



# KC Molière

## 400 in 2022

a 501(c)(3) nonprofit EIN 84-2313832  
PO Box 22815, Kansas City MO 64113-1628  
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PRESENTS

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

# Molière's *Two Precious Maidens* (*Les Précieuses ridicules*, 1659)

CLASSIQUES

Molière

*Les Précieuses  
ridicules*



POCKET

TEXTE INTÉGRAL  
+ LES CLÉS DE L'ŒUVRE

\*suitable for all grade levels, 6 - 12

\*short and funny

\*mocks pretentiousness in fashion & manners

\*combines comedy, farce, & satire

\*Molière's first public success in Paris

\*available in many English translations

## Plot summary:

Setting: the drawing room in the Paris house of **Gorgibus**. It can be a bare stage to start. Three chairs will be carried in later.

**DuCroisy** and **LaGrange** are two gentlemen leaving the house of Gorgibus after paying a call on his daughter and niece, **Magdelon** and **Cathos**. Although the family only recently moved to Paris from the country, the two young ladies are already "precious." That is, they want the men who court them to be ultra-refined. LaGrange tells DuCroisy that he has an idea for teaching the girls a lesson. All we learn about the plan at this point is that LaGrange has a foppish valet named **Mascarille** who tries to be elegant though he is only a servant.

Gorgibus chastises Magdelon and Cathos for driving away the gentlemen that he hoped might marry them. Magdelon wishes for a courtship with poetry and gallantry. Cathos thinks their suitors ought to be familiar with the *Carte du Tendre* (see below) and wear more ribbons.

The maid **Marotte** announces a new visitor, so the young women retire to refresh their make-up before meeting him. **Mascarille** arrives in a sedan chair carried by two porters. When Magdelon and Cathos return, they are dazzled by Mascarille's preening and by a poem he has written, which he himself praises extravagantly. Soon Mascarille's friend **Jodelet** arrives, and they brag about their war wounds. They all decide to do some dancing, but suddenly LaGrange and DuCroisy arrive and scold their two servants for pretending to be gentlemen. They even force Mascarille and Jodelet to take off their finery. Gorgibus sends everyone away, including the humiliated young ladies, and ends the play with a rip-roaring temper tantrum.

## English Translations of *Les Précieuses ridicules*

*The Pretentious Young Ladies* free for download on Project Gutenberg or on DigiLibraries.com

<http://www.dominipublico.gov.br/download/texto/gu006562.pdf>

<https://digilibraries.com/ebook/the-pretentious-young-ladies>

*Precious Provincials*, translated by George Graveley & Ian Maclean, in *Don Juan and Other Plays* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

*The Ridiculous Precieuses*, translated by Donald Frame, in *Tartuffe and Other Plays* (Signet Classics, 2015).

*Two Precious Maidens Ridiculed*, translated by Albert Bermel, in *One-Act Comedies of Molière* (Applause Theatre Books, 1992).

*The High-Brow Ladies*, translator not credited, in *Plays by Molière*, introduction by Waldo Frank (The Modern Library).

*Such Foolish Affected Ladies*, translated by Peter Wood and David Coward, in *Molière: The Misanthrope and Other Plays* (Penguin Books, 2000).

*The Affected Young Ladies*, translated by Barrett H. Clark (Samuel French).



## What were *précieuses*?

"Precious ladies" were women who adopted a mid-17th-century fad called *preciosité* (preciousness): pretentious and excessive refinement in dress and manners. Their influence extended to gentlemen who used carefully polite speech in order not to offend these ladies' delicate sensibilities. Both men and women accessorized themselves with as many laces, ribbons, flounces, and feathers as they could manage.

The following essay was published in September 2020 on KC Molière's website:

<https://www.kcmoliere400in2022.com/news/archives/09-2020>

### The Influence of the *Salons*

Scarcely a generation before Molière, Paris theatre was not at all geared to polite ladies. The plays performed in converted indoor tennis courts were full of rough-and-tumble action, fight scenes, and even indelicate language. Those tragi-comedies might have evolved into something like the barbaric works of Shakespeare if it had not been for a woman whose influence helped change the course of French drama and pave the way for Molière's genius.

Cathérine de Vivonne (1588-1665) was married at age twelve to a man nearly twice her age, Charles d'Angennes (1577-1652), who later acceded to the title of Marquis de Rambouillet. Appalled at the vulgarity of swaggering male aristocrats even at the court of Henri IV, she renounced going out in society. After dutifully bearing a few children, she acquired a convenient illness that kept her bed-ridden and free from becoming further inconvenienced by pregnancy. She remodeled the Rambouillet mansion to feature a suite of rooms leading to her *chambre bleue* (blue room), where she could recline on her bed to receive friends and literary celebrities who met her standards of polite manners and good conversation.

From the 1610s on, the Marquise de Rambouillet led a quiet revolution in taste. Regulars at her *salon* often adopted pastoral names; hers was Arthénice, an anagram of her name Cathérine. Admission to Arthénice's *chambre bleue* Tuesdays became so prestigious that a widening circle actively upgraded the norms of civilized social interaction. The theatrical turning point came in 1636 when Pierre Corneille wrote *Le Cid*, still inevitably bearing some traces of the old tragi-comic swashbuckle, but ultimately winning the day for the disciplined restraint of neoclassicism.

By the 1650s, under Louis XIV, many women were imitating Arthénice, each woman attracting her own coterie of poets or philosophers or clever pretenders to intellect. Notable among these was Madeleine de Scudéry (1608-1701), whose Saturdays are best remembered for having produced the *Carte du Tendre* (Map of Tenderness), a map of the

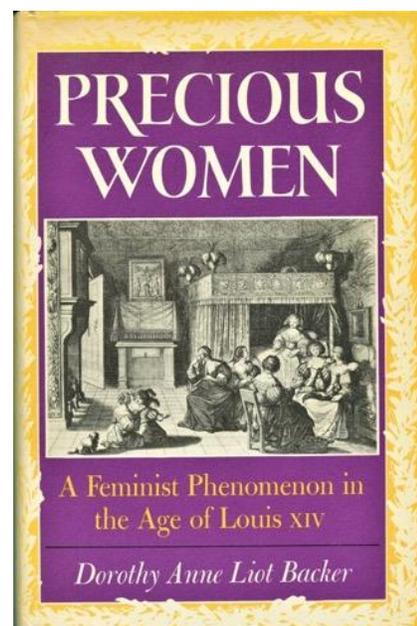
human heart with such locations as the Lake of Indifference, the Dangerous Sea, the Town of Lukewarmness, and the Inclination River flowing through the center. This was a great resource for conversation on subjects like the four varieties of love, the twenty kinds of esteem, or the forty types of smiles.



Clearly the second generation of *salons* was fostering a more preening, self-conscious atmosphere of high-toned artifice. Fashions in dress evolved alongside flowery euphemisms in speech; men and women alike sported ribbons, ruffles, laces, and flounces. Disdaining to pronounce lowly words like "chair" or "teeth," they found substitutes like "apparatus for conversation" or "furniture of the mouth." The women began to be called *précieuses* and took pride in it. The "preciousness" of the 1650s-60s might be defined as excessive display of virtue and refinement. It was such excess that gave rise to Molière's 1659 one-act *Les Précieuses ridicules* (*The Laughably Precious Young Ladies*) and his 1672 five-act comedy *Les Femmes savantes* (*The Learned Ladies*).

It is one of the many paradoxes of France's *Grand Siècle* (Great Century, the 17th), like its accommodation of both the Baroque and the neoclassical, that Molière flourished as a playwright for a theatre scene that had become polite enough for women, yet he went on to find fun in portraying women who practiced too much *politesse*.

--by Felicia Londré





### For Discussion and Exercises:

\*What are some signs in Mascarille's speech or behavior that serve as clues that he is not a real gentleman?

\*Precious people tried to avoid using common words for everyday items or body parts. What euphemisms can you imagine for some basic nouns?

\*Is it possible to interpret this comedy in a way that shows the women's power to influence?

\*Study the fashions of mid-17th century France. Then draw your own dress design with extra added precious fripperies.

\*Which sequences in the play are verbal comedy and which are physical comedy? How might the actors transition between comic styles?

\*How does the dynamic change with Jodelet's entrance? How are Magdelon and Cathos different from each other?

Opening the play with a pantomimic dance allows the audience to witness the snobby behavior of the two young ladies toward the gentlemen who came to court them.



Marotte, Almanzor, 1<sup>er</sup> porteur, Mascarille, 2<sup>e</sup> porteur  
*Les précieuses ridicules*, 29-30 novembre 1966



It's such fun to see Mascarille carried into the house in a sedan chair.

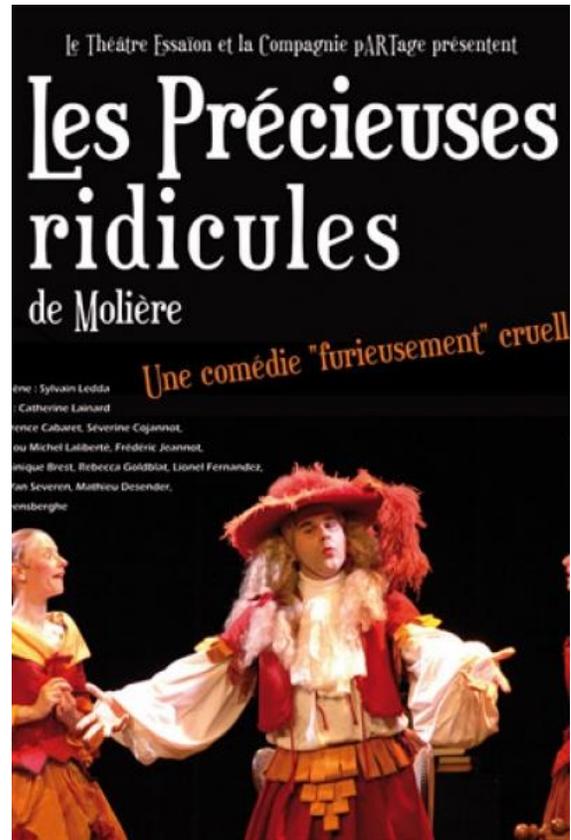
Cathos, Magdelon, Violon, Mascarille, Violon,  
Gorgibus, Jodelet: *Les Précieuses ridicules*, 1966



Cathos & Magdelon are shocked after La Grange & Du Croisy came and took away the fine clothes that their servants Mascarille and Jodelet were wearing.



This painting by Alfred Edward Chalon (1780-1850) shows a 19th-century conception of Mascarille with Magdelon and Cathos. The women's gowns are 18th-century fashions.



The poster is from the Théâtre de l'Essaion's 2019 production of *Les Précieuses ridicules*.  
[https://www.essaion-theatre.com/spectacle/185\\_les-precieuses-ridicules-de-moliere.html](https://www.essaion-theatre.com/spectacle/185_les-precieuses-ridicules-de-moliere.html)

The black and white production photos are from a 1966 production of the Department of French and Italian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Directed by Felicia Hardison.



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