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The Comforts of *Tartuffe*

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Abstract:

In the later versions of *Tartuffe*, Molière raises the stakes of the play by putting Orgon’s house at risk. This article situates this preoccupation with real estate in terms of New Paris’s urban engineering projects and Louis XIV’s attempts to make the city safe for the well-off. In this light, the play’s real target becomes less the familiar “bad father” of comedy than the outsider, the homeless gueux who would be best locked up in the Hôpital général—newly founded by precisely the all-seeing prince so flattered in the play’s closing scene.

*Le Tartuffe* is Molière’s real estate play: while classical comedy is very often about the household, this particular comedy is about the house. By all appearances Orgon has a nice one, perfect for holding the parties to which his pious mother objects. There were a lot of nice houses being built in Paris at the time—in the area of the Place Royale (now Place des Vosges), on the previously undeveloped Île Saint-Louis, soon around the Place des Victoires. Orgon’s Paris is the new, proudly modernized city whose transformations have been so well charted by Joan DeJean—a city developing the physical infrastructure to support its upper-class sociability, with parks and prospects and public lighting. And straighter, wider streets to accommodate the private carriages now proliferating. These urban improvements pave the way for all those *visites*, those *bals*, those *conversations* about which Madame Pernelle complains so shrilly in the play’s opening.[[1]](#endnote-1) All this hangs in the balance because of Orgon’s obsession, the one that pushes him to make a gift of his property to Tartuffe.

Yet it is in all likelihood more accurate to say that the work *became* Molière real estate play—some time, that is, between its initial version of 1664 and the final version we possess, of 1669. After all, the security of the home does not immediately connect with the problem of religion and its proper place, which is long the subject for which literary history has quite sensibly enshrined *Le Tartuffe* (see McBride; Rey and Lacouture; Prest). Tartuffe is, as most anyone who is in the position to have heard of the play knows, a hypocrite; he affects spiritual airs in in view of satisfying his carnal cravings. Admittedly, property could be one of those cravings, along with the “moitié de Gigot en hachis” (108; 1.4.240) he wolfs down and the “étoffe ... moelleuse” (146; 3.3.917) he fingers on Elmire’s person—those more palpably direct sops to his desire. Yet the house as target fits better in the context of the textual transformations scholars have for many decades deduced based on extant evidence.[[2]](#endnote-2) These transformations have taken *Le Tartuffe* from a three-act play apparently subtitled *l’hypocrite* to a five-act play subtitled *l’imposteur*, and in the process loosened Tartuffe’s relation to the traditional object of satire that is the fornicating and gluttonous man of the cloth. The stakes of Tartuffe’s parasitism increase: from a hypocrite eating his way through Orgon’s larder we pass to an imposter with designs on his house. And if hypocrites and imposters are both something other than what they pretend, imposters additionally usurp social identities that do not belong to them. Imposters come from below. They infiltrate. “Un Inconnu,” warns Dorine, “céans s’impatronise“ (102; 1.1.62).[[3]](#endnote-3)

In what follows, I want to argue that the 1669 *Tartuffe* is designed for the New Paris in a way that its predecessor was likely not. Henri IV’s urban projects such as the Pont Neuf and the Place Dauphine stand at the beginning of the modernization, pursued throughout the century by Louis XIII and Louis XIV. The Sun King is sometimes accused of forgetting Paris for Versailles, perhaps on account of animus relating to the Fronde revolt. Yet as DeJean writes, “this theory overlooks an essential period in the history of Paris, the twelve to fifteen years that began in 1660” (95).[[4]](#endnote-4) And surely all this building of public spaces and the private dwellings that complemented them cannot be separated from initiatives to make New Paris safe, ranging from the aforementioned street lighting to the establishment of the first Parisian police force to, most signally, what Michel Foucault has famously called the *Grand Renfermement*—an attempt to rid the city of the indigent and the unemployed by rounding them up and putting them to work in the archipelago of institutions known as the *Hôpital Général*. My basic point, I trust, is already evident: imprisoning Tartuffe ensures the symbolic safety of Parisian homeowners.

The exclusionary valence of Paris’s modernization bears recalling. Public works are, it stands to reason, for the public; and DeJean has emphasized the way that a square such as the Place Royale broke from the Italianate tradition of the piazza, organized around a building of some importance to Church or State.[[5]](#endnote-5) Architecturally, the Place Royale was purely secular: its celebration of the monarchy was limited to what we might want to call naming rights, and to the modest bronze of Louis XIII on horseback installed at its center some decades after its construction. If the Place Royale was a credit to the monarchy, that credit came about via the production of housing stock on the one hand and of planned public space on the other. The same can be said about the Pont Neuf and its flanking Place Dauphine, or the leafy encircling boulevards that were built on the rubble where the city walls stood before Louis XIV ordered them razed in 1669.

It would appear, however, that there was some sort of contradiction between public space and private housing development of a distinctly upscale sort. The Place Royale may be the best example. Henri IV’s plans insisted on the need for a *proumenoir*—“a space where the inhabitants of our city can walk; they are now tightly confined within their homes because of all the people who keep flooding into Paris in such numbers from all sides” (cited in DeJean 53). But DeJean detects in contemporary visual representations an evolution: once an open space, frequented by all walks of life, the Place Royale is remodeled following the Fronde, taking on a park-like aspect, with an elegant, patterned *parterre de gazon* separated by enhanced fencing from the encircling road where upper-class Parisians displayed themselves in their new carriages (54-55). (DeJean [31] helpfully reminds us that private carriages are essentially a technology of the seventeenth century.) DeJean (28) points as well to a detail in Hendrick Mommers’s view of the Pont Neuf, painted in the very years Molière was working and reworking his *Tartuffe*: behind the parade of aristocratic carriages, strolling bourgeois, and street peddlers, indistinctly huddling between the statue of Henri IV and the bridge’s balustrade, is a large group of paupers or vagabonds. For the moment—for the time needed for Paris police prefect Gabriel Nicolas de La Reynie to march them off to the Hôpital Général—these street people haunt the margins of the Grand Siècle’s swanky new infrastructure.

What if Orgon’s house were haunted in a similar way? “Un Inconnu céans s’impatronise,” to re-quote Dorine: a stranger is becoming the boss in this house, on these premises. Scholars have more than once observed the insistent repetition of the word *céans*, used more in this play—fourteen times—than in any other by Molière (Gutwirth 35; Romanowski 34). As I have suggested, this makes sense in the context of play’s thematization of the home, as opposed to comedy’s more usual interest in the proper functioning of the patriarchal household. “*Tartuffe* is unique [in Molière’s *oeuvre*] in the particular importance it gives to the house itself,” observed Quentin M. Hope (48) some time ago, and Marcel Gutwirth (35) soon added: “Tartuffe’s whole act is an intrusion; with all the force that the compound word ‘housebreaker’ wrings out of the word ‘house,’ it calls up the solid walls, the privacy, the inward familial reality it breaches.” Yet the porosity of the home cannot be the effect solely of Tartuffe’s intrusion, since it’s that porosity that Madame Pernelle spends the opening scene complaining about—altogether too much coming and going, “ces Carosses sans cesse à la Porte plantés” (103; 1.1.88). And indeed, if one thinks about the newly engineered public spaces of Paris, one might argue that historical momentum was on the side of turning the inside out and outside in, thus increasing porosity—making it easier to get out and see others, and easier to have those others in. So the problem isn’t that someone has come inside the house—after all, the house was built for receiving. Rather the problem is that it’s the wrong someone, a nobody. *Un inconnu*. Or, as Dorine refines, upping the ante: “un Gueux” (102; 1.1.63), a beggar.

*Gueux*, appearing a more modest four times (once in the participle *gueusant*), is nonetheless another keyword. One imagines it must have been introduced in the final version of the play, because before then Tartuffe’s social origins were not at issue. It most probably wouldn’t have a place in the lost 1664 version. There, if Tartuffe’s precise religious status was unspecified—charged with spiritual direction, he might have been a lay *dévot*, or just possibly an actual priest[[6]](#endnote-6)—the specter of social abjection would not have come into play. The emphasis, after all, was on the gulf between the character’s lofty vocation and his fleshly reality—on his hypocrisy. In the 1667 version, Molière proposed a tactical reorientation by rescripting the notion of *fausse dévotion*: the *faux dévot* is no longer an actual *dévot* unable to practice what he preaches, but rather someone pretending to be a *dévot* in order to get what he wants—an impostor, then, to use the word that was now, in full, the title of the play. But still the social status of the character now named Panulphe doesn’t seem to be in doubt: on the contrary, Molière’s *second placet*, addressed to the king in the days following this version’s interdiction, clearly designates the imposter as “un homme du monde” (Molière *Oeuvres* ed. Forestier 193). Thus it is probable that allusions to Tartuffe’s beggarly origins appear only in the final 1669 version. This is where Dorine twice applies the term. First, in the opening of the play, right after Damis calls him a “pied plat” (102; 1.1.59; country bumpkin, or a peasant who wears shoes without heels), she raises the ante in the passage quoted above by maintaining that the *gueux* entered Orgon’s house in worthless rags and no shoes at all, flat or otherwise. Then, in the second act, Dorine enrages Orgon by emphasizing the enormity of the misalliance Orgon is contemplating between his daughter and Tartuffe, “un Gendre gueux” (120; 2.2.484). Eyes newly opened, it is Orgon himself in the closing act who takes up the term: “Et moi qui l’ai reçu gueusant, et n’ayant rien” (174; 5.1.1603). (The fourth use of the term also belongs to Orgon, who applies it to his son Damis, whom he has just disinherited [154; 3.6.1134].)

Whether the successive modifications of the play have resulted in a coherent character is doubtful. It has been remarked that Dorine herself implicitly endorses Tartuffe’s claimed provincial nobility in her description of Mariane’s future married life (129; 2.3.654-667), so perhaps her treatment of Tartuffe as a beggar is merely exaggeration (Butler 53). Moreover, a penniless *gueux* would by definition be illiterate, far from having at his disposal the kind of theological arguments that characterize Tartuffe’s attempted seduction of Elmire. Those arguments, granted, are mixed-up: James M. Gaines calls them “a veritable fruit salad of doctrines” (199). The mixing of Jesuit bananas with Jansenist grapes makes sense as part of the humor of the play’s first version, in which a smooth-talking spiritual director—of willing spirit but weak flesh—availed himself of whatever argument he could to overcome the resistance of his victim. Simply by virtue of the fact that he knows the arguments enough to twist them, this Tartuffe can hardly be a *gueux*. And the status of barefoot *gueux* sits uneasily with the portrait of the serial con man emerging from the Exempt’s speech at the play’s close—a passage surely datable to the play’s 1667 version. Not that Panulphe’s high birth made much sense, either: why would such a person turn to a life of crime?[[7]](#endnote-7) Obliged by circumstance to turn the original Tartuffe into some sort of social imposter, Molière hit upon two separate solutions, each of which led to logical impasses, further compounded by the fact that all three Tartuffes were present, palimpsestically, in the play’s final version.

To all appearances, logical problems don’t necessarily make for dramaturgical problems: *Tartuffe* is Molière’s most staged play. More important, they don’t make for ideological problems. On the contrary, *Tartuffe* is an ideological gold mine precisely because Molière has stuffed it with a rich lode of overlaid fears. Without a doubt, the fear of religious domination of secular space—the space of *mondanité*, or worldliness. But also the fear of the economic margins, of people who can no longer *not* be seen, at least out of the corner of our eye—the way we spot, behind all the colorful hubbub of Mommers’s painting of a mid-1660s Pont Neuf, the huddled paupers. These obscure figures are no real threat to those who have purchased newly built homes in rapidly developing Paris. *Tartuffe* may suggest, however, the kind of psychic threat they pose to the newly domesticated urban space, a space that needs the kind of policing so memorably described in the Exempt’s closing speech.

That speech has long provoked a kind of discomfort with what can only be called Molière’s toadying propaganda—“its gross flattery of Louis XIV” (Cairncross 3)—along with a larger unease over the entire *rex ex machina* ending that extricates the playwright from what might appear an otherwise inescapable plotting dilemma.[[8]](#endnote-8) Yet we might as well marvel at the dexterity with which Molière has integrated *both* the dilemma and its solution into his original play, thereby much increasing its resonance. While the 1664 version certainly contained the theme of domestic space infiltrated by the hypocrite, the stakes were relatively low—cuckoldry, which is to say, the traditional stuff of comedy. A plausible reconstruction of the 1664 dénouement might have Tartuffe’s hypocrisy exposed by *la scène de table*, roughly as in the version we have now, followed by his banishment at the hands of the family, perhaps by a *bastonnade* (Rey and Lacouture 90–91). What better advertisement for the so-called power of comedy, with Elmire starring in a little “table theater” of her own creation that proves efficacious in dispelling Orgon’s blindness and thereby saving the day? *Tartuffe* might then suggest that “bad actors”—hypocrites, literally—could be countered by the work of good ones, thus allegorizing comedy’s role in a self-policing society, which is to say restoring and keeping order. To the extent the 1664 *Tartuffe* was already a political play, it was on this very circumscribed, perhaps pre-modern, level: the polis it imagines is not that of the state but of the community, still symbolized by the household, and still sufficiently defended by the resources of comedy.

In its passage from three to five acts, all this changes. Elmire’s theater still cures her husband’s blindness, but it cannot stop Tartuffe. And now the stakes are much greater—the house, so impetuously donated to the imposter. Yet there’s another significant added plot point, because as scholars have pointed out, Orgon’s contract would have been unenforceable (Gaines 211; Shaw). So Molière also introduces the specter of lèse-majesté. Unlike any other of the playwright’s protagonists save perhaps Dom Juan, Orgon acquires a backstory: though himself a supporter of the monarch during the Fronde, he simultaneously kept questionable company and agreed to store the papers of a now-exiled friend who backed the losing *frondeurs*.[[9]](#endnote-9) In bringing those incriminating papers to the king, Tartuffe hopes his wobbly contract will be upheld. It is as if alerted now to the precarity of his own authorship, Molière has decided to encode his brush with censorship within the play by imbricating its action within the larger, fully political world. Decidedly, the world of comedy is no longer sufficient unto itself.

Nowadays we like our writers subversive, and it’s tempting to see the Exempt’s speech—its hailing of the king’s all-seeing eye, of his ability to distinguish loyalty from sedition—as standard-issue encomium, the price to be paid for the king’s support and for the freedom to attack what we might call religious extremism. Yet the extent to which that speech overlays the play’s discourse on religion with a second discourse on policing must not be forgotten. Indeed, considering the timing, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Exempt’s speech is a pendent for the March 1667 edict of Saint-Germain-en-Laye establishing the office of the Paris police prefect, whose role is to “assurer le repos du public et des particuliers, [et] purger la ville de ce qui peut causer des désordres” (Louis XIV 1).[[10]](#endnote-10) The vocabulary of purgation used in the Edict, however, might miss the mark: New Paris operated less by expulsion of the unwanted than by their reformation, courtesy of the Hôpital Général. Compare the disciplinary regime of the latter—“prayers, sermons, forced labor, and, if needed, floggings,” writes Orest Ranum (319)[[11]](#endnote-11)—to earlier attempts to tackle homelessness, as described by Foucault.

A parliamentary act of 1606 decreed that in Paris all beggars were to be whipped in a public place, branded on the shoulder, and then thrown out of the city with their heads shaved. The following year another act created companies of archers to guard the gates of the city and refuse entry to any of the poor who tried to return. (63)

The problem was an old one, but the *Tartuffe*-era solution was novel. As befits the logic of what DeJean calls “the open city” (96-121), secure without the fortifications that Louis XIV would soon replace with an unmilitary “rampart of trees,” expulsion was no longer an option.[[12]](#endnote-12) For there was no more elsewhere in the obsessively mapped and domesticated territory of absolutism: the unwanted would need to be processed by the system, and confinement and reeducation would be the answer to mendicity and fainéantisme.[[13]](#endnote-13) Cléante’s reaction to the Exempt’s *coup de théâtre*—his charitable hope that Tartuffe’s impending prison stay will lead him to “corrig[er] sa vie” (190; 5.7.1953)—makes sense precisely in this context, one in which criminals were no longer detained temporarily while awaiting judgment and physical punishment, but instead, through reformative incarceration itself, were made into productive members of society.

Nothing in the 1669 version keeps the play from continuing to function as it did at the outset—as a critique of religious hypocrisy, or more specifically, as a primer on the proper boundaries between spiritual concerns and what one can metaphorically call civil space. But the possibility that Tartuffe may be a shape-shifting *gueux* layers over this another motif. Civil space is now also an engineered urban terrain, joining private property and public works. This terrain requires its own defenses: again, not fortifications, but the kind of state policing apparatus that in the Exempt’s speech is symbolized by the prince’s all-seeing eye. And needed as well is an institution, the Hôpital Général, capable of fabricating good subjects from bad. The new ending of *Tartuffe* has long provoked a kind of embarrassment one can qualify as dramaturgical: in a moment of plotting impotence, Molière is forced into a last-ditch effort to, as it were, *sauver les meubles*—threatened “jusqu’au moindre ustensile” (183; 5.4.1790), as Monsieur Loyal puts it. I’ve suggested that this particular discomfort doesn’t make much sense, since it is hard to imagine that the impasse and the *rex ex machina* escape were not of a piece, and because at any rate the appearance of the Exempt is prepared by the unusual mention of Orgon’s Fronde-era support of the king. Blushing over the writer’s apparent willingness to curry royal favor, meanwhile, may closer to the mark—although perhaps not quite close enough. For it’s not merely that Molière chooses to sing the prince’s praises, which he does elsewhere and often in his work, including with the admirable flair of *L’impromptu de Versailles* or the “Remerciement au roi.” I would propose that the ending of *Tartuffe* is of a different nature, simply because the “prince,” here, is now less a transcendent ordering principle than another name for the administrative state, drawing its legitimacy from the custodial services it provides *les gens de bien*. So to the extent the ending of the play provokes unease, this may also have to do with the comprehensive vision of society the work proposes—a vision held together by an insistent othering of the social margins.[[14]](#endnote-14)

If one accepts a kind of desacralization of the top—the king as efficient administrator, the king as Big Brother—it also follows that a change has come about at the other, lower end of things: begging has become a social problem with a technocratic solution. Presumably, the 1664 version of the play did not thematize charity as does our version, in which Orgon presents his first contacts with Tartuffe as follows:

Je lui faisais des dons; mais avec modestie,

Il me voulait toujours en rendre une partie.

C’est trop, me disait-il, c’est trop de la moitié,

Je ne mérite pas de vous faire pitié :

Et quand je refusais de le vouloir reprendre,

Aux Pauvres, à mes yeux, il allait le répandre. (111; 1.5.293-98)

Orgon’s alms make sense only in the context of Tartuffe’s new status as *gueux*.[[15]](#endnote-15) Why Molière’s obsessives act the way they do is a nonsensical question, at least when posed psychologically: they are not deep characters, having in their pasts formative experiences, originary traumas, or anything similar.[[16]](#endnote-16) But *ideological* motivations for Orgon’s charity are clearly another matter. It is less that Molière has invented a character who feels guilty over his success—Gaines (202–5) has made this point about Orgon—than that the play itself is anxious about charity and its effects. Foucault detects in the existence of the Hôpital Général a change in the meaning of poverty: “God no longer appeared in a poor man’s rags” (60).

A new form of pathos came into being, which no longer spoke of a glorification of pain, nor of salvation proper both to Charity and to Poverty, but concerned rather the idea of civic duty, and showed the poor to be both a consequence of disorder and an obstacle to order. The aim therefore was no longer to glorify poverty in the act of relieving it, but quite simply to dispose of it altogether. (57)

In this light, alms themselves appear compromised, part of a system of showmanship that Molière, via Cléante’s long speech in act I scene iv, diagnoses as empty. It is not merely that Orgon has chosen the wrong *gueux* as the target of his hospitality (“Moi, qui l’ai reçu gueusant...”). Rather, *Tartuffe* acknowledges poverty in the midst of the riches of New Paris while warning us against this traditional charity, undertaken by individuals in the context of their personal spirituality. The comedy turns poverty into a *problem* whose solution is (again in the words of Foucault) “the belief that virtue can be established by decree and policed by civil authority” (74). The suggestion that Orgon’s behavior is born of guilt over his family’s rapid ride is a good one, but it situates the issue at the level of the diegesis, whereas it’s the play itself that performs both New Paris’s guilty conscience and its absolution by the administrative state.

The absolution, however, has a further consequence: let’s call it the rehabilitation of patriarchy. To be sure, Orgon is the familiar “bad father” of comedy, whose imperious blindness puts the family’s perpetuation (and proper social evolution) at risk. He is, then, the comic character, necessarily played by Molière himself in the work’s contemporary productions. Structurally speaking, it is therefore odd that the play is not called *Orgon ou la dupe*: the title is the spot occupied, normally, by those whose proper socialization has gone off the rails. But along with the title to the house, Tartuffe has taken over the title of the play. Certainly, one can maintain that he deserves the spot because he too is comically blind, despite the fact that he knows he is acting a part. (That blindness might consist, for example, in his misestimation of his acting talent, which fools only Orgon and his mother.) Yet the fact is that Tartuffe’s presence has the effect of taking comedy’s structural pressure off Orgon. For in what other Molière play is the bad father redeemed as Orgon is redeemed? Molière’s patriarchs don’t open their eyes to the error of their ways, they either storm off in humiliation or remain immured in their delirium, oblivious to the fact they’ve been played. One might be excused therefore for thinking that classical comedy, heteronormative as it is, is simultaneously deeply antipatriarchal: its ideal society is a society of equals, symbolized by the mutual desire of the young romantic couple. How unusual, then, to hear Orgon pronounce the words “je vois ma faute” (172; IV, viii, 1567); but also how fitting that this unusual moment of paternal lucidity should occur in the very play that takes the task of social ordering away from comedy itself and gives it to the king. The father is no longer the antisocial other, rendered inoffensive thanks to the ruse of all those who serve the interests of young love. He can and indeed must be recuperated: his sacrificial role is now assumed by a true outsider whose punishment cements a new vision of order in which the king guarantees the rights of the householder. “Fathers all the way down,” one could say.

Of course, for a moment, it does seem that all is lost, in the sudden turn that turns Orgon’s comfortable “Salle basse” (143; 3.2.873), which we might want to anachronistically call his drawing room, into a chamber of horrors. It is commonplace to point out how the plot swerve of 1667—the imminent expulsion of the Orgon family from its own house—seems to come from a register that is not properly comic.[[17]](#endnote-17) That register doesn’t have a name in classical poetics, and while one might take it as an anticipation of the later *drame bourgeois* or the melodrama, it might be worth taking the idea of horror more literally. In classical comedy, the archetypal threat is the father himself; there are no qualms about sidelining him or pulling the wool over his eyes, because the genre aims not at reestablishing some transgenerational affective bond, but at assuring the orderly social advancement of the household via an appropriate marriage. Horror, by contrast, is the genre par excellence of the threatened nuclear family—threatened from the outside by someone who incarnates the appetites and drives that the patriarchal nuclear family represses. The othering of Tartuffe functions also along these lines. This homeless other of the New Paris carries also a sexual energy that is not necessarily easy to laugh off. Jean Serroy (157) has likened him to the figure played by Terrence Stamp in Pier-Paolo Pasolini’s *Theorema* (1968), the guest who comes into a bourgeois Milanese household to awaken the repressed desires of every one of the family’s members.[[18]](#endnote-18) We might think of the Pasolini film as the high-culture auteurist twin to George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968 as well), the film that represents the birth of modern horror. Film critic Robin Wood has famously cast horror as an evolutionary twist on the American family comedies of the 1940s. Whereas as a film such as Vincente Minelli’s *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) manages to contain the “enormous surplus of sexual energy” (Wood 171) created by monogamy and the family, horror—belonging to the moment of feminism and gay liberation—stages the return of that repressed energy through a continual assault on the family unit.

From this perspective *Tartuffe* is an intriguing mix. On the one hand, its rehabilitation of Orgon nudges classical comedy toward the nuclear family—toward the benevolent father of, say, Marivaux’s *Le jeu de l’amour et du hasard* (1730). (In the Marivaux play, Silvia learns that paternal order, which she wrongly mistrusts, is in fact indistinguishable from her own desire.) Here too the nudging seems to be an artifact of the play’s suppression, since it is only with the addition of the Mariane–Valère subplot that Orgon, “*se sentant attendrir*” by his daughter’s pleas, can apostrophize his heart, urging its strength in the face of “la faiblesse humaine” (161; 4.3.1293).[[19]](#endnote-19) The proto-*sensible* vocabulary of *attendrissement* is very rare in Molière’s plays, and it never applies, as in this stage direction, to filial relations. But this movement is accompanied—one might even say generated—by the specter of Tartuffe’s aberrant and indeed profoundly *disturbing* sexuality. One is entitled to wonder if the tendency in many modern productions to play the role of Tartuffe seriously—Gérard Depardieu’s incarnation of the character in his 1984 film version may be the most obvious example—is really a betrayal of Molière’s text. Certainly, the “correct” comic reading of character is well documented by the *Lettre sur la comédie de L’Imposteur*,[[20]](#endnote-20) and if one hews to it, the needle of the viewer’s moral compass need never be deflected by his sexuality, always played for laughs. Yet as the transparently incompetent lover of 1664 morphs into 1669’s master of legal maneuvering, it becomes more difficult to sustain a purely ridiculous, anti-clerical reading of the character. It might be preferable, then, to see in this apostle of “[le] plaisir sans peur” (148; 3.3.1000) a double threat, as the social other of the New Paris is intertwined with a sexual other whose threatening eroticism allows, by its exclusion, the affective family to constitute itself as both necessary and desirable.

His identity blurred over five years of rewrites, the Tartuffe of 1669 is above all a social cipher—part priest, part pauper, part dispossessed nobleman from the provinces, perhaps. My point is certainly not that in 1669 he is “really” a sexually charged beggar, whereas in 1664 he is “really” a comically priapic man of the cloth. Rather, just as Molière’s later text continues to evoke the familiar image of the gluttonous priest—“gros et gras, le teint frais, la bouche vermeille” (108; 1.4.234)—it simultaneously raises a new specter, whose presence in the New Paris of the 1660s could not be more apposite. This is the specter of the dispossessed, who threaten the home in its two senses—as property and as family unit. As a result, classical comedy has had to circle the wagons via the father’s conversion and the prince’s police. Comedies always end on the reestablishment of a desired “natural” order, providing their audience the archetypal satisfaction of heterosexual coupling. This particular comedy provides as well the pleasures of keeping house—the new comfort of property and the patriarchal family preserved.

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1. “Ces Vistes, ces Bals, ces Conversations” (104 ; 1.1.151). Citations from *Tartuffe* are taken from the Forestier edition of Molière’s *Oeuvres*; act, scene, and line follow the page number. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Although the precise contents of the 1664 version had been a subject of speculation starting in the nineteenth century, it was John Cairncross who first advanced the thesis that it consisted roughly of the extent 1669 version’s acts I, III, and IV. Cairncross’s thesis has not been uniformly accepted (see, e.g., McBride), but its logic informs most of the recent historical scholarship on Molière’s texts, most notably Georges Forestier’s Pléiade edition of his works. I would note that even if the interpretation of the play I advance here follows the Cairncross scenario, it could survive—*mutatis mutandi*—should ever the 1664 version be shown to have consisted of acts I to III. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For the argument that the notion of imposture—though not in the socially menacing sense important to me—already must have characterized the original hypocrite, see Dandrey. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For the view that Colbert rather than Louis was the animating spirit behind this period’s absolutist urbanism, see Ranum 335-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This was architecture, DeJean specifies, “designed for the inhabitants of a city rather than to celebrate its civic or religious authorities” (49). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The original Tartuffe’s precise relation to the Church has been much discussed. See Cairncross 36; Rey and Lacouture 93-95; Molière *Oeuvres* ed. Couton 836-38; McBride 179 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See the objections of François Rey (Rey and Lacouture 325). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Already in 1670 the anonymous author of *Lettre satirique sur le Tartuffe* complains that the last act.“tranche le nœud que [Molière] n’a pas su dénouer”; and in his 1669 *Promenade de Saint-Cloud*, Gabriel Guéret also objects, maintaining that “Molière devait garder son Dieu de machine pour une autre fois” (cited in Piot 120) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Guicharnaud (138-39) notes that the allusion to a hisotircal event such as the Fronde in Molière is very rare—the only other examples being from *comédies ballets*, where one may find allustions to the movements of the king. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Orest Ranum sums up the extraordinary portfolio of the new prefect La Reynie: “He was in charge of arresting thieves, murderers, seditious persons, and the insane; of suppressing begging, fortune-telling, counterfeiting, abortion, prostitution, and gambling; and of exercising surveillance over foreigners and spies, and over habitual duelers” (349). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ranum continues, “Public shame played its part, for those interned had to wear special uniforms; intractable prostitutes had their heads shaved.” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In the words of the king himself, as quoted in DeJean 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. On the surveyed grid of Louis XIV’s new “territorial state,” see Mukerji. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For an alternate view of the play’s othering, one that does not see it as a specifically social problem, see Serroy. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Forestier notes the possible link between the final version and a *commedia dell’arte* canvas, “Il basilisco di Berganasso,” which features a merchant who takes on a beggar as his servant when the latter refuses the former’s alms. Eventually, just as in the final version of *Tartuffe*, the merchant ends up donating his house to the beggar, who then drives him out (Molière, *Oeuvres*, ed. Forestier 1384-1385). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The point is stressed repeatedly by Forestier, who urges us not to see Molière as “un précurseur de La Bruyère en quête de ‘vérité psychologique’” (Molière, *Œuvres*, ed. Forestier 1325). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. “La situation est d’une gravité qui n’appartient plus vraiment au genre comique” (Rey and Lacouture 324) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For a recent reading of this film, see Young. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Observing that Mariane and Valère appear almost exclusively in act II, Cairncross (36) hypothesizes that the 1664 version contained a different filial subplot involving Damis. (The earlier Tartuffe being close to if not actually of the Church, marriage to Orgon’s daughter would have made no sense.) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. “La galanterie de Panulphe ne convient pas à sa mortification apparante, et ne fait pas l’effet qu’il prétend” (Molière *Œuvres* ed. Forestier 1194). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)