, Scene i, for example, he condemns Tartuffe. In the beginning of the Act, Cléante raises such convincing objections that Tartuffe avoids the issue. He denounces the hypocrite, saying:

Vous nous payez ici d'excuses colorées,  
Et toutes vos raisons, Monsieur, sont trop tirées.  
Des intérêts du Ciel pourquoi vous chargez-vous?

(IV, i, 1217-1219)

Tartuffe is finally forced to evade the argument when he excuses himself:

Il est, Monsieur, trois heures et demie:  
Certain devoir pieux me demande là-haut,

Et vous m'excuserez de vous quitter sitôt.

(IV, i, 1266-1268)

Moreover, Molière avoids the accusation that he uses Cléante as a vehicle for libertine thoughts. In the beginning of Act V, Cléante clearly detests libertines who deny the existence of true devotion:

Quoi? parce qu'un fripon vous dupe avec audace  
Sous le pompeux éclat d'une austère grimace,  
Vous voulez que partout on soit fait comme lui,  
Et qu'aucun vrai dévot ne se trouve aujourd'hui?  
Laissez aux libertins ces sottes conséquences;

(V, i, 1618-1621)

At the end of the play Cléante shows his charity to Tartuffe; he is the one who wishes that the hypocrite's soul might be saved:

Souhaitez bien plutôt que son coeur en ce jour  
Au sein de la vertu fasse un heureux retour,  
Qu'il corrige sa vie en détestant son vice...

(V, vii, 1951-1953)

Cléante does not only talk about Christian virtues like moderation, honesty and charity but he puts them into practice in the same way as a true devout would. Of course he does not use antics to show true devotion as Tartuffe does, in his attempt to demonstrate his piety. Cléante is a true Christian. The "piété traitable" of this character is opposed to the bigotry of Orgon and to the hypocrisy of Tartuffe, and by this confrontation the ridiculous in the latter two characters is brought out.

Two of the main characters are pious but Tartuffe is a hypocrite and a scoundrel, Orgon, a bigot. We can see why Le Tartuffe may have been offensive to religionists. Many commentators have concluded that Molière was therefore a free-thinker. Such a judgment suggested in turn that the author disclosed his own refusal to believe in religion. However, the play may not be as anti-religious as some made it out to be; it can be that the work is an attack on religious people rather than on religion. Also, the author may have considered religious hypocrisy a suitable subject of comedy. On which possibility religion becomes incidental to comedy; on the other two points comedy is incidental to satire.

With regard to the assumption that Molière was a free-thinker, we have no proof. We cannot tell for sure to what extent the views expressed in Le Tartuffe echo Molière's own views on religion. It is not until we can say to what extent the play reflects the author's views that we can use the work as evidence. However, concerning Molière's religious views, there are two things about which we can be certain. Firstly, he was not allowed to be a practising Christian, whatever he may have privately thought, for his profession of comedian cut him off from any communication with the Church. Secondly, his profession as usually exercised by writers of classical comedies did not allow him to express his own opinions.

As to the other controversial point, it is quite probable that Molière levelled criticism at certain religious followers but it is

difficult to discover who they were. He claimed in his preface and placets that he avoided confusion with any example of true piety and it would seem that he has succeeded. The closest we can get to a model of Tartuffe is in the person of Charpy de Sainte-Croix; some facets of the way of life of the "Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" may be attributed to Tartuffe. Attitudes and arguments which were common to the devout, both to the pious and the hypocritical, are suggested in the play although Molière could not understand the fact that these attitudes would meet with criticism from all kinds of religious people on the grounds that both piety and hypocrisy have certain similar traits. An example of allusion to religious habits can be found in Act IV, Scene v, where Tartuffe gives direction of his intention concerning Elmire, Orgon's wife:

De ces secrets, Madame, on saura vous instruire;  
Vous n'avez seulement qu'à vous laisser conduire.

(1493-1494)

At this time, "directeurs de conscience" were suspected of acting unscrupulously according to Tartuffe's methods.

However, neither "la Compagnie" nor Charpy has contributed so many and so marked features to Tartuffe for us to say that he and not the Society served as prototype. Molière's satire cannot be attached to any definite person or to any specific religious group. Molière had put the impostor before the public, a religious hypocrite indeed he was.



The argument against Molière lies in the fact that despite what he intended, the hypocrite was portrayed on stage and nobody was obliged to agree with his innocent intentions. The audience interpreted the play as they saw fit. The nuns and priests, bishops and archbishops, all religious followers were free to give an opinion and this they did. Here lay the satiric strength of the play. So far, there is really nothing definitive that can be said about Molière's religious attitude and views. We can give more serious consideration to the last alternative: that Molière chose and developed the subject as a comedy rather than as a satire.

It is the way that Molière mastered the art of comedy which is important in discussing Le Tartuffe. Hypocrisy is a mask used by the Impostor to achieve his aims. The play deals with a man who is not what he has claimed to be; he wears the mask of piety but this on its own cannot be said to be a comic technique. Truth and illusion are both present in Tartuffe's presentation of himself. This contrast within Tartuffe is fundamental to the role he plays. He plays the part of a pious man but actually works in the guise of a holy man only to ensure his own welfare and his function as exploiter of other people. The following lines characterise Tartuffe, the hypocrite, who assumes a pious attitude:

Couvrez ce sein que je ne saurois voir:  
Par de pareils objets les âmes sont blessées,  
Et cela fait venir de coupables pensées.

(III, ii, 860-862)

Nevertheless, he does not sustain this part always. He shows himself to be sincere many times and not hypocritical. The alternating characteristics of sincerity and hypocrisy within the man form a contrast which can reveal the dramatic purpose of the writer.

Examples where the mask falls are seen in Act III, Scene iii, Act III, Scene vi, Act IV, Scene v, and finally in Act IV, Scene vii. In the first instance, we catch a glimpse of the real nature of Tartuffe as he talks to Elmire:

Ah! pour être dévot, je n'en suis pas moins homme;  
Et lorsqu'on vient à voir vos célestes appas,  
Un coeur se laisse prendre et ne raisonne pas.  
Je sais qu'un tel discours de moi paroît étrange;  
Mais, Madame, après tout, je ne suis pas un ange;

(966-970)

The declaration that Tartuffe makes of himself is perfectly true in so far as this is the natural and evil man speaking.

The second example is found in Act III, Scene vi, when Tartuffe, accused of seducing his friend's wife, pleads guilty, as actually he was. He says:

Vous fiez-vous, mon frère, à mon extérieur?  
Et, pour tout ce qu'on voit, me croyez-vous meilleur?  
Non, non: vous vous laissez tromper à l'apparence,  
Et je ne suis rien moins, hélas! que ce qu'on pense;  
Tout le monde me prend pour un homme de bien;  
Mais la vérité pure est que je ne vauds rien.

(1095-1100)

These are indeed true statements. But Tartuffe says the truth in these circumstances because he feels sure that he will not be believed by Orgon. Telling the truth in this context is the best means of deceiving Orgon and it succeeds. Once more Tartuffe can assume the mask and defend his own selfish aims by saying he is acting only in the interests of Heaven:

La volonté du Ciel soit faite en toute chose.

(1182)

Later on, he shows again the sincere side of his character, that is, what he really is, the sensual Tartuffe when he attributes religious terms to the happiness he feels before Elmire. The impostor is honest when he expresses his libido in his anxiety to hear these words from Elmire's lips:

Leur miel dans tous mes sens fait couler à longs traits  
Une suavité qu'on ne goûta jamais.

(IV, v, 1439-1440)

Further on, he mixes religious language with his avowal of love, a trait which is characteristic of the hypocrite. In fact, he speaks derisively of morality as he becomes the sincere Tartuffe:

Si ce n'est que le Ciel qu'à mes vœux on oppose,  
Lever un tel obstacle est à moi peu de chose,  
Et cela ne doit pas retenir votre cœur.

(IV, v, 1481-1482)

He is then the casuist who says it is ridiculous to fear God and that sin is pardonable when hidden.

Finally in Act IV, Scene vii, Tartuffe is unmasked and Orgon wants to chase him from his house. Whereupon Tartuffe says:

C'est à vous d'en sortir, vous qui parlez en maître:  
La maison m'appartient, je le ferai connaître,  
Et vous montrerai bien qu'en vain on a recours,  
Pour me chercher querelle, à ces lâches détours,  
Qu'on n'est pas où l'on pense en me faisant injure,  
Que j'ai de quoi confondre et punir l'imposture,  
Venger le Ciel qu'on blesse, et faire repentir  
Ceux qui parlent ici de me faire sortir.

(1557-1564).

Again, Tartuffe, being unmasked, shows his true feelings which are aggressive. He then covers up his real motives by saying he is avenging Heaven. However, Molière gives a comic twist to the actions of Tartuffe as a dangerous man at work. The hypocrite becomes the human being in matters where his natural desires are to be satisfied and it is such circumstances that make him drop the mask.

The fact that Molière had exposed on stage a bigot and a crook at whom the public was able to laugh did not find favourable support from the devouts. Their grievance was that the role of a crook consisted of dangerous material which was thought immoral and irreligious to publish. Uneasiness was aroused among the religious people when Molière's comedy enjoyed immense reputation with the King and the public; Le Tartuffe ran for forty-four consecutive performances. The hatred of the theatre

and of actors by the Church was increased on account of the success of the play.

In conclusion, we cannot say for certain that Le Tartuffe is an attack on religion or on any specific religious person or institution. There is not enough evidence to prove the truth of these statements. We can say with more certainty and we shall be on much safer ground when we say that Molière thought that religious hypocrisy was an appropriate subject for comedy. This is not to say that Le Tartuffe is a pure comedy and that there are no serious elements in the play. What Molière does, is to maintain simultaneously two centres of interest, the comic and the serious, but he gives predominance to the comedy over the satire in Le Tartuffe.

## CHAPTER IV

### DOM JUAN

Dom Juan (1665) was subject to the same kind of criticism as Le Tartuffe. Both plays were considered to be impious. In Dom Juan Molière depicts a libertine and a fool. The devouts felt that Molière openly declared his own attitude and views on religion and they argued that it was both immoral and dangerous to religion to have the work published. The attacks were so persistent that the play was withdrawn after fifteen performances.

It is often assumed by religious attackers of Dom Juan that the play is promoting libertinage and that Molière's sympathies clearly lie with Dom Juan, the libertine. Such critics maintain that Molière deliberately makes the main character an atheist and that the atheist is confronted by a fool called Sganarelle who is supposed to defend religion but makes a mockery of piety and dishonours through his buffoonery the cause that is entrusted to him.

Some modern critics like Antoine Adam, for example, contend that Molière wrote a religious tract. The playwright's intention to retaliate against the interdiction of Le Tartuffe by the devouts is said to be distinctly indicated by the farcical treatment he gives to Dorimond's and Villier's tragi-comedies on the same subject. It is alleged that the

writer is expressing his desire to take revenge on his religious enemies by making Sganarelle the defender of sacred beliefs:

"Il se venge en portant au théâtre, dans une scène pleine de bouffonnerie, les preuves traditionnelles de l'existence de Dieu, en livrant aux railleries de Don Juan et aux ridicules démonstrations de son valet les croyances religieuses, la foi en une vie future.<sup>1</sup>

However, if we compare Villier's and Dorimond's plays with Molière's comedy, we soon discover that Molière was more concerned than they were with developing the rôle of the central character, and this helped to give a different perspective to his treatment of the subject. The playwright was therefore obliged to depict the wickedness of Dom Juan to the fullest, hence, Dom Juan's persistent denial of the existence of God and his constant flouting of traditional morality do not strike us as being exaggerated. Molière then saw the need of setting off the libertine's ideas, and Sganarelle's views serve as a contrast to those of his master. The rôle of the valet is treated in equal depth for Sganarelle fulfills two important functions: he serves as a foil to Dom Juan and at the same time he is the organ of popular beliefs, an element which Molière exploits for its comic value. With this in mind, we can easily understand why the defense of religious beliefs is entrusted to the buffoon, Sganarelle.

Act III, Scene i, raises the religious issue; Dom Juan expresses his disbelief in a supernatural Being in the following dialogue with his

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<sup>1</sup>A. Adam, *Histoire de la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Domat, 1961), iii, p. 333.

valet:

Sganarelle

Je veux savoir un peu vos pensées à fond. Est-il possible que vous ne croyiez point du tout au Ciel?

Dom Juan

Laissons cela.

Sganarelle

C'est à dire que non. Et à l'Enfer?

Dom Juan

Eh!

Sganarelle

Tout de même. Et au diable, s'il vous plaît?

Dom Juan

Oui, oui.

Sganarelle

Aussi peu. Ne croyez-vous point l'autre vie?

Dom Juan

Ah! ah! ah!

Sganarelle

Voilà un homme que j'aurai bien de la peine à convertir. Et dites-moi un peu, [le Moine bourru, qu'en croyez-vous, eh!

Dom Juan

La peste soit du fat!

Sganarelle

Et voilà ce que je ne puis souffrir, car il n'y a rien de plus vrai que le Moine bourru, et je me ferais pendre pour celui-là. Mais encore faut-il croire quelque chose dans le monde: qu'est-ce donc que vous croyez?

Dom Juan

Ce que je crois?



Sganarelle

Oui.

Dom Juan

Je crois que deux et deux sont quatre, Sganarelle,  
et que quatre et quatre sont huit.

Sganarelle

La belle croyance [et les beaux articles de foi] que  
voilà! Votre religion, à ce que je vois, est donc  
l'arithmétique?

Dom Juan does not justify his stand-point and fails to defend himself against the accusations of impiety by Sganarelle in this situation where he is expected to do so. Religious attackers have cited Dom Juan's inability to defend his attitude as a clear example where Molière uses the libertine to promote anti-religious thoughts. However, Dom Juan's refusal to answer his valet's reproaches is the kind of action that is expected from "le grand seigneur"; the superiority of Dom Juan is opposed to the humility of Sganarelle.

Those who maintain that Molière is anti-devout say that we should regard the scene of the Poor Man, Act III, Scene ii, as an example of Molière's anti-religiousness in Dom Juan. The poor man refuses to swear for the gold Louis that Dom Juan promises to give him if he does swear, by saying: "Non, Monsieur, j'aime mieux mourir de faim." Some have seen these words as a typical answer from a person who upholds Christian honour, a notion whose existence the libertine has repeatedly denied, and have interpreted the beggar's reply as a parody of religion. Other religious censors have seized upon the last words of Dom Juan to the poor man to

point out an example of the atheism which pervades the play: "Va, va<sup>n</sup>"; he says to the beggar, "je te le donne pour l'amour de l'humanité." Many have considered Dom Juan's act of charity as an extreme case of insult to both God and to the bravery of the man. This is the meaning that Monseigneur Calvet, for example, has given to the 'mysterious formula':

Allons, imbécile; le voilà tout de même ce  
louis; je te le donne, non pas pour l'amour  
de ton Dieu qui est une billevesée ; je te  
le donne pour que tu n'aies pas la satisfaction  
de plastronner victorieusement devant moi en  
le refusant. Je ne suis pas chrétien, je suis  
mieux, je suis humain.<sup>2</sup>

The libertine, therefore, whose views set the tone of the play, is a blasphemer who expresses his disbelief in a Supreme Being and his disapproval of the hermit's heroism. But are the religious critics right to say that Dom Juan's atheism is the clear expression of Molière's own atheism? We should remember that Molière first found this scene with the Poor Man in Dorimond's and Villier's works and the playwright used this episode to complete the depiction of atheism of his hero in Dom Juan.

Act V, Scenes i, ii, and iii, produced more trouble for Molière. Dom Juan feigns conversion while he praises hypocrisy to his valet in a long tirade:

Il n'y a plus de honte maintenant à cela:  
l'hypocrisie est un vice à la mode, et tous  
les vices à la mode passent pour vertus.  
Le personnage d'homme de bien est le meilleur

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<sup>2</sup>Calvet, pp. 108-109.

de tous les personnages qu'on puisse jouer  
 aujourd'hui, et la profession d'hypocrite  
 a de merveilleux avantages. C'est un art  
 de qui l'imposture est toujours respectée;  
 et quoiqu'on la découvre, on n'ose rien  
 dire contre elle....

(V, ii)

Dom Juan plans to avenge himself on his enemies by exploiting his assumed  
 zeal for religion:

Je ferai le vengeur des intérêts du Ciel, et,  
 sous ce prétexte commode, je pousserai mes ennemis,  
 je les accuserai d'impiété, et saurai déchaîner  
 contre eux des zélés indiscrets, qui, sans  
 connoissance de cause, crieront en public  
 contre eux, qui les accableront d'injures, et  
 les damneront hautement de leur autorité privée.

(V, ii)

The devouts inferred from these passages, whatever Molière's opinions,  
 that the author was accusing pious people of being hypocrites for the  
 most part. Their main grievance is clearly expressed by Cairncross who  
 criticises the 'conversion' scene on aesthetic grounds. He claims that  
 the only connection he can see between the scene in question and the  
 rest of the play is the short passage in Act I where Dom Juan, under the  
 pretext of religious scruples, "[se dé]barrasse] de l'affection gênante  
 de Doña Elvire."<sup>3</sup> Here, he lets her know that he finds it difficult to

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<sup>3</sup>J. Cairncross, Molière, bourgeois et libertin (Paris: Nizet,  
 1963), p. 35.

reconcile his piety and his love for a nun who has broken her vows because their marriage will be considered "un adultère déguisé". According to the same critic, this episode is placed there for the sole purpose of preparing the spectators for the unexpected conversion which appears in the final Act.

Nevertheless, there is nothing illogical about Dom Juan's behaviour. His hypocrisy is depicted throughout the play. For example, he habitually plays the hypocrite with women as the scene where he tries to play each of the peasant girls against the other reveals. We also see Dom Juan's hypocrisy in Act IV, Scene iii, where he makes fun of M. Dimanche from whom he has borrowed money. Moreover, the hypocritical conversion of Dom Juan is inevitable because the libertine needed the subterfuge to avoid the vengeance of his enemies. Molière saw the necessity of this scene since the liberal life of his hero was in danger.

At this time, the "Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement" campaigned against the use and the effects of "les tabacs". "La Compagnie de Marseille", writes d'Argenson, "souhaita fort d'empêcher l'usage du tabac en fumée dans les lieux publics, à cause des désordres qui arrivaient tous les jours dans ces lieux-là."<sup>4</sup> Again Molière came in for criticism by allegedly alluding to this event in the very beginning of the play:

Quoi que puisse dire Aristote et toute la  
Philosophie, il n'est rien d'égal au tabac:  
c'est la passion des honnêtes gens, et qui

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<sup>4</sup>F. Baumal, Tartuffe et ses avatars (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1925), p. 219.

vit sans tabac n'est pas digne de vivre. Non-seulement il réjouit et purge les cerveaux humains, mais encore il instruit les âmes à la vertu, et l'on apprend avec lui à devenir honnête homme.

(I, i).

As far as those who see a parody of the campaign are concerned, this is the same technique Molière uses as he does elsewhere to attack the Cabal. They believed that the plant was harmful when used and that its consumption encouraged vice and immorality. Sganarelle, Dom Juan's valet, gives a contrary opinion. He declares that tobacco instills feelings of honour and virtue in the person who uses it.

But, it must be remembered that the allusions to contemporary issues have a dramatic function in Molière's work. For example, when Molière begins his play with Sganarelle, a snuff-box in his hand, commending the good qualities of tobacco, the writer is setting the mood of the play. He emphasises from the start the farcical element which will be found throughout the work. Molière provokes laughter by giving a comic twist to contemporary issues of moral relevance. Sganarelle is a buffoon who cannot and does not in fact attach importance to appearances and reality. Guicharnaud puts this idea well:

le valet ne fait pas de distinction nette entre les apparences et la réalité (après tout il est de la même famille que le Sganarelle du Cocu Imaginaire), et comme il se pique de philosophie, il confond manières et significations profondes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>J. Guicharnaud, Molière: une aventure théâtrale --- Tartuffe, Dom Juan, Le Misanthrope (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp. 184-185.

Sganarelle is exactly the character as described by this same critic:

Un personnage de première importance, par nature plongé dans une fausse vision de la réalité qui va être entraîné dans une aventure romanesque, contraire à tous ses vœux.<sup>6</sup>

The problem that confronts the reader of Dom Juan lies in the question of how much significance can be attached to the satire in the play. Dom Juan is evidently an unbeliever in the supernatural. He responds to no guide but rationality as far as supernatural matters are concerned. If he sees the head of the statue move, he dismisses the cause of such motion by a logical explanation. They must have been deceived by "quelque vapeur" which ought to have crossed the path of their sight. He receives supernatural warning to repent for his iniquity from a spectre in the form of a woman under veil. But he immediately believes that this is a hoax and says that the phantom's voice sounds familiar to him. He rejects all heavenly omens by saying: "Si le Ciel me donne un avis, il faut qu'il parle un peu plus clairement, s'il veut que je l'entende." (V, iv). Dom Juan's philosophy is contained in the belief that two and two make four and that four and four make eight. It is a purely rational attitude that does not acknowledge the ethereal.

The hero does not believe in revelation nor in repentance. He disobeys convention and morality and shirks off the protests of his valet contemptuously. He has no scruples about doing whatever he wants. ✓ The

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 185.

only code that he respects is his reputation as a gentleman by displaying qualities of independance and bravery. His life comes to a disastrous end but this fact does little to pacify opposers of the play and of Molière.

However, is it true to say that Molière's own views find expression through this main character of the play? We ought to remember that the question at issue is not whether Dom Juan is a libertine or not, but whether he and in turn the play is a vehicle for libertine thoughts. In the first place, it would have been very risky for Molière to use the theatre as an instrument for his own ideas and it is difficult to see him venturing upon this at this crucial stage when he was already under the hostility of the devouts.

It is worthwhile to look at the play from a dramatic point of view for, if we do not, it is likely that we shall see no comedy in Dom Juan and shall end up explaining comedy as satire. Molière's work ought to be considered also as a study in relationships that provide comedy. A comparison between his Dom Juan and the same play of his predecessors will help us to discover where Molière put the emphasis in his version.

Although we have no evidence that Molière completely imitated Tirso de Molina's El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra (1630), he appears to have been acquainted with the Spanish version of the play. We know for certain that he knew Dorimond's Festin de Pierre (1658) and that of Villiers which appeared in 1659. Molière had taken the idea and

essential elements from different sources to compose his own Dom Juan ou le Festin de Pierre (1665).

Some details of the latter's Dom Juan seem to be borrowed directly from the Spanish edition. For example, the following similarities occur in both Molière's and Tirso's plays: the shipwreck of the hero; the seduction of the peasant girls; the scene between the father and the son; the encounter with the statue; the supper episode and the punishment of the libertine. However, the irreligion, the hypocrisy and the wickedness of Molière's Dom Juan are not found in the Burlador. The moral lesson that Tirso de Molina's play contains, that life is short and that it is necessary to repent before the last hour, disappears from Molière's Dom Juan.

Molière's Dom Juan is an atheist. Tirso's hero is not: he neglects the Church and its offer of salvation but he is not atheistic. Dorimond's and Villier's Dom Juan believes in divinity, or rather in divinities, because it is a question of Jupiter and Neptune in their plays, but their hero delights in defying these gods. The superficial treatment of Dom Juan in previous versions has become a deep study of this character in Molière's work. The character of the valet, Sganarelle, receives equal treatment from the playwright.

We have two figures contrasted frequently at almost every point throughout the play. The portrait of Dom Juan is confronted strikingly with that of his superstitious valet, Sganarelle. The man quickly believes everything, the master believes in nothing. The valet obeys the



sacrament of marriage -- "mystère sacré" he calls it, while the master does not. The man is naïvely humble, the master is pompous. The servant is superstitious, the master attaches no importance to magic. The man fears the effects of action, Dom Juan does not. Sganarelle clings to the cliché that "libertins" come to a bad end, Dom Juan scoffs at the belief. In the end, the man is right, the master is wrong; he is punished for his deeds. There seems to be a dialogue between both men, with sufficient equal responses from each of them. The man is humane in his feelings to others; the master is inhumane in his contempt of other people.

However, the comic structure does not cut out the satiric element of the work. The satire is set in a cadre that is more than satiric, a cadre of irony in so far as Dom Juan thinks himself superior to man, that he is self-sufficient and does not need the company of God nor his fellow-men but yet he needs and enjoys always the companionship of his valet whom intellectually he detests. Dom Juan is constructed around the question of humanity; it is principally a dialogue on humanity.

There is no indication of Molière's own attitude to religion in Dom Juan. In fact, it is just as good a reason to say that Molière needed money to support himself and his troupe as to say that he expressed his personal views on religion, by staging the play. Indeed, Molière is not acclaimed for his achievement in the realm of religion. He won his reputation as a keen comic writer who literally exploited all topics to make comedy. The subject matter of the play was suggested to Molière by his predecessors; it was they who seemed to see the dramatic possibilities of a master-man relationship.

We do not know for sure and we cannot argue convincingly that Molière is promoting atheism in Dom Juan. We cannot say that the play is a theological treatise on impiety. If the play were a tract on religion then it would be serious and dangerous to make the libertine intelligent and the pious man a fool. But it is mainly a comedy and the satire becomes incidental to the comedy. Whatever Molière's intentions were about religion when he wrote Dom Juan still remains a matter of conjecture.

## CONCLUSION

It appears quite wrong to begin with Molière the man. We know little of his personal life and the facts we have do not really allow us to make a sound judgment about him. Our concern ought not to be with Molière's motives nor with his intentions but with the works that he has left us.

In L'École des femmes, Arnolphe's aim is to ensure fidelity in Agnès, whom he intends to make his wife, by making her unattractive and entirely dependent upon him. Arnolphe, therefore, becomes a tyrant to achieve his own ends. When he is in control of the situation, the tyrannical trait of his character is revealed:

Je suis maître, je parle: allez, obéissez.

(644)

This is exactly the tone of the sermon and the Maxims of marriage which Arnolphe religiously makes Agnès read in order that she may fully understand her wifely duty. It is the inhuman side of Arnolphe that we observe in these examples. But we see also Arnolphe, the human being, demonstrating humane qualities when he falls in love with Agnès; this is no part of his scheme and it is a feeling quite contrary to Arnolphe's

plan and which he did not expect to occur at all. It is when Arnolphe falls in love that the true qualities of the man are disclosed; it is at this moment that the mask is off. The man who intended to prove that a woman can be so indoctrinated that no one will take her away from her husband has fallen for the girl that he tried to make unattractive. We catch a glimpse of the reality beneath the mask. Arnolphe's problem is to keep the mask in place to achieve his end. The contradiction in Arnolphe's plans and the man himself explains to us how Molière's comedy can treat what may seem at first to be unattractive material and yet remain comic.

One of the clearest characteristics of Le Tartuffe is the disapproval of pretence, the insistence of truth in people as in daily affairs. The satire of the play lies in the opposition of reality and illusion, truth and falsehood. Molière has depicted a religious criminal in his play and the attitudes of such a character delighted the enemies of religion and frustrated its followers. It is mainly for this reason that Le Tartuffe is not considered by many people as a comedy. It is often read as complete satire for the mask of hypocrisy on the religious hypocrite is almost a perfect fit. In the preface of the version of the play of 1669, Molière admitted as much:

Mais les hypocrites n'ont point entendu raillerie;  
ils se sont effarouchés d'abord, et ont trouvé  
étrange que j'eusse la hardiesse de jouer leurs  
grimaces et de vouloir décrier un métier dont tant  
d'honnêtes gens se mêlent. C'est un crime qu'ils

ne sauraient me pardonner; et ils se sont tous armés contre ma comédie avec une fureur épouvantable.... Suivant leur louable coutume, ils ont couvert leurs intérêts de la cause de Dieu; et Le Tartuffe, dans leur bouche, est une pièce qui offense la piété.<sup>1</sup>

Molière justifies his play on moral grounds, further on, having granted to his attackers that there is satire in the play:

Si l'emploi de la comédie est de corriger les vices des hommes, je ne vois pas par quelle raison il y en aura de privilégiés...les plus beaux traits d'une sérieuse morale sont moins puissants, le plus souvent, que ceux de la satire; et rien ne reprend mieux la plupart des hommes que la peinture de leurs défauts. C'est une grande atteinte aux vices, que de les exposer à la risée de tout le monde....<sup>2</sup>

We agree that there is satire of religion in Molière's portrayal of the impostor. Tartuffe is a scoundrel; he is a sinister figure. However, it is a question of what aspect Molière stressed the most in Le Tartuffe. It is our belief that the playwright has emphasised the satiric elements far less than others. Tartuffe's religiousness is a mask which the impostor uses to attain his desires. The true man, the sensual Tartuffe, inevitably and eventually is revealed. The art of religious hypocrisy as exemplified by the impostor runs contrary to his

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<sup>1</sup>Molière, Oeuvres complètes, éd. R. Jouanny (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1962), 1, p. 628.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 629-630.

real self. If such be a principle of comedy used by Molière, does the play not disclose more the dramatic purpose of the playwright than the realism to be found there? We suggest that Le Tartuffe ought not to be read as a religious tract, since it is more likely to have been a work of dramatic imagination.

The same question that arises about Le Tartuffe recurs when discussing Dom Juan. Is this work of art better and more justifiably interpreted as a comedy or as a clear satire on religion? Religious attackers see no comedy in the play; they have sought the meaning of the work in the libertinage of Dom Juan that pervades the comedy. But if we suppose that Molière is exposing to ridicule a certain attitude through the libertine and in turn that he is promoting atheistic thoughts, we shall read the play in a different light from those who see it as principally a study in relationships that produce comedy. The comic aspect of the libertine appears to us to be the contrast between the assumed superiority of Dom Juan to other men's principles when in fact he shares the same lot both in life and in death. Molière has reflected this situation on the poetic level by the dependance of the clever master on the stupid valet. Consequently, the structure of the master-man relationship fits into a framework which is mainly dramatic and not subjective or satiric.

The diatribes of religious censors originate in their belief that the different personages in Molière's comedies can be characterised by a specific way of facing life which direct all their actions. They

inevitably conclude that the presence of the author is continually there behind these characters and that through his works, he himself confronts life. They have virtually tried to determine the place that comedy occupies among the literary genres by grounding their arguments on actual data. By doing this, these same critics have attempted to outline Molière's philosophy. Such an undertaking is not only a complex job but it is also useless for what religious critics have been saying in fact is that comedy always is destructive and that it destroys and demoralises institutions like the Church. But satire, parody of religion and of social behavioral patterns are not really destructive; perhaps they are more constructive. But we can not be totally concerned with morality and immorality in Molière's comedies for the playwright took care in graduating the action in his plays in such a way that in the eyes of the spectator, the comic preponderated over the serious at every moment.

In this dissertation, we have implied that Molière's plays must be read mainly as plays and not principally as propaganda. We have suggested too that we could look for Molière's own view on religion only when we have determined the dramatic value of the passages concerned, which we have cited for each of the three plays respectively, L'École des femmes, Le Tartuffe and Dom Juan, using the criticism of commentators like Monseigneur Calvet, Brunetière, Cairncross and Molière's contemporaries to bring out the impact of the religious elements that arose in each play.

We have not tried to prove that Molière's drama is not full of ideas.

We have endeavoured to show that what in many cases has been attributed to Molière's ideas may be the expression of an attitude which is necessary to complete the dramatic contrast. Consequently, we have avoided to be as dogmatic as religious critics who interpreted Molière's plays as clear instruments of the author's own views on religion.



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