

The Unlearned Lesson of *Tartuffe* or the Comedic Typology and the Fight Against Fake News

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Abstract

It is often thought that the threat posed by *fake news* is a problem that strictly affects the modern world in which we live in and has become increasingly more prevalent with the rise of social media. In truth, *fake news* has been around for a far long a time that we might think, and its presence could be traced all the way back to ancient times. Although it was not always labeled as such, throughout history there have always been leaders or governments who have tried to manipulate the masses by feeding them false information and art has often been used both as a tool for propaganda and also as a means to depict the use of that propaganda. That is also the case with the famous comedy *Tartuffe* by Molière.

Keywords: Molière, *Tartuffe*, comedic typology, impostor, fake news, laughter, social media.

How to cite: Sinca, A. (2021). The Unlearned Lesson from *Tartuffe* or the Comedic Typology and the Fight Against Fake News. *Doctoral Horizons* 1(3), 50-59.

Introduction

The history of mankind is filled with events whose recording and interpretation were subject to the decisions and rulings of those who were either in power at the time of their occurrence or had the necessary levers to influence the decisions of the authorities. A relevant example in this regard is the seventeenth century

Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament from France, a secret society made up of clergy and laity, which, although banned in 1660, continued to carry out its activity of pursuing and punishing those who did not respect the moral conducts imposed by it. With the staging of *Tartuffe* in 1664, in which Molière vehemently condemns bigotry, the aforementioned secret society will launch a coordinated campaign to denigrate the great playwright, resorting to manipulation and spreading false information.

The action of manipulation is defined as influencing public opinion through the media, resulting in the imposition of certain behaviors without resorting to coercion. Slander is the false and tendentious statement made with the aim of discrediting someone's honor or reputation. *Fake news* is a completely false news or news that contains partially true information, created in order to form the wrong opinions of those with whom it comes into contact. All of the above will be used against Molière, by the infamous so-called *Cabal of the Devout* society.

About typologies

When we speak of a typology we refer to that sum of physical, mental and moral characteristics, fixed in the public's consciousness both by the literary tradition and by the fact that they represent universal human types, and this sum is the one that allows the distinguishing, in the eyes and understanding of the spectator, between an impostor and a miser, to give just a few examples.

What makes a typology comedic is incongruity, as expounded in many theories of the source of the comic, "it is commonly said that ridicule is produced by incongruity which always involves the manifestation of at least two things or qualities, which naturally contain opposite features within themselves" (Bain, 1865, p. 247). At the same time, ridicule was also defined by the moral and moral decay theory first postulated by Aristotle, which claims that what causes laughter is something unworthy that tickles the petty human need to feel superior (Sully, 1902, pp. 119-120). A compatriot of Molière's, Henri Bergson, will help us understand this abstract notion of incongruity as *something mechanical applied to something living* (1992). At the same time, for an incongruity to be comical, it must consist of a mismatch that is resolved in a way that is unexpected or surprising to the person who notices it.

In *the Anatomy of Criticism*, Northop Frye uses Aristotelian terms to define the most widespread comedic typologies, thus the *alazon*, often constructed in opposition to an *eirone* or "the one who despises himself" (1972, p. 215), is the impostor character who can be found even in tragedies or dramas, even if a comedic typology is predominant.

Obstructionist characters dominated by humor are almost always impostors, although more often they are characterized not so much by hypocrisy as by lack of self-knowledge. The multitude of comedic scenes in which one character monologues contentedly, while another addresses the audience, sarcastically and separately, presents the dispute between *eirone* and *alazon* in its purest form, while indicating that the spectator is on the side of the *eirone* (Frye, 1972, p. 215).

In the case of Molière's famous play, the Tartuffe–Orgon couple is not presented as a classic opposition between *alazon* and *eirone* because Orgon's typology can be defined both as *eirone* and as *agroikos*, the bearish brute.

The impostor, at least when we talk about comedies, gives himself away from afar, this *alazon* usually augmenting a fixed idea, which is generally conservative in nature, to mask his perverse intentions or of reprehensible moral quality. This is also the case of Tartuffe, where the extreme contrast between appearance and essence is made possible only by the pen of the brilliant Jean-Baptiste, who manages to ensure the necessary proportions for the dramatic action to be credible. The character's first appearance in Act III, scene 2, features a Tartuffe who wants to give the impression that he has just self-flagellated, but being pressured by the urgent need to share his alms with those in the prison, he asks his servant to continue in his place, all the while making sure that he is heard by those around him so that his piety does not go unnoticed. An exaggeration that the playwright is sure to emphasize for its reception by the audience through Dorine's short but sharp reply. Thus, from the first presentation of the character framed in the typology of the impostor, the playwright defines his bidirectional features. The first direction is outlined by the way the character acts, and the second is traced by the lines by which the character justifies his actions:

TARTUFFE (as soon as he sees Dorine, turns his head and speaks to his son through the door still open):
 Laurent, lock up my hair shirt and my scourge,

And pray for freedom from each carnal urge.
 If anyone comes calling, say I have gone
 To share my alms with the poor souls in prison. (Molière, 1955, p. 313)

Tartuffe's impact

Human nature carries within itself a germ of doubt and a grain of circumspection, a fact that has allowed us to progress over the centuries, but at the same time this characteristic can make us doubt the strength of comedy and the exposure of such a typology to the public. Under these auspices, in order to be able to dispel any inherent doubts, it should be noted that the thrill produced by the spectacular performance of the play *Tartuffe* led to its prohibition for five years, so strong was its impact and so deeply frightened were those portrayed by Molière (1955, pp. 259-260). The political and social turmoil produced by it shook Paris and was felt throughout France. If other social categories ridiculed by Molière had revolted in the past, the representatives of the Catholic Church did not give up until the play was banned. The opposition against this text was so virulent that today only its third version survives, the others being destroyed and, consequently, lost to posterity.

In a petition to the king regarding *Tartuffe*, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known to the public as Molière, explains that being in the service of comedy, whose purpose is to correct people by amusing them, the greatest service he believes he can bring to the French kingdom and its inhabitants is to attack the vices of his time, depicting them in manifestly ridiculous typologies. Thus, people of good faith will be more difficult to deceive by hypocrites, who will benefit from the opportunity to recognize them even by the grimaces of the excesses of false piety, which Molière (1965) says he studied carefully before staging, precisely so that the public could easily make a distinction as clear as possible between these impostors worthy of condemnation and true believers.

If we were to try a brief description of the typology of the impostor Tartuffe, we would notice that he appeals predominantly to emotional arguments, especially those that enjoy a certain conservative nuance in order to be able to impose his opinions, and does not hesitate to discredit his opponents by compromising, nor does he discount the corrupt actions of those opponents when he fails to convince the decision-makers in his favor. His *modus operandi* is reminiscent of the secret

services that operated within the communist totalitarian regime. Fortunately for the situation described above, this time we are referring to a work of fiction, more precisely a comedy, and its manipulation tactics and attempts to assume power do not ultimately produce material damage or victims, as would have happened if the aforementioned actions had taken place in the world we live in, as, unfortunately, over the centuries, it has often happened.

Today, as yesterday

We live in an era in which we hear the term *fake news* more and more often, an aspect due in part to the multiplication of media, with the advent of the internet. If we were to use a simplistic manner to describe the aforementioned term, it designates false information, camouflaged in the form of news, which generally originates in the online environment after which it is spread by broadcasters, either naïve or with malicious intentions, thus making the transition to other media, even penetrating authentic news channels. It should be noted that this information is released with the aim of influencing the opinions of the target audience or occasionally to amuse them. Regardless of the purpose of a *fake news*, its precise effects will always be impossible to predict because the medium of dissemination of the message contained by the *fake news* is extremely generous and varied, and the sources that redistribute it are extremely heterogeneous, reaching extremely diverse social strata, regardless of the social, cultural or professional profile of those layers. Even when the message contained by the *fake news* is benign in nature, its destructive potential, which is particularly difficult to quantify, turns it into an informational element with a high degree of dangerousness, as shown by the material developed by the Romanian Intelligence Service, entitled *Fake News - AWARENESS* (2023), and on certain occasions it may even be detrimental to public health (Przemyslaw, Kasprzycka-Waszak and Kubanek, 2018, pp. 115-118).

With the spread of the internet, but especially of social networks, the speed and means of propagation of *fake news* have grown exponentially. This is due to the various groups that can be accessed through mobile networks and data services such as the messaging application "Whatsapp" or the virtual social network "Facebook". Whether or not we ourselves are part of these groups or networks, we have friends, acquaintances or people with whom we come into contact in different social or professional contexts, who are part of such groups. For this reason, it is

practically impossible not to contact or be affected in one way or another by the information disseminated through material such as *fake news*. *Fake news* can easily infiltrate and spread quickly because we tend to take the information we receive as such, especially when it comes from friends or people in our entourage, and all this journey of information from group to group makes it almost impossible to identify the original source (Oprea, Dănilieț and Țibrigan, 2021, pp. 4-60). In certain cases, even when it is possible that the original source was a bona fide one, there is the possibility that the person was also fooled by the quality of the imposture *fake news*. Another cause is the personal information that each of us shares in the world with a naivety comparable to that of Orgon, every time we fill out a virtual questionnaire to find out what kind of car we would be if we were a car or with which character in the *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars* we are alike. Driven by an intense curiosity and under the false sense of security that we have because we are alone in front of the computer or the phone, we need to know if we are an SUV or a Coupe, if we are Gandalf or Galadriel, Luke or Anakin, we are willing to offer intimate details about ourselves and our lives to strangers who manage to give us the feeling that they just want to amuse us. It reveals hidden information about us, which we have always suspected, but we ourselves were too modest to believe it, that is, we expose ourselves to the same risks and consequences as Mariane's father.

Most studies conducted in recent years, such as the aforementioned one by the Romanian Intelligence Service or the one conducted by Loughborough University's Online Civic Culture Centre in 2019 (derby.ac.uk, 2023), to name just a few, show that the *fake news* user tries to manipulate his targets by resorting to emotional arguments of a conservative nature, with a point of origin that is difficult to identify, but which manages to create the sensation of familiarity of the source, by spreading it on message groups or by posting it on various social media pages. This is due to the fact that almost all of us check our Facebook or Whatsapp at least once before, during or after we have carried out a current activity, and those who do not do so usually have a certain amount of time dedicated to this activity, whether in the morning, before starting the day's activities, either in the evening at the end of the day, or on the way to a certain destination.

In order to be able to outline a clearer picture of what has been expressed above, it would be appropriate to carry out an exercise of imagination that would involve the action in *Tartuffe* as a series of news, posts, sensational headlines,

tweets and promos. We will try in the following to see in what form this action would appear to us briefly and if we can identify *fake news*.

The story of the first contact between Tartuffe and Orgon, recounted by Elmire's husband to her brother, can be read, through this filter, as one of those inspirational posts about people who, following a personal experience, as deep as it is mysterious, realized that life is about dedication and generosity and who then urge you to donate to an obscure account. Tartuffe, although he poses as a Christian, as bitter as he is humble, nevertheless takes care to distinguish himself from the group through a completely extraordinary altruism, sharing with the other beggars right under the eyes of his benefactors the alms received which always seemed too great for his unworthiness. Skillfully placed in an environment that is familiar to Orgon, using the emotional factor and displaying ultra-conservative values, Tartuffe begins to implant himself in the consciousness of the target.

By reconstructing the chronology of events in the play, the next information we receive about Tartuffe is during his first scene with Dorine (at which point Tartuffe has been in the house and under the protection of Orgon for some time), basically the character's entrance into the scene. Here we are dealing with a sensational newspaper headline that could be imagined in the form: "SERVANT DORINE PUSHES CITIZENS TO DEBAUCHERY!". Beauty, as well as perversity, lie exclusively in the eyes of the viewer, but in this case the impostor in question not only betrays his own erotic frustrations, but tries to sow doubt by discrediting, but without other receiver than Dorine his attack remains unsuccessful. Luckily for Dorine, we didn't find a person to comment on the tendentious post in our imagination exercise.

The first attempt to conquer Elmire ends in disaster for the rest of the house, Tartuffe quickly retreating and using a stratagem, unfortunately far too present today close to the borders of the European Union, in which, from an obvious aggressor to the eye of any lucid audience, the impostor sets himself up as a victim, trying to transfer the blame, in a first phase, on the victim, and then, in the presence of others, they falsely admit their sins, succeeding in the effect of diverting, in the minds of the most naïve in the play, the guilt from the aggressor to the victim. A fact that seems incredible to achieve, but which is too easily circumscribed exclusively to the theatrical sphere, inducing among the spectators the erroneous feeling that only in theatre such events are possible.

Feeling his newly acquired authority threatened, Tartuffe takes the necessary precautions, but the scandal hits him in the middle of the second attempt to conquer Elmire, when Orgon, who was hiding under the table, needs an extremely strong dose of reality to escape the effect of manipulation and the lie of which he was the victim of, in this way demonstrating how easy a false idea can be implanted, but also how difficult it is for an objective factor to remove that idea.

From the dictatorship established under Orgon, through the manipulation of Tartuffe, we pass to the dictatorship under Tartuffe, and this change of regime brings what it has brought for all despots and dictators from the beginning of this world to the present day, namely the exacerbation of the dictatorship and the isolation from the civilized world, but above all the acceleration of the end of the one who committed the crime, that is, of the criminal Tartuffe.

If in a work of fiction we can be amused by actions such as those committed by Tartuffe, in everyday life the actions of this comedic typology of the impostor become tragic through their devastating consequences. If Orgon had not benefited from royal support, the swindler would have acquired all his material and immaterial assets by deception, an event that is not very different from so many cases of abuse and aggression of all kinds presented in the evening news.

Conclusions

Comedic typologies allow us the necessary detachment to analyze and lucidly observe the situation and correct the exposed mistakes, from the collective comfort of *the audience* that is well protected in the privacy of the darkness of the auditorium. But if the events and lessons in *Tartuffe* were a journalistic or social-media account of a country in crisis, in which the authority (Orgon) allows itself to be manipulated by *fake news* (Tartuffe) and dictatorship is established (for Mariane and the rest of the house), how would we act? Could we finally learn the lesson of *Tartuffe* and stop letting ourselves be guided only by emotions and familiarity when it comes to intimate or sensitive things or, worse, our own life? Will we have Dorine's lucidity when we are exposed to *fake news* or will we be as gullible as Orgon, risking destroying destinies out of naivety or lack of information? If we were to keep the limits of the proposed exercise of imagination, we could imagine that if Gertrude had read *Tartuffe*, we would risk dealing with the *Trial of Claudius* instead of the well-known *Hamlet*.

As in the case of comedic typology, when we are exposed to fake *news* or the manipulative actions of some interest groups, it is important not to forget that the recognizable elements are already there, it is up to us to identify them and act accordingly.

Considering the cyclical nature with which the history of mankind repeats itself, under various iterations, we can see that Molière himself was the victim of what today we would call *fake news*, as the great French playwright himself wrote to the Sun King:

You can imagine how disagreeable it is for me to be exposed daily to the insults of these gentlemen, how much harm such slander will do me in the world, and how much it is in my interest to be purified of deceit, and to let it be known to the public that my comedy is not at all as they describe it. (Molière, 1965)

Fortunately, history has fully avenged Molière, since few people can name today three members of the Cabal of the Devout, so influential at the time, among the few who still know of its existence, but everyone knows at least three plays or at least three characters of those of the famous Jean-Baptiste.

Molière was a free, profound and courageous spirit, who hated hypocrisy and imposture, because of the danger they represent for man, for society, for the soul. That is why it would be a pity if now, more than 400 years after his birth, we persist in error, refuse the great lessons of humanity that Molière taught us without didacticism in a funny and ironic way, and not expose imposture or not charge hypocrisy wherever they harm the fundamental and inalienable freedom and security of every man.

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