

DESJARDINS' *LE FAVORI* AND MOLIÈRE'S *TARTUFFE*:
DISSIMULATORS AND DUPES

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ABSTRACT

KILLEY JULIAN HAMILTON: Desjardins' *Le Favori* and Molière's *Tartuffe*:

Dissimulators and Dupes

(Under the direction of Ellen Welch)

The French writers of the 1660's-1680's such as La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, whom we now know as the *moralistes*, critiqued the theatricality of life among the urban bourgeois and among the nobles at court. Meanwhile, the Jansenist theologian Pierre Nicole in fact blamed theater for instructing French subjects in the ways of dissimulation. In the midst of this debate, Desjardins and Molière wrote their plays *Le Favori* and *Tartuffe*, which appear to respond to some of the *moralistes*' concerns about dissimulation in society. These authors offer contrasting messages on the question of dissimulation's morality in seventeenth century French society. While Desjardins depicts dissimulation as a necessary means to ends at court, Molière ostensibly warns his audience to be wary of malign dissimulators in society. These authors' messages about dissimulation give us insight into life and theater in Louis XIV's France.

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INTRODUCTION

The French writers of the 1660's-1680's whom we now call the *moralistes* examine dissimulation as a social concern in later seventeenth century France. Dissimulation's ubiquity in French society of this time prompted the *moralistes* to write about their concern that truth and reasonableness prevail in society. These writers critiqued the theatricality of "real life" at court and in the city, describing ways in which French subjects dissimulated their true feelings for the benefit of an "audience" of their peers. In his *Maximes* (1665), La Rochefoucauld comments on the courtesans' superficiality:

Nous sommes si accoutumés à nous déguiser aux autres qu'enfin nous nous déguisons à nous-mêmes.

(La Rochefoucauld 34)

La Rochefoucauld cites what he sees as the human tendency to feign appearances for the sake of ingratiating oneself with an audience of peers. Our actions are so carefully designed to create an impression on someone else that we may even begin to ourselves believe in the "veracity" of the feigned act.¹ Jean de la Bruyère is another writer who critiqued elite social

¹ Hodgson notes, "La Rochefoucauld desperately sought out truth... La Rochefoucauld looked around at his world as well as back to his earlier life as a courtier and found much evidence that deceit and falsehood were integral parts of the human experience" (3).

life in seventeenth century France.² In his *Caractères* (1688), La Bruyère depicts the royal court as comprised of courtesans pursuing their self-interest. Therefore, it is “best” to employ ruses to satisfy one’s desires:

Un homme qui sait la Cour, est maître de son geste, de ses yeux, et de son visage; il est profond, impenetrable; il dissimule les mauvais Offices, sourrit à ses ennemis, contraint son humeur, déguise ses passions, dément son cœur, parle, agit contre ses sentiments : tout ce grand raffinement n’est qu’un vice, que l’on appelle fausseté, quelquefois aussi inutile au Courtisan pour sa fortune, que la franchise, la sincérité, et la vertu.

(La Bruyère 319)

Thus, La Bruyère portrays the typical courtesan to be cunning and ready to manipulate circumstances toward his/her own ends.³ La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld show that dissimulation and theatricality in French elite social life was a major topos in literature under Louis XIV.

Meanwhile, the Jansenist theologian Pierre Nicole effectively blamed theater for instructing French subjects in the arts of dissimulation. In *Traité de la Comédie* (1667), Nicole argues that theater is a profession (for actors and actresses) and a mode of entertainment (for spectators) which is unbecfitting of Christians:

² See Cohen 225-254. La Bruyère, a Frenchman of middle class origin, developed his satirical views of aristocrats while he worked as the *précepteur* for the noble Condé family. Cohen notes, “La Bruyère was an eyewitness to the aristocracy’s decline, both the natural degeneration of a family (from the brilliance of the Grand Condé to the sullen torpor of his grandson) and its self-debasement before the tainted blandishments of Versailles. In moving from preceptorship to writing the *Caractères*, La Bruyère turns from the dynastic map of Europe, ripe for free-booting royal appropriation, to the claustrophobic moral cartography of Versailles in which, as the *Caractères* reveals, even royalty finds itself imprisoned” (Cohen 247).

³ Escola reinforces the notion that one commented on the wide-spread hypocrisy at the time during which la Bruyère was writing, as he calls hypocrisy “un vice à la mode” (347).

Quand on ne sent donc pas la même aversion pour les folles amours et les autres dérèglement que l'on représente dans les Comédies, et qu'on prend plaisir à les envisager, c'est une marque qu'on les hait pas, et qu'il s'exite en nous je ne sais quelle inclination pour ces vices, qui naît de la corruption de notre cœur.

(Nicole 60)

As Nicole was writing his treatise he was responding to an ongoing debate at the time as concerns the purposes of theater. Nicole dismissed the critical injunction of the arts to “plaire” and “instruire,” as he saw theater as divorced from Christian ethics in all ways.⁴

Molière and Desjardins wrote their plays during the early years of the *moralistes*' discourses on the theatricality of life and Nicole's condemnation of theater as an art form which promotes dissimulation. This thesis will address the commentaries about the theatricality of life that Desjardins and Molière make in their plays *Le Favori* (1665) and *Tartuffe* (1669). Ironically, they use theater as a medium to critique that theatricality.⁵ Desjardins and Molière concur about the predominance of dissimulation in French society, yet they offer different messages about what—if anything—guarantees truth in society.

⁴ See Stack 174: “The literary artists were faced with the difficulty of conforming with two different requirements, “Plaire” and “Instruire.” The latter was insisted upon especially by members of the clergy, whose influence was important socially as well as spiritually. The Jesuits were easily appeased, but ecclesiastics who adhered to ancient Church tradition went to the extreme of condemning the theater outright.... Nicole and Port Royal went further to condemn all fiction.”

⁵ When I refer to “theater” here, I mean more specifically the dialogue and the literary devices that each playwright employs. When I refer to the “theatricality” of life in the seventeenth century, I mean the act of feigning appearances for an audience of one's peers.

CHAPTER 1

HERO(INE) AND ANTI-HERO(INE) IN *LE FAVORI*

The royal pomp and decorum which accompanied the first performance of *le Favori* at Versailles seems appropriate for this play about courtesans who do not concern themselves with too much more than their social status and happiness (or lack thereof).⁶ This first performance of the play at Versailles in June 1665 was part of an elaborate party for the nobility that was replete with a ballet, musical concert and dinner.⁷ In the context of this lavish party, the play's courtier *personnages* thus "perform" for the "real life" Versailles courtiers. In the play, Clotaire and Elvire, who sense that Moncade, "le favori," is on the verge of disgrace before the king, employ various stratagems to oust Moncade as the favorite in order to secure the king's favor for themselves. In an unforeseen denouement, the king restores Moncade to good standing, revealing that his disparagement of Moncade was all a ruse. He thus rebuffs the manipulators Clotaire and Elvire.⁸ While Moncade at first appears

⁶ *Le Favori* actually debuted at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal in Paris in April 1665. Molière used *Le Favori* as a replacement for his heavily censored *Dom Juan*.

⁷ Louis XIV's chief patrons directed this event: The duke of Saint-Aignan, who was the organizer of royal festivities for Louis XIV, planned this staging of *Le Favori* in conjunction with Molière and his troupe. Molière actually wrote a prologue for the play that was mysteriously lost at an unknown point in history. For more on the history of the play, see Hogg's chapter, "Staging Fouquet: Historical and Theatrical Contexts of Villedieu's *Le Favori*" and Perry Gethner's introduction to the play in *Femmes dramaturges en France*.

⁸ Hogg links Moncade's character to Louis XIV's disgraced finance minister, Nicolas Fouquet, whose trial culminated in December 1664. The writing and rehearsal of the play happened before the trial's conclusion. Hogg thus interprets the play as an appeal to the king to pardon Fouquet. She notes: "The play that Villedieu wrote and Molière rehearsed in 1664, before the end of Fouquet's trial in December 1664, could have been

to be Desjardins' hero, his nonplused distrust of others at the court ultimately renders him a weak character. On the other hand, Desjardins' subtle exaltation of the opportunist Elvire reveals that Elvire is in fact Desjardins' heroine. The play reveals that sincerity fails as a survival strategy at court. The ability and willingness to dissimulate is a requirement in this society.

The play's ostensible protagonist, the king's favorite Moncade, seems at first to be the hero of the play. The audience is perhaps cajoled into liking Moncade because of his chivalrous pursuit of his true love Lindamire, his emotional language, and his moral reasoning. Nevertheless, though he displays a commitment to his friends and to the royal court, this loyalty and sincerity do not deliver him true happiness:

Bien que de ce grand nom je fasse peu de compte,
J'en discerne pourtant l'honneur d'avec la honte :
Le plaisir de me voir dans un illustre emploi
Propre à servir l'état, mes amis et mon roi,
Et l'heur d'être l'objet des bienfaits de mon maître
Trouvent mon cœur sensible autant qu'il le doit être :
Mais de tout ce bonheur je goûte peu de fruit, ...

Un homme qui parvient à ce degré suprême,
Doit se garder de tous... (1.1. 21-27, 33-34)

Moncade's language initially encourages the audience to assume that he is the hero. This speech, in which he talks of distinguishing honor and shame, seemingly establishes him as a moral figure. He also talks of his gratitude of being in a position to "servir l'état, mes amis et mon roi." This line demonstrates that he appreciates his country, friends, and king, and,

interpreted as a plea for forgiveness, a performance of what Louis could/should do: pardon his former finance minister. The play that was performed before the court in June 1665, when Fouquet had been exiled and imprisoned, would have been received differently. In this context, *Le Favori*, with its generically determined, yet improbably happy ending, seems to be a wish-fulfillment fantasy, a rewriting of history performed before the king" (48).

moreover, that he is willing to render service to the people and objects of his affection. He is also compelling as a hero because of his self-proclaimed “coeur sensible.” Furthermore, his pursuit of his true love Lindamire, a typical quest for a hero figure, renders Moncade likeable. Moncade’s vexation on the question as to whether Lindamire truly loves him might further coax the audience’s favor:

[L]a gloire [d’un favori] a plus d’amis bien souvent que lui-même,
Quelquefois on le hait au même temps qu’on l’aime ;
On ne peut discerner dans ce qu’il a d’appas,
Ce qu’il a d’étranger, de ce qui ne l’est pas,
Et tel est amoureux de ce qui l’environne,
Qui n’a jamais pensé peut-être à sa personne. (1.4. 237-242)

The audience sympathizes with Moncade in his quest to understand if Lindamire truly loves him or merely seeks to exploit his high position at court—that is, if she is genuinely in love with “sa personne” or more opportunistically “amoureux[se] de ce qui l’environne.” His character is tragic in so far as he is decent and loyal, yet unfulfilled in his noble aspirations.

At first appearing tragic, his situation ultimately becomes laughable, however, when one considers that his “favori” status is juxtaposed with his constant lamentations.⁹

Desjardins’ eponymous character Moncade is “le favori,” yet he is always distressed and

⁹ Hogg comments on the ambiguity of Desjardins’ tone: “Villedieu takes advantage of the suppleness of the genre to incorporate elements of both tragedy and comedy. The resulting text is highly ambiguous in tone. A tragic lexicon undermines the play’s purportedly comic setting. Dom Alvar’s questioning of Moncade is expressed in tragically coded terms.... [The] potent word ‘chagrin’ [grief, sorrow] often describes Moncade’s unhappy plight as the king’s favorite. Unlike the last-minute recuperation of Moncade, the play reads like a tragedy. Even the last scene undermines the happy ending of classical comedy, normally marked by a marriage or uniting of couples. It is the disturbingly amoral Elvire who has the last word, responding to Leonor’s question linking court celebration and politics” (47).

paranoid. Desjardins' dramatic framework is rife with situational irony for the audience; this irony progressively becomes more and more apparent to the audience.¹⁰ Even though Desjardins would seem to initially present Moncade as the hero, she gradually comes to portray him as an ineffective hero figure. He does not cope well with Desjardins' reality—which is that dissimulation is widespread and moreover inevitable in court society. Alvar's questioning of Moncade's "ennui profound / Qu'on voit dépeint sur votre front" makes an ironic contrast with his comments on the luxury that Moncade has available to him at the court (1.1.79-80). His dependence on the social milieu of the court renders his passions and sincerity pointless. He in fact consigns himself to misery because he so strongly attaches his identity to the court. Moncade stakes his very existence on his relationship to the king:

Je voudrais dans l'ardeur du zèle qui m'inspire
Que je vous dusse aussi tout l'air que je respire ;
Que je ne pusse agir ni vivre que par vous.... (1.6. 321-323)

Ultimately Desjardins establishes Moncade as her anti-hero because he cannot determine who really merits his trust and who merits his skepticism. Ironically, he unduly fears the king. The king ultimately restores Moncade to a favorable standing at the court, revealing that he had feigned the plot to exile Moncade. Moncade also unduly fears Lindamire, who eventually reveals before the king an appreciation for sincerity:

Je l'ai vu conquérant sans être téméraire,
Favori sans orgueil, courtisan et sincère;
Vous l'avez connu tel, et vous êtes surpris,
Qu'après cela Moncade ait charmé mes esprits. (5.4. 1265-1269)

¹⁰ The irony to which I refer belongs to Claire Colebrook's category of "cosmic irony," defined here: "[Cosmic irony], like linguistic irony, [has] a doubleness of sense or meaning. It is as though there is the course of human events and intentions, involving our awarding of rankings and expectations, that exists alongside another order of fate beyond our predictions. This is an irony of situation, or an irony of existence" (14).

Though Moncade is apparently rewarded for his sincerity at the end, when the king restores Moncade to favor, he is inept as usual. When the king finally reveals that the plot to exile Moncade was all a ruse, Moncade utters a word of amazement and then lavishes the king with praise for his magnanimity. Moreover, Moncade exhibits a naïve concern for one of his foes, Clotaire, when the king's ruse effectively disgraces Clotaire: As Moncade ostensibly prepares to say something on Clotaire's behalf, the king interjects, saying "Non, laissez-le dans ces justes transports, / Il a bien mérité de si cuisants remords" (5.5. 1427-1429). While he is content at the end, Moncade's happiness is but a function of the king's graces. Thus, we are not convinced that his approach to court life is a good one.

Moncade's antagonist, the expert at dissimulation, Elvire, on the other hand, triumphs despite her seemingly dubious morals. Elvire's triumph derives from her astute disposition toward the court, which is that dissimulation is inevitable at the court, thus one should profit from it. She is Desjardins' successful opportunist who employs the realities at court to her advantage. On one hand, she knows that she must avoid the king's wrath, but her concern for the king's favor stops far short of Moncade's reticence:

C'en est une en effet, et je tiens quant à moi,
Que c'est un grand fardeau que le courroux d'un roi,
Il le faut éviter avec un soin extrême
Et le premier amour est l'amour de soi-même. (3.4. 747-750)

Elvire thus reveals her duplicity: she worries about the king's authority, but only insofar as it directly pertains to her happiness. The audience might at first perceive Elvire as the rebel at court. Her callousness for any other character's welfare, her unabashed "amour de soi-même," might render her irritable or even abrasive to the audience. In fact, in some instances

Elvire appears audacious vis-à-vis the king's authority. For example, in the debate as to Lindamire's departure in exile with Moncade, Elvire tells the king, "Je ne m'entends pas trop aux maximes d'état" (4.5. 1072). She is unafraid to speak her mind when she perceives no threat to her happiness. In contrast, Elvire shows herself to be a strong force in her own right at the court. She is a manipulator, always seeking to exploit her "charms" to achieve her ends.

While Desjardins depicts Moncade as bemoaning his status as the favorite, she elevates Elvire as the more capable protagonist. Elvire makes dissimulation into a humorous game among the courtiers. She is a shrewd opportunist who moves vigorously to satisfy her fancies. Such successful opportunism at court leads Elvire to proclaim, "J'aime fort la cour" (4.1. 968). Her liking of the court is found in her ability to manipulate circumstances at the court to her selfish ends. She reveals that she courted Moncade so long as he was the vibrant favorite at court, "quand sa faveur rendait son amour précieux / Que les jeux et les ris le suivaient en tous lieux," yet her love for Moncade faded as his mentality descended into paranoia (4.1. 899-900). She sees the court as a stage for her amorous "conquests." Her narcissistic desire is to prove the power of her seduction over the male courtiers. Elvire's grasp on the events at court are displayed by her dishonest maneuvering as concerns the love triangle of Moncade, Elvire, and Lindamire. Once she perceives that Moncade is out of favor with the king, so much that he is to be exiled, she swiftly turns her attention to other love interests:

J'ai fait une conquête à cette promenade:
Car sans trop me flatter, je ne m'y connais pas
Ou Dom Lope a senti l'effet de mes appas;
J'ai surpris par hasard un certain regard tendre.... (4.1. 934-937)

First, Elvire applies the strong word “conquête,” which has masculine overtones and normally connotes a war, to her love relationships. Moreover, she celebrates her ingenuity in being able to put concern for Moncade behind her as she looks toward another potential “conquest” of Dom Lope. Elvire, unlike Moncade, does not depend on sincerity, as she sees that depending on sincerity is not a viable survival strategy at court. Desjardins’ message is that dissimulation abounds, thus one should seize the day.

Desjardin’s elevation of Elvire as the heroine indicates her comment on the illusory nature of appearances at court. Elvire in fact sees the court as offering her a game of illusions. Moreover, she recognizes the necessity of alienating herself from Moncade and Lindamire in order to avoid the king’s wrath:

Et le moindre envieux que j’aurais près du roi,
Peut d’un mot attirer tout son courroux sur moi ;
Il faut donc me parer de cette calomnie,
en montrant que je suis leur plus grande ennemie[.] (4.1. 955-958)

Intrigue at the court is a game of tactful position to satisfy one’s self-interests. Indeed at one point Elvire declares love at court to be nothing but “une chimère habillée en vertu” (4.1. 912). Here she employs a theatrical metaphor to insist on the chimerical nature of love at court, which to her is nothing but an illusion “dressed up” as virtue. Her diction in this line seems quite appropriate for a character that sees the court as a stage for her machinations. Furthermore, Elvire makes clear that finding true love is secondary to her to finding true happiness. Because she perceives the flattery and politics involved in the love relationships at court, she does not stake her hopes on finding true love, which she considers to be a vain

ideal in this society.¹¹ She unabashedly declares that her first priority is to satisfy herself: “Je fais tous mes efforts pour en être louée” (2.1. 399). She is shrewd in the ways of dissimulation, thus she is a happier character.

The play’s conclusion indicates that Elvire is the more effective of the two protagonists.¹² Having been temporarily rebuffed when the king reveals that his embroilment with Moncade was all a ruse, Elvire is nevertheless poised for a new conquest. She does not suffer from any potential misfortune at the court because her opportunism at the court allows her to work around this. The play concludes with Elvire’s blithe dismissal of any potential misfortune: “Tout cela ne vaut pas la peine d’en parler, / Et Dom Lope m’attend qui m’en va consoler” (5.8.1435-1436).¹³ Such a conclusion to the play indicates that, while the king is ultimately in control, Elvire’s schemes will continue furtively and outside of the king’s control.

To conclude, Elvire is Desjardins’ expert dissimulator at court, who seems to make an art form out of her opportunism, especially that which concerns her coquetry

¹¹ Hogg advances the idea that Desjardins conceals some of her political commentary within the context of a story largely based on love: “The presence of the coquette points to another textual strategy by which Villedieu might have sought to render *Le Favori* more palatable to its courtly audience. The relationship between Moncade and his king is consistently expressed in sentimental, if not amorous terms. Likewise, Moncade’s main preoccupation is proving Lindamire’s love. Elvire contributes to the sentimental register with her frequent discourses on the nature of love and coquetry. Thus, the political implications of Moncade’s apparent discontent and disgrace are moved to a safer register, that of the discourse of love” (58).

¹² Lalande notes Desjardins’ fondness of the feminine protagonist: “The author portrays women who flaunt their freedom of expression in a milieu governed by rigid rules of social conduct. They advocate a love ethic based on natural discourse ... as well as the right to express their feelings with complete freedom, thereby breaking the rules of conventional female reticence and discretion” (18).

¹³ Hogg comments on Elvire’s steady *joie de vivre* and notes that it is Elvire who has the last word: “[h]er hypocritical pursuit of Moncade having been revealed by the king’s stratagem, Elvire ends the play with a cynical dismissal of the festivities, as she sets her sights on a new courtly conquest” (44).

among the male courtiers. Moncade is a naïve dupe of the court intrigue. That Desjardins gives Elvire the last word indicates that her heroine, though temporarily rebuffed, has not been but emboldened and that her manipulation of the court will continue. The court seems to be nothing more than a hierarchy of dissimulators by the play's end. The play seems to build to this conclusion: The king reveals the ruse of his own which had—not coincidentally—set into motion much of the other action in the play. Dissimulation is an inevitable and necessary means to accomplishing one's ends at the court.

CHAPTER 2

HONEST AND DISHONEST DISSIMULATION IN *TARTUFFE*

Desjardins' justification of dissimulation's omnipresence at the royal court in *Le Favori* contrasts with Molière's more ominous depiction of the dangers of dissimulation in bourgeois society in *Tartuffe*. In *Tartuffe*, the ambiguous character Tartuffe feigns Christian piety in order to ingratiate himself with Orgon, the patriarch of a seventeenth century bourgeois family; Tartuffe intends to marry Orgon's daughter Mariane and to ostensibly exploit the family. Molière's play, with its presentation of this religious hypocrite, caused uproar from the religious community after its first performance at Versailles in 1664. The *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement* fiercely criticized the 1664 version of the play—which was entitled *Tartuffe ou l'Hypocrite*—because of Molière's presentation of Tartuffe as a hypocritical man of the church. Molière defends himself from this criticism twice in his *placets au roi*, once in 1664 then again in 1667. In the 1664 *placet*, Molière argues that comedy plays a role in correcting vices in society (such as hypocrisy in this case).¹⁴ In the

¹⁴ In the 1664 *placet*, Molière writes the following to the king: "Le devoir de la comédie étant de corriger les hommes en les divertissant, j'ai cru que, dans l'emploi où je me trouve, je n'avais rien de mieux à faire que d'attaquer par des peintures ridicules les vices de mon siècle..." Molière's defense of his satire—though he does not use this word—corresponds with a contemporaneous satirist's defense of his own satire from his critics. Nicolas Boileau writes the following about his critics in his *Discours sur la satire*, "[I]ls ne veulent pas ester détrompez. Il leur fâche d'avoir admiré sérieusement des ouvrages que mes Satires exposent à la risée de tout le monde, et de se voir condamnez à oublier, dans leur vieillesse, ces mesmes vers qu'ils ont autrefois appris par Coeur comme des chefs-d'oeuvres de l'art" (20).

1667 *placet*, Molière says that he has taken care to extricate Tartuffe’s character from direct affiliation with the church by changing his costume to that of a layman (from that of a man of the church).¹⁵ For the 1667 version of the play, Molière titles the play *Panufle ou l’Imposteur*. Then in 1669 Molière again renames the play, this time titling it *Tartuffe ou l’Imposteur*. I surmise that Molière affected this title change because “impostor” implies one who consciously plays a role—and might also connote a pariah—as opposed to a “hypocrite,” which implies one who dupes himself as well as others. However, I argue that Tartuffe is indeed a hypocrite who lies to himself and to others. Tartuffe is a malign, “dishonest dissimulator” because his exploitation of Orgon’s family threatens to dismantle it; meanwhile, Tartuffe convinces himself and others of his own dissimulated realities. Tartuffe is not the only character who pretends to be something that he is not, however. To the contrary, Elmire, Molière’s heroine, is also a dissimulator. In contrast to Tartuffe, Elmire is an “honest dissimulator” because she strives to attain the best outcome for her family. Molière comments on the theatricality of life in the seventeenth century. Molière’s message is that we all play roles in society but a reasoned awareness of this fact promotes truth in society.

Tartuffe is Molière’s “dishonest dissimulator,” a trickster whose actions and moral reasoning are divorced from truth and reality. Tartuffe is certainly Molière’s villain, as his actions threaten to destroy Orgon’s family. However, the fact that the reader has minimal access to Tartuffe’s thoughts combining with the fact that Tartuffe’s actions are deleterious

¹⁵ In the 1667 *placet*, he says that he has been careful to distinguish between the hypocrite and the *vrai dévot* by casting Tartuffe as an *homme du monde* (as opposed to a man of the church in the original version) and that he has made some *adoucisements*, the nature of which are vague as a historical matter because there is no extant copy of the original 1664 text.

to the family together render him a frightening character. Tartuffe does not appear in the play until the third act. Even before he appears on stage, the audience suspects that Tartuffe is a villainous character based on what the other characters say about him. In response to Madame Pernelle's praise of "Monsieur Tartuffe," the astute servant Dorine says, "Il passe pour un saint dans votre fantaisie: / Tout son fait, croyez-moi, n'est qu'hypocrisie" and the wise *raisonneur* Cléante warns Orgon, "vous ne ferez nulle distinction / Entre l'hypocrisie et la dévotion" (1.1. 69-70, 1.5. 331-332). Once Tartuffe does finally appear in the play, his limited speech only augments the ambiguity surrounding his character. Tartuffe even admits the shallowness of his identity. He says the following while intervening on Damis' behalf when Orgon threatens to oust Damis from the house:

Ah! Laissez-le parler; vous l'accusez à tort,
Et vous ferez bien mieux de croire à son rapport.
Pourquoi sur un tel fait m'être si favorable ?
Savez-vous, après tout, de quoi je suis capable ?
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 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. (3.6. 1091-1100)

This quote illustrates the complexity inherent in analyzing Tartuffe's character. Here Tartuffe is poised to cause havoc for the family, as Orgon is ready to banish his son from the household while allying himself with Tartuffe. Meanwhile, Tartuffe objects to the actions of his "ally," Orgon, remarking that there really are no solid grounds on which Orgon's trust of him is based, saying, "Tout le monde me prend pour un homme de bien, / Mais la vérité pure

est que je ne veux rien.” Tartuffe is mysterious, yet he is unequivocally disingenuous—even by his own admission when he tells Orgon, “Vous vous laissez tromper à l’apparence.”

Molière’s presentation of the consummate actor is all the more troubling because the audience never has reliable access to the “real” thoughts or intentions of the character underneath the pious disguise. While his actions pose a fatal threat to the family, he never clearly delineates his motives. Tartuffe is a cipher, a nonentity who seems to only assume a moral character with respect to the *performance* he enacts for whoever is watching him. Indeed, Tartuffe’s successes—and moreover his ultimate failure—depend on who believes what regarding his character. Orgon’s alliance with Tartuffe is predicated on Orgon’s perception that Tartuffe is a righteous figure; this notion of Tartuffe’s righteousness has been established in Orgon’s mind because he has been witness to Tartuffe *performing* acts of pious alms-giving. A series of feigned appearances constitutes Tartuffe’s behavioral pattern.

Molière’s characterization of Tartuffe is a vehicle through which Molière satirizes widespread dissimulation and hypocrisy in society.¹⁶ In establishing Tartuffe as a vague but scary character, Molière makes Tartuffe’s histrionics into a display of such prevalent vices during the seventeenth century. Tartuffe’s intrusion into the family affairs is disquieting underneath the comedic façade. This episode of the *faux dévot’s* near upheaval of a bourgeois family was reason for concern among Molière’s audience (first noble, then

¹⁶ I use the term “satire” in the “Horatian” sense to imply that Molière (the satirist) “seeks to laugh men out of their follies” (Griffin 6-7). Even though Molière does not use the term “satire” to describe his play, he does profess the intent to correct vice (namely hypocrisy) in society in his first *placet* to the king. Also, Auerbach notes the following about morality in Molière’s plays: “Molière’s criticism is entirely moralistic; that is to say, it accepts the prevailing structure of society, takes for granted its justification, permanence, and general validity, and castigates the excesses occurring within its limits as ridiculous” (365).

bourgeois.)¹⁷ Also, Elmire's reasoning about how she might entice Tartuffe's sexual desire of her reinforces Molière's satire: "[O]n est aisément dupé par ce qu'on aime. Et l'amour-propre engage à se tromper soi-même" (4.3. 1358-1359). Her words here take the form of a broadly applicable generalization about human nature. The fact that Molière's heroine voices these concerns about human nature indicates that hypocrisy is a vice which Molière illuminates in his play. Tartuffe would indeed seem to be a hypocrite according to his moral reasoning in justifying adultery with Elmire:

Selon divers besoins, il est une science
D'étendre les liens de notre conscience
Et de rectifier le mal de l'action
Avec la pureté de notre intention. (4.5. 1489- 1492)

He basically says here that it is okay to commit immoral acts so long as one acts out of good intention, so long as "[on] rectifi[e] le mal de l'action [a]vec la pureté de notre intention." This spurious moral reasoning is clearly untenable in reality. Molière thus depicts Tartuffe as a character who is divorced from truth and reality. Moreover, Molière's intentional ambiguity about the intruder's motives stirs the audience to ponder these questions in assessing his apparently hypocritical nature.

Molière also satirizes Orgon's and Mme. Pernelle's smug prudishness and overzealousness. The fact that Tartuffe is able to fill a void for the character with whom he intends to ingratiate himself facilitates Molière's satire of these dupes. Tartuffe actually

¹⁷ In his article "Didactic Strategies in French Classical Comedy," Gethner comments on the significance of Molière's moving of comedy "indoors": "The house becomes a microcosm of upright, middle-class society, and the malefactor becomes a kind of housebreaker, aiming to disrupt the lives of the inhabitants, and, at worst, to dispossess and banish them.... Tartuffe is the blackest of these intruders" (160).

serves as a mirror or foil by which one can judge the reasonableness of the other characters.¹⁸ Orgon seeks to assert power in his family; to this end, Tartuffe is his accomplice. While Tartuffe presents himself as a pious church attendee, Orgon, meanwhile, seeks to exploit the church as a vehicle through which he can exercise power over his family. As Riggs notes, “Orgon, like his mother, is thoroughly addicted to exercising a power that provides personal pleasure while defining that pleasure as service to ‘higher’ principles” (“Molière’s ‘Poststructuralism’” 48). Tartuffe fits well into this power schema for Orgon. Tartuffe is likewise able to win over support from Madame Pernelle; Tartuffe fits well into her dogmatic worldview, which is characterized by clichéd, ritualistic piety. When Madame Pernelle finally reconciles herself to the truth of Tartuffe’s false devotion, exclaiming “Je suis toute ébaubie, et je tombe des nues,” the audience sees how inane Orgon and Madame Pernelle have been acting (5.3. 1659, 5.5. 1814).¹⁹ While Tartuffe does not even pretend to be discreet in his dissimulation, Orgon and Madame Pernelle seem to act as an eager audience for his feigned devotion.²⁰ Molière’s audience can laugh at the ridiculousness while simultaneously feeling enlightened as reasonable persons. Molière condemns the

¹⁸ Auerbach notes: “Orgon’s most deeply instinctive and secret craving, which he can indulge precisely by selling himself and his soul to Tartuffe, is the sadism of a family tyrant” (361).

¹⁹ Her idiocy here reflects the comedic register of *le ridicule* as defined in *Lettre sur la comédie de l’imposteur*, a pamphlet written by a partisan of Molière’s cause: “[Q]and nous voyons une action ridicule, la connoissance que nous avons du Ridicule de cette action nous eleve au dessus de celui qui la fait, parceque d’une part, personne n’agissant irraisonnablement à son sceu, nous jugeons que l’homme qui l’a faite ignore qu’elle soit deraisonnable et la croit raisonnable, donc qu’il est dans l’erreur et dans l’ignorance[.]” (*Lettre* 166)

²⁰ Molière imbues Tartuffe with qualities which reflect his absurdity as an impostor. As Auerbach notes, “Molière cannot possibly have intended to bring a perfect incarnation of the term *faux dévot* on the stage. He needed strong comic effects for the stage, and he found them, most ingeniously, by contrasting the part played by his Tartuffe with the man’s natural character. This strong, health fellow... with his big appetite... and his other no less strongly developed physical needs, has not the slightest talent for piety, not even for a feigned piety” (360-361).

overzealousness of Orgon and Mme. Pernelle and their incumbent gullibility with respect to Tartuffe's "dishonest dissimulation." He implicitly argues for more logic and honesty.

In contrast to the vices represented by these characters, Elmire is Molière's heroine, as she is both astute in the ways of role-playing, while she is also fundamentally honest. While Tartuffe's motives are ambiguous and his actions are deleterious, Elmire's motives are clear and benign with respect to her family: She wishes only for the best for her family. She reveals that she is acting out of consideration for her family when she speaks to Orgon, revealing that she intends to enlighten the family as concerns Tartuffe's dishonesty:

[P]our vous convaincre, ainsi que j'ai promis...
Je vais par des douceurs, puisque j'y suis réduite,
Faire poser le masque à cette âme hypocrite,
Flatter de son amour les désirs effrontés,
Et donner un champ libre à ses témérités.
Comme c'est pour vous seul, et pour mieux le confondre,
Que mon âme à ses vœux va feindre de répondre...
C'est à vous d'arrêter son ardeur insensée,
Quand vous croirez l'affaire assez avant poussée,
D'épargner votre femme, et de m'exposer
Qu'à ce qu'il vous faudra pour vous désabuser :
Ce sont vos intérêts ; vous en serrez le maître[.]

(4.4. 1372, 1374-78, 1381-85)

In this passage, Elmire reveals that she is willing to take authority into her own hands when she sees a threat to her family. Her main desire is to bring to light Tartuffe's treachery. She knows that her husband is not seeing matters clearly. She wants to restore him as the "maître" of knowledge of what is in fact going on in the family, stating first her intention to "[f]aire poser le masque à cette âme hypocrite," then encouraging Orgon to seize moral authority over the household: "C'est à vous d'arrêter son ardeur insensée." She intends to

restore Orgon and Madame Pernelle to “lucidity”—that is, a clear understanding of what is happening—thus establishing herself as an *honest* character (Riggs “Esthetic Judgment” 684). As he establishes Elmire as a successful heroine in the play, Molière underscores the inherent “theatrical” aspect of social interaction. Elmire exposes Tartuffe’s theatricality. In order to do so, however, she must resort to theatricality herself, having Orgon hide under a table as she allures Tartuffe’s attention upon her. Elmire is keen to note the human propensity toward theatricality in social interaction and she responds judiciously in such a way that establishes her as Molière’s heroine.²¹

The success of Elmire and Tartuffe can be measured with respect to their interaction with the dupes in the play, Orgon and Madame Pernelle. Tartuffe initially succeeds in inserting himself into the affairs of the family, exploiting the lack of lucidity among Orgon and Madame Pernelle, up until Elmire’s triumph. Elmire’s triumph occurs when she awakens Orgon and Madame Pernelle to their idiocy and thus brings them to lucidity. Elmire effectively brings Orgon to see the fictitious world of false righteousness that Tartuffe has fostered in his mind via Tartuffe’s theatrical display of devotion. That Elmire awakens Orgon and Madame Pernelle to their grave misconstruing of Tartuffe’s actions underscores her role as the “enlightened” character who better understands human social interaction. Orgon is seen as overzealous in attaching himself unequivocally to Tartuffe. Molière implicitly argues for more discretion and caution regarding social interaction.

²¹ Larry Riggs notes: “Elmire’s theatrical production makes Orgon ‘present at his own absence.’ He cannot be mesmerized by Tartuffe as his, Orgon’s, magical reflection. Presumably, he is uncomfortable under the table. His senses are fully engaged. He must listen to what Tartuffe says, and he hears it as what it is—the expression of Tartuffe’s desire. The solipsistic ‘couple’ is broken apart by this play within the play....[Orgon] is forced to perceive the theatrical, performative nature of all social discourse and the pluralism within and among selves (“Molière’s ‘Poststructuralism’” 53-54).

The character of Tartuffe arguably has much utility as a literary figure. *Un Tartuffe* connotes a hypocritical character more than a *faux dévot*.²² Indeed, Tartuffe's audience, including both characters inside the play and spectators outside of the play, could have much to learn from Tartuffe's "dishonest dissimulation." Dorine's quip to Madame Pernelle accentuates such "utility" for Molière's audience:

Vous vous plaignez à tort, à tort vous le blâmez,
Et ses pieux desseins par là sont confirmés :
Dans l'amour du prochain sa vertu se consomme ;
Il sait que très souvent les biens corrompent l'homme,
Et, par charité pure, il veut vous enlever
Tout ce qui vous peut faire obstacle à vous sauver. (5.5. 1815-1820)

To conclude this chapter, Tartuffe's dishonest dissimulation represents the lies and ruses in society that Molière wishes to correct via his satire. Orgon and Madame Pernelle are dupes who easily fall victim to Tartuffe's histrionics. These characters are all divorced from reason and truth. Elvire, on the other hand, is Molière's heroine because she understands the theatrical nature of social interaction in seventeenth century France. Moreover, she is an honest character who represents truth and "lucidity."

²² Marc Escola notes the connotations of a "Tartuffe" in historical literary criticism : "[I]l n'est pas sûr... que nous entendions encore dans l'expression "un Tartuffe" le scandale d'une fausse dévotion, pourtant essentiel dans le contexte initial... L'antonomase ne retient sans doute que les traits les plus généraux : l'hypocrisie davantage que la fausse dévotion, le double langage plutôt que la gourmandise" (346).

CONCLUSION

The portraits of the expert dissimulators that Molière and Desjardins offer are diverse. Desjardins' Elvire is amoral and carefree. She is successful insofar as she is happy and undeterred by a higher authority. Molière's Tartuffe is amoral and frighteningly ambiguous. He is ultimately unsuccessful vis-à-vis Elmire's and the king's moral certitude. Finally, Molière's Elmire is moral and resolute. She is successful in reinstating moral clarity in Orgon's household. As we have seen, the final success or failure of these characters perhaps indicates each playwright's moral comment on the theatricality of society. Nevertheless, the central issue at stake in each of these plays is the prevalence of dissimulation in society. Moreover, the portraits of these expert dissimulators suggest that we can never know when others are being truthful or duping us.

Each of the plays presents a solution to this disquieting dilemma. The king's words and/or actions provide a resolution to this concern in each play, although this resolution is accomplished with greater or lesser degrees of certainty in each play. In *Tartuffe*, the king's omniscience guarantees true identity, whereas "true identity" in *Le Favori* is little more than a charade. In *Le Favori*, the king reveals his ruse at the end, implying that he is the one who is capable of manipulating truth. Thus, while the courtier's success is determined by his/her prowess in the "game" of dissimulation at court, the play ultimately reinforces the traditional power structure: The king appears to be in command and "le favori" is restored to happiness.

and good standing. Meanwhile, however, the rebel at court is poised to manipulate a future suitor. The fact that Elvire waltzes away ready to pursue future suitors indicates that her schemes will continue under the king's not-so-authoritative surveillance.²³ We have the impression that every "actor" in the theater of court society has the potential to be his/her own stage director. Thus this play's ending, while affirming the king's preeminence, also leaves open to question the degree to which the king is always in control. On the other hand, Molière indicates that the king is without question the guarantor of truth in *Tartuffe*. Such a conclusion is evident when the king's messenger delivers the speech insisting on the king's clairvoyance:

Nous vivons sous un Prince ennemi de la fraude
Un Prince dont les yeux se font jour dans les cœurs,
Et que ne peut tromper tout l'art des imposteurs.
D'un fin discernement sa grande âme pourvue
Sur les choses toujours jette une droite vue[.] (5.7. 1906-1910)

There is no uncertainty about the king's ability to vanquish the malign dissimulators because he is able to see into his subjects' hearts, because he is "[u]n Prince dont les yeux se font jour dans les coeurs." The king can see through any disguise and punishes offenders of the "right" order. Such an ending indicates that there is truth behind the characters' theatrical illusions. While the king is not but another dissimulator in Desjardins' *Le Favori*—albeit the supreme dissimulator who can manipulate truth—the clairvoyant king in *Tartuffe*, in contrast, intervenes to reestablish order and truth. As artistic patrons of Louis XIV, Desjardins and Molière portrayed dupes and dissimulators in their plays. They show concern (or lack

²³ On this point, Gethner concludes the following: "Although Villedieu allows herself a bit of mockery at the expense of male authority figures... and shows kings who either are, or temporarily appear to be, evil tyrants, she always manages to stop just short of expounding truly subversive views on politics" ("Conspirators and Tyrants" 41).

thereof) for the ubiquity of feigned appearances in French elite social life, although they both show—with greater or lesser degrees of certainty—the king’s capacity to maintain a desired (if not but chimerical) order in society.

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