

On the Image of "Hypocrisy" in Moliere's Works

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ABSTRACT

Molière as the preeminent figure of 17th-century French classical drama, he exposed the hypocrisy of feudal aristocracy and religious institutions through incisive satire and profound insight, his works allude to the moral corruption and institutional decay of feudal society. Centering on the archetype of the "hypocrite", this paper analyzes canonical texts such as *Tartuffe*, *Don Juan*, *The Miser* and *The School for Wives* across four dimensions: the duality of good and evil, the sociopolitical genesis of hypocrisy, innovations in comedic artistry, and the enduring influence of these characters. The study reveals that Molière's hypocrites not only critique the moral decay of feudal society but also unveil the complexity of human nature through a "tragic core beneath the comedic facade". Furthermore, the paper explores the cautionary significance of hypocrisy in modern contexts, affirming its timeless value as a literary archetype.

KEYWORDS

Moliere; Moliere's Works; neoclassicism; Character typical; Hypocrisy

1 Introduction

Moliere was a representative writer of 17th-century French classicism. In the whole history of European classical drama, Moliere is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding comedy masters. He and his writings have widely influenced the world and have lasted for hundreds of years. In his early years, Moliere traveled around France for more than ten years and created a series of farce works. Until the Louvre, King Louis XIV realized the characteristics of fighting the feudal forces from the play, so he became the protector of the troupe. Moliere troupe was able to perform many times in the palace. During the performance, the script performed by Moliere Troupe gradually shifted from traditional farce to classical drama, discussing the problems of the bourgeois family, warning the hypocrisy and falsehood in religious culture, and exposing the sharp and insurmountable contradictions between the decadent and backward patriarchal world outlook and the world view of the bourgeois family.

The "hypocritical" characters are the typical characters produced under the social system at that time, and also the epitome of the feudal bourgeois society under Moliere's pen. Between 1664 and 1669, Moliere, together with the musician Lu Li, successively created a love dance drama catering to the court king, and also created a series of powerful satirical comedies. Among them were the influential *Tartuffe*, *Don Juan* and *The Miser*, which tore apart the ugliness of the feudal aristocracy, stupidity and the hypocrisy of the church.

2 "Good" and "Evil": The Dual Contradictions within Hypocritical Characters

The essence of hypocrisy lies in the inconsistency between appearance and reality. Molière exploits this phenomenon to dissect the moral fissures of 17th-century French society. Through dramatized conflicts in his plots, Molière compels both his characters and the audience to confront inherent contradictions within power structures, religious beliefs, and social hierarchies. By meticulously depicting characters such as *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan*, Molière reveals to the audience more than just "good" and "evil"; he transcends simple moral dualism, exposing hypocrisy as both a personal moral flaw and value deficiency, and a societal structural demand, reflecting real phenomena under feudal society. This section explores how these characters embody hypocritical qualities of "good" and "evil", using their contradictory behaviors and language to reflect broader societal issues.

2.1 The "Evil" in Hypocrisy: Cunning and Desire

Hypocrites often cloak greed with moral or religious rhetoric. *Tartuffe*, the titular character of *Tartuffe*, epitomizes the exploitation of religious piety for personal gain. His declaration, "My soul is bound to heaven," serves not as a spiritual affirmation but as a strategic performance. When Orgon offers him control of his estate, *Tartuffe* theatrically resists: "Wealth chains the soul... How dare I accept?" Yet even as he utters these words, he eagerly seizes the legal deed. This calculated duality exposes his hypocrisy: *Tartuffe* weaponizes religious language to manipulate Orgon's trust, transforming divine rhetoric into a tool for material accumulation.

Molière's critique targets not only individual deceit but also institutional corruption. *Tartuffe*'s actions reflect the 17th-

century French clergy's conflation of spiritual authority with economic exploitation. Numerous historical examples exist. For instance, many parish priests controlled rural land under the guise of "spiritual guardianship" and extorted farmers through moral blackmail, it demands that believers donate their land to the church in their wills under the pretext of "saving souls", threatening them with "insincere confessions" to force the surrender of land rights. Molière juxtaposes Tartuffe's hypocrisy with the misuse of power in the real world, highlighting how religion uses spiritual control to maintain socio-economic dominance, emphasizing moral decay within society. Tartuffe's black robe, symbolizing his religious position, becomes a metaphor for opaque institutional power, and this is a theme underscored in Dorine's rebuke: "Your eyes are so delicate... it seems the flesh has too much control over you." (Act 3, Scene 2) The criticism of Tartuffe using religious guise to conceal his desires is a moral condemnation from the lower class towards the upper class.

2.2 The "Good" in Hypocrisy: Rebellion and Heroism

Notably, Molière's hypocrites are not entirely devoid of virtue. In contrast to Tartuffe's overt villainy, Don Juan represents a more ambiguous image of hypocrisy. He proclaims that "morality is but a chain for the weak", rejecting religious dogma and noble privileges, which makes him a critic of feudal norms. However, his actions of crossing class boundaries to deceive women, mocking marriage customs, and disregarding religious doctrines reflect spiritual emptiness, value deficiency, and skepticism towards traditional moral views, leading to nihilism and weakening his political stance.

Molière complicates this character: from a social perspective, Don Juan's "good" lies in dismantling oppressive feudal traditions, possessing the courage to challenge traditional dogmas, and having a unique code of conduct for nobility; however, Don Juan's "evil" is that he turns women into appendages of the nobility, perpetuating new forms of exploitation, transforming him from a critic of feudal society into its perpetrator.

This duality reflects the contradictions of 17th-century bourgeois ideology. As the rising merchant class sought to challenge aristocratic dominance, their critiques often masked self-interest. Don Juan's rebellion against arranged marriages, for instance, mirrors bourgeois attacks on feudal kinship networks. Yet his treatment of women like Charlotte, which is a peasant he seduces and discards, exposing the limits of this "progress." Molière suggests that liberation narratives, when divorced from ethical accountability, risk replicating the injustices they claim to oppose.

3 Democracy and Critique: The Sociopolitical Genesis of Hypocrisy image

The hypocrisy of 17th-century France was not merely a moral flaw but a structural phenomenon rooted in the strict social hierarchy of the time. At that period, the nobility acquired authority through divine rights and dynastic alliances, while the emerging bourgeoisie sought legitimate rights through commercial wealth. Both classes used moral rhetoric to mask their true motives for gaining benefits, leading to virtue and ethical behavior in society gradually becoming a performative currency. The brilliance of Molière's works lies in his use of drama to amplify and reveal this widespread deceit, employing characters like Harpagon and Arnolphe to dissect how the upper class utilized moral weapons to impose and sustain oppression over the populace. His plays transcend mere personal satire by questioning and critiquing the social and political mechanisms behind hypocrisy, thus criticizing the institutions and power structures inherent in feudal society.

3.1 Bourgeois Alienation: Moral as Economic Capital

In *The Miser*, the character of Harpagon embodies the moral contradictions within the bourgeoisie. Throughout the reading, we repeatedly encounter his maxim: "Frugality is a virtue." This statement is not a moral guide but rather a justification for his desire to hoard wealth privately. In his worldview, emotions and morals are merely tools for gaining profit. When his son, Cléante, requests financial support for his marriage, Harpagon responds, "Love? That's just an excuse for the poor!" Such direct association between emotional morality and money reveals a worldview that simplifies human relationships into transactional calculations, indicating a moral disconnection. This moral disconnection reflects the period of early capitalism's rise, where bourgeois values such as frugality and diligence became detached from public welfare and were repurposed for capital accumulation.

In Molière's work, his critique aligns with the economic realities of the time. During the tenure of Colbert, Louis XIV's finance minister, France implemented mercantilist policies prioritizing national wealth over social equity. Consequently, in *The Miser*, Harpagon's obsession with his chest of money, "They'll cut my throat!" exemplifies the satirical portrayal of the bourgeois class's reality during that era, where virtues were turned into tools to reinforce economic hierarchies. By depicting the greed of hypocritical characters as adherence to morality, Molière exposes the hypocrisy of a class that moralizes poverty and wealth while profiting from inequality.

3.2 Feudal Control: Education as a Tool for Consolidating Authority

The aristocracy wielded education for social control if the bourgeoisie weaponized it for profit. In *The School for Wives*, Arnolphe's imprisonment of Agnès under the pretext of "education" epitomizes feudal hypocrisy. His claim to "purify her mind" masks a project of patriarchal domination, where moral instruction becomes indoctrination. Agnès's rebellion, expressed through her statement "You teach me words but forbid me to thought", highlights the core paradox of feudal education: it appears as education on the surface but functions as discipline, suppressing human autonomy.

This scene from Molière's work alludes to issues of institutional corruption in real society. In 17th-century France, Louis XIV's Edict of Fontainebleau forced Protestant converts to Catholicism, with Huguenot children being compelled to attend Catholic schools for indoctrination, stripping them of religious and cultural autonomy. This historical context resonates with Arnolphe's silencing of Agnès, illustrating how feudal authority uses education to suppress dissent. It reveals the absurdity of authorities conflating dissent with immorality. Through dramatizing Agnès's gradual awakening, Molière critiques not only personal despotism but also the upper echelons' neglect and silence towards marginalized voices.

Molière situates this dynamic within broader institutional corruption. The Church's condemnation of Tartuffe for "blasphemy" mirrored Arnolphe's suppression of Agnès's voice, revealing how authority figures conflated dissent with immorality. By dramatizing Agnès's gradual awakening, Molière critiques not just individual tyranny but the systemic silencing of marginalized voices. Her eventual defiance:

I was a fool, I own, to think you right, And let my heart be governed by your spite. But Heaven has taught me, by this late remorse, That marriage without love is fatal curse. To wed Horace I'm bound, and I confess I trembled but to hear your shrewd address. But threats and force, whatever you intend, Shall never make me wed you in the end.

Agnès outwitting Arnolphe through naïve sincerity, symbolizes the fragility of regimes built on performative virtue.

3.3 The Social Contract of Hypocrisy

Molière's plays reveal hypocrisy as an unspoken social contract. The nobility claimed divinely granted power, the bourgeoisie moralized greed, and the Church monetized redemption, all of which required collective collusion.

The hypocrisy of the nobility's "divine right" is exemplified by Louis XIV's declaration "I am the state". In Molière's work *Tartuffe*, Orgon's family initially tolerates the hypocrite's piety because they believe power is granted by God. As a nobleman, Orgon, deluded by Tartuffe's false piety, believes obeying the "saint" fulfills a sacred duty, thereby forsaking rational judgment and exposing the blindness of noble authority and the hypocrisy of "divine right". This segment of the play satirizes the real-life phenomenon of the nobility's "divine right". At that time, Louis XIV proclaimed "I am the state", established the Versailles court etiquette system, and granted tax exemptions to the nobility. Through elaborate court rituals such as the "ceremony of rising" and the "ceremony of retiring", Louis XIV transformed the nobility into symbolic puppets of royal divine right, claiming "the king's power comes directly from God", while actually stripping the nobility of political power, leaving them with only a hollow title. The nobility used "divine obligation" as a pretext for tax exemption, which actually exacerbated fiscal exploitation, ultimately leading to the revolution, where the August Decrees of 1789 abolished privileges, and the narrative of divine right collapsed.

Secondly, the bourgeoisie's "moralization of greed" is reflected in the hypocrisy of tax farmers. French bourgeois tax farmers of the 17th century, like Nicolas Fouquet, prepaid taxes to the crown and exploited peasants, yet portrayed themselves as "public benefactors", building churches and hospitals as "acts of penance". This phenomenon of moralizing greed is also mirrored in Molière's plays. In the comedy *The Miser*, Harpagon treats his daughter's marriage as a debt collateral, revealing how the bourgeoisie alienates ethics into a capital game. Additionally, the nobility's tolerance of characters like Don Juan exposes the flexibility of moral standards. Although Don Juan's debauchery violates religious norms, his noble status spares him punishment until supernatural intervention occurs. Similarly, the nobles only act when Tartuffe threatens their material stability—a metaphor for the bourgeoisie's selective ethical engagement. Thus, Molière demonstrates how hypocrisy serves as a lubricant for power: elites can violate moral codes with little consequence, while dissenters face severe retribution.

Furthermore, the Church's "monetization of redemption" is evident in indulgences and the sale of ecclesiastical offices. Although the Council of Trent in the 16th century prohibited the direct sale of indulgences, the French Church in the 17th century still collected "voluntary donations", implying money could buy redemption, such as special contributions for St. Peter's Basilica, thus creating variants of indulgences. Bishopric positions were openly priced, for instance, Cardinal Richelieu paid 400,000 livres for the Diocese of Luçon, while lower-ranking priests had to remit their earnings to church authorities, forming a "redemption industry chain". Molière reflects this monetization of society by the Church in his works. Orgon gives his property to Tartuffe for "redemption", reflecting how the bourgeoisie alienates faith into a transaction, purchasing moral superiority with money. Tartuffe, positioning himself as God's agent, declares, "Who offends me, offends the King of Heaven", converting religious authority into actual control, subtly satirizing the societal malady of binding redemption with money and power.

The essence of the hypocritical social contract is a collusion between power and morality—nobility uses divine right to mask parasitism, the bourgeoisie uses morality to disguise exploitation, and the church justifies greed through redemption. Together, they weave a “sacred order”, that is, in reality, a web of lies serving feudal interests.

4 Innovation and breakthrough: the counterattack to the Social vices

In his first petition to Louis XIV, Molière wrote: “The duty of comedy is to correct human errors through entertainment. To fulfill this task, I believe the best approach is to attack the vices of our age with absurd and exaggerated portrayals.” This manifesto was not mere rhetoric but a revolutionary blueprint for theatrical reform. Hypocrisy, as one of the era’s most pervasive vices of 17th-century France, became Molière’s prime target—not through didactic sermons, but through a dual assault on dramatic form and moral complacency. By merging scathing satire with structural innovation, he transformed comedy into a scalpel, dissecting societal ills with surgical precision while redefining the boundaries of the genre itself.

4.1 Subversive character language and structure

Molière abandoned the classical tragedy’s refined language tradition, incorporating Parisian street slang into high-level drama. Engels once stated that the tendency of a work does not need to be explicitly mentioned but should emerge naturally from its scenes and plot. Molière’s works follow this principle as well. He integrates his satirical tendencies into the plot and characters, allowing audiences to genuinely feel the intended message of the work through detailed descriptions of specific characters’ language and structure, all within the carefully crafted developments of the plot, while experiencing laughter. Nobility is a typical characteristic of the hypocritical characters in his works. The language and structure of these “noble” individuals reveal the contradictory and decadent feudal vices they embody.

In *Tartuffe*, Molière constructs a rhetorical system directly opposing religious hypocrisy through the vernacular language of the maid Dorine. When Tartuffe declares, “If I dared to be hypocritical, I would refuse this gift”, he feigns rejection of Orgon’s property. Dorine counters with slang that exposes his hypocrisy: “Your eyes are so delicate... it seems your flesh has too much control over you.”. In this dialogue, Tartuffe’s original French lines employ the Latin-derived term “hypocrite” (from Greek “hypokritēs”, meaning “stage actor”) to mask moral superiority, while Dorine’s original lines choose “délicat” (meaning “delicate”), a term describing the aesthetic malaise of the nobility, implying that his hypocrisy is a byproduct of class privilege. Additionally, her use of “chair” (meaning “flesh”) which in Christian context refers to “the vessel of original sin” is stripped of its theological veneer by Dorine, who reinterprets it as a straightforward expression of physical desire.

Dorine’s lines subvert the traditional grandeur of drama, employing short sentences, ellipses, and rhetorical questions to mimic the chatty style of market women, creating a rhythmic contrast with Tartuffe’s lengthy moral expositions. This “difference in speech speed” allows the audience to intuitively grasp the cumbersome nature of elite discourse versus the sharpness of street wisdom. Moreover, despite being a servant, Dorine becomes the sole character persistently unmasking Tartuffe throughout the play. The original French term “domine” in her lines serves a double entendre, signifying both “control” and alluding to “Dominus”, meaning “God”. Through her vernacular, Molière grants lower-class language the critical power to deconstruct authority.

In addition to subverting the language of drama, Molière also innovated in structure by employing repetitive dialogue to expose the hypocrisy of societal institutions. In *The Miser*, the bourgeois character Jourdain’s mechanical imitation of noble language, revealed through repetitive lines, exposes the inherent emptiness of feudal hierarchy. For instance, in Act 2, Scene 4, Jourdain flatters the noble Dorante: “Oh, my elegant wit!... My noble lady!... How graceful you are!” receiving a dismissive response of “You’re joking” from Dorante. In five exchanges, Jourdain repeats “belle” (meaning “beautiful”) seven times, referring to “wit” “person” and “grace”, creating confusion and disorder. This absurd repetition and indiscriminate praise reveal the bourgeoisie’s symbolic understanding of aristocratic culture—they do not grasp the cultural connotations behind “belle”, viewing it merely as a pass for social elevation. Additionally, Jourdain’s lengthy praises contrast with Dorante’s brief responses, forming a structural oppression. The nobility maintains their class superiority through restrained language, while the bourgeoisie’s excessive expression highlights their cultural inferiority. This “difference in linguistic length” presents a microcosm of feudal hierarchy to the audience.

4.2 Unique art of comedy

Molière employed the technique of “tears of laughter” to reveal the tragic aspects of his comic characters, subverting traditional boundaries of comedy. Beneath the laughter, Molière’s plays conceal undercurrents of tragedy, this duality breaking the rigid limits of classical comedy. In *The Miser*, Harpagon’s frantic monologue after discovering his treasure

chest has been stolen, "Thieves! They've cut my throat!" causes the play to oscillate between farce and pathos. Harpagon, bound by greed to view gold as the blood of life, evokes both ridicule and sympathy. This "tears of laughter" technique was later refined by Chekhov and Beckett, transforming comedy into a mirror reflecting societal corruption. The audience's laughter gradually shifts to critique individuals, further prompting reflection on systemic issues. This unique "tears of laughter" technique marks a paradigm shift in the methods of comedic literary expression.

Furthermore, Molière further utilized the concept of "carnival" to undermine authority, a concept later theorized by Bakhtin. In *Don Juan*, the licentious feast of Don Juan collides violently with the sudden arrival of the Stone Guest, a ghostly emissary of divine retribution. As the nobles flee in panic, shouting "Run! The statues walk", they unconsciously degrade their piety into cowardice. This farce reveals that faith is merely a performance in the social activities of the upper class. The stage becomes a blurred space where hierarchical structures dissolve, and sacred truths are revealed as fraudulent rituals.

Even under the constraints of the classical "unities" (time, place, action), Molière designed formal resistance. He adhered to the unities but expanded their expressive scope. In *Tartuffe*, Molière maintained the unity of place by setting the story within Orgon's household, yet this internal narrative reflected real society, thus transforming the unity of place from "Orgon's household" to "a microcosm of corruption". The traditional family environment, typically seen as a bastion of order, became a battleground for Tartuffe's influence to gradually permeate, reflecting the societal phenomenon of the church encroaching on private life. By compressing systemic corruption into a single location, Molière relaxed its constraints, demonstrating that formal rigidity can coexist with radical critique.

5 Reference and renewal: The Enduring Impact of Hypocritical Archetypes

Molière's hypocrites transcend literature, becoming metaphors for universal societal flaws. *Tartuffe's* legacy permeates later critiques of religious hypocrisy.

Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1963) stands as a seminal postcolonial reworking of Molière's works. Brother Jero, a self-proclaimed prophet in post-independence Nigeria, mirrors Tartuffe's religious charlatanry but layers it with anticolonial irony. His declaration "God needs gold to illuminate mankind" parodies both Christian missionary rhetoric and the extractive logic of colonial capitalism. However, Soyinka's critique extends beyond religious hypocrisy: Jero's manipulation of communal faith reflects the complicity of indigenous elites in perpetuating colonial power structures. As Soyinka remarked: "If religion were taken away, I'd be happy." His work underscores both African independence consciousness and the timeless vitality of Molière's satire. His satire targets not faith itself but its weaponization by neocolonial actors.

Like Tartuffe's theatrical piety, Jero performs miracles with a transistor radio, this is a symbol of modernity's intrusion into spiritual realms. His "healing" sessions, broadcast to gullible followers, echo Tartuffe's staged asceticism. Yet Soyinka adds a uniquely African dimension: Jero's hybridity—part Pentecostal preacher, part Yoruba trickster god "Èṣù", exposes the identity contradictions in postcolonial culture. Here, Molière's critique of hypocrisy merges with Fanonian theories of colonial alienation, illustrating how borrowed ideologies corrupt authentic cultural revival.

In the current internet era, social media has given rise to a new type of hypocrite—the "internet celebrity"—whose meticulously crafted "authenticity" mirrors the modern-day Tartuffe's devout performance. Activists on Instagram advocate for sustainability while promoting fast fashion, and "mental health advocates" on TikTok exploit personal trauma for profit. Their slogans often revolve around "living your truth", much like Don Juan's motto, "morality is but a chain", commercializing "rebellion" to make it the most enticing highlight in the online wave, enticing others to click.

The interaction metrics between platforms and poster are one way of earning profits in the digital age, and many methods of obtaining these metrics amplify hypocrisy. On the Chinese social video platform Bilibili, where young people gather, a British uploader named "Fulinfang" went viral with an entertaining video comparing Chinese and foreign phenomena, garnering millions of views. The platform seized the opportunity to feature the video on its homepage, making it accessible to more people. Interaction metrics surged rapidly, prompting this British uploader to continuously update videos on the topic. However, upon deeper investigation, it was revealed that behind his pursuit of profit and audience admiration on this platform, he had previously openly posted racist remarks and mocked history on other social media platforms. This profit-driven behavior, akin to Tartuffe's paradoxical actions, turns "virtue" into a tangible form of capital.

6 Conclusion

The image of hypocrites in Molière's works is a product of feudal society, with each stage being a microcosm of society and a mirror reflecting the hidden ailments of feudalism.

The hypocrite character exhibits duality—"evil" and "good". Molière portrays characters like Tartuffe and Don Juan as representatives of religious and noble upper classes, highlighting their contradictory behaviors and thoughts to reveal their true moral corruption. Simultaneously, through the hypocritical hero Don Juan's aimless rebellion against feudal society, Molière points out that these characters recognize the inadequacies of feudal society but, due to a lack of values and morals, resort to extreme actions, which only exacerbate the situation. In summary, Molière exposes the essence of hypocrites as a moral deficiency in human nature.

Hypocrisy is not merely a moral deficiency but also a phenomenon rooted in the strict hierarchical system of feudal society. Seventeenth-century French society was an era of divine right and utilitarianism. The upper class used moral embellishments to mask their true motives for gaining benefits, gradually turning morality into a form of behavioral currency; education became a tool for ruling thoughts and consolidating authority under feudalism; social regulations that exploited the people and controlled their thoughts were moralized, forcing people to comply, essentially a collusion between power and morality. In summary, the essence of hypocrite characters is a moral deficiency in human nature and the decadence of feudal society.

Through innovative character representation and dramatic expression, Molière precisely analyzes societal phenomena, using comedy to magnify and satirize hypocrites and social flaws. This is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, the subversive language and linguistic structure in the plays. Molière integrated Parisian street slang into high drama, overturning traditional theatrical language; repetitive mechanical imitation of language patterns showcase some bourgeoisie's flattery towards nobles and the hypocrisy behind aristocratic culture. Second, Molière employs the technique of "tearful laughter" in comedy, revealing the tragic nature of his comedic characters, subverting the boundaries of traditional comedy. Additionally, he expanded the scope of the unity of place in the three unities, broadening the fixed event scenes to reflect society as a whole.

Molière's hypocrite characters have become metaphors for universal societal defects. His influence permeates later literary criticisms of religious hypocrisy. Moreover, Molière not only critiqued the moral crisis and societal flaws of the 17th century but also foreshadowed various forms of superficiality in today's internet age. In an era where "personal branding" and "social media influence" obscure reality, revisiting Molière's works serves as a mirror of enlightenment, reminding us that the essence of comedy lies in steadfastly revealing the truths of the times.

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