



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 3, Episode 8

Tartuffe: Censor? I Hardly Know Her

Hosts: Rose Herold, Ella Pellegrino, and Julia Sommer

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A note on content: This episode includes discussions of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

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Episode Transcript

Julia: Hello one and all, and welcome to today’s episode of Writ in the Margins “Censor? I Hardly Even Know Her”! Today we’re investigating censorship surrounding the play *Tartuffe*, written by the French playwright Molière in the mid-17th century. I’m Julia!

Rose: I’m Rose,—

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Ella: And I'm Ella!

Julia: And we're so excited to tell you about this play. *Tartuffe* is a farce, which means that it is an over-the-top comedy which constantly toes the line between comedy and tragedy. Tartuffe, also known as the Hypocrite, has fooled Orgon into believing that he is a good, pious man. After Orgon invites Tartuffe to stay with him at his house, hijinks ensue: Tartuffe steals the family fortune, flirts with Orgon's wife, and is overall not a great guy.

Ella: Tartuffe feigns piety, putting on an act as an extremely religious man. This representation of religion, even as a ruse, caused some controversy and - in combination with the play's racy ending - prompted the beginning of the play's long history of censorship, but what is censorship?

Rose: Wait, Tartuffe was censored?! I didn't know that!

Julia: Neither do a lot of people, my guy. Why don't you read us a definition of censorship to get us started?

Rose: All right, let me just pull one up here— Okay; Merriam-Webster defines censorship as “examining in order to suppress or delete anything considered objectionable.”

Ella: That's cool, I can see how that ties into the history of *Tartuffe* and the political situation in France.

Julia: I'm sorry, for those of us who don't research this stuff in our free time, what political situation?

Ella: King Louis XIV, caught between Jansenist political pressures and violent, homegrown fanatics, censored Molière's incendiary *Tartuffe* after its premier at the inaugural Versailles festival in 1664.

Rose: Woaah!

Julia: What was wrong with the original *Tartuffe* that made people so mad, though?

Ella: The initial, condensed *Tartuffe*, which was written in prose, ended with the titular priestly poser successfully seducing Elmire and ousting Orgon from social prominence.

Rose: Ooh yeah. That would've pissed off the *dévots*, a group of overzealous Catholic fanatics. I just looked this up. Totally didn't do tons of research on this several weeks ago. This group, “convinced [the King] of the need for a ban on *Tartuffe*” and Schismatic Jansenists also threatened Louis' claim to an absolute monarchy. Péréfixe repeatedly pressured Louis to revoke Molière's license to perform the play until he “finished” it, aka created a “more acceptable” ending. Eventually, Louis listened, and created a ban.

Ella: Did Molière take the ban lying down?!

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Rose: NO! And he wasn't without his friends in the Church, either! He petitioned the king "repeatedly on the matter for as long as the ban remained in place," and Archbishop Chigi from Italy liked the play so much he arranged for Molière to perform a private reading of it for him and several of his legates.

Ella: So, was Molière ever able to get the play "legalized" again?

Julia: Yes, but I'll be telling you more about that later!

Rose: It's worth mentioning, though, that the public LOVED the play, and even though we aren't sure exactly how many people were in attendance at the various performances, we do know a bit about the original staging and why it was considered worthy of censorship.

Ella: Ooh, do tell! (*loud tea slurp*)

Rose: So, Act 4 Scene 5, y'know, *the best part*, when Orgon hides under the table and Elmire tricks Tartuffe into coming on to her so hubby'll see how much of a creep he is?

Ella/Julia: (*Remembering*) Yeah!

Rose: Well, candles aren't called for in the text, but we know from production history they were used in almost every early production in this scene. The table in question is almost always represented in engravings from the time as a long table with a cloth over it and two candles on either end, which would've looked to French Catholics like an in-home altar, which many people had at the time. Tartuffe, in his clerical garb, behind this table, would've definitely given French Catholics Mass *déjà vu!*

Ella: *Déjà vu?!*

Julia: Ooh la la!

Ella: **laughs Frenchly and twirls imaginary mustache**

Rose: However, considering what happens next, a personating priest attempting to seduce a married woman on, to all intents and purposes, this "actual altar," this scene carried some uncomfortable salacity, and basically teetered on profane.

Julia: Wow. That's more about the table scene than I ever thought it'd be possible to know.

Ella: What about the text itself? Was there anything in it that warranted censoring?

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Julia: Oh I'm so glad you asked. Here's a short reading from the 4, scene 5 of the play, in which Tartuffe attempts to seduce Orgon's wife. You know, good church-y things! Rosemary will be reading for Elmire, Orgon's wife, and Ella will read for Tartuffe. For some context, Elmire is attempting to elicit Tartuffe's horrible behavior to prove it to Orgon, who is hiding under the table.

TARTUFFE

I shan't quite trust your fond opinion of me
Until the feelings you've expressed so sweetly
Are demonstrated somewhat more concretely,

ELMIRE

(she coughs, to warn her husband).

Why be in such a hurry? Must my heart
Exhaust its bounty at the very start?

TARTUFFE

We trust no promised bliss till we receive it;
Not till a joy is ours can we believe it.
I, who so little merit your esteem,
Can't credit this fulfillment of my dream,
And shan't believe it, Madam, until I savor
Some palpable assurance of your favor.

ELMIRE

My, how tyrannical your love can be.
And how it flusters and perplexes me!
How furiously you take one's heart in hand,
And make your every wish a fierce command!
Come, must you hound and harry me to death?

TARTUFFE

Well, if you look with favor upon my love,
Why, then, begrudge me some clear proof thereof?

ELMIRE

But how can I consent without offense
To Heaven, toward which you feel such reverence?

TARTUFFE

If Heaven is all that holds you back, don't worry.
I can remove that hindrance in a hurry.
Nothing of that sort need obstruct our path.

ELMIRE

Must one not be afraid of Heaven's wrath?

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TARTUFFE

Madam, forget such fears, and be my pupil,
And I shall teach you how to conquer scruple.
Some joys, it's true, are wrong in Heaven's eyes
Yet Heaven is not averse to compromise.

Ella: Wow, no wonder the church wasn't a fan of it.

Rose: And just think, this is the tame version!

Julia: Yep, it's pretty obvious why the catholics weren't very into this play. In order to save face and prevent this rhetoric from spreading, the church put out some pretty intense messaging: after the first version of the play premiered, the archbishop of Paris threatened that anyone who interacted with the play would be excommunicated. And things didn't go much better with the second version, either; it got a single performance before being shut down. The version we have today is Molière's third try.

Ella: It's so messed up how so few people got to see the earlier versions!

Julia: True, although even though public performances of the play were suppressed, elite members of society put on secretive private showings amongst themselves. The content was considered far too radical for public consumption, but the elite have always and will always do whatever they want, apparently.

Rose: Hm.

Ella: Hm.

Julia: Hm, indeed.

Rose: So, quick question, do we know what sorts of things Molière changed from the earlier versions of the play?

Julia: Well, it's hard to tell throughout most of the play because the earlier versions don't survive, but the ending has a pretty obvious change in it. See, the problem Molière kept running into is that no matter what happens, Tartuffe is just way smarter than Orgon. So Molière had to get creative and introduce an entirely new character: King Louis XIV.

Ella: Never heard of him.

Julia: All you really need to know about him in this context is that he was the king of France while Molière was writing the play.

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Rose: So he just... put the current king into it? Was that allowed?

Julia: Well... unclear, but believe me when I say that Molière included him in the most positive, perhaps even sickly sweet light. Here's an excerpt from the final scene of the play, where it is revealed that the King has ordered the arrest of Tartuffe. Rosemary will be the Officer, and Ella remains Tartuffified.

TARTUFFE

To prison? This can't be true!

OFFICER

I owe an explanation, but not to you. *[to ORGON]*

Sir, all is well; rest easy, and be grateful.

We serve a Prince to whom all sham is hateful,

A Prince who sees into our inmost hearts,

And can't be fooled by any trickster's arts.

His royal soul, though generous and human,

Views all things with discernment and acumen;

His sovereign reason is not lightly swayed,

And all his judgments are discreetly weighed.

He honors righteous men of every kind,

And yet his zeal for virtue is not blind.

Nor does his love of piety numb his wits

And make him tolerant of hypocrites.

'Twas hardly likely that this man could cozen

A King who's foiled such liars by the dozen.

Julia: For those of you who might have missed it, Molière did a complete king-ex-machina and made King Louis the savior of the play.

Ella: I don't know how anyone *could* have missed it! Molière was pretty on the nose about it.

Rose: Yeah, well, I feel like that's the only real way the play can end in a way which doesn't let Tartuffe win. If he's always going to outsmart and overpower the family, then taking it to the extreme and making the King solve it all is at least practical if not over-the-top.

Julia: And what's so interesting about it is how it actually speaks to the structure of the rest of the play, too. There are so many instances in this play where characters stage scenes themselves in attempts to solve the various problems they face. Due to the nature of farce, which this play definitely is, it's easy for these theatrical conventions to just become another part of the world. What Louis' entrance does is it recenters the theatricality as just that: theatrical.

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Ella: Oh, so you're saying that by making the end of the play metatheatrcial, Molière is sort of giving the middle finger to the censor by pointing out how dumb it is to get so worked up about a play?

Julia: I mean, pretty much! Including the King basically points to the censor and says, "Fine, you deal with it. Clearly I can't fix it, so take care of Tartuffe yourself." If *Tartuffe* was going to keep getting censored in the real world, Molière decided that Tartuffe would have to be censored in the play itself.

Rose: Okay, but, in the end isn't this the outcome the characters wanted? They want Tartuffe to get out of their house and out of their lives, and the King's intrusion gives them that. Why does it matter if it's the King at all?

Julia: That's a totally fair point, Rosemary. My immediate answer to that is that it just isn't as exciting of an ending to see everything smoothed over by a higher power who cannot be questioned. Given the chaos of the rest of the play, it leaves much to be desired.

Ella: It also feels like this ending isn't really earned at all. The king isn't really making a happy ending, but instead subverting a bad one.

Julia: I totally agree. His entrance into the play is as obnoxious as his and the Church's intrusions into the arts. If anything, the fact that we learn that the King knew from the first about Tartuffe's hypocrisy implicates him in the drama which has previously unfolded. Rather than the benevolent overlord looking out for his supporters, he is at risk of coming across as a manipulative puppet master.

Rose: Yeah, that all makes a ton of sense. I just have one more question though: what does all of this give us when it comes to actually producing the play? Many countries in the world today don't have kings, and so how does knowing all of this help us in understanding the play today?

Ella: Ooh, me, pick me! (*As if she is raising her hand to be called on*)

Julia: Ella, you don't have to raise your hand, it's just the three of us.

Ella: I'm just excited to get into using this stuff in modern performance! Sue me! Considering the question on contemporary relevance, I think there's something to be said for how an understanding of the controversies surrounding the early performance history of *Tartuffe* can provide useful historical context inside of the rehearsal room.

Julia: Right, but in this imaginary rehearsal process, how is any of that eventually going to be legible to the audience?

Rose: Sometimes directors or dramaturgs include a note in the program about the work that went into the production. Something like that could let the audience in on what goes on behind the scenes.

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Julia: Sure, but... does anybody actually read the program?

Rose: I do.

Ella: We're in grad school. I don't think we count.

Julia: We're all nerds, we'd throw off the data.

Ella: Putting program notes to the side, although the history itself may not be entirely legible without one, I think that this background knowledge could still be valuable in terms of empowering directors and performers to make informed choices surrounding their performance.

Julia: Even if an audience doesn't necessarily know exactly why a certain performance choice was made, they might still appreciate choices that were actually prompted by historical context if these choices engage with *Tartuffe* in a unique way.

Rose: I can see how knowing about the play's history of censorship might even lead a production team to make choices that provide social commentary on not only the central themes of the play, but on the subject of censorship itself.

Ella: That seems to be an emerging trend. Twenty-first century theatremakers engaging with *Tartuffe*'s history of censorship as its own metatheatrical theme often make bold departures from any standard versions of the text, opting instead to reinterpret the narrative and venture into the world of adaptation.

Julia: Ooh, have there been any particularly interesting ones recently?

Ella: I'm glad you asked. In 2018, Playwright Christopher Hampton decided to set the story of *Tartuffe* in California. His version, directed by Gerald Garutti, depicts Orgon as a wealthy film producer from France who finds his life thrown into chaos by Tartuffe, "a radical American evangelist" (Gans).

Julia: It sounds like by setting *Tartuffe* in this context, Hampton emphasizes how the play's themes of religious hypocrisy are relevant to today's world

Ella: Exactly. He also used the backdrop of the film industry in American to provides specific commentary on how the wide-ranging issue of sexual harassment has made headlines in recent years for its particular prevalence in Hollywood.

Rose: Do you know what made him want to adapt *Tartuffe* in the first place?

Julia: Craving French food that day?

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Ella: Hampton had previously developed a new translation of the play and kept it in its standard setting of seventeenth century France. Mark Lawson’s interview with Hampton delves into how he drew on the play’s history of censorship for inspiration and specifically set out for his new Americanized adaptation to be faithful to Molière’s work in tone, if not in time and place.

Julia: What did he make of the 1669 rewritten and monarch-approved ending with the notable passage praising King Louis XIV?

Ella: The interview offers Hampton’s perspective in his own words - quote, “Molière was fantastically subversive. The speech is so over the top that I think it was written tongue in cheek” unquote.

Rose: Oh, so, he agrees with the idea we talked about already that Molière possibly wrote this speech as a not-so-covert mockery of the king.

Julia: Imagine being like “Oh? You don’t like my play and I legally can’t have it performed the way I wrote it? Here’s a speech about how you’re the (sarcastic) BEST KING EVER”.

Rose: (sarcastic) Oh, I just LOVE the KING.

Ella: Sticking with this theory, Hampton ends his *Tartuffe* by satirically singing the praises of his chosen analog.

Julia: But you said it was set in California. We don’t have a king in America.

Ella: Oh, Hampton pulls no punches with his choice of king equivalent. In Lawson’s interview, Hampton reveals just who is the butt of this joke: quote, “When you think about who would be the equivalent deus ex machina in modern America, it has to be Trump. So what happens at the end of the play is that an envoy from the White House arrives” unquote. The envoy informs Orgon that his problems with Tartuffe shall be resolved by quote “a great president, whom no impostor’s cunning can mislead, who’s followed this whole incident on Twitter” unquote.

Julia: That’s a lot of sarcastic praise.

Ella: I told you he wasn’t pulling his punches. Hampton’s adaptation uses the history of *Tartuffe*’s censorship to imagine what Molière might have really been implying in his cleaner version - and Hampton follows suit, using the final scene to tell former President and more recent mugshot model Donald Trump just where he can stick it.

Rose: That adaptation is truly designed for a post-2016 America. I’m curious how other rewrites of *Tartuffe* might work with a broader scale of time in mind.

Julia: Anything taking us backwards?

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Ella: Surprisingly, yes! Drawing upon Molière's possible intentions and the issues of censorship also inspired Georges Forestier's collaboration with Isabelle Grellet on a reworking of *Tartuffe* that takes its cues from all the way before the 1669 rewrite.

Rose: It sounds like they created an imagined version of the uncensored version.

Ella: This version is, as Steven Suskin writes, quote “a fanciful reconstruction of what [the authors] theorizes the play might have been” unquote.

Julia: Has this version ever been staged? It could be fascinating to see a group try to recreate not only the uncensored script, but also the original performance that got this play in some much trouble in the first place.

Ella: Ivo van Hove directed this version in 2022. We just missed it!

Julia: Bummer.

Rose: Wait a minute, if this was intended to recreate Molière's first staged version of *Tartuffe*, that means there's no reason for it to end with the king-ex-machina. It hasn't been censored yet. What happens in this imagined recreated version instead?

Ella: Oh, get ready for this one. The final scene of this *Tartuffe* features no speeches in praise of any politicians, instead the dialogue reveals that Elmire is pregnant, Tartuffe is the father, and there might be something new and saucy going on with Orgon and Dorine (Suskin).

Julia: That's a bit of a doozy.

Rose: Did they add in anything else? Given that this was meant to be the “uncensored” version brought to life again, I assume they must've thrown in some things before the ending that you might imagine a king would want to censor.

Ella: Steven Suskin's write-up notes the presence of quote “one case of full nudity on display” unquote. He doesn't specify who.

Julia: I just hope it was a character in the play and not a random audience member.

Ella: I do too.

Rose: Wow. If you think about it, an imagined script of the original 1664 text of *Tartuffe* is inextricably linked to the play's history of censorship. That kind of project couldn't exist for any play that's never been censored in the first place.

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Ella: While both of these potentially provocative stagings engage with that history of censorship, our listeners might raise questions about the current relevance of censorship in seventeenth century France. After all, if both of these versions exist and have been performed in the recent past without any officials cracking down on them, what does this controversy mean anymore?

Julia: Even if the controversy surrounding *Tartuffe* is less of a heated debate today, our listeners should know that censorship on a broader scale is still relevant.

Ella: It's true. While I did not find any reports of *Tartuffe* appearing on the banned and challenged books lists appearing at school board meetings and public libraries across America, the ongoing issue of book banning has grown over the past few years. In a September 2023 article for NPR, Ayana Archie wrote that at that time quote "There [had] been attempts to censor more than 1,900 library book titles so far in 2023" unquote. Plays are certainly not exempt from these restrictions.

Rose: In September 2022, Wentzville School District in Missouri banned a graphic novel adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (PEN).

Julia: In November 2022, Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia banned August Wilson's *Fences* from classrooms. (PEN). For a little context, that's less than a three hour drive from where we're sitting.

Ella: Censorship is unfortunately still a pervasive issue in the twenty-first century. Engaging with the history of censorship of a play like Molière's *Tartuffe* has value in the rehearsal room as it may lend itself to a broader conversation on dramatic censorship as a widespread issue.

Julia: Clearly censorship is still a problem faced today, and this play can be a powerful tool in commenting upon and challenging it.

Ella: It definitely is! To be clear, though, it isn't vital that audiences and playmakers know these things in order to do the play, but learning more about the play's production history can help clarify the storytelling, and provide avenues for making it speak to our present day.

Rose: Thank you for spending the past 20 minutes with us! I'm Rosemary.

Ella: I'm Ella.

Julia: And I'm still Julia! Thanks again for listening to "Censor? I Hardly Know Her".

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