

ЖАН-БАТИСТ МОЛЬЕР

THE
PRETENTIOUS
YOUNG LADIES

Жан-Батист Мольер

The Pretentious Young Ladies

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Molière

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INTRODUCTORY NOTICE

Molière began in *The Pretentious Young Ladies* to paint men and women as they are; to make living characters and existing manners the ground-work of his plays. From that time he abandoned all imitation of Italian or Spanish imbroglions and intrigues.

There is no doubt that aristocratic society attempted, about the latter years of the reign of Louis XIII., to amend the coarse and licentious expressions, which, during the civil wars had been introduced into literature as well as into manners. It was praiseworthy of some high-born ladies in Parisian society to endeavour to refine the language and the mind. But there was a very great difference between the influence these ladies exercised from 1620 until 1640, and what took place in 1658, the year when Molière returned to Paris. The Hôtel de Rambouillet, and the aristocratic drawing-rooms, had then done their work, and done it well; but they were succeeded by a clique which cared only for what was nicely said, or rather what was out of the common. Instead of using an elegant and refined diction, they employed only a pretentious and conceitedly affected style, which became highly ridiculous; instead of improving the national idiom they completely spoilt it. Where formerly D'Urfe, Malherbe, Racan, Balzac, and Voiture reigned, Chapelain, Scudéry, Ménage, and the Abbé Cotin, "the father of the French Riddle," ruled in their stead. Moreover, every lady in Paris, as well as in the provinces, no matter what her education was, held her drawing-room, where nothing was heard but a ridiculous, exaggerated, and what was worse, a borrowed phraseology. The novels of Mdlle. de Scudéry became the text-book of the *précieux* and the *précieuses*, for such was the name given to these gentlemen and ladies who set up for wits, and thought they displayed exquisite taste, refined ideas, fastidious judgment, and consummate and critical discrimination, whilst they only uttered vapid and blatant nonsense. What other language can be used when we find that they called the sun *l'aimable éclairant le plus beau du monde*, *l'époux de la nature*, and that when speaking of an old gentleman with grey hair, they said, not as a joke, but seriously, *il a des quittances d'amour*. A few of their expressions, however, are employed even at the present time, such as, *châtier son style*; to correct one's style; *dépenser une heure*, to spend an hour; *revêtir ses pensées d'expressions nobles*, to clothe one's thoughts in noble expressions, etc.

Though the *précieux* and *précieuses* had been several times attacked before, it remained for Molière to give them their death blow, and after the performance of his comedy the name became a term of ridicule and contumely. What enhanced the bitterness of the attack was the difference between Molière's natural style and the affected tone of the would-be elegants he brought upon the stage.

This comedy, in prose, was first acted at Paris, at the Théâtre du Petit Bourbon, on the 18th of November, 1659, and met with great success. Through the influence of some noble *précieux* and *précieuses* it was forbidden until the 2d of December, when the concourse of spectators was so great that it had to be performed twice a day, that the prices of nearly all the places were raised (See Note 7, page xxv.), and that it ran for four months together. We have referred in our prefatory memoir of Molière to some of the legendary anecdotes connected with this play.

It has also been said that our author owed perhaps the first idea of this play to a scarcely-known work, *le Cercle des Femmes, ou le Secret du Lit Nuptial; entretiens comiques*, written by a long-forgotten author, Samuel Chapuzeau, in which a servant, dressed in his master's clothes, is well received by a certain lady who had rejected the master. But as the witty dialogue is the principal merit in Molière's play, it is really of no great consequence who first suggested the primary idea.

The piece, though played in 1659, was only printed on the 29th of January, 1660, by Guillaume de Luyne, a bookseller in Paris, with a preface by Molière, which we give here below:

A strange thing it is, that People should be put in print against their Will. I know nothing so unjust, and should pardon any other Violence much sooner than that.

Not that I here intend to personate the bashful Author, and out of a point of Honour undervalue my Comedy. I should very unseasonably disoblige all the People of Paris, should I accuse them of having applauded a foolish Thing: as the Public is absolute Judge of such sort of Works, it would be Impertinence in me to contradict it; and even if I should have had the worst Opinion in the World of my *Pretentious Young Ladies* before they appeared upon the Stage, I must now believe them of some Value, since so many People agree to speak in their behalf. But as great part of the Pleasure it gave depends upon the Action and Tone of the Voice, it behooved me, not to let them be deprived of those Ornaments; and that success they had in the representation, was, I thought, sufficiently favorable for me to stop there. I was, I say, determined, to let them only be seen by Candlelight, that I might give no room for any one to use the Proverb; [Footnote: In Molière's time it was proverbially said of a woman, "*Elle est belle a la chandelle, mais le grand jour gate tout.*" She is beautiful by candle-light, but day-light spoils everything.] nor was I willing they should leap from the Theatre de Bourbon into the *Galerie du Palais*. [Footnote: The *Galerie du Palais* was the place where Molière's publisher lived.] Notwithstanding, I have been unable to avoid it, and am fallen under the Misfortune of seeing a surreptitious Copy of my Play in the Hands of the Booksellers, together with a Privilege, knavishly obtained, for printing it. I cried out in vain, O Times! O Manners! They showed me that there was a Necessity for me to be in print, or have a Law-suit; and the last evil is even worse than the first. Fate therefore must be submitted to, and I must consent to a Thing, which they would not fail to do without me.

Lord, the strange Perplexity of sending a book abroad! and what an awkward Figure an Author makes the first time he appears in print! Had they allowed me time, I should have thought it over better, and have taken all those Precautions which the Gentlemen Authors, who are now my Brethren, commonly make use of upon the like Occasions. Besides, some noble Lord, whom I should have chosen, in spite of his Teeth, to be the Patron of my Work, and whose Generosity I should have excited by an Epistle Dedicatory very elegantly composed, I should have endeavoured to make a fine and learned Preface; nor do I want books which would have supplied me with all that can be said in a scholarly Manner upon Tragedy and Comedy; the Etymology of them both, their Origin, their Definition, and so forth. I should likewise have spoken to my friends, who to recommend my Performance, would not have refused me Verses, either in French or Latin. I have even some that would have praised me in Greek, and Nobody is ignorant, that a Commendation in Greek is of a marvellous efficacy at the Beginning of a Book. But I am sent Abroad without giving me time to look about me; and I can't so much as obtain the Liberty of speaking two words, to justify my Intention, as to the subject of this Comedy. I would willingly have shewn that it is confined throughout within the Bounds of allowable and decent Satire, that Things the most excellent are liable to be mimicked by wretched Apes, who deserve to be ridiculed; that these absurd Imitations of what is most perfect, have been at all times the Subject of Comedy; and that, for the same Reason, that the truly Learned and truly Brave never yet thought fit to be offended at the Doctor or the Captain in a Comedy, no more than Judges, Princes, and Kings at seeing Trivelin, [Footnote: The Doctor and the Captain were traditional personages of the Italian stage; their parts need no further explanation; Trivelin was a popular Italian actor, who in a humorous and exaggerated way played the parts of Judges, Princes, and Kings.] or any other upon the Stage, ridiculously act the Judge, the Prince, or King; so the true *Précieuses* would be in the wrong to be angry, when the pretentious Ones are exposed, who imitate them awkwardly. In a Word, as I said, I am not allowed breathing time; Mr. de Luyne is going to bind me up this Instant: ... let it be so, since the Fates so ordain it.

In the third volume of the "Select Comedies of M. de Molière," this comedy is called "The Conceited Ladies." It is dedicated to Miss Le Bas in the following words: —

MADAM, Addresses of this Nature are usually fill'd with Flattery: And it is become so general and known a Practice for Authors of every kind to bedeck with all Perfections Those to whom they present their Writings, that Dedications are, by most People, at Present, interpreted like Dreams, directly backwards. I dare not, therefore, attempt Your Character, lest even Truth itself should be suspected — Thus far, however, I'll venture to declare, that if sprightly blooming Youth, endearing sweet Good-nature, flowing gentile Wit, and an easy unaffected Conversation, maybe reckon'd Charms, —*Miss LE BAS* is exquisitely charming.

The following COMEDY of *Monsieur MOLIERE*, that celebrated Dramatick Writer, was, by him, intended to reprove a vain, fantastical, conceited and preposterous Humour, which about that time prevailed very much in *France*. It had the desir'd good Effect, and conduced a great deal towards rooting out a Taste so unreasonable and ridiculous. — As Pride, Conceit, Vanity, and Affectation, are Foibles so often found amongst the Fair Sex at present, I have attempted this Translation, in hopes of doing service to my pretty Country-Women. — And, certainly, it must have a double efficacy, under the Patronage of one who is so bright an Example of the contrary fine Accomplishments, which a large Fortune makes her not the less careful to improve.

I am not so presumptuous to imagine that my *English* can do sufficient Justice to the sense of this admir'd AUTHOR; and, therefore, have caused the ORIGINAL to be placed against it Page for Page, hoping that, both together, may prove an agreeable and useful Entertainment. — But I have detain'd you too long already, and shall only add, that I am, with much respect, and every good Wish, MADAM, *Your most Obedient Humble Servant*, THE TRANSLATOR.

The *Précieuses Ridicules* have been partly imitated in "*The Damoiselles à la Mode*, Compos'd and Written by Richard Flecknoe. London: Printed for the Author, 1667. To their graces the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle, the Author dedicates this his comedy more humbly than by way of epistle." This gentleman, who was "so distinguished as a wretched poet, that his name had almost become proverbial," and who gave the title to Dryden's *Mac-Flecknoe*, is said to have been originally a Jesuit. Langbaine states "that his acquaintance with the nobility was more than with the Muses." In the preface our author says: "This Comedy is taken out of several excellent pieces of *Molière*. The main plot out of his *Pretieuse's Ridiculee's*; the Counterplot of *Sganarelle* out of his *Escole des Femmes*, and out of the *Escole des Marys*, the two *Naturals*; all which, like so many *Pretieuse* stones, I have brought out of *France*; and as a Lapidary set in one Jewel to adorn our English stage."

This motley play was never acted; at least the author says: "for the Acting it, those who have the Governing of the Stage, have their Humours, and wou'd be intreated; and I have mine and won't intreat them; and were all Dramatick Writers of my mind, they shou'd wear their old *Playes* Thred-bare e're they shou'd have any *New*, till they better understood their own Interest, and how to distinguish betwixt good and bad."

The "Prologue intended for the overture of the Theater 1666," opens thus: —

"In these sad Times our Author has been long
Studying to give you some diversion;
And he has ta'en the way to do't, which he
Thought most diverting, mirth and Comedy;
And now he knows there are inough i' the Town
At name of mirth and Comedy will frown,
And sighing say, the times are bad; what then?
Will their being sad and heavy better them?"

[Footnote: In 1665 the plague broke out in London, and in the succeeding year the great fire took place; only at Christmas 1666 theatrical performances began again.]

According to the list of "The Representers, as they were first design'd." I see that Nell Gwyn should have played the part of "*Lysette, the Damoiselle's waiting Woman.*"

James Miller, a well-known dramatist, and joint-translator of Molière, with H. Baker, has also imitated part of "the *Pretentious Young Ladies,*" and with another part borrowed from Molière's *School for Husbands*, two characters taken from Molière's *Learned Ladies*, and some short speeches borrowed from the *Countess of Escarbagnas*, he composed a comedy, which was played at Drury Lane, March 6th, 1735, under the title of *The Man of Taste, or, The Guardians*. Mr. Miller appears to have been a man of indomitable spirit and industry. Being a clergyman, with a very small stipend, he wrote plays to improve his circumstances, but offended both his bishop and the public. At last he was presented to the very valuable living of Uperne, in Dorsetshire, and was also successful with a translation of *Mahomet* of Voltaire, but died within the year after his induction. *The Man of Taste* was printed for J. Watts, MDCCXXXV., and is dedicated to Lord Weymouth. We give part of the dedication:

"As to the Attempt here made to expose the several Vices and Follies that at present flourish in Vogue, I hope your Lordship will think it confined within the bounds of a modest and wholesome Chastisement. That it is a very seasonable one, I believe, every Person will acknowledge. When what is set up for the Standard of Taste, is but just the Reverse of Truth and Common Sense; and that which is dignify'd with the Name of Politeness, is deficient in nothing – but Decency and Good Manners: When all Distinctions of Station and Fortune are broke in upon, so that a *Peer* and a *Mechanick* are cloathed in the same Habits, and indulge in the same Diversions and Luxuries: When Husbands are ruin'd, Children robb'd, and Tradesmen starv'd, in order to give Estates to a *French Harlequin*, and *Italian Eunuch*, for a Shrug or a Song; [Footnote: Farinelli, an eminent Italian soprano, went to England in 1734, remained there three years, sang chiefly at the Theatre of Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, then under the direction of Porpora, his old Master, became a great favorite, and made about, £5,000 a year. As *The Man of Taste* was performed at a rival house, Drury Lane, the bitterness of the allusion may be easily understood. The French Comedians acted at the Haymarket from November 22, 1734 to June 1735, hence the allusion to a French Harlequin.] shall not fair and fearless Satire oppose this Outrage upon all Reason and Discretion. Yes, My Lord, resentment can never better be shown, nor Indignation more laudably exerted than on such an occasion."

The Prologue, spoken by Mr. Cibber, is racy. We give the first half of it: —

"Wit springs so slow in our bleak Northern Soil,
It scarce, at best, rewards the Planter's Toil.
But now, when all the Sun-shine, and the Rain,
Are turn'd to cultivate a Foreign grain;
When, what should cherish, preys upon the Tree,
What generous Fruit can you expect to see?
Our Bard, to strike the Humour of the Times,
Imports these Scenes from kindlier Southern Climes;
Secure his Pains will with Applause be crown'd,
If you're as fond of Foreign sense as ... sound:
And since their Follies have been bought so dear,
We hope their Wit a moderate Price may bear.
Terence, Great Master! who, with wond'rous Art,
Explor'd the deepest Secrets of the Heart;
That best Old Judge of Manners and of Men,
First grac'd this Tale with his immortal Pen.

Molière, the Classick of the Gallick Stage,
First dar'd to modernize the Sacred Page;
Skilful, the one thing wanting to supply,
Humour, that Soul of Comic Poesy.
The Roman Fools were drawn so high ... the Pit

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