



The Misanthrope/ Tartuffe

Molière , Richard Wilbur (Translator)

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Critics have heralded Richard Wilbur's translations of Molière's seventeenth-century dramas as masterpieces. In brilliant rhymed couplets Wilbur renders into English not only the form and spirit of Molière's language but also its substance.

The Misanthrope, one of Molière's most popular plays, is a searching comic study of falsity, shallowness, and self-righteousness. The misanthrope in this case is Alceste, a man whose conscience and sincerity are too rigorous for his time. In *Tartuffe* the title character, a wily opportunist and swindler, affects sanctity and gains complete ascendancy over Orgon, a rich bourgeois who in his middle years has become a bigot and prude. Only when Orgon actually witnesses Tartuffe's attempt to seduce his wife does he come to his senses. Richard Wilbur won a share of the Bollingen Translation Prize for his much-acclaimed translation of this satiric turn on religious hypocrisy.

The Misanthrope/ Tartuffe Details

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William2 says

Read *The Misanthrope* and was surprised by how it held me. Generally, I find plays very dead on the page. Not this one. Moliere's keen wit and sharp characterizations comes through beautifully. He has this very light touch. And here's the funny thing--the play's in verse! Rhyming couplets for the most part. Here's part of what translator Wilbur says about it: "In this play, society itself is indicted, and though Alceste's criticisms are indiscriminate, they are not unjustified...." Let me add that Alceste thinks of himself as the only moral visionary about. Everyone else is ruined by the various social fraudulences of the day (1666). There are others who see through this faux civility, too, of course, but Alceste is the one whose pride spurs him on to ever greater truth telling. If the play weren't so funny, and Wilbur's verse so sharp, Alceste would be a very great bore indeed. *Tartuffe* I liked too. It's about this con man who, playing the role of the pious Christian, wheedles his way into the heart of a prosperous Paris householder. That man, Orgon, is so taken in by the fraud Tartuffe that he allows it to disrupt his very large household. But then he's caught trying to seduce the lady of the house. That moment of exposure provides enormous pleasure. Though the meter tends to slow the reader down a bit, both plays read very fast, about an hour each.

Terry says

When I reread these plays last summer, I thought to myself, "Someone needs to write a rhyming verse play about America's farcical election." I even sketched it out: a vaguely Frenchish court abuzz over the news that the king intends to appoint a new minister of everything, various courtiers puffing themselves up with expectation, the surprise news that the court jester intends to put himself forward... That was back when it all still seemed so laughable.

Deanna says

2 stars for The Misanthrope and 5 stars for Tartuffe.

The Misanthrope by Moliere is a French comedy written in 1666. The main character Alceste despises the current trends in French society of empty praise and unmerited flattery and decides instead to denounce all men and speak with brutal honesty instead. His friend Philinte advocates a less confrontational approach calling him to be more lenient and to cease his rantings. He points out Alceste's own hypocrisy in decrying the flattery of men while at the same time being in love with Celimene, who is known for her coquettishness. When Alceste asks Celimene to prove her love by sending away the other suitors, she declares that she loves him but does not wish to send the others away. Later he demands she prove her love by leaving Paris with him to live away from other people; but while she is willing to marry him, she does not wish to leave Paris causing Alceste to declare he will no longer be her suitor.

While I find the ideas of the play thought-provoking and think Moliere did an excellent job in showing the folly of both brutal honesty and empty flattery, I did not enjoy this play nearly as much as Tartuffe. The play is more character focused than plot focused, and quite frankly I disliked the characters. While some of the

dialogue was quite witty, I did not find the play entertaining or humorous. I still believe that there is value in reading the play and exploring the ideas that it presents, but it is not something that I would read for enjoyment.

Tartuffe by Moliere is a French comedy written in 1664. Orgon, a wealthy nobleman, has invited into his home a "pious" man named Tartuffe to guide his household in religious manners. Tartuffe's hypocritical religious charade fools only Orgon and his mother while the rest of the family wishes him gone. Troubles come to a head when Orgon decrees that his daughter should marry Tartuffe instead of Valere, the young nobleman whom she loves. Orgon's wife Elmire tries to ask Tartuffe to change his mind and is shocked when he makes advances upon her. The hot-headed son Damis tries to break Tartuffe's hold by telling his father about these advancements; but Orgon refuses to listen, banishes his son, and decides to make Tartuffe his heir. Finally Elmire convinces Orgon to hide in the room while she talks with Tartuffe to expose his deception, but since Orgon has already given everything to Tartuffe instead of him leaving he gives Orgon's family a notice of eviction and goes before the king to charge Orgon with treason. Were it not for the king's recognition of Tartuffe's treachery, Orgon would have been ruined; but all is set to right as legal document giving Orgon's possessions to Tartuffe is nullified and the true traitor is imprisoned.

I found the play to be humorous, witty, and thought provoking and would recommend it as a must read.

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

Moliere has long been on my to-read list because his comedies were on a list of "100 Significant Books" I was determined to read through. The introduction in one of the books of his plays says that of his "thirty-two comedies... a good third are among the comic masterpieces of world literature." The plays are surprisingly accessible and amusing, even if by and large they strike me as frothy and slight compared to comedies by Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Wilde, Shaw and Rostand. But I may be at a disadvantage. I'm a native New Yorker, and looking back it's amazing how many classic plays I've seen on stage, plenty I've seen in filmed adaptation and many I've studied in school. Yet I've never encountered Moliere before this. Several productions of Shakespeare live and filmed are definitely responsible for my love of his plays. Reading a play is really no substitute for seeing it--the text is only scaffolding. So that might be why I don't rate these plays higher. I admit I also found Wilbur's much recommended translation off-putting at first. The format of rhyming couplets seemed sing-song and trite, as if I was reading the lyrics to a musical rather than a play. As I read more I did get used to that form, but I do suspect these are the kinds of works that play much better on stage than on the page.

Misanthrope - this was the first Moliere play I ever read, and arguably the most famous of all his plays. The introduction in what might seem an oxymoron calls it a comic *King Lear*, and I can see that side of it. As comic as this might read, it is basically a tragedy about the young man Alceste, the "misanthrope" of the play, who makes such a fetish of always being honest he alienates everyone around him. The character I enjoyed the most was definitely the malicious Arsinoe who plays the prude. The catty scenes between her and Alceste's love Celimene is particularly hilarious.

Tartuffe - of the five Moliere plays I now have read, this one, about over-religiosity and hypocrisy is my favorite. The title character Tartuffe is a conman who prays on the religious sensibility and man-crush of his patron Orgon. The scene in particular where Orgon responds to reports of his wife's illness by repeatedly

asking, "But what about Tartuffe" nearly had me laughing out loud. The character of the pert and shrewd lady's maid Dorine is particularly delightful.

david says

I would imagine that between the time of Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde many important and disparate events occurred throughout the world.

But, who cares?

I am not a historian nor an academic. I have not a clue as to what went on during these two-three hundred years. In fact, I can hardly recall the last two hundred hours.

This is astonishing work. As we say in Dordogne, "Holy Cannoli." Or, in Puglia we might exclaim, "mon Dieu."

Rhyming stanzas only, employed.

The Zeitgeist of seventeenth century France, delivered though the lines of characters on a stage.

With humor.

Impossible? I guess not.

"Tartuffe," and "The Misanthrope," two plays.

The principle players represent two types of individuals, the hypocritical manipulator of people in one, and in the other, the disdain for them.

Everyone has an opinion of the French. Me too.

They have climbed and summited some very challenging literary mountains.

And descended to bring us some great stuff to read.

Bbrown says

Clichés are a strange thing to judge an older text by, since it's often hard to say whether something that is commonplace and tired today wasn't fresh and revolutionary at the time. While I can't be sure about how new the tropes used by Molière in these two plays were when they were written, I know that they struck me as stale when I read them today.

Tartuffe features a bumbling, foolish, and quick to anger husband and a clever wife trying to undue his mistakes, a Homer and Marge Simpson for 17th century France. The antagonist is the titular Tartuffe, a hypocrite who hides in the mantle of piousness while secretly lusting after both wealth and a married

woman. It's never believable that Tartuffe hoodwinked anyone, as he's only ever portrayed as an idiot only a hair's-breadth more clever than the bumbling husband. The play really beats you over the head with its message, that you should avoid being suckered by deception or self-deception, and that all that glitters isn't gold. Tartuffe's use of religion to mask his true intention may have been revolutionary at the time, but nowadays it's hard to go on an online forum without someone drawing the same connection between the church and deceit of the masses. Molière uses a royal *deus ex machina* to shoehorn in a happy ending.

The *Misanthrope* is slightly more interesting, mostly because of how it largely refuses to give the expected ending. There are some interesting characters here, but instead of exploring the worldview of a man who detests people, or one who shamelessly flatters everyone equally, or someone who can't restrain herself from flirting with everyone available, Molière treats these as amusing personalities for the play and nothing more. Large swaths of this play are characters just flat out refusing to communicate (something that is played for comedic effect in *Tartuffe*, but more briefly) and using this method to create dramatic tension has always rubbed me the wrong way. It's something that occasionally happens in real life, but rarely, and not usually for an extended conversation. It's a very artificial way to put two characters at odds with each other, and I take it as a sign of bad writing. Again, though, perhaps it wasn't so tired in the 17th century.

There are some good points to the plays as well, for instance women aren't passive objects but active participants in both plays, and Molière is gifted at crafting dialogue. I'm sure a production of either of these plays could be quite funny. Overall though, I expected something more from one of France's greatest playwrights. As Molière wrote:

Everything, madam, may be praised or blamed,
And each is right, in proper time and season.

Others have loved this play for hundreds of years, and I'm sure many will continue to do so for many years to come, but for me I'm afraid Molière's season has passed.

Brian says

In this volume, containing Moliere's "*The Misanthrope*" and "*Tartuffe*" we get two of his greatest comedies. One rather high minded and philosophic, and the other an early form of satire. I will break this review into two parts, examining each play as a separate unit.

First up is "*The Misanthrope*" which is a joy to read, if for no other reason than the witty and razor sharp wordplay of its leading characters. This play focuses on Alceste a man who hates all forms of hypocrisy and social niceties. I read a critic who once referred to his character as "a man in the world, but not of the world." It is an apt description. Alceste hates when people are ever less than 100% honest, in all matters, yet he is in love with a women named Celimene who is an incurable gossip, two faced, dishonest social climber. Alceste coming to terms with who he has chosen to love is really the crux of the play, with Moliere throwing in some sharp criticism of the courtly life of the French upper class, and some barbed commentary on when one should prize the truth above all others. A definitive answer is never given, and Moliere seems to be saying that there is a middle ground between dishonesty and 100% fidelity to the truth that most reasonable people occupy. A quick and delightful read, but be warned. Only see this play in performance with a good cast and stellar director. Otherwise it can quickly descend in performance to people just spitting out aphorisms and philosophy. The play is much more than that and the characters are real, but onstage it would be easy for weak performers to slip into caricature.

As for "*Tartuffe*", it is a more enjoyable play in performance than "*The Misanthrope*". I have seen

professional productions of both, but "Tartuffe" has a scam artist and sex, and that does make good theater. Of these two plays "Tartuffe" is the more accessible to the casual reader, and it has a lot to say about the extremes of religious piety and religious hypocrisy. Moliere seems to be encouraging the reader to be somewhere in the middle of the two, and personally I agree with his even handed views. Although some have argued that this play is an attack on religion, and I readily admit that the most "religious" characters in the play are the biggest fools, I don't feel Moliere is attacking the institution as much as he is attacking how it is practiced. I argue this because the character of Cleante often speaks very highly of morality, when it is practiced with sincerity and regard for others.

All in all, both plays are worth reading, and adding to your library, and this handy volume fills the bill nicely. Neither piece will disappoint, and each is relevant to the modern reader. Moliere was indeed a writer for all times.

Jhoel Centeno says

3.75/5*

Moliere is just amazing and his french comedies are the true art form of French theatre . These translations do much more than justice to what Moliere truly wanted to advocate for. My favorite being Tartuffe, I couldn't ask for anything more !

Dawn says

I have read Tartuffe a number of times in college for various classes, but always in prose. This is lovely, because it keeps the structure of the rhyming couplets from the original French.

Also, I had only read The Misanthrope perhaps once in my studies; I'd forgotten what a pleasure it is.

Susan says

The Misanthrope — 5 stars —Alceste wants to cut through social niceties with honesty and despises those who ply friends and acquaintances with false compliments and courtesies, but he falls in love with Celimene, beautiful, flirtatious, and juggling a retinue of beaux. Witty, thoughtful, and offering no easy answers to the questions it poses.

Audiobook: After reading the play, I listened to the excellent LA Theater Works audiobook. In addition to the play, it includes an interesting 16 minute talk on Moliere's life and work.

E. Crawford says

Now this little book should be required reading in every college in the English-speaking world. Richard Wilbur and Molière saved my life as I transitioned from college to find something human and meaningful in the wider world. This comedy was my companion and guide to surviving as a mere semi-misanthrope rather

than a full-on enemy of all-too-human humanity. A touchstone of my understanding of humanity, every bit as much as anything that Shakespeare guy came up with.

The translation is miraculous: fresh, alive, and constantly delightful, as I imagine the original lines are in French.

Judy G says

I chose this book for the title - Misanthrope and I didnt read Tartuffe. This is a very old play from 1600s. It is delightful and disturbing at the same time ...

Judy

Jeremy says

Written in the ~1660s, I loved these two plays. Wilbur translated these into rhyming prose, like the original, which makes the reading fun, and the wording was excellent throughout. In *The Misanthrope*, Alceste has a tendency to speak his mind bluntly, without regard for consequences. To that extent I see misanthropic tendencies in myself. The play is full of sarcasm and wit, which I loved. *Tartuffe* is a pious Christian hypocrite. Orgon doesn't see the hypocrisy at all, though everyone in the family does. He will not listen to them. *Tartuffe* can be read more deeply than *The Misanthrope*, and I liked it more. Orgon's blind loyalty to the hypocrite caused him to lose everything. Orgon wouldn't listen to reason. *Tartuffe* was clever, and would invoke Christian ideals to persuade Orgon; indeed he was willing to get on his cross for Damis, Orgon's son, when Orgon disowned him for accusing *Tartuffe* of making a pass on Orgon's wife - *Tartuffe* didn't admit to the specific sin, just all of his sins, and how God was using this situation to punish him for all of his previous sins, which were probably not that bad for *Tartuffe* was so pious - and of course Orgon bought it and wouldn't allow *Tartuffe* to get on that cross. *Tartuffe* was brilliantly clever. The main thing I didn't like about both of these plays were the endings. Both had happy endings, and were tied up in pretty bows. Moliere gave the audience what it wanted; it was too easy, but not as good as it could have been.

Val says

Like reading the most fucked up episode of *Curb* ever. 10/10 recommend. Found myself relating to Alceste on a near spiritual level, which may or may not be good.

Patdmac7 says

I did not read this particular edition but it was with these two plays in addition to *The Sicilian* or *Love the Painter* in one book.

The Misanthrope

There's precious little satisfaction in the most glorious of reputations if one finds that one has to share it with the whole universe. 26

I take men as they are, school myself to bear with what they do, and, in my opinion, my self-possession is no less philosophical than your intemperate spleen. 28

Ay! Confound it! Because people are wrong, because there's always justification for being annoyed with them, because they are invariably as misguided in their praise as they are rash in their condemnation. 45

The Sicilian or Love the Painter

If I were in love with anyone nothing would please me better than to see everyone love him. What better evidence could there be of the wisdom of one's choice? Ought we not to congratulate ourselves when the one whom we love is found lovable? 84

Affection is very insecure when you seek to retain it by force. 85

Tartuffe

If the purpose of comedy be to chastise human weaknesses I see no reason why any class of people should be exempt. 101

Folk whose own behaviour is most ridiculous are always to the fore in slandering others. 113

Just as, when honour puts men to the test, the truly brave are not those who make the biggest noise, so the truly pious, whose example we should ever follow, are not those who make the greatest show. 118

Men, in the main, are strangely made. They can never strike the happy mean: the bounds of reason seem too narrow for them: they must needs overact whatever part they play and often ruin the noblest things because they will go to extremems and push them too far. 118

There's a deal of difference between talking about a thing and doing it. 134

The less one deserves the less one dares to hope... 150
