CHAPTER SIX

SOCIOECONOMIC INTEGRITY
AND PARASITISM

The most far-reaching transgression of social codes to be treated in Molière's theater involves the imposition of external, parasitic processes on the carefully balanced systems of the société d'états. To appreciate the importance placed on socioeconomic integrity by the mid-seventeenth-century audience, it is essential to remember that to live in the world, *vivre dans le monde*, carried a connotation of unbroken contact with a network of human benefits and obligations. We have already seen in a variety of economic and social documents that Molière's contemporaries perceived themselves to be highly interdependent and subject to the unpredictable demands of a "permanent" power structure. Thus, there was always an emphasis on self-control, on the ability to subordinate the particular interest to the general well-being of the larger social body.

In society, where almost all considerations were relative, the introduction of absolute, nonsocial goals—especially those demanding total commitment from the head of the family—could disrupt the primary functions of exchange, drastically reorganize the structures of affiliation, and work to the detriment of family survival, consolidation of wealth, and the welfare of the state. It may seem incredible that such cancer-like distortions could take place in the conformist atmosphere of the ancien régime, but one must not forget the tremendous demands that this world made of its citizens: constant vigilance.
for indicators of rank, observance of specialized duties, and adherence to heterogenous standards of behavior must have placed a great burden on the burghers who were seeking at the same time to claim and defend the most advantageous positions in the changing order. At times these overwhelming responsibilities must have forced some people to look for a simpler solution that would predetermine all questions of value and behavior, orienting priorities of kinship, finance, and status around a single transcendent end. A soul free of sin, a body impregnable to disease, or some other single goal is thus raised to an all-powerful position, and the person supposed to bring about the desired transformation is allowed by the gullible host to dictate disastrous terms to him.

The sort of parasitism that replaces mutual responsibility with personal imperatives was certainly what Jean Domat had in mind when he formulated his third general rule of law: “Ne faire rien en son particulier qui blesse l’ordre public.” The jurist’s sweeping statement encompasses such a variety of misallocations of value that one is tempted to exclude apparently innocuous eccentricities, yet the two external goals on which Le Tartuffe and Le Malade imaginaire focus, the salvation of the soul and the body, belong to this same superficially harmless category. Molière’s attention was drawn to these problems from a relatively early point in his career: the ill-defined movement of préciosité appears to exercise a pernicious influence over the family of Cathos, Magdalon, and Gorgibus in Les Précieuses ridicules (1659). A full-scale confrontation is only averted because the girls demonstrate a high degree of ineptitude and because their false noble suitors steal the show. No précieux parasite emerges to exploit the young ladies’ absolute devotion to the language and lifestyle of Le Grand Cyrus.

It was in 1664, with the first production of Le Tartuffe, that the threat of an invasion of values first gained the complete
attention of the dramatist. There is, of course, considerable disagreement among scholars as to what was contained in the 1664 version. Was it made up of approximately the first three acts of the eventual 1669 version, or was there, as John Cairncross has argued, a finished three-act play to which Molière later added acts two and five? In either case, the radical realignment of Orgon’s priorities under the influence of Tartuffe would have been clear, and there would have been some kind of unmasking of the hypocrite. The earliest version of the play already featured the conflict between the social interests of the household and the egotistical motives of Tartuffe. The hinge that joins these two elements is the comic *paterfamilias* Orgon. After all, Tartuffe’s role, which was played by the character actor Du Croisy, is a vivid but relatively brief one in terms of stage time and proportion of lines. It is true that many critics have been preoccupied with the problem of identifying a real life prototype for the character, but his spiritual pronouncements (let us not make the mistake of calling them beliefs) represent a veritable fruit salad of religious doctrines, where Jansenist and Jesuit, Pascal and Bourdaloue, Bossuet and Fénelon, clergy and lay directors, Charpy de Sainte-Croix and the prince de Conti, Monsieur de Saci and Crétenet, all are combined into a single archetypal figure.

It is the host Orgon who makes the arch-parasite possible. The character clearly was a delight for Molière, offering him an extraordinarily wide range of dramatic and comic techniques, from repetition and accumulation (the “pauvre homme” sequence), misdirected rage (unsuccessful attempts to strike the noisy Dorine), and extreme stupefaction (his delayed appearance from under the table), to ironic reversal of roles (his efforts to persuade Madame Pernelle that Tartuffe really is a cad). The audience cannot help but share Elmire’s sentiment that Orgon is a dupe worthy of undivided attention: “A voir ce que je vois, je
ne sais plus que dire, /Et votre aveuglement fait que je vous admire" (4. 3. 1313–14). Tartuffe can trick, amuse, and even surprise, as when he manages to turn the tables on Damis’s accusations; but he is incapable of the depth of emotion, the exemplarity of error that has driven Orgon to admit a parasite into his house.

The wealth of Orgon’s family assures its members a high social standing and a maximum degree of worldly comfort—rare benefits in the 1660s. Orgon owns his own home, for it is included in the donation he signs over to Tartuffe between the third and fourth acts. His absence at the beginning of the play could well have been due to a visit to a property in the country, like the one from which Arnolphe returns in L’Ecole des femmes. Besides Mme Pernelle’s maid, Flipote, the family has engaged the services of Dorine, an expensive suivante. Dorine alludes to her master’s considerable wealth when she recommends that he use some of it to marry his daughter, Mariane, to a man of importance rather than to a penniless devot: “A quel sujet aller, avec tout votre bien, /Choisir un gendre gueux?” (2. 2. 483–84). Luxury abounds, permitting the women of the household to wear the finest clothes, a state of ostentation that shocks Madame Pernelle. She tells her daughter-in-law: “Vous êtes dépensière; et cet état me blesse, /Que vous alliez vêtue ainsi qu’une princesse” (1. 1. 29–30; emphasis added). The word état points to a social significance. This petty jealousy over a showy gown for the radiant Elmire is a subtle indication of the uneasiness that accompanies success in the high bourgeois family. The existence of superfluous riches invites unusual patterns of consumption that sometimes inhibit Orgon’s understanding of what is happening, as he describes in his account of his charitable gifts to Tartuffe: “Je lui faisais des dons; mais avec modestie /Il me voulait toujours en rendre une partie” (1. 5. 293–94). Con men through the ages have always known that a
glut of money, even an imaginary one, will cause normally thrifty and prudent citizens to become disoriented and to fall victim to well-calculated schemes.

The abundance of money in Orgon’s household affects the conduct of all its members. Mariane has an inheritance of her own, independent of the patrimony managed by her father, which she offers to surrender to him if he will refrain from ordering her to marry Tartuffe: “Vos tendresses pour lui ne me font point de peine; / Faites-les éclater, donnez-lui votre bien, / Et, si ce n’est assez, joignez-y tout le mien” (4. 3. 1294–96). Her suitor, Valère, has a carriage which he puts at the disposal of Orgon in order that he can flee Tartuffe’s persecution in the fifth act. The ease that accompanies wealth is also perhaps at the root of Damis’s hotheaded actions. After all, Orgon himself, even after donating the greater part of his possessions to Tartuffe, reveals that he still has at least 1,000 livres that he would trade for the frivolous purpose of taking a punch at Monsieur Loyal:

Du meilleur de mon cœur je donnerais sur l’heure
Les cent plus beaux louis de ce qui me demeure,
Et pouvoir, à plaisir, sur ce mufle asséner
Le plus grand coup de poing qui se puisse donner.

[5. 4. 1797–1800]

Besides indications of the family fortune, there are also strong hints that Orgon is a royal officer. Dorine praises her master’s valiant service to the crown during a time of troubles that calls to mind the revolts of the Fronde in 1648–52: “Nos troubles l’avaient mis sur le pied d’homme sage, / Et pour servir son prince il montra du courage” (1. 2. 181–82). Although it is possible that an ordinary bourgeois merchant or businessman might have rendered some service, it is far more likely that
Orgon is an officier de longue robe, either of the sovereign courts or the financial administration. This is further confirmed when Monsieur Loyal, himself an officer of the "short robe," explains that he has served Orgon's father during his forty-year tenure: "Toute votre maison m'a toujours été chère,/Et j'étais serviteur de Monsieur votre père" (5. 4. 1737–38). It would be quite natural that a counselor or other parliamentary officer would deal with a sergent or huissier à verge, and since the sovereign court offices were almost always hereditary, Orgon probably holds a rank at least equal to that of his prominent father, perhaps even président à mortier. A position of this level in the hierarchy would be worth hundreds of thousands of livres in itself, and its holder might even have acquired a personal title of comte or marquis.6

Molière thus selected as his parasite's victim an exemplary host, a man of wealth and power whose intimate knowledge of the hierarchy and its rules precluded such vulgar excuses as ignorance or want. The dramatist chose to portray an individual whose only vulnerable point was his susceptibility to absolute, asocial values. The dysfunctions of Orgon and his mother occur ironically at the moment of their manifest financial and political success. It would appear that, caught up in the dizzying spiral of social mobility, they became unsure of their places in the material world and were shaken by a profound crise de conscience.

Was this indecisive weakness caused by an attack of guilt over crossing so many social boundaries so rapidly?7 Other comedies by Molière provide evidence of just such a tendency toward closure from below: Madame Jourdain, for instance, self-consciously mentions that great fortunes like that of her husband are not amassed by honorable means (BG, 3. 12). The idea that bourgeois people should be content to copy the behavior of their forebears and shun the ways of their superiors is
echoed in *Le Tartuffe* by Madame Pernelle. When she says Elmire is attired like a princess, she is in fact accusing her daughter-in-law of dressing above her class in an ambitious manner. She compares the household to the court of *le roi Petaut*, injecting still another aristocratic element, however comic, into her reprisals (1. 1. 12). Her own expressions reflect clearly the vocabulary of an old-fashioned commoner: *mamie*, *forte en gueule*, *un sot en trois lettres*, *je ne mâche point ce que j'ai sur le coeur*, *Madame à jaser tient le dé*. Madame Pernelle, who may belong to the first generation of robe nobility, when membership in the second estate was considered personal but not familial, finds the presence of so many noble visitors in her son's house entirely disconcerting:

>Tout ce tracas qui suit les gens que vous hantez,  
Ces carrosses sans cesse à la porte plantés,  
Et de tant de laquais le bruyant assemblage  
Font un éclat fâcheux dans tout le voisinage.  

[1. 1. 87–90]

Thus, in Orgon’s mother, and probably in the man himself, the mania of religious devotion seems to be linked to a guilty reluctance to assume the ostentatious way of life suitable to the clan of an important *noble de robe*, whose children, as third generation *parlementaires*, would acquire the legal distinction of *nobles de race*. The would-be pious citizens fall victim to an *horrure du monde*, and here the word *monde* assumes its triple significance of “nobility,” “society,” and “physical world.”

Into the ideological void caused by this crisis of uncertainty steps the man with all the answers—Tartuffe. Orgon becomes so blinded by his simplistic, pious program that he loses all sight of family matters. The famous “pauvre homme” dialogue shows him to be more concerned about the hypocrite’s appetite than
about his wife's real ailments. When Cléante questions him about the crucial issue of Mariane's marriage, he gives only vague and evasive answers. Tartuffe's antics of ostentatious piety in the church and his subsequent teachings have led Orgon to accept an ideology of material dispossession and social irresponsibility, a delusion of poverty not uncommon among those suffering from guilty depression.

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]

According to Vladimir Jankélévitch's theory of the bad conscience, each pleasure is accompanied by a consciousness of its obverse pain and privation. Thus in Orgon's case, the enjoyment of his first fruitful marriage and his secure judicial office is marred by the death of his wife and the fall from power of his fellow magistrate Argas, apparently a victim of the post-Fronde purges. Physical diversion becomes virtually impossible—all the more so because of Orgon's double condemnation to wear the somber garments of mourning and the solemn robes of a judge. Jankélévitch's penetrating analysis of this mental condition is worth quoting:

La conscience, acculée dans ses derniers retraitements, privée de ce "divertissement" qui, selon Pascal, la détourne de penser à soi, la conscience est directement aux prises avec elle-même; et comme elle ne peut ni se regarder en face, ni se détourner de cette vue, elle est tourmentée par la honte et les regrets. C'est l'un des éléments essentiels de la mauvaise conscience que cette affreuse solitude d'une âme qui a dû renoncer à toute diversion et qui éprouve une sorte d'horreur panique ou d'agoraphobie morale à se sentir nue en présence du seul témoin auquel on ne puisse rien cacher puisque ce témoin, c'est moi-même.⁸
His second wife’s vitality and social verve would only exacerbate Orgon’s remorse and agoraphobia, especially since she immediately becomes a target for the reprimands of a natural rival, Mme Pernelle. Faced with the frightening duty of satisfying Elmire’s appetite for pleasure, Orgon doubtlessly found it convenient to call pleasure itself into question and to retreat behind a shield to which all his legal training drove him: moral conscience. Of course, moral conscience systematizes guilt by encouraging an endless search for cas de conscience and by praising scruples that turn trivial and uninteresting details into occasions for sin. But moral conscience deprives its host of the important capacity to anticipate problems, and Orgon is particularly vulnerable because of his profession: “la conscience morale, elle, arrive toujours en retard, et elle est plutôt judiciaire que législative.”

Tartuffe’s secondhand doctrine of otherworldliness succeeds in anesthetizing the troubled officier to the emotional pains of his existence, without relieving the cause of his problems. Socially disaffected, Orgon lapses into a form of solipsism and hopes to avoid responsibility by closing his eyes, and to abolish the material evidence that (in his view, at least) incriminates him, by handing over all his goods to his directeur de conscience. Little does he dream that he has fallen into one of the traps outlined in the Sermon on the Mount: he has cast the pearls of his familial wealth and virtue before a swinish creature that will shortly turn on him and rend him.

For despite the protestations of critics who see Tartuffe’s swindles as perfectly congruent with piety, this is not a case of holy divestiture but merely of transferred possession! The single aim of the scheme is to put the family wealth into the hands of the unscrupulous hypocrite, and the pennies Tartuffe doles out to the poor fulfill the same function as the token money used to deceive the “pigeon” in modern confidence games. Orgon is all the more attracted by the feigned indigence of his director. Dorine describes Tartuffe’s first appearance as “un gueux qui,
quand il vint, n'avait pas de souliers/ Et dont l'habit entier valait bien six deniers" (1. 1. 63–64). When the lady's maid presents this objection to counter Orgon's plan of marrying his daughter to the upstart, the eminent Orgon claims that Tartuffe is really a gentleman who has let himself be cheated while preoccupied with pious charity:

... Enfin de son bien il s'est laisse priver
Par son trop peu de soin des choses temporelles,
Et sa puissante attache aux choses eternelles.
Mais mon secours pourra lui donner les moyens
De sortir d'embarras et rentrer dans ses biens:
Ce sont fiefs qu'à bon titre au pays on renomme;
Et tel que l'on le voit, il est bien gentilhomme.
[2. 2. 488–94]

What a treat for an officier to come to the rescue of a noble de race and what a temptation to fulfill his search for God by playing god himself! An existential psychologist might say that Orgon is attempting to compensate for his lack of identity and anxieties about the permanence of his status by transforming himself into an omnipotent hero of piety. It is ironic that Orgon is utterly locked into the role of benefactor to the impoverished nobility. The Brissart and Sauvé engraving shows that he wears the same type of ecclesiastical collar as the hypocrite, but has also provided for the latter some of the trappings of a marquis: a foppish rhingrave, tiny pourpoint, and jabot. He strives to be all-powerful by giving away power, to function by ceasing his normal functions.

The famous “pauvre homme” sequence (1. 4), where Orgon ignores Dorine’s account of his wife’s illness while repeating a sympathetic litany for his gluttonous guest, introduces the man as a mechanical, programmed individual. Obsessed with his
spiritual *idée fixe*, he turns a deaf ear to his brother-in-law's warnings about the danger of succumbing to "dévots de la place" (1. 5. 361) and to his daughter's objections against marrying Tartuffe. Having eschewed all responsibilities as a bourgeois *père de famille*, Orgon is concerned only with providing for his *directeur*'s sexual and financial fulfillment by giving him his daughter and the family fortune. Any alternative to this artificial identity fills him with horror. Mariane tells her father that she has always followed the decisions of her elders with perfect obedience: "C'est où je mets aussi ma gloire la plus haute" (2. 1. 437). Yet, Orgon's frivolous plan to marry her to an upstart fanatic places her in an impossible position, unable to agree or refuse. When she learns that her father is capable of making a gross error that may cast shame on the whole family, she is stunned and never really recovers, despite the support of Dorine, Damis, and Cléante.

Mariane's predicament, which occupies the entire second act, elicits different responses from her three closest allies. Dorine makes every effort to awaken the girl to an active and personal sense of duty by coaxing and mocking her and by painting a vivid picture of the unpleasantness of marriage with the hypocrite. At the same time, her taunting repartee distracts her master by devaluing his speeches: "Chansons! . . . / Allez, ne croyez point à Monsieur votre père: / Il raille" (2. 2. 468-70). She also attacks Tartuffe at his most sensitive point; when he tries to hide her bosom beneath a handkerchief, she debunks both his prudery and his virility by declaring, "toute votre peau ne me tenterait pas" (2. 2. 868). But she herself admits that these gadfly tactics serve only to stall, rather than to alter the balance of power in the household.

Damis takes a bolder approach predicated by his own *condition*. Overproud of his position as the family's first *noble de race*, he impetuously takes it upon himself to expel the parasite
from the home through some dramatic confrontation that would hopefully allow him to demonstrate his swordplay. Though his awkward insistence on sincerity of expression, regardless of the demands of social codes and amenities, recalls the attitude of the haughty misanthrope Alceste (1. 1. 58–60), Damis eventually proves that artistocratic orgueil has not diluted his loyalty to the officer clan, for he returns from banishment intending to punish his father’s persecutor: “C’est à moi, tout d’un coup, de vous en affranchir” (5. 1. 1636). When Damis surprises Tartuffe in the process of trying to seduce Elmire, he assumes that he has achieved his mission of familial liberation: “Mon âme est maintenant au comble de sa joie” (3. 4. 1050). Nevertheless, he fails to reckon with his father’s patterned responses of sympathy for the false dévot, and his accusations simply make Orgon more enraged: “Ah, traître, oses-tu bien par cette fausseté / Vouloir de sa vertu ternir la pureté?” (3. 6. 1087–88). In fact, the “fanfaron de la vertu,” as Cléante calls him, dominates Orgon so completely that it is Damis who is sent packing, under threat of a beating, while Tartuffe receives a gift of the entire patrimony. The thoroughness of the host’s social dysfunction is embodied in his stubborn intention not only to unite Mariane in a misalliance and to impoverish himself and his son, but also to place his wife more firmly in Tartuffe’s clutches. A willing victim of parasitism, Orgon has perversely taken as his motto “Faire enrager le monde est ma plus grande joie” (3. 7. 1173).

More serious than Dorine and more lucid than Damis, Cléante repeatedly tries to sway his brother-in-law with reason and moderation. Early in the play, he explains to Orgon that Tartuffe is among

Ces gens qui, par une âme à l'intérêt soumise,
Font de dévotion métier et marchandise,
Cléante’s ingenious description of spiritual parasitism in simple bourgeois terms of exchange such as *intérêt*, *crédit*, *marchandise*, and *fausse monnaie* is good enough to enlighten the audience but has little effect on the dupe, for whom all systems of exchange have become devalued. His subsequent conversations with Tartuffe (4. 1) and with Orgon (5. 1) are equally fraught with ethical humanism and dedicated to the viewpoint that spiritual needs are compatible with rationality. This position recalls that of Molière’s old friend La Mothe Le Vayer: “Notre religion n’est pas comme celle des Mahometans, où il n’est jamais permis d’user de raisonnement. . . . En vérité, nous serions plus modestes si nous étions aussi Chrétiens que nous en faisons profession.”

By comparing Tartuffe with real *dévots* known in the community for their piety, Cléante illustrates that Orgon is as inexperienced in religion as Monsieur Jourdain is in aristocratic behavior. Unfortunately, the intellectual Cléante operates on a totally different plane from that of his kinsman, who has reduced himself to a burlesque caricature and remains impervious to any but the most visceral stimuli.

By the end of the third act, Tartuffery has reached its apogee of power. Mariane does not know where to turn, for when she makes a final plea to her father, he merely intones in mock-tragic style: “Allons, ferme, mon coeur, point de faiblesses humaine” (4. 3. 1293). Damis has been sent away, Cléante’s speeches are unheeded, and Dorine has nearly run out of maneuvers to avert the impending catastrophe. Neither the *gloire* of the Old Nobility, nor the civil rationalism of the New, nor the obedience of the officer group, nor the commoner’s badgering has caused Orgon’s blind devotion to spiritual salva-
tion to lessen. It is left to Elmire, who has previously tried to remain apart from the struggle and to appeal, in vain, to Tartuffe’s emotions, to sway her husband with empirical evidence that will stir a primitive possessive drive—fear of cuckoldry.

Orgon’s wife is aware of the advantage of sexual influence over both her husband and the directeur. When Orgon returns from the country, she retires to her chambers to await him rather than greeting him downstairs with the rest of the family, which expects “moins d’amusement,” as Cléante cleverly puts it. Skilled in the craft of extracting promises from those who visit her ruelle, Elmire shows no reluctance to blackmail Tartuffe with the threat of revealing his indiscretions: “N’appréhendez-vous point que je ne sois d’humeur/A dire à mon mari cette galante ardeur?” (3. 3. 1003–4). Nor does she flinch when it comes to proving Tartuffe’s assault on her honor: “Mais que me répondrait votre incrédulité/Si je vous faisais voir qu’on vous dit vérité?” (4. 3. 1339–40).

Confident of her ability to play the meneur du jeu, Elmire arranges for a tête-à-tête with Tartuffe in the room where Orgon can be concealed conveniently to overhear the seduction, thus exposing herself a second time to the advances of her odious soupirant. She hopes to force Orgon to resume his responsibility by appealing to the fear of cuckoldry—a sense of sexual control that may have survived the parasite’s onslaught on the values of earthly stewardship. Placing the whole weight of intervention on her husband, she stipulates that he must be the one to stop Tartuffe: “J’aurai lieu de cesser dès que vous vous rendrez,/Et les choses n’iront que jusqu’où vous voudrez./C’est à vous d’arrêter son ardeur insensée” (4. 4. 1379–81). Ironically, the trap does not spring as easily as she had imagined; for Orgon’s astonishing obduracy allows the lecherous parasite’s efforts to proceed unhindered, and Elmire is nearly forced to accept Tartuffe’s detestable licorice stick and much more,
despite her desperate coughing signals to her husband. Crouched under the table, Orgon refuses to believe what is happening until Tartuffe’s ad hominem remarks (“C’est un homme, entre nous, à mener par le nez” [4. 5. 1524]) rouse him from his stupor. Elmire’s scheme ultimately works, but the re-awakening of Orgon’s sexual urges and social identity is too little and too late to check the wily Tartuffe. The burgher’s boastful, mendacious language proves that he needs a more powerful lesson before he can be reintegrated.

Even without the delicate matter of Orgon’s having kept the rebel Argas’s secret and incriminating papers, *Le Tartuffe* would have undergone a change of register, from the familial level to that of the state, at the end of the fourth act. After all, Orgon’s donation unilatérale, having been already signed and sealed, would present a legal problem that would call for the intervention of formal authority in the shape of the courts. Molière’s addition of an accusation of treason against Orgon is a legalistic expedient. It is evident that a donation involving dowry and patrimony is of questionable validity—a fact that would not have escaped the attention of the legacy-conscious audience. Yet, the possibility of treason on Orgon’s part significantly increases Tartuffe’s chance of retaining the property given him, for the goods of a traitor were sometimes confiscated and might well be redistributed to those who denounced him, especially if they had a religious motive or affiliation. In any case, treason is a matter that requires the attention of the monarch, thus putting the whole behavior of the Orgon family before the ultimate tribunal of appeal.

During the final act, the entire clan rallies around Orgon to support him; but the more vocal members, Cléante and Damis, advocate diplomatic deference or rash violence—solutions ill-suited to the threat of prosecution that hangs over the burgher’s head. As for Madame Pernelle, her persistent disbelief in Tar-
Tartuffe's treachery mirrors her son's stubbornness until, like him, she is given dramatic proof by the arrival of Monsieur Loyal, the huissier à verge sent to enforce Tartuffe's eviction notice. Even the most recalcitrant of the parasite's hosts is thus finally forced to admit that she had erred in allowing the behavior patterns of the family to be supplanted by extrinsic metaphysical concerns. It is this summit of reintegration that Dorine refers to as the "juste retour . . . des choses d'ici-bas" (5. 8. 1695)

Monsieur Loyal represents an extension of Tartuffe's perverse, self-centered materialism into the realm of civil law. As his ironic name indicates, superficial attributes alone cannot be trusted to furnish accurate impressions of social affiliation. Using the conventional formula of polite discourse, he proceeds to seize the property and to place its inhabitants under what amounts to house arrest. It now seems that the external element has gained a foothold in institutions of much wider range and power than the individual lineage. The monarch himself is named as a party to this antisocial conspiracy when Valère announces that Tartuffe has profited from a royal audience to obtain an arrest decree against his former host. All hope of escape appears to be lost when the hypocrite himself arrives with an exempt and a lettre de cachet presumably to carry out the arrest. The exempt's white wand and the official writ were the incarnation of the king's sovereign power—one touch on the shoulder from the wand was all that was necessary to doom a man to the galleys, the Bastille, or the place de Grève. Thus, the question of parasitic influences is carried as far as logically possible: the monarch must ultimately either become the accomplice of the parasite, who preys on the society over which he stands in stewardship, or else he must eradicate the extrinsic concern. "Toute justice émane du roi," wrote Antoine Loysel, and it is now up to the king himself to arrange for a proper dénouement.
Brossette relates that Boileau disapproved of the ending of *Le Tartuffe* and would have preferred to rewrite it so that it would conclude with a trial of the hypocrite within the family, after which all the relatives would participate in administering a hearty *bastonnade* to the interloper. This alternative might appear to us now as being more “bourgeois,” but it is certainly less “ancien régime” that the dénouement provided by Molière. Louis XIV had a moral and behavioral significance for his subjects that surpassed the level of politics, a fact that the author, who depended upon the king for the sponsorship of this very play, never forgot. Ralph Albanese has pointed out that the king could never really be separated from God himself, and that Louis, as the supreme *directeur de conscience*, owed it to himself to suppress irregular competition from the likes of Tartuffe. He was widely admired as a *roi thaumaturge*, a royal healer who was supposed to be able to cure scrofula (*écrouelles*), the neck ailment now known to be caused by vitamin deficiency. However, even though Louis’s power was perceived to be an absolute (indeed, the only secular absolute), Molière’s presentation of him in the fifth act of *Tartuffe* is not couched in terms of totalitarianism. In fact, the king appears as an incarnation of the golden mean, for *Sa Majesté* is eminently self-controlled.

*Chez Elle jamais rien ne surprend trop d'accès,*  
*Et sa ferme raison ne tombe en nul excès.*  

[5. 7. 1911-12]  

This hopeful picture of royalty, which doubtless would have been blurred by the subsequent revocation of the Edict of Nantes, shows sovereign power to coincide with reason, and reason to be the key to the *souverain bien*. In this light, his clemency toward Orgon surpasses the mere gift of a tyrant’s
preferment to a sometimes-obedient creature. The wrong done to Orgon, with or without his acquiescence, was exemplary—a family disaster that encompasses all families of the kingdom. Therefore, Orgon’s importance as a social victim outweighs any personal (and evidently harmless) infraction he may have committed. Tartuffe, on the other hand, is revealed as a social criminal. Not only is he not the *gentilhomme* that the host thought him to be, but he is an incorrigible recidivist who has had many other shameful ventures. The king’s justice embodies the concept of rational self-restraint, for unlike Orgon and his son, Damis, who were on the point of coming to blows with the hypocrite and his minions, Louis’s exempt waits until the last possible minute before revealing his true mission, thus imparting to the peccant burgher the lesson that true authority rests first of all on a wise mastery of one’s own hierarchical qualities. It is just the sort of epiphany that is required to restore Orgon to his social function as subject and *père de famille*. Effacing himself before the ultimate principle of good in society, Orgon hastens to acknowledge Sovereign and *souverain bien*, “ce premier devoir” (5. 7. 1959), before providing for the survival and prosperity of his lineage through the marriage of Mariane and Valère.

If the eventual production and success of *Le Tartuffe* in 1669 marked the most radiant stage in Molière’s career, *Le Malade imaginaire* proved that in 1673, on the eve of his death, the dramatist’s creative talent was intact and that his social interests continued to develop. As Robert Garapon has pointed out, the play is far more than a fleshed-out medical farce. The key difference with earlier pieces such as *Le Médecin volant*, *L’Amour médecin*, and *Le Médecin malgré lui* is that the spotlight is on the patient. Here, for the first time, he sincerely believes himself to be afflicted and allows this condition to interfere with his role as the leader of the family unit.
Argan, the hypochondriac protagonist of *Le Malade imaginaire*, resembles Orgon not only in name but also in social station. Although the indicators in this play are somewhat less precise with regard to actual profession, it is clear that both men belong to the same upper segment of the bourgeoisie. Toinette first mentions the family's extensive wealth in terms that echo Dorine's advice: "Et avec tout le bien que vous avez, vous vou­driez marier votre fille avec un médecin?" (1. 5). Later, Argan's brother, Béralde, voices the same sentiment, which reflects the general reputation of riches and eminence that the hypochondriac enjoys: "D'où vient, mon frère, qu'ayant le bien que vous avez, et n'ayant d'enfants qu'une fille, car je ne compte pas la petite . . . que vous parlez de la mettre dans un couvent?" (3. 3). These statements imply that Argan's wealth is enough to attract a very considerable match for his daughter. When making out a will of dubious legality in the first act, Argan reveals he has 20,000 livres in cash and two promissory notes totaling 10,000 livres:

Je veux vous mettre entre les mains vingt mille francs en or, que j'ai dans le lambris de mon alcôve, et deux billets payables au porteur, qui me sont dus, l'un par Monsieur Damo, et l'autre par Monsieur Géralde . . . ils sont, mamie, l'un de quatre mille francs et l'autre de six. [1. 7]

Equal to the treasure in Harpagon's casket, this sum corroborates the testimony of Toinette and Béralde and places Argan on equal footing financially with officers of the *noblesse de robe*. The invalid's medical bills serve as a further indicator, for Argan adds up one month's figures in the first scene of the play: "Trois et deux font cinq, et cinq font dix, et dix font vingt. Soixante et trois livres, quatre sols, six deniers" (1. 1). Multiplying this by twelve, we arrive at a yearly total of about 760 livres for medicines and treatments alone—a great expense that represents more than the net worth of many *petits bourgeois*.
As for the hypochondriac’s profession, we can infer from the notary scene that Argan is not an officer of the parlements. Monsieur Bonnefoy (seated on a siège, which indicates social inferiority to Argan) explains that in common law regions, such as Paris, the husband may not make his wife sole beneficiary of his estate:

La Coutume y résiste. Si vous étiez en pays de droit écrit, cela se pourrait faire; mais à Paris, et dans les pays coutumiers, au moins dans la plupart, c’est ce qui ne se peut, et la disposition serait nulle. Tout l’avantage qu’homme et femme conjoints par mariage se peuvent faire l’un à l’autre, c’est un don mutuel entre vifs; encore faut-il qu’il n’y ait enfants, soit des deux conjoints, ou de l’un d’eux, lors du décès du premier mourant. [1. 7]

Surely a magistrate or parliamentarian could not be ignorant of such fundamental principles of the law of succession! No wonder Argan mentions that he has a lawyer to handle his ordinary legal affairs. Yet, even though he is not a judge, we should not underestimate Argan’s wealth and power. Throughout the play, he is addressed by his fellow characters as monsieur, never as seigneur (term of address used for his inferior, the usurer Polichinelle). He remains seated in an armchair, thus manifesting authority through préséance.²⁰ He also provides a lady’s maid for his wife and a music master for his elder child.

The first scene may furnish a clue to the source of Argan’s money. In it we find him quickly and accurately figuring his apothecary bills, handling the jetons, making entries in the account book, taking discounts, and comparing totals against those of the previous months. Such skill in mathematics and bookkeeping was by no means commonplace in Molière’s time, when these arts were perhaps even rarer than literacy itself. The task was rendered more difficult by the non-decimal monetary system of the ancien régime. It is possible that Argan’s proficiency in mathematics and bookkeeping indicates a career in
commerce or in the financial administration, both very respected fields during the ministry of Colbert.

The situation of Argan's family is one of the most interesting in Molière's theater. This père de famille, who enjoys wealth but apparently not nobility, has produced no sons, and his lineage seems doomed to extinction. In fact, there is in Le Malade imaginaire, as in Tartuffe, a definite atmosphere of transition, of both ending and beginning, that pervades the social framework of the play. Already, Argan's first wife has left him alone in the world with two daughters to rear. In a sense, his responsibilities are simplified, for the girls' dowries should be his primary concern, according to the codes of the socioeconomic system.

The hypochondriac's choices should be all the more straightforward because his daughter already has found a perfectly acceptable suitor in Cléante. Like other bourgeois daughters in Molière's theater, Angélique owes a life-debt to her young man: "Ne trouves-tu pas que cette action d'embrasser ma défense sans me connaître est tout à fait d'un honnête homme?" (1. 4). This confrontation, a gentlemanly defense of the helpless victim, undoubtedly involved some swordplay; it establishes Cléante not only as an homme d'épée but as an exemplary student of pastoral love, to boot.

Un Berger était attentif aux beautés d'un spectacle, qui ne faisait que de commencer, lorsqu'il fut tiré de son attention par un bruit qu'il entendit à ses côtés. Il se retourne, et voit un brutal, qui de paroles insolentes maltraitait une Bergère. D'abord il prend les intérêts d'un sexe à qui tous les hommes doivent hommage; et après avoir donné au brutal le châtiment de son insolence, il vient à la Bergère, et voit une jeune personne qui, des deux plus beaux yeux qu'il eut jamais vus, versait des larmes. [2. 5]

Faced with simple decisions in fulfilling his duties prescribed by the social codes, Argan has overlooked, for reasons of self-
indulgence, the well-being of his family. For him the entire socioeconomic system has become perverted by one exterior goal, the pursuit of physical health. This is a type of excellence analogous to Orgon's notion of spiritual salvation, and every bit as dangerous. The extent of Argan's social dysfunction is made evident by his abuse of the servant Toinette, the first human being he encounters in the play: "Drelin, drelin, drelin: carogne à tous les diables! Est-il possible qu'on laisse comme cela un pauvre malade tout seul?" (1. 1.).

Although the source of Argan's problem cannot be traced to a political event such as the Fronde, it is obvious that some powerful combination of events has so traumatized his personality that he has become obsessed to the point of paranoia with the fear of sickness, physical degeneration, and death. The audience knows that, like Orgon, Argan has lost a wife of many years, the mother of his two girls; but the imaginary invalid's response to that loss has caused him to overvalue his own physical survival, in contrast to the would-be dévot's otherworldliness and dispossession. Orgon cannot wait to become an angel, whereas Argan rages so strongly against "the dying of the light" that he has attained the same state of unofficial civil death. If the loss of his wife placed Argan frighteningly face to face with death, the lack of a male heir constantly reminds him of his family's impending nominal extinction. Argan has failed to regenerate his male lineage, placing the genetic heritage along with the financial one at the ultimate disposal of other men. Though it is important to avoid the flights of sentimental fantasy that characterized Ariane Mnouchkine's recent quasi-biographical film, Molière, ou l'histoire d'un honnête homme, one must point out that Molière was in fact subjected to the same psychological privations as his characters, since he lost his mother at an impressionable age and produced no sons. Guilt, failure, sexual withdrawal, and alienation from relatives are perfectly natural
reactions to such events, particularly when the subject, like Argan and Molière, lives in a house filled with women.

In contrast to Orgon, who had only one parasite, Argan has a collection of them who cater to his external preoccupation: the formidable Béline, her lover, and a pack of pernicious doctors. They all perform the same destructive service, since they assure the imaginary invalid that he is truly ill. Argan finds a ready-made identity as the physicians’ patient and as Béline’s helpless “child:”

Hé bien! je vous crois, mon ami. Là, remettez-vous. . . . Ça, donnez-moi son manteau fourré et des oreillers, que je l’accom-mode dans sa chaise. Vous voilà je ne sais comment. Enfoncez bien votre bonnet jusque sur vos oreilles: il n’y a rien qui enrume tant que de prendre l’air par les oreilles. [1. 6]

Béline and the doctors have been allowed to take over Argan’s life on the premise that they alone can eliminate his sense of wrong and allow him to function. Both of the primary facts of Argan’s life, the loss of his first wife and his inability to beget a male heir, stem from physical phenomena. Thus it is not odd that Argan has become fascinated with bodily functions rather than socioeconomic ones. He stockpiles medicines in his cabinets rather than capital in the patrimony, and is more concerned with the wording of prescriptions than marriage contracts. Purgation is more attractive to him than intercourse, and he measures his strength not by virile sperm and semen but by lifeless urine and feces. Eager to discuss his bowel movements with whoever will listen, he invites Toinette to peek into his chamber pot and inspect the contents; but the maid, who cares more for social decorum than does her master, vehemently declines: “Ma foi! je ne me mêle point de ces affaires-là: c’est à Monsieur Fleurant à y mettre le nez, puisqu’il en a le profit” (1. 2).21
The first scene of the play, which ranks with Harpagon's distress over the loss of his casket as one of Molière's truly great monologues, establishes beyond a shadow of a doubt that Argan's socioeconomic being has been perverted by his morbid search for health. Although he disagrees with the amounts that Fleurant charges for *clystères*, he seems to rejoice in enumerating the treatments. He even categorically states that the more he spends on doctors, the better he will feel: "Si bien donc que de ce mois j'ai pris . . . huit médecines . . . et douze lavements; et l'autre mois il y avait douze médecines, et vingt lavements. Je ne m'étonne pas si je ne me porte pas si bien ce mois-ci que l'autre" (1. 1). Health is perversely defined by the very treatments that supposedly indicate the presence of disease. Argan has hopelessly confused the medical and economic codes, and keeps parallel records of expenses and enemas! He is sure that he can buy health just as Orgon attempted to buy salvation by extending charity to Tartuffe. Moreover, a reconstruction of Argan's costume proves that he was a dapper patient who dressed for his illness as another might for a ball.²² Perhaps, as some critics assert, the medical corps of this play is in part a travesty of the "untouchable" Faculty of Theology of Paris.²³ What is important, however, is that both elements are external and transcend individual identities through the seriousness of their challenge to the prevailing socioeconomic system.

The doctors are not the only beneficiaries of Argan's disorientation, for his second wife, Béline, also stands to receive remuneration for treating Argan as an invalid rather than a responsible burgher. He has foolishly agreed to reward her feigned devotion with his daughter's patrimony: "Pour tâcher de reconnaître l'amour que vous me portez, je veux, mon coeur . . . faire mon testament" (1. 6). Béline betrays her mercenary spirit at every turn. Angélique sarcastically alludes to her gold-digging schemes with the sharp wit of a wronged stepdaughter:
Chacun a son but en se mariant. . . . Il y en a . . . qui font du mariage un commerce de pur intérêt, qui ne se marient que pour gagner des douaires, que pour s'enrichir par la mort de ceux qu'elles épousent, et courent sans scrupule de mari en mari, pour s'approprier leurs dépouilles. [2. 6]

The parasites threaten to disrupt not only the normal economic patterns of gaining and spending but also the exchange of women, for both the doctors and Béline covet Angélique's dowry money, and they have parallel plans for getting control of it. The doctors plan to marry the girl to Thomas Diafoirus, the imbecilic heir to a vast medical fortune:

Monsieur Diafoirus n'a que ce fils-là pour tout héritier; et, de plus, Monsieur Purgon, qui n'a ni femme, ni enfants, lui donne tout son bien, en faveur de ce mariage; et Monsieur Purgon est un homme qui a huit mille bonnes livres de rente. [1. 5]

This sum, indicating a capital of perhaps 100,000 livres, at the denier douze, is less attractive to Argan, however, than the prospect of having a doctor in the family:

Ma raison est que, me voyant infirme et malade comme je suis, je veux me faire un gendre et des alliés médecins, afin de m'appuyer de bons secours contre ma maladie, d'avoir dans ma famille les sources des remèdes qui me sont nécessaires, et d'être à même des consultations et des ordonnances. [1. 5]

The dowries of the economic system are utterly confused with the external element of dubious medical treatments. Thomas Diafoirus, a big oaf lacking in the social graces, symbolizes the gap between the demands of the social system and the goals of Argan. Confronted with his future family, the fool does not even know which rehearsed greeting to attempt first: "N'est-ce pas par le père qu'il convient commencer?" (2. 5) This antisocial
quality is reinforced by an allusion to the doctors’ disfavor at court: “A vous en parler franchement, notre métier auprès des grands ne m’a jamais paru agréable, et j’ai toujours trouvé qu’il valait mieux, pour nous autres, demeurer au public” (2. 5). Purgon and his cohorts shun the king because this monarch can expose their fraud and punish them for the harm they have brought to the entire nation by their insalubrious practices.

In fact, the doctors have gone so far as to usurp extensive authority in the system they seek to pervert. The medical prescription becomes a kind of lettre de cachet that cannot be disputed. When Béralde wisely dismisses Fleurant and insults the medical profession, Purgon, head of this “faculty,” accuses Argan’s brother of a heinous crime: “Un crime de lèse-Faculté, qui ne se peut assez punir” (3. 5). Of course, lèse-Majesté, an offense against the person of the king and the most serious infraction of the age, had nothing to do with medicine. In likening themselves to the king, the doctors are escalating their dangerous ambitions in a manner reminiscent of Tartuffe, who also sought to speak with royal authority.

In addition to the doctors’ plot, Béline has a scheme of her own; she wants both daughters sent away to a convent and disinherited. Her insistence on this point is mentioned by Argan very early in the play: “Ma femme, votre belle-mère, avait envie que je vous fasse religieuse, et votre petite soeur Louison aussi, et de tout temps elle a été aheurtée à cela” (1. 5). Later in the same scene, he threatens again to send Angélique to the nunnery, unless she marries Diafoirus. This is doubtlessly Béline’s secondary plan, to have the girl sequestered for disputing her father’s choice. While the doctors are bleeding her husband physically, Béline plans to bleed him financially by controlling all the cash in the household. She has manipulated Argan into a position directly opposed to the whole sense of the social order, for when the notary, Bonnefoy, explains the princi-
pies of common law, Argan replies, "Voilà une Coutume bien impertinente" (1. 7). One senses the donation entre vifs that she has been pressing her husband to make is strictly illegal. In fact, it is probable that Béline supports the doctors so willingly because, as Béralde notes, they pose a definite threat to Argan’s health:

Une grande marque que vous vous portez bien et que vous avez un corps parfaitement bien composé, c’est qu’avec tous les soins que vous avez pris, vous n’avez pu parvenir encore à gâter la bonté de votre tempérament, et que vous n’êtes point crevé de toutes les médecines qu’on vous a fait prendre. [3. 3]

Béline is a kind of anti-Elmire, a stepmother who seeks to do away with the whole family, to sterilize the daughters by confining them behind the convent walls and to kill off the husband with excessive doctoring. She resembles the treacherous women of the Affaire des poisons, which was to surface within a few years.

Argan’s dysfunction in the play is reinforced by two unusual dramatic devices that deserve some attention. The first is the comic interlude between the first two acts, where we meet the usurer, Polichinelle, a lesser bourgeois who has become dysfunctional because of infatuation:

Pauvre Polichinelle, quelle diable de fantaisie t’es-tu allé mettre dans la cervelle? A quoi t’amuses-tu, miserable insensé que tu es? Tu quittes le soin de ton négoce, et tu laisses aller tes affaires à l’abandon. Tu ne manges plus, tu ne bois presque plus, tu perds le repos de la nuit. [1er Intermède]

In the midst of his Italian serenade, he is thrust into a conflict with a group of musicians and then fires a pistol at the town watch. The archers finally subdue him and threaten to toss him in prison, despite his appeal to his civil rights. As the price of his
reentry into society, they charge him 60 livres in drinking money or a beating; he eventually opts for the former and retires. Polichinelle is a burlesque figure who is driven, like Argan, to become a degenerate and to oppose the laws of his society for the sake of a selfish goal. His goal is just as external as Argan’s, for the representatives of the social order condemn his amorous escapades as much as they do Argan’s gifts to Béline.

The second reinforcing device is the introduction of the younger sister, Louison, and her feigned death. Argan vows to whip the girl if she will not tell him the details of a visit by Cléante that she has overheard. Because she has promised to keep silent, Louison is faced with an impossible situation and resorts to imaginary disaster by pretending to be dead: “Ah! mon papa, vous m’avez blessée. Attendez: je suis morte” (2. 8). Argan is genuinely distressed by this act, for he cannot tell truth from illusion at this point. Fortunately, the tender-hearted Louison quickly returns to life when she sees her father’s tears. The incident serves to prefigure Toinette’s ingenious solution to the problem of medical parasitism. It may also shake Argan from his blindness for a second, to show him the prospect of real death and to remind him of his own morbid acting.

Toinette’s disguise as a doctor, a farce element that Molière had utilized in Le Médecin volant, also serves to attenuate Argan’s faith in medicine. Her dizzying change of clothes, her obvious counterfeit of the “art,” and her extravagant suggestions that her master pluck out his eye and lop off his arm leave Argan in need of proof. In this state, he readily agrees to the servant’s suggestion that he play dead to demonstrate Béline’s faith and love (3. 11). The greedy wife’s response is very typical: “Il y a des papiers, il y a de l’argent dont je me veux saisir, et il n’est pas juste que j’aie passé sans fruit auprès de lui mes plus belles années. Viens, Toinette, prenons auparavent toutes ses clefs” (3. 12). The comic delight of the scene results from the
fact that Argan’s own pattern of hypochondriac exaggeration has prepared the way for this *pièce en abîme.*

Of course, the resurrection of the “late” husband frightens the wife into flight and raises a number of interesting judicial questions. Does Argan have any legal basis for his understandable desire to divorce Béline? Can any further punishment be given her? Certainly she has robbed her husband, and in doing so she has forfeited any right to property held in the community or in usufruct by Argan; for the jurist Gabriel Argou specifies, “Quand la femme vole son mari les biens dotaux en sont responsables.” Furthermore, Charles Chappuzeau lists among the sufficient grounds for divorce adultery, maltreatment, and impotence (failure to consummate the marriage). It is more than likely that Béline is guilty of all three. After all, what has she done but to sterilize Argan, pervert his natural drives, and turn him into a submissive “fils” rather than a responsible husband. Thus, the very socioeconomic system that Argan had spurned still offers him a possible means of reintegration.

Soon after testing Béline’s true intentions, Argan tries the same experiment with Angélique and witnesses her sincere grief: “Ah! Cléante, ne parlons plus de rien. Laissons là toutes les pensées du mariage” (3. 14). After such clear proof of filial devotion, the hypochondriac is nearly prepared to allow his daughter to marry Cléante, except for one small item: “Qu’il se fasse médecin, je consens au mariage” (3. 14). Argan seems incapable of giving up entirely his extrasocial preoccupations, even after he has learned that his wife and her cohorts were exploiting him. He persists in his wish for a medico-marital alliance. The only alternative to further stagnation is his brother Béralde’s scheme to make him believe that he can become his own doctor. The kindly Béralde will then serve as foster father to the young couple.

Béralde’s burlesque medical ceremony resembles in some
ways the actual rites for initiation of doctors in the Faculty of Paris. It has less in common with the ending of *Le Tartuffe* than with that of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. A common strategy of "accommodement à la fantaisie" runs through the two plays, and like Jourdain, Argan is only partially reclaimable to this society. The personal adjustment made by the "bachelierus" is far less costly and more convenient to the family than Argan’s original wish to have his son-in-law become a doctor. After all, he can heal himself at least as well as the practitioners in the play can heal him; his universal remedy of "Clisterium donare, postea seignare, ensuitta purgare" may be less harmful than those invented by the likes of Thomas Diafoirus. In a sense, Argan takes steps to exile himself from family affairs, since he declares during the ceremony that the Faculty now means more to him than his kin or his *condition*.

Vobis, vobis debo
Bien plus qu’à naturae et qu’à patri meo:
Natura et pater meus
Hominem me habent factum;
Mais vos me, ce qui est bien plus,
Avetis factum medicum.

[3<sup>e</sup> Intermède]

This distancing is linked to the more gruesome aspects of the medical burlesque, for along with wishes that he eat and drink well, Argan is given a license to kill: "Et occidendi / Impune per totam terram." It must, of course, be kept in mind that the only death that has taken place in play is a mock death, which proved quite salutory to the corpse in the long run! Thus, the repeated exhortations of "seignet et tuat" are mitigated in part by the context of illusion. Also, one cannot disregard the effect of Stoic philosophy, which taught that the individual had to be constantly prepared for death, and that only by doing this could
he hope to live a good life. This tradition was represented in Molière's circle of friends by the family of the learned La Mothe Le Vayer. Argan's hopes for happiness, and those of his clan, depend on his ability to confront successfully the possibility of death, rather than his trying to forestall the crisis through appeals to parasitic and extrasocial forces.

Argan and Orgon may differ in certain external details, but they do function as the alpha and omega of the disoriented upper bourgeois père de famille. Molière makes no attempt to present a thorough analysis of why the two men fell into a state of social dysfunction that allowed them to become the hosts of parasites like Tartuffe and Béline. He does, however, allude to vague past crises that swept through their families. Orgon had faced the Fronde and its polarization of political interests that caused the dissolution of time-honored alliances, such as that which existed between Orgon and Argas, and resulted in a dizzying climb to power for the victors. In Le Malade imaginaire, it is the loss of the beloved wife, combined with the impossibility, perceived if not real, of producing a male heir to carry on the financier lineage. Pious Tartuffery and Purgonian medicine can gain a foothold in those homes that have been shaken by guilt, doubt, and uncertainty, but they go on to threaten the state itself on a much wider scale.

Molière seems to suggest that the société d'états is only as strong as its weakest link, that what starts as an idiosyncrasy in one household may burgeon into a dangerous social perversion. Doctors and hypocrites reveal an insatiable desire for power and wealth, as they seek to monopolize all dowries, all inheritances, all women, eligible or not. Moreover, they try to withdraw their wealth and goods from the system of exchange, and to redirect sexual energy to their illicit gratification, at the expense of traditional imperatives like the consolidation of patrimony and the
procreation of the lineage. The parasites inevitably challenge the monarch himself, be it through the usurpation of royal prerogatives by a medical body or through the misuse of *lettres de cachet* and formal police authority. It is significant that the aims of socially responsible characters in the plays, such as Elmire, Dorine, Béralde, and Toinette, are not primarily to effect a psychological change in the host-protagonist or to stamp out the extrasocial influences for the sake of abstract morality, but to facilitate the uniting of life-giving couples, Mariane and Valère, Angélique and Cléante, who will pass by the huge obstacles that confront the generation of Argan and Orgon, ensuring the prospect of a bright future. Infinitely conscious of the formative influence and moral preponderance of the past, Molière nevertheless orients his plays toward a future that he associates with people better able to cope with the problems of a rapidly evolving world.

*Le Tartuffe* and *Le Malade imaginaire* function all the while within strictly worldly parameters. Identifying the major concern in *Le Tartuffe* as a question of *bonnête* behavior, Francis Lawrence stresses, “It has nothing to do with instruction in the practice of religion.” An analogous observation could be made regarding *Le Malade imaginaire*: nowhere does the dramatist discuss anatomical truths or scientific method—there is no verdict on the circulation of blood or any other substantive issue, despite the fact that Molière’s rumored work of translating Lucretius would have made him quite able to venture into biology if he desired. This lack of a detachable thesis is what distinguishes Molière’s masterpiece from the “bourgeois dramas” of the following century, for Molière’s art involves the construction of a network of structural relationships, rather than the replication of messages separate from the work itself. Instead of a collection of distinct but articulated thoughts, his ideology can only be described as a way of thinking, feeling, and seeing, all in one.
In Molière's theater, socioeconomic integrity is far more a material and temporal concern than a utopia. Like a living organism, the social body exists. It is not only mutable but also fragile, so that its energies must be directed toward regeneration and security. This is not to say that the individual units, Argan and Orgon, cease to exist. Indeed, they even have enough control over their existence to get themselves and their dependants into, and occasionally out of, trouble. They define themselves primarily through others, and their responsibilities proceed from their status as "mon mari" or "mon père" or "mon maître." A generic identity such as that of bourgeois can only provide a single point of reference in a fabric of parentèles without which identity itself was seen to be impossible.

1. The supreme example of the penalty for failure to observe these standards was the bitter fate of exile and imprisonment, experienced by one of Molière's former patrons, the finance minister Fouquet.


4. Some of the more noteworthy attempts to discuss biographical keys to this work are: F. Baumal, *Tartuffe et ses avatars*; Henri d'Alméras, *Le Tartuffe de Molière*; P. Emard, *Tartuffe, sa vie, son milieu*; D. Mornet, "Un Prototype de Tartuffe," in *Mélanges de philologie et d'histoire littéraire offerts à Edmond Hugnet*; and Mireille Girard, "Molière dans la correspondance de Madame de Sévigné." Historians have followed for the most part the same biographical approach in treating the play: Emmanuell Chill, "Tartuffe, Religion, and Courtly Culture"; and R. B. Landolt, "Molière and Louis XIV."

5. Two of the critics to set the focus squarely on Orgon were Ramon Fernandes, in his work of the 1930 recently reprinted as *Molière ou l'essence du génie comique*; and Will G. Moore, in "Tartuffe and the Comic Principle in Molière." Other works to follow in this scrupulous tradition are: Judd Hubert, *Molière and the Comedy of the Intellect*, pp. 255-64; Jacques Guicharnaud, *Molière, une aventure théâtrale*, pp. 1-162; Francis L. Lawrence, "The Raisonneur in Molière"; and Myrna Zwillenberg, "Dramatic Justice in Tartuffe."

6. Besides the definitive works of Mousnier and Bluche on the sovereign courts, mentioned earlier, useful books on the courts during the Fronde period are A. Lloyd Moote, *The Revolt of the Judges*, and Albert Hamscher, *The Parlement of Paris after the Fronde*, 1633-1673. Hamscher describes, on pp. 107-9, the judges' conflicts with Mazarin over special courts to prosecute Frondeurs such as Claude Vallée, who, like
Orgon’s friend Argas, was banished; he warns, however, against drawing too close an association between the magistrates and the Jansenist movement—a caveat worth repeating in the case of Tartuffe.

7 Gustave Roupnel, in La Ville et la campagne, pp. 155–56, points out that the “esprit de caste” of the magistrates caused the downfall of urban autonomy, resulting in royal intervention in all of Dijon’s internal matters by 1668. Certainly the royal government coerced the noblesse de robe into adopting a strict self-discipline, not unlike that advocated by Tartuffe, as Robert Mandrou explains in L’Europe absolutiste, p. 47: “Pour la noblesse de robe ... Louis XIV et Colbert se sont bornés à exiger d’elle ... une obéissance absolue aux volontés royales, qui ne s’est pas démentie jusqu’aux dernières années 1712–1713, où l’affaire de la bulle Unigenitus marque le réveil de la magistrature.”


10. Two who deny the possibility of parasitic manipulation by a dévot are R. Picard, “Tartuffe, production impie?” in Mélanges d’histoire littéraire (XVI–XVIIe siècle) offerts à Raymond Lebègue; and J. Cairncross, “Tartuffe ou Molière hypocrite.” On the other hand, Pierre Clarac’s “La Morale de Molière d’après Le Tartuffe” presents a cogent summary of the evidence to the contrary (the comments following Clarac’s paper are equally interesting).

11. See G. A. Goldschmidt, Molière ou la liberté mise à nu, p. 63 ff.; Lionel Gossman, Men and Masks: A Study of Molière, pp. 100–144, contains an in-depth analysis of the power dimension in Le Tartuffe, including Orgon’s megalomania.

12. OC La Grange, 5:24.


14. Rousillon’s 1980 production of Tartuffe portrayed Elmire as a veritable whore, unbuttoning her clothes to tempt a beau ténébreux Tartuffe; but though this version undoubtedly conveys a certain epidermal interest, it deviates radically from Elmire’s structural and textual honnetête and from the “beau museau” that Molière intended his directeur to be. See Philippe Sénart, review of Tartuffe.

15. A. Loysel, Institutes coutumières, p. 4.

16. Brossette, Correspondance Boileau-Brossette, pp. 516–17. Boileau was not the last to tamper with Molière’s ending. Roger Planchon’s production of Le Tartuffe made the Orgon household a kind of construction site for Classicism, complete with a veiled statue of Louis XIV that is uncovered as the imposter is arrested in a violent, CRS-style police raid; see Philippe Sénart’s review.

17 Ralph Albanese, “Une lecture idéologique du dénouement de Tartuffe.”


20. The famous armchair on display at the Comédie-Française is supposed to have served Argan onstage. For an illustration, see Alfred Simon, Molière (Paris: Seuil, 1974), p. 39.
21. As Marcel Gutwirth has pointed out, in *Molière ou l'invention comique*, pp. 25-60, Toinette represents an important final stage in the feminization of the domestic staff, which coincides with the evolution from traditional comic types to more recognizable contemporary figures. J. T. Stoker notes, in “Toinette's Age and Temperament,” that the maid's incessant sniping serves as a structural dramatic counterpoint to Béline's mollycoddling of Argan.


23. A. Adam, “Molière,” p. 396; J. Cairncross, *Molière bourgeois et libertin*, p. 38. For a sensible assessment of these suggestions, see Garapon, *Le Dernier Molière*, pp. 155-58. Although the medical profession did maintain close ties with the church in seventeenth-century Paris, we cannot go so far as to agree with Carlo François, “Médecine et religion chez Molière, deux facettes d'une même absurdité,” that the droit coutumier would have represented the Old Testament to Molière's audience, or that the Diafoirus clan is a satire on the Holy Trinity.

24. Such linguistic distortion by all three doctors in the play actually devalues language and threatens to destroy the codes of signification and identity on which society relies; see Will G. Moore, *Molière, A New Criticism*, pp. 63, 75-76.


30. In “L'Impromptu de Versailles Reconsidered,” Robert J. Nelson disagrees with Gide's view that *Le Malade imaginaire* is a “farce tragique,” and goes on to reflect that those who are triumphant in Molière's theater are “those who are willing to assume a mask.” Though the theory is interesting, one wonders whether Argan is aware that he is masquerading.

31. The extrasocial forces are so much like deadly viruses in their effect that Marcel Gutwirth has called Tartuffe an “Andromeda strain”; see “Tartuffe and the Mysteries.”

32. Francis Lawrence, “*Tartuffe*: A Question of Honnête Behavior.”