

From Précieuses to Peasants:
Names in Molière's Les Femmes savantes

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Well-to-do women of the seventeenth century often devoted themselves to the study of literature, philosophy, rhetoric, and science. They also wielded a great deal of power through their literary salons. These two facts were sufficiently irritating to the ladies' male counterparts to provide fertile ground for social satire and comedy. In two comedies, Les Précieuses ridicules of 1659 and Les Femmes savantes of 1672, Molière satirized the exponents of préciosité, a feminist literary movement which sought to purify language and the relationships between the sexes. The précieuses regarded themselves as women of great worth, in other words "precious." Molière found their use of elaborate periphrases and euphemisms absurd and their rejection of physical love contrary to the interests of society.

The title of Les Femmes savantes is somewhat different in conception from that of Molière's earlier comedy, Les Précieuses ridicules, in which the adjective "ridicules" is used as a pejorative qualifier of the noun "Précieuses." Rather, it is analogous to the title of Le Bourgeois gentilhomme of 1670. In the titles, of

Les Femmes savantes and Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, Molière has combined words that do not belong together. A bourgeois is not a gentleman, and women should not be savantes.

The learned women of the title of Les Femmes savantes--the mother, Philaminte; her older daughter, Armande; and Armande's aunt, Bélise--wish to found an academy in which women would study literature, science, history, grammar, morals, and law. They also preside over a salon whose principal attraction is a poet and pedant named Trissotin. While the ladies are busy with their intellectual pursuits, their household is in disarray, much to the consternation of Chrysale, Philaminte's henpecked husband. The love interest in the play is provided by the younger daughter, Henriette, and her suitor, Clitandre. Clitandre's desire to marry Henriette brings to a head the intense sibling rivalry between Henriette and Armande and underlines the differences between the two sisters. Henriette looks forward to marriage, a husband, a home, and a family. Armande is philosophically and emotionally devoted to a totally spiritual concept of love. Nevertheless, Armande still considers Clitandre her property, for he had courted her for two years and had turned to Henriette only after she, Armande, refused to contemplate marriage and what she envisioned as its filthy and revolting consequences. A further complication is added when Philaminte decides to inspire her younger daughter, Henriette, with a love of learning and philosophy by marrying her off to the pedant Trissotin.

Literary critics and historians have proposed to divide the characters in Les Femmes savantes into various categories, for example, the learned women and pedants on one side and the exponents of reason or bon sens on the other. I propose to divide the characters on the basis of their names: those with real names, such as Henriette and Armande, and those with conventional or artificial names, such as Chrysale and Philaminte. To the names of the characters in the play, I have added names mentioned by these characters, for the play is especially rich in contemporary and classical literary and philosophical allusions. Among the contemporary writers mentioned are the grammarian, Vaugelas; Malherbe, who reformed French poetry; Balzac, who reformed French prose; the philosopher Descartes; and Boileau, referred to by the periphrase, "the author of the Satires." Greek references include Plato and his Republic, peripatism, Epicurus, stoicism, Theocritus, Plutarch, and Parnassus. Latin references are to Horace, Vergil, Terence, and Catullus. While these references show a certain erudition on the part of the learned women and the pedants, they are used in the play to show the superficiality of their learning. The women display an emotional enthusiasm for philosophy rather than a reasoned appreciation of its complexity.

Characters with ordinary French names are fewer in number than those with conventional or artificial names. The names of the two sisters, Armande and Henriette, are both regular feminine forms of the French masculine names Armand and Henri and were popular in France

at the time. The sister-in-law of Louis XIV was named Henriette, for example.¹ Curiously enough, these feminine names were not officially acceptable French baptismal names even though their masculine equivalents were.² In any event, the names Henriette and Armande are well chosen and reflect the interests and actions of the characters in the play. Henriette, who is favorably disposed toward marriage and family life, was christened with a name meaning "mistress of the house." Armande, whose name means "warrior," is very warlike and aggressive in her desire to undermine her sister and to regain Clitandre's affection and seeks to cause dissention in her household to gain these ends.

The other normal French names of characters in the play are assigned to servants. Two of them, a clumsy lackey named L'Epine and a valet named Julien, appear only briefly. The name of the clumsy lackey means "The Thorn," and L'Epine might be considered a thorn in the side of his employers, or perhaps the name refers to his thorny personality. Martine, the only servant in the household who ever did any work, was dismissed by Philaminte because of offenses against the rules of grammar. Martine's name reflects her peasant origins, for in the seventeenth century feminine names ending in -ine were used almost exclusively by peasants.³ The name is also in the tradition of many of the peasants and female servants in Molière--Dorine (Tartuffe), Mathurine (Don Juan), Martine (Le Médecin malgré lui), Jacqueline (Sganarelle), Frosine (L'Avare), Nérine (Les Fourbournies de Scapin), and Claudine (George Dandin).

In addition to the names of conventional lovers and their ladies mentioned in the play--Dorante, Damis, Cléonte, Lycidas, Iris, Philis, Amarante, Uranie--and a reference to the famous Greek courtesan Laïs, six important characters in the play have either conventional, non-French, names or names forged by Molière. These are the domineering Philaminte; her husband Chrysale; Chrysale's brother and sister, Ariste and Bélise; the young lover Clitandre; and two pedants, Trissotin and Vadius.

Philaminte's name has two possible meanings, both of which are suitable for her character. One meaning is "lover of the truth," and truth seems to be the object of Philaminte's scientific investigations. Another is "one who defends,"⁵ and Philaminte determinedly defends her choice of Trissotin as Henriette's future husband against all attacks. The name of the husband, Chrysale, comes from a Greek word meaning "golden,"⁶ and we know that Chrysale is well off, for Trissotin hopes to marry Henriette because of her large dowry. The same word is the root of the word "chrysalis," the third stage in the development of an insect, especially of a moth or a butterfly. This meaning is also appropriate for Chrysale, who in the end comes out of his cocoon and stands up to his wife Philaminte.

Bélise, Chrysale's sister, is a scatterbrained, overaged, and deluded précieuse, who thinks that every man who appears on the scene is in love with her, despite all evidence to the contrary. Possible explanations for her name are these: Changing one consonant

sound in the name *Bélise* gives us the noun "*bêtise*"--silliness, stupidity, folly, foolishness, or obtuseness. *Bélise* proves the appropriateness of the parallel *Bélise/bêtise* in scene after scene. Another possible explanation of the name comes from breaking it down into the components "*bé*" and "*Lise*" or "*Elise*." The prefix "*bé*" survives in the word "*bévue*," meaning "misunderstanding" or "serious mistake." The name *Lise* or *Elise*, from *Elisabeth*, means "consecrated to God." Thus, the name *Bélise* might indicate the foolishness of devotion to a purified conception of love.

A scene between *Clitandre* and *Bélise* provides an example of *Bélise*'s obtuseness. In this scene, the name *Henriette* is taken in two different ways by the two characters involved. *Clitandre* asks *Bélise* to support him in his suit for *Henriette*'s hand in marriage. Since *Bélise* thinks that every man who enters the house is in love with her, she insists on understanding *Clitandre*'s use of the name *Henriette* as a clever way of revealing his passion for her without offending her sensibilities.

Clitandre. Des projets de mon coeur ne prenez point d'alarme:

Henriette, Madame, est l'objet qui me charme,

Et je viens ardemment conjurer vos bontés

De seconder l'amour que j'ai pour ses beautés.

Bélise. Ah! certes le détour est d'esprit, je l'avoue:

Ce subtil faux-fuyant mérite qu'on le loue,

Et, dans tous les romans où j'ai jeté les yeux,
Je n'ai rien rencontré de plus ingénieux.

Clitandre. Ceci n'est point du tout un trait d'esprit, Madame,
Et c'est un pur aveu de ce que j'ai dans l'âme.
Les Cieux, par les liens d'une immuable ardeur,
Aux beautés d'Henriette ont attaché mon coeur;
Henriette me tient sous son aimable empire,
Et l'hymen d'Henriette est le bien où j'aspire:
Vous y pouvez beaucoup, et tout ce que je veux,
C'est que vous y daigniez favoriser mes vœux.

Bélise. Je vois où doucement veut aller la demande,
Et je sais sous ce nom ce qu'il faut que j'entende;
La figure est adroite, et, pour n'en point sortir
Aux choses que mon coeur m'offre à vous repartir,
Je dirai qu'Henriette à l'hymen est rebelle,
Et que sans rien prétendre il faut brûler pour elle.
(Act I, scene 4, pp. 691-692)⁷

The name Clitandre means "famous as a man" or "famous for manliness."⁸ The name was used as the title of one of Corneille's plays⁹ and appears elsewhere in Molière as Lucinde's lover in L'Amour médecin of 1665, as a marquis in Le Misanthrope of 1666, and as a young courtier pursuing a discontented wife in George Dandin of 1668. The name Clitandre is particularly appropriate for the character in this play because he opposes Armande's purified conception of love

with his own more earthly desires. Armande's expressions of distaste for physical love throughout the play recall Cathos' lines from Les Précieuses ridicules: "Pour moi, mon oncle, tout ce que je vous puis dire, c'est que je trouve le mariage une chose tout à fait choquante. Comment est-ce qu'on peut souffrir la pensée de coucher contre un homme vraiment nu?" (scene 4, ed. Jouanny, I, 200).¹⁰

Armande counsels abstinence from the degrading claims of the senses and prefers a love of souls in which the body plays no part.

Clitandre counters that he has a soul and a body too. "J'aime avec tout moi-même, et l'amour qu'on me donne / En veut, je le confesse, à toute la personne" (Act IV, scene 2, p. 729).¹¹

The name of the pedant Trissotin is derived from the name of the Abbé Cotin, a poet and scholar of the seventeenth century.¹² In fact, the character was originally called Tricotin,¹³ but the name Trissotin is even funnier, for it means "three times stupid." Cotin had incurred Molière's enmity by mentioning him in a satire and perhaps by preaching against him and his plays.¹⁴ Molière avenged himself on Cotin by portraying him as a mediocre poet and a mercenary dowry-chaser. In a delightful scene, Trissotin reads two of his poems, "Sonnet to Princess Uranie upon her Fever" and "On a Marigold-Colored Carriage, Given to a Lady Who is a Friend of His," two rather bad poems actually written by the Abbé Cotin himself.¹⁵ Philaminte, Armande, and Bélise are beside themselves with admiration, and what they admire most are the weakest points in the poems. Thus, Molière ridicules not only

Cotin for his bad poetry, but also the femmes savantes for their lack of taste. It was reported that the actor who played Trissotin did his best to imitate Cotin's speech and gestures and that he wore one of Cotin's outfits, purchased for the occasion from a second-hand clothes dealer.¹⁶ It was also reported that Cotin was so mortified by Molière's portrayal of him that he dared not show himself in public after the play opened.¹⁷

Although names can be dangerous, anonymity has its perils as well. After Trissotin has read his poems to the admiring ladies, Vadius, a scholar dressed in black, begs to be admitted. Vadius and Trissotin compliment each other on their erudition and their poetic talents. Trissotin then makes the mistake of asking Vadius his opinion of the "Sonnet to Princess Uranie," without revealing that he himself is the author. Trissotin is incensed when Vadius pronounces it a bad sonnet, and the compliments which the two pedants had showered upon each other at the beginning of the scene turn to insults. They promise to meet "chez Barbin," or at their publisher, an appropriate battleground for two writers.

The scene rhymed and transposed for the stage by Molière actually took place between the Abbé Cotin and the erudite précieux poet Ménage.¹⁸ The -ius ending of Vadius' name indicates that he belongs to the community of scholars. It confers on the name an air of erudition and reflects the latinizing tendencies of the sixteenth century. His name may originally have been an ordinary French name such as Vadier, Vadet, Vadon, Vadot, Vadel, or Vadé.

Alternatively, the name may come from the Latin vadis, to walk, from the Greek root badeizo, to plod or walk with a heavy tread, or from the Latin vadosus, shallow, or full of shallows. In fact, both meanings are appropriate if we think of Vadius as a plodding scholar and a shallow poet. Cleverer than Cotin, Ménage refused to recognize himself as the character Vadius, even though he himself, like Vadius, was an eminent Greek scholar and wore black. Indeed, despite the fact that displays of erudition, dressing in black, and latinizing one's name were sixteenth century fashions, out of favor in seventeenth century France, the portrayal of Vadius is not altogether unsympathetic. He, at least, had the good taste to share Molière's dislike of Trissotin's sonnet.

The play ends happily for Clitandre and Henriette when Chrysale's brother, Ariste, whose name means "the best,"¹⁹ playing the part of a deus ex machina, reads two letters, one saying that Philaminte has lost an important lawsuit because of her negligence and has been condemned to pay an enormous fine and another that Chrysale's bankers, Argante and Damon, both went bankrupt on the same day. The name Argante, from the Greek meaning "silver" or "shining,"²⁰ is also a play on the French word from the same root, "argent," meaning "money" or "silver." The name Damon is well known from the legend of Damon and Pythias, two devoted friends, so perhaps Argante and Damon were sticking together by going bankrupt on the same day. Clitandre, living up to the manliness inherent in his name, offers to share his modest fortune with

Henriette and her family. Trissotin, who no longer sees any hope of gaining a rich dowry, withdraws. Ariste then reveals that the letters were not genuine. He had composed them simply to test Trissotin. Philaminte joins Chrysale in approving the marriage of Clitandre and Henriette. Armande must console herself with philosophy, and Bélise still believes that she is the one Clitandre really loves.

Les Femmes savantes is one of the richest in the use of names of any of Molière's plays, not only because of the many allusions to contemporary and classical authors and philosophers, but also because of the number of characters with symbolic names. Furthermore, Molière's use of names to avenge himself on literary opponents was highly successful, so much so that the names of Ménage and Cotin are remembered even more for their appearance as characters in Molière's play than for their own works.²¹

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⁵ From the Greek philos, "one who loves, prefers, enjoys" and the Greek amyn from the Hebrew amin (English amen), "yea, verily," "in truth," or the Greek amynon, "to defend, fight for, aid." The loving aspect of Philaminte's name is mental or altruistic, not erotic. I wish to thank Dr. Marius P. Valsamis for his helpful suggestions on the Greek roots of the names in Les Femmes savantes

⁶ The Greek chryso-, chrys- indicates gold or the color of gold.

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Clitandre. My plans, Madame, give you no cause for fear:

Henriette is the one I hold so dear;

And I implore you to be on my side

And try to help me win her for my bride.

Bélise. Oh! that's a neat evasion, I must say,

Which earns the highest praise in every way;

In all the novels I have read, I've never

Encountered anything that was so clever.

Clitandre. Madame, let me say one thing from the start:

It's no evasion, but what's in my heart.

With Henriette I'm ardently in love

By a decree that comes from Heaven above;

Henriette is the one for whom I pine,

I dream that Henriette one day be mine.

You can help greatly, and my one request

Is that on my behalf you do your best.

Bélise. Ingenious as you are, I realize
 What you are getting at under this guise;
 The trick is clever, and I'll play my part
 By not revealing what is in my heart;
 But Henriette views marriage with disdain,
 And if you love her, you will love in vain.
 (p. 370)

⁸ Kluto - renowned; andros - man.

⁹ Corneille's Clitandre, first performed in 1630, was published in 1632 under the title Clitandre, ou l'Innocence délivrée. See Théâtre complet de Corneille, ed. Maurice Rat (Paris: Garnier, no date), I, 81.

¹⁰ "As for me, Uncle, all I can tell you is that I consider marriage a very shocking thing. How can one endure the thought of sleeping beside a man who is actually naked?" (p. 26).

¹¹ "When I'm in love, it's with a love entire / For the whole person to whom I aspire" (p. 409).

¹² Charles Cotin, 1604-1682.

¹³ Letter from Madame de Sévigné to Madame de Grignan, March 9, 1672, Madame de Sévigné, Correspondence I (mars 1646 - juillet 1675), ed. Roger Duchêne (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1972), p. 452; Oeuvres de M. Boileau Despréaux, nouvelle édition . . . par M. Brossette (Paris: David & Durand, 1747), "Remarques," Satire III, I, 56-57.

¹⁴ La Satyre des satyres et la critique désintéressée sur les satyres du temps par l'abbé Cotin avec une notice par le Bibliophile Jacob (Paris: Jouaust, Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1883), "Préface," p. v.

¹⁵ "Sonnet. A Mademoiselle de Longueville, à présent duchesse de Nemours, sur sa fièvre quarte" and "Sur un carrosse de couleur amarante acheté pour une dame: Madrigal" are in Cotin's Oeuvres galantes (Paris: E. Loyson, 1665).

¹⁶ Menagiana ou les bons mots et remarques critiques, historiques, morales & d'érudition, de Monsieur Menage, recueillies par ses amis, ed. Bernard de La Monnoye (Paris: Florentin Delaulne, 1715), III, 23; Oeuvres de Molière, Nouvelle édition augmentée de la vie de l'auteur & des remarques historiques & critiques par M. de Voltaire (Amsterdam and Leipzig: Arkste'e & Merkus, 1765), VI, 237.

¹⁷ Pierre Bayle, Réponses aux questions d'un provincial (Rotterdam: Reiner Leers, 1704), pp. 245-246.

¹⁸ Gilles Ménage ("Aegidius Menagius"), 1613-1692. Ménage did not consider himself the original of Vadius, but his contemporaries did. See Menagiana, III, 23-24.

¹⁹ Ariston - the best.

²⁰ Argos - shining, bright, glistening; argyros - the white metal, silver.

²¹ In Menagiana (III, 23), La Monnoye quotes these verses written shortly after Cotin's death: "Savez-vous en quoi Cotin / Differe de Trissotin? / Cotin a fini ses jours. / Trissotin vivra toujours."