

Characters in Moliere

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.

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.'

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 Moliere 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.

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?