French drama: *Tartuffe*
by Moliere (1622-1673)

*Tartuffe* by Moliere
In *Tartuffe*, a comedy in five acts, Molière relates the story of an attempt, by an irreclaimable hypocrite, to destroy the domestic happiness of a citizen who, charmed by his seeming piety, has received him as a prominent guest.

The first three acts were produced during the fêtes held at Versailles, nominally in honor of the queen and Anne of Austria, but really to please the maid of honor who had now become the king’s mistress. It would be impossible to exaggerate the effect produced by this gruesome picture upon its first beholders—upon the mass of revelers who, resplendent in masquerade attire, filled the theatre in every part. Not only did the entertainment differ entirely from what they had expected, but the author, who seems to have been born to make the world laugh at itself, showed that he had also the power to confront them with one of the deepest mysteries of human existence.

The king at once perceived the genius displayed in *Tartuffe*, and was also clear-headed enough to see that it was aimed exclusively against hypocrisy; but from the moment it made its appearance in Paris another and heavier storm began to rage over the head of the dramatist. According to his assailants, he had at length thrown aside the mask altogether, and under pretense of exposing hypocrisy was seeking to undermine the foundations of religion itself. Roullés, the curé of Saint Barthélemy, took upon himself to damn the author of *Tartuffe* on his own authority, and another virulent denouncer of the play was the bishop of Autun, supposed to be the original of the stage imposter. The agitation steadily increased until the king deemed it prudent to prohibit the performance in Paris of a play which he had unreservedly approved.

Irritated by his disappointment, Molière registered a vow that, sooner or later, the interdiction should be set aside, and before long awakened such a friendly interest in his drama among the leaders of society as to induce the king to withdraw his prohibition. This was made the more easy by the anxiety of the fashionable world to taste the forbidden fruit, the salons competing with each other in their inducements to have *Tartuffe* read in the presence of a select audience; for "no greater pleasure," they said, "could be afforded them." Molière
complied with many of these requests, inasmuch as they gave him an opportunity of dispelling the numberless misapprehensions in regard to his play, and of inspiring a wish to see it performed on the stage. His first private reading was before the pope's legate and a party of prelates, who, imagining *Tartuffe* to be a covert satire against the Jansenists--an idea which, however erroneous, the author took no pains to dispel--decided very strongly in its favor. The Jansenists placed on it an entirely different construction, while Molière, adroitly answering the questions put to him, managed to win over both sides, and that without suffering any twinges of conscience.

http://www.theatrehistory.com/french/tartuffe001.html