

**LES FEMMES
SAVANTES (THE
LEARNED LADIES)**

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Les Femmes Savantes (The Learned Ladies) by Molière & Curtis Hidden Page

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MOLIÈRE & CURTIS HIDDEN PAGE

**LES FEMMES
SAVANTES (THE
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Molière's Plays

Translated by Curtis Hidden Page

Les Femmes Savantes

(The Learned Ladies)

Tartuffe

(The Hypocrite)

Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme

(The Tradesman Turned Gentleman)

Les Précieuses Ridicules }

(The Affected Misses)

Le Médecin malgré Lui }

(The Doctor by Compulsion)

Le Misanthrope

(The Misanthrope)

L'Avare

(The Miser)

G. P. Putnam's Sons, Publishers

Les Femmes Savantes
(The Learned Ladies)

By
Molière

Translated by
Curtis Hidden Page

Late Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures in Columbia University

G. P. Putnam's Sons
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LES
FEMMES SAVANTES
COMEDIE EN CINQ ACTES
11 MARS, 1672

THE LEARNED LADIES
A COMEDY IN FIVE ACTS
MARCH 11, 1672

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The Learned Ladies ended the war begun by *The Affected Misses*, against intellectual snobbishness, bad taste, and affectation of all sorts. Between these two plays, separated by an interval of less than twelve years and a half, lies the whole career of Molière, and in the contrast between them, nearly alike as are the subjects treated, lies the range of Molière's great and rapid development as a comic dramatist and as a critic of life. Though he had attacked worse vices in *Tartuffe* and pictured higher virtues in *The Misanthrope*, though he had gone deeper in *Don Juan* and *The Miser*, and his humour had been broader in *The Tradesman Turned Gentleman* and *The Doctor by Compulsion*, yet in this next to the last of his plays he shows an ease, breadth, and sureness in character-drawing and in picturing the manners of his time, a command of technique both in the dramatic construction of the play as a whole and in the detailed presentation of each scene and character, in short a complete mastery of his material and his means of expression, such as he had hardly attained before. The greater seriousness and significance of his work has brought with it hardly any apparent loss of gayety or spontaneity, while his humour has grown richer, and his attack upon contemporary foibles and shams far bolder.

The age had developed as well as Molière. The *précieuses* had become "learned ladies"; besides keeping up with elegant literature, they had studied philosophy, and, under the inspiration of Descartes, had even attempted something of the sciences, especially physics and

astronomy ; they could talk with apparent intelligence of atoms, vortexes, and vacuum, and could distinguish by name at least, the more important doctrines of Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. Like the true *précieuses*, these learned ladies had their imitators, who merely picked up a few catch-words of their jargon. Molière satirised both imitators and originals mercilessly, without trying to make any distinction as he had done in the *Précieuses ridicules*. His three learned ladies belong to a family of the rich *bourgeoisie* ; but in the wit whom they worship, and in the pedant whom they embrace "for the love of Greek," he puts on the stage two contemporary authors who were favourites of the ladies of highest rank in the land. The famous sonnet of Trissotin, "To Princess Uranie, upon her Fever," is to be found word for word in the *Oeuvres galantes en prose et en vers* of the Abbé Cotin, published in 1663 ; it is addressed "To Mlle. de Longueville, now Duchess of Nemours, on her quartan fever." ; Mlle. de Longueville was of the royal blood ; and the "certain princess" who had esteemed this sonnet "quite delicate" was Mlle. de Montpensier, own cousin of the King Louis XIV. Trissotin's "epigram, or rather madrigal" in which he describes himself as reduced to his last penny through the purchase of a coach, embossed with gold and blasonry, for his mistress, is likewise to be found in the *Gallant Works* of this favoured poet.

It is said that Molière at first called him Tricotin in the play, and then, not to leave the resemblance too close, modified this to Trissotin, or "triple fool"—a generous concession ! Charles Cotin, early a frequenter of the Hotel de Rambouillet, and a member of the French Academy since 1655, had produced abundantly in the various classes of parlour literature, such as madrigals, epistles, and especially enigmas, which he published, with an *Essay on the Enigma*, in 1659. His self-esteem

is fairly illustrated in his saying : " My monogram is two C's, interwoven and forming a circle ; which, in a mystic sense, may signify the circle of this round earth, which my works shall fill." He was so bold as to attack Boileau, in two anonymous works, and to accuse him not only (by distorting his own words) of disloyalty and atheism, but even of being a friend and admirer of the play-actor Molière ! Boileau, the " author of the *Satires*" (p. 427), answered with bitter open attacks, often repeated. But it was Molière who gave the finishing stroke to Cotin's reputation, by ridiculing him on the stage with an Aristophanic directness hardly justified even by the manners of literary controversy of that time. It did not kill the poor Abbé, as has sometimes been alleged ; but when he came to die, eight or nine years after Molière, the " Father of the French Enigma" (as he proudly called himself) had this fit epitaph :

What is the only point wherein
Cotin differs from Trissotin ? . . .
The life of Cotin now is over,
But Trissotin lives on forever.

Vadius almost certainly represents Ménage, a *précieux* and pedant, who " knew Greek as well as any man in France," wrote society verse, eclogues, and *ballades* in Greek, Latin, Italian, and French, and had a bitter quarrel with Cotin. This quarrel is said to have occurred at Mlle. de Montpensier's and to have originated in Ménage's inadvertent criticism of the *Sonnet to Princess Uranie*. In any case, Ménage published a Latin epigram against Cotin, and Cotin answered with a collection of abusive verse, called *La Ménagerie*, and dedicated to Mlle. de Montpensier. Ménage published in 1672 his *New Observations on the French Language*.