

BOURGEOIS GENTLEMAN

Moliere

Bourgeois Gentilhomme (*Bourgeois Gentleman*) by Moliere

Overview Moliere (1622-1673) was a French playwright and actor, whose comedies -- *Tartuffe*, *The Miser*, *The Misanthrope*, *The Would be Gentleman* (1670), *The Imaginary Invalid*, *The Doctor despite Himself*--epitomize the sharp wit and social canniness of 'le grand siècle,' that mid-seventeenth century dominated by the monarchy of Louis XIV and his culturally brilliant court at Versailles. Through extensive experience as a stage actor, and high connections at court, Moliere built himself into the perfect analyst of the foibles of his new bourgeois/pretentious culture, and though making many enemies—among the church hierarchy, among medical professionals—he prevailed as one of France's most beloved dramatists/social critics.

Story As in *Tartuffe*, Moliere takes pleasure in mocking fakes and their social pretenses. Whereas *Tartuffe* pretended to a high spirituality, the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, of Moliere's most famous and hilarious play, exemplifies the dreams of the new middle class, which by 1670, the date of the present play, is rapidly laying claim to social respectability, even in those cases, like that of M. Jourdain, where the money in the family has come from commerce. (Jourdain's dad has been a wealthy clothing manufacturer.) M. Jourdain goes all out to try to establish his own respectability, though by his age, forty, he is hardly up to the rigors of a personality make over.

As the play opens, M. Jourdain is in the midst of co-ordinating the social skills specialists who are going to help make him socially attractive. He is being visited by the dancing and fencing masters, who will try to make him nimble and adroit. (Do you see how easily this play will veer into slapstick?) That is not all. Jourdain has hired a philosopher to teach him long words and long sentences. And as for the tailors, the sky's the limit. Jourdain will be trendy to the max. Anything that strokes his ego, flattery from the visiting count, Dorante, the hope of a love interest from Dorimene, who is unfortunately Dorante's girl, will bring out M. Jourdain's ardent desire to shine. One by one the specialist trainers fall away, and leave Jourdain in the midst of a household of conflict. Only Jourdain's wife, ultimately, knows what a fool he is, but even when she tries to convince him, that Dorante is making a fool of him, she is rebuffed, on the grounds that she doesn't know how to interpret high class people.

It is time for M. Jourdain's daughter, Lucile, to get married, and Jourdain above all wants a socially prominent match for the girl. Unfortunately for Jourdain, his daughter falls in love with an Army veteran, an unacceptable choice, as Jourdain sees it. Only the daughter and Jourdain's wife—a fountain of good sense, thanks to the gods—have the common sense to construct a plan which will take an end run around Jourdain's objections to the marriage.

The plot, of course, involves playing to Jourdain's ego. A Turkish nobleman, it is alleged, is dying for Lucile's hand in marriage, a consummation for which he will see to it that Jourdain is well rewarded. Jourdain is promised the rank of paladin, knight, if he arranges the marriage of his daughter, and in the midst of a great deal of fake-Turkish language and folderol—including ballet and sword fights In some versions of the play—Jourdain presides over the wedding preparations.

As the time nears, however, Lucile grows stubborn, and—like most others—can no longer endure her father's ego-satisfying needs. As she questions her husband to be she realizes that he is none other than Cleonte, her army veteran boyfriend, who has decided to disguise himself as a Turkish knight in order to fool Jourdain. She immediately plans for her wedding, having realized how neatly her father has been tricked, having allowed himself once more to be duped by others.

Themes

Liberation. is the dominant theme. Jourdain is above all eager to appear a sophisticated member of the new and growing middle class—a refuge, in a way, for the trades and lower business echelons, which had long been dissed as inferior representatives of society. Jourdain is a victim of this new desire for social freedom.

Marriage is caught in the midst of social change, and Lucie is symbol of the new desire for genuine romance. True marriage, we are being taught both by Lucie and by Mme. Jourdain, is being able to sustain a romantic and personal relation to your mate.

Characters

M. Jourdain is a gullible business success, who supposes that by spending his money lavishly he can acquire the skills and reputation of a 'bon bourgeois,' a true and respected middle classer, rather than the scion of a simple cloth merchant. He is of course mistaken, because the special charm of the aristocracy cannot be purchased.

Mme Jourdain is the sensible wife of Jourdain, who advises him to think for himself, to form his own opinions, and to disregard the trend of the moment. When she tries to convince her husband, that Dorante is playing games with him, she has to put up, and does, with her husband's patronizing implications that she doesn't know which end is up.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

M. JOURDAIN (open)

Character M. Jourdain, a wealthy Parisian merchant, epitomizes the new bourgeois middle class which can think of nothing finer than to be an aristocrat, a member of 'the quality,' but who is scorned by the aristocracy, except when it needs to borrow money—for in the new economy of seventeenth century France, money is draining from the aristocracy. Molière rejoiced in the boldness of this social conflict, and in *The Would be Gentleman*, first performed in 1670, he chooses a stereotypical new bourgeois, M. Jourdain, to represent the open longings, cultural insecurities, naivete, and economic centrality of a new social class.

Parallels Jourdain's discovery that in fact he has been speaking prose all the time bespeaks his condition as a parvenu, eyes not yet open to the reality of his condition. This kind of naïve arrival in middle or upper class society spills out of the language of Mrs. Malaprop, in Sheridan's play *The Rivals*, 1775, which bubbles over with social maladjustment, or in the contemporary *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), where Goldsmith plays on the dilemma of the old middle class flirting with the new middle. The social transformation Jourdain struggles through is also daunting for Dickens' Pip, in *Great Expectations* (1861), though two centuries after Molière the upward transition is faster, and Pip quickly becomes a gentleman. The same can hardly be said for Jay Gatsby, *The Great Gatsby* (1922), whose taste for the garish betrays him to the end.

Illustrative moments

Ostentatious M. Jourdain first appears on an occasion when his dancing master and music master have come to instruct and polish his social skills. Thanks to his tailor, M. Jourdain is wearing an outfit that is uncomfortable for him: 'I kept you waiting a bit because today'—Jourdain says to his two Masters—'I'm dressing like one of the quality, and my tailor sent me a pair of silk stockings so tight I thought I'd never get into them.' While waiting for his new suit to arrive, he shows everyone in the room his new dressing-gown, with its 'red velvet breeches and green velvet jacket.'

Ambitious M. Jourdain is under the influence of his dancing and music masters, who are his conduits to the values of 'the quality.' The music master remarks that 'a gentleman such as yourself, living in style, with a taste for fine things, ought really to be holding musical at-homes every Wednesday or

Thursday.' 'Is that what the quality do?' asks M. Jourdain? He goes on to fantasize the large dinners he will provide his guests, and 'don't forget to send in singers later on, so they can warble during dinner.'

Ambitious M. Jourdain has his eye on an affair with a marquise, Dorimène, and with that in mind, addresses the music-master on the skills of dancing the minuet. As he huffs and puffs the music master comments 'splendid, splendid,' which emboldens M. Jourdain to state what is really on his mind. 'By the way, just show me how to bow when you meet a countess. I'll need to know a bit later on...' He listens attentively to the complex instructions, which include 'the third time going right down to the level of her knee,' and realizes he is taking on a formidable challenge.

Ignorant The philosophy master enters, to discover that M. Jourdain is deficient in basic grammar; M. Jourdain is eager to remedy this weakness, but, as with the dancing-master, he has an ulterior motive, to prepare himself for making his suit to the marquise Dorimène. 'I'm in love with a lady of the highest quality, and I'd like you to help me write her a little note that I can drop at her feet.' At this the philosophy master asks whether the note should be in prose or in verse; and is amazed when M. Jourdain replies: 'No I don't want prose and I don't want verse.'

Discussion questions

Has Moliere any sympathy for M. Jourdain? Are the experts who dress and teach Jourdain purely mercenary in the attentions they pay to him?

What does M. Jourdain anticipate from making the acquaintance of 'the quality,' and from moving himself toward the ambience of aristocrats and royalty? Is he after money, respect, or something more intangible than those gains?

Is it possible to bypass social vetting, class by class, on your way to the top of society? Or is the iron grip of social structure not negotiable in that way?