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The Characterization of Elmore

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Moliere's *Tartuffe* is hailed as one of his greatest works and has been performed and studied throughout the world. Although the most well known characters are the two primary male characters, Orgon and Tartuffe, Orgon's wife Elmire stands out as a strong and intelligent woman. *Tartuffe* was written in a period when women were considered inferior to men and were objectified by men both in life and in theatre. Women during the Restoration period, which began in 1660, were expected to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers and remain in the background, while men continued to dominate society. Elmire contradicts this expectation of women in society, making her an example of early feminism in theatre. In my performance as Elmire in CU (University of Colorado) Boulder's production of *Tartuffe*, I sought to emphasize Elmire's defense of women's equality in the time period and demonstrate her independence and intelligence in contrast to the expectations of women in the period.

The Restoration Time Period

The term "Restoration" is used to define this period of time and primarily refers to England and the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660. However, it can be used to refer to this period of time in general throughout Europe, including France where *Tartuffe* takes place. King Louis XIV ruled France during the Restoration, when the monarchy and monarch were the center of the people's attention. In Richard Barton's book *Style for Actors*, he notes that King Louis XIV dictated everything in the Restoration time period in France (often referred to as Baroque), and that "few kings have ever lived longer or ruled more powerfully" (180). King Charles himself noted during his time in France that King Louis had "obsessive control over every aspect of his country and

subjects' lives" (Popple, 39). This shows just how much power King Louis had over France and how he dictated the lives of the people.

Society expected the husband's rule over his wife to follow the same principles of the King's rule over his people. Religion and God ruled the people, as King Louis himself was a devout Catholic (*Rowlands*) who used the Bible as a guide for daily life. The Bible itself can often be considered a sexist text, describing women as "weaker vessel" (1 Peter 3:7) and promoting male supremacy. The Church believed that men had the right to dominate their wives or daughters due to their inferior intelligence and physical capability. The Church encouraged people to believe that women were substandard to men, which was one of many reasons why women were reduced to insignificance.

Although women were considered inferior beings during the Restoration time period, feminism slowly began to gain popularity among women. Many women realized that they had the right to be more than just a wife and mother. Women began to appear in more aspects of life, such as on stage or in the workplace. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines "feminism" as "the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities". The concept that women should have equal education as men began to gain momentum during the Restoration time period from several different sources. British writer and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft outlines the ridiculous expectations of women in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but have been made that way through history by society and a lack of education. "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by their mothers' example, that a little knowledge of human weakness (properly called 'cunning'), softness

of temperament, outward obedience, and scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and if they are also beautiful, that's all they need for at least twenty years" (13). In her book, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, Mary Astell promotes similar ideas. Astell questions the rights and expectations given to men versus women: "if all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?"

This thought began to creep into the minds of the English and French during the Restoration time period. However, most of society still expected women to act as women 'should' and fulfill their duties as wives and mothers, or serve purely as sexual objects. Jennifer Popple writes in her new book *Spectacular Bodies*, "If the actress was viewed as a sexual object both on and off the stage, she was, according to [Elizabeth] Howe, "no danger to the patriarchal system, but rather, its toy." On display and rumored to be sexually available to any man, many actresses would have found it difficult to create much personal power for themselves off the stage" (39). Although women were emerging in the workplace and on stage, they were still treated as inferiors, present only for the sexual pleasure of men.

I believe that in period works of theatre, such as the plays of Shakespeare and Moliere, roles often can be performed to make a stronger case for feminism than modern plays do. An example is Kate's submission to her husband in Shakespeare's *The Taming of The Shrew*. If an actress interprets Kate's final speech as defying her husband by forcing him to see the disgusting nature of what he has done, it leaves a strong impression on the audience. Or, if a woman plays a traditionally male role and brings the same strength and power that a man would bring to the character, it gives women the power to

be equal to men in history. For example, if a woman played Henry V and delivered the famous St. Crispin's Day speech in which Henry rallies his troops and prepares them for battle, it would give women power and status equal to men. I find this to be effective because it is almost as if the actors are rewriting history, giving women a chance to prove themselves as equals to men earlier in time. This is what I attempted to accomplish with my portrayal of Elmire, using my interpretation of the lines and my presence on stage to create a woman who was the intellectual and physical equal to men.

Moliere's Life and Works

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, more commonly known by his stage name Moliere, was a French playwright in the seventeenth century whose work was produced under the rule of King Louis XIV. Moliere was born in Paris in 1622 to a merchant, who served as an upholsterer to the king. Consequently, Moliere grew up within the court and received an excellent education. However, despite his education and the opportunity to assume his father's position in the court, Moliere was pulled towards a life in the theatre and chose to abandon his family name. In 1643, Moliere joined the Béjart theatre troupe. After several years of working with the troupe, Moliere left them and formed his own troupe, Illustre Théâtre in 1650. Moliere became the head of his troupe and slowly began to garner attention through touring performances in France. In 1658, Moliere's troupe was asked to perform for the King and gained the King's admiration through their amusing farce, *The Love Doctor*.

In 1664, Moliere performed *Tartuffe* for the King. The plot of *Tartuffe* focuses on a religious imposter named Tartuffe, who swindles an upper-class French family into believing his piety is authentic. The *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* explains that

religious members of the court did not react kindly to this portrayal of religion, which severely damaged Moliere's career:

It is not surprising that the play incurred the wrath of the powerful Society of the Holy Sacrament. This order of puritan religious devotees advocated restraints and assumed postures not unlike those of Tartuffe. Although the King harbored no love for the puritans, even he was ineffective in lessening their hold over a segment of the aristocracy.

Consequently, *Tartuffe* was not performed again until 1669, when the religious group finally relented. Throughout his remaining years, Moliere wrote several more successful comedies, including *Don Juan*, *The Misanthrope*, and *The Imaginary Invalid*. Moliere died in 1673 while performing *The Imaginary Invalid*. Although unsubstantiated in my research, the story goes that Moliere was giving such a convincing performance that the audience did not realize he was actually experiencing convulsions.

Tartuffe tells the story of Orgon and his household, where the house has been taken over by an impostor, who is posing as a spiritual advisor and devout religious man. Orgon and his mother, Madame Pernelle, are the only members of the family who remain fooled by Tartuffe's pious mask. The members of the household include Orgon's wife Elmire, his son Damis, and his daughter Marianne. The other characters present that are not a part of the immediate family are Dorine (the family maid), Cleante (Elmire's elder brother) and Valere (Marianne's lover and fiancée.) At the beginning of the play, Marianne is betrothed to Valere. However, Orgon soon informs Marianne, to her horror, that he has changed his mind and promised her to Tartuffe.

Throughout the play, Orgon expresses more love for Tartuffe than he does for any of the members of his family. He even tells Cleante “Oh, yes, I’ve quite changed under his instruction: he teaches me to cast aside affection and clear my mind of any trace of love; now I could watch my mother or my brother, my wife and children die, and not give that” (Hampton, 19). This blind devotion to a complete stranger infuriates and frustrates Orgon’s family and each member attempts to convince him of Tartuffe’s true nature. Finally, Elmire resolves to show him that Tartuffe is a fraud by tricking him into seducing her while Orgon hides in the room. At last Orgon believes his family, but unfortunately this revelation comes too late. Orgon has already signed his house and possessions over to Tartuffe and is facing arrest if he does not comply. But, in the end, although it seems that all hope is lost, the final scene features a member of the King’s guard informing Orgon that the King has saved him and will imprison Tartuffe for his deception. The family celebrates and Orgon announces that they must rejoice with the wedding of Valere and Marianne.

The Folly of the Aristocracy

The world in which *Tartuffe* was written was ruled primarily by one concept: Patriarchy. Patriarchy is a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it. Women were not given rights to vote or to become soldiers or generally take on roles of power. The expectations of women were that they grow up learning how to cook, clean, sew and perform other household duties as well as flirt and pleasure men without giving away too much before marriage. Once women reached their 20’s, they were expected to marry and immediately start producing children. Arranged marriages were not uncommon, although it was becoming

increasingly popular for men and women to make suitable choices for themselves. Additionally, young and attractive women were often married off to older, richer men. After women had finished giving birth, they would often assist in the raising of their children, along with the help of maids and other household employees (presuming the women were wealthy). Women were continually expected to please their husbands throughout marriage, and were required to accept any infidelity on their husband's part without a fight. Infidelity was almost expected of men, and was deemed acceptable on occasions for women. This is just one example of the double standards set for men and women: while men are expected and even encouraged to have affairs, women are encouraged to shy away from it, even if it is acceptable. This is troubling because, if women are discouraged from having extramarital affairs, with whom are the men expected to be sleeping?

Moliere understood the double standards set by the patriarchy and the folly of the aristocracy and was able to satirize these in his plays. Richard Barton's book *Style for Actors* calls this ability to satirize the "genius of Moliere": "Imagine a playwright of the twenty-first century managing to draw from vaudeville and the circus, to honor the strictest rules of etiquette and most repressive lobbying groups, to serve the whims of a major tycoon who believes himself the center of the universe, and to still write strong satire. This is the genius of Moliere" (177) One of Moliere's inspirations for his plays was the folly of the aristocracy. Moliere had a unique perspective on the aristocracy because, while he grew up a part of it, he was slightly removed, being the son of an upholsterer. His third party perspective on the people who surrounded the King allowed him to notice their flaws and vanities. Moliere saw clearly that there was a large error in

the logic of the aristocracy. The King relied largely on members of the court and upper class for their support and counsel. This is demonstrated in *Tartuffe* as the King's Officer explains that Orgon has been pardoned for his crimes due to his support of the King during the war. And yet, Orgon has just spent the last day demonstrating his complete foolishness, showing them that any charlatan easily dupes him. Richard Barton writes, "Characters in Moliere's plays often deny reality out of blind egotism or stupidity and seek to impose false visions of themselves" (179). Orgon is also obviously impulsive, irrational, and blind in matters of great importance. The critique of the aristocracy, and the target of Moliere's satire, is that the King's most trusted friends and advisors are idiots. In fact, the greatest voices of reason are the four women in *Tartuffe*. Barton again discusses this aspect of Moliere's work: "(Moliere's) plays have concerned good friends trying tirelessly to save foolish central characters from self destruction, offering patient, measured advice and comfort. The plays juggle excess against common sense, low farce with high wit, and emotion with reason" (181). The women in *Tartuffe* are the ones who attempt to rescue Orgon from his own gullibility.

Each of Moliere's female characters in *Tartuffe* fulfills a different but vital role in his critique of the aristocracy. Madame Pernelle, the matriarch, is strong, intelligent, and outspoken. Despite these characteristics, Pernelle believes that women are inferior to men. She repeatedly scolds Elmire for not obeying her husbands every wish and for having her own desires as well. She serves to demonstrate the clash of the old versus the new, the traditional woman versus the modern woman. She also shows great loyalty to her family, serving to display the significance of familial loyalty in the Restoration time period. Marianne, the ingénue, is meek, polite, obedient and impulsive. She is still a girl

and, while she has the potential to be a strong woman like the other three, demonstrates how women were expected to be submissive and docile. Dorine is the most similar to Elmire in that she speaks her mind and pays no attention to what society expects of her. She is brash, opinionated, and feisty, speaking her mind outright to the other characters. Unfortunately, this tactic makes Orgon and other male characters dismiss Dorine, because she is too honest about her feelings. Where Dorine fails to make an impression by making a beeline at the problem, Elmire succeeds by taking a side-angle and tactically exploiting men's weaknesses. She uses her body *and* her brains to achieve results while no one else succeeds as she does.

An Actor's Journey

As an actor, there are many steps one must take in order to prepare a character for a performance, such as mine in *Tartuffe*. Most begin with what is considered the first training technique for realistic drama: the Stanislavsky System (*Creating a Role*). Konstantin Stanislavsky, a famous Russian director and actor and the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, developed a system of techniques for performance known as "the system".

Stanislavsky believed that, through study of the play, analysis of the role, and recall of previous emotions, the actor could arrive at the 'inner truth' of a part by actually experiencing the emotions he conveyed to the audience. Furthermore, the actor must never lose control of his creation and must have the technical discipline to repeat his previously experienced emotions at every performance. (*"Stanislavsky"*)

His book, *The Actor Prepares*, is structured like a lesson from a director to his actors and involves conversations about different techniques the actors can use to create a character. One of the most important aspects of Stanislavsky's system, is the use of the imagination. Stanislavsky asks, "Does the dramatist supply everything that the actors need to know about the play? Can you, in a hundred pages, give a full account of the life of the dramatis personae? For example, does the author give sufficient details of what has happened before the play begins?" (60).

I often use my imagination to create a history for my character. I ask myself "Where did this person grow up? What sort of upbringing did they have? What has influenced their life and the person they have become?" I answer these questions with facts that I know about the time period in which the play takes place and the history that is available to me through my research. Stanislavsky touches on this as well: "Every invention of the actor's imagination must be thoroughly worked out and solidly built on a basis of facts. It must be able to answer all the questions (when, where, why, how) that he asks himself when he is driving his inventive faculties on to make a more and more definite picture of a make-believe existence." (76-77)

One of the many resources that are made available to actors during a show is the dramaturge. One of the most important members of a creative team, a dramaturge supplies all the research and facts about the time period. For *Tartuffe*, our dramaturge presented the cast with a series of important facts about the time period, including what life was like during the 1660's in France. She met with the cast during the first rehearsal and provided each actor with a packet of information that included key facts about King Louis XIV, Moliere, and the play's translator, Christopher Hampton. It also offered

research on aristocratic households, religion, family life, and the role of servants. This information is important because it provides actors with facts that inform their characters background and behaviors. I used this information in my creation of Elmore, but I also conducted additional research into the roles of women during the Restoration.

In addition to the dramaturge's research, the cast also had training from our resident Period Styles expert, Tamara Meneghini. Professor Meneghini instructed us on our movement and how we embodied the characters within the period. One of the most important elements of performing a role in any period play, the Restoration time period included, is moving and behaving in the same manner as men and women of the indicated time period. Our styles expert introduced the cast to important concepts in Restoration movement, by utilizing the five main areas of concentration necessary in creating a period movement score: stance, relationship to space, salutations, codes of behavior and use of properties. In the Restoration time period, there was an important sense of movement being fluid and this having a quality of floating. For example, with respect to an actor's relationship with space during this time period, people appeared to float across the room. This is in contrast to pressing or pounding through space, as may be more aligned with how one moves in a contemporary period play. People also generally utilized a much more expansive use of space, thus placing much importance on the enlarged size of one's own "personal bubble". This was partly due to the robust clothing worn by both men and women.

Professor Meneghini also stressed the importance of curved lines and pathways in this period. Whenever one wanted to move through space, they employed a curved pathway rather than making a straight line towards a target. This was because curves

were thought to be elegant and graceful, showcasing all the beauty of the individual. Beauty was a virtue and valued highly. All of this information is valuable to me because one of the most important aspects of creating a character is finding how that character lives inside an actor's body. Acclaimed acting teacher Stella Adler teaches in her book, *The Art of Acting*, "everything you say, everything you do, defines your character. The outside is what counts most in character. Your physical self is the most interesting thing in character." For me, physical embodiment of a character is key to bringing them to life on stage. Professor Meneghini's instruction was instrumental in the rehearsal process and in creating the character of Elmire.

The Rehearsal Process

The first week of rehearsal focused on plotting out "blocking" possibilities for the show scene by scene. Blocking is the process of planning when and where actors move on stage during the play. Directors set the blocking with their actors during the beginning of a rehearsal process in order to keep each performance uniform and to create aesthetically pleasing pictures on stage. The process for *Tartuffe* involved working with other actors to determine where and when we might move, as well as working with our director, Professor Lynn Nichols, to determine what he had in mind visually. Each director works differently, and Professor Nichols prefers to work in terms of "pictures" on the stage. He focuses primarily on what looks the most pleasing visually, as well as what suits the action of each particular scene. The most rewarding aspect of this process was being able to collaborate with Professor Nichols to combine our individual visions for the characters. In Act Three Scene Three, where Elmire begins to formulate her plot to trap Tartuffe, I wanted to take command of the stage by becoming an overwhelming

presence, standing firmly grounded at center stage, beginning with my line “Bring him”, directed towards Dorine. This demonstrates Elmire’s power over her household and her ability to think on her feet and use her brain. Professor Nichols embraced this concept and it remained a part of the performances.

This first week of rehearsal became crucial for me in my creation of Elmire. This is the time when an actor is able to collaborate with the director on who exactly the character is. The American Association of Community Theatre (AACT) defines the director’s role as “central to the production of a play. The director has the challenging task of bringing together the many complex pieces of a production—the script, actors, set, costuming, lighting, and sound and music—into a unified whole.” The director’s duties include interpreting the script, collaborating with the designers, planning rehearsals, and guiding the actor’s work during rehearsals” (AACT). Collaboration and communication with the director is imperative for actors during rehearsals. Professor Nichols and I both agreed that Elmire was the smartest person on stage and that this should be reflected both in my portrayal of her and in her embodiment on stage. When I asked what he thought of her, he told me this: “(she is) grounded and centered in solid humanity, Elmire reacts to her husband’s and Tartuffe’s misuse of the highest moral values, with the sort of common sense that human beings come by naturally when in a healthy state”. I agree with Professor Nichols’s interpretation of Elmire, an aspect of this process that was significant as we were able to see eye-to-eye when bringing her to life.

I spent the three-week break before rehearsals resumed memorizing lines and characterizing Elmire. As I spent time with the lines and the character, I noticed her ability to manipulate the men in her life by using her femininity to her advantage. Elmire

is very aware of her effect on men and, again, is often the smartest person in the room. As a Restoration woman, she cannot always express her intelligence directly so instead she uses her wiles to gain status and respect from the men who surround her. Even though Elmire is willing to speak her mind, men often refuse to listen to her because she is a woman. So instead of using words, she uses the stereotypes of the period to her advantage and manipulates men's weakness for beautiful women to obtain their attention.

Elmire's Relationships

When we returned to campus for rehearsals, I dove into Elmire's relationships with the other characters. In my first appearance on stage, I interact with the character of Cleante, Elmire's brother. In an added element to our production, I participated in a dance with Cleante at the top of the show. I became very curious about the director's decision to reveal Elmire first on the arm of her brother. Elmire and Cleante have several similarities: They are both smart, innovative, and the voices of reason. The greatest difference between the two is that Cleante is a thinker while Elmire is a doer. This curious relationship drew me in and I deduced that Elmire and Cleante are two sides of the same coin, so to speak. The two were raised in the same home and grew up together, learning the same lessons from their family. Cleante continues to be the most important man in her life and the only man whom she really trusts. Her brother also remains a strong presence in her home, despite the fact that she is his only relative within Orgon's household. Cleante is a peacemaker, always seeking solutions to the family's issues. He attempts to discuss Marianne's marriage with Orgon, tries to dissuade Tartuffe from accepting Damis inheritance as his own, and calms Orgon throughout the final scene. Contrastingly, Elmire takes action against Orgon when he refuses to believe Tartuffe's

true nature and *shows* him. While Elmire and Cleante are both peacemakers, where Cleante fails Elmire succeeds. This demonstrates that Elmire is just as smart as a man and can even be more successful in achieving her goals.

The next relationship I focused on was with my mother-in-law, Madame Pernelle. Elmire's relationship with Madame Pernelle is especially strained for several reasons. The first is that Elmire is Orgon's second wife, which is a fact of particular importance because it impacts her relationship with each member of the family differently. As such, she is constantly compared to the seemingly perfect first wife who gave Pernelle her grandchildren. Pernelle scolds Elmire for her incompetence, "Now, dear, don't take this amiss, but everything you do is simply wrong. You ought to set these two a good example, as their late mother never failed to do," (Hampton, 10). This infuriates Elmire, who is hurt by Madame Pernelle's comparisons to Orgon's first wife. Elmire fights against the typical female stereotype of the period and does not believe she exists only to serve her husband. Although Madame Pernelle is also a strong woman, she follows a different model than Elmire. Pernelle still believes in complete obedience and subservience to men, as demonstrated by her insistence that Elmire should want only to please her husband, such as bearing children. Pernelle expects Elmire to be obedient to her family and to follow whatever demands Orgon expects of her. However, Elmire is a woman of a new generation who is not afraid to speak her mind or defy her husband, nor does she live her life only to please the man she married. This is why Elmire is a feminist for the time period and Pernelle is not; Elmire does not believe her existence is purely for the pleasure of her husband and children and Pernelle does.

One of the most interesting relationships in the play is Elmire's relationship with Dorine, the maid. Dorine is Marianne's maid (as dictated in the script), but serves the entire family and often serves as a voice of reason in desperate situations. This is demonstrated in Act Two Scene Two, when Dorine attempts to convince Orgon that he is being ridiculous in forcing Marianne to marry Tartuffe. Although Dorine is of the household servants, Elmire recognizes the huge influence she has had on the upbringing of her stepchildren and considers her an equal. Elmire has an incredible amount of respect for the servants of the household, as she recognizes that she would not have the lifestyle she lives without them. She relies on Dorine for support in understanding and connecting with her new stepchildren and in keeping an eye on her husband, who is easily influenced by Tartuffe. Elmire recognizes Dorine as a member of the family and allows her free reign over the household, which also fuels Madame Pernelle's dislike of Elmire, as Pernelle believes servants should be seen and not heard. This is evidenced by Pernelle's treatment of her own maid, Flipote, whom Pernelle barks demands at and calls a slut. While Dorine too is an example of a strong woman, she goes about her interactions ineffectively. Dorine is abrasive and aggressive, often challenging men with such attitude that they completely ignore her. Elmire contrasts this by gaining the respect of men before she speaks her mind. When Elmire knows she cannot gain a man's respect, she exploits their weakness by utilizing specific feminine physical behavior to get what she wants from them.

My favorite relationship is Elmire's relationship with her husband, Orgon. Elmire is significantly younger than her husband and is his second wife. The actor who played Orgon, Jesse Pacheco, concluded from his own research that Orgon was approximately

50 years old and I concluded that Elmire was around 25 years old. I also imagine that he is wealthier than her family was, though not by too significant an amount. Despite these differences, I found through rehearsals and character work that Elmire truly loves Orgon. In my conceptualization of the character, which I used significantly in creating Elmire, the two met several months after Orgon's first wife died, when he was grieving and struggling to raise two children. She was immediately charmed by him and his kind heart and quickly fell in love with him. I found it very important in my development of Elmire that she loved Orgon for more than just his money or his status. Their relationship is built on mutual respect, which is demonstrated in Act Three Scene Three when Orgon agrees to let Elmire show her Tartuffe's true nature despite his initial unwillingness. This shows that Orgon's respect for his wife outweighs his instincts. In many ways, Orgon recognizes Elmire as an equal because he admires her independence and intelligence. The aspect of respect is significant during the play because Orgon's respect for Elmire diminishes as his love for Tartuffe increases. Elmire is forced to challenge Orgon's ignorance and blind devotion to Tartuffe. It is in these moments that the evidence of Elmire as an example of early feminism becomes clearest.

A Scene-by-Scene Breakdown

Although she does not say much in the first 30 pages of the play, the audience is able to gain an understanding of the kind of woman Elmire is by her presence on stage. I endeavored to make her presence and opinions known throughout Act One Scene One, an ensemble scene where Madame Pernelle berates the family for their classless behavior, during which time my only line was "but mother -" (Hampton, 10). Rather than attempting to become the focus of a scene that did not belong to me, I chose to make

Elmire's opinions of her stepmother's words known through my reactions and facial expressions. Because Elmire is a feminist, she would not mask her opinions, as other women of the period may have. Instead, Elmire makes her poor opinions of her stepmother known, rolling her eyes and outwardly scoffing at her unsavory remarks. Through these small interactions in front of the audience, I aspired to convey Elmire's defiance of the period and her unwillingness to stifle her feelings.

The first major interaction Elmire has is with Tartuffe, in what is commonly called the "pouf scene", or Act Three Scene Three. Elmire enters with a purpose: to get Tartuffe to give up his influence on Orgon and reject his proposed marriage to Marianne, who wants to marry Valere. Throughout the scene, Elmire fights off Tartuffe's attempts to seduce her and get back to her original objective. When Tartuffe squeezes Elmire's hand, as the script prompts, and then places his hand on her skirt, Elmire manages to evade him by claiming that she is "very ticklish". Then, when he feels the front of Elmire's bodice, and excuses his behavior by claiming to be fascinated by the workmanship, Elmire calmly rebuffs him: "I'm sure. But can we get back to the point," (Hampton, 47). This is something Elmire has had to face her entire life: men caring more about her body than the contents of her brain. In my created backstory, most of Elmire's interactions with men consist of them attempting to seduce her and her politely refusing their advances. This would be enough to deter any woman from pursuing her goals. However, Elmire uses her femininity to her advantage, allowing Tartuffe to go far enough for her to be able to use his advances as blackmail against him. Instead of resenting men for their boorish behavior, Elmire has learned to take these interactions and grow from them. This continual objectification by men has pushed Elmire to work

harder to prove them wrong by being their equal in intelligence. In the following interaction between the two, Elmire challenges Tartuffe and uses his own urges against him:

ELMIRE. I've heard you out now, and your eloquence is unambiguous enough, I think. But aren't you worried that I might decide to tell my husband about this proposal? And that if he were told about your hopes it might do damage to his friendship for you?

TARTUFFE. I know that you're too generous for that and that you will forgive my recklessness; the violence of a passion which offends you you will exonerate as human weakness, and, bearing in mind your looks, you will acknowledge that I'm not blind and men are flesh and blood.

ELMIRE. Others might take another line perhaps, but I prefer to exercise discretion. I shall say nothing of this to my husband; but in return I'd like something from you: I want you to support quite openly, without beating about the bush, Valere's marriage to Marianne, and to give up your unfair influence and your desire to enrich yourself with someone else's money, and...
(Hampton, 49)

At this point in the dialogue, the untimely entrance of her stepson Damis cuts off Elmire. This is the first time when the audience truly sees Elmire's intellect, when she threatens to expose Tartuffe's insolence and agrees to hold back this information in exchange for his promise to relinquish his hold over Orgon and of Marianne's hand in marriage.

I love this moment for Elmire because it is the first time she reveals her true power. Although she previously hints to the audience that she is a strong woman, such as

in Act One Scene One, her threat to expose Tartuffe is the first time she reveals her strength and acuity. In my conceptualization of Elmire, her mother passed away early in her life, leaving her father and brother to raise her. I drew this conclusion based on her intimate relationship with Cleante and her quick thinking moments such as in Act Three Scene Three. Elmire was given lessons in becoming a lady, such as dancing and sewing. This assumption was substantiated in my research of *Becoming a French Aristocrat*, which asserts that women were given lessons in “social graces and domestic arts at home,” (Motley, 50). However, strong and smart men, whom she viewed as her equals, surrounded Elmire. This influenced how she viewed herself growing up. Additionally, her father and brother encouraged her to speak her mind, seeing her as the unique woman she is. Elmire resisted marriage until she met the right man for her. Thus, she was around the age of 24 when she married Orgon. Most women of the Restoration time period were married between the ages of 20 and 30, which I discovered in my research from *The Informal Social Control Of Marriage in Seventeenth Century England*. I also discovered that although marriages were often arranged, “social and demographic historians tell us that marriage partners increasingly made their own choices”, which made it plausible that Elmire would have chosen her own mate (Collins). Elmire never doubted that she is equal to the men that surround her, despite society urging her to fulfill the “duty” of a woman of the time. Director Lynn Nichols said about Elmire, “When pushed, she's inventive, as any good feminist would be, to set things back on an appropriate track. Yes, she's a product of her period, but always functions, more than her husband, stepson, stepdaughter or even brother, with a sort of level-headed common knowledge and human logic to support a healthfully functioning family.” I agree with Professor Nichols’

assessment of Elmire, especially with his assertion that while she is a product of her period, she is still a surprisingly smart and outspoken woman for her time.

After Damis reveals himself and swears to expose Tartuffe's insolence, Elmire continues to hold her ground despite her stepson's blind rage. While Damis is impulsive and reckless, Elmire is thoughtful and calculated. Every decision Elmire makes is designed to achieve the most effective results. This leads to the next moment where Elmire demonstrates herself as a feminist. After Orgon enters the scene and Damis exposes Tartuffe, Orgon looks for some affirmation from Elmire on the situation. Elmire wastes no time avoiding the topic and instead, engages Orgon and Damis head on and attempts to defuse the uncomfortable situation. "Its true. I don't think one should ever ruin a husband's peace of mind for trivial reasons; honor is not affected. It's enough for us to know how to defend ourselves. That's how I feel, and if I'd had the slightest influence on you, you would have kept quiet" (Hampton, 51). This last line is in reference to Damis, with whom she is furious for not listening to her when she has devised a clearly superior plan. This has always been one of my favorite moments for Elmire. Interestingly, it is the first time the audience sees her interact with Orgon and it provides them with an immediate sense of who she is with him. This interaction demonstrates that Elmire is not afraid to stand up to her husband or to speak the truth, even when it is not the "polite" choice. I also take pleasure in the final line to Damis, it always made me chuckle to myself, feeling all that aggravation with Damis and his stupidity.

Elmire's first entrance at the top of Act Two begins my favorite portion of the play. In this scene Orgon completely disregards all members of his family, pushing Elmire to her limit. In my creation of her backstory, Elmire has been comforting

Marianne since her last exit; she attempts to calm her for long enough to find a suitable solution to Orgon's ridiculous decision that Marianne marry Tartuffe. By this time, she is legitimately concerned for the health of her stepdaughter, and furious with her husband for not giving his daughter the freedom to choose her own husband. Her emotions turn from fear for Marianne's wellbeing to disgust towards her husband in the blink of an eye the moment he enters. Orgon enters and informs Marianne that he has drawn up and signed the contract that will force her to marry Tartuffe. This prompts Marianne to get on her knees and beg Orgon not to force her into this marriage. Watching Marianne beg for her father's pity, particularly hearing her say, "Don't take my life from me, this life you gave me" drives Elmire over the edge. As an actor, I gave this moment to Marianne because this is *her* story and I wanted to support it by giving her my full attention. My only reactions were in support of what she was saying and to focus the audience's attention on her.

The moment where Elmire snaps back into the foreground of this scene occurs after Orgon tosses Marianne to the ground, when Elmire rushes forward to comfort her and help her to her feet. Elmire recognizes that it is time for her to act and protect her family. Because she knows that her stepdaughter is too afraid to stand up for herself, Elmire chooses to come to her defense and confront Orgon. The following interaction is significant because it demonstrates the power Elmire has in her household:

ELMIRE. I don't know what to say about all this, I'm staggered by your
blindness. You must be infatuated and obsessed with him to overlook what's
happened here today.

ORGON. Seeing's believing, with all due respect. I know how indulgent you are towards my son, and that you were afraid to contradict him, when he tried playing that trick on the poor boy. You were too calm to be believable, you would have looked a great deal more upset.

ELMIRE. Need we react quite ferociously when someone just declares his love for us? Are blazing eyes and spitting out insults the only possible response to it? My way is just to laugh at these approaches, I get no pleasure out of melodrama. I think a chilly and discreet refusal is as effective a rebuff as any.
(Hampton, 61-62)

The scene continues in this direction until Elmire decides to do something about Orgon's blindness in regard to Tartuffe and *show* him that she is telling the truth by getting Tartuffe to seduce her in Orgon's presence: "This delusion has lasted far too long, and I am tired of being accused of lying. It's high time I gave myself the satisfaction of showing you everything we've said is true" (Hampton, 62). This line is significant in my development of Elmire because she very clearly challenges Orgon and puts her needs and desires above his. This scene is where the audience really sees Elmire as Orgon's equal and understands why these two people are married. I discussed this scene with Professors Nichols and Meneghini and they agreed that it was significant in understanding Elmire and Orgon's relationship. The audience sees the two challenge each other as intellectual rivals and equals and understand that beneath all the bickering, Orgon does indeed respect his wife.

The next scene is the best-known scene from *Tartuffe*: what is called "the table scene" (Act Four Scene Five). Elmire turns the tables on Tartuffe, and instead of

allowing her sexuality to overwhelm her as a person she *uses* it against him to get what she wants. I found that Elmire uses her intellect to the utmost in this scene. As soon as Tartuffe enters the room, you can almost see the cogs turning in her brain. First, Elmire makes sure that Tartuffe is satisfied that no one is listening in on their conversation (despite the fact that she has hidden Orgon underneath the table). When he asks why she wanted to see him, Elmire replies, “There’s a secret I must tell you. But, before I do would you please close those doors, and make sure no one’s likely to surprise us.” By telling Tartuffe to check around for eavesdroppers, Elmire ensures Tartuffe that no one will be listening. She then goes on to explain her reaction when Damis revealed himself in the last scene the two shared, “Its true I was so worried that it never occurred to me to contradict his story” (Hampton, 64), she then strokes Tartuffe’s ego by assuring him that she thinks as highly of him as her husband does, “Your reputation soon dispelled the storm, my husband couldn’t think badly of you” (Hampton, 65). Finally, she explains that her husband would never know if anything happened between them because he “wants us to spend lots of time together” (Hampton, 65) and explains that she, in fact, does want to “entertain his suit” and sleep with Tartuffe. In this monologue, Elmire covers all her bases, making sure that there are no holes in her story and that she will easily be able to convince Tartuffe of her desire for him. This level of creativity makes Elmire one of the smartest characters in the play, knowing exactly what she needs to do to accomplish her goals.

In the next monologue, Elmire cleverly uses what she knows of Tartuffe to convince him further that she is ready to submit to him (even though it is actually a trick, as Tartuffe suspects). Elmire exploits the weakness of men and the expectation of

women to be sexual objects in her deception of Tartuffe, drawing him in with the promise of her body. In my physical portrayal of this monologue, I used seduction techniques from the Restoration time period that I learned from our movement coach, Professor Meneghini. I used a very specific hand prop, a fan, which is a symbol of sex and temptation in the Restoration period. Both women and men practiced intimate communication, most often in public settings where they were expected to display politeness and adherence to period protocol, through the creation of a private fan language. In this seemingly secret code the woman uses the fan to send signals to lovers and bring the attention of their intended towards favored physical assets. Thus, this “language of the fan”, as it is frequently called, is often practiced and understood primarily as a tool in flirting and seduction. In the Restoration time period, seduction was a desired quality in which one could demonstrate both power and passion for an intended lover - and Elmire is a master of it (Professor Meneghini). I used the fan to pull Tartuffe close to me and then to reveal my bosom to him, finally doffing my fan and using it to reveal the slightest amount of ankle to him.

Another important tactic Elmire uses are her words. I carefully used my words and the way I delivered them to lure Tartuffe even closer in to me. By placing emphasis on words such as “pleasure” and shaping my mouth in a way that would entice him, I made myself irresistible to him. This second monologue, though still about convincing Tartuffe that I am telling the truth, is about seduction and tempting him so much that he forgets his hesitation. Although Elmire believes that women are more than just objects for sex, she uses the sexism of the period in her favor by using her sexuality, leaving him with no choice but to submit to her. By taking advantage of the sexism of the period,

Elmire demonstrates her intellect because she knows how to manipulate the system to get what she wants.

The rest of this scene involves Elmire avoiding Tartuffe's advances long enough for Orgon to come out from underneath the table and stop the chicanery. However, Orgon is slow to reveal himself and Elmire is forced to think on her feet to rebuff Tartuffe while still maintaining the charade. She finally gets him to leave the room for a moment and she confronts Orgon when he finally comes out.

ORGON. So you were right, what an appalling man! I can't get over it, it's such a shock.

ELMIRE. What already? Get back under the tablecloth, you're early; wait till he's finished, to be on the safe side, I don't think you should make unfair assumptions

ORGON. He's worse than any devil out of Hell

ELMIRE. Good God, now, don't go jumping to conclusions! Before you change your mind, I think you should be properly convinced, so don't be hasty, I wouldn't want you to make a mistake. (Hampton, 69)

At this point, Tartuffe reenters and Orgon finally catches him in the act. Although this exchange could be read as passive on Elmire's part, I interpreted it as complete sarcasm. The audience recognizes at this point how smart and hilarious Elmire is as she lies on the table exhausted and annoyed because she is sick of having to work so hard to counteract the reticence of her husband to see the truth. She shares this moment with the audience, as they have witnessed everything and know that she is not only intelligent, but also crafty. And although Elmire feels a brief moment of relief when Orgon finally faces up

to Tartuffe, it is quickly destroyed as she learns that her husband has turned over all of their possessions to the very man they just deceived.

Elmire spends the final scenes, where Orgon faces imprisonment and eviction because of Tartuffe's disloyalty, listening. She takes in all of the chaos that happens around her and occasionally offers wisdom and advice. Primarily, she is preoccupied with thinking of a solution to their predicament and worrying about her family. In this moment, Elmire fulfills her roles as a wife and mother while still maintaining her intelligence and independence. For example, when Marianne steps forward to confront Tartuffe, Elmire sees that Marianne is putting herself in danger and steps in front of her to protect her stepdaughter. She knows that she has to protect her family and that this is now a matter of greater importance than proving she was right and Orgon was wrong. She also finds great comfort in the presence of her brother, using him as support and looking to him to intervene in moments of desperation for her husband.

This is also a moment of reconciliation between Elmire and Madame Pernelle. Just after Tartuffe enters to claim the house and arrest Orgon, the actress playing Madame Pernelle chose to grow weak and stumble. As Elmire, I stood beside her and caught her before she could fall. Although it was silent, I relayed to her that I was sorry for any trouble I have caused her and that this moment was bigger than our conflict because it was about saving the man we both love: Orgon. The family's hatred of Tartuffe is so strong in this scene that the audience can almost feel it radiating from them. Although Elmire has remained relatively calm and "ladylike", she loses her composure for one moment. The urge to attack Tartuffe overwhelms her and she attempts to assault him as she calls him an "impostor," which was a choice that I made with Professors

Nichols and Meneghini to demonstrate Elmire's boldness. Even though she is furious, Elmire stands by her husband and her family throughout this scene and feels an incredible amount of relief when it is revealed that Tartuffe is the one being arrested. By the end of the play, Elmire forgives her husband for his being duped by Tartuffe, and celebrates beside him as he grants Marianne and Valere his permission to marry.

Conclusion

All of this work can be seen in the videotaped performance of *Tartuffe*, where my thoughts on Elmire as a feminist come to life. My research and realization that Elmire is an equal to her husband and to the other men in her life is present throughout this work. Revisiting Merriam-Webster's definition of feminism, "the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities", I demonstrated this equality in my work and in my performance as Elmire. She asserts herself when her husband is wrong, uses her intellect to trap Tartuffe, and stands up for what she believes in while maintaining her role as a wife and mother, in the end proving she is more than just that.

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