

Contesting Authority in Molière's *Tartuffe*: The Role of the Pedantic Characters

by
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In an excellent study published in 1969 and reprinted in John Cairncross's 1988 volume, *L'Humanité de Molière*, Phillip Butler examines *Le Tartuffe* in its relationship to the Counter-Reformation movement in France, as a play satirizing the absolute authority which the church accorded to the *directeur de conscience*. His proofs are brilliant; yet he encounters an interesting difficulty about halfway through his argument. Noting that, "Ce qui importe," as Tartuffe arrives on stage, "ce n'est pas qu'il ait choisi [le masque] du directeur, mais le fait qu'il porte un masque. [...] [il] n'est pas le Directeur; il est l'Hypocrite," he suddenly finds himself forced to rejustify his line of inquiry, which seems to have vanished before his very eyes (Butler 55). He rescues it about a page later after some rather fancy argumentative footwork, but the gnawing feeling remains that the validity of his claim may hinge on a rhetorical sleight-of-hand.

Such a problem of shifting focus is understandable enough; the subtitle of the first version of the play is, after all, "L'Imposteur." Yet viewing the extant version more as an attack on hypocrisy than on absolute authority attributes perhaps unwarranted significance to Cléante's famous speech distinguishing "le vrai" and "le faux dévot" by suggesting that it was designed above all to draw attention to the theme of hypocrisy. Such an assumption regarding the intent of this speech is problematic at best, given the relationship of these lines to the different versions of the play and to notions of dramatic justification.

Butler himself asserts that Cléante's lines are "sans aucun doute des additions postérieures" to the missing, original version of the play, doubtless because he is eager to relegate the theme of hypocrisy to the category of a polemic afterthought (Butler 49). He bases this assertion on the 1956 work of John Cairncross, *New Light on Molière*. Cairncross himself is rather less categorical, calling Cléante's speech "an addition, it would seem, to the original text" (Cairncross 43). He bases this assessment both on Michaut's 1925 claim that, "Beaucoup des paroles qu[e Cléante] prononce sont des ripostes évidentes aux accusations des ennemis de Molière," (Michaut 81) and on his own analysis of Cléante's

last line, “Que cela vous soit dit en passant, mon beau-frère,” as “pointless” and therefore evidence of hasty rewriting (Cairncross 43-44).

While the arguments employed by Cléante, which Cairncross labels “laborious tirades,” may seem to him to be plausibly explained as hastily added responses to Molière’s critics, that does not in itself prove beyond a doubt that they were therefore added later in an apologetic intent, in hopes of changing the play’s focus to placate the critics. To judge from the *Lettre sur la comédie de l’Imposteur*, which deals with the second version of the play, these lines were already part of the play by 1667 (Molière, *Œuvres* 1150-53). Even in his “Premier placet,” written after the missing, first version was performed in 1664, Molière admits to having “ôté ce qui pouvait confondre le bien avec le mal” so as to make clearly evident “des traits essentiels qui font reconnaître d’abord un véritable et franc hypocrite” (Molière, *Œuvres* 890). Cairncross suggests that Tartuffe had originally appeared in the unequivocal guise of a cleric, a costume and role which presumably had to be abandoned in the face of heated criticism. What is equally clear from Molière’s assertion is that the theme of hypocrisy existed as early as the original version of the play, perhaps including the distinction Cléante establishes between honest devotion and hypocrisy, although this latter supposition cannot be proved with any certainty. In any case, whether Cléante’s lines existed from the very start or made their way in at the second version, their existence before the final version seems likely.

This raises an interesting question: what was the *raison d’être* of these lines if they were not merely added as a polemic afterthought? If we search for a theatrical justification, we must inevitably begin by laying to rest Cairncross’ accusation of “laboriousness” since a master playwright like Molière, ever conscious of the pace and flow of dialogue, would not have foregone one, perhaps two opportunities to improve on his text, had he felt the need.

Cléante’s apologetic arguments themselves shed some light on the problem. The “faux dévots” are in the first speech likened to the “faux braves,” the “fanfarons” whom one recognizes by their bragging since any guiding virtue of honor is too difficult to ascertain. Such belittling through the use of simile passes to more direct vilification in the second speech by the use of absolute negatives to establish a stark contrast between “vrais” and “faux dévots”:

Et comme je ne vois *nul* genre de héros

Qui soient plus à priser que les parfaits dévots,
Aucune chose au monde et plus noble et plus belle
 Que la sainte ferveur d'un véritable zèle,
 Aussi ne voisje *rien qui* soit plus odieux
 Que le dehors plâtré d'un zèle spécieux [...]

(I. 1. 355-60, emphasis mine)

after which follow a full twenty lines enumerating the extent of the perfidy of the "faux dévots." Subsequently there follows a list of "vrais dévots," "[des] exemples glorieux" of a devotion that is characterized as "humaine" and "traitable" even as it is expressed by negatives as absolute as those used earlier: "Ce titre par *aucun* ne leur est débattu;/ Ce ne sont *point du tout* fanfarons de vertu." (vv. 387-88, emphasis mine)

What such tactics create is a rhetorical construct implying the existence of an absolute, ideal order, exemplified by the "vrais dévots," in contrast to which the "faux dévots" appear, not as pitiable examples of the humanly flawed, but as evidence of a dangerous corruption of the ideal order, which alone is recognized as being truly human and thus desirable. Cléante's apologetics are, therefore, characteristic of such textual strategies as Ronald Paulson has studied in his *Fictions of Satire*. Furthermore, both Cléante's tirades begin in self-defense, countering Orgon's assessment of the import of Cléante's previous words. Self-defense evolves into a more generalized defense, however, and what emerges from Cléante's preambles is a self-portrait that is an apologetic argument in itself. Not only does he distance himself from Orgon's assessments of him, side-stepping the political or social risks associated with the *libertinage* or the intellectual elitism with which he is being taxed; he actually goes on to set himself up as an authority fully able to distinguish truth from error and already bent on making pronouncements based on that authority.

Now satirists since Roman times have presented themselves not only as moralists who denounce existing vices in order to correct society, but as realists who perceive the truth better than others. That 20th-century critics are beginning to question the validity of their claim as an analysis of how satire functions does not devalue the importance of the claim as a central *topos* of satiric literature, an intertextual repetition which serves not only as a set form for use in any satire, but as a basic method of argumentation. In effect, Cléante's arguments constitute the justificatory *topos* of the satirist. As such, they fall into a recognizable, conventionalized pattern of argumentation which draws attention to its rhetorical

nature and thereby loses transparency in its claim to truthfulness. In fact, critics such as Gabriel Conesa have recently shown to what a great extent tirades such as those of Cléante are fashioned according to the principles of classical rhetoric with which Molière's contemporaries were thoroughly familiar (see Conesa 44-50). As a result one might expect a 17th-century audience to be conscious of not only the skill with which Molière uses the form of the *disputatio* in Cléante's speeches, but above all the fact of his doing so.

Orgon, at any rate, certainly does not miss what Cléante is up to. His main function in the dialogue that contains Cléante's two tirades seems to be to point to the form of his brother-in-law's speech. He reacts not only to the condescension with which Cléante treats his failure to distinguish between "l'hypocrisie" and "la dévotion," "le masque" and "le visage," "l'artifice" and "la sincérité," "l'apparence" and "la vérité;" he reacts as well to the enumerations, to the use of the commonplace of the golden mean as a basis for his argument, to the structure of contrasting aphorisms that contributes as much to his claim to authority as to his argument regarding the "vrai" and "faux dévot." When Cléante so strays from interactive dialogue that his return from the rhetorical heights to conversation with Orgon is abrupt enough as to seem almost clumsy (the "Que cela vous soit dit en passant, mon beau-frère" noted by Cairncross), Orgon sees the final in a long series of failings that justify drawing attention to Cléante's true identity, not as the sage moralist of the play, but as its most conceited pedant:

Oui, vous êtes sans doute un docteur qu'on révère;
 Tout le savoir du monde est chez vous retiré;
 Vous êtes le seul sage et le seul éclairé,
 Un oracle, un Caton dans le siècle où nous sommes;
 Et près de vous ce sont des sots que tous les hommes.

(vv. 346-50)

This should not altogether come as a surprise. Roger Hertzell has noted in passing that the doctor of farce and the *Commedia dell'arte* are the probable ancestors to all of Molière's *raisonneur*'s (Hertzell 566). Nor is this mere name calling on the part of Orgon, uttered out of spite at finding himself at an argumentative disadvantage. By treating Cléante's role as that of a pedant who uses his capacity for impressive verbiage to set himself up in this case as the moral authority in the play, Orgon shows every bit as much argumentative acumen as his brother-in-law, for he draws upon the spectator's familiarity with a type character who, as Roger Guichemerre has shown, was extremely popular in plays of the

period 1640-1660 (Guichemerre 156-79). No contemporary could fail to grasp the parallelism thus established between Cléante and the verbose professor whose claims to knowledge, be it specialized or universal, could hide neither his fundamental incompetence nor his ultimate failure to exert any real influence over the course of a play's action. Here was a character whose goal was to impress, for whom knowledge, and more particularly its verbal expression, was power (therefore the more verbiage, the more power), and whose very use of speech made it automatically suspect since it was principally the vehicle of the pedant's own posturing, rather than of any professorial lesson or ostensible form of truth.

In effect, Orgon treats the satiric *topos* as an argument from authority (and therefore as logically unconvincing), significant in relation to Cléante's claim to understanding not so much because it is a "plagiarized" argument, although it is arguably that, but because it derives its force from the familiarity of its use by forebears of note. While the Catos of this world may be admirable, using their arguments in a new context is not enough to make Cléante's claim to authority equal to theirs; nevertheless, it may be enough to convince many a spectator who allows himself to be wooed by Cléante's claims. Hence the importance of Orgon to the scene: Cléante may go on to display his satiric ability in a remarkably constructed sentence 26 lines long; he may end his second tirade with a rhetorical flourish that is at the same time far more adept at effecting the transition back to dialogue than his previous enchaînement. At every step Orgon's gestural response calls attention to the pompousness of Cléante's discourse, and at its end, he ignores its content in order to treat it as nothing but the verbiage of a pedant: "Monsieur mon cher beau-frère, avez-vous tout dit?" (I, 408). And lest any spectator miss the point, Molière brings home Cléante's pedantic incapacity to cease talking. No sooner does he reply "oui" to Orgon's question than he returns with: "De grâce, un mot, mon frère." (v. 409) It would seem that, regardless of the merits of Cléante's rhetoric and in spite of any validity his arguments might possess, Molière's primary goal in the scene was to make of the couple Orgon/Cléante a comic duo. But why?

In trying to resolve this question, it may be helpful to examine how the pedantic scene in which Cléante and Orgon participate relates to the tradition which Molière was attempting to bring to bear. The tried-and-true pedant consultation scene features a protagonist who seeks out a learned pedant in order to find out how he should deal with some problem facing him, only to discover in the end that what the pedant has to offer corresponds neither in content

nor in form to what he is seeking. The scene between Cléante and Orgon takes up this scenario at the tail end, long after Orgon has come to realize that Cléante has no advice that he wishes to hear, but long before Cléante is ready to quit preaching.

The comic tradition of the pedant finds other echoes throughout the play, as well. If one considers the scenes in which Tartuffe himself participates, one cannot fail to notice their structural similarity to the traditional pedant scene, too. In Act III, sc. 2, for example, Dorine comes to consult with Tartuffe regarding the possibility of an interview with her mistress, Elmire, and we witness the beginning of a pedantic encounter. Before she can state her purpose, Tartuffe breaks in with the typical interruption on a tangential subject, but which inevitably shows where the pedant's real interests lie:

TARTUFFE

Que voulez-vous?

DORINE

Vous dire...

TARTUFFE

Ah! mon Dieu, je vous prie,

Avant que de parler prenez-moi ce mouchoir (emphasis mine).

DORINE

Comment?

TARTUFFE

Couvrez ce sein que je ne saurois voir.

(vv. 858-60)

Dorine tries to put the matter to rest, only to provoke a second postponement of the central topic of discussion by Tartuffe: "Mettez dans vos discours un peu de modestie, / Ou je vais sur-lechamp vous quitter la partie." (II. 869-79) One is reminded of Marphurius, one of the pedants in *Le Mariage forcé*, who proclaims: "Seigneur Sganarelle, changez, s'il vous plaît, cette façon de parler," (v) or perhaps of Métaphraste of *Le Dépit amoureux* who threatens to leave as soon as the dialogue takes a turn that he dislikes: "voulez-vous que j'écoute à jamais? / Partageons le parler, au moins, ou je m'en vais." (II. 749-50) A similar structural parallelism exists in the following scene when Elmire arrives to consult Tartuffe about helping to further the marriage between Valère and Mariane. She

only finds the opportunity to state her desire for his aid a mere four lines before the end of the scene, such that no discussion of his role in the matter ever takes place before the arrival of Damis to unmask him. The rest of this justly famous scene is taken up with his rhetorically sophisticated casuistry, which forms a series of obstacles to her statement of purpose. Elmire, more sophisticated than most non-pedants, tries to adapt her efforts to his manner of speech in order to arrive at her point, rather than simply to condemn him for making her task so difficult. Even so, his speeches, which alone in the play rival those of Cléante in length, do finally provoke a mention by Elvire of their rhetorical form and an allusion to her role as listener rather than speaker, when she says: "Je vous écoute dire, et votre rhétorique / En termes assez forts à mon âme s'explique."(vv. 1001-42)

What joins Cléante's pedantic scenes to those of Tartuffe is, of course, Orgon, for Tartuffe's relationship to Orgon is remarkably like that of Cléante. Both men are in the business of dispensing advice to Orgon: Tartuffe as his *directeur de conscience*, Cléante as his would-be *directeur de conscience*. Both argue from authority and to less than thoroughly convincing ends. Cléante claims authority on the basis of reason; Tartuffe speaks in the name of a higher authority (which is probably why he manages to get the better of Cléante in the one scene in which the two pedants actually come head to head (IV.i)). The principal difference between their roles would seem to lie in whether Orgon has yet discovered his distaste for the sort of pronouncements they make.

If the comic functions comparatively, as the *Lettre sur la comédie de l'Imposteur* suggests when it speaks of the comic as being "quelque chose de relatif," a comic author may try to enhance the underlying contrast between reason and unreason by bringing to the attention of his audience parallel manifestations of unreason for comparison. Thus when Molière formulates a comic relationship uniting Cléante and Orgon, he draws attention to Tartuffe and Orgon as a comparable comic team by structural parallel. To be sure, Cléante and Orgon have advanced further in the pedant consultation scenario than have Orgon and Tartuffe. Yet it is this very disparity that offers Molière the power of the comparison, for it permits the spectator to anticipate the pass which Tartuffe and Orgon must inevitably reach. As such, the implication is inescapable: the relation of the *directeur de conscience* to his charge is fundamentally comic: it is based on "disconvenance," to use the terminology of the *Lettre sur la comédie de l'Imposteur*, that is, it is not only inappropriate, it is in contradiction with the exercise of

reason and is thus based on error. When assessed by an act of judgment on the part of the spectator, the very principle of direction as conceived by the Counter-Reformation - the absolute authority of the *directeur de conscience* and the blind submission of his charge - flies in the face of Orgon's most basic duty to open his eyes, consider the facts and judge for himself.

This is not, however, the end of the matter. At the risk of making an anachronistic comparison, one might note that the comic relativity of Molière shares something with the relativity of Einstein, for on closer inspection the parallel courses followed by the two comic couples seem to converge. One might expect their theatrics to intersect at some point since Orgon is a partner to both couples, but what actually seems to occur in the only two scenes in which Orgon and Tartuffe speak to each other on stage before Tartuffe's unmasking (III, vi & vii) involves the convergence of the two pedantic roles as well. After hearing Damis' condemnation of Tartuffe's behavior with Elmire, Orgon asks, "Ce que je viens d'entendre, ô Ciel, est-il croyable?" (v. 1073) Whereupon Tartuffe launches into one of the most remarkable passages of all comic literature, for he contrives to speak the truth unambiguously, yet with the full assurance that Orgon will understand the exact opposite and therefore will rally to his defense:

Oui, mon frère, je suis un méchant, un coupable,
 Un malheureux pécheur, tout plein d'iniquité,
 Le plus grand scélérat qui jamais ait été;
 Chaque instant de ma vie est chargé de souillures;
 Elle n'est qu'un amas de crimes et d'ordures;
 Et je vois que le Ciel, pour ma punition,
 Me veut mortifier en cette occasion.
 De quelque grand forfait qu'on me puisse reprendre,
 Je n'ai garde d'avoir l'orgueil de m'en défendre.
 Croyez ce qu'on vous dit, armez votre courroux,
 Et comme un criminel chassez-moi de chez vous:
 Je ne saurois avoir tant de honte en partage,
 Que je n'en aie encor mérité davantage. (vv. 1074-86)

What Tartuffe creates in this way is a rhetorical patchwork joining the *topoi* common to devotional language to the satiric *topos* already expounded by Cléante. Everyman as a "malheureux pécheur," misfortune as evidence of God's righteous punishment, the necessity to avoid manifestations of pride in order to lead the religious life — all these are commonly recognized *topoi* of Church literature and preaching and help to identify Tartuffe as "un dévot"

in Orgon's eyes. But cleverly strewn throughout these familiar landmarks are other terms more clearly satiric in their exaggeration and their capacity to vilify: "un méchant, un coupable," "le plus grand scélérat qui jamais ait été," whose life is but "un amas de crimes et d'ordures," and of which "chaque instant est chargé de souillures." This is a degree of exaggeration that transcends any ordinary claim to being a "malheureux pécheur" and smacks of the satiric rhetoric of Cléante. Indeed, Tartuffe seems to be taking over Cléante's *persona*, as the satirist, at the point where his vilification of the satiric object reaches its greatest intensity. One might say that the two roles even mesh in the justification Tartuffe proposes for avoiding his own self-defense. What he chooses to call an effort at Christian humility is little more than turning over his defense to his pedantic rival, the satirist whose characteristic speech Orgon is sure to reject, for Tartuffe thereupon invites Orgon to accept the familiar arguments that seek to vilify him: "Croyez ce qu'on vous dit [...]" That Tartuffe argues from authority, an authority of familiar terms, both religious and satiric, that calls as much on the arguments that Orgon has already heard from Cléante as on those provided by religious rhetoric, poses no problem for Orgon in this case: he is still willing to listen to the awe-inspiring speech of Tartuffe-the-pedant and be impressed. However, he can recognize the sound of Cléante's satiric verbiage from afar: he has rejected it before, and he does so again, thus discounting any validity that Tartuffe's satiric words might possess. Falling for Tartuffe's bait, he chases Damis offstage and continues to call after him to further condemn him even after he has disappeared. One is reminded of Sganarelle, who joins with Pancrace in *Le Mariage forcé* to condemn the pedant's offstage attacker who has had the audacity to quarrel with the pedant. In full possession of his pedantic powers, then, and with the assurance that Orgon wants nothing more than to go on listening to his rhetoric, Tartuffe is safe in offering to leave the household to avoid disturbing the family any more. He can even permit himself to press the point, detailing how the others might work to weaken the bond uniting Orgon to Tartuffe; Orgon's response is assured: "Non, mon frère, jamais," "Non, vous demeurerez: il y va de ma vie." (v. 1161, v. 1165) And when Orgon is hidden under the table to overhear the proofs of Tartuffe's advances to Elmire in Act IV, sc 5, his willingness to listen to Tartuffe's impressive rhetoric, rather than react to what should immediately warn any potential mari cocu of impending disaster, makes him wait perilously long before emerging. In the long run, in order for Orgon finally to realize that this pedant must be condemned like any other for having spoken "C'est un homme, entre nous, à mener par le nez; / De tous nos entretiens il

est pour faire gloire, / Et je l'ai mis au point de voir tout sans rien croire." (vv. 1524-26) Whereupon Orgon explodes with understanding: "Voilà, je vous l'avoue, un abominable homme! / Je n'en puis revenir, et tout ceci m'assomme." (vv. 1529-30)

If the revelation of a pedant's verbal faults inevitably signals his waning influence, since his partner will thereafter refuse to abide his speech it does not signal any waning of comic effect. On the contrary, reacting to speech that is deemed unacceptable in some way offers one of the surest means of eliciting laughter from an audience. Yet even the period preceding this revelation is one during which the powerful comic potential inherent in any pedantic encounter can be exploited to the fullest, for while the partner may be oblivious to the unacceptability of the pedant's speech, the spectator is not. Therefore, while a Cléante cast as pedant-already-revealed offers his own share of comic action to the play, he further serves Molière's comic intentions by offering up his role for comparison with that of Tartuffe, thereby helping to reveal the comic nature of the relationship uniting Tartuffe to Orgon and to suggest a comic context in which to assess Tartuffe's actions as *directeur de conscience*. What is more, Molière draws from his *raisonneur's* use of satire the very means of achieving the comic ambiguity that makes Tartuffe's masterpiece of rhetoric so powerful an expression of unreason.

Cléante of the "laborious tirades" clearly serves many theatrical purposes, among which emphasizing the theme of hypocrisy ranks relatively low, since the treatment of him as pedant to a certain extent discredits his argument. If Molière seems quite willing to undercut the unquestioned believability of an argument seemingly made to order for his polemic purposes, it is presumably because for such purposes it was enough to furnish an argument whose internal logic was strong enough to withstand any discredit of its form or its speaker and to which he could easily enough point as evidence of a theme more acceptable to his critics.

To the extent such logic joins with Cléante's rhetorical skill to win to his viewpoint any less-than-astute spectator, giving Cléante the ultimate pedantic triumph of not being "found out," Molière wins doubly: while seeming to affirm the satire of hypocrisy as the focus of the play, he no less provides any astute spectator with the means of detecting such an affirmation as a mere smokescreen and of recognizing that the principle of absolute authority, characteristic of all sorts of pedantic language, makes of the *directeur de con-*

science and of his blindly submissive charge the real focus of the play's satire.

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