



## The Bourgeois Gentleman

*Molière (1622 -1673)*

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When Moliere wrote *The Bourgeois Gentleman* in 1670 and first performed the comedie-ballet at the court of Louis XVI, it would have been clear that the term was an oxymoron. A gentleman could only be one born to the aristocracy; there was no such thing as a “bourgeois gentleman”. That difficult truth does not, however, prevent the middle-class from aspiring to join the ranks of the nobility, particularly those who have become wealthy. The play, which has also been titled *The Middle-Class Aristocrat* and *The Would-Be Noble*, satirizes both the pretentious social-climbing of the vulgar middle-class and the vanity of the snobbish aristocracy. Monsieur Jourdain is the middle-aged son of a wealthy cloth merchant, who spends his time making a fool of himself studying the arts of fencing, dancing, music and philosophy

against the objections of his wife. He dreams of marrying his daughter Lucille to a nobleman. She, of course, is in love with the middle-class Cléonte and denied permission to marry him. Dorimene, a cash poor nobleman, flatters Jourdain by confiding that he has dropped his name at court and thus persuades him to pay off his debts. In cahoots with Mme Jourdain and his valet, who has a thing for the maid, Cléonte disguises and presents himself as the son of the Sultan of Turkey. Jourdain is only too eager to believe his good fortune, and is thrilled to have his daughter marry so well. Even better, he learns that, as father of the bride, he will be granted a title as well. The play ends with a ceremony arranged to bestow this honor.

**Jean-Baptiste Poquelin**, better known by his stage name **Molière** (January 15, 1622 – February 17, 1673), was a French playwright and actor widely regarded as one of the world’s greatest writers. His works include comedies, farces, and tragicomedies and are performed at the Comédie-Française more often than those of any other playwright. Born into a prosperous family and educated at the Collège de Clermont, Molière spent thirteen years as an itinerant actor while he began writing. Through the patronage of aristocrats he procured a command performance before the King. Performing a classic Corneille play and a farce of his own, Molière was granted the use of salle du Petit-Bourbon and later the theatre in the Palais-Royal, where he met success with plays such as *The Affected Ladies*, *The School for Husbands* and *The School for Wives*. Royal favor brought a pension and the title Troupe du Roi to his troupe and appointment as official author of court entertainments. Though popular with the court and Parisians, Molière’s satires attracted criticism. *Tartuffe*’s attack on religious hypocrisy was roundly condemned by the Church, while *Don Juan* was banned from performance. His hard work took its toll on his health. In 1667 he was forced to take a break from the stage. In 1673, during a production of his final play, *The Imaginary Invalid*, Molière, suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis, was seized by a coughing fit and a hemorrhage while playing the hypochondriac Argan. He finished the performance but collapsed and died a few hours later.