

Why haven't I heard of her?

How we forgot the women authors of 17th century France



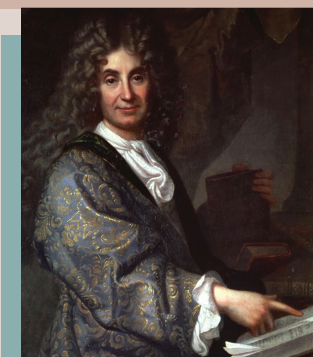
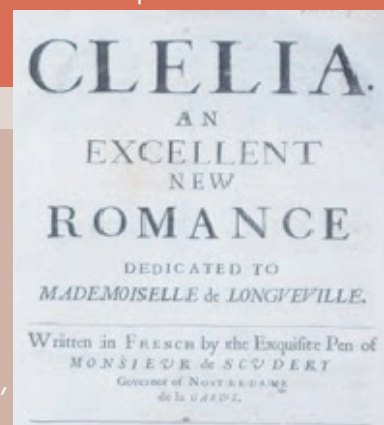
France in the 17th century saw the publication of hundreds of books written by women. By 1700, there were some 225 active female authors. Many achieved popularity during their lifetime. While they faced considerable detractors, most recognized and admired their literary achievements. Yet, by the 18th and 19th centuries, their accomplishments had been almost completely forgotten. *How did this happen?*

1. Names and Misattribution

Many women did not sign their work. Some used the names of male relatives, others collaborated on pieces that were then only attributed to the men. Detractors overemphasized the 'help' they received from male contemporaries.

(Right) A translation of Madeleine de Scudery's *Clelio*, attributed to her brother.

(Below) Boileau referred to her as the 'sister of the author with the same name'



Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux

2. The politics of the novel

'Our best French novels have for some time been written by women.'
- Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, (1697)

Women were credited with originating the novel, a form of 'modern' literature that differed from neo-classical form. Some, like Boileau, saw the novel as overly feminizing and morally dangerous to the aristocratic state. Despite their popularity, Boileau and later critics claimed that women's works had declined both in readership and literary influence.

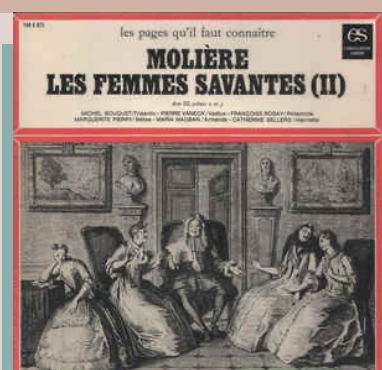
4. 18th century anthologies

The claim that women's novels were of inferior quality and limited influence meant most were excluded from the 'Bibliographie' and national literary histories of the 18th century. Many only mentioned 'exceptional' women like Madame de LaFayette or Madeleine de Scudery.

Most influential, was the exclusion of women from educational anthologies. Their novels, plays, and letters, were seen as unsuitable for the education of boys. The 17th century 'classics' were dominated by Moliere, Racine, and Corneille. This became the standard literary canon for 17th century France and lasted to the 20th century.



'[Under 'novels']
Mme la Comtesse de Lafayette
made the public sick of the
ridiculous nonsense...'
- Jaucourt, *Encyclopedie* (1765)



Moliere's *Les Femmes Savantes* became most popular in the 19th century.

5. Women and the salon

Women were acknowledged as pioneers of the first 17th century salons. However, their contribution was seen as listening to the classics, not writing them. As Academies emerged for more serious gatherings of intellectual elites, the salons were seen as more frivolous, dominated by the 'petty intrigues' of women.

The official canon of 17th century 'classics' reinforces this narrative. Moliere's *Les Femmes Savantes* mocks both the young women who saw themselves as intellectuals and the men who supported their literary interests. Women's writings, and their readership, were seen as reflecting the inherent femininity of the salon.