

Tartuffe

(1669)

Act I

Madame Pernelle, Orgon's mother, is complaining about the bad example Elmire, Orgon's second wife, sets for her stepchildren, Mariane and Damis. They are all too keen on parties and should instead take as their model Tartuffe, a holy man whom Orgon has taken into his home. But only Orgon and Madame Pernelle are impressed by Tartuffe's holiness; the others suspect him of being a hypocrite, as a conversation between Dorine, Mariane's companion, and Cléante, Elmire's brother, reveals. Orgon returns from a trip in the country and is eager for news of Tartuffe. He does not even listen as Dorine tells him of his wife's illness. Cléante tells him that he is foolish to be so impressed by Tartuffe's showy piety. When Cléante reminds Orgon that he has promised Mariane's hand to Valère, Orgon refuses to discuss the matter.

Act II

When Orgon tells a stunned Mariane she must be prepared to marry Tartuffe, Dorine tries to point out how unsuitable such a match would be. Orgon leaves in a fit of rage and Dorine reproaches Mariane for not standing her ground, since she and Valère love each other. When Valère enters, having heard of the planned marriage, the lovers quarrel, but thanks to Dorine, they soon make up and Mariane vows to marry no one but Valère.

Act III

Damis, who has a violent temper, is enraged after hearing of Orgon's decision regarding Mariane's marriage. When he hears that Elmire is going to intercede with Tartuffe, who has great regard for her, he decides he will listen to the conversation from a hiding place. Tartuffe now enters and immediately criticizes Dorine's low-cut dress as an occasion for sin. He mellows when he hears Elmire wants to speak to him. In the next scene, using religious terms, he declares his love to Elmire. Before she has time to persuade Tartuffe to refuse the proposed marriage, Damis bursts in, soon followed by Orgon. But the latter refuses to listen to his son's accusations and casts him out. There follows what can almost be considered a love scene between the two men. Orgon decides that he will give Tartuffe not only his daughter, but all of his wealth also.

Act IV

Cléante tries to reason with Tartuffe, but in vain. The rest of the family enters: Mariane begs her father not to force her to marry a man she does not love. When Orgon refuses to listen, Elmire offers to show her husband what kind of man his Tartuffe really is. Orgon hides under the table and Elmire and Elmire sets out to "seduce" Tartuffe. On his guard now, the latter demands some tangible proof of her affection. Only in the nick of time does Orgon come out from under the table. He throws Tartuffe out, but as he leaves the latter reminds Orgon that the house is no longer his. Orgon rushes up the stairs to see whether the small casket he has entrusted to Tartuffe is still there.

Act V

Orgon is very worried about the disappearance of the casket which contains compromising papers. Damis returns, threatening to cut off Tartuffe's ears. Just as her son did earlier, Madame Pernelle refuses to believe Tartuffe could do anything evil. A bailiff, inaptly named, Mr. Loyal, informs Orgon that he and his family must leave the house the next day so that Tartuffe can take possession of it. Valère then enters and tells Orgon that he must flee at once as he is to be arrested because of the compromising papers. But there is not time: Tartuffe enters with a captain of the king's guards. However, thanks to the king's justice and magnanimity, the evil Tartuffe, who is guilty of many other crimes, will go to prison and Orgon is forgiven. There only remains for him to go and thank the King and give his permission for Mariane to marry Valère.