Opening Moves, Dialectical Opposites, and Mme Pernelle

by
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*Tartuffe* begins with an ending. Mme Pernelle departs from the Orgon household, commanding her servant: “Allons, Flipote, allons, que d’eux je me délivre.” (1). She does not leave, however, without having the last word, or series of last words, as she shows criticism on every member of her extended family, the “eux” (them) from whom she disdainfully distinguishes herself. Dorine is “impertinente,” Damis a “sot,” Mariane is too “discrète,” (meaning sneaky). Elmire “dépensière,” while, finally, Cléante is sententious.

Her attitude is “têtue et incivile” (Ledoux, préface), but Mme Pernelle is both correct in her assessment, if wrong in her conclusions. Guicharnaud points out that each portrait is an:

Erreur de jugement seulement, puisque le contenu de faits de ses portraits est exact. Cette erreur la conduit à des accusations graves. ...La suite de la pièce mettra chaque personnage dans une situation telle qu’il démentira précisément le jugement particulier que Mme Pernelle a porté sur lui au début du premier acte. (25)

As the initial scene, it performs the important task of introducing the main characters and the principal subject matter to the audience. As we know, this is especially crucial in a comedy, where neither characters nor plot elements are known by the spectators. But the way in which this is achieved in *Tartuffe* is atypical, even extravagant. The conventional opening scene of the time, and also found in Molière’s other plays, has a couple of characters discussing their situation and that of other characters. Arnolphe and Chrysalde expound their differing views on women and marriage in *L’Ecole des femmes*, Philinte and Alceste exchange ideas on social graces and sincerity in *Le Misanthrope*, and Valère and Elise declare their love for each other as *L’Avare*.
begins. Yet a dialectics of opposition operates from the very first line of *Tartuffe*, with a beginning that is an end, or which announces an imminent end, of at least of one particular episode in which a whole stage full of characters is present. It is a quantitative and qualitative switch, with a multitude of voices, and the movement and activity of seven members of the household shown before our eyes. Such crowd scenes are typically reserved for the end of a play.

Another important opposition is found in the irony of the opening scene of *Tartuffe* and the rhetorical strategy required to understand the scene. The household has been thrown into disorder due to Tartuffe’s presence, and we begin to see the extent to which values have been distorted, even inverted. Mme Pernelle is presented as an unsympathetic character through her arrogant manners and harsh criticisms. She was further discredited in the 1669 performances by her outdated clothing and the fact that she was portrayed by Louis Béjart, Molière’s brother-in-law who walked with a limp. On stage, Mme Pernelle was a travesty, both in her cross-dressed portrayal and in her exaggerated, ridiculous expressions. In this first scene, the spectator may already be wary of her words and judgments, and soon realizes that she praises folly and vice, and rebukes those who are reasonable and good. Larry Norman sees her as a satirist who is herself satirized in the play —as was the case of Arnolphe in *L’École des femmes*. From the very beginning of *Tartuffe*, we are presented with an ambiguous or double message, and, as Larry Norman writes, “The audience thus must separate the author’s satire of Mme Pernelle’s bitterness from the character’s own satire of her family; it is a question of intelligently pulling information, and laughter, from both” (172-173). Things have been turned topsy-turvy in the household, which, in Mme Pernelle’s words resembles “la cour du roi Pétaud,” and we can begin to understand characters and situations only when we believe the opposite of what she says. As Jacques Scherer notes, “Molière montre qu’on ne peut attacher ni importance ni valeur aux jugements que prononce dès le début cette vieille dame ridicule” (126).
She can be believed, however, about her intention to depart, for she does leave, after slapping her sleeping servant Flipote into action. Departure is followed by arrival, or rather by the return of the master, as Orgon is spotted on his way home after an absence of two days. The scene with Mme Pernelle may be seen as a prelude to the play, setting the stage, as it were, since the action does not really begin until Orgon is back home. An analysis of the beginning and ending of the play Tartuffe raises many complex issues in a play well suited to the topic.

The text to which we refer is that of the 1669 performances. But this is not where the play begins. First performed in 1664, during the Plaisirs de l’Ile enchantée at Versailles, it was then banned. Presented to a Paris audience August 5, 1667 under the name Panulfe, during the absence of the king, the comedy was again banned. Neither of these earlier texts survives, although what resulted in the author’s attempts to have the bans lifted now form a textual prologue to his work, a Préface and three placets au roi, providing explanatory commentary placed before his work. These documents are unique in the Molière cannon, setting Tartuffe apart from the other plays. The ban was finally lifted in 1669, perhaps due in part to the recent death of Anne d’Autriche, the queen mother, a strong dévote whose pious convictions supported the ban. Much speculation has focused on the possible structure of the earlier versions, and the possibility that much of the beginning of the 1669 text was added in order to make clearer the play’s intent of satirizing only false devotion, and not all devotion. Such additions would have helped make the play more acceptable.

The fact that the comedy begins with Mme Pernelle’s departure, and ends with the king, through his envoy, restoring the house to Orgon is relatively clear. But when we ask where the beginning ends, and the end begins, in other words, where the middle of the play really lies, then matters become less clear. There is movement and change in the play, but it is such that it does not involve development of character or plot so much as a switch from one side to the other, from one extreme to its opposite. Either one believes Tartuffe to be a vrai dévot, or a false one.
Cléante’s long list of analogies in I, v (masque vs. visage, artifice vs. sincérité, apparence vs. vérité, fantôme vs. la personne, fausse monnaie vs. la bonne, etc.) is one of the best indications of this basic, bipolar structure underlying characters and plot in the comedy. Now as a comedy, the play has young lovers (Mariane and Valère) whose union is blocked by the young woman’s father, but the play is more significantly about the hold that Tartuffe has on Orgon, and therefore the whole family. But everything changes immediately and diametrically, from the opening situation, to that of the close, when Orgon comes out from beneath the table. He is disabused as to Tartuffe’s real intents, recognizes the dévot to be false, and (although not stated yet) the obstacle to the Mariane-Valère union is removed. If it had been Orgon in the cabinet in Act III rather than Damis, the play would be one act shorter. All this reveals the minimal aspects of the play’s “middle,” a point Orgon briefly passes as he switches his opinion of Tartuffe from one extreme to the other. For, indeed, there are several layers of beginnings that lead into, and many stages of endings which lead from, a comparatively small nucleus at the heart of the play: the double seduction scenes in Acts III and IV.

In order to determine a beginning, one element involves the protagonist. Yet in this play the role is split between Orgon and Tartuffe. In other Molière comedies the action is clearly begun and starting to develop once the central character is present for a few scenes, whether it is Arnolphe, Alceste, or Harpagon. But Orgon is not on stage as much as the other protagonists. Even when he is present in Acts I and II, he is still not wholly there, his words and actions are deferred, he is the spokesman for his directeur de conscience. We see that the character inversion is complete, the host has been invaded by the parasite, the master has become the servant. Orgon evades his brother-in-law’s questions, threatens his maidservant, intimidates his daughter, as he follows the dictates of, and in a sense in order to please, Tartuffe. Yet all the while Orgon is not completely there, because he is separated from Tartuffe.

Even Molière states, in the Lettre sur l’Imposture, that the first two acts serve as a long exposition, so that when Tartuffe appears
in Act III, there can be no doubt that he is a faux dévot. The long wait is over, and the action can truly begin (the first two acts have shown him to be central to the plot and character interaction), once Tartuffe appears in Act III. We can begin to judge him for ourselves. He barely has a chance to act like a dévot, however, and he is given to extravagant displays of an exaggerated piety. He gives his hair shirt and whip to his servant Laurent, and tells Dorine to show a little less cleavage. For a spiritual man he seems to focus on carnal pain and pleasure, and Dorine rightly comments that he appears quite “tendre à la tentation.” At this point, he is more caricature than character. But primarily Tartuffe enters, quickly moves to his interview with Elmire, and, at that point, shows his true nature as a hypocrite, a faux dévot, mixing the language of piety with that of seduction. There can be no doubt for the audience, which hears and sees the real Tartuffe from the “beginning.” Our opinion does not change, it has no development, and we are ready to proceed to the end of the play.

The departure of Mme Pernelle, the return of Orgon, the unconventionally delayed appearance of Tartuffe, all these can be viewed as beginnings to the play. And if we shift our attention away from the couple Orgon-Tartuffe and consider the love story, quite obscured in this comedy, between Mariane and Valère, is not even mentioned until the end of Act I as Orgon and Cléante exchange opposing views. It does become the focus of Act II, but this act has often been seen as superfluous, a pleasant digression ending in the opposition between the lovers in the dépit amoureux that closes the act. One of the reasons for the multiple beginnings to the play is caused by the multitude of characters, as found in the opening scene, and an exposition that explores the effects of Tartuffe’s presence, and Orgon’s changed behavior, on several of them individually.

The departure of Mme Pernelle, which acts as the first beginning of the play, introduces the audience, as according to contemporary custom, to a situation in medias res, a beginning that is situated at the middle of a story. In so doing, the action can be limited to the unité de temps, the final day of an extraordinary event. We go back to the beginning, or rather before the begin-
ning, as significant incidents that occurred prior to the day represented on stage are presented in discursive allusions to antecedent actions. The beginning of the play’s action (récit) is not the beginning of the story (histoire), as significant incidents that occurred prior to the day represented on stage are presented in discursive allusions to antecedent actions (verbal flashbacks).

In Tartuffe, four significant passages refer to antecedent actions which, as the play progresses, present incidents from further back in the past. At or near the play’s beginning, two of these passages occur. The first, and referring to a most recent past, is found as Orgon returns home in Act I, iv. He alludes to his two day absence without giving a precise description of the nature of his trip. It is plausible to assume that, like many bourgeois of the time, he was visiting or inspecting property in the country. There then follows the well-known scene in which Dorine describes Elmire’s recent fever and illness, which Orgon ignores in favor of hearing news of Tartuffe, who ate, drank and slept to contentment—“le pauvre homme.” Orgon shows from the very beginning that his priorities are flipped topsy-turvey, proving what Cléante had just observed in I, ii that “[Orgon] l’appelle son frère et l’aime dans son âme / Cent fois plus qu’il ne fait mère, fils, fille et femme” (185-186). Rather than being concerned for his wife, who really was sick (truly “une pauvre femme”), he shows a disregard for her and an excessive, nonsensical sollicitude for the hale and hearty Tartuffe.

We are not told the circumstances of the first meeting of Mariane and Valère, but we do hear from Orgon the story how his association with Tartuffe began:

Chaque jour à l’église il venait, d’un air doux,
Tout vis-à-vis de moi se mettre à deux genoux. …
Et, lorsque je sortais, il me devançait vite
Pour m’aller à la porte offrir de l’eau bénite. …
Enfin le ciel chez moi me fit retirer
Et, depuis ce temps-là, tout semble y prospérer.
(I, 5 283-84, 289-290, 299-300)
An ironic description, it reveals far more than the teller realizes, since we see how Tartuffe’s exaggerated gestures mark him as a *faux dévot*, and how it was Tartuffe who insinuated his way into Orgon’s protective care. Impressed with what he sees as piety, Orgon wanted to take this valuable man out of circulation by taking him home.

Near the play’s end the other two allusions to antecedent actions are found. Whereas the first two contribute to a depiction of character, primarily that of Orgon, and interaction (Orgon/Elmire, Orgon/Tartuffe), the last two are crucial to the plot. In 1669, the Fronde (1648-52) pertained more to earlier generation, yet Orgon finds himself compromised by events from that time. In V, I, he considers himself under suspicion, and unable to pursue the restitution of his house, because of papers which his friend Argan, implicated in the Fronde, had left in his safekeeping in a *cassette*. Orgon had foolishly given this *cassette* to Tartuffe, his *directeur de conscience*, who now threatens to use the contents to maintain (by blackmail) his claim on the house, the other gift from Orgon. By this means Orgon considers himself silenced, blocked in his attempt to get justice from the law, which is ultimately the king (we see, of course, that he is wrong in this perception, and the papers hold no threat to him ultimately).

The final antecedent action alluded to in the play occurs at the very end, in the long discourse of the Exempt. We see, as elsewhere, dialectical opposition at work in this scene. The representative of the king arrives supposedly to evict Orgon and his family from their house in order to give it to Tartuffe, while in reality the house is restored to les *bons bourgeois* and the *faux dévot*, unmasked, is led off to prison. As the Exempt explains the miraculous turn-about, the past is brought into the present in a circular movement, and Tartuffe’s repeated crimes have finally caught up with him. The king’s gaze penetrates all (“les yeux se font jour dans les cœurs” 1907), and, in this case, Orgon learns that Tartuffe:

\begin{verbatim}
Venant vous accuser, il s’est trahi lui-même
Et, par un juste trait de l’équité suprême,
S’est découvert au prince un fourbe renommé
Donc sous un autre nom il était informé;
\end{verbatim}
Rather than arrest Tartuffe on the spot, the king shows the extent of his vast powers. Vernet comments that “cette intervention arrive au moment où il n’est plus possible de discerner l’ordre du désordre,” and that for the king “différer la justice, c’est démontrer sa perspicacité exceptionnelle, puisque c’est démontrer que sans son intervention, Tartuffe deviendrait Orgon sans que le monde, hors de la famille ainsi dépossédée, puisse juger de l’imposture.” (261) He is able on the one hand to pardon Orgon’s “offense secrète” of the compromising papers because he remembers Orgon’s supportive “zèle [d’]autrefois” (1939) during that time, and on the other hand, the king allows Tartuffe to think that his scheme succeeded, in order to reveal further the hypocrite’s perfidious actions.

The play’s ending has been considered, of course, as Molière’s praise to Louis XIV, who by 1669 was finally able to lift the ban on the comedy and allow its performance. The creation of this final scene, if not in fact the entire fifth act, has long been viewed as one of the additions in the change from the three act play of 1664, that has not survived, to the five act version of 1669, the play as we know it. The ending is satisfying in that Orgon moves from ignorance to knowledge, from folie to raison, joining the rest of his family (except his mother) in their rejection of Tartuffe. If not exactly character development, there has been a reversal of Orgon’s earlier position. He is, unlike Arnolphe, Alceste or Harpagon, cured of his obsession, or at least his obsessive, blind trust in this one man. He seems all too ready to switch from credulity to cynicism, rather than find a middle position of justly ascertaining a person’s worth. In response to Orgon’s equally foolish plan to not trust a single dévot, “je renonce à tous les gens de biens” (1604), Cléante exclaims “toujours d’un excès vous vous jetez dans l’autre” (1610). In this particular case of Tartuffe, Orgon has finally seen the light, but he cannot move from particulars to universals, or rather he takes Tartuffe’s behavior as typical of all dévots, true and false. But in this case, with Tartuffe discredited
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in Orgon’s new opinion, Mariane and Valère’s can eventually wed, as the comedy concludes with the father’s promise: “Et par un doux hymen couronner en Valère / La flamme d’un amant généreux et sincère” (1961-1962). The artificial ending to the play (nothing new for Molière) in the ancient theatrical tradition of the deus ex machina, or, in this case, rex ex machina, was nonetheless effective in providing a satisfactory conclusion to the plot, a restoration of the house to its rightful owner, and an acknowledgment of the king’s beneficial powers for both Orgon and Molière. Although more recently some critics have seen (quite rightly, it seems) the final passage in praise of Louis in a more ironic or sinister light, as a monarch able and intent to “surveiller et punir” his subjects, the praise operates, or is meant to operate, on a literal level at least, as genuine. Perhaps L’Exempt is a naive narrator, like Orgon relating his first encounter with Tartuffe, who tells something more, or differently, than intended.

From beginning to end, the play moves from “la cour du roi Pétaud” to the court of Louis XIV, from Mme Pernelle leaving the house, to the entire family being able to remain at home. Mme Pernelle, on stage only in Acts I and V, is a character of beginnings and endings (as is also Cléante). She is indeed a most unusual character, and requires some further attention. It is as an exception that we see the mother of the authoritative father, the obsédé in a Molière comedy, for we certainly never see the mothers of Arnolphe, Harpagon or Alceste. In Tartuffe we have a great number of characters, with doublings and repetitions substituting for development of character or plot. Mme Pernelle’s presence has been observed as revealing a kind of “telle mère, tel fils” explanation of Orgon’s comic vice of gullibility. Her blind faith in Tartuffe also poses a greater threat to the household than if Orgon alone believed in him, since she is by extension a figure of the authority that is supposed to lead the family. It is also extremely important that, in Act V, after Orgon has understood Tartuffe’s identity as a faux dévot, that he is unable to convince his mother. As Dorine states, “Juste retour, monsieur, des choses d’ici-bas; / Vous ne vouliez point croire, et l’on ne vous croit pas” (V, iii, 1695-1696). It is only when words give way to actions, and Monsieur Loyal comes to order the family from its home that she
finally realizes Tartuffe’s true intents, exclaiming “Je suis toute éboudie, et je tombe des nues” (V, v 1814). This is the counter-part, the corrective, to all of her remonstrations of the first scene.

Positioned as she is at the opening of the play, as a theoretical authority figure with no actual authority, Mme Pernelle stands in sharp contrast to the figure, the image of the king at the comedy’s close. If praise is due to him for having brought order to chaos, and for having restored possessions to those who were duped and manipulated (by the barest of legal chicanery) out of them (the king transcends the law since he is the Law), then in this play which has its structured on so many dialectical opposites, it seems that Mme Pernelle is to blame as much as the king is praiseworthy. And, given the other structuring and thematic element of doubling, we see in Mme Pernelle, mother of an authority figure (the father), the possibility of another reading, or ascription, of her character, that other mother who was instrumental in the banning of Tartuffe, the mother of the king, Anne d’Autriche. On the same subtextual level, a level of multiple, ambiguous readings, that we find the praise of Louis XIV providing a glimpse of something more sinister, so we raise the possibility that at the play’s outset there is portrayed a grotesque rendition, a kind of medieval farcical Mère Sote, of a woman not-unlike the queen mother, perhaps if only as an inside joke to the comedians.

It was primarily the secret Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, founded by the duc de Ventadour in 1629, that was instrumental in the interdiction of the play, an action approved or carried out by the président de Lamoignon (the 1667 version), Hardouin de Péréfixe, archbishop of Paris, and other notable men. Yet Anne d’Autriche was one of the strongest supporters of the dévots, and her death in January 1666 was a blow to them. It has been observed that, in 1664, the king, who at first enjoyed the comedy immensely, did not want to contradict his ailing mother “Louis XIV ne voulait pas heurter sa mère qu’il savait très malade” (Ros-sat-Mignot 14). Molière’s critics at the time even went so far as to impute Anne’s death to her violent reaction to his plays: “le sieur de Rochemont prétend, dans ses Observations sur le Festin de Pierre, que l’auteur faisait mourir la reine-mère par le chagrin
que lui causaient des œuvres impies.” While the death of the queen mother did not lead immediately to the lifting of the ban on the play, which occurred some three years later, it represents the removal of one of the most powerful opponents to the play who exerted influence on the king.

Among other factors, the play also needed some revisions, such as changing Tartuffe from a character who, in the beginning (1664) wore an ecclesiastical collar, to a lay *directeur de conscience* in 1669. This change allowed him to be promised in marriage to Orgon’s daughter, and the entire second act was probably added to increase this dimension of the play. It also seems possible that the first scene may have been added, that a sufficiently distorted caricature of Anne d’Autriche take shape in the form of a woman of a contemporary age, but whose bourgeois origins would distance her far from the Louvre.

**Works Cited or Consulted**


