

ELMIRE AND THE EROTICS OF THE MÉNAGE À TROIS IN MOLIÈRE'S *TARTUFFE*

At first sight, the character of Elmire in Molière's *Tartuffe* appears to have much to commend her, and modern critics and theatergoers generally warm to her: she is attractive, stylish, independent, smart, resourceful, in many ways a modern woman.¹ Even older, more patriarchally inclined critics have generally been slow to condemn her,² yet I would like to argue that rather than being a female exemplar who helps resolve the *Tartuffe* situation as is often stated, her function within the play is in many ways a disruptive one; she is a catalyst to the disintegration of the Orgon household and in practice contributes little toward the resolution of a plot that teeters on the brink of a tragic outcome. Here, I would like to restore some of the shock value to the character of Elmire, a shock value that has become lost over the centuries, overshadowed in particular by the even greater shock value of the provocative religious dimension to the play. Yet it is surely no coincidence that the anonymous author of the *Lettre sur la comédie de L'Imposteur* (1667) defends the play against the twin accusations of attacking true religion and of promoting adultery. But the second of these continues to be overlooked in favor of the first. I shall insist on the extraordinary daring of Elmire's plan to trap Tartuffe in the famous "table scene" of which I shall propose a new reading. In particular, I would like to investigate the complex erotic overtones in the Elmire-Orgon-Tartuffe triangle,³ and to suggest that Elmire would be very

1. Calder's assessment of Elmire as a "paragon of womanhood" (167) is being passed on to generations of undergraduate students. Similarly, though less influentially, Thierry paints an exaggeratedly flattering portrait of Elmire as morally upstanding but also capable, confident, and competent. Coquelin is more measured in his evaluation: "Elmire n'a pas d'amour, sans doute, son mari pourrait être son père, mais elle a pour lui une amitié loyale, pleine de ménagements et de bonne grâce; point de passion, point de froideur non plus" (54). Veuillot's initial verdict is similar to Coquelin's: "Elmire est téméraire, elle a d'étranges pratiques, mais c'est pour parvenir à la punition du crime" (181).

2. Veuillot becomes more critical of Elmire when he calls her "une indolente bourgeoise, qui attend un homme de cour" (204).

3. Scherer remarks that because of Tartuffe's desire for Elmire, "il y a dans *Tartuffe* un contenu érotique exceptionnel pour l'époque" (242). He is right, but this eroticism, as I hope to show, extends far beyond Tartuffe's lust.

well-equipped to embark on an extramarital affair with a suitor whom she found more attractive than Tartuffe.

We must begin by asking the question who and what is Elmire? She is something of an anomaly in Molière's theater. There are famously few mothers or mother-figures in Molière;⁴ and Elmire is one of only two noteworthy stepmothers in his corpus, the other being Béline in *Le Malade imaginaire*, who is straightforwardly and stereotypically grasping. Elmire is not the wicked stepmother in any obvious sense, neither is she the sensible bourgeois wife or the henpecking domineering wife, still less a shrew. Nor is Elmire a *femme savante* or a *précieuse* (indeed she explicitly rejects the *précieux* ethic). Rather, she is a *mondaine* who enjoys an unusual degree of latitude from her husband thanks, in large part, to Orgon's displaced obsession with Tartuffe. It is worth noting that Orgon does not expect Elmire to become a *dévoté*; rather, his extreme and blinkered form of devotion has taught him not to pay much attention to his wife.⁵ And this seems to suit her perfectly, as it brings with it many attendant freedoms, including relative independence of action and the ability to have and keep secrets.

One of the keys to Elmire's enigmatic character may lie with how her role was rewritten in the years between the original 1664 version of the play and the 1669 version that has made its way down to us.⁶ It is thought that the original may have been closer to a typical tale of cuckoldry, i.e., that the Tartuffe figure and the Elmire figure did indeed—or were at the very least sorely tempted to—have a sexual relationship.⁷ Michaut attributes Elmire's ambiguity precisely to the changes that the play underwent: “il y a eu deux Elmire, l'Elmire coupable, ou au moins tentée, du premier *Tartuffe*, l'Elmire irréprochable du dernier” (124). But even in the final version, she is far from irreproachable, for, as Eustis comments: “having started out seduced (or willing to be) in the original version, she remains somewhat brazen in the midst of her

4. For an interesting and provocative reading of this phenomenon, see Riggs.

5. “Il m'enseigne à n'avoir affection pour rien; / De toutes amitiés il détache mon âme; / Et je verrais mourir Frère, Enfants, Mère, et Femme, / Que je m'en soucierais autant que de cela” (1.5.276–79). All quotations from the play are from Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Forestier and others, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

6. For further, detailed discussion regarding the different versions of the play, see in particular the work of John Cairncross and Robert McBride.

7. Michaut suggests that the original version of the play may have ended with “je veux qu'à toute heure avec elle on vous voie,” an ending reminiscent of that of *George Dandin* (81). Eustis, too, draws a parallel between Tartuffe and Dandin, noting that the original Elmire “cannot [. . .] have had a character much more edifying than the Barbouillé's or George Dandin's wife” (118).

new, self-proclaimed virtue, which is at odds with the situation that Molière finally creates for her and in which, constantly declaring that one should not trouble a husband with complaints of *galants* (3.4.1032–35, 3.5.1067–72; 4.3.1335–36), she offers herself to Tartuffe in order to disabuse her husband” (149). In order to pursue this line of inquiry further, we must now turn to the 1669 published version of the play.

The substance of the words of Mme Pernelle in the opening scene of the play are often dismissed as the comic rantings of a deluded old bigot. However, both Pernelle and her son, Orgon, are capable, on occasion, of making valid observations. One important detail that we learn from Mme Pernelle is that Elmire is not like Orgon’s first wife: “leur défunte Mère en usait beaucoup mieux” (1.1.28). This should not be dismissed merely as the all-too-common lament of the grumpy old shrew whereby things were so much better before; it is almost certainly the case that Elmire is indeed cut from altogether different cloth from her predecessor. We do not know Elmire’s exact age, but it is possible that she is only in her twenties; she was played by Mlle Molière, who typically performed attractive, eligible women in Molière’s works, and who had performed the eponymous heroine in *La Princesse d’Elide* only a few days before the *Tartuffe* première in 1664.⁸ Orgon’s first wife, by contrast, had given birth to two children who are now of a marriageable age. Where Orgon and his first wife were probably fairly close in age, Orgon and Elmire are almost a generation apart. Elmire behaves not as a middle-aged wife, but as the young, still childless woman that she is. And on this matter too, Mme Pernelle may have a point:

Vous êtes dépensière, et cet état me blesse,
Que vous alliez vêtue ainsi qu’une Princesse.
Quiconque à son mari veut plaire seulement,
Ma Bru, n’a pas besoin de tant d’ajustement. (1.1.29–32)

Elmire is young, attractive, sociable, and childless. But she is also married. And a stepmother. And there exists a tension between these various roles. For Pernelle is right to note that a married, upper-middle-class woman was not expected to dress in a way that suggested a wish to attract further suitors. The insinuation whereby Elmire seeks to please men other than her husband is enforced by a number of references to Tartuffe’s jealousy vis-à-vis further

8. See Herzl (53). Other roles taken by Mlle Molière include Lucinde in *L’Amour médecin*, Célimène in *Le Misanthrope*, Lucinde in *Le Médecin malgré lui*, and, *justement*, Angélique in *George Dandin*.

possible male suitors: Dorine remarks, for instance, in the opening scene, “Je crois que de Madame il est, ma foi, jaloux” (1.1.84), and Orgon comments later:

Je vois qu’il reprend tout, et qu’à ma Femme même,
Il prend pour mon honneur un intérêt extrême;
Il m’avertit des Gens qui lui font les yeux doux,
Et plus que moi, six fois, il s’en montre jaloux. (1.5.301–4)

That Elmire has suitors seems clear to the other members of her household; meanwhile, we also learn in 1.1 that there are rumors circulating to this effect around the neighborhood. When Mme Pernelle tries to give Elmire the benefit of the doubt on this issue, observing, “Je veux croire qu’au fond il ne se passe rien; / Mais enfin on en parle, et cela n’est pas bien” (91–92), Elmire remains oddly silent. Even Dorine’s witty riposte about the local *maudisantes* having become so only in old age when their own source of suitors had dried up is only partially convincing as a defense of Elmire because it is based on the premise that youth is a time for romance and old age for celibacy and religion. Age (rather than marital status) is key here, and Elmire, while married, is still young.

Another point to note is the fact that, according to Mme Pernelle, Elmire’s presence in the (Orgon) household has brought about a shift away from what Pernelle (and the neighbors) deems to be modest, seemly behavior, in favor of more lively, and dubious, sociability. Elmire, like Tartuffe, is a relatively recent arrival in the household, an alien who is welcomed by some (in her case most) but not all. Without wishing to stray too far from the text, it is plausible to suggest that the crisis of Orgon’s wife’s death was followed by the crisis of his remarriage and in turn by that of the arrival of Tartuffe, and that the three events are all interrelated. Orgon lost a wife to whom he may or may not have been close, but with whom he had two now grown-up children; he does not appear close to Elmire, and the couple lacks the glue that shared children bring. Furthermore, I shall argue that both Orgon and Elmire are looking elsewhere to satisfy their emotional and sexual needs and desires. And this, of course, is where Tartuffe comes in.

The homoerotic overtones of Orgon’s relationship with Tartuffe have not passed unnoticed.⁹ Dorine tells Cléante, “il l’appelle son Frère, et l’aime dans

9. Guicharnaud stresses Orgon’s femininity and desire to be possessed by Tartuffe (44), while Owen insists on his homosexuality and mother complex, and his attempt to “sublimate and direct his desires into religious channels” (611, 614, 617).

son âme / Cent fois plus qu'il ne fait Mère, Fils, Fille, et Femme. [. . .] Il le choie, il l'embrasse; et pour une Maîtresse, / On ne saurait, je pense, avoir plus de tendresse" (1.2.185–86, 189–90). Gibson has noted that, in seventeenth-century France, "it was taken as axiomatic that the husband should rarely speak about his wife. In letters to friends he merely noted the state of her health or passed on her respects, whilst reserving the right to dilate at length on his mistresses" (10).¹⁰ This sheds further light on the famous "Et Tartuffe?" scene in which Orgon shows little or no interest in his wife's recent ill-health and every interest in Tartuffe's obscene vigor. This in turn is reinforced by the choice of vocabulary used to discuss Orgon's attitude toward Tartuffe,¹¹ and in the more oblique attention that is drawn to Tartuffe's biological sex. Cléante asks: "Se peut-il qu'un *Homme* ait un charme aujourd'hui / A vous faire oublier toutes choses pour lui?" (1.5.263–64, my emphasis), to which Orgon replies:

Mon Frère, vous seriez charmé de le connaître,
Et vos ravissements ne prendraient point de fin.
C'est un Homme . . . qui . . . ha . . . un Homme . . . un Homme
enfin. (1.5.270–72)

This repetition of "homme" demonstrates more than just Orgon's inarticulacy or even Tartuffe's human weakness; the point is also that he is a man and not a woman.

This in turn points toward a more nuanced reading of the dynamics of this relationship that I am proposing whereby Orgon has in some way projected his wish for emotional and sexual intimacy with Elmire onto Tartuffe, both in the sense that he is somehow attracted to Tartuffe himself *and* in the sense that he wishes Tartuffe to enjoy a sexual relationship with Elmire on his behalf. It should also be noted that, earlier in the play, Orgon had first projected his wish to engage in a sexual relationship with Tartuffe onto his daughter Mariane. As he explains to her: "Oui, je prétends, ma Fille, / Unir, par votre hymen, Tartuffe à ma Famille" (2.1.453–54). Orgon's idealized image of Mariane's marriage with Tartuffe is laced with eroticism:

10. She continues, "Never must he show assiduity or passion for her, lest he excite derisive comment, such demonstrations of interest and affection being more properly reserved for the mistress who compensated him for marital abstinences" (69).

11. Damis comments, for instance: "Vous êtes bien payé de toutes vos *caresses*; / Et Monsieur, d'un beau prix, reconnaît vos *tendresses*" (3.5.1057–58, my emphasis).

Cet hymen, de tous biens, comblera vos désirs.
 Il sera tout confit en douceurs, et plaisirs.
 Ensemble vous vivrez, dans vos ardeurs fidèles,
 Comme deux vrais Enfants, comme deux Tourterelles.
 (2.2.531–36)¹²

And when discussing Orgon's choice with Mariane in the following scene, Dorine rightly and sarcastically observes:

C'est à vous, non à lui, que le Mari doit plaire;
 Et que si son Tartuffe est pour lui si charmant,
 Il le peut épouser, sans nul empêchement. (2.3.594–96)

But whereas the sexual union of Tartuffe and Mariane will only ever remain an unfulfilled fantasy of Orgon's, that of Elmire and Tartuffe is a very real possibility. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the famous scene in which Elmire's second audience with Tartuffe is overheard by Orgon from under the table (see Figure 1). Indeed, I would like to suggest that the whole scenario may be read as a sex game devised by Elmire as much for the enjoyment of her voyeuristic (and confused) husband as for his enlightenment.¹³

The suggestion that Orgon would enjoy seeing Elmire and Tartuffe together is hinted at as early on in the play as in his response to Damis's accusation of Tartuffe in Act 3. Generally it is understood that Orgon simply does not believe Damis, but it is also possible that at some level Orgon *does* believe Damis, and that he is titillated by the thought of his attractive young wife¹⁴ and the object of his homoerotic obsession together. Tartuffe rightly observes that it would be dangerous for the two of them to be seen together in public,¹⁵ but it is precisely when he notes that Orgon will no longer *see* him ("Je fuirai votre Epouse, et vous ne me *verrez* . . ." [1171, my emphasis]) that the latter interrupts, desperately insisting,

Non, en dépit de tous, vous la fréquenterez.
 Faire enrager le monde, est ma plus grande joie,
 Et je veux qu'à toute heure avec elle on vous voie. (3.7.1172–74)

12. This, of course, contrasts wildly with Dorine's portrait of the same marriage in 2.2.657–66.

13. This reading consciously runs counter to more traditional interpretations of this scene. Another thought-provoking reading is provided by Robin, who describes Elmire's plan as "un dispositif expérimental de type scientifique" (262).

14. In the *Lettre sur la comédie de L'Imposteur*, she is described as "une femme bien faite" (1179).

15. Tartuffe says, "L'honneur est délicat, et l'amitié m'engage / A prévenir les bruits, et les sujets d'ombrage. / Je fuirai votre Epouse, et vous ne me *verrez* . . ." (1168–71).



Figure 1: Frontispiece by C. Barbin (1673)
 Rés-YF-4211, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Not only is it suggested that Orgon wishes to see Tartuffe and Elmire together (certainly, the act of seeing them together is going to prove to be erotically and emotionally very powerful for him); he also wishes to share his voyeuristic pleasure with the rest of society (“on”).

Let us now examine how Elmire presents her scheme to her husband. Both by the standards of seventeenth-century polite society and those of 1660s French drama, it is quite brazen. Apparently without a blush, Elmire spells out her

plan, or, to put it in the terminology of BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism), Elmire assumes the position of “top” or “dominant” outlining and requesting consent for the upcoming “scene”:

Au moins, je vais toucher une étrange matière,
 Ne vous scandalisez en aucune manière.
 Quoi que je puisse dire, il doit m'être permis,
 Et c'est pour vous convaincre, ainsi que j'ai promis.
 Je vais par des douceurs, puisque j'y suis réduite,
 Faire poser le masque à cette âme hypocrite,
 Flatter, de son amour, les désirs effrontés,
 Et donner un champ libre à ses témérités.
 Comme c'est pour vous seul, et pour mieux le confondre,
 Que mon âme à ses vœux va feindre de répondre,
 J'aurai lieu de cesser dès que vous vous rendez,
 Et les choses n'iront que jusqu'où vous voudrez.
 C'est à vous d'arrêter son ardeur insensée,
 Quand vous croirez l'affaire assez avant poussée;
 D'épargner votre Femme, et de ne m'exposer
 Qu'à ce qu'il vous faudra pour vous désabuser.
 Ce sont vos intérêts, vous en serez le maître. (4.4.1369–85)

In his account of Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze insists on the importance of the contractual dimension to masochistic relations, and it is precisely such a contract that Elmire has drawn up. Several crucial points emerge from it: first, that this is for Orgon's benefit, enjoyment, and satisfaction (*c'est pour vous seul*); second, that it will go on for as long as he likes and as far as he likes (*J'aurai lieu de cesser dès que vous vous rendez, / Et les choses n'iront que jusqu'où vous voudrez*); and, finally, that there is a clear mechanism in place for things to be brought to a halt (*C'est à vous d'arrêter son ardeur insensée*). Orgon's proposed function here, then, is as the “safeword” in a sophisticated sex game.¹⁶ And herein lies Elmire's mistake: by relinquishing sole ownership of the safeword she makes herself extremely vulnerable, still more so given that she has relinquished it to a third party. Orgon, meanwhile, will submit to the (pleasurable) humiliation, graphically illustrated by his submissive

16. According to Robin's reading, “Elmire laisse au témoin Orgon la double responsabilité d'interpréter et d'arrêter l'expérience” (265). In a scientific context, this represents an even greater “dérogação à l'étiquette protocolaire” (265) than the transferral of the safeword to a third party in a structured sex-scene. On the other hand, Robin is able to reconcile “l'absence d'un contrôle total de la part du personnage d'Elmire” (265) with his scientific model.

position under the table, of his own potential cuckoldry at the same time that he will enjoy the pleasurable prospect of an erotic encounter between his wife and Tartuffe.

But throughout this scene, Elmire's position is highly ambiguous: she is the "dominant" or "top" in the sense that she engineers the whole scenario and sets out in advance its parameters; yet she willingly hands over control for the final outcome of the scene to the otherwise passive Orgon (whom she describes as the scene's "maître") and submits herself not to Orgon directly but to his substitute, in the form of Tartuffe. Elmire thus functions as a "switch" both in her relationship with Tartuffe (whom she is manipulating yet who enjoys physical superiority over her) and with Orgon (who consents to her proposed scenario but to whom she unwisely hands over the power to bring it to a close at the moment of his choosing). But if the contract with Orgon is, in theory at least, clear, her encounter with Tartuffe is dangerously un-negotiated, and it can be said that Elmire pays a price for her departure from the received etiquette of BDSM that requires that the parameters be set out between all (usually both) parties in advance of any role play.

When Orgon repeatedly fails to appear from beneath the table, we see that Elmire attempts to reclaim the safeword function for herself by invoking a new *non-negotiated* safeword equivalent: her coughing.¹⁷ But this fails spectacularly. However, it is Elmire, and not Orgon, who deviates from the contract. For Orgon *does* bring things to a close when he considers them to have gone far enough, i.e., when the erotic spell is broken by Tartuffe denigrating him (his pleasure in humiliation is not limitless). Until that moment, he has been enjoying the deferred pleasure that characterizes the masochistic encounter; indeed, Orgon's pleasure is deferred both in the sense of a temporal delay for as long as he remains hidden, and in the displacement of the encounter onto another individual, Tartuffe.

But if Orgon is aroused by the thought, sight, and sound of Elmire and Tartuffe together, where does Elmire stand in all this? We have established that, in marked contrast with the other married women in Molière's theater, Elmire dresses attractively and has a number of suitors. The apparent ease with which she arranges private audiences with Tartuffe and with which she draws on tactics that are deceptive, even devious, suggests that she is familiar with the mechanics of deception that adultery invites.¹⁸ I have suggested that she is also somewhat familiar with the intricacies of role-playing sex games. We are

17. In the 1667 version of the play, Elmire used her foot for this purpose. We read in the *Lettre sur la comédie de L'Imposteur* of her frustration "après lui avoir fait avec le pied tous les signes qu'elle a pu" (1184).

18. Calder suggests that his religious status allows Tartuffe somewhat easier access to Elmire than an ordinary suitor (167).

undoubtedly a long way from “la pudeur du Sexe” (2.3.634) that the virginal Mariane invokes on several occasions (1415 and 1424). Yet Elmire appears shaken by the prolonged scene with Tartuffe resulting from Orgon’s deferral and she is described in the *Lettre sur la comédie de L’Imposteur* as appearing “honteuse de la fourbe qu’elle a faite au Bigot” (1184). On the other hand, her suggestion that she is willing to accord Tartuffe her “dernières faveurs” (1458) is repeated several times: “il faut que je consente à vous *tout* accorder” (1508, my emphasis), she announces. And when Orgon finally emerges (see Figure 1), she comments sarcastically, “Attendez *jusqu’au bout*, pour voir les choses sûres” (4.6.1533, my emphasis). Yet, just as the conventions of seventeenth-century French comedy obviate such a possibility, so also does the masochistic model tend to avoid a full sexual consummation.¹⁹ It is perhaps the masochist’s aversion to coitus that Orgon is expressing when he asks a skeptical Mme Pernelle if “Je devais donc, ma Mère, attendre qu’à mes yeux / Il eût . . .” (5.3.1688–89).

The fact that Elmire is so well-versed in deception makes her difficult to read, for Tartuffe as for us. Consider 3.3, the first big scene between Elmire and Tartuffe: Elmire’s *entrée en matière*, with its references to secrecy and one-on-one intimacy, is wide open to (mis)interpretation by a hopeful lover: “J’ai voulu vous parler en secret, d’une affaire, / Et suis bien aise, ici, qu’aucun ne nous éclaire” (3.3.897–98). And Tartuffe’s response is certainly at odds with readings of the scene that assume no ambiguity of intent on Elmire’s part: “J’en suis ravi de même; et sans doute il m’est doux, / Madame, de me voir, seul à seul, avec vous” (3.3.899–900). Elmire only makes it worse when she continues: “pour moi, ce que je veux, c’est un mot d’entretien, / Où tout votre coeur s’ouvre, et ne me cache rien” (903–4). Thierry is surely right to perceive between the two “une complicité avouée,” and to suggest that Elmire is (or at least sounds as though she is) asking Tartuffe for a declaration of love (194). Certainly, that is exactly what she receives.²⁰ Had Elmire not anticipated or invited such a declaration, one might reasonably have expected her to have responded differently; more forcefully, more firmly, more fearfully even. One would have expected her to have left the room the moment Tartuffe squeezed her fingers, certainly when he put his hand on her knee. But instead, she listens to all twenty-eight lines of the declaration before deeming it both “galant[e],”

19. See M’Uzan (130) and Mennel (24–25).

20. Time and again, Elmire’s behavior runs directly counter to the precepts set out by François de Sales in his best-selling *Introduction à la vie dévote*, in which he advises women not to employ any form of deception and never to listen to any amorous declarations. See de Sales 2 (87 and 139).

which it is, rhetorically speaking,²¹ and “surprenante,” which it may or may not be. It is important to note that the basis expressed for her alleged surprise is that the declaration is made by “un Dévot comme vous” (965) and *not* that it is made to a married woman. She does *not* point out that she herself is married and as such unavailable. But, as Tartuffe explains, he is different from “tous ces Galants de Cour” (989) because he is discreet. He can offer her “de l’amour sans scandale, et du plaisir sans peur” (1000). Only now does Elmire mention her husband, but not explicitly in the context of adultery; rather, she asks Tartuffe if he is not afraid that she will tell Orgon, the suggestion being that he might risk losing his privileged position in Orgon’s heart and home. Tartuffe replies that he is sure of her discretion, and, astonishingly, his confidence is well-placed. Of course this gives Elmire a degree of power over Tartuffe, but only at the expense of good *dévot* and even good *mondain* behavior. Even the author of the *Lettre sur la comédie de L’Imposteur* admits that she responds with “beaucoup de modération, de retenue et de bonté” (1183). As Elmire herself says,

D’autres prendraient cela d’autre façon, peut-être;
 Mais ma discrétion se veut faire paraître.
 Je ne redirai point l’affaire à mon Epoux. (3.3.1013–15)

Why ever not? Is that not what any decent woman would do? Worse still, she goes on to ask that Tartuffe push for the marriage of Valère and Mariane in place of his own marriage to Mariane. Tartuffe might not unreasonably expect this to indicate something other than a rejection. And later, of course, Elmire will invoke this very request in her attempts to convince Tartuffe that she *does* desire him and is willing to enter into a sexual relationship with him. We see, then, that Tartuffe and Elmire have a certain amount in common, if no longer in this version of the play a genuine mutual attraction.²²

But what exactly are we to make of Elmire’s shocking decision not to inform Orgon of Tartuffe’s designs upon her? According to the *Lettre sur la comédie de L’Imposteur*, she is moved by an incipient sense of pity for Panulph-Tartuffe (1179). Although Damis, who has of course been listening to the whole interview, is impulsive, he cannot be said to be wrong when he leaps out of hiding and declares that “ceci doit se répandre” (3.4.1021) or in his wish

21. Tartuffe’s “yeux” and “soupleurs” (979) have told Elmire of his feelings, just like a *galant* lover. She also speaks of his “galante ardeur” (1004).

22. Mercader writes on the relationship between Elmire and Tartuffe, “on dirait d’une escrime secrète entre deux compères qui se craignent et se ménagent et qui finissent par s’accorder tacitement sur un compromis” (309n).

to “détromper mon Père, et lui mettre en plein jour, / L’âme d’un Scélérat qui vous parle d’amour” (1027–28). Yet Elmire remains firm and once again her response is (or should be) shocking:

Non, Damis, il suffit qu’il se rende plus sage,
 Et tâche à mériter la grâce où je m’engage.
 Puisque je l’ai promis, ne m’en dédites pas.
 Ce n’est point mon humeur de faire des éclats;
 Une Femme se rit de sottises pareilles,
 Et jamais d’un Mari n’en trouble les oreilles. (3.4.1029–34)

It is difficult to concur with the reading of Elmire proposed by the *Lettre sur la comédie de L’Imposteur*, in which we are told that she is “une vraie femme de bien, qui connaît parfaitement ses véritables devoirs, et qui y satisfait jusqu’au scrupule” (1172). Whatever is motivating Elmire here, it is emphatically not a slavish devotion to scruple. A more accurate interpretation is perhaps provided by the anonymous anti-theatrical author of the *Sentimens de l’Eglise & des SS. Peres pour servir de decision sur la Comedie et les comedians*, who writes:

Elmire, pour convaincre son mary de la déloyauté de ce perfide [Tartuffe], fait semblant d’écouter ses vœux, & d’acquiescer à ses désirs criminels. Mais quoy qu’elle soit aussi chaste dans le coeur & devant Dieu, qu’elle l’est peu dans ses paroles; il est toujours vray de dire que le Poëte luy fait faire des démarches tout-à-fait indignes d’une femme, qui est veritablement fidele & à son Dieu & à son mary. (67)

Meanwhile, three readings of Elmire’s scheme are proposed within the play by Damis, Elmire, and Orgon, respectively. Damis initially makes the (possibly sly) observation that “Vous avez vos raisons pour en user ainsi” (1035) and later comments to his father that “Elle est d’une humeur douce, et son coeur trop discret / Voulait, à toute force, en garder le secret” (1063–64). In response, Elmire confirms her belief in the legitimacy of keeping secrets from one’s husband, while at the same time hinting at the tension that has arisen between herself and certain other members of her (relatively) new household:

Oui, je tiens que jamais, de tous ces vains propos,
 On ne doit d’un Mari traverser le repos;
 Que ce n’est point de là que l’honneur peut dépendre,
 Et qu’il suffit, pour nous, de savoir nous défendre.

Ce sont mes sentiments; et vous n'auriez rien dit,
 Damis, si j'avais eu sur vous quelque crédit. (3.5.1067–72)

Later, in response to Orgon's theory whereby she had been afraid to contradict Damis, and that had Tartuffe made a pass at her she would have been more visibly upset by it,²³ she offers a more complete explanation that reads like a manifesto for her preferred *façon de vivre*:

Est-ce qu'au simple aveu d'un amoureux transport,
 Il faut que notre honneur se gendarme si fort?
 Et ne peut-on répondre à tout ce qui le touche,
 Que le feu dans les yeux, et l'injure à la bouche?
 Pour moi, de tels propos, je me ris simplement,
 Et l'éclat, là-dessus, ne me plaît nullement.
 J'aime qu'avec douceur nous nous montrions sages,
 Et ne suis point, du tout, pour ces Prudes sauvages,²⁴
 Dont l'honneur est armé de griffes, et de dents,
 Et veut, au moindre mot, dévisager les Gens.
 Me préserve le Ciel d'une telle sagesse!
 Je veux une Vertu qui ne soit point diablesse,
 Et crois que d'un refus, la discrète froideur,
 N'en est pas moins puissante à rebuter un coeur. (4.3.1323–36)

While this kind of discourse may seem perfectly reasonable to us now, it relies on a degree of female autonomy in matters of the heart that was not widely available to married women of Elmire's social class. Moreover, its flagrant showcasing of certain qualities in the face of a (supposedly unwelcome) declaration—notably secrecy, levity, and discretion—whether intentionally or not, allows considerable scope to adopt those same transferable skills in response to a welcome one.²⁵ In that sense, Elmire is an inverted Princesse

23. "Vous avez eu peur de le désavouer / Du trait qu'à ce pauvre Homme il a voulu jouer. / Vous étiez trop tranquille enfin, pour être crue, / Et vous auriez paru d'autre manière émue" (4.3.1319–22).

24. This is a reference to the type of *précieux* extremism satirized by Molière in *Les Précieuses ridicules* and *Les Femmes savantes*.

25. For Eustis, Dorimène's view in sc 2 of *Le Mariage forcé* of a tolerant (almost open) marriage "perhaps allows a hidden interpretation of Elmire's lines in *Le Tartuffe* where she declares that she prefers to defend her honour 'discreetly' " 4.3.1323–36 (128). One might also recall Arnolphe's desperate offer to Agnès of a similarly tolerant or open marriage in *L'École des femmes* 5.4.

de Clèves. Where the princess confesses a mutual extramarital love to her husband in order to fight it, Elmire stands up for a woman's right to keep unwelcome advances from her husband in order, perhaps, to adopt the same practice in the event of a more appealing offer.²⁶

In the end, it is Elmire who offers us the rope with which to hang her when she has to convince Tartuffe of her desire for him in order to trick him into revealing his true intentions and, according to my reading of the scene, to act out Orgon's sexual fantasy. When Tartuffe points out that she had not responded in this fashion to his first declaration, she replies, on the subject of women generally:

Ah! si d'un tel refus vous êtes en courroux,
 Que le coeur d'une Femme est mal connu de vous!
 Et que vous savez peu ce qu'il veut faire entendre,
 Lorsque si faiblement on le voit se défendre!
 Toujours notre pudeur combat, dans ces moments,
 Ce qu'on peut nous donner de tendres sentiments.
 Quelque raison qu'on trouve à l'amour qui nous dompte,
 On trouve à l'avouer, toujours un peu de honte;
 On s'en defend d'abord; mais de l'air qu'on s'y prend,
 On fait connaître assez que notre coeur se rend;
 Qu'à nos vœux, par honneur, notre bouche s'oppose,
 Et que de tels refus promettent toute chose. (4.5.1411–22)

Elmire's use of the generalized "une Femme" and the repeated "on" is an attempt to write herself into an existing feminine model (broadly that of the "femme galante"), for while she is exceptional in Molière's drama, a small but significant number of her real-life contemporaries did exist. On her own case more specifically, she comments:

Mais puisque la parole enfin en est lâchée,
 A retenir Damis, me serais-je attachée?
 Aurais-je, je vous prie, avec tant de douceur,
 Écouté tout au long l'offre de votre coeur?
 Aurais-je pris la chose ainsi qu'on m'a vu faire,
 Si l'offre de ce coeur n'eût eu de quoi me plaire?
 Et lorsque j'ai voulu moi-même vous forcer
 A refuser l'hymen qu'on venait d'annoncer,

26. An interesting comparison may be made between the table scene in *Tartuffe* and the scene in *La Princesse de Clèves* in which Nemours overhears the princess confess her genuine love for him to her husband.

Qu'est-ce que cette instance a dû vous faire entendre,
 Que l'intérêt qu'en vous on s'avise de prendre,
 Et l'ennui qu'on aurait que ce noeud qu'on résout,
 Vint partager du moins un coeur que l'on veut tout?
 (4.5.1425–36)

Elmire is hardly short of arguments, and read together they are strikingly convincing. And they go some way toward convincing a skeptical (but sexually aroused) Tartuffe. Whether or not the arguments are in this instance sincere is less important than the fact that they can convincingly be made. In so doing, Elmire has in fact demonstrated exactly how a married woman might respond to the overtures of a welcome suitor and the role of her much-trumpeted discretion therein.

While the Elmire figure of 1664 may have been attracted to the Tartuffe figure in a simple tale of cuckoldry, the erotic dynamics in 1669 (and, seemingly, also in 1667) are far more complex. Tartuffe is still attracted to Elmire; Elmire may yet be attracted to Tartuffe in some way. What is clear, however, is that Orgon's erotic (and masochistic) impulses are also very much at play. I have argued that rather than having a simple homoerotic obsession with Tartuffe, Orgon has transferred his sexual desire for Elmire onto Tartuffe *and* requires Tartuffe to act as a sexual substitute for him. He even briefly (and more disturbingly) contemplates having his own daughter act as sexual substitute in his homoerotic desire for Tartuffe. Elmire, meanwhile, is willing to play out a sexual fantasy for her husband in a simulated (but potentially real) seduction scene to be observed, interrupted, and thereby controlled by him, just as she appears willing to receive other suitors (and the dangers of one may have taught her something about the dangers of the other). The crisis in the Orgon household is, then, as much a sexual one as a personal, religious, or political one; but whether the "Prince ennemi de la fraude" also exerts dominion over the sex lives of his subjects is uncertain. If the more pernicious alien (Tartuffe) has been removed at the end of the play thanks, only, to the King, the other, less obviously pernicious one remains. But where the unrepentant Tartuffe must be punished, Elmire appears, on the other hand, to have learned a lesson, or at least to have come to regret some of her actions: "Si j'avais su qu'en main il a de telles armes, / Je n'aurais pas donné matière à tant d'alarmes" (5.3.1713–14). While her skills in deception, secrecy, and erotic game-playing were able to provide her husband with sexual pleasure as well as factual clarification, they proved inadequate tools with which to take on the likes of Tartuffe, and risky as well as *risqué*. Unlike Tartuffe, then, Elmire is capable of reform, and at the close of the play she corresponds a little more closely to Calder's paragon than she did at its opening.

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