

1989

# Le Misanthrope and Tartuffe: Two Critiques of Verbal Portraiture

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## Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. (1989). *Le Misanthrope and Tartuffe: Two critiques of verbal portraiture*. *Rivista di letterature moderne e comparate*, 42, 137-152.

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LE MISANTHROPE AND TARTUFFE:  
TWO CRITIQUES OF VERBAL PORTRAITURE

Portraiture is a deeply rooted and characteristic feature of seventeenth-century France. Verbal portraits abound in the literature of the period. By the time Molière wrote *Le Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* (1664-1669), the «gallant» portrait had already known a great vogue, first with Mlle de Scudéry's *Grand Cyrus* (1649-53) and *Clélie* (1654-61), and then in the salons of the nobility and the bourgeoisie, as reflected in the *Divers Portraits* (1659) and the *Recueil de Portraits et Eloges* (1659). Adaptations of the verbal portrait would later appear in memoirs, letters, sermons, novels, and «caractères», remaining an important force in literature to the end of the century.

Portraits appear in the theater of the period as well, despite certain potential obstacles to their employment (e.g., lack of verisimilitude, interruption of onstage action). They appear throughout Molière's theater, but are particularly prominent in *Le Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*. These two plays, by their emphasis on the act of portraiture, illustrate the vogue of the portrait in seventeenth-century society and raise the issue of the role of the portrait-form in drama<sup>1</sup>. We shall see that Molière also exploits the prominence of portrait-telling to question assumptions behind the form itself. In both plays portraiture is linked to failure: Célimène's abuse of portraits leads to her exposure, and the multiple portraits of Tartuffe fail to unmask him. Such failures ultimately raise the question of whether or not the portrait is as accurate or as powerful a tool as the characters, and perhaps the audience, would assume.

Whether in a social context or in a play, portraits are a curious form. After all, what are they, really? At base they are an activity of definition. Philippe Hamon compares a portrait to a dictionary: in both cases one begins with a name, and seeks a definition<sup>2</sup>. Portraiture is an attempt to fix and immobilize an individual by supplying a definition that is atemporal and immutable. The claims to objectivity underlying the verbal portrait are particularly strong in seventeenth-century France. The classical *episteme*, as elucidated by Michel Foucault, sets out the world in terms of systems of identities

and differences. Portraiture resembles the other taxonomic undertakings of the period (e.g., zoology): the individual is classified according to identities and differences of certain physical and moral traits considered to be pertinent. The supposed objectivity of such an undertaking is buttressed by the fact that language, the vehicle for these portraits, is viewed as neutral, transparent, and capable of faithful representation<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, underlying the objectivity of verbal representation is the presupposition that each individual possesses a stable, immutable essence which the portrait can reflect. While certain problems pertaining to the objectivity of portraiture were commonly raised (i.e., the self-portrait, the difficulty of capturing extreme beauty in words), it is clear that the portrait enjoyed a firm foundation during the period.

Molière creates a powerful critique of portraiture in *Le Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, implicitly questioning several of the assumptions upon which such description is based. Whereas the form of portraiture assumes the objectivity of the narrator, Molière demonstrates the limitations of perception and the force of context. The adequacy of the portrait becomes problematic as we see that the individual described risks being dehumanized by the portrait and reduced to stasis. Finally, as we shall see, the transparency of language itself is placed in doubt.

Drama is an ideal form in which to question the adequacy of verbal portraiture: its problems are enacted onstage where there is a full representation not merely of the portrait, but of the narrator, the object of the portrait, and perhaps most importantly, the context of its telling. The three are closely linked onstage and yield a more complex understanding of the process and results of portraiture than would be possible in another medium.

The three elements of narrator, object, and context permit the playwright a scope for variations in emphasis. To contrast *Le Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* in this light is to reveal an important difference in focus between the two plays. *Le Misanthrope* focuses on the teller of portraits and the social context of their telling, and *Tartuffe* on the character described. Célimène and Tartuffe may both act as mirrors (Célimène by offering unflattering images of her suitors' rivals, and Tartuffe by reflecting and legitimizing Orgon's desires), but they do so from opposite ends of the narrative spectrum, the describer and the described. In *Le Misanthrope* Célimène controls and seeks to exploit the activity of portraiture, while Tar-

tuffe is the object of the other characters' attempts to use portraits in order to expose and defeat him. Célimène is never the object of a portrait, while Tartuffe is the focus of remarkably sustained description. Yet despite this contrast, a common concern with and criticism of the act of portrait-telling pervades the two plays.

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*Le Misanthrope* contains nineteen portraits<sup>4</sup>, an enormous number when one considers that, aside from this play and *Tartuffe*, no other of Molière's plays has more than six. The portraits in *Le Misanthrope* are unusual, not only in their number, but also in their function. Generally in theater, and specifically in Molière's theater, portraits function to introduce a character before he or she arrives onstage. Sganarelle, for example, describes Dom Juan for both Gusman's and the audience's benefit (*Dom Juan*, I, i); in a similar fashion, Angélique presents Cléante (*Le Malade imaginaire*, I, iv), and Cléante describes Mariane (*L'Avare*, I, ii). However, in *Le Misanthrope* character introduction is secondary (only two of the nineteen portraits have this function: Alceste describes Clitandre, II, i, 475-88, and Célimène depicts Arsinoé, III, iii, 854-72). Rather, the portraits in this play often describe characters who do not appear at all (ten portraits). Molière further alters the traditional role of portrait-telling by creating one dominant portraitist in his dramatic universe. Of the nineteen portraits in *Le Misanthrope*, Célimène tells sixteen. The cumulative effect of Célimène's dominance and the lack of reliance on portrait-telling as a dramaturgical device (that is, for the introduction of characters) is to make the portraitist, and not the object of the portrait, the focus of attention. One of the consequences of this technique, as W.D. Howarth has noted, is that portraits do not interrupt the action of the play, but rather are part of that action<sup>5</sup>. The portrait scene (II, iv), in which most of the portraits of non-appearing characters are told, is itself a significant event in the dramatic action. Portrait-telling thus constitutes a thematic force in the play: a major activity of the salon and the source of the heroine's ultimate disgrace.

For Célimène, portrait-telling is both a social activity and a means of reigning over her salon. Her portraits are not confidences, but a form of entertainment for her guests: she becomes the center of attention through her talents as a portraitist. Consider the fa-

mous «galerie de portraits» (II, iv). Each of Célimène's eight portraits in this scene is a cruel attack on its object. The portrait becomes a clever means of reductionism in which the object is generally rendered inanimate. Béliise's «silence stupide» is a main feature of her description; not only does she not converse during a social call, but, having overstayed her welcome, she makes no move to leave. Célimène compares her to a «pièce de bois» (II, iv, 604-16). Cléon is compared to his table, and found to be a less interesting dish than those he offers his guests to eat (625-30). Others are reduced to a single act, «pester» (Adraste, 618-22), or an epitaph, «le mystérieux» (Timante, 586-94). These portraits meet with approval from Célimène's audience. Both René Fromilhague and Nathan Gross discuss the delight of the guests at hearing potential rivals ridiculed; in the reduction of others they perceive their own glorification.

The scene has a ritual quality: the victims are seemingly sacrificed by the high priestess with the active collusion of the «spectators». Each of the objects of portraiture is introduced by one of the guests. In the first two examples (Cléonte and Damon), Clitandre and Arcaste (respectively) spend as long presenting the victims as Célimène devotes to tearing them apart (four lines each). It is as though Célimène were a kind of «machine-à-portraits» which required warming up or encouragement. In the following four portraits a line or less, mentioning the individual's name and perhaps one characteristic, suffices to incite Célimène to produce what are generally longer descriptions. The final two examples (Cléon and Damis) suggest that she has become more reluctant or coy, requiring two questions or comments to begin a portrait. Throughout, Célimène is careful never to present herself as the source of any judgment of others; rather, she relies heavily on pronouns such as «on» and an impersonal «vous». Nevertheless, she is hardly a pawn of ceremony; her delight at being the center of attention, of performing for her friends, is evident.

Célimène exercises power as the teller of portraits. She determines the point of view from which others are evaluated. By telling portraits, she sets herself apart and above the objects of her portraiture, allowing her auditors to share her superiority by their approbation. While her judgments are unremittingly harsh and at times border on caricature, her conclusions are rarely contested. In fact the only disagreement she encounters is from the individuals who are themselves objects of her portraits (i.e., Alceste, Arsinoé, and

the full cast of suitors in the last scene); everyone else tacitly or explicitly agrees with her. Her powers of evaluation are validated in the second act of the play when Alceste objects to her portrait-telling. She dismisses him with an unflattering portrait, characterizing him as a habitual contradictor. Her judgment is immediately validated by Philinte who continues the portrait:

Mais il est véritable aussi que votre esprit  
Se gendarme toujours contre tout ce qu'on dit,  
Et que, par un chagrin que lui-même il avoue,  
Il ne saurait souffrir qu'on blâme, ni qu'on loue.

(II, iv, 683-86)<sup>7</sup>

While one might object that Philinte always agrees in polite company, here his first movement is toward Alceste («votre») and thus likely to be sincere, while the second two lines are more for show, shifting Alceste to the third person and displaying his own verbal talents through the use of antithesis. Philinte's agreement with Célimène validates her portrait, and with it, the general accuracy of her evaluation of individuals.

Célimène's ability to unmask through telling portraits bears a certain resemblance to Alceste's fervent desire for honesty. Similarly, the general approval of her portraits seems to support a claim to objective truth in the portrait-form itself. As soon becomes clear, however, the social context of the salon and not a scientific spirit are responsible for these appearances. While truth is Alceste's goal, it is only a means for Célimène to indulge her taste for success in society. And Célimène's success as a portraitist is predicated not merely on her objectivity and her wit, but also on the observance of the unwritten rules governing the telling of portraits. When her thirst for power and control over her guests leads her to violate these rules, she rapidly falls from grace.

What are these rules? Célimène's portraits are not those of Mlle de Montpensier's salon; flattery of the object has completely given way to *médisance*. Therefore the possibilities for public airing are radically different, and predicated on the absence of the object. Célimène's portraits could not be published in a collection such as the *Divers portraits* or even circulated in written form as was frequently the case in the salons of the *précieux*. Although not exactly secret (Célimène relishes a large audience), the portraits of this salon must remain slippery, ephemeral, deniable, much like the assurances of

love that Célimène hands to her suitors. They are spoken and thus do not leave an incriminating trace. While in the worlds of Mlle de Scudéry and Mlle de Montpensier it was a sign of status to be included as the object of a portrait, in Célimène's salon there is a shift from object to audience. Portraits are told to only a select group of people, and to be included in that group connotes social privilege.

Thus the basic rule of salon behavior in the universe of the play is that one must praise the individuals present and blame the absent<sup>8</sup>. In terms of portraiture this means that critical portraits of individuals present are not permitted. Célimène, however, enjoying the admiration that her caustic wit elicits from her audience during the portrait scene, oversteps her bounds. When Alceste plays the kill-joy with his criticism of her portraits, Célimène cannot resist the urge to caricature him as she has just caricatured eight others who are not present. Her audience (with the exception of Alceste, of course) gives her almost as much approbation for this portraits as for the others, so that Célimène sees no danger in what she has done. But it is precisely such negligence of the rules of absence and presence that will lead to the breakdown of her salon.

In the third act, Célimène again uses a portrait to attack a character who is onstage. Arsinoé provokes Célimène with thinly veiled criticism of her conduct, and the latter reacts with a cruel description of her interlocutor (III, iv, 924-44), flimsily excused by the pretense that the portrait was originally told by a third party. Célimène is so secure in her powers, both sexual and verbal, that she again neither acknowledges nor attempts to repair her breach of salon rules. Arsinoé's anger will, however, influence the dénouement: she helps to orchestrate the final confrontation where almost all of the supposedly absent are present. Acaste and Clitandre read aloud Célimène's written portraits of themselves and the other suitors, all but one present onstage. Jacques Guicharnaud states that «avant tout, le crime de Célimène, c'est d'avoir décrit les 'présents' comme elle avait décrit les 'absents'»<sup>9</sup>. In fact, her crime is more complex: not only does she not recognize the dangers of telling portraits of those present, but she has written portraits in her correspondence. And it is the trace left by these written words that is used against her. Approval of her portraits turns to anger as we see that truth and wit matter less than flattery of those present. In the end,

the physical presence of the described robs the describer of her power.

Beyond demonstrating the force of context, Molière questions the principle of objectivity upon which the portrait-form is based. Resemblance is a fundamental tenet of portraiture throughout the seventeenth century; a portrait is successful only insofar as it is understood to represent its object faithfully. While this resemblance is to a certain degree conventional in nature (one need only read the portraits in the *Divers portraits* to be convinced), it is nonetheless central to portraiture.

A serious problem of objectivity is presented by the self-portrait, wherein the teller and the object are one and the same. Although a case can be made for privileged knowledge and insight, the unreliability of the teller is so patent that the objectivity of the resulting portrait is highly questionable<sup>10</sup>. The distorting effect of the self-portrait is obvious in the case of the sole such example in *Le Misanthrope*, that of Acaste (III, i, 781-804). The little marquis describes himself in extremely flattering, self-serving terms, and the spectator is hardly tempted to believe his description. It is clear that Acaste, like any self-portraitist, is unreliable.

Célimène's objectivity as a portraitist is suspect as well. We have discussed at length her goals in telling portraits. While she employs truth and penetrating perception, the imbalance of the resulting descriptions — she mentions virtually no positive qualities — is such that resemblance hinges on one or two traits. Although all portraiture is by its very nature reductive, here the reduction is so extreme that resemblance would seem to have been sacrificed for the sake of amusing her listeners.

Célimène goes even further in weakening the claims of portraiture to resemblance, and in her excesses Molière seems to undermine the very foundations of the portrait-form. Let us consider the last of Célimène's series of eight portraits of individuals not present:

Philinte:

On fait assez de cas de son oncle Damis:  
Qu'en dites-vous, Madame?

Célimène:

Il est de mes amis.

Philinte:

Je le trouve honnête homme, et d'un air assez sage.

Célimène:

Oui; mais il veut avoir trop d'esprit, dont j'enrage;  
Il est guindé sans cesse; et dans tous ses propos,

On voit qu'il se travaille à dire de bons mots.  
 Depuis que dans la tête il s'est mis d'être habile,  
 Rien ne touche son goût, tant il est difficile;  
 Il veut voir des défauts à tout ce qu'on écrit,  
 Et pense que louer n'est pas d'un bel esprit.  
 Que c'est être savant que trouver à redire,  
 Qu'il n'appartient qu'aux sots d'admirer et de rire,  
 Il se met au-dessus de tous les autres gens;  
 Aux conversations même il trouve à reprendre:  
 Ce sont propos trop bas pour y daigner descendre;  
 Et les bras croisés, du haut de son esprit  
 Il regarde en pitié tout ce que chacun dit.

(II, 5, 631-48)

This is the longest and arguably the most mean-spirited portrait of the entire group. Nathan Gross notes that the individual described, Damis, resembles Alceste. He also suggests that this resemblance accounts for drawing Alceste into the scene<sup>11</sup>: it is only after this portrait that Alceste intervenes. Célimène may well have been seeking to provoke her suitor, but what concerns us is that she is trying to make a portrait do double duty and describe Alceste as well as Damis. Resemblance in portraiture involves the relationship between one individual and a text. Just as each individual is believed to be different from all others, portraits too must be univocal and discrete. Once again Célimène has broken the rules. Furthermore, while there are a number of features that are easily identified with Alceste («il est difficile», «Il se met au-dessus de tous les autres gens», etc.), there are at least as many that could describe Célimène («il se travaille à dire de bons mots», «Et pense que louer n'est pas d'un bel esprit», «Il se met au-dessus de tous les autres gens»). The teller, overstepping her bounds by trying to make her portrait account for two objects, seems to have lost control; her discourse splits open and she falls in as well. The resulting portrait refers to the three characters simultaneously: Damis, Alceste, and Célimène. The entire system of portraiture has implicitly broken down: there is no stability in the object; without a one-to-one resemblance, there can be no truth in portraiture. Language is no longer the instrument of transparent resemblance, but an easily shifting vehicle that calls into question the objective description that the seventeenth-century portrait promises.

In *Tartuffe* the nature of the portraits is radically different. No longer do we find the talented and habitual teller of portraits; here, the focus has shifted from an almost single teller to an almost single object, Tartuffe. Virtually all of the characters contribute to his portrait. In *Le Misanthrope*, the portraits were clearly defined and set apart from the surrounding discourse. In *Tartuffe*, even the form has changed: the portraits are fragmented, broken up, scattered; they mix with narrative and dialogue. The entire play is suffused with elements of portraiture<sup>12</sup>.

As in *Le Misanthrope*, portraiture is not limited to first-act introductions of characters who have yet to appear onstage. While it is certainly true that the abundance of portraiture in the first two acts serves to prepare Tartuffe's late entrance (III, ii), his arrival does not mark an end to the descriptions. Portraits are a constant throughout: Tartuffe is described in twenty-eight of the thirty-one scenes of the play. Generally in theater, character is revealed primarily through action. In *Tartuffe*, action and description alternate: the audience comes to «know» Tartuffe as much from what is said about him as from what he does.

Why this abundance of portraits of Tartuffe? As we have seen, a portrait is an attempt at definition, a fixing and a permanent identification of an individual. While ascribing a certain importance, and often complexity, to its object, the portrait is also a gesture of control. The teller seeks to pin down and immobilize the object. When there is a multiplication of portraits, such as we find in *Tartuffe*, one concludes that there is some difficulty arriving at a satisfactory definition. Indeed, Tartuffe is a problematic object for portraiture: a hypocrite, he is not what he appears to be. Orgon's family is divided into two groups: those who accept Tartuffe's appearance as reality (Orgon and Mme Pernelle), and those who recognize the hypocrisy and perceive unsavory characteristics behind the façade of piety (Elmire, Dorine, Damis, Cléante, and Mariane). The attempt by the second group to impose its basic definition of Tartuffe on the first group constitutes the action of the play<sup>13</sup>. In other words, the play presents and enacts the activity of defining Tartuffe, of arriving at a definition on which everyone can agree.

Should the search for a definition of Tartuffe seem too limited a characterization of the action of the play, a more acceptable formulation might be: the attempt to expel Tartuffe from the house and family of Orgon. Defining and expelling Tartuffe are not op-

posed to one another, but may be linked by stating that the action of the play is to unmask Tartuffe<sup>14</sup>. The portraits all have this goal, as does Elmire's far more successful ruse of hiding Orgon under the table. If we focus on Orgon rather than Tartuffe, a secondary action suggests itself: that Orgon learn how to judge others and arrive at accurate portraits. This subject will be discussed in greater detail later; for the moment it suffices to note that when first challenged to present a portrait of Tartuffe, all that Orgon can offer is «C'est un homme ... qui ... ah! ... Un homme ... un homme enfin» (I, v, 272). At the end of the play, not only does he explicitly revise his portrait of Tartuffe, but the play ends with Orgon's succinct and accurate one-line portrait of Valère: «un amant généreux et sincère» (V, vii, 1962). Whatever formulation of the play's action is acceptable, it is clear that multiple portraits enjoy an important role and that Tartuffe is their chief object.

Disagreements about Tartuffe's character have extended to critical interpretations. Jacques Scherer entitles a chapter of his book on the play: «Tartuffe, qui êtes-vous?»; Antoine Adam asks: «Machiavel ou Rasputine? Ou bien Machiavel *et* Rasputine, figure mal cohérente où Molière a mêlé des traits incompatibles?»; and Marcel Gutwirth calls Tartuffe a «man of mystery»<sup>15</sup>. The spectator's confusion or uncertainty concerning Tartuffe comes not from a lack of information, as may be said to be the case with Célimène, but rather from an overabundance of not always consistent information in the form of fragmented portraits. These portraits are frequently multi-voiced, subsumed in a dialogue between two or more characters (for example, between Orgon and Dorine, II, ii, 486-504). Narrative is at times combined with description for the purpose of characterization (Dorine's relation of how Tartuffe has fared in Orgon's absence, I, iv, 233-56; how Orgon met Tartuffe (I, v, 283-310). Tartuffe himself contributes to the diversity and multiplicity of portraits of which he is the object. Aside from some brief self-descriptive comments offered as part of his attempt to seduce Elmire (III, iii), Tartuffe intervenes at length in the argument between Orgon and Damis about Tartuffe (III, vi). The result is a highly unusual configuration of three characters, all of whom are arguing over the true identity of one of the three. In fact Tartuffe has the most to say. What he says, however, is problematic:

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,

(III, vi, 1074-78)

Tartuffe gives a fairly accurate portrait of himself, but his use of hyperbole (and doubtless gesture and expression as well) insures that Orgon will not believe him. He also lacks specificity in his self-portrait. Instead of saying, «je suis coupable», he generalizes his crime: «je suis ... un coupable». He refuses to say whether he is a «criminel»; he only suggests that he should be treated «comme un criminel» (II, vi, 1084). Clearly it is not Tartuffe who will facilitate a «true» portrait of himself.

Elmire proposes an alternative to portraiture in order to unmask Tartuffe; rather than attempting to convince Orgon with words he refuses to believe, she invents the scene of seduction with her husband hidden under the table. Unlike the many portraits, her effort is successful. However, rather than counteracting the danger that Tartuffe thereafter represents, Orgon devotes most of his attention to fabricating a totally revised portrait of his former idol. At the beginning of the play, Orgon has no distance vis-à-vis Tartuffe, and thus is incapable of describing him («c'est ... un homme enfin»). Now Orgon sees him more clearly. From IV, vi until the end of the play, almost every scene contains fragments of Orgon's new portrait of Tartuffe.

Orgon's portrait, however, is neither different from nor better than those of Dorine, Damis, Elmire, or Cléant. While they all have the distance from Tartuffe necessary to see that he is a scoundrel and a hypocrite, they are finally not objective: the portraitists all have too much at stake to be able to view Tartuffe dispassionately. And while Orgon hones his skills as a portraitist, the portrait itself remains largely ineffectual: his description of Tartuffe does not convince his own mother. While we must not forget the extreme obduracy of both Orgon and Mme Pernelle, this failure is nonetheless significant.

The failure of portraiture in *Tartuffe* has another source as well: disorder. Not only do portraits, unlike narrative, not have any inherent order<sup>16</sup>, but they appear in the play in a disorganized fashion: they come from all sides (multiple tellers), and go off in all directions (multiple addressees). Elmire's charade, with its clear narrative thrust and its single agent, constitutes a far more organized



attack, and succeeds<sup>17</sup>. The disorganization of the portrait, both in its structure and in its distribution within the play, contributes to its lack of success as a tool of persuasion.

The dénouement brings an important shift: the family is rescued from ruin and the portrait is saved from dismal failure. A voice of authority arrives, the *exempt*, speaking for the king. He not only arrests Tartuffe in the name of Louis XIV, he also tells portraits. The first is of the king himself:

Nous vivons sous un Prince ennemi de la fraude,  
Un Prince dont les yeux se font jour dans les cœurs,  
Et que ne peut tromper tout l'art des imposteurs.  
D'un fin discernement sa grande âme pourvue  
Sur les choses toujours jette une droite vue;  
Chez elle jamais rien ne surprend trop d'accès,  
Et sa ferme raison ne tombe en nul excès.  
Il donne aux gens de bien une gloire immortelle;  
Mais sans aveuglement il fait briller ce zèle,  
Et l'amour pour les vrais ne ferme point son cœur  
A tout ce que les faux doivent donner d'horreur.

(V, vii, 1906-16)

This portrait has two primary functions: it explains and justifies the king's intervention in the affairs of a bourgeois subject, and second, it presents a model of portraiture, of objectivity, of certainty<sup>18</sup>. This is the king; the *exempt's* portrait is a transparent and adequate resemblance.

It is also a prelude to and a guarantor of the *exempt's* portrait of Tartuffe that follows (V, vii, 1919-28). Unlike the form of the portrait of Louis XIV (a unified set-piece), this «official» portrait of Tartuffe is fragmented, as are so many in this play<sup>19</sup>. The judgment is absolutely clear: Tartuffe is a «fourbe» and a «traître». The contrast with the portrait of the king is strong: as Gossman points out, Tartuffe is the false idol and Louis XIV the true one<sup>20</sup>. Already convinced of Tartuffe's perfidy, Orgon does not need to be swayed by the *exempt*; he does respond, however, to the authority of the discourse. Orgon almost immediately adopts the *exempt's* term, «traître», to describe Tartuffe (V, vii, 1947).

In one sense, the portrait is a complete success in this play. Orgon has learned about portraiture: he has gone from a total inability to recognize the important traits in another individual to a succinct and accurate portrait of his future son-in-law. The mysterious nature of Tartuffe is also, in large measure, cleared up: the *ex-*

*empt's* portrait carries with it the authority and perfection of the king, and thus is able to provide the final and definitive portrait of the hypocrite. And if this is not enough to demonstrate the adequacy of portraiture, Molière himself contributes to Tartuffe's portrait. Didascalía (stage directions) are not uncommon in Molière's theater, but they generally deal with gesture and movement; those that delineate character are extremely rare. Yet in the middle of Tartuffe's attempted seduction of Elmire, Molière interrupts to point out, «c'est un scélérat qui parle» (IV, v).

Yet the portraits in this play pose problems as well. Much as the spectator may feel uneasy about the king's intervention in the dénouement, so too we may perceive the *exempt's* (king's) and Molière's portraits of Tartuffe as both artificial and radical. Simple bourgeois portraiture will not suffice to expose Tartuffe, just as exposing Tartuffe will not suffice to defeat him; extreme measures are required. In order for the portrait to succeed as an adequate, reliable tool, the intervention of the king and the author are needed. Even these portraits may not satisfy everyone (literary scholars persist in finding Tartuffe mysterious) because they do not address the complexities of Tartuffe's motivation and personality. Finally, portraits persuade no one, neither Orgon nor Mme Pernelle; in this dramatic universe effective knowledge concerning another person must come through a different channel.

Of the relatively few portraits in *Tartuffe* devoted to other characters, the longest and most detailed is that of the king quoted above. In almost all other cases, not only are the descriptions brief, but the object is onstage at the time. In *Le Misanthrope*, the onstage presence of the object constitutes a dangerous breach of the laws governing the salon portrait. The rules which govern portraiture in Célimène's world, however, do not obtain in *Tartuffe*<sup>21</sup>. Nonetheless, it is a deviation from the norms of portraiture for the object to be present onstage during the telling. The object's presence calls the objectivity of the portrait strongly into question. At the same time, this situation creates dramatic tension: description becomes action, and even dialogue, in the onstage interchange between characters.

The most well-known example of portraits directed at their object is Mme Pernelle's series of five character sketches in the opening lines of the play (I, i, 13-38). As each of the family members begins to speak, she lashes out at them with an unflattering descrip-



tion. The notion of portraits is thus built strongly into *Tartuffe* from the very beginning. These particular portraits are polemical as well as introductory; with them Mme Pernelle attacks the five members of Orgon's household much as they will later use portraits to attack Tartuffe. The primary difference is that Tartuffe is generally described in his absence. Mme Pernelle's highly dramatic use of portraits also indicates several of the themes and problems attached to portraiture. The complex relationship between teller, object, and addressee is immediately brought to the fore; coming upon this opening scene with very little preparation, the spectator must judge the objectivity of the teller and thus of the portraits. Several indicators that the portraits are not perfectly objective are present: the note of conflict, the presence of the objects of the portraits, and especially the abundance of references that the teller makes to herself. Her fundamental misapprehension of the character of her son's family foreshadows the problem Orgon will have judging and thus describing others. While Pernelle's descriptions certainly contain a grain of truth, they are primarily an indication of, as Guicharnaud puts it, «les inversions du sens de la réalité et la confusion entre être et paraître qui constituent la dimension principale du sujet de la pièce»<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, all of the portraits of Tartuffe are fundamentally attempts to separate the «être» and «paraître» of his character and his behavior.

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*Le Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* present portraits very differently. While neither mocks the genre of the literary portrait (as does *Les Précieuses ridicules*), both underline the basic failure of portraiture as a means of representation. In *Le Misanthrope*, portraits ostensibly exist to entertain; in *Tartuffe* they are supposed to persuade. In both plays they multiply out of control and yet come no closer to meeting their goals: they are always inadequate, incomplete. Language is an imperfect medium, the narrators are not objective, and the situation of portraiture shapes the portrait at least as much as the object. Thus, in two of his most popular plays, Molière has written powerful critiques of verbal portraiture, while at the same time exploring and broadening the dramaturgical possibilities of the portrait genre.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that *L'Ecole des femmes* is one of the few plays in Molière's theater not to contain any portraits, while *Le Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* contain no monologues. It is as though the over-abundance of one sort of set-piece precludes the other, or more simply, that the absence of monologues in conjunction with the presence of enigmatic characters pushes portraits to the forefront. In fact monologues and portraits may perform some of the same functions (certainly the revealing of character) and thus may render the other redundant.

<sup>2</sup> *Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage*, «Littérature», 6 (1972), pp. 86-110. Rpt. in *Poétique du récit*, Paris, Seuil, 1977, p. 175, n. 51. See also A. Kibédi Varga, *Synonymie et antithèse*, «Poétique», 4 (1973), p. 308.

<sup>3</sup> «La vocation profonde du langage classique a toujours été de faire 'tableau' que ce soit comme discours naturel, recueil de la vérité, description des choses, corpus de connaissances exactes, ou dictionnaire encyclopédique». Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p. 322.

<sup>4</sup> For the time being, the definition of a portrait will be the description of an individual, containing either or both exterior and interior traits, and extending for at least several lines.

<sup>5</sup> *Portrait and Self-Portrait in French Classical Drama*, «Newsletter of the Society for Seventeenth-Century French Studies», 2 (1980), p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> René Fromilhague, «*Le Misanthrope*», *galerie des miroirs*, «Cahiers de littérature du dix-septième siècle», 2 (1980), p. 157; Nathan Gross, *From Gesture to Idea: Esthetics and Ethics in Molière's Comedy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 93. Lionel Gossman makes the point that while all enjoy the humiliation of the victims, the nagging question lingers of what Célimène might say about those present in their absence, thereby adding a dimension of general uneasiness to the scene; *Men and Masks: A Study of Molière*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963, pp. 87-88.

<sup>7</sup> All references to Molière's theater are taken from his *Oeuvres complètes*, Ed. Georges Couton, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, 2 Vols.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Mesnard, «*Le Misanthrope*», *mise en question de l'art de plaire*, «Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France», 72 (1972), p. 869.

<sup>9</sup> Molière, *une aventure théâtrale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 472.

<sup>10</sup> See Jean Rousset for a discussion of the problems of self-portraiture; *Narcisse romancier*, Paris, Corti, 1973, pp. 42-45.

<sup>11</sup> Gross 94.

<sup>12</sup> In discussing *Tartuffe*, the terms portrait and portraiture will be used to identify both the set-pieces such as we found in *Le Misanthrope*, and also the fragments of portraits (i.e., a line or two) that are so common in *Tartuffe*. For example, the first portrait of Tartuffe is multi-voiced: Dorine, Damis, and Mme Pernelle all describe the man within the context of a heated dialogue (I, i).

<sup>13</sup> Kibédi Varga notes that description may take on the characteristics of argumentation (308).

<sup>14</sup> This is a position taken by both W.G. Moore, *Molière, A New Criticism*, London, Clarendon Press, 1949, p. 45; and Marcel Gutwirth, *Tartuffe and the Mysteries*, «PMLA», 92 (1977), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Scherer, *Structures de Tartuffe*, Paris, SEDES, 1974, p. 74; Antoine Adam, *Histoire de la littérature française du dix-septième siècle*, Paris, Editions Mondiales, 1962-68, vol. 3, p. 315; Gutwirth 33.

<sup>16</sup> Portraits are not organized by chronology and have no necessary end-points. Hamon states that description is «un effort pour résister à la lignarité contraignante du texte, au post hoc ergo propter hoc des algorithmes narratifs, au dynamisme orienté»; *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, Paris, Hachette, 1981, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Tobin explains Elmire's success in terms of its theatrical nature: she presents not another «lecture de Tartuffe», but a situation in which he makes himself seen and heard, and thus reveals himself; «*Tartuffe*», *texte sacré*, in *Dramaturgies. Langages dramatiques. Mélanges pour Jacques Scherer*, Paris, Nizet, 1986, p. 379.

<sup>18</sup> Tobin states that Louis XIV guarantees the authenticity of the spoken word without ever saying anything himself, 380.

<sup>19</sup> Does the nature of Tartuffe's character have anything to do with the fragmentation of the portraits in which he is described? While the possibility of a link

is tantalizing, it is also the case that the description of others, Orgon and Damis in particular, have a similar form.

<sup>20</sup> Gossman 43-44.

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that the action of both plays reaches a climax because of a presence where there was supposed to be absence. In *Le Misanthrope*, Célimène is finally denounced because the objects of her portraits are onstage; in *Tartuffe*, the man is expelled, not because of portraits, but because Orgon is present (under the table) when he is supposed to be absent.

<sup>22</sup> Guicharnaud 26.