Maids: An Analysis of Molière’s Female Ideal in Tartuffe and The Learned Ladies

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Abstract

This poster examines apparent contradictions in Molière’s feminine ideal through two of his plays: Tartuffe and The Learned Ladies. Written at different points during his career but sharing many significant similarities, these plays reveal a struggle on Molière’s part to come to terms with the evolving role of women at the time. Molière’s perspective on women is analyzed through the two maids in these plays, Dorine and Martine, who present differing ideas in their dialogue and their role as servants. Using the themes, historical context, and arguments and counterarguments of each play, this poster addresses some of the ambiguity in Molière’s writing.

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This study examined two plays, *Tartuffe* and *The Learned Ladies* by Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, more commonly known as Molière, to assess the contradictions within the plays and better understand the playwright’s struggle to reconcile the evolving role of women during his time period as illustrated in his treatment of the character of the maid in his plays.
Molière’s technique of using the character of the maid to express his opinion, raises several questions about those characters.

- What is the role of the maid within the plays?
- Why did Molière choose to express his views on women through such outspoken female characters?

Answering these questions will determine not only the significance of the maids, but also illustrate how they align with Molière’s opinion of women.
Significance of the Study

As the role and status of women have evolved over the course of history, the portrayal of women and cultural attitudes towards them have changed. Examining the representation of women in art from other eras is critical to understanding this evolution. The cultural and social context of the time coupled with a modern lens can yield insight into how ideas of femininity have both shaped and been shaped by history.
The Plays

Tartuffe
- Orgon is under the influence of Tartuffe, a hypocritical con artist.
- Orgon’s wife and family devise a plan to save their wealth and their daughter from an unwanted marriage to Tartuffe.
- They are too late and Tartuffe almost makes off with the family money, but is stopped by the king. Everything ends well.

The Learned Ladies
- The women of the house are infatuated with Trissotin, the pretentious scholar, whom the mother wants her daughter, Henriette, to marry.
- Other members of the household must band together to stop the foolishness and allow Henriette to marry the man she loves.
- Using trickery, the family exposes Trissotin (who is after money) and succeeds in chasing him off.

*Note the similarities between the two plays.*
The Maids

The maids have much in common: both are unmarried, outspoken and direct. Common sense is their strongest asset.

- **Dorine (Tartuffe)**
  - Practical, observant, skeptical
  - Confidant of Orgon’s daughter (Mariane)
  - Helps devise plot to expose Tartuffe
  - Presents seemingly feminist viewpoints

- **Martine (The Learned Ladies)**
  - Uneducated, unrefined speech, little respect for authority
  - Instrumental in exposing Trissotin
  - Testifies about the roles of husband and wife, antiquated views by today’s standards
Analysis - *Tartuffe*

- Satirizes hypocrisy
- Molière targets religion, Tartuffe serving as the representation of religious hypocrisy
- Dorine provides a vantage point from which to judge the hypocrisy of others
- Molière displays a range of moral judgment, in which those who lead a simple, honest life are the most respectable
- Dorine and Tartuffe battle for control, each with a different motive
  - Tartuffe wants the family’s wealth
  - Dorine wants to protect her employers and stop the hypocrite
Satirizes scholarly pretention (particularly in women, though not exclusively)
Seemingly more misogynistic of the two plays
Specifically targets women’s salons, places for women to practice the art of conversation and discuss worldly subjects
Seems to demonstrate the “correct” and “incorrect” way to be feminine
Similar moral judgments on wealth and status
Asserts that common sense should be held above all else, and that common sense includes traditional gender roles
To fully establish Molière’s view of women, further research into his body of work is required. These two plays are significant in his career and they highlight some of the themes and challenges he took on. While they are similar in form, their content appears to be at odds with each other. Molière seemingly believed women were extremely capable but still supported traditional gender roles. These plays seem to advocate the powerful but understated role of women in maintaining order and sanity.
Attempts to reevaluate the role of women in society were still in their infancy during this time.

Molière was grappling with these issues in his work, but lacked resources linguistically and ideologically because the feminist movement did not exist yet.

A strong case could be made either way for whether or not these plays are misogynistic in a targeted way.

Molière doesn’t target women exclusively, frequently satirizing men as well.

These plays are a product of their time, often using misogynistic language.
Works cited


