

VIRGINIA SCOTT

Women on the Stage

in Early Modern France

1540-1750



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WOMEN ON THE STAGE IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE: 1540–1750

Focusing on actresses in France during the early modern period, Virginia Scott examines how the stereotype of the actress has been constructed. The study then moves beyond that stereotype to detail the reality of the personal and artistic lives of women on the French stage, from the almost unknown Marie Ferré – who signed a contract for 12 *livres* a year in 1545 to perform the “antiquailles de Rome” or other “histories, moralities, farces, and acrobatics” in the provinces – to the queens of the eighteenth-century Paris stage, whose “adventures” have overshadowed their artistic triumphs. The book also investigates the ways in which actresses made invaluable contributions to the development of the French theatre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and looks at the “afterlives” of such women as Armande Béjart, Marquise Du Parc, Charlotte Desmares, Adrienne Lecouvreur, and Hippolyte Clairon in biographies, plays, and films.

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*To my dear friends and colleagues
Laurence Senelick
and
Richard Trousdell
with gratitude for years of support and companionship*

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Translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

The illustration on the cover is *Thalia, Muse of Comedy* (1739), by Jean-Marc Nattier. It is used with permission from the Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco.

Introduction

In 1729 the celebrated actress Adrienne Lecouvreur died in mysterious circumstances. Some of the events that supposedly took place before and during her final illness are reported by her friend, Mlle Aïssé, in a letter written to Mme Calandrini:

Shortly thereafter, la Lecouvreur became so ill in the middle of a play that she could not finish. . . The poor creature went home, and four days after, one hour after midnight, she died.¹

La Lecouvreur, a poor *creature*, is thus summed up by her “friend,” who was not, incidentally, known as *la* Aïssé, although her own history was far from impeccable. An epistolary writer, Mlle Aïssé was meant to have been a Circassian princess, sold into slavery and bought by the French ambassador to Turkey, who brought her back to France to be raised by his sister-in-law. Like her friend Adrienne Lecouvreur, she never married, and she had at least one notorious love affair and at least one illegitimate child. Nonetheless, she retained the honorable title of “mademoiselle.”

Why “la Lecouvreur”? Inside the theatre of the *ancien régime* the actress was almost always given the title “mademoiselle,” but outside the private world of the stage, the actress was often referred to not with a title but with an article. Even today in France, the *la* is sometimes used, although now it indicates an actress of mythic stature. Among the praises Pierre Cardin lavished on Jeanne Moreau when she was inducted into the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 2001: “We do not hesitate to call her ‘LA MOREAU.’”²

¹ Charlotte Elisabeth Aïssé, *Lettres de Mademoiselle Aïssé à Madame Calandrini* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1878), pp. 102–3.

² “Discours prononcé dans la séance publique tenue par l’Académie des Beaux-Arts. . . pour la réception de Mlle Jeanne Moreau. . . par M. Pierre Cardin,” www.academie-des-beaux-arts.fr/membres/actuel/cinema/moreau/discours_reception_cardin.htm

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, “la” meant something quite different. It was not an honorable title but a dishonorable substitute. Historically, “monsieur,” “madame,” and “mademoiselle” were not modes of polite address but titles that indicated a person’s place on the social ladder.³ The *petit peuple*—servants, craftsmen, peasants—had no titles, and the issue of what titles could be assumed by more affluent members of the third estate was sensitive.

Actors and actresses, who came from many different social strata, were often perceived to have adopted titles to which they were not *entitled*. Men usually took a stage name that implied the particule, sometimes a feature of the landscape like Montfleury or Parc, sometimes a place name like Molière. To this they added the title “sieur de,” thus assuming the particule and higher status. Actresses, most of whom were married to actors, took the title “demoiselle” or “damoiselle.” In the Middle Ages a “demoiselle” was someone married to a “demoiseau,” a gentleman, although one who had not been knighted.⁴ This may offer a clue as to why actors and actresses adopted the titles they did: they were pretending to nobility, but at the lowest level.

Honoré de Balzac suggests another possible reason actors chose these titles, asserting that the title “sieur” was “accorded by Charles V to the bourgeois of Paris, permitting them to buy seigneuries and call their wives by the fine name of demoiselle.”⁵ If Balzac has it right, we might infer that the actors were not claiming nobility *per se*, but merely bourgeois wealth sufficient to buy an estate. On the other hand, that particule with its claim to ownership of property and the noble status that went with it suggests a more obvious motive.

In general, men were accorded their borrowed rank. “M. Molière” or “M. de Molière” or “sieur de Molière” were all used to refer to or address the actor–playwright; “le Molière” is unheard of. But mademoiselle Molière was often “la Molière,” and the other actresses in the troupe were la Du Parc, la de Brie, la Beauval. There seems to have been a general unwillingness to allow them the use of “demoiselle.”

Actors, actresses, and playwrights were all very conscious of titles and how they were employed. Molière, for instance, uses the title “madame” in a very particular way, calling attention to the bourgeois penchant for self-aggrandizement. Madame Jourdain, of course, is the

³ In referring to a person, one used a title: “le sieur,” “la demoiselle,” and “la dame.” When directly addressing the holder of such a title, one said “monsieur,” “mademoiselle,” or “madame.”

⁴ *Trésor de la langue française*, <http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm> ⁵ *Ibid.*

wife of a pretentious bourgeois, Madame Pernelle in *Tartuffe* is a pretentious bourgeoisie herself, and Madame de Sotenville in *George Dandin* is a member of the aristocracy. Molière is playing on the social significance of titles. In *George Dandin*, for instance, the rich peasant complains of having married a “demoiselle.” His in-laws, the Sotenvilles, impoverished gentry, cannot possibly give him the “monsieur,” but address him as “son-in-law.” When he responds with “mother-in-law,” the lady snaps back that he must never use such familiarity with her, but must always address her as “madame.” Dandin gets it wrong again, however, addressing his father-in-law as “Monsieur de Sotenville,” which produces an instant rebuke: “Learn that it is not respectful to call people by their name, and to those who rank above you, you must say simply ‘monsieur.’” They also chide him for referring to his wife as “ma femme.”⁶

In the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Molière again puts all of these rules into action. The Jourdain address each other as “ma femme” and “mon mari,” and only when Madame Jourdain interrupts her husband’s tryst with the marquise Dorimène does she ironically confront him as “monsieur mon mari.” The aristocrat Dorante, a count, gives his host and hostess the “monsieur” and “madame,” but only in conjunction with their surname; he always addresses them as “Monsieur Jourdain” and “Madame Jourdain,” as does Dorimène.

The adoption and careful use of titles is also a feature of Gougenot’s *Comédie des comédiens*, probably performed in 1632, very early in the history of the Paris stage.⁷ This metatheatrical play spends quite a lot of time on the subject of “condition” or social status. Mademoiselle Boniface and Mademoiselle Gaultier, new members of the troupe, although bourgeois in origin are always addressed as “mademoiselle” without surname and referred to as “ces demoiselles,” signifying that in this fictional universe they partake of the “quality” or condition of actor. Their husbands are a merchant, Boniface, and a lawyer, Gaultier, also newly inducted into the company. Gaultier assumes that as a man of the robe he will have a greater claim to the roles of kings than his commercial rival, but Bellerose, the leader of the troupe, disabuses him. In the theatre, unlike the real world, talent and hard work triumph over birth and status; all are equally “messieurs” and “mesdemoiselles.” Obviously, titles are of no small importance to the members of the troupe.

⁶ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), vol. II, pp. 469–70.

⁷ N. Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens* (Paris: P. David, 1633).

This question of “quality” is addressed largely through the action of the two servants, Guillaume and Turlupin, whose masters want to bring them along into the troupe, but only as *gagistes* or *nécessaires*, paid by the day to play minor roles while they continue to serve. Guillaume and Turlupin have other ideas, however, and refuse to come unless they are included as *compagnons*, sharing members. At issue is not only the money but the quality and the title of “monsieur.”

TURLUPIN Monsieur de Beauchasteau, since you seem to have the opinion that my comrade and I should join your troupe, if this would not dishonor the theatre, it seems to me that you would lose no personal honor by giving us the “monsieur.”

GUILLAUME Honor that we will receive straight away in our new condition.

Bellerose then asks Gaultier and Boniface to approve the addition to the troupe of “Monsieur Turlupin and Monsieur Guillaume.”

GUILLAUME That’s the way to talk to men of wit.

TURLUPIN Yes, yes, that’s why we’re here.

GAULTIER Turlupin told me. . .

TURLUPIN Monsieur Turlupin.

GAULTIER . . . of his intention and that of Guillaume.

GUILLAUME You have trouble pronouncing that word “monsieur”?

BONIFACE Monsieur Guillaume and Monsieur Turlupin, you will be satisfied.

Finally even the Capitaine, the troupe snob, agrees, after Guillaume warns him:

GUILLAUME You must say “monsieur” or we will call you simply “capitaine.”

Intimidated by this dreadful threat, monsieur le Capitaine, having vented his earlier anger at these men of vile condition on a lion, two tigers, and three giants, agrees and shakes their hands.⁸

“Monsieur le Capitaine” is a clue to the origin of the infamous “la.” As an officer and a gentleman, at least theoretically, the Capitaine enjoys a mode of address that joins a title to a state or profession. One might also say “monsieur le duc” or “monsieur le baron,” or even “monsieur le président” to a high officer of the Parlement, a noble “of the robe.” Some lower-echelon lawyers and guild masters might be addressed as “maître”; in the rest of the third estate, however, men were often known only by

⁸ N. Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*, in *Le Théâtre français au XVIe et au XVIIe siècles*, ed. Édouard Fournier, 2nd edn. (Paris: La Place, 1871), p. 299.

surname and trade or profession, and a wife used the feminine form of her husband's trade. Thus, *le boucher* Blanc and *la bouchère* Blanc, *le boulanger* Du Pont and *la boulangère* Du Pont, *le comédien* Du Parc and *la comédienne* Du Parc. According to the grammarian César Du Marsais, for women the reference to trade or profession came to be understood, leading to the construction: article plus surname.⁹ By this theory, *la comédienne* Du Parc would become *la [comédienne] Du Parc*, indicating a social status with no right to any title. In origin, the “la” was a mark of degradation only insofar as all non-nobles were degraded, but as the use of titles by the upper levels of the third estate became more widespread, refusing someone a title would be a way of demeaning him or her. The adoption by actors of the title “sieur” and by actresses of the title “mademoiselle,” given the contempt for the profession displayed by the law and the church, made them easy targets for anyone who wanted to underscore their social undesirability.

Georges de Scudéry, who was proud of his own noble status, in his play also entitled *La Comédie des comédiens* at first christens his actresses “la Belle Espine” and “la Beau Soleil,” but gives the latter a “mlle” in Act II, possibly because his gentleman character, M. De Blandimare, addresses her as “mademoiselle.” Throughout the play, however, the actors address each other using formal titles, conforming to practice inside the theatre.¹⁰ In Corneille's metatheatrical *L'Illusion comique*, titles are not an issue, since using them would give the game away. Molière's actors in *L'Impromptu de Versailles* are perfectly formal with each other, as are most of the actor-characters in most of the plays that feature them. An outsider, like the Baron in Poisson's *Le Poète basque*, might speak of la Beauchâteau, la Des Cèillets, and la Valliot, but no actor-character would do so.¹¹

Among those who wrote about actresses, Tallemant des Réaux, the gossip-monger, always uses the “la,” which stresses the contempt he tends to display for women on the stage. Various aristocratic letter-writers and memoirists – Mme de Sévigné, the duchesse d'Orléans, the duc de St.-Simon – use it, aware of the social implications of “mademoiselle”; madame la duchesse and monsieur le duc were terrific snobs. The low point was reached when a pamphleteer accusing Armande Béjart of every sexual excess, including common prostitution, subtitled his work “L'Histoire de La Guérin”; the article here assumes a whole new set of

⁹ César Du Marsais, “Article,” *Encyclopédie*, ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>

¹⁰ Georges de Scudéry, *La Comédie des comédiens* (Paris: A. Courbe, 1635).

¹¹ In Victor Fournel, *Les Contemporains de Molière* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1863), vol. I, pp. 437–9.

implications.¹² The late seventeenth century was also the time when the marquise de Brinvilliers, convicted of poisoning most of her family, was downgraded to la Brinvilliers, and la Voisin, the wife of a bankrupt jeweler, went to the stake for practicing magic and witchcraft on behalf of ladies of the highest ranks.

For the popular view of theatrical women, we need only consult the popular ballads. Jean-Nicolas de Tralage, who kept a notebook and scrapbook in the last years of the seventeenth century, was attracted to gossip and ballads about the theatre. Among them is “Sur les Filles de l’Opéra en 1696,” a veritable cascade of “las”: la Moreau, la Diart, la Deschars, la Renaud, la Carré, la Desplace, etc., etc.¹³ Of course, the *filles de l’Opéra*, the dancers and *figurantes*, had dismal reputations, even worse than those of the women in the other state theatres.

The eighteenth century was less given to the “la,” generally using “mademoiselle,” even when accusing an actress of unbecoming behavior. Private correspondents like Mlle Aïssé may have still written about la Lecouvreur, but the theatre historians François and Claude Parfaict and Godard de Beauchamps, the gossips Bachaumont and Collé, those like Allainval and Dumas d’Aiguebierre who wrote “appreciations,” all use some variation of “mademoiselle.” Even a police report of 1758, describing a drunken brawl between two stars of the Comédie-Française, uses “sieur” and “mlle.”¹⁴

The reports of the morals police, who kept their eyes on certain actresses of the Comédie-Française, especially Mlles Clairon and Guéant, had their own form of reference that combined the “la” and the “demoiselle.” Thus, they almost always refer to their prey as “la demoiselle Clairon” or “la demoiselle Guéant.”¹⁵ By the early eighteenth century, “demoiselle” had added to its earlier meanings. According to Furetière (1695), “‘demoiselle’ is also said ironically and offensively of women who lead a bad life.”¹⁶ One might suspect that this additional definition came from the adoption of the title by actresses. The word *filles* was similarly

¹² Cesare Garboli, ed., *La Famosa Attrice* (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 1997). Text in French.

¹³ Jean-Nicolas du [sic] Tralage, *Notes et documents sur l’histoire des théâtres de Paris au XVII^e siècle*, extraits, mis en ordre et publiés d’après le manuscrit original, ed. Paul LaCroix [le Bibliophile Jacob] (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1880), pp. 13–24.

¹⁴ *L’Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et Curieux* No. 249 (September 25, 1878), 550.

¹⁵ See throughout François Ravaisson-Mollien, ed., *Archives de La Bastille*, vol. XII (Paris: A. Durand and Pedone-Lauriel, 1881).

¹⁶ On the other hand, it is fair to note that the majority of orders of reception, legal documents, and police reports collected by Émile Campardon pertaining to the actors and actresses of the Comédie-Française refer to them as “le sieur” and “la demoiselle.” *Les Comédiens du roi de la troupe française pendant les deux derniers siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1879).

tainted by such usage as *fille d'Opéra*, meaning a dancer or *figurante* who used the stage of the Opéra to advertise her charms.¹⁷

As was so often the case, it was Voltaire who revolted, this time against the use of “la.” In a letter of December 1735 to M. Thiériot he wrote:

We are no longer of an age, you and I, where terms that are careless and without respect are agreeable to us. I never speak of M. Thiériot except as a man whom I esteem as much as I like. M. de Fontenelle is not a friend of Lamotte, but of M. de Lamotte. This mark of politeness distinguishes those who use it. The fops of the rue Saint-Denis said la Lecouvreur, and Cardinal Fleury said Mademoiselle Lecouvreur.¹⁸

Lemazurier in his 1810 *Galerie*, the first attempt to create a biographical dictionary of French actors, quotes Voltaire and absolutely rejects the usage of the “la,” which he finds “a crude custom that has never agreed with French urbanity. We have always doubted that the people who say *la Dumesnil*, *la Clairon* have enough education to judge Mlle Clairon and Mlle Dumesnil; the authority of Voltaire confirms us in our opinion.”¹⁹

Like Lemazurier, I have decided to avoid the “la,” even though most contemporary French theatre historians use it, because I am aware of what it meant in the past. In modern usage, “la” seems to have been imported from the Italian, where it indicates divadom, a state even beyond stardom, which is wonderful. I shall, however, represent Voltaire, and shake my finger reprovingly. Under no circumstance will I ally myself with Tallemant des Réaux, or the chevalier de Mouhy, or all those anecdotalists and voyeurs who treated an actress as a thing to which a definite article can be applied: the door, the chair, the actress.

On the other hand. . .

Poor Lemazurier, stuck in the nineteenth century, was conscious of all those anecdotes and shady tales and all those prurient readers poised to welcome a book that reprised them. Believing, however, there was gold among the dross, that within all the accounts, memoirs, collections of letters and anecdotes, gossip columns, and other publications of the eighteenth century on the subject of actors and actresses he would find enough valid information to construct individual biographies of all the *sociétaires* of the Comédie-Française from its beginning to the end of the

¹⁷ These women were also known as *les demoiselles de spectacle* and, if they found a sponsor, as *les demoiselles entretenues*.

¹⁸ Voltaire, *Œuvres: Correspondance générale* (Paris: Pourrat Frères, 1839), vol. I, p. 501.

¹⁹ P.-D. Lemazurier, *Galerie historique des acteurs du théâtre français* (Paris: Joseph Chaumerot, 1810), Préface, vol. I, p. xv.

eighteenth century, he decides the project is a worthy one. He assures his reader that “no writer who respects morality and respects himself will permit himself to collect all the offensive trash to be found in the collections; we would never forgive ourselves for having conceived this work in such a way that it would find a place here.”²⁰ That said, and limiting himself to “those things a decent man can write about,” he still confronts the inescapable paradox. While “there are and have always been, since the establishment of the theatre, many actors whose conduct merits nothing but praise, as almost everywhere, there are exceptions; and to speak generally, if morals have taken refuge somewhere, it is hard to think that they have chosen the wings of the stage for their asylum.” So, although there will be no “disgusting images of license,” there will be a few anecdotes, some morsels a little bit *gai*, a little uninhibited, since “the lives of the actors, taken in general, do not make a work suitable for the young,” and the book “is destined only for those whose reason is formed.”²¹

Lemazurier wants to rehabilitate the theatre and the women who were part of it, wants to avoid careless disrespect, but finally, grudgingly, he has to implicitly admit that “la,” and so do I. Used originally to degrade women who were not “born,” applied to artisan wives, actresses, criminals, and prostitutes, the “la” also designates the actress an outsider, someone who found no niche in the elaborate construction of social norms that characterized the upper echelons of the *ancien régime*. Not, finally, a “mademoiselle.” Victim of the system? Not necessarily. Because actors and actresses, more often than not, have been and still are people who live outside the conventions of society, sometimes because they are excluded, sometimes because they so choose, because they are attracted to the advantages of the margins. The games played there are dicey, but the rewards are great.

Actresses can be gifted with inexplicable talents, they can be different, dangerous, sexually magnetic, sometimes “abnormally interesting,” to borrow a phrase from Joseph Roach, who in studying the celebrity actress also coined the phrase “public intimacy” to account for her accessibility, which is illusory, and her appeal, which is part of her stock in trade.²² Roach also warns us that in approaching celebrity and what he calls “it,”

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. vi–vii. ²¹ *Ibid.* pp. viii–xi.

²² Joseph Roach, “Public Intimacy: The Prior History of ‘It,’” in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 15–16. See also his *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) for a fuller discussion of the constituents of celebrity.

that seductive power to command attention, we must be neither “wholly prurient” nor “unduly prim.”²³

I propose to follow that advice, focusing on the less sensational, testing the stereotypes, challenging the anecdotes, but always aware that some actresses happily displayed themselves and their sexuality on stage and off. They had allure. They had “it.” “La Molière,” “la Du Parc,” “la Lecouvreur,” “la Clairon” – all were denied the honorable title that they claimed and cherished, but were given another that also declares: “this is not *an* actress, any old actress, this is *The Molière, The Du Parc, The Lecouvreur, The Clairon*; this is someone extraordinary.”

I share something else with my predecessor Lemazurier. Like him I have concentrated, especially in the later part of the book, on Paris and on the actresses who performed in the major theatres: the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the Théâtre du Marais, the Petit-Bourbon and the Palais-Royal, the Hôtel Guénégaud, the Comédie-Française. Although there is certainly information available about the actresses of the Comédie-Italienne, the Opéra, the Opéra Comique, the other fair theatres, and the provincial theatres, I decided to set my sights on the pinnacle, as it were, because the actresses who were most noticed and written about perched there, and because without this limitation the content of the book would have tended toward the broadly general and not have dwelt, as it does, on matters of specific interest to me. I have had no intention to be exhaustive. This is not an A to Z, soup to nuts, everything there is to be said about actresses in France from 1540 to 1750 book. Rather, I have followed my nose and allowed my curiosity to guide me. I begin with the whole question of anecdotes and how to use them in writing about something that is largely characterized by anecdotal evidence, and throughout the book I am attentive to the creation and maintenance of the stereotype of the actress. In [Chapter 2](#) I explore some questions I have long had about the backgrounds of French antitheatricity in classical law and practice and in Roman Catholic thought, especially as applied to actresses. In [Chapter 3](#), I revert to narrative history and summarize what can be known about the women who performed plays and the plays they performed in France before the establishment of the Paris theatres between 1629 and 1631. [Chapter 4](#) includes, along with much of what can be known about the professional and personal lives of actresses in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, a discussion of a special group of plays, the early comedies of Corneille,

²³ Roach, “Public Intimacy.”

as evidence of what actresses may have contributed to the burgeoning art of playwriting in the 1630s. In [Chapter 5](#) I look carefully at several actresses who were stars or almost stars and speculate about how stars and celebrity influenced the now flourishing theatre. [Chapter 6](#) is concerned with the art of acting in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries – and here the men get my attention as well as the women. [Chapter 7](#) looks at the first half of the eighteenth century, pointing to changes and trends, though leaving much more work to be done, and finally at the ways in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century actresses have been used and abused in biographies, plays, and films.

In his preface to a collection of essays honoring Peter Thomsen, a pioneer in the field of actor studies, Martin Banham writes that the actor “exists precariously and survives through courage, obstinacy, wit, vanity, charisma, luck and sheer bloody-mindedness.”²⁴ The early modern French actress survived like that while traveling from place to place, bearing and raising children, managing a household, and fending off admirers – or not. To the scorn heaped on her profession was added the additional burden of being a woman who violated most of the limitations women were meant to accept. On the other hand, after 1630, if she “made it,” she could live *en bourgeois*, in considerable comfort, even luxury, in the capital, sharing equally in the rewards of her labor. In the eighteenth century, she could hob-nob with the powerful, dress like a princess, and revel in celebrity. Her life was certainly more exciting than most female lives; she went on the stage several nights a week, sometimes to applause and acclamation, sometimes to whistles and boos, but always with the exhilaration and the sense of exceptionalism that marks the relationship of performer and spectator. Insofar as she can be known, she deserves to be known. *Vive La Comédienne. Vivent Les Demoiselles.*

²⁴ Jane Milling and Martin Banham, eds., *Extraordinary Actors: Essays on Popular Performers. Studies in Honor of Peter Thomsen* (University of Exeter Press, 2004).

CHAPTER I

The actress and the anecdote

The link between the actress and the whore has been constructed historically through the repetition of anecdotal evidence.¹

The plural of anecdote is not data.²

Anecdotes are irresistible; personal and active, they add life and color to a narrative. Although the dangers embedded in using anecdotes are obvious, life narratives without anecdotal material can be short, not so sweet, and without much human interest. As W. H. Auden said of biography, “a shilling life will give you all the facts,”³ but nothing but the facts can be remarkably uninformative, especially when records are sparse and documents questionable.

A historian who is trying to piece together a credible representation of the past and proposes to include anecdotal information is faced with a daunting task, however: to “unpack” each anecdote, judge the information it yields, dismiss what is clearly impossible or improbable, and attempt to fit what is believable or probable into the emerging pattern that will in the end constitute “evidence.”

A great deal has been written in recent years about anecdotes and their use, especially by literary historians of the New Historicist school.⁴ For Catherine

¹ Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 26.

² Jonathan Freedland, Review of Thomas L. Friedman, *Hot, Flat and Crowded*, *New York Times Book Review*, October 5, 2008.

³ Quoted by Philip Ziegler, “The Lure of Gossip, the Rule of History,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1986.

⁴ For the pros and cons of the use of anecdotes see Joel Fineman, “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 49–76; Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Philip Stewart, “Complicating the Figures: Braudel’s Revolutionary Miracle,” *Diacritics* 21 (1991), 91–8; “The Status of Evidence: A Roundtable,” *PMLA* 111 (January 1996), 21–31; James Wilkinson, “A Choice of Fictions: Historians, Memory, and Evidence,” *PMLA* 111 (January 1996), 80–92; Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. ch. 1, “The Touch of the Real,” and ch. 2, “Counterhistory and the Anecdote”; Robert Darnton, “An

Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, the anecdote, like a literary work, is a text: “both are fictions in the sense of things made, both are shaped by the imagination and by the available resources of narration and description,” but they are “ineradicably” dissimilar because “they make sharply different claims upon the actual.”⁵ Joel Fineman asks us even more clearly to understand the anecdote as “a specific literary genre, with peculiar literary properties, and also with a practical literary history.”⁶ The anecdote, he adds, “as the narration of a singular event, is the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real” or “gives referential access to the real.”⁷ But neither Gallagher and Greenblatt’s defense of the anecdote as what can undermine “epochal truths” and lead the counterhistory assault on grand narratives, nor Fineman’s philosophical expedition from Thucydides to Husserl and Heidegger is of much help to a historian wrestling with the *historiettes*, *libelles*, gossip, rumors, innuendo, and flat-out lies about women who performed on stage in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It was in the eighteenth century that efforts were first made to define the anecdote and examine its evidentiary value. The word itself was included in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* (1694) only as a plural; the definition: “memoirs in which are written the secrets of the policy and behavior of Princes.” The third edition of the *Dictionnaire* (1740) defines the word, now a singular, somewhat differently. Here an “anecdote” is “some distinctive or specific secret of the past that was omitted or suppressed by preceding historians.” As for usage, the *Dictionnaire* suggests *anecdote curieuse*, possibly with the meaning of “indiscreet,” and notes that anecdotes are usually *satyrique*.⁸ This revised definition reflects a shift in usage by authors. Louis de Mailly’s *Anecdote, ou l’Histoire secrète des vestales* had appeared in 1700. Three years later an *Anecdote galante, ou Histoire secrète de Catherine de Bourbon* by a woman, Charlotte-Rose de Caumont La Force, was published, and several succeeding titles make it clear that anecdotes or secret histories were almost always about sexual intrigues and gallant adventures, very often starring women.

The abbé Mallet in the *Encyclopédie* regards anecdotes with a critical eye. After noting that in Greek the word means “thing not published,”

Early Information Society: News and Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *The American Historical Review* 105 (February 2000), 1–35; Lionel Gossman, “Anecdote and History,” *History and Theory* 42 (May 2003), 143–68.

⁵ Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p. 31.

⁶ Fineman, “History of the Anecdote,” p. 50. ⁷ *Ibid.* p. 56.

⁸ ARTFL, *Dictionnaires d’Autrefois*, www.lib.uchicago.edu

he comments that in French it is “used in Literature to signify secret histories of deeds that took place inside the private councils or the courts of Princes & in the mysteries of their policy.” He cites the most familiar usage, the *Anekdotia* of Procopius, in which the author “painted in odious colors the Emperor Justinian & Theodora, his wife.” Mallet also notes that Varillas has published some “so-called anecdotes of the house of Florence or of the Medicis, & scattered in several other of his works different strokes of the imagination that he calls anecdotes, & that have contributed no little to discrediting his books.”⁹

Although the title of Procopius’ *Anekdotia* technically means “unpublished,” its contents are most certainly the “secret deeds” of Justinian and Theodora, or “every popular tale which might discredit” them.¹⁰ The Empress Theodora is identified as an actress, “the kind of comedienne who delights the audience by letting herself be cuffed and slapped on the cheeks, and makes them guffaw by raising her skirts to reveal to the spectators those feminine secrets here and there which custom veils from the eyes of the opposite sex.”¹¹ The affiliation of the actress and the anecdote was thus validated from the very beginning.

Others of the *encyclopédistes* also wrote about the use of anecdotes, sometimes critically, sometimes apologetically. Voltaire, in the entry entitled “Histoire,” claims to be opposed to revealing a prince’s public or private secrets. Most anecdotes, he adds, are more indiscreet than useful.¹² Of course, Voltaire also devoted four chapters of his *Siècle de Louis XIV* to “Particularités et anecdotes du règne de Louis XIV.”¹³ Here he argues that anecdotes are interesting when they are about important people and can be mined for a moral.¹⁴ Although Voltaire recognized that anecdotes, especially those that report the words of some great person, are often untrue, he takes pains to cite the sources of many of those he publishes, but without much effort to judge their probable veracity. And like many anecdotalists, he can take any molehill, plausible or implausible, and turn it into a mountain. It was, he tells us, “well known at court that [the king] said, after the death of the cardinal [Mazarin]: I don’t know what I would have

⁹ *Encyclopédie*, vol. I, p. 453, ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>

¹⁰ Norman B. Baynes, Review of *Le Inedite: libro nono delle istorie de Procopio de Cesarea*, ed. Domenico Comparetti, *The English Historical Review* 45 (January 1930), 116.

¹¹ Procopius, *Secret History*, Pt. IX, trans. Richard Atwater (New York: Covici, Friede; Chicago: P. Covici, 1927; reprinted, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961). See www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/procop-anec.html

¹² *Encyclopédie*, vol. VIII, p. 225.

¹³ Gossman, “Anecdote and History,” 153.

¹⁴ Voltaire, *Siècle de Louis XIV*, ch. 24. See www.voltaire-integral.com/Html/14/o8SIEC28.html#i25

done if he had lived any longer.” In Voltaire’s note, he cites his source as the *Mémoires* of Pierre La Porte, a *premier valet de chambre* of the king from 1645 to 1653, and then goes on to add that “one sees there that the king had an aversion to the cardinal; that this minister, his godfather and supervisor of his education, had raised him very badly and had often left him lacking necessary things.” He adds even graver accusations, “which would render the memory of the cardinal infamous, but they do not appear to be proven, and all accusations must be proven.” This note seems designed to prompt the reader to rush to La Porte’s memoirs to find out what unspeakable infamy the cardinal was guilty of.

In fact, although the king’s aversion to the cardinal and his lack of necessities – in this case, sheets and dressing gowns – appears in a nineteenth-century edition of La Porte,¹⁵ the remark that Voltaire quotes does not, hardly surprising, since La Porte was dismissed from the court in disgrace in 1653, long before Mazarin died. On the other hand, Voltaire’s reader is guided to a murky accusation that cardinal Mazarin had sexually molested the 13-year-old king,¹⁶ certainly a dark and secret deed. The great man of reason was, in fact, like so many lesser beings, unable to refrain from circulating an especially juicy sex scandal.

Like Voltaire, Diderot did not necessarily refrain from using anecdotes – witness *Le Neveu de Rameau* – but he justifies the practice by suggesting that history is finally little more than a form of fiction. He writes, in the *Encyclopédie* entry entitled “Certitude,” that:

history, in effect, that we regard as the register of events of past centuries, is most often not that. Instead of true facts, it feeds with fables our irrational curiosity. That of the early centuries is covered with clouds; they are for us terrae incognitae where we walk only on shaky ground. One fools oneself if one believes that the histories closer to our own times are more certain for that reason. Prejudices, partisan spirit, national vanity, religious differences, love of the marvelous; there are so many ways open to the fable to extend into the annals of all peoples. . . It does not astonish me that some, citing Cicero and Quintilian, tell us that history is poetry without verse.¹⁷

Add to this, he notes, the difficulty caused by “all the false anecdotes and all these *historiettes* that abound” and one must conclude that most of the events that one reads about in history are doubtful, to say the least.

¹⁵ See Pierre La Porte, *Mémoires*, in *Nouvelle Collection des mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de France*, ed. Joseph-François Michaud and Jean Joseph François Poujoulat (Paris: Chez l’Éditeur du Commentaire Analytique du Code Civil, 1839), vol. VIII, p. 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 51. ¹⁷ *Encyclopédie*, vol. II, pp. 858–9.

The word “anecdote” may have come into common usage in France in the eighteenth century, and a critique of the anecdote may have become a concern of the *philosophes*, but the thing itself in Judeo-Christian culture is at least as old as the story of Adam, Eve, and the snake. For nonbelievers, the fall of man may be labeled a fable, but for believers it is an anecdote, because it is assumed to be true. Anecdotes, as many who have written about them have noted, make truth claims. And we notice that Diderot speaks of “false anecdotes,” implying that there are true anecdotes, if only the historian is clever enough to know the difference.

Why should we bother, since the thing is so difficult? We bother in part because history without anecdotal evidence loses its focus on human behavior. As Carlo Ginzburg writes, from the beginning “within the classical tradition, historical writing... had to display the feature the Greeks called *enargeia* and the Romans *evidentia in narratione*: the ability to convey a vivid representation of characters and situations. The historian... was expected to make a convincing argument by communicating the illusion of reality.”¹⁸ Anecdotes, which promote the singular, are just the thing for producing vivid impressions, especially when illusion trumps reality. Philip Stewart describes what he calls a historian’s “strategy of verisimilitude,” in which the anecdote, “insofar as it is ‘true’... belongs to the objective, the supposedly undeniable.”¹⁹ Presumably, then, so long as they are true or “true,” anecdotes are part of the valid materiel out of which the historian builds his house of cards.

The anecdote is also troublesome because of its strained relationship with generalization, what Matti Peltonen calls “the micro–macro link.”²⁰ As Philip Stewart writes, “the unique has its place in history, but how unique can the unique be?... Although in the aggregate anecdotes purport to establish some phenomena as common, we have no way of knowing whether they are representative.”²¹ This warning is especially apt since the anecdote, by its very nature, usually represents a person or an event that is strange, out of the ordinary, and especially worthy of notice.

It is one thing to use anecdote – as do historians Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton – as a “clue,” an entry into a labyrinthine excavation revealing structures that have been ignored by historians intent on

¹⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991), 80.

¹⁹ Stewart, “Complicating the Figures,” 96.

²⁰ Matti Peltonen, “Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research,” *History and Theory* 40 (October 2001), 348.

²¹ Stewart, “Complicating the Figures,” 97.

constructing great national narratives.²² It is, however, quite another thing to use anecdotes and anecdotal material as evidence for generalizing statements. Before “the exceptional” can be proposed as “typical” many operations must intervene.

La Porte’s claim that cardinal Mazarin sodomized the boy Louis XIV offers an excellent opportunity to “unpack” or systematically analyze the probability of an anecdote’s claim on truth. Among other things, the historian must ask: Does La Porte have any ulterior motives for reporting or inventing this event? If such an event occurred, how did it come to La Porte’s attention? Does any other source confirm this behavior on the cardinal’s part with Louis or with any other boys? In fact, La Porte’s anecdote can be called into question rather easily, and probably without recourse to a sweep through the various sources we turn to for information about court life in 1652.

La Porte hated Mazarin; the word is not too strong. He blamed Mazarin for limiting what had been his close relationship with the queen mother, Anne of Austria, and he did everything in his power to turn Anne and her son against the cardinal. He devotes a number of pages in his memoirs to these efforts, as well as to signs that the king shared his feelings. His accusation against Mazarin is meant to be the climax of all his other observations.

The event in question is said to have taken place while the court was in flight during the Fronde, and is described with a certain delicacy:

On St. Jean’s day of the same year 1652 [June 24], the king having dined with His Eminence, and having stayed with him until almost seven o’clock in the evening, he sent to me to say that he wanted to take a bath: his bath being ready, he arrived very distressed,²³ and I knew why without it being necessary for him to tell me. The thing was so terrible, that it gave me the greatest suffering I ever experienced, and I spent five days balancing what I should say to the Queen. But considering that it was a question of my honor and my conscience if I did not with a warning prevent similar unhappy events, I finally told her.²⁴

The consequences: some months later, at the end of March 1653, La Porte was exiled in disgrace from the court and forced to give up his office, apparently charged with the same misbehavior of which he had accused Mazarin. Not unnaturally, this episode became the central event of his later life. He wrote on several occasions to Anne of Austria, trying to force

²² See, for instance, Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); and Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

²³ “tout triste”: *triste* in the period meant more than “sad.” It meant “displeased,” even “angry,” because of something that had happened, some “affliction” or “moral outrage.”

²⁴ La Porte, *Mémoires*, vol. VIII, pp. 50–1.

her to retract, and in one of those letters, written in 1664 to the dying queen, he again described the original event:

I told Your Majesty at Melun, in 1652, the day of St. Jean, that the King, having dined with M. le cardinal, ordered me to make ready his bath at six o'clock in the river, which I did; and the King on arriving there appeared to me more distressed and more anxious than he usually was; and as we were undressing him, the *attentat manuel* that someone had committed on his person was so visible, that Bontemps, the elder, and Moreau saw it like me. But they were better courtiers than me; my zeal and my fidelity made me pass over all the considerations that should have kept me quiet. . . Your Majesty will remember, if it pleases you, that I told you that the King appeared very distressed and very anxious; this was a certain sign that he had not consented to what had happened and that he did not care for the author of it.²⁵

This version leads to some further considerations. Either there were other witnesses, who refused to speak for fear of repercussions, or La Porte is inventing them. Also interesting is the description of what La Porte said he saw: an *attentat manuel*, the result of which was *so* visible that even others could see it, others who may not have been as close to the king as La Porte. The word *attentat* has a specific meaning. It refers not just to an "attack," but to "an outrage or violence" made against "sacred persons" or persons in authority.²⁶ This was an outrage caused manually, which may have left as its sign – if indeed it happened and left a sign – something as ordinary as an erection in a teen-age boy. In any case, the cardinal was found guilty by proximity with no confirming witnesses and by a man who was looking for anything and everything he could use against him. Even if true, it cannot be considered "true," that is, exemplary or representative, since it appears to relate a singular event. It is hard to imagine a modern historian taking this anecdote as a serious indictment against Mazarin, and, indeed, its use is probably restricted to a study of pathologies among those who served the Bourbon monarchy.

And yet . . .

Leaving aside the theoretical struggles of so many recent historians to find a way to introduce anecdotes and anecdotal material into their narratives without falling into evidentiary traps, we are left with the fact that much of what is available as possible evidence for a study of early

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 55.

²⁶ See the *Dictionnaire de Furetière* (Rotterdam, 1690), L'Atelier Historique de la Langue Française, Redon CD-Rom. The word is not defined in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*.

modern French actresses is anecdotal, and that most of those anecdotes confirm assumptions about actresses that date back at least to Procopius.

One important primary source of information about Paris society – and Paris theatre – in the seventeenth century is *Les Historiettes* of Gédéon Tallemant, who called himself Tallemant des Réaux.²⁷ From a Protestant family of wealthy bankers and tax farmers, he showed no interest in the world of finance, but preferred the worlds of fashionable, literary, and libertine Paris. He was welcome at the Hôtel de Rambouillet from 1638 on and in later years was a confidant of the marquise, who was the source of many of the anecdotes he recorded. He toadied to Chapelain, Conrart, and Gombauld, the influential gods of Le Parnasse in the 1630s and 1640s, but deserted them for the more libertine Maucroix, Pellisson, Furetière, and La Fontaine, the companions of the Table Ronde. Although he wrote salon poetry and satires, and even one play, he did not publish them; he preferred to create manuscript collections of his and others' works. Between 1657 and 1659 he wrote down the accumulation of gossip and anecdotes that he called *historiettes*; in later years he added a few marginal notes. The manuscript was held privately by his heirs, sold for 20 *francs*, and published first in 1834–5 in a bowdlerized edition. Even so, the nineteenth century found its author to have blackened reputations simply for the pleasure of doing so.²⁸

Unlike Bachaumont's *Mémoires secrets* and Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* that circulated in France or internationally in the eighteenth century, nothing suggests that Tallemant's *Historiettes* were meant to be read by anyone other than the friends "who pressed me" to write them.²⁹ His eventual objective – never achieved – was to write a history of the "regency," that is, "the administration of Cardinal Mazarin," by which he meant the years before and after the death of Louis XIII in 1643, when "the French had known the sweetness of life, the right to think, the right to go to the Protestant or the Catholic church, the right to be amusing and amused."³⁰ Many of the anecdotes in *Les Historiettes*, while certainly amusing, could probably not have been included in a history of the previous reign that required a royal privilege for publication, something which Tallemant must have realized. Later, unsettled by the advance of orthodoxy in French society, Tallemant converted to Catholicism just

²⁷ All references to *Les Historiettes* are to the Pléiade edition: Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Antoine Adam, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

²⁸ See the "Introduction" by Antoine Adam, *ibid.* vol. 1, pp. vii–xxvi.

²⁹ See Tallemant's *Préface*, *ibid.* p. 1. ³⁰ Adam, "Introduction," *ibid.* p. xiv.

before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 and “consoled himself by copying into his notebooks some atrocious epigrams on the royal spouse, the widow Scarron.”³¹ If he was aware of “blackening” reputations, at least he had no intention of doing so publicly.

The first edition of *Les Historiettes* without corrections or omissions was published only in 1960 in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, and its editor, Antoine Adam, does his best to support the essential accuracy of Tallemant’s tales, insisting that “even those least disposed to have trust in *Les Historiettes* are obliged to admit that their author has collected all sorts of confidences from the best-informed people.”³² For instance, “he learned many things about Henri IV from the marquis de Rambouillet and his wife,” according to Adam, but why the marquis, who was a young captain of the household guard, should have been privy to the private life of Henri IV, Adam does not say. In fact, according to Larousse’s *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*, the marquise, a bluestocking, “after having appeared several times at the court of Henri IV, in the first years of her marriage, was quickly disgusted by the feverish life that was led there, by the intrigues of the courtiers, and fleeing all this, retired to the house of her father, the marquis de Pisani.”³³ If this were the case, we might expect her view of Henri IV and his court to have been unsympathetic.

Adam further argues – as another example of his assertion that Tallemant’s information can be trusted – that Tallemant’s discussion of the sexual habits of Louis XIII is credible because his informant *could* have been Pierre de Niert, *premier valet de la chambre* of the king.³⁴ If so, Pierre de Niert (or Mme de Rambouillet or whoever the taleteller) must have despised the late king at least as much as La Porte hated Mazarin, since the *historiette* is filled with the most malicious gossip.

As are most of them. A random reading of Tallemant’s discussions of fashionable Parisiennes, even those he apparently respected, yields many tales of illicit love, often expressed with surprising vulgarity. Mme Aubry, for instance, was so popular, her husband had to wait three months for a night with her; Mlle Paulet, the rich heiress of a tax official, was first noticed by M. de Guise, who lost his shoe climbing out of her window, and who said that “he always saw the little thing of the little

³¹ *Ibid.* ³² *Ibid.* p. xvii.

³³ Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*, “Rambouillet,” p. 667, col. 1.

³⁴ In fact, although “Niere” (Niert) is mentioned in an anecdote describing a bed scene between Louis XIII and Cinq-Mars (Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, vol. 1, p. 347), nothing permits the assumption made by Adam that Niert was Tallemant’s source (*ibid.* p. 1021, n. 1).

Paulet in his mind's eye."³⁵ Henri IV, enamored of her voice heard during a court ballet, invited her to "sing under him," and she accepted the invitation. The *vert galant* was supposedly on his way to visit her with his young son when he was assassinated. Tallemant reports that the king was already concerned about his son's sexual preference and wanted to "rendre ce prince galant,"³⁶ i.e., to encourage him to enjoy heterosexual intercourse. Tallemant never misses a chance to pass along an accusation of "Italian" tastes.

Actresses were of less interest to Tallemant than randy monarchs, lubricious society women, or misbehaving *bourgeoises*, yet he mentions most of the important *comédiennes* of the 1630s, many in a *historiette* dedicated to the actor Mondory and subtitled "L'Histoire des principaux comédiens françois."³⁷ After noting that the theatre in the 1630s was no longer in the hands of rogues and their wives kept in common, but of people beginning to live *en bourgeois*, that is, settled in one place with furniture, Tallemant begins his review. Mlle Bellerose was a "good actress," Mlle Valliot was "as beautiful a person as one could see," Mlle Le Noir was also "as pretty a little person as one could find," Mlle Baron was "very pretty, not a marvelous actress, but a success thanks to her beauty," Mlle Beaupré was "old and ugly." To these snapshots, Tallemant adds – where he can – gossip about their love affairs.

Mlle de Villiers, although "not very beautiful," was, we hear, beloved by the archbishop of Rheims, later the duc de Guise, who wore yellow silk stockings under his soutane because she liked the color.³⁸ This is not a story that can be disputed – although it is rather reminiscent of Malvolio – but other tales can be challenged. For instance, according to Tallemant, the playwright Jean Mairet wrote several starring roles for Mlle Le Noir of Mondory's Théâtre du Marais at the order of the comte de Belin who was in love with her – "and the troupe was comfortable with that."³⁹ This anecdote deserves some close attention, not because it tells us that an actress had a lover, hardly news, even if true, but because it suggests that a not terribly important noble could influence both repertory and casting within a theatrical troupe in the 1630s.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 473. ³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 474.

³⁷ *Ibid.* vol. II, pp. 773–8. Mondory, himself, is thought by Adam and others to have been Tallemant's source.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 368. ³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 774.

Mairet, like many literary men in the period, had patrons. His first was the unfortunate duc de Montmorency, who went to the scaffold in 1632. His second was the comte de Belin who “grouped around him several renowned young authors” and who “protected the Théâtre du Marais.”⁴⁰ In all, Mairet wrote twelve plays, which were performed between c. 1623 and 1640. His three earliest plays, *Chryséide*, *Sylvie*, and *Silvanire*, were in the repertory of the Théâtre du Marais in 1632 according to Scudéry’s *Comédie des comédiens*, and in that of the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1634, according to the *Mémoire de Mahelot*. They were written before either theatre was established in Paris and before Belin became the patron of Mairet. Mlle Le Noir may, of course, have played the pastoral heroines of these early plays, but there is no evidence that they were or were not written for her. Mairet’s first play after he came under the influence of Belin was *Les Galanteries du duc d’Ossonne* with two delightful and disreputable female leading roles. Neither is a tour de force for a star, however. In 1633 or 1634 he wrote *Sophonisbe*, his greatest success, which does feature a tragic heroine, and after that *Virginie*, a tragicomedy with three good female roles. Mlle Le Noir was, however, no longer at the Marais when Mairet’s last six plays were produced there. In December 1634 she left the Théâtre du Marais for the Hôtel de Bourgogne on the king’s command. In 1637 the comte de Belin died, willing Mairet his horse, and shortly thereafter Mairet stopped writing plays.

In his *Dedication* to *Les Galanteries du duc d’Ossonne* Mairet wrote:

As for me, who has never sought fortune but by the high road, I am of the opinion that an intelligent man does everything good to merit the esteem and the favor of the powerful, but I cannot tolerate that he should demand recompense. . . I hope for no other results from my best works than the satisfaction of having written them, with the resolve never to dedicate them from now on except to my personal friends. God has given me the grace to find one friend such as I could wish for, in the person of Monsieur le comte de Belin, who, great lord as he is, and of a rank to command me as my master, adds nonetheless to all he has given me the gift of freedom.⁴¹

This almost sounds as if Mairet was creating an advance refutation of what Tallemant would write twenty years later.

Maybe Belin did take a special interest in Mlle Le Noir as well as in Mairet, maybe he did ask Mairet to write a role or two for her, maybe he made sure the troupe was not unhappy about his interference – but all of

⁴⁰ Jacques Scherer, ed., *Théâtre du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), vol. I, p. 1237.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 597.

those “maybes” may be merely elements of a theatrical cliché, the sort of tale told over and over again about rich and powerful men and pretty actresses. Equally possible is a narrative that has Mondory and the troupe asking Mairêt to write something for Mlle Le Noir, an experienced actress who – according to someone writing a fantasy will for the *farceur* Gaultier-Garguille – delighted everyone with her liveliness and her pleasing little ways.⁴² There were certainly opportunities to display “pleasing little ways” in *Galanteries* and *Virginie*. Whether the lady was suited to the tragic Sophonisbe is another question.

Sometimes Tallemant’s tales, while not impossible, are also not very high on the scale of probability. One such anecdote concerns Mlle Valliot, who, according to Tallemant, after many lovers became the mistress of the abbé Armentières. The abbé, who became marquis d’Armentières after the death of his brother, supposedly took her from the stage, kept her, and was so mad about her that after her death he cherished her skull in his room for years.⁴³ Adam justifies the authenticity of the anecdote by finding it repeated in Tallemant’s brother’s *Discours sur la vie de Bensserade* that Armentières was in love with Mlle Valliot.⁴⁴ Again, maybe so. However, a record of the date of her marriage exists: September 22, 1620, the same year the abbé-marquis was born. So she was at least fifteen or more probably twenty years older than him, and remaining in love with and faithful for years to a woman so much older was not probable behavior in the seventeenth century. Nor was possessing someone’s skull. Indelicate questions must be asked: How was the skull obtained? Did the marquis rob the grave? Or have the head removed from the corpse before burial? Or was he the sort to put any old skull on display in his cabinet and enjoy telling people it was that of his ancient mistress?

Oddly enough, for one so eager to publish examples of liaisons between noblemen and actresses, Tallemant seems ignorant of the one such relationship that can be documented. A daughter, Françoise, was born in 1638 to Madeleine Béjart and the comte de Modène and baptized on July 3 with the count’s legitimate son as godfather. But of Mlle Béjart Tallemant writes – and this is the only time he focuses on an actress’s career:

⁴² Anon., *Le Testament de feu Gautier Garguille trouvé depuis sa mort* (Paris, 1634), in Édouard Fournier, ed., *Les Chansons de Gaultier-Garguille* (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprints, 1973), p. 163.

⁴³ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, vol. II, p. 774.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 1518 n. 9.

Let us end with la Béjard [*sic*]. I never saw her play; but it's said that she is the best actress of all. She is in a country troupe; she has played in Paris, but in a third troupe that was only there for a while. Her masterpiece was the character of Epicharis, whom Nero wanted to have tortured. A young fellow named Molière left the benches of the Sorbonne to follow her; he was in love with her for a long time ... and finally married her.⁴⁵

In this instance, we know that Tallemant has some of it right. Madeleine Béjart did play Epicharis in Tristan l'Hermite's *La Mort de Sennéque* at the Illustre Théâtre in Paris in 1644. Molière did not, however, attend the Sorbonne and did not marry Madeleine.

Tallemant's anecdotes have been used by many theatre historians. The standard modern reference work covering French actors of the seventeenth century is *Les Comédiens français du XVII^e siècle: Dictionnaire biographique*.⁴⁶ Compiled by Georges Mongrédien, an eminent scholar, and published by the prestigious Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, this work includes entries for both Mlle Le Noir and Mlle Valliot, and in both instances Tallemant's *Historiettes* are used as evidence for their love affairs. Mongrédien is guilty of a careless mistake, however, possibly because he thought he could add weight to Tallemant's gossip with an actual document. He writes: "the comte de Belin, patron of the actors, is in love with [Mlle Le Noir]. On February 1 1647 she leases a house belonging to him for 400 *livres* of rent."⁴⁷ This presents several problems. In the first place, the comte de Belin died in 1637; in the second, Mlle Le Noir rented the house, which belonged to her, to Henri de Taillefer de Barrière.⁴⁸ That the Le Noirs lived comfortably – *en bourgeois* – as Charles Le Noir's inventory, made after his death, indicates, and even had enough spare cash, in spite of having five children, to invest in a country house, does not appear in any account of Mlle Le Noir's life. Why? Could it be because an undocumented rumor about her affair with the comte de Belin fulfills expectations about actresses, while evidence of her comfortable married life style does not?

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 778.

⁴⁶ Georges Mongrédien and Jean Robert, *Les Comédiens français du XVII^e siècle: Dictionnaire biographique, suivi d'un inventaire des troupes, 1590–1710: D'après des documents inédits*, 3rd edn. (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981). This third edition was completed by Jean Robert after the death of Mongrédien in 1980.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 140.

⁴⁸ Mongrédien cites S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le Théâtre du Marais* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1954), vol. I, pp. 175–6, but apparently misreads the reference. See also Alan Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel à Paris 1600–1649: Documents du Minutier Central des Notaires de Paris* (Paris: Centre Historique des Archives Nationales, 2000), p. 431.

In the following century, gossip and rumor were the daily bread of social intercourse. "News" circulated orally in the cafés and at what Robert Darnton calls "other nerve centers for transmitting 'public rumors'" like the Luxembourg Gardens, the Pont Neuf, or the tree of Cracow in the gardens of the Palais-Royal.⁴⁹ Much of this gossip found its way into *nouvelles à la main*, hand-copied gazettes circulated privately to avoid censorship. Many of these have survived; one of the best known, the *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république de lettres*, was printed clandestinely beginning in 1777.⁵⁰ Anecdotal material in these sources, and in the various memoirs, journals, and letters of the period, obviously presents many of the same problems as Tallemant's *Historiettes*, but another kind of source has been taken more seriously by scholars and is often used as possessing high evidentiary value. Sadly, however, what appears to be reliable – and has been accounted so in a number of instances – for the historian of the theatre is little more than another collection of anecdotes. Referred to as the Archives de la Bastille, the collection contains both a record of arrests and people sent to the Bastille and the For-l'Évêque, and the papers of the *lieutenant-général* of the Paris police from 1716 to 1782.⁵¹ Much of this material has been published by François Ravaillon-Mollien.⁵² The full collection is also indexed in the Catalogue of Manuscripts of the Bibliothèque de L'Arsenal.⁵³ The material is, thus, easily available and well organized, but that does not mean it can be used inattentively.

For instance:

21 December 1728. At the Café Procope it is said that [on dit que] the Gentlemen of the Chamber are going to complain to the king about Mlle Lecouvreur, because she only performs at the Comédie when she feels like it. Her excuse is that she always has some vital ailment. The rest of the troupe has complained to

⁴⁹ Darnton, "An Early Information Society," 2. The tree was meant to "crack" whenever anyone near it told a lie, an unusual way of asserting a truth claim for gossip.

⁵⁰ For information about the production and circulation of these *nouvelles à la main* see Frantz Funck-Brentano, *Les Nouvellistes* (Paris: Hachette, 1905); Robert S. Tate, Jr., *Petit de Bachaumont: His Circle and the "Mémoires secrets"* (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1968); François Moureau, *De Bonne Main: La communication manuscrite au XVIIIe siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1993); Jeremy D. Popkin and Bernadette Fort, eds., *The "mémoires secrets" and the Culture of Publicity in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999); François Moureau, *Répertoire de nouvelles à la main* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999).

⁵¹ The collection is housed at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal.

⁵² François Ravaillon-Mollien, ed., *Archives de La Bastille*, 19 vols. (Paris: A. Durand and Pedone-Lauriel, 1866–1904).

⁵³ Frantz Funck-Brentano, ed., *Archives de la Bastille*, 3 vols. *Catalogue des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Tome neuvième* (Paris: Librairie H. Plon, Nourrit et Cie, 1892–5).

these lords. Others say that it's M. le duc de La Rochefoucauld who wants to drive the lady out of the Comédie, that the reason he is unhappy with her is that she had her carriage driven into the courtyard of his townhouse, and that he says that it's too great an honor for a w...⁵⁴ even to come on foot from his door to his rooms to pay him her respects. There are some who say that the only reason for the disgrace of the said Lecouvreur is that she gave an illness to M. le duc de La Rochefoucauld, but that this lord should have been told that the women of this troupe should be approached with caution.⁵⁵

This report of a café conversation is taken from the files of the Paris police, who liked to keep tabs on public opinion. The speakers are not identified, but the provenance of the report might seem to award it a high evidentiary status. Although it is an *on dit*, "a rumor," it reposes in a "reliable" source and is not dismissed as "mere gossip."

But if not "mere gossip," what is it? And of what use is it? Are we now free to assert that Adrienne Lecouvreur, the greatest actress of her day, was a slacker who evaded her responsibilities by claiming nonexistent illnesses? A record of her days of performance exists. Or that she – whose father was an artisan – was presumptuous enough to keep a carriage and arrogant enough to have it driven into the courtyard of an important duke? With whom she was sleeping? And that, like all actresses, she was a carrier of venereal disease?

We do know that Mlle Lecouvreur was ill; fifteen months later she was dead, some say poisoned by a romantic rival, but more probably as a result of what we now call Crohn's disease,⁵⁶ along with the usual horrific medical treatment.⁵⁷ We do know that she had a carriage and two horses at her disposal; her lover, Maurice de Saxe, claimed them as his property after her death.⁵⁸ We do not know if she had a venereal disease, or if she had a sexual relationship with the duc de La Rochefoucauld, or if she had the self-importance to have herself driven into his courtyard, but these accusations are entirely consistent with assumptions made about eighteenth-century actresses both at the time and by later biographers and scholars.

⁵⁴ Whore. In French, "p. . . ." that is, *putain*.

⁵⁵ Funck-Brentano, *Archives*, vol. I, p. 226, ms 10158, fo. 337.

⁵⁶ Christiane Marciano-Jacob, *Adrienne Lecouvreur: L'Excommunication et la gloire* (Strasbourg: Éditions Coprur, 2003), pp. 162–3.

⁵⁷ According to the abbé d'Allainval the doctors gave her *Hypecacuana*, that is, ipecac, a powerful emetic, for her terrible digestive upset. See abbé d'Allainval, *Lettre à Mylord *** sur Baron et la Dlle Le Couvreur*, ed. Jules Bonnassies (Paris: L. Willem, 1870), p. 56.

⁵⁸ Henry Lyonnet, *Dictionnaire des comédiens français* (Paris: Librairie de l'Art du Théâtre, 1904), vol. II, p. 323.

Robert Darnton writes, in reference to the files that inspector of the police Joseph d'Hémery kept about writers between 1748 and 1753, that:

the historian should hesitate before treating police reports as hard nuggets of irreducible reality, which he has only to mine out of the archives, sift, and piece together in order to create a solid reconstruction of the past. The reports are constructions of their own, built on implicit assumptions about the nature of writers and writing at a time when literature had not yet been recognized as a vocation.⁵⁹

We need only to change the last clause to “built on implicit assumptions about the nature of acting and actresses at a time when acting was grounds for excommunication and civil infamy” in order to encounter the same problem. Darnton goes on to mine Hémery's files on writers for “hard information” and develops three charts: Age of Authors, Birthplaces of Authors, Authors by Estate and Occupation. From these he concludes that writers in Paris in the mid-eighteenth century were likely to be between 30 and 60, that three-fourths of them were born in the north and north-east, that very few came from the artisan class, and that none were peasants. If the article had ended here, it would have been eight and one-half pages long. So, what did Darnton do with the material to fill another nineteen pages? He studied the content of the reports, the anecdotes themselves, as part of his project to investigate the production and transmission of anecdotal material. Arlette Farge has also used the Archives of the Bastille with great care and great success in recent years to study the relationship between fugitive materials and public opinion.⁶⁰ Neither Darnton nor Farge relies on the veracity of anecdotes.

Several recent historians of the eighteenth-century French theatre, on the other hand, have built their arguments by assuming that anecdotal materials from the Archives of the Bastille are true.⁶¹ In 2001 Lenard Berlanstein published *Daughters of Eve: French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siècle*. Although most of the book is focused on the nineteenth century, in [Chapter 2](#), “Theater Women and Aristocratic

⁵⁹ Robert Darnton, “Policing Writers in Paris Circa 1750,” *Représentations* 5 (Winter 1984), 9.

⁶⁰ See Darnton, “An Early Information Society” and “Policing Writers in Paris,” and Arlette Farge, *Dire et mal dire: L'Opinion publique au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992). See also Erica-Marie Benabou, *La Prostitution et la police des mœurs au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1987).

⁶¹ Lenard R. Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). See also Jeffrey Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theatre and French Political Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), who somewhat overgeneralizes from the available evidence about examples of misbehavior in the *parterre*.

Libertinism," he considers the period from the death of Louis XIV in 1715 to the inception of the Revolution in 1789 and examines the "transformation" of seduction and adultery from the mutual pursuit of pleasure enjoyed by men and women of the court to the exploitation of actresses, singers, dancers, and other "theatre women" by male aristocrats. To advance the claim he relies heavily on evidence that supports a stereotype his book does nothing to challenge: that actresses are usually or always sexually active, often with men to whom they are not married, often adulterously, usually for financial gain. His evidence is almost all drawn from the records of the *police des mœurs*, or morals police, in the Archives of the Bastille.⁶²

Even though the Archives of the Bastille are "official records," they present multiple problems for the scholar. In the first place, when the Bastille was attacked and entered on July 14, 1789 the original archives were pillaged and the papers, kept in a separate building in the courtyard, scattered and stolen.⁶³ Among what has randomly survived from the files of the *lieutenant-général* are six notebooks that contain rough notes made by an Inspector Meunier who had a special charge. He was a member of the morals police, established in 1747 by the then *lieutenant-général*, Nicolas-René de Barryer, in order to maintain surveillance of *filles et femmes galantes*, that is, prostitutes.⁶⁴ These inspectors reported directly to Barryer. Like other inspectors who kept surveillance over public manners and public opinions in Paris, they wrote and edited *gazetins*, little gazettes or newsletters, based on material they received from various agents. Some of their agents were policemen, many were *mouches*, that is, informers, some of whom were servants, others of whom were gazetteers or *nouvellistes* looking for subjects for their own licentious pamphlets. All were paid, according to Arlette Farge, for scouting out and reporting the rumors that coursed through the town.⁶⁵ Georges de Sartine, a later *lieutenant-général*, wrote of these informers that "they are usually bad sorts who are used to discover those who are even worse."⁶⁶

⁶² From n. 35 to n. 70, documenting a section of the chapter titled "From Ritual to Passion," Berlanstein cites the Archives of the Bastille twenty-five times and two other sources that quote the archives five times.

⁶³ For the history of the archives, see Funck-Brentano, *Archives*.

⁶⁴ For more information about the "morals police" see Benabou, *La Prostitution*, ch. 2.

⁶⁵ Farge, *Dire et mal dire*, p. 37.

⁶⁶ Quoted by Benabou, *La Prostitution*, p. 96, from G. de Sartine, *Mémoire sur l'administration de la police en France*.

Inspector Meunier's notes were made between May 1751 and February 1757. The sixth notebook is a collection of anecdotes and information he claims not to have used in his reports to Barryer. His subjects were *filles galantes*, actresses, dancers, singers, foreigners, and ambassadors. Also surviving are police notes by Meunier, Marais, and Buhot from 1749 to 1758, and an *État des actrices de l'Opéra*, as of 1752, with ages, addresses, and names of lovers.⁶⁷

Most of the female performers included in the inspectors' records were not criminals, were not charged, were not even detained. The reports are usually simple *on-dits*, rumors, and most of the women who figure in the *on dits* are *filles de l'Opéra*, dancers and *figurantes* who were paid badly or not paid at all, but were allowed to advertise themselves from the stage and in the dressing rooms in order to find protectors.⁶⁸ The situation of the *sociétaires* at the Comédie-Française was quite different. Actresses there had adequate incomes and a certain amount of agency within the troupe, unlike the employees of the Opéra, where the holder of the license had sole authority.

In the reports of the morals police seven women *sociétaires* of the Comédie-Française are mentioned out of the fourteen actresses who were members of the troupe between 1748 and 1759.⁶⁹ The seven are Mlles Beauménard, Brillant, Clairon, Dangeville, Gaussin, Guéant, and Lamotte. The two Mlles Quinault, although retired, are also included, as is Mme Lekain, who was not yet a *sociétaire*. The references to Mlles Beauménard and Dangeville are hardly damaging. The first of these was rumored to have made advances to the playwright Marmontel; the second was said to have had supper "nearly every night" during the company's visit to Fontainebleau in 1749 with Mlle Gaussin and the prince de Hesse Cassel. Reports on the two Quinaults give a brief account of their supposed sexual histories, although without any sources, and the inspector may be confusing Mlle Quinault *la cadette* with her sister-in-law, Mlle

⁶⁷ Meunier's notebooks are cataloged as Archives de la Bastille 10, 234. The numbers that follow, 10, 235-7, are the police notes by Meunier, Marais, and Buhot from 1749 to 1758 and the "État des actrices de l'Opéra." Ravaissin-Mollien has put all the morals police material in one volume, vol. XII, which breaks the series. A search of the index to the complete archives yields nothing pertinent in material not included by Ravaissin-Mollien. Material catalogued by Funck-Brentano under "Comédie-Française" deals almost entirely with disruptions in the audience.

⁶⁸ For a recent history of the Paris Opéra, see the thesis of Solveig Serre, "L'Académie Royale de Musique (1749-1790)," Dissertation, École Nationale des Chartes, 2005, esp. pt. I, ch. 1 and pt. II, ch. 1.

⁶⁹ All of what follows is taken from Ravaissin-Mollien, *Archives*, vol. XII. Nothing else from the *police des mœurs* is included in the index to the Archives.

Quinault Dufresne. Mlle Lamotte is accused by the chevalier de Mouhy (of whom more later), who had heard from the abbé Prévost that she was so fond of young boys that she lured two pages of the prince de Conti to her house with little pastries and other delicacies and debauched them. A typical *on-dit*.

Five of the women were subjects of multiple entries: Mlle Gaussin, Mlle Brillant, Mlle Guéant, Mme Lekain, and Mlle Clairon. The records of the morals police include three short entries for Mlle Gaussin.⁷⁰ There is little doubt that Mlle Gaussin was the original girl who couldn't say no; as she herself is said to have said, "it gives them so much pleasure and it costs me so little."⁷¹ The others, however, may or may not have been guilty of illicit sexual adventures. Mlle Brillant is featured or mentioned in seven entries.⁷² She was one of several actresses – the most famous being Adrienne Lecouvreur – who was, or was said to be, protected by Maurice de Saxe. She was spied on by the actor-playwright Destouches while she was in England in 1749 and 1750 and before she became a *sociétaire* of the Comédie-Française. Mme Lekain is the subject of four entries.⁷³ She married the famous actor Henri Lekain in 1750, but was not received as a *sociétaire* until 1761, so the interest of the police in her is curious. As is the degree of interest they showed in Mlle Guéant, who is featured in ten entries between April 1749 and January 1757.⁷⁴ The most pursued of all was Mlle Clairon, who played tragic heroines and lived in a style that aroused both envy and ridicule. Of the reports on actresses included by Ravaisson-Mollien in volume XII, sixteen out of forty-five concern Mlle Clairon.⁷⁵ What also sets Mme Lekain, Mlle Guéant, and Mlle Clairon apart from the others is that they were subjects of long summarizing reports. The entries feature supposed love affairs of the actresses with various men, some great lords, some foreign princes and ambassadors, some rich businessmen, some bourgeois men, some writers and actors. They frequently include the information that the woman is being *entretenue*, kept, or provided with funds by the man, sometimes to the extent

⁷⁰ 10 Nov. 1749, 6 Dec. 1749, 25 Aug. 1752.

⁷¹ P.-D. Lemazurier, *Galerie historique des acteurs du théâtre français depuis 1600 jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Joseph Chaumerot, 1810), vol. II, p. 242, quoted from the *Mémoires secrets*, 30 Jan. 1762.

⁷² 25 Dec. 1749, 19 Jan. 1750, 30 Jan. 1750, 5 March 1750, 20 Nov. 1752, 21 Nov. 1754, 21 Jan. 1757.

⁷³ 3 Dec. 1751, 17 Dec. 1751, 31 Dec. 1751, 12 Jan. 1753.

⁷⁴ 9 Apr. 1749, 24 May 1749, 26 Dec. 1749, 3 Dec. 1751, 18 Jan. 1752, 24 May 1752, 31 Oct. 1752, 15 Nov. 1752, 5 Feb. 1753, 23 Nov. 1754, 7 Jan. 1757.

⁷⁵ 14 June 1748, 23 June 1748, 10 Aug. 1748, 18 Sep. 1748, 21 Sep. 1748, 23 Oct. 1748, 19 Aug. 1750, 10 Dec. 1750, 2 Nov. 1751, 14 Jan. 1752, 17 Apr. 1752, 28 Apr. 1752, 5 July 1752, 22 Aug. 1752, 2 Oct. 1752, 31 Oct. 1752.

that he faces financial ruin. In addition, the reports note the birth of children, always illegitimate even if the woman is married, and, in two instances, illnesses possibly caused by venereal disease.

In order to use this material, as Berlanstein does, as evidence of libertine behavior by “dukes, counts, marquises, foreign lords, and holders of the most lucrative financial offices,”⁷⁶ its truthfulness or degree of probability ought to be assessed. Of course, even actresses at the top of the profession, like the *sociétaires* of the Comédie-Française, had lovers, some of them from the great aristocratic families, but not all actresses did. Some had children, although they were not married; some had children by men other than their husbands. Some did not. Some may have had a venereal disease, hardly uncommon in the eighteenth century, but, as in the case of Mlle Lecouvreur, police spies – and the public at large – took any illness in an actress as a sign of pregnancy, abortion, or the pox. Nonetheless, a modern historian must not come to this material with the same assumptions as those who created it. The police reports, like other forms of anecdote and gossip, should be “unpacked” before they are displayed and worn.

Every now and then something appears in these reports that is simply and obviously wrong. The first report on Mlle Clairon, dated June 14, 1748, was written by an inspector named Saint-Marc who announces that he has been able to introduce “a person of confidence” into the actress’s home. The subject of the report is her relationship with the prince de Monaco, who has returned to his regiment. The “person of confidence” assures Saint-Marc that the prince writes every day and that Mlle Clairon sees no one except some actors and actresses and an old prosecutor, a friend of her father’s. When she goes out, it is to mass and with her sister and her father.⁷⁷ The problem here is that Mlle Clairon had no sister, and her father, a sergeant whom she had never known, had been dead for many years. Another report mentions her brother, but she also had no brother, nor was she born in Rouen.⁷⁸ Yet another report claims that she has the pox and that it is incurable,⁷⁹ but apparently not, since the claim was made in 1752 and she lived until 1803.

Not all of the reports are so obviously in error, although there is no particular reason to believe them, and some are certainly subject to dissection. On April 9, 1749 a “young postulant” wanting to make a

⁷⁶ Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, p. 43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 348.

⁷⁷ Ravaillon-Mollien, *Archives*, vol. XII, p. 292.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 381.

debut at the Comédie-Française was the subject of a report by the chevalier de Mouhy. The girl was the 15-year-old Mlle Guéant, connected somehow to the celebrated Quinault family. Of this child Mouhy writes that she has rejected a declaration of love and its accompanying "propositions" from the powerful duc d'Aumont because she has her eye on higher things, i.e., Louis XV. She actually flatters herself that she is worthy of the honor of the king's bed and, concludes Mouhy, "this is a fact and not an *on dit*."⁸⁰

Although it would not have been unusual for the king to have cast a favorable eye on a pretty teen-ager, the route to his bed was via the *premier valet de la chambre* La Bel, who was the king's procurer, and not via the duc d'Aumont, one of the four *gentilhommes de la chambre* with authority over the Paris theatres. If Mlle Guéant approached the duke, it was very likely in order to ask for his support in the matter of arranging her debut, which took place five months later. The duke may, of course, have asked for a quid pro quo, as dukes were wont to do; if she rejected his proposals, as Mouhy suggests, perhaps that explains why her first and second debuts were unsuccessful. As for the king, he had final approval of the reception of a debutant into the troupe, and in the case of Mlle Guéant that approval was not granted until five years later.

In fact, the chevalier de Mouhy is hardly a reliable source of anything. A penniless member of the provincial aristocracy, he wrote a great many very bad novels that did not earn enough to support his five children. When the marquis de Paulmy added some of his works to the *Bibliothèque universelle des romans* in 1784, he noted: "the chevalier de Mouhy imagines much, thinks little, and writes badly."⁸¹ In 1736 he entered the service of the then *lieutenant-général*, M. de Marville, as a police spy, and a few years later he attached himself to Voltaire, serving as the great man's "man of business" and as one of the leaders of his claque at the Comédie-Française. Voltaire also paid Mouhy a pension of 200 *livres* a year to keep him informed of the Paris news with a handwritten gazette, which he wanted to be "short, factual, without commentary."⁸² Another of Mouhy's clients, the maréchal de Belle Isle, wanted more. He wanted to know about "all the fugitive publications, little verses, conjectures, personal news and anecdotes."⁸³ Voltaire complained that all this was

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 308.

⁸¹ Patrick Wald Lasowski, *Le Traité des mouches secrètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 37.

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 39. From a letter of Voltaire to Moussinot, August 1738.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 46.

not very exact, was, in fact “very false.” In 1741 Mouhy was put in the Bastille for having written a novel entitled *Les Mille et une faveurs*, judged to be “contrary to religion and good morals.” He wrote a shameless begging letter to Lieutenant-Général de Morville, who responded by giving the poor fellow another chance as a police spy. In 1745 he was arrested again, this time for circulating his clandestine gazette, and exiled for six years. He spent them in The Hague, rifling other clandestine publications for scandalous anecdotes and publishing them as his own in *Le Papillon* or *La Bigarrure*. Permitted to return to Paris in 1751, he enlisted once again in the ranks of *les mouches*, this time under Lieutenant-Général Barryer, and began to circulate his *Postillon de Paris*. Through it all, the obviously incorrigible Mouhy continued to hang about, listening to café and backstage gossip, passing it on to the police, circulating it from hand to hand, and using it to concoct more novels. Chances are that after a time even Mouhy had no idea what was true and what was not.

There is certainly no particular reason to believe his claim that his anecdote about Mlle Guéant, Aumont, and the king is “a fact and not an *on dit*.” There is every reason to believe that Mouhy, a paid informer with an active imagination, invented tales or distorted them for his own profit. Even Inspector Meunier of the morals police had his doubts about Mouhy; speaking of another tale reported by the chevalier, Meunier writes: “one owes this discovery to the indiscretion of the chevalier de Mouhy, fertile author of news if there ever was one; one does not infer from that that it is all true. It must be admitted that considering his immense output, there is often need for caution.”⁸⁴

Analysis of succeeding reports on Mlle Guéant further demonstrates the inconsistency of the material and casts still more doubt on its use as evidence. On December 26, 1749, three months after Mlle Guéant’s unsuccessful first debut, Inspector Meunier reports that she is being sought by the young prince de Wurtemberg [*sic*] who saw her and fell in love with her when she performed at Fontainebleau. However, there appears to be no proof that he has been successful; he goes to see her, but “the interviews are conducted under the supervision of the mother who never takes her eyes off her daughter for an instant.”⁸⁵ A little more than two years later, that same careful mother is described very differently:

⁸⁴ Ravaissin-Mollien, *Archives*, vol. XII, p. 419.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. 340. This prince must have been one of the younger brothers of the duke of Württemberg, either Ludwig Eugen, b. 1731, or Friedrich Eugen, b. 1732, so “young” meaning 17 or 18.

The father and mother of the demoiselle Guéant have not lived with her for the last six months, following a dispute in which the demoiselle reproached her mother for being a procuress who had prostituted her; what's more, the man and the woman get drunk as skunks⁸⁶ and often scandalize the chaste ears of their daughter and the persons of consequence who honor her with their visits. Thus she has rented them a room in the house of a wine seller in the same street near Saint-Sulpice, and sends them enough to live on, so long as they never put a foot in her dwelling.⁸⁷

While this might conceivably be true, it does sound suspiciously like the usual assumption that people connected with the theatre lived disorderly lives.

Meunier's chronology of Mlle Guéant's life is also confusing. On the one hand, she is being courted by the young prince de Württemberg under the watchful eye of her mother in 1749, on the other, according to a summary report done in November 1752, she had had a child by the marquis de Voyer,⁸⁸ probably at the age of 13 or 14, before she met Württemberg, and presumably when her mother was not watching. In January 1752 she is expecting a second child, and "M. le marquis de Voyer could, if he wanted to, say whose it is," but by November Meunier thinks the father was M. Gaudion de La Grange and insists that the affair with the marquis de Voyer was long over – even though he spent the night with her on May 31. And so on, although there is no hard evidence – baptismal records, death records – that Mlle Guéant ever gave birth to these children. Even Meunier's opinion of her appearance changes. In 1749 she is "small, face a little long, large almond-shaped eyes, chestnut hair, white skin, rather nice in general." In 1752, now 20, she is "small and has a rather bad figure. She has a nonchalant air that makes her sullen, and we should add to that that she is very stupid. The only thing she has is her face, which is rather amusing and makes her tolerable, for without that she would be a very uninteresting person."⁸⁹

Paul d'Estrée notes that Meunier seems to have intensely disliked women, whose adventures he reports with sarcasm and cynicism. He attributes the inspector's attitude to his own bad marriage; he had his wife, whom he suspected of infidelity, enclosed "for life" in a

⁸⁶ "se soulent comes des grives," drunk as thrushes.

⁸⁷ Ravaisson-Mollien, *Archives*, vol. XII, p. 377.

⁸⁸ Probably Marc-René, marquis de Voyer d'Argenson (b. 1722), the son of Marc-Pierre, comte d'Argenson, a former *lieutenant-général* of the police and minister of war from 1743 to 1757. Marc-René seems to be the only one of the various members of the family who used the title marquis de Voyer at this period.

⁸⁹ Ravaisson-Mollien, *Archives*, vol. XII, pp. 340, 393-4.

convent. "Inflexible and cruel," he made many enemies and was eventually assassinated, finally allowing his wife her freedom.⁹⁰

In the end, of the seventeen women potentially to be surveilled by Meunier and his *mouches* – fourteen *sociétaires*, two retirees, and one wife-future *sociétaire* – only Mlles Guéant, Clairon, and Lekain were given more than a passing glance or two, and, as we have seen in the material treating Mlle Clairon and Mlle Guéant, the accusations against them were often questionable and incoherent. As for the men involved, the inspectors named eight certain lovers for Mlle Guéant, one for Mlle Quinault *l'aînée*, four for Mlle Quinault *la cadette*, only three for the supposedly generous Mlle Gaussin, eight for Mlle Brillant, seven for Mme Lekain, and an astonishing forty-two for Mlle Clairon, plus a number of others only suspected.

Not only the assumptions but the ill-will of the inspectors and their sources are obvious. Many of the reports are heavy with sarcasm – "her talents being too sublime for the provinces..." – many include off-hand personal remarks. The chevalier de Mouhy notes that Marmontel, since he has been "amused" by Mlle Clairon, is "no longer recognizable." Inspector de La Janière, author of the summary history of Mlle Clairon, proposes that the lady can satisfy multiple lovers because she knows how to manage things and is clever enough to keep half-a-dozen "amused."⁹¹ An unsigned report claims that this same actress has "the strongest and most passionate temperament" and is the most "lubricious" of "demoiselles," and so noisy when in "action" that windows must be closed.⁹²

Why Mlle Clairon was especially singled out by the morals police is not clear. Nor is it clear why the police periodically had her watched, as they also did Mlle Guéant. Perhaps the women were not themselves always the objects of interest; possibly the men with whom they were involved or supposedly involved were the real targets. The marquis de Voyer, linked with Mlle Guéant, was the son of a very important government official, a former *lieutenant-général* of the police, who could easily have instituted surveillance of his son. Indeed, the inspectors note his visits to "la petite Buchet" and other young women without theatrical connections. And Mlle Clairon was very close to Voltaire, who continually aroused the suspicions of the authorities. Mlle Clairon was also the victim of a wretched *libelle*, written about her by an unsuccessful suitor

⁹⁰ Paul d'Estrée, "Un policier homme de lettres: L'Inspecteur Meunier," *Revue Retrospective* (October 1, 1892), 23–60.

⁹¹ Ravaisson-Mollien, *Archives*, vol. XII, p. 348. ⁹² *Ibid.* p. 294.

while she was still performing in Rouen, filled with allegations that dogged her all her life.⁹³ As to the absurd number of lovers the police accused her of, she wrote in her *Mémoires* that she was certainly not “inaccessible to love,” but “envy, calumny, and impunity have so exaggerated the total [number of lovers] that it seems impossible to me that any thoughtful person could believe it.”⁹⁴

A review of Lenard Berlanstein’s book supports the continuing need for a different kind of book about actresses in France:

[Berlanstein] tracks French theatre women through various printed matter, primarily produced by men: popular journalism, novels and plays, theatrical publications and dictionaries, letters and memoirs, and assorted official documents. We follow the adventures of female performers from 1715 to 1915. . . . From Mademoiselle Clairon in the 18th century to Sarah Bernhardt in the 20th; from the Parisian police, who kept records of performers and their official lovers in a bid to monitor vice, to the cultural journalists of the day, as excited by female bodies as by the *mise-en-scène*.

... Yet the pageantry of anecdote is at times a burden... and at times voyeuristic... What makes women “exceptional”... is less their industry and invention than their eroticization by an external eye, whether viewed sympathetically or vilified. The author discovers ultimately that the fluctuating response to female performers in France had little to do with “actual conduct.” But it is women’s conduct, and perspective, that remains so elusive in this work.⁹⁵

We live today, in the early twenty-first century, in an age of “celebrity,” when popular performers whip mobs of fans into frenzies of adulation. We drown in a sea of specious rumors and blatantly bawdy gossip. The eighteenth century had Mlle Clairon. It had the queen, Marie-Antoinette, whose sexuality was the subject of hundreds of clandestine pamphlets, some suggestive, some openly pornographic. We have Princess Diana. We have Madonna. We have women like Paris Hilton, whose only claim to celebrity is celebrity itself. What we used to call supermarket tabloids are now called celebrity weeklies, and they lead all other magazines in circulation. So, we should be able to understand the “cult” of celebrity that arose along with the popular media in the eighteenth century. Although many of us feed happily on this kind of noxious stuff, many more of us

⁹³ Gaillard de la Bataille, *Histoire de la demoiselle Cronel, dite Frétillon, actrice de la Comédie de Rouen, écrite par elle-même* (The Hague, n.p., 1746). The BNF at present has editions published in 1739, 1740, 1743, 1744, 1752, 1762, and 1772.

⁹⁴ Hippolyte Clairon, *Mémoires de Mlle Clairon, actrice du Théâtre-Français, écrits par elle-même*, ed. François Andrieux (Paris: Ponthieu, 1822; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1968), p. 46.

⁹⁵ M. J. Thompson, Review of Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, *TDR: The Drama Review* 46 (Winter 2002), 182–4.

can evaluate it without much difficulty. We can tell a hawk from a handsaw when it's a question of Britney or Bill. Why, then, are we apparently unable to do so when it's a question of Mlle Lecouvreur or Mlle Clairon?

Sabine Chaouche quotes the following from *Éléments de l'art du comédien* by Antoine Dorfeuille:

The tyranny of habit that forbids [women] the tribune and all learned professions, leaves them the freedom to enrich the Stage, with their productions and their talents, to be authors and artists. . . It is not forbidden to them to have knowledge of this Art, to cultivate, enrich and lend distinction to the French stage, and be the ornament of it, like those who have been the glory of the Republic of Literature. In all times, women have dragged the chains of this bizarre prejudice that seems to enslave them under the shameful yoke of ignorance, and restrict them to the occasional boredom of frivolous amusements; but in all times, as well, courageous women have escaped from this oppression and marched with a sure and rapid step to immortality.⁹⁶

This, it seems to me, provides a key to a study of actresses. Unlike most women in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, actresses refused to respect the established social norms and, whether by accident or by choice, lived public lives that sometimes brought them fame and/or fortune. They paid the price in the notoriety and vilification they often suffered, and the historian who wants to tell their stories will find abundant accounts of everything from joyful libertinism to sexual predation.

Sabine Chaouche warns us, however, that we risk the opposite extreme as well. "The eighteenth century marked the beginning of the *médiatisation* and the *starisation* of the actress who became, in her lifetime, a legend, whether she incarnated, from the mere fact of her profession, the image of the seductress who swept all before her, or was elevated to the rank of Queen of the Stage by her talent." The nineteenth century, when it was not mixing the prudish and the prurient, was much given to books with titles like *Queens of the French Stage*, *Idols of the Stage*, and even *Princesses of the Comedy and Goddesses of the Opera*. That point of view must also be challenged.

I propose to avoid the extremes and follow the lead of Dorfeuille. Actresses led remarkably interesting, if not easy, lives in early modern

⁹⁶ Antoine Dorfeuille, *Éléments de l'art du comédien*, Paris, an VII, p. 4, cited by Sabine Chaouche, "La Figure de l'actrice dans les écrits au 18^e siècle: Un mythe en construction? L'exemple de Mlle Clairon." Paper read at the International Conference of Women in French, Scripps College, April 2004. My thanks to Dr. Chaouche for communicating the text of the paper.

France. They were courageous women, and their courage deserves our attention and our best efforts to document their lives, both personal and professional, as individuals, not as symbols of depravity, nor as icons of grandeur. In the early years, before 1630, information is sparse, but after 1630 increasing amounts of documentary material – birth and baptismal records, marriage contracts, legal dealings, wills and inventories after death – make it possible at least to create outlines of the real lives of certain actresses. Those outlines can then, to some extent and in some cases, be filled in with information from letters, memoirs, pro- and anti-theatrical writings, plays, and – yes – even anecdotes, all used with due recognition of the assumptions they rest on and the stereotypes they promote.

It seems appropriate to give Mlle Clairon the *first* last word on the subject of anecdotal evidence. (Later, I shall give her the *last* last word on the whole subject of the actress.) Looking back from the age of 70-plus on the Frétilion *libelle* that had colored her career from the beginning, she wrote:

I was in Le Havre with the troupe when it appeared; my pain was beyond all expression. Far from my protectors, ignorant of what I should do . . . I took no steps to find out the reason for this outrage; I was naïve enough to believe in the justice of men. But even if I had thought more clearly, what would I have done? . . . I was nothing, could do nothing, had nothing; that was my crime and my misery. Alas! What does it matter to most men if there's one more miserable person? . . . however unbelievable the scandalous story that spreads about us, their own perversity permits them to believe it, and their impunity, their certainty, gives them the audacity and the cruelty to affirm it. They have seen nothing, know nothing, *on le dit*, someone says, and that's enough . . . The libel that was made against me is today lost in the immensity of those made against everyone. Innocence, greatness, divinity even, nothing is safe from malice, and all that I read about others must certainly console me for all that has been read about me.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Clairon, *Mémoires*, pp. 22–5.

*“So perverse was her wantonness”:
antitheatricalism and the actress*

Tallemant des Réaux includes the following anecdote in his *historiette* about the poet Boisrobert: the jolly abbé was told to gather up some actors, actresses, and playwrights to give their opinion of a rehearsal of *Mirame*, Richelieu’s choice for the opening of his grand new theatre at the Palais-Cardinal in 1641. Boisrobert permitted a woman Tallemant calls “la petite Saint-Amour Frerelot” to attend. The furious cardinal accused him of allowing a whore to contaminate his theatre. Boisrobert defended himself, saying:

I only know her as an actress, I’ve never seen her except on the stage, where Your Eminence put her . . . I don’t know what else she is: does one submit one’s life and morals to official inquiry to be an actress? I believe they are all whores, and I don’t believe there have ever been any who were not.¹

Boisrobert’s certainty that all seventeenth-century actresses are whores was founded on a long history of similar assumptions about women on the stage, beginning in classical times and gathering momentum in the early Christian era. Women who adopted the theatre as a profession in early modern France faced not only the usual antitheatrical biases, based on Roman law and patristic writings, but a special set of presumptions tied to their gender. As far back as Xenophon in the fourth century BCE, women who performed for money, publicly or privately, faced the condescension and contempt of their societies.

One well-known early victim of that contempt was the empress Theodora, wife of the Byzantine emperor Justinian, who in her youth

¹ Tallemant des Réaux, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), vol. I, p. 402. No other mention exists of this actress; however, since “Saint-Amour” means “holy love,” to which has been added *frère* “brother,” it might be that the reference is to Mlle de Villiers, who was at the Marais in the troupe of Mondory in 1641 and who was, so Tallemant would have it, the mistress of Henri de Lorraine, archbishop of Rheims, one of the gallants who frequented the king’s brother, Gaston d’Orléans.

performed in mime in Constantinople, and whose life we know primarily from the *Anekdotai*, the "secret history" written by the sixth-century scandal-monger Procopius:

Theodora . . . was not a flute or harp player, nor was she even trained to dance, but . . . she took part in the low comedy scenes. For she was very funny and a good mimic, and immediately became popular in this art. There was no shame in the girl, and no one ever saw her dismayed: no role was too scandalous for her to accept without a blush. She was the kind of comedienne who delights the audience by letting herself be cuffed and slapped on the cheeks, and makes them guffaw by raising her skirts to reveal to the spectators those feminine secrets here and there which custom veils from the eyes of the opposite sex. With pretended laziness she mocked her lovers, and coquettishly adopting ever new ways of embracing, was able to keep in a constant turmoil the hearts of the sophisticated . . .

Often, even in the theater, in the sight of all the people, she removed her costume and stood nude in their midst, except for a girdle about the groin: not that she was abashed at revealing that, too, to the audience, but because there was a law against appearing altogether naked on the stage, without at least this much of a fig leaf. Covered thus with a ribbon, she would sink down to the stage floor and recline on her back. Slaves to whom the duty was entrusted would then scatter grains of barley from above into the calyx of this passion flower, whence geese, trained for the purpose, would next pick the grains one by one with their bills and eat.

So perverse was her wantonness that she should have hid not only the customary part of her person, as other women do, but her face as well.²

Thus Procopius, writing around 550 of the present era, reflecting the Roman view of actresses and anticipating the objections made to them more than a millennium later by French antitheatricalists: they show themselves on the stage, they choose to play low comedy, slapstick, and farce, and they have scandalous private lives (although Theodora may be the only actress ever accused of having had geese peck bits of barley from her private parts on stage).

Unlike the Romans, the Greeks thought well of their actors, possibly because they were all men and citizens, but less well of the *hetairai*, or courtesans (literally, women who associate with men), who participated in private entertainments. Educated and trained in the arts, women like the beautiful and celebrated Phryne sang, danced, conversed wittily, and slept with men for money, although only judiciously chosen men. Unlike

² Procopius, *Secret History*, trans. Richard Atwater (New York: Covici, Friede; Chicago: P. Covici, 1927; reprinted Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961). See www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/procop-anec.html

the sequestered wives and daughters of Athens, the *hetairai* published their sexuality by posing for artists and by open displays of their bodies, or at least anecdotal evidence accuses them of doing so. They were not Athenian citizens, but either slaves or, once they had bought themselves out of slavery, *metics*, resident aliens, who could never become citizens or marry citizens. Thus, they were women with no clear position in a rigidly ordered society, and in this way not unlike actresses in later eras.³

Women and girls who were slaves but not *hetairai* also performed as private entertainers in Athens. A detailed description of one such evening's pleasure is found in Xenophon's *Symposium*, written c. 370. The men are gathered to honor the boy Autolycus, winner of the *pankration*, a boxing contest. The host has contracted for the entertainment with a man from Syracuse who has brought with him a "fine flute-girl, a dancing girl – one of those skilled in acrobatic tricks – and a very handsome boy, who was expert at playing the cither and dancing."⁴ The acrobatic girl juggled hoops, turned somersaults forwards and backwards among upright swords set in a circle, and performed more feats poised on a potter's wheel. The handsome boy danced, setting off a discussion among the assembled lovers of young male beauty of the fine muscle control of his body that he exhibited. But the most interesting performance came at the end of the evening.

Socrates, as usual the leading light of the occasion, was not entirely satisfied with what he had seen. He addressed the entrepreneur:

Sir ... I am now considering how it might be possible for this lad of yours and this maid to exert as little effort as may be, and at the same time give us the greatest possible amount of pleasure in watching them – this being your purpose, also, I am sure ... it is of course no rare event to meet with marvels, if that is what one's mind is set on ... but if the young people were to have a flute accompaniment and dance figures depicting the Graces, the Horae, and the Nymphs, I believe that they would be far less wearied themselves and that the charms of the banquet would be greatly enhanced.

The Syracusan was happy to concur. "Upon my word, Socrates," he replied, "you are quite right; and I will bring in a spectacle that will delight you."

³ For a recent appraisal of the Greek *hetaira*, see James Davidson, "Making a Spectacle of Her (self): The Greek Courtesan and the Art of the Present," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 29–51.

⁴ Xenophon, *The Symposium*, II, 1. See www.perseus.tufts.edu

After he had withdrawn, a chair of state, first of all, was set down in the room, and then the Syracusan came in with the announcement: "Gentlemen, Ariadne will now enter the chamber set apart for her and Dionysus; after that, Dionysus, a little flushed with wine drunk at a banquet of the gods, will come to join her; and then they will disport themselves together." Then, to start the proceedings, in came Ariadne, appareled as a bride, and took her seat in the chair. Dionysus being still invisible, there was heard the Bacchic music played on a flute. Then it was that the assemblage was filled with admiration of the dancing master. For as soon as Ariadne heard the strain, her action was such that every one might have perceived her joy at the sound; and although she did not go to meet Dionysus, nor even rise, yet it was clear that she kept her composure with difficulty. But when Dionysus caught sight of her, he came dancing toward her and in a most loving manner sat himself on her lap, and putting his arms about her gave her a kiss. Her demeanor was all modesty, and yet she returned his embrace with affection. As the banqueters beheld it, they kept clapping and crying "encore!" Then when Dionysus arose and gave his hand to Ariadne to rise also, there was presented the impersonation of lovers kissing and caressing each other. The onlookers viewed a Dionysus truly handsome, an Ariadne truly fair, not presenting a burlesque but offering genuine kisses with their lips; and they were all raised to a high pitch of enthusiasm as they looked on. For they overheard Dionysus asking her if she loved him, and heard her vowing that she did, so earnestly that not only Dionysus but all the bystanders as well would have taken their oaths in confirmation that the youth and the maid surely felt a mutual affection. For theirs was the appearance not of actors who had been taught their poses but of persons now permitted to satisfy their long-cherished desires.⁵

Xenophon communicates quite clearly that acting, as we understand it today, took place, that it involved impersonation, and was both realistic and persuasive. Unlike performance in the Greek theatre, where actors wore masks and conveyed high emotions to a large audience seated in a vast auditorium, this private theatrical mingled dance and mime with murmured avowals of love, and was played by young people without masks who were "truly handsome" and "truly fair" and thus truly believable as their mythical characters. But Xenophon also implies an idea of acting that would bedevil actors and especially actresses through the centuries: he suggests that the spectators would have "taken an oath" that the boy and girl were not simulating love, but were actually in love and were leaving the scene "for the bridal couch." Furthermore, these same spectators found themselves aroused by this erotic action and either went off to find their wives or "swore that they would take themselves wives" – except for the host and Socrates, who went looking for Autolycus. This

⁵ *Ibid.* IX, 1–6.

anecdote touches on several of the issues to be found in both classical and early modern antitheatrical and protheatrical discourse: mimesis versus hypocrisy and the effect of erotic representations on audiences.

The “dancing master” was, of course, also a slave master; the actors, no matter how convincing their performance, were still slaves, and Socrates found it appropriate to say: “These people, gentlemen, show their competence to give us pleasure; and yet we, I am sure, think ourselves considerably superior to them.”⁶ Indeed, the social distance between the Athenian diners and the dancing girl was immeasurable, although Xenophon was not as openly contemptuous as others were to be in later times and other cultures when they expressed their superiority to those who suffered from the condition of actor.

The entertainment described by Xenophon is usually identified as a mime, an ancestor of the later Greco-Roman mime, which was the prototypical entertainment denounced by antitheatricalists. Although we may think of mime as essentially a Roman theatrical genre, and as most important during the time of the Empire, in fact mime was Greek in origin and was performed throughout the Hellenistic world as well as the Roman world. The genre is still somewhat undefined. In a recent study of Roman performance, C. W. Marshall writes that:

the information that survives about mime resists integration ... Mimes were variously performed in public, in theatres and amphitheatres, and at symposia. For at least part of their history, they had scripts, but they apparently allowed for some degree of improvisation ... No single performance context for the mime existed and the imprecise use of the term in antiquity means that certain knowledge will continue to elude us.⁷

About all that can be said with confidence, according to Marshall, is that mime was characterized by the absence of masks and the presence of women. Most scholars who have taken on the frustrating task of studying mime agree that it was a mixed form that combined farce, song, dance, probably acrobatics, possibly more serious dramatic representations.⁸ T. P. Wiseman writes, after mining the works of Cicero for every mention of the theatre, that “the ubiquity of mime, in its many forms,

⁶ *Ibid.* IV, 1.

⁷ C. W. Marshall, *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 7.

⁸ J. C. McKeown, “Augustan Elegy and Mime,” *PCPS* 25 (1979), 71–84; E. Fantham, “Mime: The Missing Link in Roman Literary History,” *Classical World* 82 (1989), 153–62; E. Rawson, “The Vulgarly of the Roman Mime,” in *Tria Lustra: Essays Presented to John Pinsent* (Liverpool: Liverpool Classical Monthly, 1993), pp. 255–60.

is the main thing that emerges from the Ciceronian evidence ... Despite recent doubts on the subject, it is more likely than not that this popular and versatile dramatic form influenced, and even overlapped with, the literary genres of 'high culture.'" To this he adds in a note, "evidently mime could be both vulgar and sophisticated, morally sententious and obscene."⁹

From the time of the Roman Republic mime was associated with women and women performers of mime with prostitution. Some of this association may have arisen because mime performances were featured at the Floralia, the Roman May Day festival, first held in 238 BCE and given regularly from 173.¹⁰ Apparently, as the climax of the Floralia, women performed a strip show. Exactly who these women were is not entirely clear, however, because the sources, mostly from the first century CE, are contradictory. Both Valerius Maximus and Seneca the Younger refer to an incident said to have taken place at the Floralia in the time of Cato the Younger (95–46 BCE) when Cato, a renowned moralist, left the theatre because his presence was inhibiting the performance.¹¹ Valerius Maximus uses here the word *mimae*, mime actresses, to describe the performers, while Seneca refers to the games as *florales* ... *nudandarum meretricum*, or "the games of Flora with their nude prostitutes" (Seneca, *Epistle* 97.8). The Latin language itself makes it difficult to know what is meant or implied by *meretricum*, the root of which means "a woman who earns money."¹² The assumption seems to be that there is only one way a woman can do that, even when – as in the case of an actress – she is earning a legitimate income.

The fullest account of the Floralia is found in Ovid's *Fasti*, written and revised between 1 CE and the poet's death in 17 CE;¹³ the narrator interviews the goddess Flora, whose reputation among men is not of the best,

⁹ T. P. Wiseman, "Ovid and the Stage," in *Ovid's "Fasti": Historical Readings at its Bimillennium*, ed. Geraldine Herbert-Brown (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 282 and n.

¹⁰ W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic* (London: Macmillan, 1899), pp. 91–5.

¹¹ Martial's impression of this anecdote, written more than a hundred years after the incident might have happened, reveals a certain cynicism about Cato and perhaps a more positive attitude toward the Floralia. "To Cato: Since you knew the lascivious nature of the rites of sportive Flora, as well as the dissoluteness of the games, and the license of the populace, why, stern Cato, did you enter the theatre? Did you come in only that you might go out again?" Martial, *Epigrams* (London: George Bell, 1890), p. 23.

¹² Carlton Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1880).

¹³ Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. and ed. James Gordon Frazer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), V.3.183–209. The problems of dating the *Fasti* are considered in Steven J. Green, *Ovid, Fasti I: A Commentary* (Leiden, Boston, Tokyo: Brill, 2004), pp. 16–18.

and, after a long mythic and biographical passage, the subject of the games is broached. The narrator is about to ask why these games are marked by wantonness when it occurs to him that “the divinity is not strait-laced, and that the gifts she brings lend themselves to delights . . . A rakish stage fits Flora well: she is not, believe me she is not, to be counted among your buskined goddesses.” Flora, like the *mima*, is barefoot, not wearing the buskin or cothurnus, the platform shoe that elevated the tragic actor. “Thus,” the narrator continues, “the reason why a crowd of drabs frequents these games is not hard to discover.” “Drabs” is the translator’s choice, but the passage is more ambiguous than that, since it follows the reference to the barefoot Flora and precedes “She is none of your glum, none of your high-flown ones: she wishes her rites to be open to the common herd.” I suppose this passage could be read as “Flora wants her rites, i.e. sexual intimacy for money, to be available to the common man,” but surely a better reading is that Flora, not a tragic sort of girl, prefers the mime stage herself and wants her festival to attract the common people who like it. If “drabs” is replaced with “mime actresses,” the passage as a whole makes more sense.

The conflation of prostitute and mime actress, whatever its source, and the connection of prostitution and the Floralia were fixed by the time various Christian apologists begin to proclaim the iniquities of the theatre in the fourth century of our era. Lactantius, who died in c. 320, accused Flora herself of having been a prostitute who left her vast fortune to the state to fund annual public games in her honor. “These games, therefore, are celebrated with all wantonness, as is suitable to the memory of a harlot. For besides licentiousness of words, in which all lewdness is poured forth, women are also stripped of their garments at the demand of the people, and then perform the office of mime players [*mimae*].”¹⁴ In an odd reversal, instead of accusing actresses of being prostitutes, Lactantius claims that prostitutes are pretending to be actresses.

Roughly a century earlier Tertullian, the real founder of Christian antitheatricalism, described the Floralia as a kind of marketplace for prostitutes:

The very prostitutes, the victims of public lust, are produced on the stage, more unhappy in the presence of other women – the only class in the community whose notice they escape; they are paraded before the faces of every rank and age; proclamation is made of their abode, their price, their record, even before those

¹⁴ Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, I.20. See www.newadvent.org/fathers/07011.htm

who do not need the detail; yes, and more (and I say nothing of the rest) that ought to be kept hidden in the darkness of their dens and not pollute the daylight.¹⁵

Tertullian actually uses the word *prostibula*, and in his vision of the Floralia there are no actresses or prostitutes pretending to be actresses, but just prostitutes being advertised for sale.

Neither Tertullian nor Lactantius lived in Rome. The former spent most of his life in Carthage, the latter in various cities of the Eastern Empire. Whether they themselves might have experienced the Floralia in Rome or elsewhere or merely have repeated common beliefs about it, I am unable to discover. It is possible they were writing from personal knowledge; it is also possible they were reiterating rhetorical tradition.

The link between actresses and courtesans in Rome is easier to establish; as is the case in many cultures and in many eras, powerful aristocratic men took actresses as their concubines. The most famous of the Roman *mimae* is Volumnia Cytheris, star of the mime stage in the first century BCE and mistress of Marc Antony. She was also apparently the object of four books of love poetry by Cornelius Gallus, an intimate friend of Augustus Caesar and one-time prefect of Egypt. Virgil's tenth eclogue is devoted to Gallus and his love for "Lycoris," Gallus' name for the actress.¹⁶

In reality she was a freed slave who had belonged to Publius Volumnius Eutrapelus, a Roman knight.¹⁷ Cytheris was probably a stage name that referred to Venus' island of Cythera. Though celebrated, she was also a target of Cicero's contempt in his scathing denunciation of Marc Antony in the *Second Philippic*. According to Cicero, Antony in his office of tribune made a progress through Italy during Caesar's absence:

The tribune of the people was borne along in a chariot, lictors crowned with laurel preceded him; among whom, on an open litter, was carried an actress [*mima*]; whom honorable men, citizens of the different municipalities, coming out from their towns under compulsion to meet him, saluted not by the name by which she was well known on stage, but by that of Volumnia. A car followed full of pimps; then a lot of debauched companions; and then his mother, utterly neglected, followed the mistress of her profligate son, as if she had been her daughter-in-law.¹⁸

¹⁵ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, XVII, trans. T. R. Glover (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 275.

¹⁶ See <http://classics.rutgers.edu/Lat327/authors.html>

¹⁷ Giusto Traina, "Lycoris the Mime," trans. Linda Lappin, in *Roman Women*, ed. Augusto Fraschetti (University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 83.

¹⁸ Cicero, *Select Orations*, trans. C. D. Yonge (New York: Harper & Bros., 1889), p. 322.

Cicero's point is that Antony demonstrated the depth of his depravity by associating with an actress who was paraded in an open litter – visible to all as if she were on stage – and by forcing decent citizens to greet her not by a fantasy stage name but by a name that could be that of a respectable Roman matron. Cicero's animosity in this instance is so pronounced that we cannot accept his anecdote as evidence without questioning it.

Of course, most of the information available about mime actresses is anecdotal. Saint Pelagia's history forms a well-known chapter of early Christian and medieval hagiography, the reverse image of Procopius' biography of Theodora – a work of anti-hagiography if ever there was one. Unlike Theodora, who was supposedly given to slapstick and obscene comedy and had mind-boggling sexual staying power, Pelagia makes her appearance as a high-ranking actress/courtesan. Pelagia's story was told in the *Vita Sanctae Pelagiae, Meretricis* by an author calling himself James the Deacon.¹⁹ She lived in Antioch, capital of the Roman province of Syria and the third largest city in the Empire.²⁰ Antioch was more Greek than Roman, more Christian than not, and, conversely, well known as a luxurious and somewhat dissolute place. It had also been home in the previous century to Libanius, who wrote a defense of the pantomime, and of his student, John of Antioch, or St. John Chrysostom, one of the first and most uncompromising antitheatricalists.

Pelagia, the harlot of Antioch, as she is often known in hagiographic literature, was one of the so-called penitent prostitutes, mythologized with Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, and others as a symbol of the infinite mercy of God, who works the conversion of the most miserable of all sinners, the sexually immoderate. Actually, nothing in James the Deacon's account of Pelagia specifically names her a prostitute, that is, someone who sells sexual intercourse for money,²¹ but in Roman thought and Roman law all actors were associated with prostitution because they employed their bodies in performing for the pleasure of others as well as for financial gain.²² If, however, Pelagia did not accept gifts for sexual

¹⁹ For a thorough discussion of the many texts relating to Saint Pelagia, see Pierre Petitmengin, *Pélagie la pénitente: Métamorphoses d'une légende. Vol. I, Les Textes et leur histoire* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1984). Petitmengin dates the original composition to the fifth century CE.

²⁰ For more about the ancient city of Antioch, see Christine Kondoleon, ed., *Antioch: The Lost Asian City* (Princeton University Press and Worcester, MA: Worcester Museum of Art, 2000).

²¹ See Ruth Mazo Karras, "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1990), 13–14.

²² See Catharine Edwards, "Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn Skinner (Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 66–95.

favors, we might at first conclude that being a *mima* in Antioch was a very lucrative profession. James the Deacon describes her as:

the foremost actress of Antioch, the star of the local theatre. She was seated on a donkey and accompanied by a great and fanciful procession. She seemed to be clothed in nothing but gold and pearls and other precious stones. Even her bare feet were covered with gold and pearls. The male and female slaves accompanying her were extravagantly clothed in costly garments, and the torcs round their necks were all of gold. Some of them went before, others followed after. The worldly crowd could not get enough of their beauty and attractiveness. As they passed by us the air was filled with the scent of musk and other most delicious scents.²³

But what if Pelagia's entrance with her mime troupe was merely a bit of theatre, a street parade in advance of a festival? What if Pelagia was in costume and make-up, with her head and shoulders and her feet (and possibly the rest of her) bare as they would be on stage, her nudity enhanced by carefully arranged costume props? If so, then Pelagia represents another characteristic of the actor that Romans found disquieting; as Catharine Edwards writes, "Actors earned money by pretending to be what they were not."²⁴ To the anonymous writer who posed as Deacon James, Pelagia had to be what she appeared to be, a prostitute who violated all standards of female decorum and appeared in public bedecked with real gold and real jewels. She then gave those jewels to the bishop who converted her, disguised herself as a man – the sin of cross-dressing, that favorite of the antitheatricalists – and escaped from Antioch.

Pelagia's luxurious and licentious life as imagined by James the Deacon reflects the idea of the actress promulgated by John Chrysostom, who had preached aggressively against the theatre in Antioch in the fourth century. Before, however, turning to the antitheatrical writings and preachings of the early patristic writers, we need to consider the Roman legal foundations of antitheatricalism that formed the basis of French law in the early modern period.

"In Rome," writes Jonas Barish, "the theatre appears to have aroused antipathy even in its early days, and to have become thoroughly disreputable by the time of the Empire."²⁵ All actors, male and female, were

²³ See www.vitae-patrum.org.uk for Jacob the Deacon, "The Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot," trans. into Latin from Greek by Eustochius.

²⁴ Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 124.

²⁵ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), p. 38.

considered infames and were denied full citizenship. In many instances, they were otherwise marginal, being either slaves or former slaves or aliens, but the occasional Roman citizen who went on the stage was instantly reduced in status and classed with prostitutes, gladiators, dishonorably discharged soldiers, and other outcasts. As infames they were denied a number of legal protections, including the right to avoid capital punishment, the right to accuse others in court, and the right to appeal. Men who caught their wives *in flagrante delicto* were permitted to kill the man involved, but only if he were a slave, a gladiator, or an actor.²⁶

Like the *hetairai* of Greece, Roman actresses were subject to legislation preventing them from marrying at will. Early marriage legislation affected both men and women, but later laws seem to be addressed more specifically to the women:

From the Augustan period, any marriage between a woman of the stage . . . with an *ingenus* (a free-born man) was not officially recognized and did not provide the parties with the normal advantages of full legal marriage. The same applied to any marriage between a senator or close relation and an actor, actress, or child of an actor or actress. The loopholes in this law were progressively tightened.²⁷

Eventually all such marriages were simply declared null. The reason for such draconian measures appears to have been the fear of Roman wealth and property falling into the hands of actresses, notoriously seductive and luxurious, and eventually their children. The Romans had much the same attitude as the French police in the eighteenth century, who spied on female performers in part because they were seen as leeches who sucked wealth from the hapless scions of the aristocracy. When Justinian wanted to marry the *mima* Theodora in the 520s, his uncle, the emperor Justin, passed a new law that permitted marriage to a former actress who had renounced the theatre.²⁸ However, in the later years of the Empire, when theatres proliferated, acting became a compulsory public service and a hereditary obligation; women whose parents were actors were obliged to go on the stage.²⁹

In the same period, other new laws dealt with problems caused by actors and actresses who converted to Christianity and wanted to leave the

²⁶ For further accounts of the legal implications of infamy, see *ibid.* pp. 40–2, and Edwards, *Politics of Immorality*, pp. 123–6.

²⁷ Ruth Webb, “Female Entertainers in Late Antiquity,” in *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession*, ed. Pat Easterling and Edith Hall (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 294.

²⁸ *Code Justinian*, 5.4.23. Cited in *ibid.* p. 298.

²⁹ Dorothea R. French, “Maintaining Boundaries: The Status of Actresses in Early Christian Society,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (August 1988), 304 and Webb, “Female Entertainers,” p. 295.

theatre. An edict of 371 CE provided for the baptism of actors and actresses on their deathbeds, provided they had renounced their profession and had the approval of their bishop. The baptism also had to be reported to the secular authorities, who would send an inspector to make sure the deathbed was not merely simulated. If the dying person recovered, he or she was exempt from further "obligatory public service" on the stage, provided there was no moral relapse.³⁰ A few years later, an edict of 381 allowed actresses who wanted to convert to Christianity to request a release from service; if granted, the release removed "all legal prejudice and stigma attached to the woman's former occupation" and "all barriers to marriage."³¹ It also, however, decreed that "any former actress who failed to lead an exemplary life upon leaving the stage for religious reasons" could be forced to return to her former profession with no hope of relief, even when she was "a ridiculous old woman made ugly by age."³² These laws were weakened in the fifth century when the Christian emperors "may have reasoned that there was no reason to exempt actresses from their compulsory public service since they would be providing entertainment for an increasingly Christianized society under the supervision of Christian bureaucrats."³³ Or, perhaps, thanks to an escape route provided to the daughters of theatrical families, there simply were not enough actresses to fill the need. In either case, Pelagia may well have not been free to leave the stage and may have had good reason to disguise herself in Bishop Nonno's cassock, flee from Antioch, and live out the rest of her life as a male hermit.

Early modern French law, based on Roman law, continued to declare actors and actresses to be civilly infamous, although it did not concern itself with infames and marriage; that was left to the Catholic church and its power to deny the sacraments to those who earned disreputable livelihoods. French actors and actresses were also forced to renounce their profession before the church would permit them Christian burial. Civil law and canon law shared contempt for actors, with the church, or rather, some elements within the church, basing their attitudes on a discourse that began in the second century.

The first, and one of the most influential, treatises against performance was Tertullian's *De Spectaculis*, written c. 197 by a recent convert to

³⁰ French, "Maintaining Boundaries," 305. ³¹ *Ibid.* 306.

³² *Cod. Theod.*, 15.7.8. Cited by Webb, "Female Entertainers," p. 297, French, "Maintaining Boundaries," 307.

³³ French, "Maintaining Boundaries," 309.

Christianity who had been trained in rhetoric and law. The theatre's most important defect to Tertullian, though perhaps less important in later periods, was its historic connection to pagan ceremonies and festivals, intimately tied, in his mind, to sexuality and the display of the body:

The theatre is, properly speaking, the shrine of Venus; and that was how this kind of structure came to exist in the world ... So when Pompey the Great ... had built that citadel of all uncleanness, he was afraid that some day the censors would condemn his memory; so he built on top of it a chapel to Venus and, when he had summoned the people by edict to its dedication, he called it not a theatre but a temple of Venus, "under which," he said, "we have set seats for viewing the shows." So a structure, condemned and deservedly condemned, he screened with the title of a temple, and humbugged morality with superstition. But Venus and Bacchus do very well together, demons of drunkenness and lust, two yoke-devils sworn to either's purpose. So the theatre of Venus is also the house of Liber (Bacchus) ... while all that is done with voice and song, instrument and book, is the affair of the Apollos and the Muses, the Minervas and Mercuries. You, O Christian, will hate the things, when you cannot but hate the authors of them.³⁴

Although his technical objection was to pagan idolatry, Tertullian's rhetoric is heavily inflected with a conflation of art and sensuality.

Another of the theatre's failings was its use of representation and impersonation, a principal objection of the patristic writers. The basis of this objection in early Christian writings is not Platonic, as it would be in some Renaissance denunciations, but is rather founded on the idea that God's creation was not to be tampered with:

Will God be pleased with the man who changes his features with a razor, faithless to his face ... In the same way the devil makes the tragic actor taller on his cothurni, because "nobody can add a cubit to his stature"; he wants to make a liar of Christ ... The Author of truth loves no falsehood; all that is feigned is adultery in His sight. The man who counterfeits voice, sex or age, who makes a show of false love and hate, false sighs and tears, He will not approve, for He condemns all hypocrisy. In His law He denounces that man as accursed who shall go dressed in women's clothes; what then will be His judgment upon the pantomime who is trained to play the woman?³⁵

Tertullian is more concerned with the immorality of cross-dressed actors than with actresses, whom apparently he did not distinguish from prostitutes. Or perhaps the theatre in Carthage did not employ women. His

³⁴ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, bk. X, pp. 259–60.

³⁵ *Ibid.* bk. XXIII, pp. 85–6.

successor, who sermonized against the theatre in the fourth century, was more clearly obsessed with the particular evils of female performers. John of Antioch or John Chrysostom, celebrated as a preacher, was born c. 347 CE in Antioch, where he spent most of his life. In 398 he was named bishop of Constantinople and served with difficulty in that capacity until 404. Although his best-known homily attacking the theatre was written in Constantinople, his antipathy toward performance was expressed in many other sermons and was probably based on experiences in Antioch, a center of theatrical activity, where he seems to have had an especially difficult time competing with the Sunday spectacles.³⁶

John Chrysostom was largely concerned with the effect that women on the stage had on male spectators. "Tell me," he thundered from the pulpit,

from where do those who plot against marriages come? Is it not from this theatre?... Is it not from there that most people are adulterers? "Who," you ask, "has been made an adulterer by theatrical shows?" Rather, who has not been made an adulterer? If it were possible now to call out their names, I would show just how many men those prostitutes have separated from their wives ... holding others back from even venturing upon marriage.³⁷

This is in striking contrast to Xenophon's description of the spectators of a mime performance hurrying home to their wives or off to find wives.

Chrysostom assumes that the theatre's power is direct. He, and many of those who followed him during the seventeenth-century *querelles du théâtre*, give no credence to the idea that spectators can separate representation from reality. Men are aroused by actresses, captivated and enchained by them, because of "the marvelous ability of the mind endlessly to recreate in its interior spaces spectacle once seen."³⁸ "At the same time as the tongue breathes the name of the dancer does not the soul immediately conjure up the image of ... a harlot: her words, her appearance, her face, her roving eyes, her languid gaze, her curly hair, her smooth cheeks and kohl-rimmed eyes?"³⁹

³⁶ According to Paul Petit, spectacles may have been held there every weekend. Paul Petit, *Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche au IV^e siècle après J.-C.* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1955), p. 136, n. 6. Cited by Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p. 15, n. 8. Leyerle summarizes the evidence of the importance of the theatre in Antioch, pp. 15–19.

³⁷ John Chrysostom, *De Dav. et Saul*, III, 1–2, cited by Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, p. 68.

³⁸ *Ibid.* ³⁹ John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Jo.*, 18.4, cited in *ibid.* p. 69.

This “captivation” enfeebles and feminizes men, one of Chrysostom’s several objections to the way in which the theatre confounds normative gender roles. Men deny their divine nature by dressing up as women or adopting the gestures of women on the stage, while women, destined only for the private sphere, behave like men when they appear in public unveiled and speak to an audience. For Chrysostom, this reflects the “paradigmatic sin” when Eve controlled Adam, inverting “a rightful hierarchy stipulating human obedience to God and female obedience to males.”⁴⁰

Another of Chrysostom’s objections to actresses underscores the Roman fear that family and property were endangered when “the most talented women of the stage attracted large followings of love-struck admirers who squandered their family resources by showering the actresses with costly perfumes, jewels and other gifts.”⁴¹

Although Tertullian’s and John Chrysostom’s views informed later debates about the moral and social influence of the theatre, the more philosophical reflections of Augustine of Hippo were also influential. Augustine, like Tertullian, centers much of his argument on theatre’s origins in pagan religious ceremonies, and like Chrysostom focuses on the theatre’s power to affect spectators. In his *Confessions* (397–c. 401 CE) Augustine interrogates his own experiences in the theatre, acknowledging that actors had the power to move him, and that the extent of his pleasure was directly related to the ability of the actor to make him cry. The theatre also aroused him to empathy for lovers who “sinfully enjoyed one another, although this was done fictitiously in the play. And when they lost one another, I grieved with them, as if pitying them.” This he advises was “uncleanness,” and “let us beware of uncleanness. O my soul, under the protection of my God, the God of our fathers, who is to be praised and exalted – let us beware of uncleanness.”⁴²

Augustine’s condemnation of the theatre is far more implacable and far less interrogative in his later writings. From the self-analysis of the *Confessions*, he turns to Tertullian’s contention that theatre was invented by demons masquerading as pagan gods whose purpose was to corrupt and debauch the citizens of Rome.⁴³ A taste of his rhetoric

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 73. ⁴¹ French, “Maintaining Boundaries,” 303.

⁴² Augustine, *Confessions*, III.2. See www.newadvent.org/fathers/110103.htm

⁴³ For a summary of Augustine’s views on the theatre, see Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, pp. 52–65. Donnalee Dox, in *The Idea of the Theater in Latin Christian Thought: Augustine to the Fourteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), analyzes in detail the various Augustinian writings concerning theatre.

from *The City of God* is entitled "That the Obscenities of Those Plays Which the Romans Consecrated in Order to Propitiate Their Gods Contributed Largely to the Overthrow of Public Order." He is speaking of the Floralia:

Cicero, a weighty man, and a philosopher in his way, when about to be made *edile*, wished the citizens to understand that, among the other duties of his magistracy, he must propitiate Flora by the celebration of games. And these games are reckoned devout in proportion to their lewdness . . . This propitiation of such divinities – a propitiation so wanton, so impure, so immodest, so wicked, so filthy, whose actors the innate and praiseworthy virtue of the Romans disabled from civic honors, erased from their tribe, recognized as polluted and made infamous – this propitiation, I say, so foul, so detestable, and alien from every religious feeling, these fabulous and ensnaring accounts of the criminal actions of the gods, these scandalous actions which they either shamefully and wickedly committed, or more shamefully and wickedly feigned, all this the whole city learned in public both by the words and gestures of the actors.⁴⁴

At least Augustine shows no special animus toward actresses, whom he rarely singles out, but simply refers to generically as *pornai*, "harlots."⁴⁵ The empathy and grief he felt as a youngster for sinful love that ended badly was not aroused by an actress but by male actors performing tragedy or pantomime. Mime might have aroused him, but was unlikely to have led to grief. The only specific mention he makes of mime (and the only time he uses the word "actress") is in a description of a performance connected to a religious celebration:

We were intensely interested spectators of the games which were going on, and saw, as we pleased to turn the eye, on this side a grand display of harlots [*meretriciam pompam*], on the other the virgin goddess; we saw this virgin worshipped with prayer and with obscene rites. There we saw no shame-faced mimes, no actress overburdened with modesty [*nullam uerecundio rem scaenicam*]; all that the obscene rites demanded was fully complied with. We were plainly shown what was pleasing to the virgin deity, and the matron who witnessed the spectacle returned home from the temple a wiser woman.⁴⁶

Apparently the matron felt no more shame than the performers, which Augustine finds perfectly wicked.

A few of the surviving references to the *mimae* suggest that not all Romans despised the women who entertained them, although the

⁴⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, II, 27. See www.newadvent.org/fathers/120102.htm

⁴⁵ Chrysostom, also, simply uses *pornai* to refer to actresses. See Webb, "Female Entertainers," p. 283.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, II, 26.

celebrated Sicilian funerary stele dedicated to the mime Bassilla, “the tenth muse,” was erected by her fellow actors and not by a grateful public.⁴⁷ In late antiquity, Choricus, a sophist and teacher of eloquence at Gaza, “whose Christian faith cannot be doubted . . . courageously defended the mimes.”⁴⁸ Unlike his predecessors who perceived the theatre as a form of idolatry because of its connection with pagan gods, Choricus entitled his apology “Discourse in favor of those who represent life in the house of Dionysius.”

He recognized that some of the actors and actresses of mime were disreputable, but he notes that he is defending the celebrated among them whose luxurious clothing, jewels, and slaves were richly deserved. He also insisted that the corporation of mimes included “honorable fathers of families (and, presumably, honorable mothers as well).”⁴⁹

Choricus is most concerned to refute the charges of the Roman and Christian moralists that the plots of mime plays were almost always built on adultery. Of course, he is forced to admit that, in fact, they almost always were, but he directly disputes Chrysostom’s assertion that adultery is communicable, that spectators learn adultery from the mimes. He argues an alternative point of view that was often adopted by later apologists for the theatre:

You will say that there is not a single play that lacks this passion [of adultery], and that the spectators – especially those young thrill-seekers – fall into incurable desire, their reason destroyed by these shows . . . But since you think the depiction of adultery leads the whole theatre to shameful desires, I think you ought to consider that hardly any adulterer escapes punishment in the mimes’ plays, so that they urge the spectators to lead decent lives. For righteousness thrives wherever vice is condemned. So by showing that nobody who soils another’s marriage bed goes unpunished, the mimes reveal Justice to be the sleepless guardian of moderation, since the goddess catches anyone who undermines a marriage *in flagrante delicto*.⁵⁰

To this assertion that mime reforms morals, Choricus adds that the mimes “take wives and have children, in the lawful way,” and that “nobody is allowed to commit adultery with a mime’s wife,”⁵¹ perhaps a

⁴⁷ Webb, “Female Entertainers,” pp. 301–2.

⁴⁸ Bernard Schouler, “Un Ultime Hommage à Dionysos,” *Cahiers du GITA* 14 (2001), 249.

⁴⁹ Choricus, 8,54. Cited in *ibid.* 255.

⁵⁰ Choricus, “Defense of the Mimes,” in *Choricii Gazaei Opera*, ed. R. Foerster and E. Richsteig (Leipzig: 1929; reprinted Stuttgart, 1972), pp. 28–34. Trans. Andrew White and privately communicated.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 54.

way of signifying that the actresses (assuming they are the ones married to the actors) are also morally in the clear.

Choricus is especially rational when he discusses the relationship of actor to character. "Do you think acting does any harm?" he asks. And he answers that "the soul does not change along with the costumes." In his reasoning, the actor or actress who plays the prostitute is wise to avoid being a prostitute, since he or she would not then be able to "move the audience to laughter or admiration." "So," he concludes, "don't try to abolish something that does no harm to the person who practices it, and that sends its spectators home . . . wearing on their faces the trace of a smile."⁵²

Choricus never actually mentions actresses, and the possibility must be considered that mime in the late fifth and early sixth centuries in Gaza, under Greek influence, still used transvestite actors in female roles. This would explain why Choricus disputes the notion that acting feminizes actors. Nonetheless, his insistence that at least some actors and their wives live reputable lives is a refreshing change from the usual Roman and early Christian assumptions.

In 314 the Council of Arles included excommunication of actors among its canons, but following the sack of Rome in 455 the issue became somewhat moot in the West,⁵³ and the theatre, if it continued to exist, did so in ways that did not call it to the attention of church polemicists. The greatest of all the medieval scholastic theologians, Thomas Aquinas, wrote in favor of the theatre in the thirteenth century, arguing that play (*ludus*) is a human need, that whatever is needful,

may have a lawful employment ascribed to it. Wherefore the occupation of play-actors, the object of which is to cheer the heart of man, is not unlawful in itself; nor are they in a state of sin provided that their playing be moderated, namely that they use no unlawful words or deeds in order to amuse, and that they do not introduce play into undue matters and seasons.⁵⁴

As the professional theatre developed in the sixteenth century, it inspired a flood of antitheatrical rhetoric, especially in England, Italy, and to a lesser degree Spain. In England, where women did not appear on the public stage, the transvestite actor was the target of much hyperbolic Protestant-inflected rant; in Catholic countries, however, it was the presence of women on stage that provoked alarm in the antitheatricalists.

⁵² *Ibid.* pp. 77, 80, 82.

⁵³ Paul Olagnier, *L'Infamie légale du comédien* (Paris: Armand Magnier, 1899), p. 120.

⁵⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2.2.168, art. 3. See www.newadvent.org/summa/

According to Michael Zampelli, the theatre, which on the continent of Europe was commercial, itinerant, and included women, “functioned as a physical countersign to the ideals of religious renewal” during the Counter-Reformation.⁵⁵

Sylviane Léoni writes that the Council of Trent, which promulgated the ideas of the Counter-Reformation, actually “formulated no measures or recommendations against dramatic spectacles,” although it did pronounce on the dangers of the visual arts that represented sexuality and especially nudity.⁵⁶ This connection of art and lubricity was applied to theatre as well by many post-Tridentine church polemicists, who, according to Zampelli, regarded “the professional actress as a threat to early modern society . . . and reserved their greatest outrage for female performers . . . these most lecherous women” who “can ignite an unchaste flame even in the snow.”⁵⁷ The rhetoric seems to have been ineffective for the most part, given the political crazy-quilt that was Italy, and the unwillingness of various government bodies to be dominated by the church. However, Carlo Borromeo, as archbishop of Milan, did manage to force the Gelosi troupe to have its entertainments inspected and censored in 1583, in spite of permission to perform from the civil authorities, while a papal ban laid by Sixtus V in 1588 prevented women from performing in Rome and the Papal States. That ban remained in effect, with exceptions, until the end of the eighteenth century.⁵⁸

There was, as Léoni notes, more than one post-Tridentine “church,” and while Carlo Borromeo became a poster child for the antitheatricalists, François de Sales, for instance, was “more indulgent,” arguing that such pastimes as fashion, gambling games, dances, banquets, and plays could be enjoyed moderately but not obsessively.⁵⁹ François de Sales, of course, was French.

In France, where the decrees of the Council of Trent were never registered, and the theatre remained decentralized and itinerant until well into the

⁵⁵ Michael A. Zampelli, S.J., “The ‘Most Honest and Most Devoted of Women’: An Early Modern Defense of the Professional Actress,” *Theatre Survey* (2001), 1.

⁵⁶ Sylviane Léoni, *Le Poison et le remède: Théâtre, morale et rhétorique en France et en Italie, 1694–1758* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998), pp. 38–9.

⁵⁷ Zampelli, “The ‘Most Honest and Most Devoted of Women,’” 2, 4.

⁵⁸ For some reason, the exact sequence of the bans and their relaxation is hard to find. Laurence Senelick asserts that the ban was lifted in 1590 and not reimposed until 1676, but cites no source (*The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre* [London and New York: Routledge, 2000], p. 193). Thomasin LaMay says that the ban continued until 1798 “although exceptions to the rule occasionally occurred” (*Musical Voices of Early Modern Women* [Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005], p. 212).

⁵⁹ Léoni, *Le Poison et le remède*, p. 40.

seventeenth century, there was very little in the way of antitheatrical rhetoric in the sixteenth century, although theatrical performance was proscribed by various Huguenot synods or limited in several cities and towns under Huguenot influence.⁶⁰ The lawyer and *parlementaire* Jean Bodin devotes one page of his *Six Livres de la République* of 1576 to the pernicious *jeux comiques*, but as his title suggests, his objections are more Platonic than Catholic.⁶¹ A more significant document is the "Remonstrances tres-humbles au roy de France & de Pologne . . . sur les desordres & miseres de la royaume" submitted to the États-Généraux at Blois in 1588, but it was written by an extremely conservative Catholic *liguer*, whose major objections are that religious plays are blasphemous and that performances on Sunday violate the Third Commandment.⁶² Nothing is said about actresses.

Although attacks on the theatre are rare in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in France – not surprising, since the theatre was not exactly flourishing – a defense of it was published in 1603, written by Marie de Beaulieu and entitled *La Première Atteinte contre ceux qui accusent les comedies par une demoiselle françois*.⁶³ She claims that she is responding to a book "that has fallen into my hands," a "book printed in Germany" (and thus presumably Protestant) that "accuses the Catholics, as if they order the things that they forbid."⁶⁴ Arguing that Catholics, like Protestants, feel only disgust and horror at the pagan games and festivals detested by Tertullian and St. Augustine, she sets out to speak "on behalf of the Actors who are accused of reviving the ancient dissolutions, that are banished from the Plays of this century."⁶⁵ The actors of whom she speaks are the Gelosi, who performed in Paris in 1603 and 1604, and who featured in their "school of modesty" this "beautiful, wise and divine muse."⁶⁶ This paragon was, as we will see in the next chapter, Isabella Andreini, model Christian wife and mother, who nonetheless paraded her sexuality on the stage.

By the early 1630s two established troupes of actors, men and women, husbands and wives, had settled into two permanent performance spaces in Paris and had set about "reforming" the French theatre. Nonetheless, the actors were still legally infamous – unable, for

⁶⁰ See Jean Dubu, *Les Églises chrétiennes et le théâtre: 1550–1850* (Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1992).

⁶¹ Paris: Jacques Du Puys, 1576.

⁶² Nicolas Rolland Du Plessis, *Remonstrances tres-humbles au roy de France & de Pologne . . . sur les desordres & miseres de la royaume* (s.p., 1588), pp. 180–91.

⁶³ Paris: Jean Richer, 1603.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* ff. 4r. ⁶⁵ *Ibid.* ff. 9v. ⁶⁶ *Ibid.* ff. 22v–23r.

instance, to testify in court or serve in the army – and still anathematized by the church, at least in Paris, where the local ritual included them among other undesirables like beggars, gypsies, and prostitutes, and denied them access to the sacraments. In spite of the many defenses of the theatre written over the next decades, in spite of more than one “reform of the theatre,” their enemies in the church remained powerful, and it was not until the Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century and the move to a secular state that actors and actresses escaped from the legal and religious opprobrium that had dogged them for centuries. Even then, as late as 1815 the church refused to accept the body of an actress, Mlle Raucourt, for burial.

CHAPTER 3

In the beginning: “12 livres per year”

BEFORE 1600

In the beginning there were a few women in France who braved the wrath of the Roman church, broke through social barriers, and went on the stage – maybe because they wanted to, maybe because they had to, maybe out of serendipity. We have no way of knowing. What we have known since 1888 is that a woman named “Marie Ferré, or Fairet, actress and acrobat, was contracted to Antoine de L’Esperonnière’s troupe in 1545 in Bourges.”¹ Ferré was the wife of Michel Fasset, a *bateleur*, or street entertainer, who lived in Normandy and was not present when the contract was signed. Given that circumstance, Ferré was permitted to sign for herself, but with the stipulation that if her husband did not approve, the contract would be void. She agreed to travel with L’Esperonnière and perform the “antiquailles de Rome” or other “histoires, morales, farces et sobressaults,” that is, histories, moralities, farces, and acrobatics. In return she was to be nourished and lodged and to receive the sum of 12 *livres tournois* per year.

This contractual arrangement is not what we might have expected from what we know of the professional theatre later on in seventeenth-century France; Ferré is to be an employee of L’Esperonnière, not a sharer in the troupe’s income. The contract does, however, require her to share any gifts she receives of money or clothing with Gaillarde, the wife of the

¹ H. Boyer, “Engagement d’une actrice au théâtre de Bourges en 1545,” *Mémoires de la société historique, scientifique et littéraire du Cher* (1888), 286. For previous studies of actresses in sixteenth-century France see Léopold Lacour, *Les Premières Actrices françaises* (Paris: Librairie Française, 1921); Rosamond Gilder, *Enter the Actress* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1931); Madeleine Lazard, “Comédiennes et rôles féminins dans la comédie française du XVI^e siècle,” in *Mélanges à la mémoire de Franco Simone. Volume I. Moyen âge et Renaissance* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1980); Aurore Evain, *L’Apparition des actrices professionnelles en Europe* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001); Jan Clarke, “Of Actresses and Acrobats,” in *Female Saints and Sinners/Saintes et mondaines* (France 1450–1650), ed. Jennifer Britnell and Ann Moss (University of Durham Press, 2002), p. 268.

director and, presumably, also a performer. Marie Ferré is to be allowed to keep whatever *deniers*, small change, she receives as a tip after a private performance, provided that L'Esperonnière has first received her share of the earnings.²

The information in this contract can be amplified by an act of association signed the previous year, 1544, in Paris by members of a troupe led by Jehan Anthoine, a document that forces us to deprive Ferré of her title as the first known professional actress in France. Although her given name is not included, "Anthoine's wife" will be permitted to perform if her husband agrees and, unlike Ferré, she can share in the profits, but only if everyone in the troupe consents to it.³ Both documents confirm that in the early years of professional theatre companies in France, women's participation was affected by the civil status of all married women, who were normally restricted from signing contracts and other legal agreements. Throughout the *ancien régime*, most documents concerning the various theatrical troupes were signed by the men, sometimes by the unmarried women, and sometimes by the married women with their husbands' permission, although many variables influenced who signed what. The first extant document signed by an actress after the Ferré contract is an act of association of the troupe of Mathieu Lefebvre in 1608. Lefebvre's wife, Marie Venière, signed after being authorized to do so by her husband.⁴

Evidence of professional theatrical activity before 1544–5 is sparse. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, records of payments to male *joueurs de farce* have been recovered,⁵ and other contracts or articles of

² Boyer, "Engagement d'une actrice," p. 288.

³ Ernest Coyecque, ed., *Recueil d'actes notariés relatifs à l'histoire de Paris et ses environs au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1905–23), vol. I, p. 598. Cited by Stephen K. Wright, "Records of Early French Drama in Parisian Notary Registers," *Comparative Drama* 24 (1990), 247–8. This act of association was discussed by Raymond Lebègue in his "La Comédie italienne en France au XVI^e siècle," *Revue de littérature comparée* 14 (1950), 5–24, but apparently he did not think it worth mentioning Anthoine's wife, since Madeleine Lazard, citing him, claims that the troupe included no women. See her "Comédiennes," p. 364.

⁴ S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, "Alexandre Hardy, poète du roy: Quarante-deux documents inédits," *Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 91 (1947), 392. The actress's name is usually given as Marie Venier, but the documents analyzed by Madeleine Jurgens in Alan Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel à Paris: 1600–1649: Documents du Minutier Central des Notaires de Paris*, study by Alan Howe, documents analyzed by Madeleine Jurgens (Paris: Centre Historique des Archives Nationales, 2000) show that Marie, her sister Colombe, and their brother Pierre all signed Venière.

⁵ William Tydeman, ed., *The Medieval European Stage: 500–1550* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 329–30. See also Charles Mazouer, *Le Théâtre français du moyen âge* (Paris: Éditions SEDES, 1998), pp. 270–1.

association exist from the sixteenth century, but they do not mention women, nor do court accounts that include payments to performers.⁶ But, as we have seen, the absence of women from troupe documents or from the accounts does not prove that women did not perform.

The presence of women actors in the 1540s implies plays that need women or will profit from the presence of women, although there is no way to know what specific roles Marie Ferré or Gaillarde, the wife of L'Esperonnière, or the nameless wife of Anthoine might have played. However, documents do provide some information that enables us to think about the repertory these troupes might have offered. In two apprentice contracts of April 22, 1544 Anthoine is described as "an actor of ancient Roman plays" and as someone who can teach "the art and craft of acting the ancient Roman plays."⁷ In the act of association, however, Anthoine and his troupe appear to have a broader compass: They are "joueurs d'anticques, moralitez, farces et autres jeux rommains et francoys" (literally, players of ancient plays, moralities, farces, and other Roman and French plays).⁸

The troupe may have been bilingual; it certainly was binational. All the full sharers were Italian – Anthoine from Piedmont, his three companions from Verona. Two French actors, Thomas Molynier and Guillaume Quatrace, had three-quarter shares, and the apprentice, Michel de Falaize, was also French. A company able to perform in both French and Italian would go a long way toward solving the mystery of what might be meant by "anticques . . . jeux rommains" or, in the instance of the Ferré contract, "antiquailles de Rome." I propose to argue that these indicate the performance of actual Roman plays. However, I should note that Madeleine Lazard thinks that by "jeux rommains" or "antiquailles de Rome" is meant moralities on themes taken from Roman history.⁹

It is true that not very many Roman plays were available in French in 1544 and 1545. Seneca's tragedies were frequently published in the

⁶ See William Howarth, ed., *French Theatre in the Neo-classical Era: 1550–1789* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Nadine Pederson, "Towards an Urban Stage: Law and Performance in Paris, 1515–1559," Dissertation, CUNY, 2004. For more information about itinerant troupes in the provinces see Yves Giraud, ed., *La Vie théâtrale dans les provinces du Midi* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1980), Henri Lagrave, Charles Mazouer, and Marc Régaldo, *La Vie théâtrale à Bordeaux dès origines à nos jours. Vol. I: Des origines à 1799* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1985), and Jacques Le Marinel, "Histoire du théâtre en Anjou du moyen âge à nos jours," *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 169–70 (1991).

⁷ Wright, "Records," 246–7. ⁸ Coyecque, *Recueil*, vol. I, p. 598.

⁹ Madeleine Lazard, *Le Théâtre en France au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), pp. 34–5.

sixteenth century in bilingual school editions, usually offering literal translations interwoven with the Latin original. However, there is no record of a performance of Seneca, in French or Latin, even in the schools, before the scholars of Saint-Maixent played what was probably Garnier's *Hippolyte*, an adaptation of Seneca's *Phaedra*, in 1576.¹⁰ Almost nothing of Plautus had been translated by the 1540s,¹¹ and although an edition of Terence's six plays, translated anonymously in both prose and verse and published by Vénard, had appeared in the early years of the century, this *Therence en francoys* was designed as a textbook for collegians.¹²

In 1539, however, the *Therence en francoys* was reprinted by Guillaume de Bossozel, who seems to have wanted a wider readership and who describes it as "a very pleasant and diverting book of farces and plays containing diverse maxims that were performed in bygone days in Rome and that are now called comedies." He also claims the book is suitable for people of all conditions and urges potential readers not to be afraid to buy the book, which is decent and full of *sentences*, maxims, hidden within the diverting language – but not too hidden, since the printer used capital letters for the moralizing.¹³ According to Harold Lawton, the gothic type used for the prose and verse translations in the 1539 edition is small and hard to read, and the translations themselves are inadequate;¹⁴ nonetheless, they existed and could have been performed.

Lawton is much happier with the second of Charles Estienne's two translations of Terence's *Andria*, published in 1542. The first edition of 1541 was clearly meant as a crib for scholars; each scene of the play consisted of the Latin text interlarded phrase by phrase with a translated text with commentaries, followed by notes and explications. Only with great difficulty can we imagine a busy actor trying to piece the translated text together. On the other hand, the 1542 version is "infinitely more lively, more colorful, and more French," according to Lawton, who calls it "the only complete and sufficient version of a Latin drama made during

¹⁰ See Gustave Lanson, "Études sur les origines de la tragédie classique en France," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 10 (1903), 177–231, 413–36. For Seneca's play as a source of Garnier's, see Lazard, *Le Théâtre en France*, p. 113.

¹¹ The *Amphitruon* had been published in French in Antwerp in 1503 (see Madeleine Horn-Monval, *Répertoire bibliographique des traductions et adaptations françaises du théâtre étranger du XVe siècle à nos jours* [Paris: CNRS, 1958], vol. II, p. 17), but otherwise none of the plays of Plautus were available in French until J.-A. Baïf's *Le Brave* in 1567. See Charles Mazouer, *Le Théâtre français de la Renaissance* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002), p. 170.

¹² The book is not dated, but scholars estimate, on the basis of the publisher's address, that it appeared between 1500 and 1503. See Harold W. Lawton, *Térence en France au XVIe siècle: Éditions et traductions* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), p. 352.

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.* pp. 422–3. ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 423.

the reign of François Ier.”¹⁵ He adds that it is the first French translation of a Latin comedy undertaken by a man of the Renaissance.¹⁶

As to translations of Greek plays, a few were in print by 1550, including Lazare de Baïf’s *Hecuba* and *Électre* (1537) and Thomas Sébilet’s *Iphigénie en Aulide* and *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1548–9). Although there is no record of their being played,¹⁷ they were available to the troupes of Anthoine and L’Esperonnière, who also had access to one spirited translation of Terence and six literal, academic ones. Not very promising, perhaps, but Anthoine was Italian; a number of translations of Latin plays were available in his language and could well have been performed, especially at court, where Italian would have been understood.

The assumption has always been that early professional theatre in France was pretty much a male enterprise on the Roman model.¹⁸ Given the known presence of women in the troupes, however, we need to challenge that assumption and ask how they were employed. If one of these troupes played *Électre* or *Hecuba*, or *Iphigénie*, women would certainly have been useful, if not absolutely necessary. The value of the actress seems more questionable, however, to the production of Terence’s comedies, since Terentian characters are mostly male. However, while *Andria* is a characteristic Roman comedy with only two female speaking roles, a servant and a nurse, roles often played by men in France even into the seventeenth century, some of Terence’s plays include major courtesan roles – Thais in *Eunuchus* and Bacchis in *Hecyra* and *Heautontimorumenos*. An argument can be made that these roles, as well as any young women in love, might have been more to the taste of the audience if played by females.

“Autres jeux rommains” might also imply the sixteenth-century Italian comedies modeled on Roman plays; Anthoine’s troupe would have had access to works by Ariosto, Machiavelli, Aretino, and others, some of which, like *La Mandragola*, continue the Roman tradition of keeping

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 444.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 428–9. Another translation of *Andria*, made before 1543 and published in 1555, is ascribed by several nineteenth-century editors to Bonaventure Des Périers, but Lawton finds the attribution highly suspect (pp. 462–9). André Bourassa, “Répertoire des pièces de la Renaissance française,” www.theatrales.uquam.ca/soufflebaroque.html, dates this translation to 1537, but without citing his source.

¹⁷ Later sixteenth-century translations and adaptations of Greek tragedies by Nicolas Filleul, Robert Garnier, and Roland Brisset were performed, as I shall discuss below.

¹⁸ See Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, “Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama,” *New Literary History* 28 (1997), 321. They write, of late medieval France and England, “that dressing across gender boundaries, as is well known, was the standard practice in medieval theatre. Men and boys played all roles, both male and female.”

women mostly off the stage, others of which put women directly in the action. Although the casting of the learned comedies at the Italian courts and academies has never been seriously investigated, and the assumption has been that only men acted in them, we do know that in 1548 Dovizi de Bibbiena's *La Calandra*, which has spirited female characters, was performed in France, in Lyon, by an Italian troupe from Florence that included actresses.¹⁹ A troupe in France that did not play in Italian in 1544–5, however, would have had access only to another Estienne translation, this one of *Gl'Ingannati* by the Intronati of Siena, published in 1540 or 1542.²⁰ It featured two young women, one of whom, like one of the main characters in *La Calandra*, is disguised as a man for most of the action.

Laurence Senelick makes a first-rate case in *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre*²¹ for the effectiveness of the “boying” of female characters, but most of his sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European examples are from England, where boys and young men played women's roles in both adult and children's professional companies until after the interregnum in 1660. His argument is built partly upon the ability of male actors to create the illusion of femaleness, partly upon the appeals of homoeroticism, and partly upon the greater presence of the male actor on stage, something I have also noticed when counter-tenors rather than contraltos play castrato roles in Baroque opera. It occurs to me to wonder, however, if France might have been different in the sixteenth century, if female sexuality might have aroused less anxiety among the French Counter-Reformationists than among the English Protestants. I am thinking, for instance, of the frontal female nudity and the erotic gesture seen in the famous anonymous portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrées and her sister – the one where a nipple is being pinched – in contrast to the grave and formal portraiture of Tudor England, or the paintings of Michelangelo and his disciple Primaticcio, many of whose painted female figures appear to have been modeled by men wearing female heads and breasts.²²

¹⁹ See below, pp. 73–4.

²⁰ See Florinda Cerreta, “A French Translation of *Gl'Ingannati*: C. Estienne's *Les Abusez*,” *Italica* 54 (1977), 12–34, for a discussion of editions.

²¹ Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). See especially pt. II, ch. 6, “Playboys and Boy Players.”

²² The portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrées is in the Louvre. Michelangelo's penchant for masculinizing female figures has been remarked on frequently. See, for instance, Rona Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 322–3. For Primaticcio, see esp. *Pénélope racontant à Ulysse les épreuves endurées pendant son absence* (Toledo Museum of Art) and the variously titled sketches for the ballroom at Fontainebleau where the two

Besides the “antiquailles de Rome,” L’Esperonnière’s troupe also played *histoires*. By *histoires* I believe to be meant what Alan Knight has defined as plays that can be included within the historical as distinct from the fictional genre, that is, plays on biblical, historical, or hagiographic themes.²³ Many of these are commonly referred to as *mystères*, a term that covers an enormous range of dramatic representations, some of which – like the Paris *Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages* (1338–82) and the *Mystères* of Jean Louvet (1536–50) – include plays that are perfectly suited to performance by a small professional troupe.²⁴ Eleven of the forty *Miracles* have a female title character, as do three of the twelve Louvet *Mystères*.²⁵ As to the *moralités*, played by Anthoine’s troupe as well, Madeleine Lazard suggests that any individual *moralité* can also be categorized as a history play and gives as an example one with a female role in the title: *Moralité ou histoire romaine d’une femme qui avait voulu trahir la cité de Rome* (*Morality or Roman history of a woman who tried to betray the city of Rome*).²⁶ I leave the complexities of definition to the experts in French drama of the late Middle Ages; however, there seems to be general agreement that one essential characteristic of the *moralité* is the use of “allegorical, abstract, or collective characters.”²⁷ Given the generalized nature of the characterization, there would seem to be less need for women to perform in them. On the other hand, there seems to be no reason for women not to perform in them, especially one like the *Nouvelle moralité d’une pauvre fille villageoise, laquelle aima mieux avoir la tête coupée par son père que d’être violée par son seigneur* (*New morality of a poor village girl who preferred to have her head cut off by her father rather than to be raped by her feudal lord*).

Both Anthoine’s and L’Esperonnière’s troupes played farces, of course, and probably more farces than anything else. The sixteenth century was

main figures, though apparently of opposite sexes, both seem to have male bodies and female heads. *Primatice: Maître de Fontainebleau. Catalogue de l’exhibition*, Musée du Louvre, 2004–5 (Paris: RMN, 2004), p. 388. The bulging biceps make one wonder.

²³ Alan Knight, *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama* (Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 20–7. Cited by Lynette Muir, “Introduction,” Section E: France, in *The Medieval European Stage: 500–1550*, ed. William Tydeman (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 281.

²⁴ See Graham Runnalls, “Jean Louvet: Compositeur des mystères et homme de théâtre parisien (1536–1550),” *BHR* 63 (2000), 561–89, for descriptions of texts that are almost completely secular, although featuring a miracle by Our Lady at the dénouement.

²⁵ See *Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages*, ed. Gaston Paris and Ulysse Robert (Paris: SATF, 1876–93) and Runnalls, “Jean Louvet.” These particular plays, which were written for performance by a Parisian guild and a Parisian confraternity, were not accessible to an itinerant professional troupe in 1545, but similar plays were.

²⁶ Lazard, *Le Théâtre en France*, p. 34. ²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 32.

the century of farce in France. Almost all of the 176 farces included in the *Répertoire des farces françaises: Des origines à Tabarin*²⁸ were published or copied in the sixteenth century, although many may have been performed in some version long before they were published. The question is: performed by whom? Certainly by Marie Ferré, as we know, and probably by many other women in the itinerant troupes of the mid-sixteenth century. It was farce above all, with its focus on sexuality and sexual adventures, that could benefit most from the presence of real women on the stage.

Women did not participate in the performance of *sotties*, a particular genre of farcical and satirical plays produced by organizations of law clerks called *basoches* and other *associations joyeuses* of young men. *Sotties*, like *moralités*, used abstract and generalized characters; they may have been included in professional repertories, but they tend to be localized, as satire often is, and designed for particular festivals. Farces, on the other hand, tend to cluster into thematic categories that apply pretty much anywhere: “organic functions linked to the *bas-ventre*,” the region below the navel, as the dictionary *Le Littré* delicately puts it; the “beast with two backs”; the “war of the sexes”; and the various other deadly sins.²⁹ Women are probably not especially necessary if the sin is gluttony or sloth, but lechery and the beast with two backs – another story. Farce is filled with Jezebels. On the other hand, certain roles may have been problematic for women to play, especially when they required what Bernard Faivre calls “erotic metaphor in action.”³⁰ And certain farces appear to have been devised especially to emphasize the ambiguities that occur when a man plays a female role.

Telling the difference is not always easy. In *L'Amoureux (The Lover)*,³¹ for instance, Alison's husband goes off to Dinant to buy a cooking-pot. Seeing him leave, her lover arrives with a bottle of wine and a burning desire to get her between the sheets. They undress; she urinates into a bottle. Before they can actually perform the act, however, her husband returns, having forgotten his purse, and the lover, trapped, dives under the bed. Alison pretends to be ill and asks her husband to take her urine to the doctor for a diagnosis so that the lover can make his escape. The husband by mistake picks up the bottle of wine brought by the lover and, feeling thirsty on the way to the doctor's house, drinks it. He is overcome

²⁸ Bernard Faivre, ed. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1993).

²⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 456–69. ³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 92–3.

³¹ André Tissier, ed., *Recueil de farces 1450–1550* (Geneva: Droz, 1989), vol. IV, pp. 85–109.

with love for a woman who makes such exquisite piss. Still, now the bottle is empty, and he is full – so he urinates and goes on to the doctor, who tastes the contents of the bottle and declares that the patient is pregnant by her lover.

Did a woman play the female role or did a man? On the one hand, the wife, Alison, is clearly sexy, very much desired by both the husband and the lover, and described as a “beauty with a fine body, as perfect as if made of wax.” The action involves quite a lot of hugging and kissing, if not actual intercourse, and she disrobes, which might present problems if the role were being performed by a man. On the other hand, she urinates into a bottle, which is not an easy thing for a woman to do. André Tissier notes that by “bottle” must have been meant “jar,” but even so!³² It had to be a wine container or the plot would be even more incoherent than it already is. If, however, a man played Alison – and the name clung to *travesti* roles in farce as late as the 1630s – the comic effect would be hugely different. A man could urinate into a bottle with no difficulty, but the moment when the beauteous object of all desire whips out a penis and pisses, though funny, would absolutely destroy whatever illusion had been achieved. On the other hand, perhaps the breaking of the illusion was precisely the point.

According to the précis constructed by Bernard Faivre, about 20 of the 176 plays he lists would have been performed with mimed intercourse, including *Le Médecin qui guérit de toutes sortes de maladies* (*The Doctor who cures all kinds of illnesses*). A doctor is consulted by a pregnant woman injured in a fall. After putting her dislocated knee back in place, the doctor gravely informs her that her unborn child is lacking a nose and that the only way to solve the problem is to engage in a supplementary conception. She agrees and they go at it, “sur-le-champ,” on the spot, right away.³³ Although this action might be read as a seduction leading to rape, and actresses might well have found this kind of behavior on stage demeaning, nothing in the text suggests that the audience was enjoying the sight of the two backs of an all-male beast. And women like Marie Ferré, who were not sharing members of their troupes but contractual employees, may not have had the power to refuse to perform this degree of bawdry.

Our understanding of this complicated issue of how gender was represented in farce can be further enhanced by considering some visual

³² *Ibid.* p. 97, n. to l. 116.

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 285–6. La Fontaine borrows this idea for one of his bawdy stories, “Le Faiseur d’oreilles.”

material from later in the sixteenth century that shows two professional bi-gender farce troupes, one French, one Italian, using women in some women's roles while retaining the special benefits of male-to-female *travesti* in others.

The earliest reference to the troupe of Agnan Sarat is 1578, when he and Pierre Dubuc agreed to perform for the Confrérie de la Passion at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.³⁴ Nothing is known of the composition of the troupe or its repertory at that time. Agnan Sarat is most often referenced as the subject of a number of engravings, two of which illustrate what is probably an interlude, and four a farce. These six are included in the Recueil Fossard, a collection made in the seventeenth century that also includes a number of prints related to the early commedia dell'arte. The two interlude prints also show an Arlequin, leading most scholars to the conclusion that at some point Sarat's troupe joined with the Italian troupe whose performances are represented in the Recueil Fossard prints. Arlequin is also featured in twelve of the sixteen prints that appear to illustrate moments from specific commedia dell'arte entertainments.³⁵

Among the other characters shown in the sixteen commedia prints is the *servetta* Francesquine, who appears in four of them as the object of the attentions of both Arlequin and Pantalon. This role was played by the male actor Battista degli Amorevoli, who was popular in Paris; he had appeared there with the Gelosi in 1577 and seems to have been there also in 1579 and 1581.³⁶ Even this late in the sixteenth century, although actresses were well established in the commedia dell'arte, a man could be celebrated for playing a female servant whose sexuality was heavily implicated in the action. In one of the Fossard prints, Arlequin is fingering Francesquine's upper thigh. In yet another, Pantalon presides over the betrothal of a heavily pregnant Francesquine to Arlequin, while the fiancée fingers the magnifico's swollen phallus.

In Agnan Sarat's French company, if we can believe the visual evidence, an actor also specialized in female *travesti* with sexual implications. In the fourth of the four prints representing Sarat's troupe playing a farce, Agnan

³⁴ S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le Théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne. Volume I. 1548–1635* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1968), pp. 23–4.

³⁵ The best reproductions of the commedia dell'arte prints can be found in Cesare Molinari, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (Milan: Arnaldo Mondadori, 1985), pp. 97–106. For both the commedia prints and the Sarat prints, see Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (New York: Dover, 1966), pp. 316–34 and 133.

³⁶ Delia Gambelli, *Arlecchino in Parigi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1993), vol. I, p. 153.

is attempting to bed what he thinks is Dame Peronne. We know, however, from prints two and three that Peronne has asked her “cousins,” Julien the Debauched and Mathieu Bouclon, to play a trick to save her from Agnan. Julien offers to disguise himself as Peronne, while Mathieu Bouclon says that he will go to visit Agnan as a necromancer who can put Peronne naked into Agnan’s hands. In the third print, Agnan begs the “Fine-isope,” that is, the *philosophe* Mathieu Bouclon, to soften Peronne’s heart. Even better, answers Mathieu, “I have brought you your lady in her shift. See how she joyously shows her thigh, ready and able to make love with you.” Julien offers a bare knee and a little bouquet as a sign of good faith, and, in the final print, Agnan wrestles his beloved onto the bed, his hand well up under “her” shift, about to make a shocking discovery – perhaps the same one Arlequin is about to make as his finger inches up the thigh of Battista degli Amorevoli playing Francesquine.

Obviously, these sexually based comic routines rely on the audience’s foreknowledge that the character is being played by a man. The actor who played Julien the Debauched is recognizable in most of the Sarat prints. He has a round face and a retroussé nose and can be seen as the Milkmaid in the second interlude print when Agnan, as a shepherd, receives a magic flute from a nymph and forces Arlequin and the Milkmaid to dance. He also appears as a female dentist with a bandolier of teeth in a print that is not part of the Recueil Fossard.³⁷ In the Agnan farce the female *travesti* is part of the plot – a male character pretends to be female – while in the commedia play the male actor represents a female character. In both instances, however, the audience is kept in happy suspense waiting for the delightful moment of discovery.

The commedia dell’arte troupe and possibly Agnan’s troupe also included women who played female characters and who were implicated in the sexual shenanigans, although the really lewd moments were apparently left to the *travesti* actors. The Italian troupe seems to have had two *donne* or *inamorate*, Vittoria degli Amorevoli and Angelica Martinelli, while the *Farce des Grecx*, a view of Agnan’s troupe in various characters, shows what seems to be the same woman who appears in the four-print series as Dame Peronne.³⁸ The characters played by these actresses could be far from circumspect. Arlequin disguised as Horacio has his hand

³⁷ See Martha Kellogg Smith, “Georges de la Tour’s ‘Old Man’ and ‘Old Woman’ in San Francisco,” *The Burlington Magazine* (May 1979), 294.

³⁸ *Farce of the Greeks*. A good reproduction is available in Molinari, *La Commedia*, p. 115.

firmly in place on the *donna's* thigh,³⁹ although outside of her skirt, and she seems only too willing to entertain him, while Dame Peronne is the originator of the trick played on the old goat Agnan.

Returning to the late Middle Ages, while professional actresses were performing their secular farces, histories, and moralities, a few amateur actresses also appeared in various *mystères*, *miracles*, and *passions*. The best-known reference to a woman on stage is probably the famous description of the 18-year-old daughter of Didiet, a glassmaker in Metz, who played St. Catherine of Siena in a privately funded production in 1468. She learned 2,300 lines of text, spoke them perfectly, and gave such a lively and touching performance that she delighted the audience and made several people cry. What's more, one Henry de Latour, a gentleman, was so impressed he fell in love with her and married her.⁴⁰ Besides this Cinderella story, the first one known of a stage-door Romeo, we have various references to girls and women performing in miracles at Valence and Romans, in a Christmas play at Toulon, and in passion plays at Grenoble, Valenciennes, Mons, Châteaudun, and in Dauphiné.⁴¹

Perhaps more telling, however, is evidence that women also participated in the performance of at least one of Jean Louvet's *Mystères*, written for the Paris Confrérie de Notre Dame de Liesse. The manuscript of *Adrianus, comte de Flandres, et sa femme, surpris de brigands* – more a *histoire* than a *mystère*, at least until the miraculous appearance of Our Lady who saves the day – was produced in 1538 and includes a cast list in Louvet's hand with indications of who played some of the roles. Our Lady was performed by Marie Le Charron, probably the wife or daughter of Maître Pierre Le Charron *l'aîné*, one of the masters of the confraternity. Even more unexpected, however, is the information that the leading female character, a countess and wife of the title character, was played by “ma bonne,” that is, Louvet's maid.⁴² Unfortunately, this is the only cast list included in the manuscript, but there is no good

³⁹ M. A. Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560–1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006), Plate 6, print 3, row 2.

⁴⁰ *Chronique de Philippe de Vigneulles*, ed. Charles Bruneau (Metz: Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Lorraine, 1927–33), vol. II, pp. 394–5. See Jody Enders, *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 17–28, for a thorough and ingenious “unpacking” of the evidence for this performance.

⁴¹ See Lynette Muir, “Women on the Medieval Stage: The Evidence from France,” *Medieval English Theatre* 7 (1985), 107–19; Pierre Sadron, “Les Plus Anciens Comédiens français connus,” *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 7 (1955), 38–43, as well as Tydeman, *Medieval European Stage*, pp. 306–7, and Lazard, *Le Théâtre en France*, p. 362.

⁴² Runnalls, “Jean Louvet,” 570–1.

reason to believe that this performance was anomalous. On the other hand, the circumstances of performance of these texts were somewhat unusual. The Confrérie de Notre Dame de Liesse produced a play at its annual banquet. Unlike a guild, a *confrérie* was established for religious and charitable purposes. This one, founded in 1413, included four women among its sixty-four charter members. Also, the yearly performances were private, open only to members, who were drawn from the legal and artisan classes.

Still, if a maid and the wife or daughter of a member of the Parlement could perform privately in Paris in 1538, perhaps women were more active in theatrical productions mounted by *confréries* and guilds than has often been supposed. After all, royal and noble women acted at court. In the 1530s and 1540s Marguerite de Navarre, the sister of François Ier, wrote seven short *comédies profanes* and four *comédies bibliques*, some or all of which were staged by members of her retinue. The Valois chronicler Brantôme writes that Marguerite “often composed plays and moralities, as they were called in those days; and some pastorals that she had played and represented by girls of her court.”⁴³ Marguerite, herself, wrote from Nérac in 1543 that “we pass our time here doing mummeries and farces.”⁴⁴ One of her most interesting “profane” plays is the *Comédie pour quatre femmes*;⁴⁵ it was performed in February 1542 in Paris by “the king’s daughter, Madame d’Estampes, Madame de Nevers, Madame Montpensier and Madame Belley.”⁴⁶

Marguerite’s niece by marriage, Catherine de’ Medici, arriving in France in 1533, was accustomed to court and private theatricals in her native Florence. She may even have participated in the plays that were performed in Florentine convents.⁴⁷ After the expulsion of the Medicis from Florence in 1527, the 8-year-old Catherine was held, perhaps

⁴³ Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Ludovic Lalanne (Paris: Renouard, 1864–82), vol. VIII, p. 115.

⁴⁴ V. L. Saulnier, ed., “Introduction,” to Marguerite de Navarre, *Théâtre profane* (Paris: Droz, 1946), p. xviii. See pp. xvii–xxv for a full discussion of Marguerite’s plays and their possible performances.

⁴⁵ Also known as *La Comédie à dix personnages*. Five women are joined at the end by five men who lead them out in a dance.

⁴⁶ Saulnier believes that a performance described in a letter of February 26, 1542 from the English ambassador to Henry VIII was of this play. The actresses were Marguerite de Savoie, daughter of Francis Ier; his mistress Mme d’Étampes; Marie d’Albret, the comtesse de Nevers; Jacqueline de Longwy, Mme Montpensier; and Louise de Clermont-Tallard, Mme Du Bellay, later duchesse d’Uzès, who also played the title role of *Sophonisbe* at the court of Catherine de’ Medici at Blois in 1556.

⁴⁷ See Elissa B. Weaver, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

as a hostage, at several convents, including the Benedictine convent of Santissima Annunziata known as the Murate. The nuns of the Murate seem to have participated in convent theatre, not surprising for Benedictines, the heirs of Hroswitha of Gandersheim.⁴⁸ Catherine was there for three years, presumably treated like a student pensioner, and she certainly might have performed along with the other girls. In any event, her stay there was something she remembered warmly.⁴⁹

A number of plays were produced in France under Catherine's aegis that included women and girls among the performers. On February 23, 1556 and again on April 21 of the same year, a cast made up of royal girls and noblemen and -women acted a French translation by Mellin de Saint-Gelais, the court librarian, and Jacques Amyot, a tutor of the royal children, of Trissino's *Sophonisba*. A manuscript version includes a great deal of information about the casting.⁵⁰

Catherine's older daughter, Elisabeth, had her eleventh birthday between the first and second performances of *Sophonisba*. She was in the Assemblée des Dames, or chorus, as was her sister Claude, who was 8 and who also spoke the *Excuse* or Epilogue. The queen of Scotland, Mary Stuart, who was to marry François, heir to the French throne, and who was being brought up at the French court, was 13. She delivered the Prologue and the final Chorus. The title role was entrusted to Louise de Clermont-Tallard, the widow of François Du Bellay. Brought up with the royal family, she was learned and witty, close to Catherine de' Medici, and, as we have seen, a participant in the theatricals produced by the court of Marguerite de Navarre. In 1556 she was governess of the royal children. *Sophonisba's* *confidente* was played by Claude de Baume, wife of the *médecin ordinaire*, an important court office; *Sophonisba's* Ladies-in-Waiting were Mlle d'Hauteville, Mlle de Bournan, and Mlle de Burlemont, and the Assemblée des Dames consisted of: the queen of Scotland; the two French princesses; the king's illegitimate daughter, Diane d'Angoulême; Mlle de Rohan; Mme la maréchale de Saint-André, whose husband was one of the four marshals of France; the duchesse de Bouillon, another marshal's wife, but also the daughter of the king's mistress; and a number of other women and girls. It seems possible that *Sophonisba* was chosen because it offered so many

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 68, n. 55.

⁴⁹ Jean Orieux, *Catherine de' Medici, ou la reine noire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 57.

⁵⁰ Luigia Zilli, "Mellin de Saint-Gelais, Jacques Amyot e un manoscritto della tragedia *Sophonisba*," *Studi di Letteratura Francese* 17 (1990), 7-29.

female roles, and, in fact, the translators actually added more opportunities for women. In Trissino's *Sofonisba*, the queen has only one Maidservant, while Saint-Gelais and Amyot provide three aristocratic Ladies-in-Waiting. Furthermore, although the published text of 1559 seems to indicate that the choruses should be spoken in unison by the Assemblée des Dames in the manner of a Greek chorus, the manuscript version assigns the choral verses as individual speeches. The first chorus, or what is called an *intermède* in the published text, was performed by the princess Elisabeth (10 lines), Mlle de Saint-André (8 lines), Mlle de Rohan (8 lines), and Mme de Bouillon (10 lines). The second was a solo for Diane d'Angoulême, the third for Mlle de Rohan, the fourth for Mme de Chantelou, and the fifth for Mary Stuart.

Other court performances of plays commanded by Catherine de' Medici and performed by royal and noble actors, male and female, include Ronsard's *Bergerie* and an adaptation of Ariosto's tale of Genevra, both seen at Fontainebleau in 1564, and an elaborate staging of an unknown play at Bayonne the following year.⁵¹

The French court also welcomed Italian actors and actresses. Beginning in 1548, our knowledge of Italian performances and Italian actresses in France is substantially more detailed than our knowledge of French performances and French actresses, perhaps because the Italians were usually summoned by French royalty. The troupe that came from Florence in 1548 to perform Dovizi di Bibbiena's *La Calandra* during the festivities that accompanied the entry of Henri II and Catherine de' Medici into Lyon included "the most excellent actors and actresses of Italy," brought there at "great cost and expense." These actors and actresses were, according to Brantôme, "things never before seen, and rare in France: for before that were mentioned only *farceurs*, *conards* (fools) of Rouen, players of the *basoche*, and other kinds of light entertainers and players of trifles, farces, mummings and foolery."⁵² Since Brantôme was only 7 or 8 years old in 1548, his account is necessarily secondhand, but apparently the memory of the production lingered at the court, it was so splendid and so well performed.⁵³ There is no doubt that women

⁵¹ For a full discussion of these plays and performances, see Virginia Scott and Sara Sturm-Maddox, *Performance, Poetry, and Politics on the Queen's Day: Catherine de Médicis and Pierre de Ronsard at Fontainebleau* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

⁵² Bourdeille [Brantôme], *Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, pp. 256–8.

⁵³ See also Maurice Scève, *Magnificence de la superbe et triumpante entree de la noble & antique Cité de Lyon faite au Treschrestien Roy de France Henry deuxiesme de ce Nom*, intro. Richard Cooper (Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1997).

were included in the cast. Brantôme adds that “I have heard several gentlemen and ladies say that if the tragicomedy of this great Cardinal was beautiful, so also was it very well acted by the actors and actresses, who were very beautiful, spoke very well and with great charm.” The troupe appears to have been semi-professional, or at least not uninterested in profit, since the king gave 500 gold *scudi* and the queen 300, so each actor could go home with a full purse.⁵⁴ The leader of this troupe was Domenico Barlacchi, the herald of the Signoria of Florence, but none of the other performers are known to us by name.

A number of references to Italian actors and itinerant troupes in France in the first three-quarters of the sixteenth century have been mined from the archives; none of them mention women by name, although women were certainly active on the Italian stage after mid-century. Although the first Italian actress known to us by name is Donna Lucrezia of Siena, who signed an act of association in Rome in October 1564,⁵⁵ she was undoubtedly far from being the first woman to perform in Italy, since a very few years later, in 1567, what Robert Henke calls “a flush of professional activity” arose in Mantua.⁵⁶ One troupe that included a Venetian (Pantalone), a *zanni*, a Gratiano (Dottore), and a Spaniard (Capitano) also featured a woman referred to as “Signora Flaminia.”⁵⁷ The other was led by a woman, Vincenza Armani. In a letter written on July 1, 1567, Luigi Rogna, secretary to the duke of Mantua, wrote that:

today two plays were performed, in competition with each other. One was done. . . by Signora Flaminia and Pantalone’s company, who were accompanied by Signora Angela, the one who leaps so well. The other was performed. . . by Signora Vincenza’s company. Each company drew a large audience, but Flaminia’s troupe more of the nobility. They did the tragedy of Dido adapted as a tragicomedy, and it came off rather well. The others, as I have heard, were rather clumsy.⁵⁸

The duke of Mantua’s younger brother, known in France as the duc de Nevers, was probably responsible for the first visit to the French court of a troupe like one of those that had played in Mantua, that is, an association

⁵⁴ This production has been described by Cooper, see above, and by Angelo Solerti, “La rappresentazione della *Calandria* a Lione nel 1548,” in *Raccolta di studi critici dedicata ad Alessandro d’Ancona* (Florence: Tip. di G. Barbèra, 1901), pp. 693–8.

⁵⁵ Emilio Re, “Commedianti a Roma nel secolo XVI,” *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 63 (1914), pp. 291–300.

⁵⁶ Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell’Arte* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 85.

⁵⁷ According to M. A. Katritzky, this was Barbara Flaminia, the wife of Alberto Naseli, Zan Ganassa. See Katritzky, *Art of Commedia*, p. 201, n. 582.

⁵⁸ Henke, *Performance and Literature*, pp. 86–7. Translation by Robert Henke.

of at least six or seven actors who played not only improvised farcical entertainments but also tragicomedies and even tragedies.⁵⁹ The English ambassador, who was in France to observe the festivities surrounding the marriage of king Charles IX, wrote on March 4, 1571 that he had visited the duc de Nevers and had been entertained there by “a Comedie of Italians that for the good mirth and handling thereof deserved singular comendacion.”⁶⁰ What may have been this same troupe, referred to as “the Galozi,” played in early May in Nogent-le-roi, where the court had gone to celebrate a christening.⁶¹ In September, Italian actors attempted to give public performances in Paris, but were soon mired in a bureaucratic nightmare as the judges of the Parlement refused to accept either the king’s *lettres patentes* or the permission granted by the city. The documents in the case tell us that this troupe’s leader was “Alberto Ganassa,” that is, Alberto Naseli, who played as Zan Ganassa. In the following year, Zan Ganassa and his “companions” were still in France or back in France performing during the festivities held to celebrate the ill-fated wedding of the king’s sister, Marguerite de Valois, and Henri de Navarre. Unfortunately, in all of this, and in references to two troupes that were in Paris in 1572, Ganassa’s is the only name that appears.⁶²

In 1574, however, the presence of women was both a feature and an issue during the Italians’ visit to France and Paris. The king, Henri III, had been away from France serving as king of Poland when his brother Charles IX unexpectedly died in 1574. The new king left his old kingdom furtively by night and returned home via Venice, where he let it be known that he was longing to see a performance by the celebrated Gelosi, and he especially hoped that “the woman” would be part of the troupe.⁶³ The Venetians, with only four days before the king arrived, instantly wrote to their envoy in Milan: “We understand the actors known as the Gelosi are at present in Milan and among them the woman called Vittoria.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 89. In July 1567, in Mantua, Flaminia performed a tragedy based on the tale of Marganorre from Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*.

⁶⁰ Armand Baschet, *Les Comédiens italiens à la cour de France* (Paris: H. Plon, 1882), p. 16 n.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* p. 18.

⁶² Two years later, however, Ganassa’s troupe of nine performers was in Spain, where it included one woman, Barbara Flaminia, now identified as Naseli’s wife. See Carmen Sanz Ayán and Bernardo José García García, “El ‘oficio de representar’ en España y la influencia de la *commedia dell’arte*,” *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna* 16 (1995), 478. This information regarding the full name and marital status of Signora Flaminia was found in Spain in a legal document and was published by Bernardo José García García in “La compañía de Ganassa en Madrid (1580–84): tres nuevos documentos,” *Journal of Hispanic Research* 1 (1992–3), 365–70.

⁶³ Baschet, *Les Comédiens*, pp. 55–60.

⁶⁴ Archives of Venice, quoted in *ibid.* pp. 57–8.

“Vittoria” was Vittoria Piisimi, prima donna of the Gelosi from 1570 to 1578, when she apparently left with several others for the Confidenti.⁶⁵ One of the four great divas of the Italian professional stage in the sixteenth century (along with Vincenza Armani, Flaminia, and Isabella Andreini), she was eulogized by Tomaso Garzoni in *La Piazza universale de tutte le Professioni del mondo* in 1685:

But above all worthy of the highest honors is the divine Vittoria who metamorphoses herself on the stage: a beautiful sorceress of love, she entices the hearts of a thousand lovers with her words; a sweet siren, she enchants with smooth incantations the souls of her devout spectators. Without doubt she deserves to be ranked as an embodiment of the arts, for her gestures are proportionate, her movements harmonious and co-ordinated, her actions disciplined and pleasing, her language sweet and affable, her sighs measured and stealing, her laughter suave and delicious, her deportment noble and generous, and her whole person has the perfect decorum that belongs to and befits a perfect actress.⁶⁶

On July 24, 1574 Vittoria and her colleagues participated in the performance in Venice of Cornelio Frangipani’s *Tragedia*, with music by Claudio Merulo. This was not at all the kind of improvised neo-Latin play with farce we normally assume to be the heart of the repertory of a commedia dell’arte troupe. Frangipani, who describes the performance, notes that “all the performers sang in the softest harmonies, sometimes singing alone, sometimes together.”⁶⁷ The play was, thus, a musical spectacle, entirely sung, although the “tragic machine . . . was impossible to regulate because of the great tumult of people who were there.” According to Anne MacNeil, Vittoria would have played the leading female role of Pallas Athena, singing a direct address to the French king.⁶⁸

Henri III was apparently enchanted by this “perfect actress” and – as soon as the distracting business of the Fifth War of Religion was settled in May 1576 – asked the French ambassador in Venice to find the Gelosi and give them the money they needed to travel to France.⁶⁹ The Gelosi were otherwise engaged, but by the following January 25 they had made

⁶⁵ Frances K. Barasch, “Italian Actresses in Shakespeare’s World: Vittoria and Isabella,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* (Summer 2001), 5. I should add, however, that tracing the exact professional associations of commedia dell’arte performers is very tricky.

⁶⁶ Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell’Arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 221–2. Translation from this volume.

⁶⁷ Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell’Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 12. Translation by Anne MacNeil.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 15.

⁶⁹ Baschet, *Les Comédiens*, pp. 64–5.

their way to the French court at Blois, in spite of being kidnapped by Huguenots along the way. The king paid their ransom, at least according to Pierre de L'Estoile, a Parisian lawyer who chronicled life as seen through a Huguenot lens from 1574 to 1611.⁷⁰

L'Estoile also tells us that on May 19 these *bateleurs* opened a season in Paris at the Palais Bourbon, where they charged 4 *sous* for admission and where there was "such a concourse and affluence of people that the four best preachers in Paris could not all together attract as many when they preached."⁷¹ To the delight of L'Estoile, on June 26 the Gelosi were forbidden to perform by the Parlement, which resolved that "all these comedies teach nothing but bawdiness and adulteries and serve only as a school of debauchery to the youth of both sexes of the city of Paris." According to the prudish L'Estoile, such teachers were not needed, since the girls and women of Paris already "make a show of their uncovered breasts, and other pectoral parts that are in perpetual motion, that these good ladies manage in rhythm like a clock, or better, like the bellows when the smith lights the fire in his forge."⁷² Unlike in 1571, when the Parlement prevailed and kept the Italians off the public stage, this time the actors won. When the court denied their petition, the king parried with a *jussion expresse*,⁷³ the constant struggle between the throne and the Paris judiciary was resolved in the royal favor, and the actors reopened at the Palais Bourbon. The saddened chronicler notes that "the corruption of this time is such that the *farceurs*, *putains* and *mignons* have all the credit."⁷⁴ To this Parisian *haut bourgeois* the actors were *bateleurs* and *farceurs*, the actresses *putains*, whores, and all were in the same category as the king's effeminate favorites. Henri III, on the other hand, renewed their subvention in October, remarking that he had had "no pleasure more perfect than the pleasure of hearing them."⁷⁵

The king's "perfect [there's that word again] pleasure" rather strongly suggests that the divine Vittoria was among the performers. Possibly – although this is a stretch – the very young Isabella Andreini was there as well. She was definitely in the troupe the following year in Florence, when

⁷⁰ Pierre de L'Estoile, *Mémoires-Journaux*. Vol. I, *Journal de Henri III 1574–1580* (Paris: Tallandier, 1982), p. 179.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 189.

⁷² The extent to which commedia dell'arte actresses bared their breasts on stage is still an open question. L'Estoile would seem to be suggesting that Parisiennes did not need to learn this from the Italians – they already knew.

⁷³ A royal command by which the king forced a judicial authority to do something it had refused to do. See *Le Littré*, ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>

⁷⁴ L'Estoile, *Mémoires-Journaux*, p. 202. ⁷⁵ Baschet, *Les Comédiens*, p. 76.

Vittoria left the Gelosi for the Confidenti. We do not know what repertory the Italians performed in France in 1577, but very likely the public performances in Paris were largely of improvised comedies, schools of bawdry and adultery in the eyes of the Parlement, while what the king “heard” at court may have been more refined and more musical. Clearly, many Italian actresses in the sixteenth century had a wide range of talents.

That the Gelosi were taken hostage by Huguenots as they traveled from Lyon to Blois underscores why we have so little information about theatrical troupes in France during the years of the Wars of Religion. Travel was difficult in the sixteenth century even during times of peace; during the troubled period of the civil war, simply moving from place to place must have been more daunting than usual, especially for actors who were not welcome in areas dominated by the Protestants. Nonetheless, while no one eulogized the actresses as Garzoni did the “divine Vittoria,” there are references to French itinerant troupes in the twenty years between the performances of the Gelosi in Paris and the declaration of the Edict of Nantes in 1598. In general, they add little or nothing to our limited knowledge of actresses, except for one document, of reasonably reliable authority, which is extremely informative and allows us to believe that, in fact, by the 1590s the French theatre in the provinces was relatively healthy.⁷⁶

The *Chronique bordelaise* relates that in 1592 a theatrical troupe led by “Valeran” played a season in Bordeaux.⁷⁷ Although a partial translation into English is available elsewhere,⁷⁸ I propose to include one in full, since the account raises a number of issues about actresses that I want to consider briefly here and extensively elsewhere in this study.

In this year, Valleran, a noteworthy actor,⁷⁹ came to Bordeaux and performed many tragedies and farces there to great applause by the spectators. It should be noted that he was not married and did not bear the title of chief of the troupe, although he was

⁷⁶ The document is the *Chronique bordelaise* by Jean Gaufrereau, ed. Jules Delpit, 2 vols. (Bordeaux: Charles Lefebvre, 1877–8). The editor puts this document into the category of the works of Brantôme, L’Estoile, and Tallemant des Réaux, i.e., collections based partly on personal knowledge, partly on gossip and anecdotes. The manuscript has problems with dating the various events it chronicles, and the editor is not entirely sure which of three possible Jean de Gaufrereaus may have written or copied the extant manuscript. All were living in 1592, but the youngest, born according to the editor c. 1584, would not have had personal knowledge of the gossip of the town.

⁷⁷ This is the first mention of Valleran Le Conte, the earliest French actor–manager about whom we have a significant amount of information. I use the more usual spelling of his name in my translation.

⁷⁸ Howarth, *French Theatre*, pp. 69–70.

⁷⁹ The word is *insigne*, a difficult translation, since it intensifies both positively and negatively. So, when used to modify a word like *fripon* or *voleur* (scoundrel or thief) it is definitely negative. *Comédiant* (actor) is not necessarily a positive term, so the translation could be “an infamous actor.”

the soul and the leader of it, along with another who was furnished with a very beautiful creature for a wife who, contrary to all the ordinary rules of this profession, was decent in her manners and her conversation, and someone who was ignorant of it, would not have believed that she had made this her trade. Several young men of the city of Bordeaux fell in love with her as much for her sweet and decent conversation as for her beauty, and they sought to enjoy her, wooing her with words as much as with gifts; but she would never consent or agree. She never played a farce character, but only acted in tragedies or tragicomedies, which was suitable to the feminine sex. That is why the rumor ran through Bordeaux that she was the daughter of a good family in Paris, that is, of a lawyer, and that she had been dishonored by the one she had married, who being of a debauched nature had wanted to exercise this vocation in order to travel the country and see the world without it costing him anything, he said, even though he was of good enough birth and the child of decent country people in Burgundy, and that she found herself engaged, without having wanted it and against her will, to practice the same trade as her husband. She played her roles marvelously, and nothing but birth was lacking in her queens and princesses; for from her appearance, her gestures, her speech, you would have taken her for royal. She was above all charming, when her character was delicate and in search of love. But also because Valleran was so marvelously playing his character, notably when that was a lover, that you would say that he was speaking for himself and not as an actor, sometimes sighing and sometimes casting amorous glances that seemed without pretense. Those who frequented the actors always said that this came from the real love that he felt for this woman, and this was true, as he confessed to several others and among them me. But it was also true that off the stage she never gave the least sign of love, the least notion that she had any affection for Valleran, although she esteemed him as an actor. This woman, during the visits that the young men paid to her lodging, took great pleasure in decent and serious conversations; she liked to talk about the science of history, and she freely and frankly reproached those who spoke licentiously in the language of carnival, telling them that off the stage she was not an actress. She created such a good opinion of herself that she was always welcome in the most respectable houses in Bordeaux, among the feminine sex. We heard in Bordeaux after her departure that her husband had died in Dauphiné, others said in Avignon, and that she had retired to Paris and was living there with her parents very decently and honorably.⁸⁰

The author's assumptions are unmistakable: in general actresses are not respectable, and young girls from good families – bourgeois and better – do not go on the stage. Being “dishonest,” actresses are available and men can visit them, even at home, ply them with gifts, speak indecencies in their presence. Even this well-behaved actress is unable to prevent these efforts at seduction, and the author does not suggest that she refuses the gifts. A more complex assumption, which this author partially

⁸⁰ Gaufreteau, *Chronique*, vol. I, pp. 306–8.

challenges, is that when an actress or actor convincingly portrays an emotion on stage, the reason is that he or she feels the emotion in life. In this case, Valleran supposedly does feel it, does actually love the woman, while the woman – who is carefully observed for signs – does not return his love. The acceptance of the actress by respectable townswomen is taken as a certain sign that she is worthy of their acquaintance.

Of all the things Gaufreteau writes about this nameless woman, one of the most interesting is that she refused to play farce – interesting because Gaufreteau would not have made the point unless women, in 1592, normally did. And if she did not play farce, but did play tragedy and tragicomedy, then what roles might she have played? What plays were available in 1592 to Valleran Le Conte and his troupe? According to Jacques Scherer, “the period 1548–1629 is extremely poor in dramatic works.”⁸¹ It is certainly the case that very few performances of specific titles are noted in the historical record, but scattered references to what the itinerant professional actors performed do exist, and by 1592 – and especially by 1598, when professional troupes began to play in Paris – a number of plays had been published.

A small troupe – “five or six players of tragedies and musical instruments” – established itself in the small town of Saint-Maixent near Poitiers from May 7 to May 24 in 1580. It included two young women.⁸² For that year we have no information about the troupe’s repertory, but in the following year what is described as “some scholars, players of tragedies, comedies, and farces,” very possibly the same troupe, arrived on July 19, stayed for five days, and played *Vénus et Adonis*, *Polidore*, *Épolisme et Carite*, and a two-day version of *Rolland le furieux*.⁸³ Various versions of most of these stories were available in dramatic form by 1581, and what they potentially share is their source in epic and romance.⁸⁴ The

⁸¹ “Le Théâtre phénix,” in Jacqueline de Jomaron, ed., *Le Théâtre en France: Du moyen âge à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992), p. 108.

⁸² Lanson, “Études,” p. 206, citing the *Journal de Michel Leriche*.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 207. The word *écoliers* might seem to the modern reader to indicate that this was not a troupe of professional actors but of schoolboys. However, the troupe was itinerant and carefully distinguished from local children who frequently performed. It had a substantial repertory and held the stage for five days. If it was the same as the one that had performed the previous year, it would have included women, which a troupe of schoolboys would not have done. Perhaps the best interpretation is that this was a troupe of young people who represented themselves as “scholars” because they were performing, and perhaps adapting, romance material from Virgil, Apuleius, Ovid, and Ariosto. *Écoliers* in this reading would mean university students or others who knew Latin, a standard definition for *écolier* before the seventeenth century.

⁸⁴ *Vénus et Adonis* could have been the *Adonis* of Gabriel Le Breton that first appeared in 1579. It was very popular and was being reprinted well into the seventeenth century. Le Breton also wrote a *Carite*, which does not seem to have survived, based on Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden*

most interesting of the plays is the *Rolland le furieux*, which had a later counterpoint at the Hôtel de Bourgogne when two acting troupes that rented the theatre were obliged by the owners, the Confrérie de la Passion, to play on Sundays a serial romance that was already underway.⁸⁵ Although this evidence is hardly overwhelming, it does suggest that scholars of French drama may have largely overlooked a popular kind of late sixteenth-century theatrical entertainment. H. C. Lancaster describes the only surviving text, the *Tragédie françoise des Amours d'Angélique et de Medor avec les furies de Rolland, et la mort de Sacripan, le Roy de Sircacye: et de plusieurs beaux effets contenuë en la dite Tragedie, tirée de l'Arioste* (Troyes: Noël Landereau, s.d.):

The play is composed of three episodes loosely joined together. The first is the meeting of the hero and heroine, followed by her healing him and departure with him for her kingdom. They do not reappear after the second act. The second is that of Roland, who discovers that Angélique loves his rival, loses his mind, and rushes off to tear up a village. The third is devoted to Sacripan, who expresses his love for Angélique in a monologue at the end of the first act. He reappears only in the last act, when he kills himself after learning of the heroine's departure with Médor.⁸⁶

This play is very short, has only seven characters (easily played by six or even fewer actors), and only one female role. It has the appearance and style of an acting version made for a small company, and even includes a frontispiece showing the *entrepailleurs*, or stage characters. Although it would hardly have taken two days to perform, it does give a general idea of how a serial romance might have worked.

Most or all of the plays performed at Saint-Maixent, whatever their form and whoever their author or authors, had leading female roles, depending, of course, on what story *Polidore* told and what part of the *Orlando furioso* was enacted. If the 1581 troupe was the same as the 1580 troupe, the two young women would have had plenty to occupy them. Venus is a role no actress could resist; Carite offers an extensive mad scene, an occasion to blind the villain who has killed her beloved husband,

Ass. *Polidore* might have been Lazare de Baïf's translation of Euripides' *Hecuba*, which opens with a long monologue by the ghost of Polydorus and is concerned with his mother's revenge for his death, but *Hecuba*, printed in 1537, would have been hard to find and does not seem to mesh with the others. Perhaps Le Breton or someone else also used the *Aeneid* as the source of a new play about the death of Polydorus.

⁸⁵ See Deierkauf-Holsboer, "Hardy," 386.

⁸⁶ H. C. Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century. Part I. The Pre-classical Period, 1610–1634* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1929), vol. I, pp. 86–7.

and a terrific suicide. Angélique, who cures the wounded Médor, then falls in love with him and marries him, is a great part, assuming that the preliminaries to the madness of Roland were enacted on the stage. And yes, all of these roles could have been played by men, but there seems no reason for it as late as 1581.

In the same year that Valleran and the nameless actress played tragedies, tragicomedies, and farces in Bordeaux, they also played in Rouen, Strasbourg, and Metz the plays of Étienne Jodelle.⁸⁷ His collected plays – *Cléopâtre captive*, *Didon se sacrifiant*, and *Eugène* – had been published in 1574, and several performances by amateurs are recorded, especially of *Cléopâtre*. When it was first performed at the collège de Boncourt in Paris in 1553, with king Henri II in the audience, Jodelle himself played the Egyptian queen, and his friends, including Rémy Belleau, played other major characters, but we might suppose that forty years later it was the woman that had so impressed Bordeaux who assumed the role. Dido is also a magnificent leading role, one selected by the Italian actress Flaminia when she competed for audience and applause in Mantua in 1567.

The next important information about the repertory played by an itinerant troupe is from 1594. In that year Adrien Talmy applied to the town council of Arras for permission to perform. His petition is worth including in full.

Adrien Talmy, a player of histories, reappears humbly, saying that, Wednesday last he presented his humble supplications to your lordships, to be authorized to be able to play in your city of Arras; to which he was answered that he had to appear and declare what histories; which the said supplicant has not wanted to fail to do.

First, *Les Juives*, otherwise called *Captivité de Sedicie sous Nabucodonosor*, as it is told by Robert Garnier in his tragedies; together with *La Troade*, *Les Amours de Phedre à Hipolite*, as is contained in the said Garnier; together with *Le Ravissement de Philomène fait par Teri*, the tragedy of *Médée* taken from the stories of Ovid, the tragedy of *Philanire dame du Piedmont*, a morality of *Les Corps humain qui laisse son âme*, *la Taverne de Volupté endormie et Peché retiré par Discipline et Sapience*, a history truly christian and catholic, a comic morality of *La Calamité du pauvre peuple*; a pastoral of *Les Amours d'Athlette et de Menalque*, taken from the works of Juliette; another pastoral called *Le Grand bon temps*. All to the honor of God, of the holy catholic, apostolic and roman church and the edification of the people, as is declared by the certificate here attached.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Raymond Lebègue, "Le Répertoire d'une troupe française à la fin du XVI^e siècle," *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 1 (1948), 11–12.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 15–16.

The councilors agreed on February 11 to permit Talmy and his troupe to play for a week and to charge 6 *deniers*. Given the language of his appeal, Talmy seems to have been eager to impress on the officials that his repertory included nothing subversive of Roman Catholic doctrine. In August of 1599 this same troupe was given permission to perform at Tournai the tragedies of Garnier and Roland Brisset, “that contain nothing to offend good morals or the Catholic religion.”

Garnier’s tragedies were available by 1594 in numerous editions; the first collective edition was published in 1580, and from 1592 to 1620 at least thirty more appeared.⁸⁹ There is no doubt, then, that Garnier’s works were popular, although Talmy’s repertory suggests that the Roman plays – *Porcie*, *Cornélie*, and *Marc Antoine* – may not have been to the taste of the provincial theatre audience. Two of the Garnier tragedies played by Talmy and his troupe have much larger casts than any of the plays done in Saint-Maixent, and they appear to require many more actresses. *Les Juives* has two major female characters, Amital, mother of Sédécie, and the Reine, wife of Nabucodonosor, but it also has a group character – Les Reines, wives of Sédécie – plus a Gouvernante and a Chorus of Jewish Women. *La Troade*, borrowed from Seneca’s *Troade* with reference as well to Euripides’ *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, has five female characters – Hecuba, Cassandre, Andromache, Helen, and Polyxene – and a Chorus of Trojan Women that participates in the action. *Hipolite* is relatively small, with only two female characters and a Chorus of Athenian Women. The other plays on Talmy’s list include a *Médée* that may be Jean de La Péruse’s adaptation of Seneca’s *Medea*, first published in 1553, reprinted in 1573 and 1579. It also has two female characters and a Chorus of Women. *Philanire* was written by Claude Roillet (often Rouillet), first in Latin, then in French for a performance by a *basoche*. The French version was published in 1563 and reprinted in 1577.⁹⁰ Unlike most plays of the period, it was based on a recent event in Piedmont. Philanira is the only important female character, and one that offers an actress the opportunity to represent the extremes of emotion. However, the cast also includes two female servants.

Le Ravissement de Philomène [Philomèle?] fait par Térée remains unidentified, but the story, told by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, was well known

⁸⁹ Lazard, *Le Théâtre en France*, p. 105.

⁹⁰ See Daniela Mauri, “Introduction to Philanire,” in *La Tragédie à l’époque d’Henri II et de Charles IX*, ed. Enea Balmas and Michel Dassonville (Florence: Olschki, and Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), vol. II, pp. 127–41.

and includes two major female characters, the title character and her sister, Progne, the principal role. Of the moralities and pastorals included by Talmy, only one – *Athlette pastourelle* – can be identified with certainty. Written by Nicolas de Montreux, it was published with his *Bergeries de Julliette* in 1585 and often reprinted. It features a shepherdess and a sorceress who both love the same man. As to the plays of Roland Brisset, approved at Tournai in 1599, his *Premier livre de théâtre tragique* was published in Tours in 1589 and included translations of Seneca's *Hercules furens*, *Thyestes*, *Agamemnon*, and *Octavia*, with George Buchanan's *Baptistes*.⁹¹ These plays have important female characters, with the exception of *Thyestes*, where the only female role is the fury Megaera, who appears in the first scene. With the exception of *Octavia*, the titles are masculine, unlike Garnier's *Juives* and *Troades*, or the *Philomène*, *Médée*, and *Philanire* of Talmy's list.

In England at the same period, with tragedy flourishing and female characters played by boys and adolescents whose voices had not yet changed, play titles – with notable exceptions – tended to stress male characters. Shakespeare entitled his tragedies *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens*; women are included only with their male partners: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*. French tragedy, again with some notable exceptions, tends to feature women, perhaps partly because women were available to play the roles.

Very little has been written about the theatrical values of sixteenth-century French tragedy, perhaps because until fairly recently it was assumed that many or most of them had not been performed and were not performable, but had been written only to be read or perhaps recited in the manner of Seneca. A typical assessment, written as late as 1981, is that Garnier's *Les Juives* and Montchrestien's *La Reine d'Escoffe* or *L'Escossoise*,

were written according to the taste of the time and contain commentaries of the chorus, long speeches, and little action. The modern reader [and notice "reader," not "spectator"], when approaching these works, should forget what tragedy in the 17th century would become, and remember that 16th-century tragedy was a "branch of poetry closely allied with epic traditions," and with great emphasis on rhetoric and didacticism.⁹²

⁹¹ Bourassa, "Répertoire."

⁹² Nicole Aronson, Review of *Four Renaissance Plays*, trans. and ed. Arthur P. Stabler, *The Modern Language Journal* 65 (Spring 1981), 95–6.

This is not necessarily wrong as a description, but it neglects the oral traditions of both epic poetry and Renaissance rhetoric. Ideally, scholars with the necessary imaginations – and perhaps in conjunction with theatre directors and designers similarly equipped – would take on some of these plays and try to figure out, without the assumptions of classicism or realism, how they might have worked theatrically in their own time – because they were indeed produced, *L'Écossaise* on several occasions that we know of. It was even the subject of a complaint filed by the English ambassador, who asked that further productions be banned.⁹³

Many of these early tragedies could not, however, have been produced by small itinerant troupes as written. A single actor can play multiple characters, as Greek actors did, but the choruses offer a greater challenge. However, Pierre Troterel wrote in 1615 that he had seen “more than a thousand Tragedies performed in various places and had never seen these choruses declaimed.”⁹⁴ His assertion is extravagant – a thousand? really? – and not entirely credible, since in many instances the chorus is integrated into the action and merely cutting it would leave enormous gaps in the story. A better solution in such a case might have been to assign one actor or actress to be The Chorus, à la Shakespeare.

Unlike theatre scholars, who have regarded Renaissance tragedy as a literary artifact, musicologists and music historians have been much concerned in the past decade or so with the performance of Renaissance opera, perhaps because early operas, unlike early tragedies, have been widely produced as part of the revival of interest in early music.⁹⁵ A useful example for theatre studies is the scholarly dialogue about the lament, and especially about Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna*, the only surviving music from his *Arianna*, written for a wedding celebration in Mantua in 1608. This lament was actually sung by an actress of the *commedia dell'arte*, Virginia Ramponi Andreini, wife of the leader of the troupe known as the Fedeli and the daughter-in-law of the famous Isabella Andreini. In 1999 *Early Music* published a special issue on the subject of the lament with articles on *Arianna* by Tim Carter, Anne MacNeil, and Suzanne G. Cusick, the latter of whom had introduced

⁹³ Frances Yates, “Some New Light on ‘L'Écossaise’ of Antoine de Montchrétien,” *Modern Language Review* 22 (1927), 284–8. These performances were by the troupe of La Vallée.

⁹⁴ Quoted by John Powell, *Music and Theatre in France: 1600–1680* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 172 n.

⁹⁵ And, to be fair, because they have both texts and scores as sources of information in many instances.

the subject with her article in *Early Music* in 1994.⁹⁶ An example of the innovative thinking by these music historians is Tim Carter's argument that the famous lament, the sort of long (84 lines), formal, and overwrought soliloquy that has often been accused by critics of Renaissance drama as being mere rhetoric, was possibly added by the librettist of *Arianna*, Ottavio Rinuccini, after a production meeting on February 26, 1608 when the duchess of Mantua, Eleonora de' Medici, complained that the proposed musical play was "very dry."⁹⁷ The lament's power over its audience was reported by an eye-witness to the first performance: every woman in the audience was moved to tears, even though the text is "a formulaic sequence of *topoi*."⁹⁸ Similar studies of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century tragedies, which feature laments and other important rhetorical structures written for female characters, would at the least initiate an effort to reimagine Renaissance modes of performance by women.⁹⁹

As to other genres – curiously, although various documents recording the passage of itinerant troupes in the last twenty years of the sixteenth century indicate that both comedies¹⁰⁰ and farces were played – none are included among the specific references to repertory. As Madeleine Lazard remarks, "we are very badly informed about the performance of humanist comedies in the second half of the sixteenth century."¹⁰¹ Such plays as Jacques Grévin's *La Trésorière* and *Les Esbahis* were played by male students. Jean-Antoine de Baïf's *Le Brave*, an adaptation from Plautus with three female roles, was seen at court in 1567, but the actors – probably male and female courtiers, as was usual at entertainments

⁹⁶ Tim Carter, "Lamenting Ariadne?" *Early Music* 27 (1999), 395–405; Anne MacNeil, "Weeping at the Water's Edge," *Early Music* 27 (1999), 406–17; Suzanne G. Cusick, "Re-voicing Arianna (And Laments): Two Women Respond," *Early Music* 27 (1999), 437–49. Suzanne G. Cusick, "'There was not one lady who failed to shed a tear.' Arianna's Lament and the Construction of Modern Womanhood," *Early Music* 22 (1994), 21–40. See also Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voice in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and Tim Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁹⁷ Carter, "Lamenting Ariadne?" 395, 401. ⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 396, 402.

⁹⁹ A few good signs have appeared. Two important series of modern editions have been or are being published: the *Textes de la Renaissance* by Honoré Champion and *Théâtre français de la Renaissance* by the Presses Universitaires de France. Also, some recent studies are more slanted toward the theatrical. See, for instance, Benoit Balduc, *Andromède au rocher: Fortunes théâtrales d'une image en France et en Italie* (Florence: Olschki, 2002), and Christian Biet, ed., *Théâtre de la cruauté et récits sanglants en France* (Paris: R. Laffont, 2006).

¹⁰⁰ Since the word *comédie* can, however, simply mean "play," the documents are not easy to interpret.

¹⁰¹ Lazard, "Comédiennes," p. 363.

sponsored by Catherine de' Medici – are not known. The most prolific provider of comedies, Pierre de Larivey, translated six *commedias eruditas* from the Italian that were published in 1579 and three more that were published in 1611.¹⁰² According to Lazard, roles for women are extremely reduced in Larivey and in plays by Jean de La Taille, Odet de Turnèbe, and Jean Godard, where often the girls who provide pretexts for the romantic intrigues are, in the Roman fashion, not visible on the stage.¹⁰³ In any case, no records survive of these plays being performed by professional troupes.

A surviving document that may relate to comedy concerns the actor–playwright Cosme de Gambe, *dit* Pollidore or Châteauvieux, who was authorized to play “histoires, comédies et tragédies” in Saint-Omer in 1593. He is said to have been the author of three comedies, *Alaigre*, *Le Capitaine Bondoufle*, and *Jodès*, published in 1580, all unfortunately lost,¹⁰⁴ but very likely played by his company. As to the turn of the century, H. C. Lancaster does not even include comedy as a category in his discussion of dramatic literature in the reign of Henri IV (1589–1610),¹⁰⁵ nor does comedy feature widely among plays published between 1610 and 1630.¹⁰⁶

AFTER 1600

In the early years of the seventeenth century, as the Hôtel de Bourgogne became available to itinerant troupes that wanted to play a season in Paris, a few French actresses begin to be named. The wife of Valleran Le Conte, Jeanne de Wancourt, although not usually included in lists of early actresses, may certainly have been one. Her

¹⁰² Bourassa, “Répertoire.”

¹⁰³ Lazard, “Comédiennes,” p. 365.

¹⁰⁴ Bourassa, “Répertoire”; Georges Mongrédien and Jean Robert, *Les Comédiens français du XVIIe siècle: Dictionnaire biographique suivi d'un inventaire des troupes, 1590–1710: D'après des documents inédits*, 3rd edn. (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981), p. 58.

¹⁰⁵ Lancaster, *History*, vol. I, pp. 1, 13–32.

¹⁰⁶ See Alan Howe, “La Place de la tragédie dans le répertoire des comédiens français à la fin du XVIe et au début du XVIIe siècle,” *BHR* 56 (1997), 283. Howe argues that tragedy was rarely played by professionals at the turn of the century. His conclusion is based on legal documents, articles of association and leases, that tend to include a phrase like “comédies, tragi-comédies, et autres jeux publics” but do not include the word *tragédie*. Since few comedies were available to be acted, it is reasonable to assume that the word *comédie* in these documents should be taken to mean “play,” a standard definition for the time. And if *comédie* means “play,” then why does it not include “tragedy” as well under its umbrella? Also, these phrases, like many legal phrases, may reflect the vocabulary of the notaries and not that of the actors.

presence in Valleran's troupe as well as in his life is attested to by several contracts: one of January 4, 1610 in which Étienne de Ruffin, a French actor, associates himself with Valleran Le Conte and Jeanne de Wancourt, his wife, to play with *them* (my emphasis) for two years, and another of October 26, 1609 in which Jeanne Crevé is apprenticed to Valleran Le Conte and Jeanne de Wancourt, his wife, "who promise to teach her the science of the theatre."¹⁰⁷ She may even have been the "beautiful creature," praised in Bordeaux, with whom Valleran was in love. According to the Bordelaise chronicler, it was rumored that her "debauched" husband had died; Jeanne de Wancourt was the widow of Michel Fournier.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, she was not the daughter of a Paris lawyer. She came from Péronne, near Amiens. In 1611 some property in which she had an interest – perhaps the family home – was sold by her brother, Foucy de Wancourt, a dealer in ropes, and her sister, the wife of a *porteur au sac*, probably someone who carried coal out of the mines. She was, then, from the artisan or small-merchant class.

Marie Venière and her sister, Colombe, the best known of the early seventeenth-century actresses, were the daughters of a lawyer. The 1602 marriage contract of Marie with Mathieu Lefebvre, sieur de La Porte, indicates that he was a native of La Roche-Bernard in Brittany while she was from Sens in Burgundy, where her father was *procureur au bailliage*.¹⁰⁹ Not only was her sister also on the stage, but so was their brother, Pierre.

In the early years of the century, three young women were apprenticed to the profession. Jeanne Crevé was the daughter of a cobbler; Judith Le Messier's father was a *huissier*, usher or bailiff, in the courts of Beauvais; and Elisabeth Diye was the daughter of "Simon Diye dit Le Capitaine La Valée," an actor.¹¹⁰ Other women who appeared on the stage, or on the trestle stages of the *bateleurs*, but whose antecedents are not known, were Claude Piton, Mlle Dufresne, Rachel Trépeau, Isabelle or Paquette Le Gendre, Françoise Petit, Marguerite Dugoy, and Renée Berenger.¹¹¹ Very little is known of these women, with the exception of Rachel Trépeau.

¹⁰⁷ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, Doc. 45, p. 219 and Doc. 92, p. 233.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* Doc. 5, p. 208. ¹⁰⁹ *Bailliage* is an administrative or judicial district.

¹¹⁰ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, Docs. 92, 94, 96, pp. 233–4.

¹¹¹ Alan Howe, "Couples de comédiens au début du XVIIe siècle: Le cas de Nicolas Gasteau et Rachel Trépeau," *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 33 (1981), 18–19.

She is the first actress named in a legal contract of the seventeenth century. On December 1, 1607 she was included, although apparently not present, in an association of actors led by Valleran and was “represented” by Nicolas Gasteau. This was the first sign of a long affiliation between Trépeau and Gasteau. In 1610 they even held jointly one and one-half shares in another troupe led by Valleran, although other evidence indicates they were never married. Rachel Trépeau signed several documents in the years 1610 to 1612, and in no instance is a permission included, a legal necessity had she been a wife.¹¹² When Gasteau did represent her, both in 1607 and again in 1612, she was required to ratify the contract.

Years later, when Tallemant des Réaux wrote of troupes in the early part of the century that “their women lived in the greatest license in the world,”¹¹³ he may have been reflecting the memory of Rachel Trépeau. Whatever the irregularity of her relationship, however, Rachel Trépeau was a very important actress who for several years appears to have been the only one sharing in the income of the company known as the Comédiens du roi.

The Venière sisters both married actors, but their experiences as actors’ wives were very different. Marie, as we have seen, married Mathieu Lefebvre, sieur de La Porte, and became Mlle La Porte; her sister, Colombe, married Fleury Jacob and became Mlle Montfleury. Mlle La Porte seems to have been the first French actress to achieve a certain fame. The abbé de Marolles remembered seeing her when he was a student in Paris:

I do not know from where [Du Lion] got the funds for all the expenditures he made, but he always had enough for the little dinners he loved so much, for tennis, and for the Theatre, where he sometimes took us, at the time when the famous actress called La Porte still mounted on the stage, and when she was admired by everyone with Valleran.¹¹⁴

The couple was also considered very valuable by their associates; in March 1610 they were granted two and two-thirds shares in the income of the troupe.

¹¹² On February 21, 1608 an act of association was issued for a troupe led by Mathieu Lefebvre which included Marie Venière, his wife. The contract reads: “Marie Venière, wife of the said Lefebvre and by him authorized to do and pass what follows” (Deierkauf-Holsboer, “Hardy,” 392.) This formula is never applied to Rachel Trépeau.

¹¹³ Tallemant des Réaux, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), vol. II, p. 773.

¹¹⁴ Michel de Marolles, *Les mémoires de Michel de Marolles divisez en trois parties* (Paris: Antoine de Sommerville, 1656), vol. I, pp. 31–2.

Marie Venière was a *filles majeure*, a woman over 25 and released from tutelage, when she married La Porte. She may have already been an actress. In any case, it is fair to assume that she was one from that time on, and that they were together both in the provinces and in Paris until they broke their association with Valleran on December 13, 1610. Some scholars believe that only he retired and that she remained on the stage, an assertion largely based on the date 1616 supplied by the abbé de Marolles and somewhat confirmed by another reference of the same year by François Rosset whose hero, observing his beloved rejecting the advances of a rival, says “I don’t think that the wife of La Porte has ever proffered on the stage words that were more agreeable to the spectators.”¹¹⁵ No legal documents support this, however; Marie Venière is not included in any acts of association or leases after December 1610.

La Porte retired to Sens, where his wife’s father had been a *procureur* and prosperous enough to provide his daughter with a dowry of 200 *écus*. A few days before he broke his agreement with Valleran, La Porte was party to another legal matter, an accord between himself and Mathieu de Roger, *bourgeois* of Paris, settling a dispute between them then before the *grand prévôt* of the Hôtel du Roi, the king’s household, “by reason of a brawl in the course of which they were wounded.”¹¹⁶ Eight days later, when the couple resigned from the troupe, they were released from their obligation to pay their share of the 300 *livres* still owed to the Hôtel de Bourgogne in rent. Perhaps La Porte “retired” because he was unable to play as a result of his wound, and his colleagues honored in principal the clause in their agreement that “should one of them fall ill, nonetheless he will have his share.” Neither were the sieur and Mlle La Porte asked to pay what was due for leaving the troupe.¹¹⁷

La Porte appears to have had some valuable connections. In an earlier legal action he described himself as “valet de chambre du prince de Condé,”¹¹⁸ while near the end of his life he claimed to be “un des cent gentils-hommes de la maison du roi,” one of the 100 gentlemen of the

¹¹⁵ Colbert Seares, “Allusions to the Contemporary Theater of 1616 by François Rosset,” *MLN* 40 (December 1925), 481.

¹¹⁶ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, Doc. 112, p. 239. This is a curious document, since only members of the king’s household had the right to take civil actions before the Prévôté de l’Hôtel du Roi. Mathieu Lefebvre later claimed to be one of the *cent gentilhommes de la maison du roi*, but he does not make that claim here.

¹¹⁷ Deierkauf-Holsboer, *L’Hôtel de Bourgogne*, vol. I, p. 189.

¹¹⁸ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, Doc. 88, pp. 231–2.

king's household.¹¹⁹ If true, this was no mean accomplishment for an actor, since the *cent gentilshommes* had important practical and ceremonial functions at court.¹²⁰ Perhaps it was because of this office that he asked for and was granted an order of "rehabilitation" from Louis XIII in 1619, which described him as having lived in Sens "as a good citizen with his wife and family" for ten years.¹²¹

Two other legal documents, although puzzling, offer some insight into the lives of the sieur and damoiselle de La Porte. In December 1622 Marie Venière petitioned for and was granted separation of property from her husband.¹²² Eighteen months later, in June 1624, Mathieu Lefebvre, "desirous of retiring into some private place to live there the rest of his days," gave all his property, real and personal, to his wife in return for an annual pension of 150 *livres*.¹²³ A petition for separation of property was an "exceptional measure" and not entered into lightly. It was an action available only to women and "depended legally on a husband's failure to maintain his wife."¹²⁴ This became an issue when a husband squandered their joint property or his wife's property, over which he had control as the "master" of the community. These petitions could also be motivated by the need to protect the household from creditors; perhaps that was the case here, since Lefebvre later donated all of his property to his wife. Maybe life at court as one of the *cent gentilshommes* made demands on his purse that he was unable to meet.

In any case, he was not to enjoy retirement to a private place for very long. By 1627 Marie Venière was remarried to a lawyer, Jean Rémond, who practiced at the Parlement de Paris, France's highest court. However, her past was not forgotten, whatever the status of her two husbands. Isaac de Laffemas, known as Richelieu's executioner, became a controversial figure in the 1630s. His father, a tailor who claimed to be noble if poor, was in the household of Henri de Navarre and made his way up the ladder

¹¹⁹ Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Hôtel de Bourgogne*, vol. I, p. 201.

¹²⁰ Arnold Van Buchel, a Dutchman visiting Paris in 1585, wrote a description of the procession before the induction of new members of the Ordre du Saint-Esprit on December 31. "The king was preceded by his body guards and his Swiss guards. . . then came the Scots guards. . . Just before the king were the hundred gentlemen of the Chamber, dressed in black silk and carrying gilded maces." Arnold Van Buchel, *Description of Paris*, ed. A. Vidier (Paris: L'Iter Parisienne de N. Chytrée, 1900), p. 152.

¹²¹ Émile Campardon, *Les Comédiens du roi de la troupe française pendant les deux derniers siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1879), pp. 281–2.

¹²² She did not petition for separation of person.

¹²³ Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Hôtel de Bourgogne*, vol. I, pp. 200–2.

¹²⁴ Julie Hardwick, "Seeking Separations: Gender, Marriages, and Household Economics in Early Modern France," *French Historical Studies* 21 (1998), 159.

of success to become *contrôleur-général du commerce* when his patron became Henri IV. The son Isaac studied law and, it would seem, dabbled a bit in the theatre; this became an issue when he was nominated a *maître des requêtes* in 1625 by Louis XIII. *Maître des requêtes* was a prestigious and expensive office, so expensive that the king gave Isaac Laffemas a part of the sum needed to purchase it.¹²⁵ Unfortunately, the other *maîtres* were not pleased and opposed his entry into their midst as “an unworthy person.” He was accused of having been an actor and, worse than that, a *farceur enfarinée*, a white-faced clown.¹²⁶ Laffemas took his seat among the *maîtres* in spite of this charge, but he evidently looked for whoever had made the original accusation and concluded that the guilty party was Marie Venière. He sued her for defamation in 1627.¹²⁷

If Marie Venière had a marriage marred by financial difficulties, her sister Colombe had one that was positively emblematic of the assumptions often made about theatrical liaisons. She was married to Fleury Jacob, who called himself Montfleury, and together they founded a dynasty that flourished on the French stage for generations. Fleury Jacob was, however, a difficult spouse, a “libertine” who was tossed out of the troupe and, “unable to give himself to any profession,” lacked the means to “nourish and provide for his wife.”¹²⁸ She stayed with the troupe, where she “earned her living as best she could, continuing the profession of actress in which he had brought her up.” Fleury then had the professional property of the troupe seized, claiming his share, and applied to the magistrates of Toulouse for an order forbidding the troupe to keep his wife. He was required to pay her 25 *livres* a month in support; when the support was not forthcoming, the actors went to court and the magistrates ordered them to keep Venière with them, on pain of a 500-*livre* fine if they did not. The king then commanded the troupe to come to play at court, but when they left Toulouse Jacob filed a charge of kidnapping on August 12, 1612, and the Parlement of Toulouse issued an act confiscating the troupe’s property and banishing the actors from France in perpetuity. Shortly thereafter Jacob admitted that his charge was untrue and agreed to waive the Parlement’s order; the actors nonetheless appealed to the king,

¹²⁵ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, p. 1124, n. 8. ¹²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 259.

¹²⁷ Tallemant des Réaux, *Les Historiettes*, ed. L. J. N. de Monmerqué and Paulin Paris (Paris: J. Techener, 1856), p. 66 n. According to this note, M. de Monmerqué found the original interrogation of Madame Rémond, dated April 19, 1627, but the note does not reveal the archive in which he found it, and no one else seems to have had the same good fortune.

¹²⁸ Campardon, *Les Comédiens*, p. 279. This document of September 14, 1613 absolves the members of the troupe to which Jacob and Venière had belonged of the charge of having kidnapped her.

who lifted the banishment and restored their “good fame and renown.” Fleury Jacob’s behavior may well have been motivated by jealousy, since by November 1614 Mlle Montfleury, presumably widowed, was the wife of Étienne Ruffin, one of the members of the banished troupe. No references to Colombe Venière are to be found that give any information about her reputation as an actress or about her repertory.

Madeleine Lazard has proposed that Italian actresses in France were more notable in the early years than were French actresses, and we have seen that much more information survives about the Italians in the sixteenth century. In the early seventeenth century, the same appears to be true, especially of Isabella Andreini. She is certainly the best known of all the early European actresses and the most studied, although perhaps more as a poet and playwright than as a performer.¹²⁹ She appeared at the French court in 1603 and at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris in 1604. Her significance is accentuated by Pierre Matthieu, a historian of the time, when he wrote, following Isabella’s unexpected death in childbirth in Lyon in 1604:

The troupe of Isabella Andreini played before the King and Queen. She was an Italian woman well-versed in Poetry, no one was her counterpart in the elegance, quickness, and ease of all sorts of discourse suitable to the stage. If she had lived in Greece at the time when theatre was in fashion, she would have had statues made of her, and received on the stage as many crowns of flowers as the stones with which the bad actors there were pelted. She was seen and heard with great applause.¹³⁰

Isabella was, in many ways, unlike the actresses who had begun to appear or soon would appear in Paris. She was a leader, if not *the* leader, of her troupe known as the Gelosi, the Jealous Ones (“jealous of their virtue, fame, and honor”), a name chosen in imitation of the names given to Italian literary academies. Like other famous women of the Italian professional stage, she asserted her status by writing and publishing plays and poetry, as well as by performing in both written and improvised plays in a range from tragedy to farce.¹³¹ She had excellent connections with the

¹²⁹ See, for instance, among recent studies, MacNeil, *Music and Women*; Henke, *Performance and Literature*, esp. pp. 103–5; Melissa Vickery-Bareford, “Isabella Andreini: Reimagining ‘Woman’ in Early Modern Italy,” PhD thesis, University of Missouri, 2000; Anne MacNeil, “Music and the Life and Work of Isabella Andreini,” PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1994.

¹³⁰ Pierre Matthieu, *Histoire de France et des choses memorables advenues aux Provinces durant sept années de paix du règne* (Paris: J. Métayer, 1609), vol. II, p. 446.

¹³¹ The only play known to have been performed during the Gelosi’s stay in Paris in 1603–4 was “la tragédie du Calife d’Egypte tué en sa tente par Numantia, femme d’Acrisis citoyen de Numance, assiégé par le dit Calife.” This was recorded by “one Octavien, lieutenant of the prévôté de Baugé,” who on January 5, 1604 saw it performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne

Italian princely courts as well as with the king and queen of France. A second edition of her *Rime* was published in Paris in 1603, dedicated to Sebastiano Zametti, her “most illustrious lord and patron” and a close friend of Henri IV. It was in Zametti’s house on the outskirts of Paris that the newly married Marie de’ Medici spent two nights before she moved on to the Louvre.

Isabella also promoted an image of herself as a respectable wife and mother and devout Christian. Five of her seven children joined religious orders, and her epitaph, composed by her husband, reads: “Isabella Andreini of Padua, a woman pre-eminent for her virtue, the ornament of morality, faithful in her marital relations, religious, pious, a friend to the muses” and, finally, “chief of theatrical artists.”¹³² The phrase “faithful in her marital relations” is not typically found on grave markers, and the epitaph’s emphasis on morality and piety clearly indicates Francesco Andreini’s consciousness of how actresses were usually thought of, especially in France.

A certain amount of hypocrisy can be detected in the “self-fashioning” of Isabella, to use Stephen Greenblatt’s idiom.¹³³ While undoubtedly a wife and mother and very likely pious and a model of faith and good works, Isabella was nonetheless an actress who emphasized sexuality and who used her famous mad scene, as well as frequent *travesti* scenes, as opportunities for behavior outside the bounds of respectable femininity.

Robert Henke, analyzing the scenarios published in 1611 by Flaminio Scala, the *innamorato*, or male lover, of the Gelosi, notes that the *innamorate*, the female lovers, perform “pleas, laments, complaints, reproofs, compliments, insults, threats, curses, jokes” and so forth. Character boundaries were fluid, he argues, and the *donna* could be as seductive as the courtesan or as grossly comic as the *serva*.¹³⁴ She could be a princess of Egypt, a sorceress, a nymph, or herself in a multitude of disguises. In Scala’s version of *La Pazzia d’Isabella*, the most famous of Andreini’s roles, the heroine falls mad from unrequited love, “tears her clothes from her body, and as if pushed by some force, goes running up

by the company of Isabelle and Prédolin (*sic*). See Raymond Lebègue, “Les Italiens en 1604 à l’Hôtel de Bourgogne,” *Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 19 (1933), 77, cited from the archives of Maine-et-Loire.

¹³² From Winifred Smith, *Italian Actors of the Renaissance* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1930), p. 53.

¹³³ See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹³⁴ Henke, *Performance and Literature*, pp. 100–1.

the street.”¹³⁵ Her mad dialogue is vulgar but not bawdy – “Jove is going to sneeze and Saturn is going to let go a powerful fart,” and “a whaling ship was seen doing service for the island of the English where the people could not piss” – but her actions are highly transgressive as she becomes a public spectacle: “Franceschina enters shouting, ‘Run! if you want to see the madwoman!’ And she leads them off up the street.”¹³⁶

If the performance of a play with the same title at a Medici wedding in Florence in 1589 also included bodice-ripping and potty language, Giuseppe Pavoni does not report them in his diary. His description evokes a far more artful performance, where Isabella, deceived by Flavio (a character played by Scala),

allowing herself to succumb to rage and fury, went out of herself and, like a madwoman, went running through the city, stopping now this one, now that one, and speaking now in Spanish, now in Greek, now in Italian, and many other languages, but all without reason. And among other things she set to speaking French and also singing certain *canzonettas* in the French manner, giving such delight to the most serene bride that she could hardly express it.¹³⁷ She then mixed in imitations of the languages of all her comedians, like that of Pantalone, of Gratiano, of Zanni, of Pedrolino, of Francatrippa, of Burattino, of Captain Cardone, and of Franceschina so naturally and with so many eccentricities that it is not possible to put into words the valor and virtue of this woman.¹³⁸

Her imitations of the comic masks – the old men, the *zanni*, the *capitano*, and the *serva* – still gave her a wide and fertile field for farce of all kinds, and though she may not have torn off her clothes, she nonetheless transgressed with her free movement through the streets and her aggressive confrontation of passers-by.

Pavoni’s praise of her “valor and virtue,” that is, her intellectual ability and her musical and political skills,¹³⁹ suggests that this performance, given the occasion and the audience, was conducted at a more refined level than the performance assumed by Scala’s scenario. The same may have been true of her court performances in France. A curious treatise, *La Première Atteinte contre ceux qui accusent les comedies par une demoiselle françois*, was published in Paris in 1603. Written by M. D. B., Marie de

¹³⁵ Flaminio Scala, *Scenarios of the Commedia dell’Arte: Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative*, trans. Henry F. Salerno (New York University Press, 1967), p. 288.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 290.

¹³⁷ The bride was the princess Christine of Lorraine, favorite granddaughter of Catherine de’ Medici, who had brought her up at the French court.

¹³⁸ MacNeil, *Music and Women*, p. 49. MacNeil’s translation.

¹³⁹ See *ibid.* p. 51, for a useful discussion of *virtù* and *valore*.

Beaulieu,¹⁴⁰ it defends the theatre by praising the Gelosi. “I need not search for shades & sepulchers,” writes Mlle Beaulieu, in her highly embellished style, to find examples of admirable actors,

since we have today in our France, in the heart of the city, the most august city of Europe, the bodies, the intelligence, & the life of all the most rare & worthy Actors of the world, in that troupe of Parnassus, nurslings of the Muses, Eagles of Jupiter, true children of Apollo, divine race, interpreters of the God, who have gratified Paris with their presence.¹⁴¹

As to Isabella, she is “that celestial flower Isabella,” and,

that rare Isabella, honor of her sex, regret of centuries past, glory of the present, hope of the future, ornament of the earth, Marvel of Heaven, miracle of nature, sacred Temple: who opening her rosy lips shows us the images of her soul, the sweet prison of ours, the connections of our minds, which she inspires with her own desires. But what are her desires? to introduce into our souls by means of our ears precepts of learning and virtue.¹⁴²

This differs from the many other eulogies and tributes that praise Isabella: it perceives her virtue to be in her power as a performer, in her ability to connect her soul and the souls of her hearers through the spoken word.

Yet, in spite of this, in spite of her virtuous reputation, in spite of the many poems in her honor written during her stay in France and the medal with her likeness struck to commemorate her death, I question whether Isabella served as an immediate model for French actresses in the early years of the century. She performed in Italian and largely at court, appearing in Paris only briefly at the beginning of 1604.¹⁴³ I suspect that most of the entertainments given for the public – and even for the court, where Henri IV took great pleasure in both beautiful women and bawdry – were the sorts of improvised pieces, heavy on farce, published by Scala seven years later. What set Isabella apart, her learning, her skill at

¹⁴⁰ Although usually referred to as simply “Mlle de Beaulieu” or “Beau-lieu,” a sonnet dedicated to her by Isabella Andreini in her second book of *Rime* uses the Christian name. Sonnet 52, “A Madamoisella Maria de Beaulieu,” *Rime* (Milan: G. Bordone and P. Locarni, 1605).

¹⁴¹ Mlle Marie de Beaulieu, *La Première Atteinte contre ceux qui accusent les comedies par une demoiselle françois* (Paris: Jean Richer, 1603), p. 16r.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 18r–21v.

¹⁴³ Although the “tragédie du Calife” was apparently performed on January 5, 1604 (see above, n. 108), a lease of the Hôtel de Bourgogne to Thomas Poirier *dit* La Valée and his companions was issued on February 7, 1604 (Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, p. 217). Perhaps the Gelosi returned to court before they left Paris sometime after April 13, 1604, the date on which Henri IV gave them permission to do so.

improvisation, her musical talents, her success as a poet, were not qualities imitated by French actresses.

Virginia Andreini, the wife of Isabella's son Gianbattista and the prima donna of the troupe known as the Fedeli, the Faithful, has been far less celebrated outside Italy than her mother-in-law, although she performed in France for more than two years, from August 1613 through July 1614, from January 1621 to February 1622, and from December 1622 to spring 1623. Although Isabella was said to have been "an excellent musician who 'sang well and played some instruments admirably,'" ¹⁴⁴ she was not famous as a singer; Virginia was. Perhaps she is best known for having stepped into the title role a week before the debut performance in Mantua of Monteverdi's *Arianna*, learning it in six days, and performing it to universal admiration. She also served as an agent for herself and her husband, negotiating with the Mantuan powers who were trying to organize a company for France that would satisfy the particular tastes of the queen regent, Marie de' Medici.

The actors that arrived in Lyon in August 1613 were referred to as the troupe of Arlequin and Florinde, that is, of Tristano Martinelli and Virginia Andreini, the two performers Marie de' Medici insisted on having. From Lyon they traveled to Paris to play at the Louvre and then followed the court to Fontainebleau, where they stayed until November. On November 23 they opened at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the lease arranged for them, according to François de Malherbe, by the queen. ¹⁴⁵ They remained until July 1614.

The troupe also included Virginia Andreini's husband, Gianbattista, whose play *Li Duo Leli simili* was performed at the *salle des gardes* of the Louvre in September 1613. This play is the only one of his works that is relatively typical of the *commedia dell'arte* and suited to the talents of Martinelli. Seven years later, when the troupe returned for a second stay, Andreini had a very different set of plays on offer, now designed to feature his wife, Virginia.

Although nothing confirms performances of Andreini's plays in Paris, six of them were published there: *La Campanazza* in 1621 ¹⁴⁶ and *La Centaura*, *La Ferinda*, *La Sultana*, *Amor nello specchio*, and *Li duo Leli*

¹⁴⁴ Henry Prunières, *L'Opéra italien en France avant Lulli* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1975), citing Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.

¹⁴⁵ These dates from François de Malherbe, "Lettres à Peiresc," in *Œuvres*, ed. Ludovic Lalanne (Paris: Hachette, 1862), vol. III, pp. 328–9, 336.

¹⁴⁶ Paris: S. P., 1621.

simili in 1622.¹⁴⁷ Also available were *La Florinda*, *La Turca*, *Lo Schiavetto*, *La Venetiana*, and *Lelio Bandito*. The titles tell the tale. Virginia Andreini specialized in exotic heroines: the queen of Scotland, a Sultana, a Turkish slave, even a female centaur.¹⁴⁸ The plays also offer many opportunities to display a fine singing voice.

Although there is no specific evidence of her influence, Florinda offered a model of a singing actress to the Paris stage, and the impression she made may have contributed to the mania for pastoral. Pastorals were filled with music: songs, complaints or laments, *pays* or contests, dialogues, and choruses. A typical French pastoral of the first few decades of the seventeenth century might include, as does *Les Amantes* (1613),

a chain of lovers (A loves B, who loves C, who loves D, who loves A), three other shepherds with other love affairs, a *miles gloriosus* and his comic servant, a prologue spoken by Amour, lovers' debates about their sweethearts, echo scenes, an abduction, use of magic, discovery of a long-lost brother, and many marriages to end the play.¹⁴⁹

Pastorals often put women at center stage; in this one Florise is a shepherdess with many skills – she knows, for instance, how to determine the sex of a lamb by tying off the ram's right testicle if a female is wanted, the left if a male. Though this may not be exactly what the theorists meant by teaching while pleasing, it does define Florise as a powerful character, one who plans to save her lover by marrying a man she detests and then committing suicide.¹⁵⁰

Virginia Andreini, like her mother-in-law, wrote poetry, although not as famously, and was also an ideal wife, even though she had only one surviving child instead of nine. One verse addressed to her celebrated her as a “flower of virtue,” another as a legendary beauty.¹⁵¹ Unfortunately, her husband was not in the mold of his father, who devoted his remaining life after the death of his wife to the glorification of her memory. Gianbattista Andreini, for all his pious published works, was publicly unfaithful, and the scandal of the *ménage à trois* he maintained with himself, Virginia Andreini, and Virginia Rotari dite Lidia by 1620 was spread widely throughout the world of the *comici* and their royal and noble patrons by Piermaria Cecchini, Andreini's rival and enemy.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ All titles Paris: Della Vigna, 1622 except *Li Duo Leli simili*, Paris: S. P. 1622.

¹⁴⁸ Visible in the frontispiece to the 1622 Paris edition.

¹⁴⁹ Lancaster, *History*, pt. I, vol. I, p. 129. ¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Luigi Rasi, *I comici italiani* (Florence: Fratelli Bocca, 1897–1905), vol. I, pp. 145, 148.

¹⁵² See Michael Zampelli, “Incarnating the Word: Giovanni Battista Andreini, Religious Antitheatricalism, and the Redemption of a Profession,” Dissertation, Tufts University, 1998,

It seems almost impossible that the French theatre world (and the French theatre audience) remained in the dark, especially after Andreini's plays began to feature both Florinda and Lidia, promoted from *serva* to *donna*.

This behavior may also have contributed to that most frequently quoted assessment of the actresses in the early years of the seventeenth century made by Tallemant des Réaux in his *historiette* "Mondory ou l'histoire des principaux comédiens françois," written after mid-century. According to Tallemant (and possibly to Mondory), in the time of Valleran "there were two troupes in Paris; they were almost all clever thieves, and their wives lived in the greatest license in the world; they were wives in common, and even of the actors in the other troupe that they were not a part of."¹⁵³

The Andreini *ménage*, Rachel Trépeau, the marital trials of Colombe Venière – these are the stories that survive, whether or not they are representative. They provide the evidence that theatrical men and women in the early years of the seventeenth century led lives that were far from the French social ideal of a marriage as a small, stable economic community existing within fixed class boundaries. Free of the constraints imposed by extended families, neighborhoods, parishes, and guilds, actors and actresses changed their names, wandered from place to place, associated across class lines, and followed an infamous profession.

François L'Hermite, who called himself Tristan, wrote a "letter," a literary letter, that is, to "A Beautiful Actress in the year 1620. Expressions of pity for her condition." This was long before he himself had begun to write plays. He was from the minor provincial nobility, but had grown up in the court, beginning as a page to an illegitimate son of Henri IV. His attitude toward the theatre reflects not the Protestant rectitude of someone like the diarist L'Estoile but the more sophisticated appraisal of a man who was part of the libertine coterie that formed around the king's brother, Gaston d'Orléans, and who fictionalized his own youth in a novel entitled *Le Page disgracié* (1643). This is what Tristan wrote:

All France cannot tire of admiring you, but, for me, I can do nothing but feel sorry for you and secretly mix my tears with the applause that you ordinarily expect from people. The esteem that I feel for your merit increases the pity I feel for your condition, which appears grand but is actually disgraced. I wish that you were really what you only represent, and that you might never suffer the loss of

pp. 85–105. See also Claudia Burattelli, Domenica Landolfi, and Anna Zinanni, eds., *Comici dell'arte: Corrispondenze* (Florence: Casa editrice Le Lettere, 1993).

¹⁵³ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, p. 773.

the advantageous titles you sometimes assume. I find that a crown sits so well on your head and that you show such grace in wielding a scepter that you should always bear one. But you have received too many advantages from Nature to be favored by Fortune. Virtue's stepmother hardly ever bestows her bounty on worthy people like you. It seems that she is afraid to mix her benefits which are alien with those that are natural to you, for fear that in seeing them together, one will not discern too well those treasures that are temporal and those that are not under her power. And I know very well that in denying you the favors of which you are worthy, she sends you misfortunes you do not deserve. At least, if you are finally able to inspire love, you who give so much of it to everyone, remember to take care of the choice you make of a lover and do not bind yourself to one who is brutal or stupid, for fear that you will bear for a long time the pain of your bad choice and that you will repent too late for having put a thing so precious in the hands of a person who does not know its worth.¹⁵⁴

Here we have another mysterious and nameless actress, this one apparently young and with her reputation still intact. Tristan exhibits none of the careless derision so often the response to women who perform, but his fundamental assumption is perfectly clear. The actress is damaged goods. She may be beautiful and talented, she may have all the gifts of nature, but fortune will not smile on her. She will not make an affluent marriage, and the best she can hope for is that the inevitable lover will be neither a brute nor an idiot. Although this assumption continues to mark public attitudes toward women on the stage, in the 1630s the stage begins to defend itself.

¹⁵⁴ François Tristan L'Hermite, *Lettres meslées*, ed. Catherine Grisé (Geneva: Droz, 1972), pp. 63–4.

“Those diverting little ways”: 1630–1640

In the second quarter of the seventeenth century, the commercial theatre became firmly established in Paris and underwent several profound transformations, among them an explosion in the number of playwrights and plays written,¹ a certain regularization of the profession of actor, and an increase in patronage – and efforts at control – by the monarchy in the person of the king’s first minister, the cardinal de Richelieu.² According to Paul Pellisson, the first historian of the Académie Française:

the passion that the Cardinal had for Dramatic Poetry raised it. . . to the highest point it had ever reached among the French. All those who thought they had some talent did not fail to work for the Theatre: that was the way to approach the Great and to be favored by the first minister. . . Not only did he attend with pleasure all the new plays, but he was also happy to confer with the Poets, to see their projects in their early stages, and even to furnish them with subjects himself.³

Beyond the personal pleasure he took in attending a play, Richelieu’s mission was to “rehabilitate” the theatre as part of his cultural policy; according to Georges Couton, the king gave him a free hand.⁴ Under his aegis Pierre Corneille, Jean Mairet, Jean de Rotrou, Pierre Du Ryer, and many other playwrights furnished the two established theatres with an astonishing number of new tragedies and comedies, increasingly consistent with the ideas of the cardinal and the taste of an audience newly attracted to the drama.

¹ In the second decade of the seventeenth century, 82 plays were published; in the following decade, 203. See Georges Forestier, *Esthétique de l’identité dans le théâtre français, 1550–1680: Le Déguisement et ses avatars* (Geneva: Droz, 1988), p. 27.

² Jacqueline de Jomaron, “La Raison d’état,” in Jomaron, ed., *Le Théâtre en France: Du moyen âge à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992), vol. I, p. 163.

³ Paul Pellisson, *Histoire de l’Académie Française*, 3rd edn. (Paris: J. B. Coignard, 1743), vol. I, p. 104.

⁴ *Richelieu et le théâtre* (Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1986).

Richelieu was named *ministre d'état* by Louis XIII in 1629, the same year that the Comédiens du roi led by Robert Guérin petitioned the king to break the monopoly that the Confrérie de la Passion exercised over the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Although the effort was not completely successful, the troupe did receive royal authorization to become the sole lessees of the Hôtel, with a lease to be renewed every three years, thus becoming the first established troupe in Paris. These Comédiens du roi, who became known as the Troupe Royale and the Grands Comédiens, remained favored during the reign of Louis XIII, eventually receiving a subvention of 12,000 *livres* a year.⁵

A rival troupe, led by Charles Le Noir and Guillaume Des Gilberts *dit* Mondory or Montdory,⁶ began efforts to establish itself in Paris in 1630. After leasing several tennis courts, the actors finally settled in 1634 into the jeu de paume du Marais on the rue Vieille-du-Temple, receiving a subvention of 6,000 *livres* a year and the right to call itself the Troupe du roi.⁷ It was also known as the Petits Comédiens. It owed its original success to its 1629–30 production of *Mélite*,⁸ a comedy of manners by a young lawyer and playwright from Rouen named Pierre Corneille.

Corneille continued to write for this troupe. After 1630 and before 1634, as it moved from tennis court to tennis court, he offered it a tragicomedy, *Clitandre*, and four more comedies of manners: *La Veuve* (1632), *La Galerie du Palais* (1632), *La Suivante* (1632–3), and *La Place Royale* (1633–4).⁹ All featured important roles for the two female members of the company. Although women certainly had been important to the success of the pastorals and the romantic tragicomedies that dominated repertory in the 1620s, Corneille's sequence of plays featuring both female characters and the city of Paris introduced a new comedy of society and manners. This new kind of comedy – and comedy was a genre that had been largely overlooked for the first three decades of the seventeenth

⁵ Jomaron, "La Raison," p. 170.

⁶ In the period, the actor's name is more usually spelled "Mondory," so I propose to use that spelling.

⁷ Jomaron, "La Raison," p. 171.

⁸ For a discussion of the dating of the performance of *Mélite* see H. C. Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century. Part I. The Pre-classical Period 1610–1634* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1929), vol. II, pp. 571–6 and Alan Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel à Paris 1600–1649: Documents du Minutier Central des Notaires de Paris*, study by Alan Howe, documents analyzed by Madeleine Jurgens (Paris: Centre Historique des Archives Nationales, 2000), pp. 106–7.

⁹ These dates are not definitive, but reflect the best scholarly judgment of H. C. Lancaster, *History*, pt. I, vol. II, pp. 571–612, and Georges Couton in Pierre Corneille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), vol. I, p. lxxii.

century – enabled the troupe of the Marais to compete with its rivals at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, better known and with greater royal support.

According to H. C. Lancaster, the necessary elements were already present, embedded in existing genres, when Corneille, along with Du Ryer and Claveret, developed the "genuine comedy of manners, very largely free from the obscenity and brutality of farce, the conventional characters of pastoral. . . and the deeds of violence. . . of the tragicomedy."¹⁰ As a result, or so says the *Gazette*, a weekly newsletter that began publication in 1631, "the theatre, since all that could contaminate the most delicate ears has been banished from the stage, is one of the most innocent and agreeable diversions in [His Majesty's] good city of Paris."¹¹ Corneille's plays clearly appealed to what Colette Scherer calls the new "potential public"¹² that must have developed after 1630 in order to support two established theatres playing several times a week each. This "potential public" was, or was reputed to be, more *honnête*, that is, more cultivated and urbane and more upper class, than the audience of previous decades. It also included, or so we hear from Tallemant des Réaux and others, a larger proportion of "honnêtes femmes," respectable and cultured women.¹³

Unlike the aristocratic shepherds of the pastoral, living in their never-never landscape, or the romantic and apparently doomed lovers of the tragicomedy, inhabiting the castles and courts of the mythos, the characters of Corneille's new comedies reside in contemporary Paris.¹⁴ This Paris is iconic, a French city that is also a potential land of Cockaigne, where beautiful and witty young people – struggling with the legal and moral constraints of a society that regards marriage as an economic community and love as a dangerous digression – could go their own capricious ways. Corneille himself attributed the success of *Mélite* to its representation of "the conversation of *honnêtes gens*," in this instance best translated as "polite society."¹⁵ As in most comedies of manners, Corneille's stage does

¹⁰ Lancaster, *History*, pt. I, vol. II, p. 568. ¹¹ *Gazette* of January 6, 1635.

¹² *Comédie et société sous Louis XIII* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1983), p. 31.

¹³ See Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), vol. II, p. 74, and *L'Ouverture des jours gras*, in Édouard Fournier, ed., *Variétés historiques et littéraires: Recueil de pièces volantes rares et curieuses en prose et en vers* (Paris: Jannet, 1855–63), vol. II, p. 252. For a summary of this development, see Wendy Gibson, "Women and the Notion of Propriety in the French Theatre, 1628–1643," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 11 (1975), 1–14.

¹⁴ In *Mélite*, the city is identified as Paris only in the 1644 edition. See Marie-France Wagner, "L'Éblouissement de Paris: Promenades urbaines et urbanité dans les comédies de Corneille," *PFSCL* 25: 48 (1998), 130–44.

¹⁵ Corneille, *Examen of Mélite*, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 6.

not mirror reality, but rather creates a representation of people and circumstances that audience members can relate to imaginatively. The women in the audience were unlikely to have been as beautiful or as clever as the young women who modeled them on the stage, nor were the men in the audience as handsome or well-spoken, but they could fancy themselves to be part of the same charmed and charming circle.

Although Corneille was not the only author providing these new theatres with new plays, his sequence of comedies, all written for the troupe of Mondory, offers a special opportunity to look at how the presence of skillful actresses might have influenced the plays that were written for a troupe. Actors and their allied playwrights, fortunate enough to find themselves in such a situation, become inextricably linked, as were Shakespeare and the King's Men or Molière and his troupe at the Palais Royal. The playwright is in a position to create characters that exhibit the particular qualities of the actors, while the actors can flourish and grow as the playwright asks them to represent ever more complex behaviors and actions. This is very different from type-casting or the later system of *emplois*, where a playwright generalizes character in such a way that anyone more or less suited to a role can play it; this is custom tailoring. For a beginning playwright like Corneille, nothing could have been happier than his long association with a group of experienced professionals who both taught him and learned from him.

In seventeenth-century Paris – as in twenty-first-century Paris and London and New York – playwrights could become theatrically sophisticated through their involvement in the staging of their plays. We know from Samuel Chappuzeau's *Le Théâtre françois* that in 1674 playwrights had the responsibility of casting, "once they knew the strength and talent" of each actor, and that they attended rehearsals, where "they corrected the actor, if he fell into some error, if he did not understand the meaning, if he deviated from the natural in voice or gesture, if he brought more or less heat than appropriate to the emotions asked of him."¹⁶ Presumably, in Corneille's time as well, a playwright was not merely a poet or man of letters who sold a play to an acting troupe and walked away, but someone who formed with the actors an "excellent combination... the body and soul of the play."¹⁷

¹⁶ Samuel Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre françois*, ed. Georges Monval (Paris: Jules Bonnassies, 1875), pp. 71–3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 86.

Among the benefits Corneille found in these circumstances was the opportunity to create a cluster of roles for two young actresses. All but one of the playwright's early comedies include two female roles:¹⁸ a "*première*" role, the "heroine" in terms of her status in the plot as the more romantically sought after, and a "*seconde*" role, a sister, a friend, or a companion, often more interesting and original. The roles have roughly equal stage time.¹⁹ Between 1629 and 1634, these characters were of necessity written for and played by Isabelle (or sometimes Elizabeth)²⁰ Mestivier, Mlle Le Noir, and Marguerite Béguin, Mlle de Villiers.

Characters in Corneille's plays are rarely if ever considered in light of the actors who originated them. In recent years a certain amount of critical writing has been devoted to Corneille's early comedies; most of what attends to character at all concentrates on the male characters, although a few critics focus on the females.²¹ In any event, this is all criticism that treats drama only as a literary genre, and does not address character from a theatrical perspective or from the point of view of performance analysis. Perhaps because they are so rarely produced, these plays do not attract theorists and critics of performance.²² While the literary nature of discussions of Corneille's early work is hardly

¹⁸ Corneille's claim to the innovation of the *suivante*, the third character written for a woman in *La Galerie du palais*, will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁹ This claim is based on tables included in Marc Vuillermoz, ed., *Dictionnaire analytique des œuvres théâtrales françaises du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998).

²⁰ These two names seem to have been indistinguishable in the seventeenth century.

²¹ Amarante was one of the subjects of Claire Carlin's "The Woman as Heavy: Female Villains in the Theatre of Pierre Corneille," *The French Review* 59 (1986), 389–98, and Constant Venesoen wrote on "La Mythification d'Angélique dans *La Place Royale* de Corneille," in *Pierre Corneille: Ambiguïtés*, ed. Michel Bareau (Edmonton, Alta.: Alta Press, 1989), pp. 10–18. The few monographs devoted to Corneille's early comedies also tend to concentrate on the male characters, as, for instance, G. J. Mallinson, *The Comedies of Corneille: Experiments in the Comic* (Manchester University Press, 1984).

²² There have been a few modern productions in France that have garnered some attention. Perhaps the best known was a production of *La Place Royale* at the Théâtre de la Commune in Aubervilliers in 1992 directed by Brigitte Jacques. Another production of the same play, directed by Catherine Delattres, opened in Rouen and toured widely in 2007 and 2008. Christian Rist, with Jean-Marie Villégier, directed *La Place Royale* as an exercise at the École Supérieure d'Art Dramatique in Strasbourg in 1978–9, and *La Veuve* with Le Studio Classique in 1990. That production played at the Théâtre de l'Athénée in Paris, a major venue, and toured throughout the country. Rist's work was the subject of a chapter in Cynthia B. Kerr's *Corneille à l'affiche: Vingt ans de créations théâtrales, 1980–2000*, Biblio 17, No. 123 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2000), pp. 127–40, and an article by Brigitte Prost, "Il était une fois une Veuve... ou du ludisme d'un metteur en scène: Christian Rist," *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 229 (2006), 29–40. Kerr also addressed Jacques's *La Place Royale*, in *Corneille à l'affiche*, pp. 141–54. Although these articles are connected to actual productions, they have little or nothing to say about acting and actors. At least two of Corneille's comedies were also subjected to the experimental productions of Eugène Green's Théâtre de la

unexpected, the plays themselves appear to the theatrical eye to be surprisingly interesting performance texts with sophisticated dramatic structures. To be sure, they include many conventional forms like lyric monologues, laments, tirades, and the occasional stichomythic exchange, and Corneille had not yet learned to write good scenes for more than two characters – a common failing among early-career playwrights. On the other hand, some of those two-character scenes show a remarkable skill for invention, and give actors intricate and revealing actions to play.

“Playing” an action is at the center of what we call “theatrical.” The job of the actor is not, as a thoughtful contemporary actor puts it, “to illustrate what the words are already saying.” Describing his rehearsal process, actor Bill Pullman remembers a time when “I was just learning words. I didn’t have physical presence,” and contemplates how to “trick your mind into the present tense.”²³ For the actor, a written text is a guide to a character’s inner life, process of thought, overall and momentary intentions, as they exist at that moment on the stage. “Someone somewhere,” says Mr. Pullman, defined good dialogue as “either lying or fishing for something.”²⁴ Sometimes it’s the words, more often it’s what’s behind the words.

In the early seventeenth century, actors were less distinguishable by their *emploi* – what we call in English “lines of business” – than they were to become as the century wore on and playwrights became in thrall to the rules of *le classicisme*. In the early years, troupes were small, but plays – those of Alexandre Hardy, for instance – could have huge casts that required actors to play multiple roles, assuring a certain flexibility. After 1630, writing for the small, established troupes in Paris, for a few brief years playwrights freed themselves from the worn-out conventions of the pastoral and the romance-based tragicomedy, but were not yet subject to the rules of character orthodoxy insisted on by adherents of *les convenances* and *la propriété*. During this unique window of opportunity, characters and actions could be constructed for particular actors, something not seen again so clearly until the time of Racine and Molière. Corneille, for instance, seems to have recognized the sorts of thing Mondory was especially good at, or, to argue in reverse, knowing that this actor later suffered a paralytic stroke while tearing a passion to tatters as Herod in

Sapience in the 1990s. For more on this American ex-pat director’s ideas about a declamatory and gestural Baroque performance style, please see below, Chapter 6.

²³ Dany Margolies, “Very, Very Extraordinary: The Fascinating Bill Pullman on the Creative Art of Acting,” *Backstage* (June 3, 2009).

²⁴ “A Conversation with Bill Pullman,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 24, 2009).

Tristan L'Hermite's *Mariane*, we can speculate that such inventions as Éraсте's multiple mad scenes in *Mélite*, the angry diatribes of Alcidon in *La Veuve*, or the furies of Lysandre in *La Galerie du Palais* were written with Mondory in mind. Since Mlle Le Noir and Mlle de Villiers were, with the one brief exception, the only women in the troupe of the Marais as it was constituted until the end of 1634, they of necessity played a range of genres, tragicomedy and pastoral as well as the new comedy. However, the comic roles written for them by Corneille suggest that they were not interchangeable but that, like their male counterpart Mondory, each was better suited to a certain range.

Although we will never know with certainty which actress played which roles, we can advance the likelihood that one of them played all the heroines and the other all the second roles, given that each cluster of roles shares certain characteristics that are not merely generic. "The actor is not interchangeable," as Christian Biet and Christophe Triau write, "and will be always seen, from the outset, as an individual, a silhouette, a voice, a look, perhaps even a personal history endowed with distinctive traits perfectly exterior to his role or his performance."²⁵ Some actors are more protean, more able to "disappear" into the character, while others, no matter how hard they try to disguise themselves – I am thinking of Laurence Olivier with his passion for false noses – are unmistakable. And even a good so-called character actor, who may be less immediately identifiable, still manifests a double presence, what Biet and Triau call a shadow.²⁶ Good casting is as much a matter of perceiving the qualities of the actor's shadow as of the actor's talent. A playwright writing for a stable troupe of known entities has the advantage of being able to tailor roles not only to the special talents of the actors, but to their shadow personae as well.

Sabine Chaouche points out that the *action* of a play, its complex sequence of events great and small, is inextricable from its *actio*, that is, from its nature as something to be performed:

It is thus incumbent on the playwright to construct dialogue from the point of view of its future performance and interpretation. There exists an interdependence and interaction between *action* and *actio* that functions in the creation of the text. During the writing, the author takes care to prepare for the work of the actor just as the actor is careful to take account of all the constituents of the author's text.²⁷

²⁵ *Qu'est-ce que le théâtre?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 443. ²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 466.

²⁷ Sabine Chaouche, *L'Art du comédien: Déclamation et jeu scénique en France à l'âge classique, 1629–1680* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), p. 133.

I propose here to look closely at three characters from the cluster I call “second roles” – Doris in *La Veuve*, Amarante in *La Suivante*, and Phylis in *La Place Royale* – to see what evidence I can find of this interdependence.²⁸ These characters are less burdened by the conventions and vocabulary of the game of love than are the heroines or the male lovers. These young women are more curious; they learn more and they give less away. They are more perceptive about their lovers than the lovers are about them, and they are more aware than the other characters that they are playing a game which, finally, given their legal dependency on parents or brothers, they are likely to lose. My hope is to discover, through close reading, not just generalizations about how *actio* is inherent in the texts, but specifics about what the playwright assumes the actress to be capable of representing, especially at moments when active behaviors, often complex, are required.

In Corneille’s second comedy, *La Veuve*, the second role is Doris, connected to the plot because she is the sister of Philiste, the hero’s best friend. Alcidon, the hero, falls in love with his friend’s mistress,²⁹ the widow Clarice, and schemes to remain in Philiste’s confidence by claiming to be in love with the latter’s sister, Doris. He and his collaborator, Clarice’s old Nurse, assume Doris is a dupe who believes everything he says to her, a young simpleton so crazy about him that she takes everything he claims as an article of faith (ll. 138–40).³⁰ In fact, when we meet the “young dupe” in the next scene, we quickly realize that she is not duped at all. Doris may play dumb, but Doris is not dumb, which may be communicated in part by the actress’s shadow, cleverness being hard to disguise. When her mother says “confess, daughter, Alcidon has your heart. His rare qualities have conquered it,” Doris soon disabuses her. “Madame, it’s not what you think. My brother is Alcidon’s friend, and it

²⁸ I shall not attempt an analysis of *Mélite*, probably written before Corneille formed his alliance with the troupe of Mondory, nor of *La Galerie du Palais*, where the introduction of a third female character adds a complication. Corneille’s comedies also include five “first” or heroine roles: *Mélite*, Clarice in *La Veuve*, Célidée in *La Galerie du Palais*, Daphnis in *La Suivante*, and Angélique in *La Place Royale*. These characters are more romantic, less perceptive, and less active in the plots than are the second characters, thus less suited to the kind of analysis I propose.

²⁹ The game of love in these plays is based on the seventeenth-century’s appropriation of medieval love games, hence the use of *amant*, lover, and *maîtresse*, mistress, to mean two people who have exchanged *vœux*, vows, to be faithful to each other, but within the game. They are not sleeping together, not engaged to be married, frequently not even in love.

³⁰ All references to the plays, cited by line numbers, are to the texts established by Georges Couton in the Pléiade edition of the *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I. I have chosen this edition because Couton has elected to use the texts of the first editions of the plays, which reflect original performances, and not Corneille’s rewritten versions.

is at his express request that I act as if I am Alcidon's mistress. But my heart remains what I want it to be, always free, and ready for a sincere friendship with whomever my mother prescribes for me." "Yes," says the unbelieving mother, "provided Alcidon is the one so prescribed." Doris unexpectedly answers: "Madame, if you could read my mind, you would see the limits of my obedience." She then describes Alcidon's "rare qualities," demonstrating conclusively that she is on to him: "You don't know him, he is two-faced and nothing but a professional liar. . . I can easily untangle all his fictions" (ll. 164-80).

We now know that Doris is playing a double game, and we are alerted to watch the actress carefully when, in Act II, Alcidon tries both to salvage his plan and to wiggle out of any entanglement with her. Although she continues to appear to be the dupe he takes her to be, she answers his first move with an *équivoque* that he does not understand but that the audience does:

ALCIDON Doris, if you could read my thoughts, and see all the impulses of my wounded soul, you would see a fire that is different and much greater than the feeble tribute that my mouth renders to you.
DORIS If you could also penetrate my heart, to see there in what way my passion is engaged, what you take in my speech for ardor would seem no more than cold indifference. Your love and mine are beyond words. The equality of our misery is what consoles me, and of the thousand defects that overwhelm me, what makes me happy is that one of them makes me resemble you.

(ll. 683-7)

The challenge here for the actress is to find a way to acknowledge what the audience understands, while playing another intention with her stage companion. The actress can indicate the pleasure Doris takes in being so much smarter than Alcidon, but then she must notice that she may have revealed more than she meant to, since Alcidon recognizes that something is not quite right. Doris is quick to reassure him, then changes the course of the scene with an astonishing move:

DORIS My dearest hope, leave off this false suspicion. You are wrong to doubt something so obvious. I'll prove how much I love to please you.
I am dying of impatience, waiting for the happy day to show you my love for you. My mother burns with the same hope for me.

(ll. 694-9)

At the mention of the mother's approval, which looks serious, poor Alcidon has to invent an uncle who would have to give his consent before any such happy day could occur. Doris has a very good time with the uncle.

Another role in the same *emploi* is Amarante, the title character of *La Suivante*. The term *suivante* can be somewhat misleading. Corneille first uses it in *La Galerie du Palais*, the play that he wrote between *La Veuve* and *La Suivante*, and claims to have substituted the *suivante* for the *nourrice*, or nurse. In the *Examen* of 1660 he writes: "The Character of the Nurse, which is from the old Comedy, and which the lack of Actresses on our Stage had conserved until then, in order that a man could play it in a mask, here is metamorphosed into that of the Suivante, that a woman plays barefaced."³¹ In terms of function, however, the character has not much changed. Both the traditional *nourrice* and Florice of *La Galerie*, even though the latter is called a *suivante*, are *femmes d'intrigue*.

Amarante in *La Suivante* is a whole different matter. Her title may be *suivante*, but her *emploi* is that of the second female role. She is closer in status to the *demoiselle suivante*, a kind of lady-in-waiting to a titled noblewoman, although the heroine Daphnis and her family – the father a *bonhomme*, or good old fellow – hardly appear to be at that level of society. In *La Galerie du Palais*, the relationship between the young lady and her *suivante* is clearly that of mistress and servant; the mistress uses "tu" and the *suivante* "vous," nor are they engaged in a love competition. In *La Suivante*, Amarante's relationship to Daphnis is not so clear. Daphnis uses "vous" in speaking to her, granting her a certain equality of status, and they compete for *amants*. On the other hand, Daphnis certainly gives Amarante orders, and Amarante is only too conscious of her subservient position.

According to Lancaster, Amarante is "tricky, embittered, and revengeful,"³² a development perhaps of Doris, who predicts that she will become like that if forced to marry against her will. According to Claire Carlin, Amarante is "obsessive," "egotistical," "a monomaniac," and "the villain."³³ Perhaps she seems like a revengeful villain from the conventional point of view that assumes all sympathies are meant to flow to the heroine; Corneille, however, has created a more complex structure, with both a heroine and

³¹ *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 304. Apparently a third actress was available in the troupe when *La Galerie du Palais* was produced, probably c. 1632–3, but I can find no solid evidence of who the third actress might have been. Mondory's wife did not act. The other men in the troupe were Pierre Marcoureaux dit Beaulieu, who married in 1637, André Boyron dit Baron who married in 1641, Nicolas de Vis dit Des Ceilleux who married in 1636 or 1637, and the Bédau brothers, who never married at all. The only other possibility seems to be the wife of François Mestivier, Isabelle Frin, who signed a receipt on behalf of the troupe in 1631. Unfortunately, there is no record that she ever acted. If she did act in *La Galerie du Palais*, we might conclude she was not successful, since none of the following plays requires a third actress.

³² *Ibid.* pt. I, vol. II, p. 606. ³³ Carlin, "The Woman as Heavy," pp. 389, 393.

a *suivante* who display positive and not-so-positive characteristics. In any case, no actress would want to address the task of performing Amarante with Lancaster's and Carlin's labels constricting her choices – nor, I think, should one address the task of reading the play that way.

Amarante means “the flower that never fades.” Corneille's *amants* sometimes worry that they will be stuck for life with a woman whose bloom is gone, but it is her social status and not her fading charms that impede fidelity to Amarante. Théante, her avowed *amant*, wants to break with her at the beginning of the play. He confides: “Whatever powerful attractions Amarante may possess, I find that after all she's only a *suivante*.” And he adds, “I'd never think of her condition, but my love must cede to my ambition” (ll. 9–12). That her attractions are indeed powerful is confirmed by Florame, introduced by Théante in the hopes that Amarante will transfer her affections to him. No dullard, Florame instead joins the hopeful suitors for the rich and beautiful Daphnis, although he finds himself still obsessed by Amarante: “her image follows me, and comes instead of her to stay with me in the night. She enters impudently into my bed, murmurs in my ear, presents me with her mouth” (ll. 143–6). Amarante, in brief, is one of those rare creatures defined in the text of a seventeenth-century comedy as a sexy girl, but Corneille needed a compelling reason for Amarante, who is not rich, to be sought after. Actresses in seventeenth-century France were continually accused of trading on their sexual allure, both on and off stage, but plays rarely stipulate a character's sexuality – and that of the actress playing her – so explicitly.

When we meet Amarante in Act I, scenes iv and v, it is to watch her play the love game with Florame. We have been prepared to see a champion, and she begins aggressively. She would very much like to take Florame in trade for Théante, and she is unexpectedly open about it. “Let Théante go,” she says. “He bears the portrait of Amarante on his heart, and I don't think it can be effaced. Just now, I want to trace it onto your heart, and the difficulty of such a victory will raise my hope of glory” (ll. 194–8). Florame reminds her that Théante is his old friend. Her response: “Friendship dies when true fires are born.” “How could you count on someone so faithless?” he asks. “I would never believe it a faithless act,” she answers, “for you to forget a friend and give yourself to me” (ll. 204–8).

Amarante seems entirely sure of her desirability, but Florame resists her while mouthing the appropriate phrases. “I serve you,” he proclaims, “I live under your power, but I cannot claim what my desire aspires to. You ask for my heart, but yours is given to Théante. . . Allow me to address

my services elsewhere, forced by lack of hope to abandon you." Her rejoinder to this move is to dangle another carrot: "If hope is what you want, I can give you that. You should know that his being the first to pay homage to me with his vows gives him only a weak advantage. Merit is what matters – and what pleases my eyes." He doesn't bite. "You flatter me only to keep me here," he says, and she is forced to concede. "You would be happier with my mistress, wouldn't you? . . . No, no, that's where you want to hurry off to. Let's go together to look for her in the garden." And aside: "Where I know how to hide her from his eyes" (ll. 213–33).

Amarante plays the conventional love game unsuccessfully, not from lack of skill but from the need to know where this potential *amant* stands. In the process, she stumbles, reveals more than she means to, and fails to engage Florame. The actress must consider, as she works through the scene, whether Amarante is truly attracted to the handsome Florame, who "pleases her eyes." Or whether she is, as he says, only flattering him because she sees him as a better opportunity than Théante to gain status and security. This is not the kind of distinction an unskilled actress can convey, and a scene of this complexity suggests strongly that Corneille now relies on his actress even more than he had done in *La Veuve*.

The first scene between the mistress and the *suivante* also requires a considerable complexity of play. Daphnis is condescending; Amarante is far from obsequious. Again, she speaks from her feelings in an unexpected way, giving us necessary information, but also reversing the usual roles of confider and confidant. When Daphnis advises Amarante to avoid Florame because her *amant* Théante is getting jealous, Amarante responds:

That would be passing strange, since it's only at his request and to please him that I listen to his friend when he comes to talk to me. To tell you the truth, this so-called lover doesn't love me enough to be worth the trouble. He has much more elevated plans; more beautiful portraits are engraved on his heart. My eyes are weapons too weak to enslave him, and I would need other kinds of attractions before he could love me. If only the luster of my birth were better sustained by wealth and not degraded by the rank that I hold. But finally (what's the use of remaining silent?), his vanity suffers him to hope to please you. (ll. 294–306)

Here Amarante is clever and active. Having established a confidential moment – "What's the use of remaining silent?" – she gets the response she expects from the haughty Daphnis: "In that case he will see that I know the right way to punish insolent men who aim too high" (ll. 307–8). Then, having thus discovered that Daphnis has no interest in Théante, Amarante tests her on Florame: "You see that out of pity he has left me

to Florame, who being less vain is more faithful." Daphnis responds that "Théante is not so vain. That's your fantasy. And all his coldness comes from his jealousy. This has nothing to do with me, and what I said to you is for your own good" (ll. 312–16).

But now Amarante is the one not fooled. In a monologue which follows she indicates what she has discovered: "however little one knows of the actions of the soul, one can easily see that she wants Florame." Her description of Daphnis is exceedingly interesting, since it conveys not only a character's reactions but an actress at work. "When I bragged falsely about how faithful Florame is, it was a terrible assault on her. Her surprise at the word was manifest, you could see it in her complexion, her language, her gestures" (ll. 319–22). This reference to an actress's tools is almost metatheatrical, especially since it comes during an opportunity for one of them to connect to the audience.

Act II includes a series of much admired scenes in which Daphnis, trying to have a tryst with Florame, must continually get rid of Amarante, who keeps popping back like a yoyo. First, Daphnis sends the *suivante* to check on some workmen who are hanging a tapestry, then she sends her to find a scarf, and finally to see Clarine, who has borrowed a lace collar that Daphnis absolutely must have back. This classic comic routine, which poses yet another kind of challenge, ends when Amarante returns the third time and Daphnis asks, "What took you so long?" This is followed by a scene of *équivoques* that Oscar Wilde himself could have claimed, which leads to Daphnis asking, "Do you love him?" and Amarante replying, maybe honestly, maybe not, "I don't love anyone enough for it to disturb your happiness." "But," she adds, unwisely, "if his presence doesn't please you, you would oblige me very much if you didn't distract him from me." "What if he does please me?" counters Daphnis. And Amarante admits that she'd have to surrender him. This is followed by another confidence, one both indiscreet and highly charged, suggesting that Amarante has lost her self-possession:

Because of you I keep nothing. At the least sign that a lover has some feeling for me, isn't it curious that you want to meet him, and when he has tasted such a sweet conversation, I can say that that's the end of it for me. That's how Théante began to neglect me, and now you abduct Florame. If you continue to interfere with my game, I don't know how I can live with you any more. (ll. 540–8)

This important moment serves to remind Amarante and the audience that she probably has nowhere else to be, and to demonstrate that threatening Daphnis is perfectly futile.

La Suivante ends atypically with a monologue by Amarante, whose ruses have failed and who has been "pardoned" on the grounds that acts taken because of love of Florame should not be thought criminal. "Whatever," as Amarante might say today. Florame gets the rich girl, a happy ending for him, although not necessarily for Daphnis. We may remember what Florame's friend Damon said about him in the first scene:

Her wealth attracts him, her beauty wounds him, she exceeds him in property, he equals her in noble rank. He is ambitious and he seeks to restore the luster of his family name by possessing her. He has very little fortune but a great deal of nerve, and he hates marriage, except for this one. (ll. 72–8)

No wonder, then, that Amarante says, at the end of the play: "Daphnis robbed me, but not by her beautiful face and not by her sharp intelligence or sweet conversation, nor does her birth have any advantage over mine. But only by the radiance that shines from her bit of money." And she warns the girls in the audience: "Don't presume too much on your charms; however charming they are, you will be neglected if Fortune has not provided you with better weapons" (ll. 1674–6). Violating the rules of comedy, Corneille provides no husband for Amarante, who fears that she will, as a result, pass many a sad night.

Amarante shares with Doris beauty, intelligence, discerning powers of observation, a sharp wit, and opportunities for direct contact with the audience. She is more overtly sexual and also more emotionally engaged, allowing her feelings to influence her actions and tending to reveal occasionally more than she wants to in the heat of the moment. She also plays a comic routine requiring precise timing. Doris is no blushing violet, but Amarante is more manipulative and more likely to lead a scene, suggesting increasing authority in an actress. Perhaps most telling is that Doris hides what she is and poses as an impotent dupe, while Amarante begins the play with a great deal of self-confidence which she loses by the end. Finally, Amarante is a more intricate character than Doris; she requires more of an actress, and she evokes a more ambivalent response from the audience.

The last play of the series, *La Place Royale*, is the best of Corneille's early comedies from the technical standpoint. The focus is quite precise, the cast is small, there are no fathers and mothers, and no go-betweens. With the exception of two small-part male servants, the action is carried out by four young men and two young women. Again, the second female character, Phylis, is the more interesting one, the counterpart though not the *amante* of the hero Alidor, an *esprit fort*, or libertine. Both cherish

their freedom, although he is emotional, even tormented – a role for Mondory, as I have suggested above – while she is detached, practical, and cynical. The plot concentrates on the shifting relationships of the six young lovers; hovering over the action, however, is the recognition that the women are constrained by the will of others.

Like Amarante before her, Phylis is manipulative, much more so than her friend, the heroine, Angélique. She wants Angélique to marry her brother, Doraste, and is perfectly happy to do what she can to fend off other suitors. While not a primary mover of action, she watches for opportunities to influence the course of events. The relationship between the two young women is closer here than between their counterparts in the earlier plays. The friends both live in the aristocratic precincts of the Place Royale, and they share the same status and the same degree of wealth. Where they differ is in their attitude toward love. Angélique is in love up to her eyeballs. “Look,” she says, “I love Alidor, and that’s all there is to say about it. All other mortals could offer me their vows, I am blind, deaf, insensible to them. . . Alidor has my heart and will have it forever” (ll. 34–40). Phylis finds this intense fidelity rather funny but dangerous. “This is taking a master, not a servant,” she argues. “Eternally trying to please him. . . living according to his whims, putting up with his moods, fearing his jealousy, and afraid that time will diminish his ardor. If he leaves us, we are shattered, if he dies we despair, if he is unfaithful we die.” And, in any case, she points out, it doesn’t matter whom we love, since “we are disposed of without asking our opinion. Rarely does a father accommodate himself to our taste” (ll. 50–61). Knowing this, Phylis believes in neglecting none of her suitors, but giving no one her heart. “Everyone tries to please me,” she says, “they all live in hope. . . and if no one has the good luck to please my parents, and if by some capricious choice they ally me with an unknown, don’t think I’ll fall into a deep depression. He’ll have some of the qualities I cherish, so I can accept any husband joyfully” (ll. 66–83). Helpful, but detached rather than engaged, she laughs at the miseries of her friend and her brother, teases them, and brags that she can cheer them up. “Confess,” she says, to her suffering brother, Doraste. “Aren’t you relieved of your pain? Don’t you feel just a little gay?” (ll. 140–1).

Compared to Doris and Amarante, Phylis seems straightforward at first, but in Act II she plays a comic double game that calls her detachment into question and would test any actress’s mettle. With Angélique convinced by Alidor that he does not love her, Phylis rushes Doraste into the breach, telling him first to find the father – “you know he wants

you" – and afterwards to press his suit with the daughter. Phylis is then encountered by one of her *amants*, Lysis, and their short, conventional *entretien* is interrupted by Cléandre, to whom Alidor has "transferred" his possession of Angélique. Cléandre is on his way to declare himself to this new mistress, while Phylis's task is to keep him from intruding on her brother's proposal. Although he has been paying court to her, Phylis does not know what we think we know: that he has just been using her to get close to Angélique. What *we* do not know is whether Phylis merely accounts him one of her many, many admirers, or takes him more seriously. The encounter between the two is essential preparation, since later in the play Cléandre will kidnap her, believing her to be Angélique, and will, in the course of the night, actually fall in love with her.

The scene is one of thrust and parry, with Cléandre trying to disengage from Phylis, who ignores his behavior and keeps the game going. At the beginning Cléandre pretends to be jealous of Lysis and brutally tells Phylis that he no longer wants "common property" and that "a man who devotes all his service to one beloved deserves no less in return." It seems unlikely that Phylis has heard this from Cléandre before, but rather than answering in kind, she parries with: "Well, if you were much better than all the others, I would reject their vows for yours, but a thousand others, just as handsome as you, are treated no better, and they don't grumble." Continuing to assume that she has the upper hand, she pronounces that "You are meant to be subject to my rule, not I to yours. Anyone who loves me the way you do loves himself and not me" (ll. 546–61).³⁴

At this point, however, Phylis notices that all Cléandre's attention is directed to Angélique's house, and she, like Amarante confronting her lover, loses her self-possession. Dropping the formal "vous" that is part of the conventional conversation of lovers, she asks: "Is she the cause of this inconstancy? Would you commit two acts of faithlessness at once?... Cléandre, it's bad enough to betray your mistress, but in this new passion spare your friend." "It is on behalf of Alidor that I'm going to see the lady," he answers, huffily, not truthfully. "Leave it to me to patch up their quarrel, and keep your nose out of my business" (ll. 567–75).

Since her brother is still in Angélique's house, a resolution of the quarrel between Alidor and Angélique is the last thing Phylis wants, and, whether relieved by Cléandre's lie or offended by his tone, she must keep him talking in the Place Royale while trying to decipher just where

³⁴ Molière echoes this sentiment in *The Misanthrope* when Célimène says, "No, you don't love me as one ought to love."

each of them stands. She tries a new tactic, threatening to break with him entirely: "Since my attractions are too worthless to keep you, let's be free of obligations to each other before the Farewell: what I have had from you, I'll give back to you here; you offered me your vows, I'll give those back as well, and everything will be equal between us" (ll. 577–81).

She assumes that since they have not yet ended the game and pronounced the Farewell, he is still under her rule, but his response is unambiguous: "Go practice your charade on someone else; I'm not going to put up with this nonsense any more." At this point, their conflict is transformed. She does not believe in love, but she just might be in love with him. He believes in love, but not in the game of love. And then he unexpectedly returns to his original complaint against her: "Don't love me at all, or love no one but me" (ll. 593–5), a revealing remark from someone supposedly in love elsewhere.

Phylis's answer is also revealing: "I won't impose so harsh a law on you, go ahead if you want to, and love the whole earth, and I won't make war on you. I recognize my imperfections, and what share I have in your affections, more than I deserve, only don't reject the perfect friendship of an imperfect girl" (ll. 596–602). This is Phylis doing far more than stalling for time. She admits, "I am more upset than I may seem. Let's compose ourselves together," an observation that suggests she has been shaken by the discoveries she has just made.

It is this action of discovery that sets this scene apart from the scenes I discussed above. Corneille now is able to rely on an actress to be fully in the moment, fully aware of multiple, complex, and competing strands of the action, fully alert to every shade of meaning, and to every vocal and physical expression by her companion on stage. She has the overt task of keeping Cléandre out of Angélique's house, and the discrete task of finding out where she stands with him, in spite of his inconsistent responses to her. She must also deal with her growing awareness that she loves him and her inability to conceal what she feels. All of this necessarily prepares for the end of the play, when Cléandre falls in love with her and wants to marry her.

At that point, she gets back the upper hand and reminds Cléandre that everything is up to her parents. "If you refuse me, will they listen to me?" he anxiously asks. "You are believed to be rich," she answers, "and my parents are old" (ll. 1312–13), passing the responsibility on to them. She's "in love" with him, a state of which she disapproves; she may be content to marry him, perhaps she will be the faithful wife he seeks, but we suspect that the flexibility of the cynic will trump the rigidity of the romantic.

In contrast, Angélique, for whom love was everything, is so disgusted by Alidor's off-and-on wooing that she decides to go into a convent, leaving the marriage of Phylis and Cléandre to fulfill the comic law of the happy ending. Corneille now fluently questions the conventions of both comedy and society with an ambiguous action that relies on the ability of actors to convey complex and conflicted emotions.

Phylis is more flirtatious than her predecessors, especially the brooding Amarante, although they are both certain of their allure. She is the most light-hearted of the three, at least on the surface, since she proclaims herself to be free from the afflictions of love. Like the play's hero, Alidor, she prefers that freedom to the constraints of fidelity, although he is far more emotional about it, which is characteristic of a role written for Mondory. While Alidor expresses his suffering in four soliloquies, Phylis, who has no opportunities for direct address, must make her feelings and intentions clear in the give-and-take of dramatic action.

Corneille himself recognized the importance to the play's success of the actresses who played Phylis and Angélique. In 1633 he was asked by the archbishop of Rouen, who was also governor of Normandy, to write something in praise of the king, who was coming to take the waters at Forges. While excusing himself from participating, the young playwright took advantage of the opportunity to define himself and his work. After claiming that his plays are distinctive, because he joins the sock to the buskin and the comic to the tender, and can please with opposing tones at the same time, he notes that he can do this because of the actors:

Clever Phylis, those that you make laugh with all their might cannot hold back their tears when they see Angélique weeping. But at the least the stage is there: gesture and speech come to our aid, and Roscius [symbol of a great actor] can finish imperfect works. He builds up whatever is sagging, his whole person contributes to the play's success, and it is perhaps the actor who is the source of the fire and the grace of my verses. Away from his stage, my muse can barely be understood; she stutters and cannot risk speaking with her own mouth. These are my boundaries, do not seek me outside them: if the theatre were closed, you could expect no more verses from me.³⁵

This analysis must of necessity end with "not proven"; Corneille may have consciously or unconsciously tailored Phylis to display the stage presence and the talents of Mlle Le Noir or Mlle de Villiers, or he may have invented Phylis without giving the actresses more than a passing

³⁵ Pierre Corneille, *Excusatio*. Translated from the Latin by Charles Marty-Lavaux, included in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 464.

thought. Nonetheless, the complexity of the demands made by Phylis and her counterparts on the persons who represented them would seem to indicate that even if they were not written for specific performers, they were written with recognition of the power of the women who were part of the newly established troupes.

What do we know about the personal lives and characteristics of the actresses who played the *première* and *seconde* roles? The answer, unfortunately, is not much. Both Mlle Le Noir and Mlle de Villiers were still young in the 1630s. Mlle de Villiers is first heard of in 1627, Mlle Le Noir not officially until 1631, although she was the daughter of an actor, François Mestivier, who is cited in documents from 1622.³⁶ Her husband, Charles Le Noir, who was active from 1618, was in the same troupe as her father in 1622, but when she married him and when she began to act is not known. Very little information also exists about the early days of Mlle de Villiers. She was her husband's second wife, and her marriage must have taken place after 1624.³⁷ She had a long career, retired in 1660, and died in 1670.

Mlle Le Noir was "as pretty a little person as could be found," according to Tallemant,³⁸ while the burlesque *Testament de Gautier Garguille*, a pamphlet published in 1634 shortly after the death of the actor who played that role, advises her to hold on to her "petites douceurs et gaillardises," her diverting little ways, her coquetry.³⁹ She sounds, frankly, like a good match for Phylis. Of Mlle de Villiers, we know even less. According to Tallemant, she was "not too beautiful,"⁴⁰ although, since she was still on stage in the 1650s when he wrote about her, he may have been influenced by how she looked then, not how she had looked in the 1630s. Elsewhere he calls her "an excellent person in her profession" and implies that she was the equal on stage of Mondory.⁴¹ In 1637, when she played Chimène in *Le Cid*,⁴² she definitely was playing *première* roles, although that was not necessarily the case in 1634. Considering this sparse information, however, and also

³⁶ These dates are established by legal documents from the Minutier Central of the Notaries of Paris. See Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*.

³⁷ According to Georges Mongrédien and Jean Robert, *Les Comédiens français du XVIIe siècle: Dictionnaire biographique, suivi d'un inventaire des troupes, 1590–1710: D'après des documents inédits*, 3rd edn. (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981), p. 206, in 1624 Claude Deschamps dit de Villiers was married to Françoise Olivier and had a son baptized January 22.

³⁸ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, pp. 774–5.

³⁹ *Testament de feu Gautier Garguille trouvé depuis sa mort et ouvert le jour de la réception de son fils adoptif Guillot Gorgeu* (Paris: 1634), in Édouard Fournier, ed., *Les Chansons de Gaultier-Garguille* (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprints, 1973), pp. 162–3.

⁴⁰ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, p. 368. ⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 774.

⁴² Georges de Scudéry, *Lettre de Mr de Scudéry à l'illustre Académie* (Paris: Somnaville, 1637), p. 5.

considering that she probably was senior in the troupe to Mlle Le Noir, I will tentatively suggest that Mlle de Villiers played the heroines.

Since they were, with the one brief exception of the *suivante* in *La Galerie*, the only women in the troupe of the Marais as it was constituted until the end of 1634, Mlle Le Noir and Mlle de Villiers of necessity also had to adjust when tragedy was reintroduced mid-decade. Mlle Le Noir may have been the first to gain fame in the new genre. According to the anecdotal evidence I discussed in [Chapter 1](#), she was admired by the comte de Belin, the patron of Jean Mairet, who supposedly had Mairet write principal roles for her.⁴³ If that were the case, she may have starred as Mairet's *Sophonisbe*, which restored tragedy to the Paris stage in 1634. One bit of evidence that supports this casting does exist. In December 1634 the king ordered six actors from the Théâtre du Marais, including Mlle Le Noir and her husband, to move to the Hôtel de Bourgogne. On December 23 the *Gazette* reported that "Monsieur [the king's brother, Gaston d'Orléans], the evening of [December 18] heard the play at the home of the duc de Puylaurent (which was the *Sophonisbe* of Marais, performed by Mondory and his former troupe, brought together once more for this occasion)." It seems likely that the special arrangement to reconstitute the former troupe so that *Sophonisbe* could be performed was made largely because of the absence of Mlle Le Noir. The leading male role, Massinisse, was played by Mondory, who remained at the Marais, and the other female roles are *confidentes*. Even though we know with certainty that it was Mlle de Villiers who created the principal female role in *Le Cid*, *Sophonisbe* is more active and more central to the plot than is the passive Chimène, more like Corneille's aggressive second roles, which suggests once again that playwrights were aware of the innate and ineradicable qualities of these actresses.

The Hôtel de Bourgogne also had actresses and faithful playwrights, especially Jean de Rotrou; an analysis of his work during the 1630s might reveal something about the *emplois* in use there, although with more women available to play roles, the results of such speculation would be more dubious. At the beginning of the Troupe Royale's established tenure at the Hôtel, only its male members are documented. By 1630, however, we know that three of these men had wives who acted: Nicole Gassot *dite* Mlle Bellerose;⁴⁴ Madeleine de Pouget *dite* Mlle Beauchâteau; and Jeanne

⁴³ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, p. 774.

⁴⁴ Mongrédien and Robert assert that Nicole Gassot entered the troupe only after she married Bellerose on February 2, 1638 (*Les Comédiens français*, p. 39) but have mistaken the date. Their cited source is Émile Campardon, *Les Comédiens du roi de la troupe française pendant les deux derniers siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1879), p. 107. However, that entry is a contract of

Buffequin *dite* Mlle La Fleur, the third wife of Robert Guérin. We can assume with some degree of certainty that all were performing in the troupe. Mlle Bellerose had a long career at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and was acclaimed by Tallemant at mid-century as “the best actress in Paris.”⁴⁵ Mlle Beauchâteau was an important actress who in 1634 was transferred to the Marais and later created the role of the Infante in Corneille’s *Le Cid*. Mlle La Fleur, however, is mentioned last in 1633 and probably retired from the troupe after the death of her husband in 1634.

By 1632 the Grands Comédiens had five actresses. Gougenot’s *La Comédie des comédiens*, published in 1633 but performed the preceding year, also includes in its cast Mlle Valliot and Mlle Beaupré.⁴⁶ Neither woman appears to have been accompanied by a husband. Jean Valliot flourished from 1614 to 1627, but is not included in any documents after that time, indicating that Mlle Valliot may have been widowed, while Nicolas Lion *dit* Beaupré, seems to have acted in the provinces while his wife performed in Paris. In 1644 and 1647 she was described as “séparée de biens avec lui,” that is, in the marital state known as “separation of property.”⁴⁷

Mlle Beaupré was born before 1598, since she was *majeure*, that is, older than 25, at the time of her marriage in 1623; Mlle Valliot was married in 1620, suggesting a date of birth around 1600; Mlle Bellerose was born in 1605 or thereabouts.⁴⁸ Thus, the principal women at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, like those in the competing troupe, were still relatively young at the time of establishment, although Mlle Beaupré was in her 30s. Mlle Beauchâteau was younger, 65 when she died in 1683, so born in 1611.⁴⁹ When the troupe was refreshed in 1634 by order of the king with several actors from the Marais, Milles Bellerose, Valliot, and Beaupré were joined by Mlle Le Noir, while Mlle Beauchâteau and her husband moved to the competing troupe.

We know what roles for women were available at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, if not which actress played which role. The repertory of the Hôtel

marriage of that date between Josias de Soulas *dit* Floridor and Marguerite Baloré. On p. 33 Campardon gives the date of marriage of the Bellerose couple as February 9, 1630. His source is A. Jal, *Dictionnaire critique de biographie et d'histoire*, 2nd edn. (Paris: H. Plon, 1872), p. 190.

⁴⁵ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, p. 778.

⁴⁶ Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens* (Paris: P. David, 1633). Modern edition by François Lasserre, Biblio 17 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2000).

⁴⁷ S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le Théâtre du Marais* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1954–8), vol. I, pp. 188, 191.

⁴⁸ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, p. 265.

⁴⁹ S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le Théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1968–70), vol. II, p. 158.

for the season of 1633–4 is recorded in the *Mémoire de Mahelot*, a notebook kept by the *décorateur* responsible for the scenic *décors*.⁵⁰ The troupe was apparently prepared to perform seventy-one different plays, although some of the older plays, those of Alexandre Hardy, for instance, were probably performed infrequently if at all. A significant number of these plays, especially those produced in 1630 or later, had roles for three women, but what distinguishes this repertory from that of the Marais is the prominence of female-to-male *travesti* roles, occurring in both tragicomedies and comedies.⁵¹

Several different kinds of female-to-male *travesti* role are featured in the tragicomedies. The Amazonian *travestis*, the warrior women, include Hippolyte in Du Ryer's *Lisandre et Caliste*, two young women in Marschal's *Sœur valeureuse* (one of whom defeats at arms every man she meets), Lorise in Pichou's *L'Infidèle confidante*, Nise in Rotrou's *La Céliane*, and characters in Scudéry's *Prince déguisé* and *Vassal généreux*.⁵² Incidents when young women fight, either in or out of armor, are mostly taken from romance novels and in many instances from Honoré d'Urfé's *Astrée*, the great favorite of the early seventeenth century. Other *travesti* roles are either for convenience – when a young woman wants to travel, or to pursue a lover who has defected, or to disappear for some reason – or for sexual titillation, when one or more women fall in love with the disguised heroine. These non-Amazonian *travestis* include Beys's *L'Hôpital des fous*, with Méliane hiding among the madmen; Rampale's *La Béline*, which has male-to-female as well as female-to-male *travesti* and a jumble of gender confusion; and Rayssiguier's *La Célidée sous le nom de Calirie*, with a lesbian-inflected subplot. Rotrou's *L'Amélie* and *Cléagénor et Doristée* also play with the attraction of women to women.

Comedies also make use of cross-dressing. Benserade's *Iphis et Iante* rings the most changes on what Laurence Senelick, in his magisterial study of *travesti* through the ages, calls "the homosexual potential of the

⁵⁰ Laurent Mahelot, *Le Mémoire de Mahelot: Mémoire pour la décoration des pièces que se représentent par les Comédiens du roi*, ed. Pierre Pasquier (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005). Pasquier agrees with a previous editor, H. C. Lancaster, that the first list of seventy-one plays, the list of Mahelot himself, represents the repertory toward the end of the season of 1633–4.

⁵¹ Forestier, *Esthétique*, notes that disguises of various kinds were extremely popular in plays of the 1620s and 1630s, especially in tragicomedy. In the 1630s he finds that fifty-four out of eighty-eight tragicomedies featured disguise, as did nine out of twelve pastorals and twenty-four out of forty-one comedies. See pp. 24–7. Forestier derives his figures from the lists of extant plays developed by Lancaster, *History*.

⁵² I assign *Sœur valeureuse* to the Hôtel de Bourgogne because it has three young female characters, which the Hôtel troupe could cast. The *Prince* also needs three young women.

situation.”⁵³ Raised as a boy from birth, Iphis is more than just a flirtatious temptation; she is deeply in love with her fiancée, Iante. The wedding night approaches, the desperate mother prays to the goddess Isis, and an unexpected metamorphosis saves the day. Another very important comedy with homoerotic overtones is Rotrou’s *Célimène*, where the heroine reveals her gender to the unbelieving girls who are in love with her by baring her breasts.

The Marais may have briefly tried to wage war on the competition with its actresses also in breeches; Corneille did include a *travesti* role in his tragicomedy *Clitandre*. It would appear, however, that by and large *travesti* was the province of the Hôtel and that at least one and possibly several actresses there specialized in cross-dressed roles. One was probably Mlle Valliot. In a pamphlet entitled *Songe arrivé à un homme d'importance sur les affaires de ce temps*, published in 1634, the author encounters the ghost of Gaultier-Garguille, who claims that the *testament*, the burlesque will, being read by everyone is Paris is, in fact, false, “written on spider webs with the feet of flies.”⁵⁴ Here, claims the ghost, is the real testament, which includes a bequest to Mlle Valliot of Gaultier’s Florentine sleeves to do with what she will.⁵⁵ The gift of a pair of men’s sleeves certainly suggests that Mlle Valliot played *en travesti*.

Another anecdote implicates Mlle Beaupré in swordplay. According to Tallemant, Mlle Beaupré, “old and ugly,” was performing at the Marais in 1649 when she and a young actress began to speak a few home truths. “I can see, Mademoiselle,” said Mlle Beaupré, “that you want to see me sword in hand.” And so saying, she went to fetch two blunted swords. The girl took one, thinking it was a joke. Mlle Beaupré, angry, wounded her in the neck and would have killed her.”⁵⁶ The anecdote has a certain tenuous claim to probability if Mlle Beaupré was famous for playing Amazonian *travestis*. Perhaps Mlle Valliot and Mlle Beaupré both cross-dressed, one in Amazonian fashion, the other as a tempting young man. And perhaps the two of them were joined in one or the other of these fascinating *emplois* by Mlle Bellerose, who might have appeared in a *travesti* role in Gougenot’s *Comédie des comédiens*, as we shall see below.

All of the actresses who appeared on the Paris stage in the 1630s were or had been married to actors, and although the husbands came from

⁵³ Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 185.

⁵⁴ Fournier, *Chansons de Gaultier-Garguille*, p. 196. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 197–8.

⁵⁶ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, pp. 776–7.

many different backgrounds, several of the wives were from families that had some connection to the theatre. Nicole Gassot *dite* Mlle Bellerose was the daughter of Jean Gassot *dit* La Fortune, an "actor, sculptor, and charlatan" who signed an Act of Association with Mondory and five other actors in March 1618. He also signed for his daughter, who was 13 or "thereabouts" at the time. She married, first, Mathias Meslier, an actor, who was still living in April 1629. On February 12, 1630 she married her second husband, Pierre Le Messier *dit* Bellerose. Her sister Françoise was also the wife of an actor. Mlle Le Noir was the daughter of actor François Mestivier *dit* La France; when she married Charles Le Noir is not known. A third daughter of the profession was Jeanne Buffequin, Mlle La Fleur, married April 18, 1626 to Robert Guérin *dit* La Fleur and Gros-Guillaume. Her father, Georges Buffequin, acted briefly, but is better known as a *décorateur* of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and a designer for the court. Slightly later in the decade actresses included Jeanne de La Chappe *dite* Mlle Montfleury, who was the daughter of actor Michel de La Chappe, and Jeanne Auzoult *dite* Mlle Baron, who married André Boiron in 1641 when she was only 16. She was the daughter of a provincial actor, Jean Auzoult *dit* Le Pré and his wife, Jeanne Crevé, who had been apprenticed to Valleran Le Conte in 1609.⁵⁷ Her brother was also an actor. Finally, Françoise Petit, Mlle Beauchamps, was the niece of Mlle de Villiers.

The other actresses were not, so far as we know, from theatrical families. I have found no information about the family backgrounds of Mlle Valliot or Mlle de Villiers. Madeleine Lemeine, Mademoiselle Beaupré, was the daughter of a merchant from Châtres-sous-Montlhéry in the Île-de-France. Among the later arrivals, Marie Boullanger, Mlle Beaulieu, was the daughter of a self-described *noblehomme*, Charles Boullanger, living in the parish of St.-Gervais in Paris. Marguerite Baloré, Mlle Floridor, was the daughter of a master tailor. The only actress who may have come from a somewhat questionable background was Madeleine Du Pouget, Mlle Beauchâteau, according to an anecdote the natural child of "a demoiselle of good family and a magistrate."

The husbands include Zacharie Jacob *dit* Montfleury, whose parents were actors, Nicolas Biet *dit* Beauchamps, son of a business agent of the princesse de Mantoue; Pierre Marcoureau *dit* Beaulieu, son of a Parisian master cooper; Nicolas Lion *dit* Beaupré, son of a laborer; Pierre le Messier *dit* Bellerose, son of a court officer; Josias de Soulas *dit* Floridor,

⁵⁷ Unless specifically noted, information about families is drawn from Howe, Jal, and Mongrédien and Robert.

son of a Protestant pastor and actual member of the minor nobility; and André Boiron *dit* Baron, son of a merchant at Issoudon. Robert Guérin *dit* La Fleur and Gros-Guillaume, was by tradition from a family of bakers, although that might merely reflect that Gros-Guillaume was performed *enfariné*, his face whitened with flour.

Although all of the actresses prominent in the 1630s were married to actors, some actors had wives who did not appear on stage. These included Hugues Quéru or Guéru *dit* Flechelles and Gaultier-Garguille, the son of a notary, who married Aléonor Salomon, the stepdaughter of the famous *farceur/opérateur* Tabarin; Guillaume Des Gilberts *dit* Mondory, son of a cutler who held various civic offices in Thiers, whose wife famously spent all her time in church; and Henri Legrand *dit* Belleville and Turlupin, who called himself a “Commissaire de l’Artillerie.” He married Marie Durant who, after his death, remarried Adrien Des Barres *dit* Orgemont, son of a *huissier des comptes et du trésor*, and who himself held an office. Bertrand Hardouin de Saint-Jacques *dit* Guillot-Gorju, who replaced Gaultier-Garguille at the Hôtel de Bourgogne after the latter’s death, was the son of a doctor. He married Gabrielle Le Messier, who did not act, although she was the sister of Bellerose. Pierre Petitjean *dit* La Roque was the son of Sidrac Petitjean, a joiner who had briefly been an actor; he married the daughter of an officer of the duc de Sully. Philibert Robin *dit* Le Gaulcher was a son of a Lyonnais merchant whose wife was the daughter of a Paris bourgeois.

Finally, of the families of Charles Le Noir, Claude Deschamps *dit* Villiers, François Chastelet *dit* Beauchâteau, and the Bédeau brothers who acted as Jodelet and L’Espy, we know nothing.

What this rather tedious catalog has to tell us is that in spite of “common knowledge,” actors and actresses in seventeenth-century France came not from the gutter, but from a representative range of social and economic backgrounds. Granted, all actors pretended to be ladies and gentlemen, *sieurs* and *demoiselles*, but even if that claim was nothing but fantasy – and, after all, they did play nobles and even royals on stage – they were still mostly from what we today understand to be the middle class and were well-supplied with earthly goods. Tallemant in the 1650s may have believed that Gaultier-Garguille “was the first to live a little more regularly” and that Turlupin went a step further and “furnished his bedroom properly” and lived “like a bourgeois” with his wife whom he did not allow to act.⁵⁸ In fact, however actors may have lived before 1629

⁵⁸ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, pp. 773–4.

while making their brief appearances in Paris, in the 1630s the established actors were able not only to furnish their bedrooms but to rent expensive apartments and even to buy town and country houses. In his burlesque *Testament*, that very Gaultier-Garguille whom Tallemant praises leaves it up to his comrades to keep their audiences happy and to amass enough money to buy houses in the country and the town.⁵⁹

The Belleroses are a good example. On September 1, 1632, early in the decade of the theatre's establishment, they rented a "sumptuous" house on the rue Beaurepaire, near the Hôtel de Bourgogne, for 240 *livres* a year and for six years. Howe points out that this contract reflects "material well-being" as well as "confidence and optimism."⁶⁰ A year later, on November 5, 1633, Bellerose (and one assumes his wife) bought a "grande maison" at Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, 12 miles northwest of Paris on the northern edge of the park of the château of St-Germain-en-Laye. The property had been owned by one of the gentlemen of the *maison du roi*. It is described as "a great house in the street that leads to the port of Pontoise, consisting in several wings, pressing mills and stables, covered with tiles. . . the courts, gardens and cultivated lands of approximately four arpents⁶¹ . . . plus twenty-two *arpents* of arable land, meadows, vines, etc. together with all the furnishings, utensils, and wine which are in the house." The cost was 14,542 *livres*. In 1642 Bellerose added "diverse lands, gardens and woods" to this holding.

Philibert Robin *dit* Le Gaulcher bought a village house in Athis with three-and-a-quarter *arpents* of vines for 3,300 *livres*, also in 1633, and Charles Le Noir bought a house in Paris on the rue Périgord with a *porte cochère* and courtyard for 9,800 *livres* in 1637. His wife later rented it for 400 *livres* a year. Other actors also owned property, either because they had bought it as an investment or had inherited it. Zacharie Jacob *dit* Montfleury owned a rental property on the rue Saint-Sauveur that brought him in 300 *livres* a year, while Pierre Petitjean, sometimes *dit* La Roque, got 400 *livres* for his house on the rue des Égouts. When the Beaulieus got married in 1637, the groom dowered his bride with 3,300 *livres* cash and a house situated on the rue de l'Arbre sec.⁶² The bride

⁵⁹ Fournier, *Chansons de Gaultier-Garguille*, p. 153.

⁶⁰ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, p. 130. All the financial information here is from Howe. The only way to put the amounts in what follows in context is to compare them to average wages in the period and to the cost of living. In general, working men made 1 *livre* a day or less.

⁶¹ An *arpent* is slightly less than an acre.

⁶² Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, pp. 294–5. Actors rarely lived in the houses they owned in Paris, but rather rented apartments near their theatres. Beaulieu, for instance, was living on the rue Limoges.

brought to the community of the marriage cash and property worth 10,000 *livres*, however, so it would seem that Beaulieu married well.

Actors and actresses also borrowed and loaned money, both to and from people outside the profession and to and from each other. In 1647 Mondory loaned an astonishing 24,000 *livres* to one Claude de Buénégaud, a king's councilor. Mlle Beaupré loaned 10,333 *livres*, 8 *sous* to the owners of the Marais, that is, to the owners of the actual building, reconstructed after a fire in 1644, anticipating an annual return of 574 *livres*.⁶³ In 1655 she again loaned the proprietors money.⁶⁴

Not all actors made a good income, of course, especially those who remained itinerant. And even those who worked steadily or had another profession were always one misstep away from disaster. When Claude Leclerc *dit* Du Rozay, who was a writing master as well as an actor, died in Lyon in 1643, his wife, Nicole Ravanne, was in Marseille, presumably acting. Their property was stored in Paris. In order for it to be inventoried she returned to Paris, to her father's house, where she stayed with her five children, the oldest only 13. Lerclerc's wife declared to the clerks making the inventory that two costumes were to be found in the city of Rennes, one of black satin, the other of green velvet, and that she had two others in her possession, but that everything else had been sold to support her husband during his long illness. Their remaining property was worth 300 *livres*, but 200 was owing to the apothecary in Lyon who had cared for Leclerc.⁶⁵ Fortunately, she was able to remarry, to a musician named Jean Brouart, and the 13-year-old daughter Catherine later became Molière's ingénue, Mlle de Brie.

Some of the most telling information about what level of income Parisian theatrical families enjoyed and how they lived comes from inventories. Charles Le Noir, long a principal actor and company leader, died shortly after he bought the house on the rue de Périgord.⁶⁶ In fact, it seems that he was murdered.⁶⁷ The inventory was done on April 18, 1637 in the rented house on the rue Beaurepaire for the benefit of their five minor children. They had two servants and lived in some luxury.

⁶³ Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le Théâtre du Marais*, vol. II, pp. 59–60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 83.

⁶⁵ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, pp. 312–13.

⁶⁶ The purchase of this house suggests that the Le Noirs were planning to return to the Marais from the Hôtel de Bourgogne, to which the king had transferred them in 1634. In 1637 they were living on the rue Beaurepaire near the Hôtel, but the new house was on the rue de Périgord or Périgueux, now the rue Debelleye, two blocks from the Théâtre du Marais.

⁶⁷ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, p. 318.

Their furniture and other household property, which was valued at 692 *livres*, included seven paintings (only one of which was holy), an elaborate bird cage, some books and bookshelves, a lute, and several guns, as well as such theatrical arms as a scimitar, a cutlass, and several swords. Among the most expensive things the couple owned were costumes, his valued at 3,531 *livres*, hers at 2,871 *livres*. They had 278 *livres*, 8 *sous* in cash, and the troupe owed them 1,500 *livres*, a loan guaranteed by the manuscripts of two plays worth 600 *livres* in the hands of Mlle Le Noir.

Even though she had five minor children to house, clothe, and feed, Mlle Le Noir found it possible to retire from the stage. She could have sold her and her husband's costumes as well as their shares in the property of the troupe and, with the 1,500 *livres* which the troupe had to repay, invested the resulting capital at the usual 5 percent.⁶⁸ The house on the rue de Périgord was also a steady source of income: a contract from 1647 indicates that it was rented for 400 *livres* a year.⁶⁹ Then, in 1644, seven years after her husband's death and her retirement, Mlle Le Noir sold to Charles Savoyen the civil claim she had against the murderers of her husband for a very significant 4,500 *livres*.⁷⁰ Although these amounts do not permit us to infer that she was wealthy, in comparison with the Paris artisan who was raising a family on less than 1 *livre* a day in wages, she was *bien aisée*, comfortable. When André Boiron *dit* Baron died in 1658, his inventory indicated an even more elevated style of life for himself and his wife. Their property included table silver worth 2,808 *livres* and several pieces of jewelry.⁷¹ Mlle Baron, unlike her predecessor, did not retire, but continued to act until her own death in 1662.

Many anecdotes, mostly retailed by Tallemant des Réaux, would have us believe that Mlle Le Noir and Mlle Baron and the other actresses were in no danger of financial distress because they had attracted the attention of one or several rich "keepers" whose generosity was well repaid. And possibly some of the actresses were kept and did benefit from a sexual exchange, although the evidence is not persuasive for this period. One

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 335. In 1647 Josias de Soulas *dit* Floridor sold his share in the Marais to Jean Mathée *dit* Philandre for 550 *livres*. Although the acting companies did not own the buildings that housed their theatres, they did own the interior fittings: the stages, the boxes, the galleries, the dressing rooms, the machines, and so forth.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 332.

⁷⁰ Among the legal documents included by Howe are three examples of claims for civil damages being transferred. My thanks to three scholars, Sarah Hanley, Amalia Kessler, and Al Hamscher, all specialists in seventeenth-century French law, for allowing me to pester them for more information about this practice. None of them, however, had ever encountered it.

⁷¹ Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Théâtre du Marais*, vol. I, p. 170.

hundred years later, matters were different, as we shall see. The issue that seems to have been most pressing for this first generation of Parisian actresses, however, the stereotype that needed most to be overcome, was not that they were easy prey for predatory noblemen but that they lived irregularly within their own families and troupes.

Three important metatheatrical plays were written and performed in the first years of the 1630s. The best known of these, and the only one to have survived in the theatrical repertory, is Corneille's *L'Illusion comique* (1635–6), which contains an impassioned “apology” for the theatre, but provides little or no information about actresses, except showing them sharing in the day's receipts. The first of the metatheatrical plays was probably Gougenot's *La Comédie des comédiens*, written for the Hôtel de Bourgogne and performed before January 1633.⁷² Georges de Scudéry's play with the same title, written for the Théâtre du Marais, is mentioned in a preface of 1633 and was performed before November 28, 1634. Both give us important information about the theatre of the period, but it is in Scudéry's version, written for the Théâtre du Marais,⁷³ that an actress speaks in defense of herself and her way of life.

The conceit of Scudéry's play is established in a Prologue that points to its essential metatheatrical paradox. The bewildered Mondory, speaking as himself, tells the audience that the other actors “are trying to persuade me that I am not on a stage, that this is the city of Lyon, with an inn over there and a tennis court there, where some actors who are not us and who, however, are us are performing a Pastoral.”⁷⁴ Unlike Gougenot's play that uses actual actors' names – Bellerose, Beauchâteau, Turlupin, etc. – Scudéry's “new invention” makes fun of the actors' practice of giving themselves “beautiful” names drawn from nature like Belle Ombre, Beau Soleil, and Beau Séjour, a practice even more prevalent in the rival troupe than in their own – although Guillaume Des Gilberts had rechristened himself sieur de Mondory, “lord of the golden mountain.”

Unable to muster a Lyonnais audience, the actors bicker and blame each other until Belle Ombre accuses Mlle de Belle Espine and Mlle de

⁷² For a discussion of dating, see François Lasserre, “Scudéry et Gougenot: Les Deux *Comédies des comédiens*,” Appendix 2, pp. 322–5, in Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*.

⁷³ The date of the première is not known. It was performed by the troupe of Mondory at the Arsenal for the wedding festivals of two of Richelieu's nieces. See the *Gazette* (November 30, 1634).

⁷⁴ Georges de Scudéry, “Au lecteur,” in *La Comédie des comédiens*, ed. Joan Crow (University of Exeter Press, 1975), p. 5. Actually, since Gougenot's play with a similar conceit preceded Scudéry's, the invention was not exactly new.

Beau Soleil of "repartee rather too free for a woman." Mlle de Beau Soleil responds:

Dormant waters are not the most wholesome, and virtue is found as often in a free spirit as among those who hold themselves back, who might be suspected of hypocrisy. But almost everyone makes an error regarding women of our profession, for they think that farce is the image of our life, and that we only perform what we otherwise practice. They think that the wife of one of you is indubitably the wife of all the Troupe; and imagining that we are common property, like the Sun or the Elements, to a man they think they have the right to inflict on us the importunity of their demands, and it's from that especially that proceeds the most distressing aspect of our condition in life. Our dressing rooms are like Churches, open to all, and for every decent man who pays us a visit, we must endure the impertinence of a thousand who are not. One comes to sit on a chest and swing his legs back and forth the whole afternoon without saying a word, just to show that he has a moustache and knows how to curl it. Another, a little less of a dreamer, but no more clever, talks of nothing but trifles, as insignificant as his mind: and just to be helpful, he wants to place a beauty mark on your throat, but only so he can touch you; he wants to hold the mirror, attach a bow, and powder your hair. . . The third, taking a higher tone. . . inconsiderately begins to criticize the Poems that we are performing; this one is boring because it's too long, another lacks judgment in the conduct of the plot, that one is flat and without ideas, the other, on the contrary, is overstuffed with them. . . In the end no play escapes the tongue of the Critic, who puts on trial so many fine minds and hears nothing in their defense, showing that he is as bad a judge in matters of poetry as he is of the morality of women.⁷⁵

This set piece, which has no further ramifications in the play, answers in advance the charge made by Tallemant that before the 1630s and the reforms promoted by Richelieu, theatrical women were kept in common by their men, living in "the greatest license in the world."⁷⁶ This commonplace is, as Mlle Beau Soleil says, based on the inability of people to tell the difference between reality and the stage, the very paradox Mondory mocks in the Prologue. On the other hand, Belle Ombre's suggestion that the women's "repartee" is rather too "free" is borne out by the text. The sieur de Beau Soleil offers an insult to the sieur de Belle Espine, suggesting the latter will be reduced to "the eloquence of his country, that is, to the expressions of the Périgord." Périgord, the present Dordogne, was a symbol of the ultimate backwoods, where bad French was spoken in an incomprehensible accent.

⁷⁵ Scudéry, *Comédie*, pp. 11–12.

⁷⁶ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, vol. II, p. 773.

Mlle Belle Espine comes to her husband's rescue: "If my husband's tongue is not so dexterous as yours, he has other parts that recommend him." And Mlle Beau Soleil offers that "we must believe it since you say it, Mlle de Belle Espine, for there is nothing so hidden that you cannot speak of it with great knowledge." This is hardly the purified language that was being claimed for the reformed theatre. Guez de Balzac wrote to Mondory that "having cleansed your stage of all sorts of ordures, you can praise yourself for having reconciled the Theatre with the devout and the Pleasures of the senses with Virtue."⁷⁷ Nonetheless, sometimes Virtue had to give way to other attractions, even to an exchange of "ordures" between two actresses playing actresses. After all, a laugh is a laugh. And importunate men could have been barred from the dressing rooms, but they weren't. Thus, while wishing to be thought virtuous, the actress could always rely on sexual innuendo as well as the display of sexuality.

Harley Granville-Barker once famously wrote, and not only apropos of the women who replaced the transvestite boys on the English stage: "Let the usurping actress remember that her sex is a liability, not an asset."⁷⁸ In the French theatre of the seventeenth century, it was both. The paradox remained inescapable, and actresses continued to confront it, although some must have recognized how difficult – maybe impossible – it was to reconcile, as Guez de Balzac put it, "la vertu et la volupté."⁷⁹

Unlike the "reformed" Marais under the aegis of Mondory, the Hôtel de Bourgogne remained a temple of farce through the early 1630s, and its version of *La Comédie des comédiens*, although not a farce *per se*, is permeated by farce and by the *farceurs* of the troupe: Gros-Guillaume, Gaultier-Garguille, Turlupin, Boniface, and the Capitaine. The troupe's two most important actresses, Mlle Beaupré and Mlle Valliot, also play major roles as the wives of Gaultier and Boniface, once again engaging the issue of actresses playing farce.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Corneille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 1423.

⁷⁸ *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (London: Nick Hearn Books, 1993), p. 18.

⁷⁹ Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, "Lettre à . . .," quoted by Georges Mongrédien, *La Vie quotidienne des comédiens au temps de Molière* (Paris: Hachette, 1966), p. 28.

⁸⁰ Editors and historians have had a grand time trying to analyze the rather unusual list of "personnages" included in the 1633 edition of Gougenot's play. This *Comédie des comédiens* has two prose acts featuring the actors of the Hôtel followed by a three-act "comédie" in verse entitled *La Courtisane*. The cast of the prose play includes Bellerose, Gaultier, Guillaume, Turlupin, Boniface, and the Capitaine, as well as Mlle Gaultier, Mlle Boniface, Beauchasteau, Mlle Beauchasteau, Mlle La Fleur, and Mlle Bellerose. The text, however, does not correspond to the list of characters. Mlle Beauchasteau does not appear, while Mlle Gaultier, we discover, is played

François Lasserre contends that the identification of Gougenot's play with the troupe of the Hôtel de Bourgogne is a "myth," leading to the conclusion that theatre historians should not bother with it, but his argument is based on a reading of the play that is unrealistically literal. He asserts, for example, that the actor Beauchâteau had been in the troupe for seven years, while the character "Beauchasteau" is a candidate for entry; that Bellerose the actor was not the leader of the troupe like "Bellerose" the character; that Gros-Guillaume the actor was not a valet like "Gros-Guillaume" the character, but was the actual chief of the company; and so forth.⁸¹ He seems totally to miss the point of the play, which cheerfully blends actors and characters into a metatheatrical mélange. After all, although Gros-Guillaume was not a valet in reality, he often played valets. And there is something comic afoot when an experienced actor performs a novice. The play might even be capitalizing on a return of Beauchâteau to the fold; he was with Bellerose and the others in June 1629, but is not mentioned in the lease of the Hôtel negotiated on August 5, 1632. The audience would surely enjoy the spectacle of a former member of the troupe being forced to seek the approval of the colleagues he had deserted. Lasserre also makes much of the fact that the published cast list includes Mlle Gaultier and Mlle Boniface, who are characters, as well as Mlle Valliot and Mlle Beaupré, the company's leading actresses who played those characters, but the play as seen on stage would have featured only two and not four actresses and confused no one. Although Lasserre recognizes this, he still concludes that the actresses are "apocryphal."⁸²

Pleasant as it would be to continue to dispute Lasserre, one last example will have to suffice to confirm his literal approach. Arguing that the fictional troupe has little in common with the actual troupe of the Hôtel, he notes that "a line of Guillaume's expressly refutes this comparison: 'I was the other day,' he says, 'at the Hotel de Bourgogne.'"⁸³ This, Lasserre proposes, defeats the illusion of showing a representation of the troupe itself. What, one wonders, would Lasserre make of that famous moment in Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire* when Béralde invites Argan to come with him to see one of Molière's plays?

by Mlle Valliot and Mlle Boniface by Mlle Beaupré. Perhaps someone other than the author drew up the cast list.

⁸¹ Lasserre, "Présentation," in Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*, p. 41.

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 44. See Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, p. 116, for his response to Lasserre.

⁸³ Lasserre, "Présentation," p. 49.

In any case, what matters is not so much that the play gives accurate data about the composition of the troupe at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1632 or thereabouts – although it looks accurate enough to me – but that, being highly metatheatrical, it provides a window onto theatre practices that prevailed when it was written. The situation of the two leading actresses is especially telling. Mlle Valliot and Mlle Beaupré, as we have already noted, were the female stars of the troupe, one or both especially adept at *travesti* roles, and one or both disposed to appear in farce. Abraham Bosse's famous engraving of *Les Farceurs de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne*, which shows the three great comic stars of the company, Gros-Guillaume, Gaultier-Garguille, and Turlupin, also shows a very attractive, very well-dressed young woman with one hand on Guillaume's arm and one on his shoulder. His hand, finger outstretched, is suspiciously close to a private part of her body. Observing this is Gaultier, pulling out his spectacles to take a closer look and so distracted that he fails to notice Turlupin stealing his purse.⁸⁴ It makes sense that the actress in this visual vignette is Mlle Valliot, who plays the "femme de Gaultier" in Gougenot's play and who is so very nice to Guillaume. "The other day she gave me a writing desk," he brags, "day before yesterday, a shoe horn, yesterday a comb, and today she gave me six pairs of her old slippers, some toothpicks, a gingerbread, some mittens, a wooden whistle, a spoon, and more than thirty new songs from the Pont Neuf, and always my soup filled with plenty of cabbage."⁸⁵

Unlike Scudéry's actress who directly defends her moral status, Gougenot's actresses remain in the fictional frame of the play where they, their husbands, and their servants are negotiating *emplois* in a troupe led by Bellerose. The two husbands, Gaultier and Boniface, a lawyer and a merchant, violently dispute which one is to play the kings and noble fathers, while the servants Guillaume and Turlupin insist on being taken on as shareholders and not mere salaried employees. The two women are largely concerned about which one has the least satisfying marriage: Gaultier is violently jealous, Boniface is a miser.

Mlle Gaultier, who flirts openly with Beauchasteau, postulant for the *emploi* of lover, wonders how her jealous old husband will respond to

⁸⁴ I am indebted for this reading of the print to John Golder, "Holding a Mirror up to Theatre: Baron, Gougenot, Scudéry and Corneille as Self-Referentialists in Paris, 1628–35/36," in *The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-theatre and Self-Reflection*, ed. Gerhard Fischer and Bernard Greiner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 84–5. The image can be seen by searching on Google Images.

⁸⁵ Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*, p. 116.

the liberties practiced on the stage, calling attention once again to the potential confusion of stage and reality: "But what if I'm performing in a play with a member of the company and the plot obliges us to exchange compliments that grow to caresses and from caresses to kisses?... How do I know that the rage of the Doctor will not be extreme?"⁸⁶ Mlle Boniface worries that her miserly husband, who doles out the household matches one by one, won't provide the expensive fabrics and jewels she will need in order to dress appropriately when she plays empresses and queens.⁸⁷ Mlle Gaultier is reassured by Beauchasteau, who advises her that she is now in a new and enviable situation, and that she should begin to get used to her freedom, while Bellerose sets Mlle Boniface's mind at rest: "As for the avarice of Seigneur Boniface, nothing is easier to control, because your personal satisfaction corresponds to the interests of the troupe in general, which will determine the costumes and the ornaments of the stage. If someone wants to dispute or act contrary to the general will, he will be banished from the 'little academy.'"⁸⁸

The fictional Mlles Gaultier and Boniface, as members of the troupe, are no longer socially isolated, even though they are still legally subject to their husbands. In contrast, the Mlles Valliot and Beaupré enjoyed true liberty, the one widowed, the other profiting from a form of legal separation that protected her income and her property from her spouse. Gougenot's play would seem to be making an ironic reflection on this situation, contrasting the plight of the two *honnêtes femmes* with the relative agency of both the actress-characters and the real actresses.

A comparison of the frame play and the play-within-a-play that follows allows us to speculate about the casting of the latter, thus providing us with a little information about the normal *emplois* of the actors and actresses. *La Courtisane*, which H. C. Lancaster calls a "comedy of intrigue," is given an ironic twist by its mirroring of the frame. Although it has been accused of having no relationship to the frame play, in fact it is quite clearly related by means of the actors' *emplois*.⁸⁹

The *farceurs*, to begin with the obvious, had created stock characters over a span of years that aroused clear expectations in the audience. Gaultier-Garguille was a Pantalon, an old man who was greedy for love,

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p. 132. By "Doctor" is meant someone with a degree in law, not a physician.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 130. ⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 132.

⁸⁹ See Lasserre, in Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*, pp. 52–8, for a discussion of this issue. Lasserre (p. 54) claims that one can determine from the text which character from the frame play performs which role in the inner play. I agree, and I even agree with some of his casting, although for entirely different reasons.

obsessed with the desire to possess young and beautiful women. It seems obvious that he would play the Venetian Trasile, rich, old, and impotent, who will do almost anything to have Caliste, the courtesan, for himself.⁹⁰ In Act III, scene 4, what Mlle Gaultier predicted in the frame play happens: Gaultier/Trasile is forced to watch as Caliste – played, one must presume, by Mlle Gaultier/Valliot – is roundly kissed by the over-eager Filame, undoubtedly played by Beauchasteau, who has flirted with her in the frame play. Trasile's response is not violent, as she had expected, but rather suggestive: a kiss, he warns, leads from the mouth to the breast to the couch. Caliste responds, "If you become jealous over nothing, what would you do if I belonged to you?"⁹¹ The reference to the frame play is unmistakable.

Gros-Guillaume, as we know from various visual sources, wore two belts, one above and one below his enormous stomach. His role would be Faustin, whose belly is "the marvel and the center of my body." The valet of Symandre, he is greedy and starving throughout *La Courtisane* in the mode of an Italian commedia dell'arte second *zanni*.

The third *farceur*, Turlupin, would play Polion, Trasile's valet. Turlupin was a *fourbe intrigant*, a clever rascal, who in this play shares his intimate knowledge of his master's sexual problems with the spectators in multiple asides. Boniface, the merchant of the frame play, would play Symandre's father, Cristome, a "noble father," indicating that he, not Gaultier, was awarded that *emploi*.⁹² This particular "noble father" is a bit avaricious, like Boniface. He is looking for equality of social status in a daughter-in-law, and when he encounters in Venice the cross-dressed Clarinde, who was supposed to be his perfect daughter-in-law, although he does not recognize her, he "feels an incredible pleasure, believing I am about to recover a property that belongs to me."⁹³ The Capitaine would be cast as Argant, referred to in the cast list as a parasite, but described by Faustin as *un mangeur de dragons*,

⁹⁰ A line of dialogue further confirms this casting. Polion says, while listing the things his master could do to woo Caliste: "If you were to make for her a Roman de Chansons [a Romance in Song], your flowers would be to her nothing but bits of ice." Gaultier-Garguille was famous for his songs, many of which were published. According to Lasserre, the jealous Gaultier would play the disdained lover, Symandre, while the miser Boniface would play Trasile, "forced by love to squander his property." I think it unlikely, given the standard characteristics of the farce *emploi*.

⁹¹ Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*, pp. 155–6.

⁹² We do not know which actor in the troupe played farce as "Boniface," but this casting suggests that it was whoever played the *emploi* of noble fathers.

⁹³ Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*, p. 191.

a dragon-killer, one of the *commedia dell'arte capitano's* most frequent self-designations.

The casting of the lovers is less clear. There is much to be gained, as noted above, by casting Mlle Gaultier/Valliot as Caliste in the scene with Gaultier playing Trasile, but some evidence in the text also suggests that she might have played the *travesti* role of Clarinde/Floridor. Discarded by her fiancé, Symandre, Clarinde comes to Venice disguised as a man, Floridor, to try to get him back. There she encounters Cristome, Symandre's father, who has also come to retrieve his son from the clutches of Caliste, and Faustin, Cristome's servant, who is weeping at their loss of Clarinde, "a girl so fine, a girl so good... whom I could never disoblige except by refusing food or drink."⁹⁴ Faustin's feelings for Clarinde strongly remind us of Guillaume's praises of Mlle Gaultier. However, the text offers another possibility. "Floridor" wonders whether Faustin would recognize Clarinde, and Faustin brags that he knows her better than he knows himself. "Why, Sir," he says, "if your hair were a little redder... I would bet all the treasures of the Indies, certain to win, that you are Clarinde."⁹⁵ That red hair makes us think not of Mlle Valliot but of Mlle Bellerose. According to Paul Tallemant, the brother of Tallemant des Réaux, Isaac de Benserade became a passionate theatregoer because of Mlle Bellerose. The attraction was based on "conformity of hair," hers being red-blond, his plain red.⁹⁶

If we consider Mlle Bellerose, who had very little to do in the frame play, a candidate for Clarinde, that leaves Mlle Boniface/Beaupré for the third female role, the scheming Flaminie. As to the two young male lovers, if Beauchasteau as Filame continues his pursuit of Mlle Gaultier/Valliot, then Bellerose, famous as an *amoureux*, will have played Symandre.

Gougenot's *Comédie des comédiens* also provides us with an example of the way in which the Hôtel de Bourgogne mingled comedy and farce in an entertainment that gave the *farceurs* opportunities to perform, but in material that was only mildly indecent. The manner in which the women's roles are integrated here is not unlike the pattern often found in the *commedia dell'arte*. By and large, the farcical elements – Gaultier's goatishness, Turlupin's mockery, Guillaume's gluttony – are left to the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 189. ⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 190.

⁹⁶ Mons. L. T. [Paul Tallemant], *Discourse sommaire Touchant La Vie de Monsieur de Benserade*, in *Œuvres de Monsieur Benserade* (Paris: C. de Sercy, 1697), fol. 7.

farceurs, but the women are implicated. Caliste has to fend off Gaultier, while Clarinde enjoys Guillaume's eulogies.

La Comédie des comédiens can also be taken as a model of how farce was modified and toned down so that apologists could argue that even the most respectable women went constantly to the theatre, and had their husbands' approval to do so.⁹⁷ However, it can also be seen as an example of the reality of the theatre in the early 1630s, often at least mildly lubricious. Wendy Gibson is among the scholars who cast doubt on the contentions of the apologists that "nice women" didn't go to the theatre before 1630, and given the prevalence of pastorals – a woman's form if ever there was one – and the romantic intrigues of the tragicomedies, it is hard to imagine an all-male audience. Gibson further remarks that the "alleged female approbation for the theatre was considered a good bait with which to draw audiences," adding that it "is plain from even the most cursory appraisal of contemporary drama that at the precise period when women are represented as flocking without scruples to the theatre they were being offered entertainments which matched and surpassed the worst excesses of Alexandre Hardy and his predecessors."⁹⁸

At the middle of the decade Louis XIII, who liked farce and was far less concerned with the reform of the theatre than was his minister Richelieu, took the unprecedented step of replacing the two deceased *farceurs* of the Hôtel, Gaultier-Garguille and Gros-Guillaume, with three or four *farceurs* from the Marais. These included the Bédeau brothers, who played as Jodelet and L'Espy, and an older actor, François Mestivier *dit* La France, who played farce as Jacquemin-Jadot.⁹⁹ By this point, however, the moral imperative was "Do not play farce." The actress we met in Bordeaux in

⁹⁷ *L'Ouverture*, vol. II, p. 252.

⁹⁸ Gibson, "Women and the Notion of Propriety," p. 3.

⁹⁹ In Renaudot's *Gazette* of December 15, 1634, it is reported that six actors have been moved by royal order from the Marais to the Hôtel, and that their names are being printed in italic type "to distinguish them from others in the list that follows." Unfortunately, the six names in italics include an "or": *La France or Jacquemin-Jadot*. Since La France and Jacquemin-Jadot were the same person, only five actors are indicated. Who, then, was the sixth actor? Included in Renaudot's list of the male members of the Hôtel troupe is "Alizon," not italicized, and scholars have typically assumed that this is a typographical error, that Alizon is the missing sixth actor. See *French Theatre in the Neo-classical Era: 1550–1789*, ed. William Howarth (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 103 n. Following S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer (*Le Théâtre du Marais*, vol. II, pp. 142–3) it has also been assumed that Alizon, as well as Jacquemin-Jadot, were hijacked not from the Marais but from a third troupe performing in the Faubourg St.-Germain, and known only from a reference in the *Gazette* of a few weeks later (January 6, 1635). Howe found no legal documents testifying to the existence of any such troupe, nor are there any other known references to it. Perhaps the time has come to suggest that Renaudot's error was not forgetting to italicize Alizon, but rather overlooking the "or," and counting both La France and Jacquemin-Jadot.

the 1590s had the approbation of the local *honnêtes femmes* because she eschewed farce; in the following century Mondory was morally superior to his colleagues because he never played farce.¹⁰⁰ In fact, in spite of the king's action, farce held a minor role in the repertory after 1635, as did comedy. Those comedies that did appear reflected Richelieu's interest in regularity, leading – according to Lancaster – to "sentimentality and insipidity."¹⁰¹

The second half of the decade of the 1630s marks the rise of tragedy. Mahelot's list of the seventy-one plays in the repertory of the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1634 included only two tragedies; by 1639 Paris had seen Mairet's very successful *Sophonisbe*, produced in 1634, Corneille's *Médée*, Benserade's *Cléopâtre* (and Mairet's *Marc-Antoine*), and Tristan's *Mariane*, among a total of thirty-seven tragedies, many of them featuring a female title character.¹⁰² For the actresses, this meant roles that were no less demanding and important, but also a shift from the relatively realistic style indicated in Corneille's Paris comedies to a grander and possibly more mannered style, especially as the neoclassical ideas of *vraisemblance* and *convenance* began to exercise control over stage behavior.

In the great debate about the drama set off by the success of *Le Cid*, that too-popular tragicomedy with Spanish roots, the presence of women on stage had no particular significance. The debate itself is interesting in part because it demonstrates the growing effort by theorists and playwrights to wrest control of the stage from the actors. The best-known work of the period about the theatre is the abbé d'Aubignac's *La Pratique du théâtre*, which has little to say about acting, and less about the actors.¹⁰³ In fact, in Aubignac's work, "actors are often depreciated in extremely pejorative terms."¹⁰⁴ In an addendum to the major work, published with it in 1657, the abbé outlines his *Projet pour le rétablissement du théâtre français*, and there he does admit that although the late cardinal's reforms have not been entirely successful, "those who mount the boards" should no longer be accounted infamous. However, to "preserve propriety, girls

¹⁰⁰ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Adam, vol. II, p. 775.

¹⁰¹ H. C. Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century. Part II. The Period of Corneille 1635–1651* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1929–42), vol. I, p. 96.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* pp. 29–71, 152–201.

¹⁰³ Begun before 1642, published 1657. See abbé d'Aubignac, *La Pratique du théâtre*, ed. Hélène Baby (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001).

¹⁰⁴ Baby, "Observations," in *ibid.* p. 669.

must not go on stage unless their father or mother is in the troupe” and “widows must remarry within the six months following their year of mourning, and not play during that year unless they are remarried.”¹⁰⁵ Since, however, we do not know when Aubignac wrote that proscription, very similar to the rules that were constantly ignored by actors in the Spanish theatre, we cannot apply it to anyone in particular, although the beautiful Mlle Baron, widowed at 30 in 1655 and not yet remarried in 1657, is certainly a candidate.

Whatever Aubignac may have thought of the need to force actresses to behave, and leaving aside Tallemant’s obsessive collecting of *on-dits* relating one or another actress to one or another noble lover or keeper, very little hard evidence exists to confirm that the women who became such powerful attractions on the French stage in the 1630s were sexually incontinent off the stage. They were, of course, trapped in the paradox. On the one hand, they presumably attracted male audience members by the public display of their sexual bodies, and the profitability of their theatres – in which they shared equally – depended on their doing so. On the other hand, they seem to have led private lives that were respectable and increasingly affluent.

One or two of them even played a small role in the literary life of Paris. Madeleine Béjart, although we know nothing of her career as an actress until the 1640s, was asked to provide a liminary quatrain for Rotrou’s *Hercule mourant* in 1636, most unusual for a woman unless she was part of a literary circle.¹⁰⁶ Mlle Beauchâteau also seems to have had a literary bent. According to Paul Scarron in the “Au lecteur” preceding his *Précaution inutile*, it was Mlle Beauchâteau who “a dressé le sujet,” that is, wrote the prose version, of Tristan L’Hermite’s *Les Coups de l’Amour et de la Fortune*, which was finished by Scarron after Tristan died in 1655. “I still have Mlle de Beauchâteau’s draft and mine,” is his claim.¹⁰⁷ According to Tallemant, she also tutored at least one aristocratic lady in how to recite verses,¹⁰⁸ and she had a reputation as a wit. Raymond Poisson said, “she is as witty as the devil, for a woman,” while Donneau de Visé

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 704.

¹⁰⁶ See Virginia Scott, *Molière: A Theatrical Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 39–40.

¹⁰⁷ A complicated argument against Scarron’s claim was mounted by N.-M. Bernardin, who based his conclusion on various publication dates. However, Bernardin was not able to find the first edition of *La Précaution inutile*, published in 1655, and seems to doubt its existence. It exists, and quite explodes his case. See N.-M. Bernardin, *Un Précurseur de Racine: Tristan L’Hermite, sieur du Solier (1601–1655). Sa famille, sa vie, ses œuvres* (Paris: Alphonse Ricard, 1895), pp. 305–7.

¹⁰⁸ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, vol. II, p. 694.

remarked that if he were to speak about her wit, he would have to "remain a long time on such a rich and vast matter."¹⁰⁹ She was also the mother of an infant prodigy, François-Mathieu, the "petit Beauchâteau," who published a very big book of very bad poetry at the age of 11 and presented it to the Académie Française. The boy later went to England, converted to Protestantism, went off to be a missionary in Persia, and died there.¹¹⁰

Finally, however, no matter how fine their minds or how moving their portrayals, these first actresses to be established in Paris still battled the same old perceptions of their sexual availability and their marginal position in society. As late as 1662 the provincial actor-playwright Dorimond created a scene in which an actress is harassed in her dressing room by two dolts, perhaps suggested by the harangue Scudéry wrote for Mlle de Beau Soleil thirty years earlier. In Dorimond's little curtain-raiser, *La Comédie de la comédie*, Isabelle has to brush off a hand that wants to rearrange her costume and to refuse fruit and faïence, gloves, ribbons, cosmetics, and jewelry, and "something rare from Catalonia." When the determined stage-door Jeannot insinuates that "you are so beautiful when you speak of love," she tartly responds that "my profession is my sole concern, and I am ardently in love only with it." Nonetheless, she recognizes that there are still men to be feared, libertines, who "imagine themselves to have access to us, who say, seeing one of us, 'Look there, my friend, that actress: she is mine.'"¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Léopold Lacour, *Les Premières Actrices françaises* (Paris: Librairie Française, 1921), p. 108.

¹¹⁰ Georges Monval, "Les Beauchâteau," *Le Moliériste* 8 (1887), 137–43.

¹¹¹ Nicolas Drouin, *dit* Dorimond, *Théâtre*, ed. Mariangela Mazzocchi Doglio (Fasano: Schena; Paris: Nizet, 1992), pp. 396–401.

Mademoiselle L'Étoile: 1640–1700

When Paul Scarron baptized the leading lady of his profoundly provincial theatrical troupe “Mademoiselle de L'Étoile” in *Le Roman comique* in 1651, we might think he was verging on irony. In fact, the word “star,” meaning an actor or actress distinguished by his or her celebrity, seems to have entered English usage only in the nineteenth century and to have been borrowed by the French in the twentieth.¹ Scarron’s pairing of Mlle de L'Étoile with her partner, Le Destin, plays rather on an earlier meaning of *étoile*, as in Shakespeare’s “a star danced and under that I was born.” Both “Destin” and “Étoile” imply that fate rather than choice has determined their profession. But in fact, if not in lexicography, the “star,” that is, someone notably conspicuous for professional accomplishments and celebrity, was born in France over the course of the last half of the seventeenth century.

A “star” displays some fairly obvious characteristics. Perhaps the most important one is that audiences are drawn to star performances, increasing the financial rewards for everyone involved. Another sign of stardom is when playwrights write specific roles to feature the biggest draws. In the seventeenth century, the two great star-makers were Molière and Racine. Of course, Molière primarily wrote plays that featured Molière, but he also established the stardom of his wife, Armande Béjart, with roles like the Princesse d'Élide, Psyché, Célimène, and Elmire. Racine would probably be aghast at being accused of writing star vehicles for anyone, but nonetheless he wrote for one potential star, Mlle Du Parc, and one full star, Mlle Champmeslé, fashioning for them important roles that played to their strengths.

¹ See the various *Dictionnaires de l'Académie Française* (Dictionnaires d'Autrefois, ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>). On the other hand, Bussy-Rabutin did use the word in connection with an actress when he wrote in 1668: “J'admire l'étoile de la Duparc, qui a donné mille passions” (Pierre Melèse, *Le Théâtre et le public sous Louis XIV, 1659–1715* [Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1976], p. 171).

Celebrity, which mixes fame with notoriety, is another aspect of stardom.² Mlle Du Parc and especially Mlle Molière and Mlle Champmeslé were both famous and notorious. Mlle Du Parc, whose career as a star actress was fleeting, and who is known to history as the mistress of Racine and for her mysterious death and her supposed involvement with the poisoner la Voisin, has been the subject of two recent biographies and a film,³ while Mlle Des Œillets, the most accomplished actress of the period, is completely forgotten. Notoriety need not rest on reality; it can be manufactured. Mlle Molière, for instance, was the subject of a vicious book accusing her of all kinds of transgression, including common prostitution, and damaging her reputation, although primarily after the fact.⁴ She, too, has been the subject of various biographies, including one fictionalized biography that features many of the accusations contained in the book.⁵ And even Ariane Mnouchkine's great biographical film *Molière* relies on the assumption that Armande Béjart was persistently unfaithful to her husband, although no hard evidence supports that such was the case. Mlle Champmeslé was certainly no saint; that she enjoyed relationships with men other than her husband is incontrovertible. Of the three, however, she would seem to be the one whose celebrity arose from a balance of professional accomplishments and her willing participation in the *galanterie* of late seventeenth-century Paris.

At mid-century, when Scarron wrote his picaresque novel, most actresses were not victims of fate like Mlle de L'Étoile, nor were they stars. Rather, they were working actresses born into theatrical families and/or married to theatrical men. Their numbers included Mlle Beaupré, Mlle de Villiers, and Mlle de Beauchâteau, whom we have already met, while newcomers to the Paris stage included the beautiful Mlle Baron, daughter of actors Jean Auzoult and Jeanne de Crevé and wife of André Boiron *dit* Baron. Mlle Baron and her husband were the parents of

² For a recent discussion of celebrity/notoriety both in the theatre and in the wider society see Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). Roach concentrates on the English theatre after 1660.

³ Nadine Audoubert, *Mademoiselle Du Parc, prénom Marquise, reine du théâtre* (Paris: Publibook, 2001) and Alain Couprie, *Marquise, ou la "déhanchée" de Racine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006). The film *Marquise* (1997) was directed by Véra Belmont and starred Sophie Marceau.

⁴ Anon., *La Fameuse Comédienne ou l'histoire de la Guérin, auparavant femme et veuve de Molière* (Frankfurt: Rottenberg, 1688). Armande Béjart married another actor, Isaac Guérin, after Molière's death.

⁵ Jacques Chabanne, *Mademoiselle Molière* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1961).

Michel Baron, arguably the most important actor and male star of the French theatre in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Mlle Beauchamps, born Françoise Petit, was the niece of Mlle de Villiers and was married to Nicolas Biet *dit* Beauchamps. She was very probably descended from Benoist Petit, who was both an actor and a member of the Confrérie de la Passion early in the century.⁶ Her three sons and a grandson all became actors. Mlle Brécourt, born Étiennette Des Urlis, was married to Guillaume Marcoureau *dit* Brécourt and was the sister of Jean, Madeleine, and Catherine Des Urlis, all actors. Their father was clerk of the court of the privy council, no mean office.

By mid-century, the various theatrical families had become intertwined and interrelated; an example is the Fleury Jacob/Colombe Venière family. Their son, Zacharie Jacob *dit* Montfleury, married Jeanne de La Chappe, the daughter of actor Michel de La Chappe. Her sister Marie married Antoine Lefebvre, probably the son of Mathieu Lefebvre *dit* La Porte and Marie Venière. A third sister, Anne, married Toussaint Le Riche *dit* Hautefeuille; a fourth sister, Simone, married Nicolas Le Roy *dit* La Marre; and a fifth sister, Victoire, married successively two actors, François de La Motte and Charles de La Haye *dit* Romainville. When Victoire de La Chappe died, Romainville married Elisabeth Des Urlis, Catherine's great-niece. Montfleury's daughters, Louise and Françoise, who became Mlle Du Pin and Mlle d'Ennebaut, were both important actresses. Mlle d'Ennebaut's daughter married the son of M. and Mlle Du Parc.

Another dynasty descends from the Le Noirs. Their son, François, renamed himself La Thorillière and married Marie Petitjean from yet another theatrical family. Their son, Pierre, known as La Thorillière *le jeune*, married Catherine Biancolelli, a daughter of the celebrated Arlequin Dominique and a star in her own right at the Comédie-Italienne. Pierre's sister Charlotte married Michel Baron and his sister Marie-Thérèse married actor-playwright Florent Carton *dit* Dancourt. The Dancourts were parents of Mimi and Manon Dancourt, who began their careers playing children's roles at the Comédie-Française. These family networks characterized the personnel of French acting troupes after 1650.

As late as 1684–5, most of the women who belonged to the Comédie-Française, created by a merger of existing troupes in 1680, were still from

⁶ Alan Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel à Paris 1600–1649: Documents du Minutier Central des Notaires de Paris*, study by Alan Howe, documents analyzed by madeleine Jurgens (Paris: Centre Historique des Archives Nationales, 2000), p. 19.

theatrical families. These included Marie Ragueneau, Mlle La Grange; Armande Béjart, now Mlle Guérin; Charlotte Le Noir, Mlle Baron; Jeanne Bourguignon, Mlle Beauval; Marie-Angélique Gassot, Mlle Poisson; Françoise Pitel, Mlle Raisin; Catherine Leclerc, Mlle de Brie; Louise Jacob, Mlle Du Pin; Françoise Jacob, Mlle d'Ennebaut; Thérèse Le Noir, Mlle Dancourt; Louise Pitel; and Anne Pitel, Mlle Du Rieu. Only four were not from theatre families: Marie Desmares, Mlle Champmeslé; Françoise Cordon, Mlle Bellonde; Judith de Nevers, Mlle Guyot; and Jeanne de La Rue, Mlle Desbrosses.

One difference: in the 1680s a significant number of actresses were not accompanied by husbands. These included Mlle Poisson, whose husband would join the troupe in 1686, Mlle de Brie, Mlle Desbrosses, and Louise Pitel, who were widowed, Mlle Du Pin, whose husband had “retired” in 1680 when the troupes merged, Mlle d'Ennebaut, whose husband was living but not acting, Mlle Du Rieu, whose husband was in another troupe, and Mlle Guyot, who had never married. This pattern would dominate in the eighteenth century.⁷

In the third quarter of the seventeenth century, however, acting was still primarily a family business, one we know rather a lot about because of an apology for the theatre written by Samuel Chappuzeau. Published in 1674, it is unlike others of its kind – Georges de Scudéry's *L'Apologie du théâtre*, for instance – because it includes a long section entitled *De la Conduite des comédiens*, perhaps best translated as “How the Actors Manage Their Lives.” In this section, Chappuzeau depicts both the personal and professional lives of the actors, ranging from the establishment of the Paris troupes to how the troupes are organized to how actors raise their children. Because it has never been fully translated into English, I propose to take my time with it.⁸

Chappuzeau seems an unlikely apologist. A Calvinist born in Paris but educated in Geneva, he spent much of his life outside of France. In the early 1660s, however, he lived in and near Paris and wrote five plays that were performed by the resident troupes, three by the Hôtel de

⁷ This information is derived from Madeleine Jurgens and Marie-Antoinette Fleury, *Documents du Minutier Central concernant l'histoire littéraire, 1650–1700* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960) and from Georges Mongrédien and Jean Robert, *Les Comédiens français du XVII^e siècle: Dictionnaire biographique, suivi d'un inventaire des troupes, 1590–1710: D'après des documents inédits*, 3rd edn. (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981).

⁸ Samuel Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre françois*, ed. Georges Monval (Paris: Jules Bonnassies, 1875). Georges Mongrédien's *La Vie quotidienne des comédiens au temps de Molière* (Paris: Hachette, 1966), which has been translated into English (*Daily Life in the French Theatre at the Time of Molière* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1969]), relies heavily on Chappuzeau.

Bourgogne, one by the Marais, and one by Molière's troupe. His apology is exceptionally pro-theatre and not entirely credible, but it strikes a balance with the antitheatricalism that erupted with the publication of treatises in 1667 by Pierre Nicole and the prince de Conti.⁹

Chappuzeau's most often reported observation regarding the actresses is that the governance of a troupe, while not purely democratic, is a "sort of republic" where "the authority of the state is shared equally between the two sexes, the women being as useful to it or more so than the men, and they have a voice in all the deliberations that regard the common interest." It is to the advantage of an actor, Chappuzeau notes, to marry someone, who, like him, merits a share. . . . She has a voice in all the deliberations, and speaks up, if necessary, and (which is the principal benefit) the household is more united and profitable. The same is true of a good actress, for whom it is advantageous to marry a capable husband with a reputation, but one rarely encounters that.¹⁰

Among the most important matters that had to be deliberated was the choice of new plays. "The actors," according to Chappuzeau, "know better than all the playwrights and *beaux esprits* if a play has a chance of succeeding."¹¹ The women, however, at least according to Chappuzeau, "out of modesty left the judgment of works to the men, and rarely came to the readings, although they had the right to attend, and some of them certainly were capable of giving their insights to a poet."¹² This hardly sounds like the workings of a "republic," but what must be kept in mind is that Chappuzeau is writing polemic, not description, even though his tone is judicious. His goal is to refute the assumed "otherness" of the people who create theatrical productions; in order to do so, he cannot show them engaging in activities that are totally opposed to what a reader will approve. Hence, actresses can be seen to participate in a non-specific way in the management of their troupes, but only insofar as their actions express the accepted notion that modesty is an intrinsic female quality and that women who are not "modest" and who do not defer to men are somehow defective.

⁹ Pierre Nicole, *Traité de la comédie*, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1961) and Armand de Bourbon, prince de Conti, *Traité de la comédie et des spectacles, selon la tradition de l'église tirée des Conciles et des saints pères* (Paris: P. Romé, 1667).

¹⁰ Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre françois*, pp. 97–8. In fact, after mid-century only a few husbands and wives made equal or nearly equal contributions to their troupes; the Molières, the Du Parcs, and the Champmeslés come to mind.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 63. ¹² *Ibid.* p. 66.

Actresses are also painted by Chappuzeau as more difficult to manage than male actors, another stereotypical assumption. In the matter of casting, for instance, he perceives more competition among the women than among the men, even though their talents are as diverse, "this one excelling in the tender passions, that one in more violent emotions; this one admirable in a serious role, that one only appropriate to a comic role."¹³ "And," he adds later, "since there is not one of them who does not want to pass as forever young, they do not rush to perform the Sisigambis."¹⁴ This competition for roles would have brought the actresses into direct confrontations with the playwrights, who presumably had the power to cast their plays.¹⁵

Women were supposedly included when financial matters were considered, when the treasurer and the secretary made their reports, when decisions were made about repairs to the theatre or the acquisition of new scenes and machines, when the *répertoire*, that is, the list of plays to be performed, was drawn up, and, of course, when new members were proposed for the troupe or when other personnel issues arose.¹⁶

Those personnel issues often arose over the status of an actress. The *registre* kept by Charles Varlet *dit* La Grange of the troupe at the Palais-Royal allows us some fascinating insights into what some of those deliberations might have been like. In 1664, for instance, some members wanted to dismiss Mlle Du Croisy from the troupe, while others wanted to keep her. A compromise was reached; she was retained at a half-share, while the other half of her share went to compensate those who had wanted her gone.¹⁷ This absolute guarantee of bad feeling was repealed a year later, when Mlle Du Croisy was deprived of her share.¹⁸ Another example of creative personnel management occurred in 1670, when the troupe badly needed a replacement for Madeleine Béjart. An actress named Jeanne Beauval was summoned from the provinces in mid-season, but she came burdened with a less desirable husband. She was admitted with a full share, he with a half-share, but he was also required to contribute 500 *livres* a year from that share to a pension just established

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 85. Sisigambis was the mother of King Darius of Persia in Hardy's *La Mort de Daire*.

¹⁵ Presumably, because some evidence suggests the playwright did not always get his way. Racine, for instance, may have assumed that Mlle Du Parc would play Axiane in his *Alexandre le Grand* at the Palais-Royal, but the role was actually played by the troupe's customary ingénue, Mlle de Brie. See André Chagny, "Vie de Marquise Du Parc," *Cahiers raciniens* 6 (1958), 377.

¹⁶ Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre français*, pp. 109–10.

¹⁷ Charles Varlet *dit* La Grange, *Registre*, ed. Edouard Thierry (Paris: J. Claye, 1876), p. 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 72.

for Louis Béjart and to give 3 *livres* each day of performance to pay the salary of a *gagiste* ("hireling" in the English theatre) named Chasteauneuf.¹⁹ A share that year was worth 4,689 *livres*; M. Beauval's half-share was, then, worth 2,344 *livres*, 10 sous, minus the approximately 1,000 *livres* returned to the troupe. Two years later, the troupe wanted to relieve Beauval of part of this burden by admitting La Grange's wife at a half-share only if she would pay Chasteauneuf's salary. La Grange finally agreed to what he clearly thought was unfair, but only to "end our differences and maintain peace and amicable relations in the troupe."²⁰

The finances of a troupe were overseen by three officers: a secretary, a treasurer, and a controller.²¹ The treasurer kept the cash box and paid the bills, the secretary kept the *registre*, the account book and personnel record, while the controller kept an eye on the treasurer. From 1664 the actor André Hubert was secretary-treasurer of the Palais-Royal troupe, while La Grange and Du Croisy appear to have held the office of controller.²² Although the evidence is sparse, it would appear that women never held these offices. Chappuzeau does not say, one way or the other, but the *Registre* of La Grange and the other extant *registres* from the Palais-Royal have few mentions of the women.²³ Very early on during the troupe's stay in Paris La Grange makes several references to Madeleine Béjart. In July 1659, for instance, she was given a substantial sum, nearly 400 *livres*, for "vieilles décorations," presumably old scenery from the troupe's itinerant years that she had paid for. In August of the same year she was reimbursed for "expenses," and in April 1661 she received 10 *louis d'or* as a part payment for something. Madeleine Béjart had been one of the troupe's founders and a long-time leader, but when the troupe took over the dilapidated Palais-Royal theatre in 1661 it was not Madeleine but the actor L'Espy who oversaw the work of refitting it.

Chappuzeau describes the private as well as the professional lives of the actors. Theatrical families are portrayed by him as firmly and conservatively middle-class. The actors are charitable and "assiduous in pious exercises."²⁴ They bring up their children with great care; their sons are "instructed in *les belles connaissances*," what an educated man should

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. III. ²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 134.

²¹ Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre français*, pp. 143–4.

²² William Leonard Schwartz, "Light on Molière in 1664 from Le Second Registre de la Thorillière," *PMLA* 53 (December 1938), 1055.

²³ No such documents have survived from the other troupes.

²⁴ Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre français*, pp. 88–90.

know, and their daughters are occupied with learning housewifely skills. Their "table" is good, but not extravagant, their conversation during meals is decent, and in the end he can find "no distinction between their households and the best-regulated bourgeois household."²⁵ Except, perhaps, that the children of the best-regulated bourgeois households were not trained from infancy for the stage.

Chappuzeau may have realized at this point that his portrayal was not entirely believable, since he then confronts the issue of those actors "who do not live with all the regularity one might wish." "These people," he opines, "are tolerated only because they are of exceptional merit in the profession," and acting, he suggests dryly, is not the only profession where this is the case. According to Chappuzeau, many things must be considered before an actor or actress is accepted into a troupe. Does the person have the qualities necessary for success in the theatre: great natural talent, an excellent memory, a quick wit and intelligence, an easy-going disposition that will enable him or her to get on with the other actors, and – possibly less readily available than the other qualities – a zealous regard for the public good detached from all self-interest? Of course, good moral character is also to be wished for, and, in his opinion, one rarely finds in a troupe a man or woman whose behavior is actually scandalous, "for all the rumors that fly about everywhere are most often perfectly false."²⁶

He describes the theatres in admiring terms: the actors keep them clean and warm in the winter, and in the summer – when little air circulates in such closed spaces – they do their best to provide some ventilation. Backstage, the men and the women have their separate dressing rooms and will welcome visitors known to them. During the performance "they observe perfect silence. . . and sit modestly on seats in the wings so as not to miss their entrances."²⁷

To summarize, Chappuzeau writes:

Here in a few words is all that can be said about the governance of the actors and their behavior. I have not flattered them, the portrait I have made is faithful, and I could not refuse the request of several gentlemen who wanted to know them in depth in order to defend them against annoying criticism. . .

I would do them an injustice to portray them otherwise. In general, they live morally, they are honest and straightforward and deceive no one; they are civil,

²⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 90–1.

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 91–2.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 112–13.

polite, generous; they devote themselves wholly to the service of the king and the public; and in furnishing them with the most decent of pleasures. . . they merit the universal approbation of respectable people.²⁸

Not everyone would have agreed with this assessment, nor would this spotless theatre where virtuous men and modest women perform plays that will not bring a blush to the cheek of the most delicate of ladies have necessarily had wide appeal. Fortunately, the theatre was a bit more adventurous than Chappuzeau's apologetic rhetoric could encompass.

Most of the women who became stars or near-stars in the last half of the seventeenth century were not Chappuzeau's well-behaved bourgeois ladies but rather the tabloid celebrities of their day. I propose to take a careful look at the lives and careers of several of them in order to see how their increasing fame influenced the way in which drama and theatre developed, especially during the period of Molière and Racine (1640–80), and how the increasing emphasis on celebrity and notoriety affected how actresses were perceived. Curiously, most of the women who became or almost became stars were not born into the profession. Mlle Béjart, Mlle Des Œillets, and Mlle Champmeslé all chose the theatre, Mlle Du Parc was born on the fringe – her father was a Swiss-Italian *opérateur* or charlatan – but only Armande Béjart, Mlle Molière, was, as it were, born in a trunk and brought up a child of the theatre.

Madeleine Béjart came very close to being a star, if only she had stayed in Paris and if she had been less attached to the star of Molière. She was undoubtedly a very fine actress in both comedy and tragedy, but especially in tragedy, which could have set her apart had she remained in Paris during the time that tragedy was being reintroduced into the French theatre. Furthermore, she was connected both to *la galanterie* and Le Parnasse. She is described in Georges (and Madeleine) de Scudéry's *Almahide*, published in 1660–3:

She was beautiful, she was *galante*, she sang well, she danced well, she played all sorts of instruments, she wrote very prettily in verse and in prose and her conversation was very diverting. She was one of the best actresses of her century and her acting had the power to inspire in reality all the feigned passions that one sees represented on the stage. This agreeable actress was called Jebar and, as Abindarrays sought to divert himself and efface the memory of past adventures, he went to the theatre where he saw her play the role of Sophonisbe in a manner

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 114.

so touching and so passionate that first he admired her and then he loved her; first his heart was tender with pity, then she stole it from him.²⁹

Galante is a curious word with a certain built-in equivocation. On the one hand, it implies elegance and grace in language and in society; on the other, it suggests a libertine life style. A *galant homme* or *galante femme* is “respectable, civil, sociable, of agreeable conversation,” and someone who is professionally competent, who “has judgment.” On the other hand, a *femme galante* is a coquette, and *la galanterie* is what is delicately glossed as *le commerce amoureux*.³⁰

Mlle Béjart's early life seems to accommodate both meanings. Born in 1618 to Joseph Béjart, a restless and improvident minor officer of the court, and his wife, Marie Hervé, a *toilière-lingère*, in 1636 she had herself emancipated, that is, legally declared an adult and free of the tutelage of her parents, in order to buy a house in the Marais.³¹ She was involved with a young nobleman named Esprit de Remond, comte de Modène, one of the “elegant and gallant young men” in the retinue of Gaston d'Orléans, the brother of Louis XIII.³² Their child Françoise was baptized on July 11, 1638 and was recognized by her father.

Mlle Béjart also had one foot on the slopes of Le Parnasse, literary Paris. In 1636 she offered a quatrain to Jean de Rotrou to be published with the liminary odes in his *Hercule mourant*.³³ Although her name appears in no documentary evidence from the 1630s relative to the Paris theatres, the possibility exists that she was a *gagiste* or small-part actor, probably at the Marais. She had a family connection to the playwright Tristan L'Hermite whose model tragedy, *Mariane*, was produced at the Marais in 1636. Her aunt, her mother's half-sister, married Tristan L'Hermite's brother Jean-Baptiste L'Hermite in March 1636, and her niece could have profited from the connection.

In any case, by June 1643, when she, her brother Joseph, her sister Geneviève, and seven others, including the young Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, founded the ill-fated Illustre Théâtre, she was their star, the only troupe

²⁹ Georges and Madeleine de Scudéry, *Almahide* (Paris: A. Courbe, T. Jolly, L. Billaire, 1661–3), vol. V, pp. 1536–7.

³⁰ *Dictionnaire de L'Académie Française* (1694). ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>.

³¹ For more details on the life of Madeleine Béjart, see Virginia Scott, *Molière: A Theatrical Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 32–47 *et passim*.

³² N.-M. Bernardin, *Un Précurseur de Racine: Tristan L'Hermite, sieur du Solier (1601–1655). Sa famille, sa vie, ses Œuvres* (Paris: A. Picard et fils, 1895), p. 186.

³³ Georges Mongrédien, *Recueil des textes et des documents du XVII^e siècle relatifs à Molière* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1965), vol. I, p. 59.

member granted the right by contract to choose any role she liked.³⁴ With the failure of the *Illustre Théâtre*, Madeleine Béjart and M. Poquelin, the newly self-christened Molière, joined the troupe of Charles Dufresne which was sponsored by the duc d'Épernon, the governor of Guyenne and Gascogne, a vast area in southwestern France. The playwright Jean Magnon dedicated his newest play to Épernon, thanking him for his "rescue" of Mlle Béjart, "the most unhappy and one of the most worthy actresses of France... You have taken that unfortunate woman from a precipice where her merit had cast her, and you have restored to the stage one of the most beautiful characters that it has ever borne."³⁵ The actress had starred as the concubine Aspasia in Magnon's *Artaxerxe* at the *Illustre Théâtre*.

Unfortunately, Mlle Béjart and Molière were to remain out of Paris for fourteen years, long enough for her to miss the opportunity to become the first great Parisian star. By the time they returned, in 1658, she was 40 and the leading tragic actress of a troupe that did not play tragedy well and that was about to become famous for comedy. Although their audition for the king included Corneille's *Nicomède* (which according to legend was not well received), it was Molière's farce of *Le Médecin amoureux* that persuaded the king to establish a third French troupe in Paris.

In 1669 Saint-Evremond wrote to Anne Hervart that "we have here some Actors rather good in comedy, detestable in tragedy, with the exception of one very good Actress in everything. They have performed *Tartuffe*."³⁶ This would appear to be a reference to Mlle Béjart, who played Dorine, but who continued to appear in tragedy. At least, her penchant for tragedy might be one reason the troupe at the Palais-Royal continued to offer a tragic repertory, even though it was hardly a money-maker. Madeleine Béjart, who had given her whole professional life to this troupe, deserved some small recompense, even if it was only the chance to play some of her great roles from time to time.

Between 1659, when La Grange began his *registre*, and the summer of 1670, when Mlle Beauval was suddenly summoned from the country to play Mlle Béjart's roles, the troupe reprised a small group of tragedies almost every year. In the first season of the decade, the troupe – newly

³⁴ Madeleine Jurgens and Elizabeth Maxfeld-Miller, *Cent Ans de recherches sur Molière, sur sa famille et sur les comédiens de sa troupe* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1963), p. 228.

³⁵ Mongrédien, *Recueil*, vol. I, p. 78.

³⁶ *Lettres* (1967), vol. I, pp. 206–7. Cited in Georges Mongrédien and Jacques Vanuxem, "Recueil des textes et des documents du XVII^e siècle relatifs à Molière: Supplément," *XVII^e Siècle* 98–9 (1973), 132.

established at the Petit-Bourbon – included ten existing tragedies in its repertory and introduced two new ones, for a total of thirty-seven performances. In the following season it introduced two more new tragedies, both by Gilbert, but reprised only four, for a total of twenty-eight performances. In 1661–2 two tragedies from the previous season were reprised along with four from the repertory, for a total of thirty performances. Those four, along with one other, continued to be performed periodically until 1669. They were Pierre Corneille's *Héraclius*, *Sertorius*, and *Rodogune*, Tristan L'Hermite's *Mariane*, and Jean de Rotrou's *Venceslas*.³⁷ Both *Héraclius* and *Rodogune* have wonderful roles for a powerful woman of a certain age. In *Héraclius* Léontine is a pivotal role, the character who has made the choices that drive the plot and the one who knows the truth. In *Rodogune* Cléopâtre, queen of Syria, is a woman who will sacrifice anything, including her twin sons, to get the throne. If these were Madeleine Béjart's roles, then her tragic *emploi* was what was later known as *rôles forts* or *reines*.

As late as 1667 Madeleine Béjart was originating tragic roles. In that year the troupe at the Palais-Royal created Pierre Corneille's penultimate tragedy, *Attila the Hun*. We know from Subligny's "appreciation" of it that the three women's roles were played by "du Parc & Bejart / Et la jeune Molière mesme,"³⁸ while from Robinet we learn that Mlle Molière played the *confidente* Flavie.³⁹ The two heroines, thus, were played by Mlle Béjart and Mlle Du Parc, even though the former was nearly 50. Since Ildione has a seduction scene and Honorie has a scene of furious rage, I will propose Mlle Du Parc for Ildione and Mlle Béjart for Honorie.

Still, no matter how generous the troupe may have been in offering Mlle Béjart the occasional chance to play her favorite tragic queens, she is still remembered as Molière's mistress–helpmate and as an actress who specialized in comic *servantes* and *suivantes*. The gazetteers paid very little attention to her compared with the tall, beautiful Mlle Du Parc and the seductive Mlle Molière. Tallemant des Réaux reports that rumor had it that "she was the best actress of all," although he has never seen her

³⁷ *Héraclius*, *Rodogune*, and *Venceslas* were published and made available to the provincial troupes between 1644 and 1647; *Mariane* dates from 1636 and *Sertorius* from 1662. Because *Sertorius* was played in 1670, after Madeleine Béjart stopped performing, I have excluded it from the considerations that follow.

³⁸ March 10, 1667 in James de Rothschild, ed., *Les Continuateurs de Loret* (Paris: D. Morgand & Cie, 1882), vol. II, p. 715.

³⁹ *Ibid.* March 13, 1667, p. 724.

play.⁴⁰ He wrote this while she was still in the south, but if he did go to see her after the return to Paris, he might not have been aware that the actress playing Magdelon or Dorine was the same one whose “master-piece” was Epicharis in Tristan L’Hermite’s *La Mort de Sénèque*.

Age and appearance were important criteria for a star, and they were problems for Mlle Béjart, although not always for other actors and actresses. Floridor and Montfleury at the Hôtel de Bourgogne continued to play young heroic roles into their 50s and 60s, even though Montfleury was grossly overweight, while Mlle Des Cèllets played the innocent princess Hermione in Racine’s *Andromaque* at 45 or 46. Mlle Béjart, on the other hand, was derided for being too old. Donneau de Visé ridicules her twice in *La Vengeance des marquis*, one of his many entries in the quarrel of *L’École des femmes*. Ariste, a “friend of the Hôtel de Bourgogne” according to the cast of characters, asks,

apropos of *Le Prince jaloux* [Molière’s *Dom Garcie de Navarre*] what do you have to say about the one who plays the *première amante*? The Painter [i.e., Molière] says that it takes fat men to play the kings in the other troupes,⁴¹ but in his it seems that only old women can play the *première* roles, since a beautiful young person would not have that certain something.⁴²

Later in the same play, he includes a dirty little ditty that refers to Mlle Béjart’s entrance from a shell at the festival of Vaux-le-Vicomte. After the song comes the following exchange:

PHILIPIN I feel like I’m at *Les Fâcheux* and I see a beautiful young nymph come out of a seashell.

ARISTE I remember her; someone thought he could fool our eyes showing her like that and get us to take an old fish for a young nymph.⁴³

Some of this nastiness may relate to the aftereffects of Molière’s marriage to a young woman who was either Madeleine Béjart’s sister or, more probably, her daughter. The new *jeune première* of the troupe was Armande rather than Madeleine Béjart, and calling attention to Madeleine’s age was another tactic in the comic war that exploited the similarity between Molière’s own marriage and that contemplated by the character he played in *L’École des femmes*. But some of it may also have been a response to

⁴⁰ Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), vol. II, p. 778.

⁴¹ Molière had mocked Montfleury in *L’Impromptu de Versailles*.

⁴² Molière, *Cœuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), vol. I, p. 1104.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 1106.

the declining attractions of a woman whose success had been based in part on her sexuality.

All the elements were in place to make Madeleine Béjart the first star of the French theatre: talent, beauty, and mild notoriety. The timing, however, was off, the troupe was a bad fit, and her image as Molière's mistress discarded for her own daughter created the wrong kind of scandal. It was her daughter who would reap the rewards of that.

Another actress in the same generation who was not quite a star, although she played the right roles and was considered a fine actress, was Alix Faviot, Mlle Des Œillets. Her family background and her exact date of birth remain unknown, although the gazetteer Robinet says that she was 49 when she died in 1670.⁴⁴ She married Nicolas de Vis (or de Vin), sieur Des Œillets, sometime before 1637. Although we encounter him in Paris at the Marais in 1634,⁴⁵ the first documentary evidence that sites her in Paris is from 1649, when she is referred to as his widow.⁴⁶ They were the parents of a daughter, Claude, who was 49 when she died in May 1687, meaning that they must have been married or at least living together by 1636 or 1637, and that Alix Faviot was married very young, at 15 or 16.⁴⁷ Although her biographer, Jean Lemoine, wants her to have been in the troupe of the Marais with her husband in the mid 1630s,⁴⁸ there is no evidence of that, and it would seem probable that Mlle Des Œillets spent her early years as an actress in the provinces.

In 1649 she was living on the rue Vieille-du-Temple,⁴⁹ strongly suggesting that she was performing at the Marais; she was there again in 1660, when she signed the lease of the theatre. In 1662 she played the role of Viriate in Pierre Corneille's *Sertorius*, which opened in February to great success.⁵⁰ Mlle Des Œillets had some sort of special connection to the play, which may have been written to feature her. In any case, Corneille wrote to the abbé de Pure on November 3, 1661, asking his opinion of the unfinished play. "I have asked Mlle Des Œillets," he writes, "who is in possession of it, to show it to you whenever you want."⁵¹

⁴⁴ Jean Lemoine, *Les Des Œillets: Une grande comédienne. Une maîtresse de Louis XIV* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, s.d.), p. 11.

⁴⁵ Mongrédien and Robert, *Les Comédiens français*, pp. 73–4.

⁴⁶ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, p. 340. ⁴⁷ Lemoine, *Les Des Œillets*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* ⁴⁹ Howe, *Le Théâtre professionnel*, p. 340.

⁵⁰ S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le Théâtre du Marais* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1958), vol. II, pp. 142–3.

⁵¹ Corneille, *Œuvres*, ed. Ch. Marty-Laveaux (Paris: Hachette, 1862), vol. IX, p. 490.

Mlle Des Œillets left the Marais at the end of the 1661–2 season for the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which added *Sertorius*, conveniently published and available, to its repertory in fall 1662 in order to benefit from the success of the play and the actress. Corneille wrote on April 25, 1663, in response to being asked if he would have a new play for the Marais in the coming season, that he could not offer them anything so soon, but “I will be delighted to take my turn at the Hôtel from time to time. . . and I cannot fail the friendship of Queen Viriate, to whom I am so obliged.”⁵²

This suggests a package deal for the Hôtel: a new actress, a remounting of *Sertorius*,⁵³ and a new play from Corneille. And, indeed, the new play was *Sophonisbe*, starring Mlle Des Œillets, which opened at the Hôtel de Bourgogne at the height of the season in January 1663. *Sophonisbe* was the apex of Mlle Des Œillets’s career. Donneau de Visé describes her success in glowing terms:

This role, which is the most predominant in the play, is played by Mlle des Œillets, who is one of the premier actresses in the world, and who maintains the great reputation that she has enjoyed for a long time. I will not eulogize her, because I could not eulogize her enough. I will be content only to say that she plays this role divinely, better than can be imagined; that M. Corneille has to be obliged to her for it, and that if you go to see this play only to see this inimitable actress, you will leave completely satisfied.⁵⁴

We can conclude that Mlle Des Œillets had many of the attributes of a star: audiences were advised to see her whatever the vehicle, and an important playwright wrote roles for her. She also appears to have been empowered through her connection to Corneille. And she was a very good actress. On the other hand, she was not especially beautiful or sexually alluring, and she was not a celebrity. She was a Meryl Streep and not a Marilyn Monroe.

Georges Forestier, in his biography of Racine, makes a compelling argument that Mlle Du Parc, the beautiful celebrity actress who played the role of Andromaque, which was written for her, was far less accomplished on stage than Mlle Des Œillets, who played Hermione. “The character of Andromaque,” he proposes,

⁵² *Ibid.* vol. VI, pp. 354–5.

⁵³ Molière’s troupe also began to perform it on September 10, 1662, although with very little success.

⁵⁴ *Nouvelles nouvelles*, vol. III, p. 246. Reprinted in François Granet, *Recueil de dissertations sur plusieurs tragédies de Corneille et de Racine* (Paris, 1739), cited by Marty-Laveaux in Corneille, *Œuvres*, vol. VI, p. 452.

is relatively uniform; everything is lamentation. While the great role, the role with multiple facets, alternating the grandeur of a princess and the innocence of a young girl, tears and haughty irony, the abasement of love and at the last destructive vehemence, in short the role that, as one said in the seventeenth century, would “faire le brouhaha dans la salle,” [that is, “bring down the house,”] was that of Hermione. And, rightly, the character of Hermione went to Mlle Des Œillets, the great tragic actress.⁵⁵

The death of Mlle Du Parc in 1668, as we shall see, was a sensational scandal; the death of Mlle Des Œillets two years later was a loss to the theatre and a cause for grief, but her funeral was not a mob scene, nor did a handsome young playwright hang, half-dead, over her coffin. Instead, she was eulogized as a great actress who was not especially attractive. Mlle Poisson, originally Marie-Angélique Du Croisy, who grew up in the theatre and many years later described Molière and other actors of his time, recalled Mlle Des Œillets as “a very excellent and even charming actress, although ugly, not young, and very thin but, in spite of all that, very pleasing.”⁵⁶ Even her colleague and good friend, Raymond Poisson, took a swipe at her in his comedy *Le Poète basque*. A comic baron, also Basque, comes to the theatre hoping to see “Dalidor [Floridor] who does marvels,” and “also La Zeuilletts [Des Œillets] said to be without parallel. Although she doesn’t have great beauty, it’s said that the listener is enchanted by her.”⁵⁷ Poisson makes the same point in a comic letter-epitaph he wrote after her death which ended on a serious note:

And it justly could be said of her
That she was not as beautiful in the light of day
As she was in the light of the candles;
But without inspiring love,
And neither young nor beautiful,
She charmed all the court.⁵⁸

In other words, although a great actress with a wonderful voice, Mlle Des Œillets was not seductive. Nor was she an object of scandal. Her biographer reports no evidence of any “adventures” on her part, although she was widowed for more than twenty years.

⁵⁵ Georges Forestier, *Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 289.

⁵⁶ *Lettres au Mercure sur Molière*, ed. Georges Monval (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1887), p. 82.

⁵⁷ Raymond Poisson, *Le Poète basque*, in *Les Contemporains de Molière*, ed. Victor Fournel (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1863), vol. I, pp. 437–8. Notice it is the listener and not the spectator who is enchanted.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 438 n.

The next candidate for stardom was also a widow, although somewhat merrier. Marquise-Thérèse Gorle, known as Mlle Du Parc, was the opposite of Mlle Des Céillets: she was a less accomplished actress, but beautiful and notorious because of her relationship with Racine. References to her by the gazetteers almost always stress her height and her beauty and her ability as a dancer; she was the *grande et belle* Mlle Du Parc. Recent scholarship has also made much of her. For instance, in his earliest account of seventeenth-century actors, *Les Grands Comédiens du XVII^e siècle*, Georges Mongrédien includes biographies of nine actors and one actress: Marquise Du Parc.⁵⁹

Marquise-Thérèse Gorle (or Gorla) was from Lyons, the daughter of an *opérateur*, a seller of patent medicines. Her father, known as Jacomo de Gorla, was Swiss, from the canton of Grisons; her mother, Marguerite Jacquart, was from the canton of Tessin. Their daughter was born in 1633 or thereabouts, since she was 35 when she died in 1668.

In 1635 the Gorla couple declared officially that they wanted to become permanent residents of Lyon, and the city gave M. de Gorla permission to build a stage in the place des Jacobins and to sell his merchandise there. In 1653, when the marriage contract of his daughter was drawn up, he described himself as the “*premier opérateur du roi en la ville de Lyon*.”⁶⁰ Marquise-Thérèse Gorle was marrying René Berthelot, an actor known as Du Parc. He was the son of a bourgeois family from Nantes and a member of the troupe of Molière and the Béjarts, now in its ninth year as a traveling company.

The marriage contract is rather elaborate. Her parents contributed a dowry of 3,000 *livres* (plus a wedding dress “suitable to her quality,” that is, to her station in life), which apparently they thought was rather high.⁶¹ Several local notables signed the marriage contract as witnesses, along with Molière, and when the couple’s first child was baptized in Lyon a year later, the godparents were a rich banker and a baroness.⁶² The groom contributed 2,000 *livres* to the community of the marriage and promised the bride to “dress her and bejewel her with clothing and jewels,” also “suitable to her quality.” The bride was very young and very pretty; the groom was nearly twenty years older,⁶³ and not handsome. His *métier* was farce, which he played under the character name of Gros-René.

⁵⁹ (Paris: Société “Le Livre,” 1927).

⁶⁰ Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller, *Cent Ans de recherches*, pp. 308–10.

⁶¹ A later contract, discovered by Alain Couprie, suggests that Du Parc himself furnished the dowry to Marquise’s parents. See his *Marquise*, p. 26.

⁶² Audoubert, *Mademoiselle Du Parc*, p. 27.

⁶³ He was born January 24, 1615, according to a baptismal record included by Couprie, *Marquise*, p. 24.

As the name suggests, he was fat, so perhaps his contractual offer of nice clothes and jewels was meant to compensate for any lack of physical attractiveness.

The glimpses we get of Mlle Du Parc over the next few years all testify to her attractiveness to men. When Daniel de Cosnac, for instance, describes the competition between the Molière-Béjart troupe and the troupe of Cormier to become the prince de Conti's resident company in Pézenas in 1653, he notes that the prince's secretary, Sarasin, favored the Molière-Béjart troupe because he had fallen in love with Mlle Du Parc.⁶⁴ And both Pierre Corneille and his younger brother Thomas wrote love poetry to her, although, as Georges Forestier notes, it would be injudicious to assume, as some have,⁶⁵ that they were in love with her. To do so would be to

ignore all the poetic tradition: for Corneille, Marquise was the pretext for a long-distance joust with the great Ronsard on the theme of fugitive beauty and immortality, of the revenge of the aging poet. . . Thomas Corneille also wrote some verses to her, as if the two brothers were engaged in a little poetic tournament with Marquise as their inspiration.⁶⁶

Molière wrote a verse to her as well, very conventional, remarking on her beautiful complexion, her admirable figure, even her wit.⁶⁷ Part of the Molière *roman* is the belief that he was in love with or slept with all three of the actresses in the provincial troupe: Madeleine, Marquise, and Catherine de Brie. In fact, there is no hard evidence that he was the lover of either Mlle de Brie or Mlle Du Parc, both of whom appear to have been content with their husbands. André Chagny, in his biography of Mlle Du Parc, concludes that her private life was perfectly correct until after her husband died. And, besides, she was very often pregnant. She had at least five children, three of whom were living at the time of Du Parc's death in 1664.

Sorting out what roles Molière may have written for Mlle Du Parc is not easy, but it does not appear that he featured her or thought of her as a star. We are reasonably sure that none of his major ingenue roles were written for her; those usually went to Mlle de Brie and, later, to Mlle Molière. Roger Herzel, who is the usual authority on such matters, begins

⁶⁴ Daniel de Cosnac, *Mémoires* (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1852), vol. I, pp. 126–8.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Chagny, "Vie de Marquise Du Parc," *Cahiers raciniens* 5, 265–301, and Audoubert, *Mademoiselle Du Parc*, pp. 37–45.

⁶⁶ Forestier, *Racine*, p. 286. ⁶⁷ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, pp. 1183–4.

his investigations with a *Répertoire* drawn up for the Comédie-Française in 1685, giving the *distribution*, or casting, for thirty-four tragedies and forty-one comedies, including seventeen by Molière.⁶⁸ Herzel, who believes in “ownership of roles,” always begins by assuming, unless there is evidence to the contrary, that whoever was playing a role in 1685 had originated it. Unfortunately, if a role was originated by an actor who died before 1685, as in the case of Mlle Du Parc, the *Répertoire* is of no use.

An example of the complexity encountered in trying to resolve these matters of casting is Herzel’s assignment to Mlle Du Parc of the role of Éliante in *Le Misanthrope*. We know from Robinet’s *Lettre en vers* of June 12, 1666 that the three women’s roles in *Le Misanthrope* were originally played by Mlles Molière, Du Parc, and de Brie. We also know that in 1685 Mlle de Brie was cast as Arsinoë; thus, by Herzel’s reasoning, she must have originated that role. On the other hand, Arsinoë seems much closer to the *emploi* that we know Mlle Du Parc played in *La Critique de L’École des femmes* and *L’Impromptu de Versailles*.⁶⁹

Herzel also assigns Mlle Du Parc to certain roles based on her known physical characteristics. Beauty is thus the reason to grant her the role of Célie in *Sganarelle, ou le Cocu imaginaire*.⁷⁰ He also argues that she probably played Ascagne in *Le Dépit amoureux* and Ignès in *Dom Garcie de Navarre*, both *travesti* roles. The lady had nice legs and liked to show them off. According to Mlle Poisson, Mlle Du Parc was a dancer “who made certain remarkable leaps, for one saw her legs, and part of her thighs, by means of a skirt that was open on both sides, with silk stockings attached to a little pair of panties.”⁷¹ Ascagne is a decent-sized role with seven scenes, one very good one of *équivoques* and *doubles entendres*. Ignès is a small role, with a certain impact on the plot, but the real value of Mlle Du Parc to the event must have been her appearance *en cavalier*.

⁶⁸ Roger Herzel, *The Original Casting of Molière’s Plays* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981). Herzel relies on H. C. Lancaster, ed., *Actors’ Roles at the Comédie-Française According to the Répertoire des Comédies françaises qui se peuvent jouer en 1685* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953).

⁶⁹ Obviously, when Mlle Du Parc left the troupe, ten months after *Le Misanthrope* opened, someone had to move into her role, whether it was Arsinoë or Éliante. No actress was hired to take her place, so the options were limited to Mlle Béjart or Mlle Hervé. Mlle Hervé, though the sister of Madeleine Béjart, was not especially talented and was limited to bit parts; Herzel finds only one role in the entire repertory he thinks she might have played. That leaves Mlle Béjart, and it stretches credulity to think of her as the young cousin of her own daughter. My solution? Mlle Du Parc originated Arsinoë, which was in her *emploi*, as Éliante was in Mlle de Brie’s. Mlle Béjart took over Arsinoë, and, after her retirement, another adjustment was made.

⁷⁰ Herzel, *Casting*, p. 40. ⁷¹ *Mercur de France*, May 1740, p. 846.

Finally, we know for certain that Mlle Du Parc played Dorimène in *Le Mariage forcé* and Aglante in *La Princesse d'Élide*, because she is listed in *livrets*, descriptions of court productions. Aglante is a more or less standard lady-in-waiting, but Dorimène, “a young coquette” according to the cast list, is a lively role in a slapdash little play, originally put together hastily for a court ballet and festival. Unlike Molière’s habitual ingenue, Dorimène is perfectly happy to fall in with her father’s plan to marry her to a ridiculous old man since, as she explains, her father keeps her in the most irritating subjection, whereas with her new husband she can make up for lost time. She will take up gambling, paying visits, going to parties and dances – all the delights of urban society.⁷²

Two of the roles we know Mlle Du Parc played place her as a Paris society woman, perhaps a somewhat older and more hypocritical version of Dorimène. *Façonnière* is how the character Mlle Du Parc describes her role in the play being rehearsed in *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, a *façonnière* being “someone who affects airs, who affects a virtue she does not have, who wants to appear reserved and prudish.”⁷³ The sequence Molière writes for himself and Mlle Du Parc is worth quoting in full because of what it tells us about this *emploi*:

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| MOLIÈRE | As for you, Mademoiselle. . . |
| MLLE DU
PARC | Good heavens, as for me, I’m going to play my character very badly indeed, and I do not know why you’ve given me this affected prude to play. |
| MOLIÈRE | Good heavens, Mademoiselle, that’s what you said when I gave you the role in <i>La Critique</i> , and you were marvelous! Everyone said that you couldn’t possibly have done it better. Believe me, this will be the same; you’ll play it better than you think you can. |
| MLLE DU
PARC | But how can that be? There’s no one in the world who is less a prude than I am. |
| MOLIÈRE | That’s true. And that’s how you show what a really fine actress you are, by playing a character who is so unlike you. ⁷⁴ |

After this clever bit of actress management, Molière continues through the *distribution*. Later, directing the rehearsal, he returns to Mlle Du Parc and instructs her to “take great care, you, to *déhancher comme*

⁷² Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 720.

⁷³ See *Le Littré*, ARTFL, *Dictionnaires d'Autrefois*, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/17>, for *façon* and *façonnière*.

⁷⁴ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 682.

il faut, swing your hips like a society woman, and give yourself airs. That won't be easy for you, but there you are. Sometimes we must suffer for our art."⁷⁵

Climène in *La Critique* is a good-sized role which has an unusual preamble: two other characters spend a full page and a half (of the Pléiade edition) talking about her before she appears. She is described by wicked little Élise, played by Mlle Molière, as both *façonnière* and *précieuse* and as *la plus sotte bête*, "the greatest fool," who has ever tried to join a conversation. Her peculiar manner of walking is also depicted: "It seems as if her whole body is disjointed, and that her hips, her shoulders, her head all move on springs. She always affects a voice that is so small, so simple, and she'll make a little moue with her little mouth, and open her eyes way up to make them look big." Molière has been careful to instruct his actress about how to manifest her role. So perhaps Boileau, when he said she was "tall, had a good figure, but wasn't a good actress,"⁷⁶ had the right of it. Racine, as we shall see, apparently also felt the need to shape her performance.

At the end of the troupe's first season in Paris, the Du Parcs left the Petit-Bourbon for the Marais – about to reopen after a two-year hiatus. The reason seems to have had less to do with Mlle Du Parc than with her husband. Molière and his colleagues had lured away Jodelet, a popular *farceur*, and his brother L'Espy, leaving the Marais with a farce repertory and no one to play it. Jodelet was featured in Molière's first written-for-Paris play, *Les Précieuses ridicules*, but then died on Good Friday 1660, leaving Molière with a hit show containing a role written specifically for a dead actor. The solution was to get Du Parc back from the Marais. The gazetteer Loret greets his return with joy, suggesting that Gros-René is the pick of the crop and worth three times as much as Jodelet. He does not mention Mlle Du Parc.

It was when Molière introduced his comedy-ballets that someone like Marquise Du Parc would have been invaluable. The first of these plays with music was *Les Fâcheux*, written for Nicolas Fouquet's ill-fated fête at Vaux-le-Vicomte on August 17, 1661. The Paris opening took place on November 4. The published text gives very little information about how the musical interludes were managed at the Palais-Royal, although La Grange does mention special expenses for the ballet amounting to some 125–30 *livres* per performance, a considerable

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 689.

⁷⁶ Quoted by Forestier, *Racine*, p. 287.

amount.⁷⁷ However, even though ballet interludes were normally performed by hired professionals and not by members of the troupe, in this instance Loret writes about:

La Du Parc, that beautiful actress,
With the bearing of an Empress,
Who, whether singing or dancing,
Does nothing that is not delightful.

She probably played one of two small roles, either Orante or Clymène, who appear in only one scene, where they debate if a woman is better off with a lover who is jealous or one who is not. No one sings or dances in the published text, but Mlle Du Parc must have done both in one or more of the interludes. Loret goes on to say that a thousand men are sighing for her not only because of her face and her figure, but also because of her *beaux pas*, her fine dancing.⁷⁸

According to Mlle Poisson, “she shone at the king’s ballets in the *danses hautes*.”⁷⁹ Although a perusal of the court ballet *livrets* suggests that it would have been most unusual for one of the professional actresses to appear as a dancer in a court ballet, in at least one instance Mlle Du Parc did. The final *entrée* of the court production of *Le Mariage forcé*, seen first at the Louvre on January 29, 1664, is entitled “Four gallants cajoling the wife of Sganarelle,” that is, Dorimène, played by Mlle Du Parc. The four gallants were all courtiers. Loret, on this occasion, writes that nothing so raises the spirits as the charms, the figure, and the beautiful dancing of Mlle Du Parc.⁸⁰ After two performances at the Louvre and two at the Palais-Royal in the apartment of the duchesse d’Orléans, the play opened on February 15 at the Palais-Royal theatre, “with the ballet and the ornaments,” according to La Grange. The extraordinary expenses included extra musicians, dancers, costumes (330 *livres*), and silk stockings.⁸¹ Unfortunately, the extant published text is not of the 1664 comedy-ballet but of a rewrite Molière did later when he turned the three-act ballet into a one-act afterpiece, so it does not reflect all that Marquise Du Parc might have contributed to the play as well as to the final ballet interlude.

⁷⁷ I arrive at this figure by multiplying the amount per share by thirteen, the number of shares, adding to that the normal daily expenses for employees, candles, and musicians as related by La Grange in 1660, and subtracting the total from the reported receipts.

⁷⁸ Jean Loret, *La Muze historique, ou Recueil des lettres en vers, contenant les nouvelles du temps*, ed. J. Ravenel, Ed. V. de La Pelouse, and Ch.-L. Livet (Paris: P. Daffis; P. Jannet, 1857–79), vol. III, p. 431. ⁷⁹ *Mercur de France*, May 1740, p. 846.

⁸⁰ Loret, *La Muze*, vol. IV, p. 159.

⁸¹ La Grange, *Registre*, after January 15, 1664.

Molière found other opportunities to capitalize on the legs, the beauty, and the presence of Mlle Du Parc, especially during the famous *Plaisirs de L'Île enchantée*, Louis XIV's 1664 entertainment at Versailles. On the first day she represented "Spring," dressed in green embroidered with silver and multi-colored flowers, and spoke a tribute to the queen Marie-Thérèse. On the second day, she played Aglante, the cousin of the princesse d'Élide, but there is no evidence in the *livret* that she sang or danced. On the third day, she was featured as Alcine, the magician who enchanted Roger and his companions. She entered the lake upon which her castle was built, riding on a sea monster, and delivered with Mlles de Brie and Molière, who entered riding whales, a dialogue in praise of the queen mother. Mlle Du Parc also appeared in the ballet that followed, along with a number of courtiers and professional dancers. The festival ended with a reprise of *Le Mariage forcé*.⁸²

If Roger Herzog is right, Molière next cast her as Elvire in *Dom Juan, ou le Festin de Pierre*, which opened on February 15, 1665, a role with nothing of the comic in it. Perhaps it was as Elvire that she caught the eye of Racine, or perhaps that had happened earlier, since some evidence suggests that he may have been thinking of her for the role of Antigone in his first tragedy, *La Thébaine*. In a letter to the abbé Le Vasseur in November 1663 he writes: "*la déhanchée* will do the young princess." Molière, of course, applied that term to Mlle Du Parc in *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, but unfortunately Racine says, in the same letter, "I haven't seen *L'Impromptu*," and in the next letter, several days later, he reports that *La Thébaine* has been promised to the Hôtel.⁸³ In fact, the Hôtel delayed, and the impatient Racine gave the play to the Palais-Royal troupe instead, but the young princess was played by Mlle de Brie and not by Mlle Du Parc.

Racine gave his second play, *Alexandre le Grand*, to the same troupe, this time with a role for Mlle Du Parc. The first performance, on December 4, 1665, was brilliant, the audience studded with royals: Monsieur, the king's brother, with Madame, his wife, the prince de Condé with his son, and the princess Palatine.⁸⁴ On December 18, however, La Grange notes that "the troupe was surprised that the same play of Alexandre was played on the stage of the Hôtel de Bourgogne."

⁸² *Les Plaisirs de L'Île enchantée* (Paris: Ballard, 1664), reprinted in Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, pp. 747–829.

⁸³ Jean Racine, *Œuvres de Jean Racine*, ed. Paul Mesnard (Paris: Hachette, 1865), vol. V, pp. 502–8.

⁸⁴ Rothschild, *Les Continuateurs*, vol. I, p. 474.

The gazetteer Robinet was happy to do what he could for Molière and his actors, but by the time his 65-line encomium appeared on December 27, the box-office receipts at the Palais-Royal had fallen off so substantially that there seemed little reason to continue, and the play closed, as did the theatre – until the third week of February.⁸⁵

More than a few trees have died so biographers and critics could try to figure out why Racine, in defiance of custom, gave the same play to two theatres. Leaving aside questions of Racine's bad faith, however, a more interesting question is why the Hôtel was apparently able to dominate the competition so quickly. Granted, reputation was important and the Hôtel de Bourgogne was *the* tragic *tripot*, but the actors at the Palais-Royal started out in a position of strength. The first night attracted a glittering audience; Robinet's review promised a fine experience; and yet the audience deserted them for the other theatre.

The answer lies in the casting. A comparison between the two casts not only has something to teach us about the differences between Molière's actors and the tragedians at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, it also forces us to consider that our own idea of good acting was not necessarily shared by audiences in seventeenth-century Paris. At the Palais-Royal Mlle Du Parc played Axiane, "queen of another part of the Indies," beloved by the two kings Porus and Taxile, played by La Thorillière and Hubert. The other major female role, Cléofile, was played by Mlle Molière, while the *jeune premier*, La Grange, played Alexandre. The cast was young, the women were beautiful, the costumes were magnificent, but even Robinet, who had gone with a "faithful heart," found La Grange too gentle, much too handsome, and much, much too young.⁸⁶ Since Alexander died at 33 and La Grange was 30, the problem was not that the actor was unrealistic in our terms. Rather, he was *invraisemblable*, he did not conform to the *emploi* of a classical hero. The women fared better, but not for their acting skills. Of Mlle Molière Robinet writes: "Oh just Gods, but she is charming! Who could not love her? To say nothing of her beautiful hair, so well coiffed, and her clothes, strewn with pearls and rubies... a veritable Venus." And of Mlle Du Parc: "the tall Axiane, brilliant as Diana, with her rich clothes and all her charms."⁸⁷

Robinet's appreciation of the production at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, published a week later, is very much shorter and not especially

⁸⁵ The last month of that "interruption" was caused, however, by the death of the queen mother.

⁸⁶ Rothschild, *Les Continuateurs*, vol. I, pp. 537–8. ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

enthusiastic. He does tell us, however, the name of the actors who played the major roles. Floridor, who was almost twice the age of La Grange, was Alexandre; Porus, played at the Palais-Royal by La Thorillière, who was then 40 and who played a wide range of mostly secondary characters in Molière's comedies,⁸⁸ was played at the Hôtel by its star tragedian, the great Montfleury, who was around 50 and enormously fat. His daughter, Mlle d'Ennebaut, a mere child of 24, played Cléophile and "shone with a thousand young charms," while Mlle Des Œillets, then 45 and not beautiful, gave an admirable representation of Axiane and wore a very expensive costume.⁸⁹ Why, then, was this the successful production?

It may be helpful to think about tragedy as it was played at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in the seventeenth century the same way we thought about opera through most of the twentieth. As the Grands Comédiens saw it, the voice was what mattered. Mlle Des Œillets enchanted the listener, not the spectator, while Montfleury was the Luciano Pavarotti of his day, so heavy that he needed a supporting frame to hold up his belly on the stage. That apparently could be overlooked so long as the voice struck the ear harmoniously and conveyed the meanings of the text. As Sabine Chaouche writes, of tragic acting:

We know that on the seventeenth-century stage "dire c'est faire," to speak is to act... and "to speak" is above all to appeal to the imagination by the evocative power of the word, to create lively and stimulating images capable of insinuating themselves into the minds of the audience, and to make an impression, arouse the senses, and deeply move the spectator.⁹⁰

This aesthetic of acting, which stresses the written text at the expense of visual action, also indicates the growing importance of the playwright. No longer, like Hardy and Rotrou, merely the hired help, the playwright now could feel that it was the job of the actors to serve him and his intentions. On the other hand, Molière, although a playwright, was an actor as well, perhaps an actor above all, and while he was not personally successful in tragedy, he had an idea of how it should be played. That idea, which was less formal and formulaic than what took place on the rival stage, would be conserved and refined by Michel Baron, who began his distinguished career in Molière's troupe. The clash of these opposing styles would continue long after both Molière and Racine were dead.

⁸⁸ He may well have appeared more prominently in the tragic repertory at the Palais-Royal.

⁸⁹ Rothschild, *Les Continuateurs*, vol. I, p. 574.

⁹⁰ Sabine Chaouche, *L'Art du comédien: Déclamation et jeu scénique en France à l'âge classique, 1629–1680* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), p. 12.

Racine may have given his play to the Hôtel after discovering during rehearsals that he was unable to persuade the actors at the Palais-Royal to speak his verse the way he wanted it spoken. According to the unknown friend who recorded what Racine's elder son Jean-Baptiste had to say about his father, "[Racine] did not approve of the too lively way in which Molière's troupe performed verse. He wanted the sound of verse to join meter and rhyme, distinguishing it from prose."⁹¹ Molière, believing that verse could be performed as if it were actual speech, made fun of the measured delivery practiced at the Hôtel. As Béatrice Dussane notes, Molière was also unlikely to permit the young Racine to "encroach upon his authority." Mlle Du Parc may have been somewhat more tractable, a "docile imitator," according to Dussane, leading Racine to believe that he could shape her performance to achieve exactly what he had in mind.⁹²

She remained at the Palais-Royal through the 1666–7 season, where her most important new role was, as I have argued, Arsinoë in *Le Misanthrope*. She may also have performed in *Le Médecin malgré lui*; the distribution is unknown. She definitely played a role, probably Ildione, in Corneille's *Attila, roi des huns*, which opened on March 4, 1667 and was performed twelve times before the season ended on March 29 and Mlle Du Parc left for the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

Her departure was not a tragedy for the Palais-Royal, and she was not replaced. Many of her roles had been written before Mlle Molière joined the troupe; the younger actress stepped with no difficulty into *L'Étourdi*, *Sganarelle*, *L'École des maris*, and *Le Mariage forcé*.⁹³ *La Critique* and *L'Impromptu* presented more of a potential problem, but the latter was never played after Mlle Du Parc's departure and the former only very rarely. *Attila* did remain in the repertory; perhaps Mlle Molière took over the larger role and one of the utility actresses, Mlle Hervé or Mlle Marotte, stepped into the *suivante* role. The one real difficulty was Arsinoë in *Le Misanthrope*, but as I suggested above, Mlle Béjart could have played that, at least for the next few years.

Why did Mlle Du Parc leave the Palais-Royal for the Hôtel de Bourgogne? Georges Forestier thinks she was dissatisfied with her roles and peeved because she was always being passed over for the other actresses. But he has not thought about what roles may have been

⁹¹ Jean-Baptiste Racine, "Les Papiers de Jean-Baptiste Racine," ed. Louis Vanois, *Cahiers raciniens* 2 (1957), 63–4.

⁹² Béatrice Dussane, *Reines de théâtre* (Paris: H. Lardanchet, 1945), p. 31.

⁹³ The *répertoire* of 1685 assigns Mlle Du Parc's probable roles in *L'Étourdi* and *L'École des maris* to Mlle Guérin, i.e., Mlle Molière.

available for her in the tragedies, nor about her importance as a dancer. He also assumes, as does everyone else, that Racine had a hand in the change of venue. He points out that the Hôtel de Bourgogne, with Mlle Des Œillets and Mlle d'Ennebaut, did not need Marquise Du Parc, and that she was not given any of their roles. In his view, then, Racine imposed her on the troupe so that she could be his Andromaque, and the troupe was happy enough to have the chance to annoy Molière.⁹⁴ This is as good a reading of events as any.

Although Mlle Des Œillets and Mlle d'Ennebaut may not have resigned any of their roles in her favor – and, actually, we have no way of knowing whether they did or did not – Mlle Du Parc did originate at least one role other than Andromaque in her first season at the Hôtel, that of Éro in Gilbert's *Léandre et Éro*. Robinet advises his readers on August 20, 1667 to see the play and its leading actors, Floridor and *la grande Du Parc*, but since the play is lost, we have no way of speculating about the possibility that this role was written specifically to feature her. Many versions of the romance of Hero and Leander exist, all of which stress the sexual relationship of the doomed lovers, so perhaps the alluring Mlle Du Parc was a better choice than the less tempting Mlle Des Œillets.

In his gazette of November 26, 1667 Robinet most unusually begins his review of the new play *Andromaque* on page one and devotes an astonishing 90 lines to it.⁹⁵ He describes it as “the play, completely new, of Andromaque, the widow of Hector.” This lady, many years after her death, is reborn in the person of a charming actress, “a tall temptress, who, dressed in magnificent mourning, with her voice, her gestures, and her eyes, fills the role admirably.” He continues with a description that focuses on Andromaque's unintended effect on her captor, Pyrrhus, who has fallen madly in love with her: “It is Mlle Du Parc, served by her faithful escort, the Little God who Bears the Bow,” that is, Eros. Racine has clearly relied on her sexual appeal to add a layer to the play that would not be there with a less naturally seductive actress in the role.

Forestier believes that Racine was taking a certain risk casting Mlle Du Parc as the faithful widow, considering that by this time she was seeking solace in the playwright's bed for the loss of her own husband. In his view their relationship was already underway when Racine had preferred her to

⁹⁴ Forestier, *Racine*, pp. 288–9.

⁹⁵ Rothschild, *Les Continuateurs*, vol. II, pp. 1092–4. Theatre news usually came near the end of the gazettes.

Mlle de Brie for Axiane in *Alexandre le Grand*.⁹⁶ If that was the case, Forestier argues, the audience, up on the latest gossip, might actually have laughed at the sight of the merry widow in her classical weeds. Nonetheless, suitable or not, Marquise Du Parc finally had her starring role as a tragedy queen.

Racine's friend Boileau later said that Racine was in love with "la Du Parc" and wrote the role of Andromaque for her,⁹⁷ although in what sense he might have done so has been disputed. The romantically inclined like to think of her as Racine's muse:

The author watches the woman, this young widow, mother of a little boy. The heart of the actress, faithful to Du Parc, beats with the same rhythm as the heart of Andromaque, faithful to Hector: [Racine] is inspired by her, watches her work, listens to her intonations, to the inflections of her enchanting voice. There is a veritable osmosis between the poet Jean Racine and the actress Marquise Du Parc: the conception of *Andromaque* without a doubt owes as much to the one as to the other.⁹⁸

Others recall that Boileau went on to say that Racine "taught her her role; he had her repeat it like a scholar,"⁹⁹ which sounds more like Pygmalion and Galatea than a tragic poet inspired by his own Melpomene. André Chagny tries to resolve any conflict. "Their artistic collaboration created a strong and intimate link between two sensibilities, two intelligences, two wills," but why should it be a problem if, "in order to be certain that his verses were understood and would be spoken with the correct expression, Racine felt obliged to teach her the role himself"?¹⁰⁰

No anecdotes have come down to us suggesting that Mlle Des Œilletts – whose role of Hermione was larger and required a far greater range than did that of Andromaque – had to be taught her text word by word, inflection by inflection, and after devoting 13 lines to Mlle Du Parc, Robinet gives 30 to her rival, far more prominent in the action and, in the end, seen "in full glory."

Nonetheless, Mlle Du Parc, no longer merely a dutiful wife and a valuable actress of the second rank, but a tragedy queen and the mistress of an ambitious and increasingly celebrated poet, was edging up toward

⁹⁶ Forestier, *Racine*, p. 289.

⁹⁷ This statement is not entirely worthy of belief, however. According to Mesnard, this is a memory of one Mathieu Marais, who held a conversation with Boileau on December 12, 1703 and recorded it in his manuscript memoirs. Racine, *Œuvres*, vol. I, p. 76.

⁹⁸ Audoubert, *Mademoiselle Du Parc*, p. 144.

⁹⁹ Chagny, "Vie de Marquise Du Parc," *Cahiers raciniens* 2, 456–7. ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

stardom. In memory she will seem to have been more than she was. According to Jacques de Losme de Monchesnay, who published reminiscences of Boileau, even that well-known realist remembered Mlle Du Parc as “the most famous of [Molière’s] actresses.”¹⁰¹ If she had lived a little longer, if she had played some or all of the rest of Racine’s heroines, she might well have been the first real star of the French stage. Unfortunately, a year later she had died in mysterious circumstances, and that, combined with accusations made some years later during the so-called poison scandals, created her posthumous notoriety.¹⁰²

Briefly – since the story can be easily found elsewhere – Mlle Du Parc probably had a daughter by Racine in May 1668. This conclusion rests on two bits of evidence. On May 12, 1668 a female child, Jeanne-Thérèse, supposedly the daughter of unknowns Pierre Olivier and Marie Courturier, was baptized in Auteuil. The godparents were Racine and the 10-year-old daughter of Marquise Du Parc, Marie-Anne. That this was actually the daughter of Racine and Marquise-Thérèse Du Parc is substantiated by Jean-Baptiste Racine’s anonymous friend who wrote:

M. Racine still very young was attached to Mlle Du Parc. . . he had a daughter by her who died at about eight years and was buried at Saint Roch. These facts were to be found in an oblong *registre* where M. Racine wrote down his receipts and expenses. In this *registre*, which Monsieur his son burned after having perused it, there were, among other articles: “So much. . . for the nurse of my F[ille?]” . . . and “So much for the burial of my daughter.”¹⁰³

After considering this evidence, Georges Forestier finds it “highly probable” that Jean-Baptiste’s friend was right, that there was a child, and concludes that it had to be kept secret, since neither the playwright nor the actress could afford the scandal of illegitimacy.¹⁰⁴

At the same time, gossip began to circulate about Mlle Du Parc. The same tale was told about two different enamored young gentlemen. According to Mme de Montmorency, in a letter of July 10, 1668, the

¹⁰¹ Jacques de Losme de Monchesnay, *Bolaeana*, in Nicolas Boileau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Édouard Fournier (Paris: Laplace, Sanchez & Co, 1873), p. 465.

¹⁰² The “affair of the poisons” involved a number of noblewomen and others associated with the activities of Catherine Deshayes, known as la Voisin, who sold love potions and practiced witchcraft, midwifery, and abortion. Louis XIV appointed a *chambre ardente* to investigate the situation, but closed the enquiry when his mistress, Madame de Montespan, was implicated. La Voisin was put to death in February 1680. See Anne Somerset, *The Affair of the Poisons: Murder, Infanticide, and Satanism at the Court of Louis XIV* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 2003).

¹⁰³ See Beatrice Dussane, *Du Nouveau sur Racine* (Paris: Divan, 1941), pp. 10–11; Racine, *Œuvres*, vol. I, p. 75; and the analysis of Forestier in his *Racine*, pp. 343–4.

¹⁰⁴ Forestier, *Racine*, p. 344.

family of the chevalier de Genlis found it necessary to lock him up because of his crazy whim to marry Marquise Du Parc, but according to a series of letters between Bussy-Rabutin and Mme d'Armentières it was the chevalier de Rohan who was struck by this madness.¹⁰⁵ In any case, even if both of them had wanted to make such an unconventional marriage, she probably had very little interest in marrying a stage-struck boy. And, according to one totally unreliable witness, she was at that point secretly married to Racine.¹⁰⁶

The run of *Andromaque* was interrupted in mid-December 1667 by the sudden death of Montfleury, who supposedly burst a blood vessel while performing a mad scene in Act V. If or when performances were resumed, and with what actor, is unknown. Nor do we have any further information about Mlle Du Parc's repertory at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. If she was pregnant through the spring, she may have stayed off the stage. Actresses normally played throughout their pregnancies, but hers was irregular. And then she seems to have become pregnant again.

According to Boileau, she died *en couches*, in childbirth.¹⁰⁷ This happened on December 11, 1668, almost exactly eight months after the birth of Jeanne-Thérèse, casting some doubt on a full-term pregnancy. The consensus would seem to be a miscarriage, but whether natural or induced is a matter of speculation.

That speculation has been fueled by what happened eleven years later. Racine, disgusted by the fate of his great tragedy *Phèdre*, victim of a cabal, retreated from the theatre. On May 30, 1677 he married Catherine de Romanet, a choice based not on love or self-interest, but purely on reason, or so says Louis Racine.¹⁰⁸ Racine had increased his status by purchasing the office of *trésorier de France* and had been named a royal historiographer by Louis XIV. In November 1679 he was the father of a son, Jean-Baptiste, and about to be a father for a second time when the notorious la Voisin, an abortionist involved in all sorts of nefarious back-alley activities, testified that Mlle Du Parc had been poisoned, and that her two daughters and her stepmother, who had been living with her, suspected that Jean Racine was the cause of their unhappiness.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 342, nn. 47–8.

¹⁰⁶ Audoubert, *Mademoiselle Du Parc*, p. 165.

¹⁰⁷ Or, rather, according to Mathieu Marais. See Paul Mesnard, "Notice biographique," in Racine, *Œuvres*, ed. Mesnard, vol. I, p. 98.

¹⁰⁸ Louis Racine, "Mémoires sur la vie et les œuvres de Jean Racine," in *ibid.* p. 268.

¹⁰⁹ François Ravaisson-Mollien, ed., *Archives de la Bastille* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1975), vol. VI, pp. 51–3.

The evidence was scanty, and Racine himself was never questioned or arrested, although an order for his arrest was issued at one point. A few months later the king made it clear that the position of M. Racine was secure when the Troupe Royale played his *Iphigénie* as entertainment for a wedding at court and his annual "gratification" was raised to 2,000 *livres*. Since all of the testimony heard by the *chambre ardente*, a court established by the king to root out sorcery and black magic, was kept secret, it is perfectly possible that Racine never even knew he had been accused. This sordid episode did not come to light, so far as I can tell, until the nineteenth century, when scholars began to sort through the Archives of the Bastille, preparatory to their publication.¹¹⁰ Its influence has been on modern biographies of Racine and Mlle Du Parc and, especially in her case, on the creation of a myth of celebrity/notoriety after the fact.

Mlle Du Parc may have been acquainted with la Voisin and used her services. La Voisin's own testimony that Racine would not let her see the dying actress suggests that the playwright suspected that the famous abortionist had been practicing her trade on his mistress. Mlle Du Parc also seems to have been linked to Olympe Mancini, the comtesse de Soissons, one of cardinal Mazarin's nieces, who was so deeply implicated in the poison affair that she had to leave Paris suddenly and pass the rest of her life in exile. In her two examinations concerning the actress, la Voisin testified that Mlle Du Parc's two daughters, Marie-Anne and Catherine, aged 9 and 10 at the time of their mother's death, were living in 1679 at the Hôtel de Soissons, presumably under the protection of the comtesse,¹¹¹ who was also the sister of the duchesse de Bouillon, one of the leaders of the cabal against Racine that emptied the house the first night of *Phèdre*.

Mlle Du Parc's name came up for the first time in the testimony of la Voisin's servant, la Boutier, who claimed "she had often seen la Du Parc, an actress, who was the *commère*, the gossip, of la Voisin and her intimate friend."¹¹² Several days later, la Voisin was asked about the connection,

¹¹⁰ Exactly when the news spread about the accusation of Racine and the involvement of Mlle Du Parc in the poison affair is unclear. Lemazurier's two-volume *Galerie historique des acteurs du théâtre français depuis 1600 jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Joseph Chaumerot, 1810) does not mention it. Paul Mesnard, in his "Notice Biographique" to his 1865 edition of Racine, knows about it; he read about it in a note to Monmerqué's edition of the letters of Mme de Sévigné published three years earlier. Monmerqué writes that he would have kept silent, if the original notes of la Voisin's testimony had not been available at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal.

¹¹¹ Ravaisson-Mollien, *Archives*, vol. VI, p. 52. ¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 39.

and she may at this point have taken advantage of the opportunity and added more ammunition to the Mazarines' war on Racine by naming him. Why Marquise Du Parc's daughters were being cared for by an enemy of her lover, however, is difficult to account for.

When Marquise Du Parc died in 1668, the gazetteer Robinet devoted 46 lines to her demise and her funeral. He repeated all the clichés that had built up over time: she was "belle," she had the bearing of a queen, Eros pulled his bow for her, and so forth. Her coffin was followed by a horde of actors, authors, and those who adored her (some incognito), those who had loved her, and one, among the playwrights, who was half-dead himself. And, of course, a crowd of those who had seen her on stage.¹¹³

Obviously, Mlle Du Parc went to her grave a star, a celebrity actress whose limited career was less important than her reputation as a seductive beauty. An actress with a much greater record of triumphs was Armande Béjart, Mlle Molière, who was also the victim of an outrageous, anonymous published attack, filled with unproven accusations and scurrilous anecdotes. This *libelle*, entitled *La Fameuse Comédienne ou histoire de la Guérin, auparavant femme et veuve de Molière*, was not published until 1688, too late to actually damage her career, but it had multiple additional printings.¹¹⁴ The stain it left on the reputation of Mlle Molière was made indelible by the Moliéristes of the nineteenth century, for whom she was, according to Sylvie Chevalley, the "chosen victim, because Molière had suffered the jealousies of an old husband with a beautiful and much admired young wife and because, a widow at thirty-one, she had not worn eternal mourning."¹¹⁵ Even before the publication of *La Fameuse Comédienne* she was the subject of a certain amount of gossip and speculation, but not enough to damage her reputation eternally.

The daughter or possibly the sister of Madeleine Béjart, Armande Béjart was born in 1642 or 1643.¹¹⁶ Her name, or rather her pet name, Menou, first appears in a handwritten cast list in a copy of the 1651 edition of Pierre Corneille's *Andromède*, possibly produced by the troupe of

¹¹³ James de Rothschild and Émile Picot, eds., *Les Continuateurs de Loret* (Paris: D. Morgand et Cie. 1890), vol. III, pp. 358–9.

¹¹⁴ For a thorough account of the certain and uncertain versions of this *libelle* see Cesare Garboli, ed., *La Famosa Attrice* (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 1997), pp. 103–19. A shortened version of Garboli's preface, translated into French, accompanies the text of the *libelle* in No. 31 of *Les Cahiers: Revue trimestrielle de théâtre*, published in Paris in 1999 by the Comédie-Française.

¹¹⁵ Sylvie Chevalley, "Armande Béjart, comédienne," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* (September–December 1972), 1035–51.

¹¹⁶ For a full discussion of the mysteries surrounding Mlle Molière's parentage and birth, see Scott, *Molière*, pp. 6–8, 43–6.

Molière and the Béjarts in Lyon in 1653.¹¹⁷ She and another young person, Mlle Magdelon, were to be cast in this elaborate machine play as nymphs. She married Molière on February 20, 1662 when she was, according to the marriage contract, “twenty or thereabouts.”¹¹⁸ Molière was just 40. He had provided for this eventuality at the Easter break of 1661 when, according to La Grange, he had asked for two shares “for himself or for his wife if he married.” The troupe agreed.¹¹⁹

The first new role we know that Mlle Molière played – although she might have taken over one or more existing roles – was Élise in *La Critique de L'École des femmes* which opened on June 1, 1663, more than a year after the marriage; her introduction had been carefully thought through. Élise is not a flirt like Mlle Molière's greatest role, Célimène, although she does share with Célimène a critical eye and a sharp tongue. She opens the play, probably with Mlle de Brie as Uranie, by announcing that she likes company, but only the chosen few, complaining that cousin Uranie is at home to far too many fools. When a servant announces the impending arrival of Climène, the prude played by Mlle Du Parc, Élise paints her portrait in the most unflattering colors. Molière was, I believe, taking advantage of the “shadow persona”¹²⁰ of his new actress and beginning to construct an *emploi* for her. Not all of her roles would express this combination of intelligence and malice, but many would. Others would put on display Mlle Molière's quite remarkable voice and bearing, and would rely on her real or imagined beauty. Like many actresses – Mlle Des Œillets before her and Mlle Champmeslé after her – Mlle Molière was not universally admired for her beauty, but again like many actresses she could appear to be beautiful on the stage, and she seems to have been sexually alluring.

We can assume that *le tout Paris* was waiting for that first appearance. Although she had not played the role of Agnès in *L'École des femmes*, the first of Molière's major social comedies and a great favorite with the Paris audience, her off-stage role made an essential contribution to Molière's successful strategy for the play. As the character Arnolphe had raised the child Agnès to be an innocent, providing him with a marriage free from the fear of cuckoldry, so – according to the common gossip – Molière had

¹¹⁷ The page is reproduced in Suzanne Dulait, *Inventaire raisonné des autographes de Molière* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1967), plate 73.

¹¹⁸ Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller, *Cent Ans de recherches*, pp. 366–70. La Grange has the date wrong in his *Registre*. According to him they were married on February 14.

¹¹⁹ La Grange, *Registre*, after April 1, 1661.

¹²⁰ See Chapter 4, p. 107, for Christian Biet's discussion of this term.

raised Armande in order to marry her, although innocence was not part of the equation. Taking advantage of his personal life was perhaps not one of Molière's most commendable habits, and this example backfired rather seriously.

Mlle Molière then played herself in *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, where Molière gave her a speech about husbands and gallants that would also return to haunt him. After the first run of that play was completed at the end of December 1664, Mlle Molière managed to work in the birth of her first child, Louis, baptized February 28. The king was his godfather, taking a stand against the gossip that had circulated during the quarrel of *L'Ecole des femmes*.¹²¹

L'Impromptu returned to the repertory on March 16. A few months later, Molière introduced his young actress-wife to the court with the title role in *La Princesse d'Élide*. This comedy-ballet was first seen at Versailles as part of the *Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée* on May 6, 1664, and later that year in Paris from November 9 through January 4, 1665, a successful twenty-four performances in all. This is one of Molière's plays that has not remained in the repertory, along with two other spectacle entertainments that starred his wife: *Psyché* and *Les Amants magnifiques*.¹²² Nonetheless, both *La Princesse* and *Psyché* were important additions to the Palais-Royal repertory, and Mlle Molière's contribution to their success was enormous.

The princesse d'Élide is a veritable Diana, a great huntress, scornful of love; she is courted by three princes, summoned by her increasingly desperate father. The plot is reminiscent of Agustín Moreto's *El Desdén con el Desdén*, published in 1654. One of the princes, Euryale, "meets disdain with disdain," and the stratagem is successful. The other two princes are married to two convenient cousins (Mlle de Brie and Mlle Du Parc), and all's well that ends well, as usual.

In writing this role for her, Molière shows that he believes the young Armande Béjart capable of dominating the stage and, what is more, of representing royalty in the face of royalty, seated in state in front of her. Our first impression of his heroine comes when the other two lovers "save" her from the wild boar she has been hunting. She is furious with them. "Do you think," she says, "that the bow and arrow are useless in my hands?" She refuses to attend the chariot race they are planning, since she would be the prize. "Love," she argues, "is nothing but error and

¹²¹ Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller, *Cent Ans de recherches*, pp. 385–6.

¹²² *La Princesse d'Élide* has had one modern production, by the Comédie-Française in 1981 as part of Maurice Béjart's *Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée*.

weakness" where men "make slaves of us." "All those tears, all those sighs, all that deference, all that respect are snares, set to trap our hearts."¹²³

The lady does not meet her match until Act III, when she actually seeks Euryale out, her interest piqued by *his* renunciation of love. Ariane Mnouchkine used this scene as the key to the character of Armande in her film, *Molière*. Watching a rehearsal, Molière motions La Grange as Euryale away and begins to play the scene himself with his wife, returning her again and again to the same line: "without wanting to love, one always finds it very pleasant to be loved."¹²⁴ This is an example of using a dramatic character as a source for imagining the character and behavior of an actor. The long-held myth that an actor can perform on stage only what he or she performs in life is still at play here, amplified by the personal relationship between the actress and the playwright.

I propose to argue that the anonymous *Fameuse Comédienne*, which is all too often the starting-point when writing about Mlle Molière, is another example of confusing actor and roles, deliberately and maliciously. Even though it was published late in her career and would have had little influence on her drawing power as a star from her debut in 1663 until its appearance in 1688, it has certainly had a pernicious effect on her reputation. Cesare Garboli notes that "the constant reference to the *libelle* as an irrefutable source of historical knowledge is accompanied by an almost formulaic contempt for it"; however, Garboli, like other scholars, overcomes this contempt and views the document as "an original source... perhaps more credible than the others."¹²⁵ Another contemporary scholar, Yves Giraud, who wrote a kind of prolegomenon to a critical edition that was never published, argues that "one can challenge or at least minimize the value of the testimony, without discarding the 'important revelations' that it contains."¹²⁶

To analyze all the commentary on this document would require a lengthy detour, but briefly: Three scholars – Paul Lacroix, Jules Bonnassies, and Ch.-L. Livet – took it on in the nineteenth century.¹²⁷ Livet's is by far the most useful and illuminating edition, although Bonnassies developed the famous list of fourteen errors which was meant to discredit the document's

¹²³ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, pp. 791–2.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 802.

¹²⁵ Garboli, *La Famosa Attrice*, pp. 9, 13.

¹²⁶ Yves Giraud, "La Fameuse Comédienne (1688): Problèmes et perspectives d'une édition critique," in *Festschrift für J. Grimm*. Biblio 17 (Paris-Seattle-Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1994), p. 191. "Important revelations" is quoted without citation from Bonnassies, see below.

¹²⁷ *La Fameuse Comédienne*, ed. Paul Lacroix (Geneva: J. Gay, 1868); *La Fameuse Comédienne*, ed. Jules Bonnassies (Paris: Barraud, 1870); *Les Intrigues de Molière et celles de sa femme, ou La Fameuse Comédienne*, ed. Ch.-L. Livet (Paris: Isidore Liseux, 1876).

evidentiary value. All were men of their century, writing at a time when Molière was being promoted as a *grand homme de la France* and as a philosopher-moralist. Their primary aim was to defend him against infamy, and especially against the *libelle's* accusation that he had engaged in a pedophilic relationship with the boy Baron. Nonetheless, they did not simply dismiss the nasty thing as a tissue of lies. They – and nearly everyone after them who has written about Molière and his wife – found it appropriate to believe any allegation made against Armande Béjart, so long as it did not reflect discredit on her husband. In fact, most historians and biographers seem eager to believe that she was guilty of betraying him with multiple men, finding this cuckold-victim portrait somehow sympathetic.

Editors are naturally interested in the reliability of the information in *La Fameuse Comédienne*, but not as interested as they should be. Jules Bonnassies is cited for having thoroughly examined the document for errors and for finding fourteen of them, although some of the “errors” found by Bonnassies were very minor and some were not errors at all, as later editors like to point out. The problem with error-hunting in this kind of haystack of untruths, half-truths, and innuendoes is that one tends to think that whatever cannot be disproved must be true. Hence, Giraud – who like Garboli wants to find the *libelle* useful – can write: “it is difficult to catch our author lying *in flagrante delicto*. Some inexactitudes, some imprecisions, some errors in detail certainly (patiently collected by Bonnassies and Livet) but no inventions.” He then feels free to use the document to construct what he believes to be an accurate account of Mlle Molière:

At the least, *La Fameuse Comédienne* retains one indisputable merit: that of giving us a portrait of Armande “au naturel” and unsuspected of falsification. We know that she is not beautiful. . . Pleasing, seductive, a seductress, “knowing in sexual matters,” “clever,” worldly, knowing how to please and arouse emotions. Coquette, she loves luxury and pleasures, costly clothes. Vain and a spendthrift, she loves to be courted and is sensitive to flattery, to compliments, credulous and easy to maneuver.

Above all, she is proud and haughty, sharp and thin-skinned, wanting to be applauded in everything and contradicted in nothing. “Imperious,” “affected,” “capricious,” according to the variants, she is “an extraordinary *esprit fort*” and has shifts in mood that make her “bizarre,” and quick-tempered as well. She gives herself “airs of importance” and speaks only of her vapors. For the rest, she has little education and not very much intelligence. She affects a negligent air and an “eternal cough.”¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Giraud, “*La Fameuse Comédienne*,” p. 211.

Almost everything in this astonishing list can be attributed to one or more of the roles Mlle Molière played. Even the cough – although usually her husband is the one with the cough – can be found in the second seduction scene in *Tartuffe*, when Elmire tries to get Orgon's attention.

The *libelliste* accuses her of having three noble lovers at the time of *Les Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée*; the princesse d'Élide has three noble lovers. "Haughty" and "imperious"? So is the princesse, until she decides that love is not so terrible after all. "Seductive, a seductress"? Like Célimène? Like Psyché, who attracts Eros himself? Like Elmire, who seduces Tartuffe without trying? "Sensitive to flattery"? Célimène, again. "Not beautiful"? Like the "middling" Lucile in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, with the "little eyes" that are "full of fire, the most brilliant, the most piercing in the world."¹²⁹ That "negligent air"? Lucile again, who "affects a negligent air in her speech and in her actions."¹³⁰ As for the major accusation, that Mlle Molière cuckolded her husband, we need look only at Angélique in *George Dandin*.

There is only one credible section of *La Fameuse Comédienne*, fully supported by documentary evidence from court files: the quite remarkable story of the provincial *président* from the Parlement of Grenoble who loved Mlle Molière from afar and was tricked by two women into believing that one of them, a prostitute named Marie Simonnet, was her.¹³¹ When Mlle Molière discovered the truth, she had the scoundrels arrested. Found guilty, the women were stripped naked and whipped "before the principal door of the Châtelet and before the house of the said Molière," while their dupe had to publicly confess what he had done and pay a fine.¹³² The *libelliste* introduces this as "an adventure of la Molière that extremely increased her pride."¹³³

As to the identity of the author, Mlle Molière's anonymous enemy, various culprits have been proposed. Yves Girard wonders, and I think rightly, if the answer is not to be found in another documented event which – funny thing – is not reprised in the *libelle*, even though it also paints a damaging picture of the actress.¹³⁴ The protagonist of this affair was a gentleman named Henri Guichard, who called himself Intendant Général des Bâtiments de Monsieur; in 1674 he received a royal privilege for an

¹²⁹ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 749. This scene – Act III, scene 4 – is often taken to be a physical description of Mlle Molière herself.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 750. ¹³¹ Garboli, *La Famosa Attrice*, p. 56.

¹³² Bonnassies edn., pp. xx–xxi.

¹³³ Garboli, *La Famosa Attrice*, p. 56. ¹³⁴ Giraud, "La Fameuse Comédienne," pp. 204–5.

Académie Royale de Spectacle, the purpose of which was to establish circuses and amphitheatres in which to perform imitations of the ancient Greek and Roman games.¹³⁵ Guichard was linked to Mlle Molière through Jean-Baptiste Aubry, the husband of Geneviève Béjart. Aubry's sister, Marie, was a singer at the Opéra and, according to Guichard, his mistress.¹³⁶ Apparently unhappy that his privilege did not allow him to include vocal music in his performances, Lully's monopoly restricting the use of music in other theatrical venues being in force, Guichard recruited yet another Aubry, Sébastien, whose reputation was not of the best, to introduce arsenic into Lully's tobacco. Sébastien told all to Lully and a trial ensued.

Mlle Molière was a witness for Lully, testifying that "during the month of November 1674, the sieur Guichard being at supper at her house, the sieur Lully was spoken of" and that "on this subject, Guichard said to her that the said Lully would soon croak."¹³⁷ Guichard responded with several *factums* impugning those who had testified against him, including Mlle Molière. He objects to her as a witness on the grounds that she is "infamous in fact and in law," that is, struck with civil infamy because she is an actress. He follows this legal challenge with a venomous personal attack. Following the standard allegation of incest, he accuses her of "universal prostitution," "public adultery," and "general abandonment of body and soul."¹³⁸ The diatribe goes on for pages. Guichard was eventually found guilty and ordered, while on his knees with his head bared, to admit that he had maliciously and wickedly formed the project of poisoning Lully. He may well have believed that Mlle Molière was one of those responsible for his fall from favor and taken his revenge.

Almost no one who has written about Molière and his wife has seriously questioned the general assumption that she was unfaithful to him. Livet, however, did ask, as early as 1876:

Who has doubted, who doubts that Molière was the most deceived of his contemporaries, and that Armande Béjart, his wife, was the worthy rival of the comtesse d'Olonne or the duchesse de la Ferté? We will not say that nothing is more false, but only that nothing is less certain. Where does this rumor come from, which has never stopped growing to this day? Is it in memoirs or in the letters of contemporaries that one finds the first traces of it? Not at all. Among

¹³⁵ Livet edn., "Appendice," pp. 227–8.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 229. ¹³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 239. ¹³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 236.

the actors of a rival troupe, enemies as ruthless as they are focused on Molière, there is one who, responding to an attack by the great comic playwright, assails the virtue of his wife. He knows that Molière is jealous, that his wife is a coquette, that the dart will be especially painful. . . And *voilà*, Alceste transformed to Sganarelle for all posterity.¹³⁹

Livet is probably referring to Montfleury's petition to the king, mentioned by Racine. However, he might also be thinking of Donneau de Visé, who suggested during the quarrel of *L'École des femmes* that Molière was not entirely happy in his marriage. In *Nouvelles nouvelles* he wrote: "if you want to know why in almost all his plays he makes so much fun of cuckolds, and depicts the jealous husbands so naturally, it is because he is numbered among the latter. . . To do him justice, he gives no evidence of his jealousy off the stage, he is too prudent for that."¹⁴⁰ At this point, Donneau de Visé himself admits he has no evidence that Molière is even jealous; his comment is obviously based on the roles the actor wrote for himself, especially Sganarelle and Arnolphe in the two *École* plays. Out of this kind of innuendo, clearly allied to the play that was the subject of the quarrel, has come the legend of the unfaithful Armande, never challenged because, after all, she was an actress.

Molière's first biographer, Grimarest, who obviously knew the *libelle*, creates an alternative narrative to counter the rumors. The young Armande Béjart, he proposes, was more sinned against than sinning. "It is very difficult," he notes, "for a beautiful, soignée actress to conduct herself in such a way that she cannot be attacked. When an actress renders to a great Lord the polite attentions that are owed to him, the gossips show no mercy; he's her lover." He attributes Molière's unhappiness to his own jealous temperament, adding that "Molière imagined that the whole Court, the whole Town wanted his wife" and that "she neglected to disabuse him."¹⁴¹ Grimarest is also clearly guilty of using the plays as evidence: "He had explained clearly to his wife how she should conduct herself if they were to live happily together, but she did not profit from his lessons that appeared too severe for a young person who, what's more, had nothing to reproach herself about."¹⁴² Grimarest's strongest condemnation of her? That, once married, she behaved as if she thought she was a

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* pp. x–xi. ¹⁴⁰ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 1022.

¹⁴¹ Jean Léonor Le Gallois, sieur de Grimarest, *La Vie de M. de Molière*, ed. Georges Mongrédien (Paris: Michel Briant, 1955), p. 59.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

duchess. "Haughty"? "Imperious"? "A duchess"? Could it be that Armande Béjart believed she was a star?

What we do know with some certainty about Mlle Molière is that she played important roles in many of her husband's plays, some of which were written especially to feature her. We might even say that Molière developed a strategy to make her a star. We know that her comic range was broad, from simple ingénues like Marianne in *L'Avare* to complex starring roles like Célimène, and that out of that mix created for her by Molière came the *emploi* of coquette, which continued to be used by playwrights well into the eighteenth century. We know that she could hold her own in spectacle plays, even in *Psyché*, performed on the vast stage of the court theatre at the Tuileries; this suggests a commanding presence. We know that she could sing; she and La Grange performed the impromptu opera in *Le Malade imaginaire*. After her husband's death and the two mergers that led to the founding of the Comédie-Française, we find her in possession of not only her roles in the plays of Molière but of other comic roles, and even a few tragic roles. She also originated roles in a number of new comedies by Boisrobert, Thomas Corneille, Champmeslé, and others. While she may have lost some of the luster she had during the ten years of starring in her husband's plays, she remained an important member of the new national troupe, in no way "useless" as the *libelliste* contends.

She was the mother of three children with Molière; only the daughter Esprit-Madeleine survived her father. After a perfectly respectable four years of widowhood, she married an actor in the troupe, Isaac-François Guérin-d'Estriché, and had another child, a son. Like many of her predecessors, she bought a country house, this one in Meudon, for 6,000 *livres*, furniture included.¹⁴³ She retired from the Comédie-Française in 1694, having spent more than thirty years on stage, and died on November 30, 1700.

To her discredit, she did not get on well with her daughter. The *libelliste* implies that Mlle Guérin had destined Esprit-Madeleine for the convent, a little too close to Béline in *Le Malade imaginaire* to be accidental, but the two did squabble over the estates of both Molière and Madeleine Béjart, and the final settlement was not favorable to the daughter.¹⁴⁴ Other than that, I find nothing discreditable in the life of Armande Béjart and much

¹⁴³ Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller, *Cent Ans de recherches*, p. 666.

¹⁴⁴ See the various legal documents in Eudore Soulié, *Recherches sur Molière et sur sa famille* (Paris: Hachette, 1863), pp. 314–17. For a brief account see Scott, *Molière*, pp. 462–3.

to admire, especially her actions after her husband's death that permitted his troupe and his legacy of plays to survive.¹⁴⁵

Mlle Molière was the first female comic star of the Parisian theatre, but her reputation in later centuries was severely damaged by that infamous *libelle*. Marie Desmares, Mlle Champmeslé, featured on the tragic marquee, was the model star. She satisfied all the criteria for stardom: she was beautiful, or appeared to be, plays were written for her, she attracted an audience, and she was naughty without being wholly infamous. Known, like Mlle Du Parc, for her performances in Racine's tragedies and for her relationship with the playwright, she was, unlike her predecessor, an enthusiastic participant in a variety of extra-marital affairs. She was not, like Mlle Molière, the subject of any systematic attempt to blacken her reputation, but she was sufficiently active to invite the notice of the gossip-mongers, from balladeers to the great Mme de Sévigné. She attracted the attention of that lady after she first attracted the attentions of her son, Charles de Sévigné. But while the affair of the young aristocrat and the actress was short-lived, Mme de Sévigné continued to follow the career of the woman she ironically called "my daughter-in-law." The "little actress" became "the young marvel" and then, in less than a year, "the most marvelous actress I have ever seen."¹⁴⁶

Born Marie Desmares in Rouen in February 1642 to Guillaume Desmares, a "receiver of the royal domain," and his wife, Marie Marc, from a family of bailiffs, her background was bourgeois.¹⁴⁷ Nonetheless, she was married on June 10, 1657, when she was only 15, to Pierre Fleurye from Harfleur, where the ceremony took place with no witnesses present on her behalf. His father was a "sergeant in the town hall of Harfleur."¹⁴⁸ At some point in the next eight years she was widowed.

She is next heard of on March 14, 1665 in Paris, when she witnessed the marriage contract of Charles de La Haze *dit* Romainville and Victoire de

¹⁴⁵ For the story of the survival of the Palais-Royal troupe and its establishment at the Théâtre de Guénégaud see Jan Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673–1680). Volume I. Founding, Design and Production* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998) and Virginia Scott, "Saved by the Magic Wand of *Circe*," *Theatre Survey* 28 (November 1987), 1–16.

¹⁴⁶ Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné, *Lettres de Madame de Sévigné*, nouvelle edn., ed. Louis Monmerqué (Paris: Hachette, 1862), vol. II, pp. 137, 149, 469.

¹⁴⁷ Her parentage is not entirely clear. The original of her baptismal certificate made by the curé of the parish leaves the name of the father blank and includes the indication *spuria*, "illegitimate." However, in a copy made in the official register, the word *spuria* is crossed out and the name of the father, Guillaume Desmares, has been added. Alain Couprie, *La Champmeslé* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), pp. 16–17.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 39–43.

La Chappe.¹⁴⁹ Two days later she joined Romainville and his wife, Louise Jacob, and Mlle Du Pin and her husband, along with d'Orgemont, Rosimond, and others in the formation of a new troupe led by François Serdin.¹⁵⁰ Also a member: Charles Chevillet *dit* Champmeslé, who held the *emploi* of kings.¹⁵¹ Champmeslé was only 24 himself, but was apparently a born character actor. We have no information about what roles Marie Desmares may have played, but she was probably junior to Mlle Dupin.

By November 1665 Champmeslé and Mlle Desmares were planning their marriage. The association was renewed for the season of 1666–7, but the following season the Champmeslés as well as Rosimond were recruited by the Théâtre du Marais and went to Paris to join the Petits Comédiens.¹⁵² According to Deierkauf-Holsboer the troupe was not doing well and needed an infusion of talent.¹⁵³ Their last success had been in January 1666 with Boyer's machine play, the *Amours de Jupiter et de Sémélé*.

Mlle Champmeslé was mentioned for the first time by Robinet on February 23, 1669, though not by name. She was a member of the cast of Boyer's *La Fête de Vénus*, a machine spectacle that had opened a week earlier. "All the actors are very good," reports the gazetteer, "notably the New Actress, equally good and beautiful." Which role she played in this elaborate pastoral entertainment is not known; it includes four female roles and the troupe had five actresses, including Marie La Vallée, who had played the leading role in Boyer's previous machine play.¹⁵⁴ The first time Robinet mentions Mlle Champmeslé by name is in his review of September 28, 1669 of a reprise of Quinault's tragicomedy, *Agrippa ou le faux Tiberinus*. Apparently she played the leading female role of Lavinie, originated at the Hôtel de Bourgogne by Mlle Des Cèillets. Robinet characterizes her as "the beautiful Champmeslé, lovable in her whole person, and such a good figure and so *pouponne*."¹⁵⁵ That *pouponne* is curious, not at all what one would expect of a budding tragic heroine. It suggests someone who is "cute" and "baby-faced" or doll-like. One might think Robinet used it in this instance as an easy rhyme for "personne," but

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 49–50.

¹⁵⁰ The Act of Association is of March 16. Mongrédien and Robert, *Les Comédiens français*, pp. 52–3, 246.

¹⁵¹ Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Marais*, vol. II, pp. 314–15.

¹⁵² They were in the company on October 22, 1668, when Champmeslé is mentioned in a legal document. See *ibid.* p. 165.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* pp. 162–3.

¹⁵⁴ Subligny, January 3, 1666, in Rothschild, *Les Continuateurs*, vol. II, p. 586.

¹⁵⁵ Rothschild and Picot, *Les Continuateurs de Loret*, vol. III, p. 508.

he uses it again the next time he mentions the actress when he calls her “la pouponne Champmeslé.” Once again featured in a machine spectacle, she was playing Venus in Donneau de Visé’s *Amours de Vénus et Adonis*, which opened on February 4, 1670. Robinet found her not only *pouponne*, but sexually enticing as well:

The *pouponne* Champmeslé
By whom one is totally *stimulé*
That is to say *émue*, performs
In a very *galant* way.¹⁵⁶

In other words, this lovely doll excites and arouses, and is very elegant and enticing. Finally, a few months later Robinet notes in his *Lettre* of May 10 that she “enchants both the eyes and the ears,” one of his most conventional remarks, in the comedy *Crispin médecin*.¹⁵⁷ By this time, however, she and her husband had moved on to the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

The consensus again is that Mlle Champmeslé was not a beautiful woman, although I can find no particular evidence of that except Mme de Sévigné’s statement that she was “almost ugly” off stage. She is often depicted as a brunette with small, sunken eyes, but since none of those who feature this description, neither Couprie nor Forestier nor Dussane, gives a source for it, I must assume they are indebted to the less than perfectly informed Parfaict brothers who – also without giving a source – describe her many years after her death somewhat inconsistently:

She had a good figure, very noble. Her features taken altogether pleased everyone; however, her skin was not white, & what is more she had very small, round eyes; but these defects were virtually effaced by the natural charms of her whole person and the gracious and touching sound of her voice.¹⁵⁸

Her portraits show her to have dark hair and brown eyes, to be sure, although her eyes do not appear to be small, round, and sunken.¹⁵⁹ Couprie argues that because her skin was not white nor her hair blond, she could not satisfy the criteria for beauty in the late seventeenth century.

¹⁵⁶ Robinet, *Lettres en vers*, March 8, 1670 in William Brooks, ed., *Le Théâtre et l’opéra vus par les gazetiers Robinet et Laurent* (Paris, Seattle, Tübingen: Papers on Seventeenth-Century French Literature, 1993), p. 33.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 37.

¹⁵⁸ François and Claude Parfaict, *Histoire du théâtre français* (New York: Burt Franklin Reprints, 1968; Paris: Le Mercier, 1745–9), vol. XIV, p. 523.

¹⁵⁹ A portrait of Mlle Champmeslé from the collection of the Comédie-Française appears on the cover of Couprie’s book in color. For other images of the actress, see Google Images.

Mlle Du Parc, however, was also dark, and we know she was considered very beautiful.

It would seem that Mlle Champmeslé did not enter the Marais to play tragedy (not that the Marais was known for its competence in that difficult form). Rather, she was cast in a range of plays – comedy, tragic-comedy, and spectacle – and was successful because of her physical appearance, her voice, and her sexuality. Something about her may have caught the eye of Racine, whose leading actress, Mlle Des Œillets, although she played the *rôle fort* of Agrippine in *Britannicus* that opened in December 1669, was aging and unwell.¹⁶⁰ As we know from the experience of Mlle Du Parc, Racine could spot tragic talent in a tall, beautiful dancer, so why not in a *poupponne* spectacle star? In any case, a few months later, at the end of the 1669–70 season, Champmeslé and his wife moved to the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

He replaced the retiring Claude Deschamps, sieur de Villiers, and she, apparently, was taken on to understudy Mlle Des Œillets. Although the only role we know she played before she originated Bérénice was the one in *Crispin médecin* mentioned by Robinet, a widely reproduced anecdote has her performing Hermione in *Andromaque* and Racine falling on his knees at her feet.¹⁶¹ Another anecdote has the mortally ill Mlle Des Œillets also seeing a performance and bitterly concluding, “That’s the end of Des Œillets. You will not regret my death.”¹⁶²

Certainly Racine seems not to have especially regretted it. Less than two months after the unhappy event, his new play *Bérénice* opened at the Hôtel de Bourgogne with Mlle Des Œillets’s successor in the title role. Although this should have been greeted as a significant event, in fact Robinet, who was ill at the time, did not go to see it, although he was assured that the Troupe Royale displayed “grace, richness, pomp, and brilliance.” Three weeks later he noted that on December 14 at the wedding festivities of the duc de Nevers the play had been performed “admirably” by the illustrious Floridor and the “charming Champmeslé, of whom I have already, often, spoken.”¹⁶³ So much for the *poupponne*.

In contrast, Robinet was fulsome in his praise of the other “Bérénice,” that is, Pierre Corneille’s *Tite et Bérénice*, which opened at the Palais-Royal a week after Racine’s version, and was declared by the gazetteer to

¹⁶⁰ Forestier, *Racine*, p. 363, citing Boursault, *Artémise et Poliante*.

¹⁶¹ This anecdote seems to have been first put into circulation by Claude and François Parfaict, *Histoire*, vol. XIV, pp. 513–14.

¹⁶² Couprie, *La Champmeslé*, pp. 110–11. ¹⁶³ Brooks, *Le Théâtre*, pp. 49–52.

be his “masterpiece.” That *Bérénice* starred Mlle Molière as the queen of Judea, an interesting bit of casting, with Mlle Beauval – who had replaced Mlle Béjart in the troupe – as Domitie, a powerful female character who does not exist in Racine’s version. The emperor was played by La Thorillière and his younger brother Domitian by the devastating young actor, Michel Baron. Unlike Racine’s “extremely simple” play, which begins with the newly named emperor’s decision to extricate himself from Bérénice and ends with his doing so, Corneille’s *comédie héroïque* is a *chassé-croisé* of the four principal characters which ends in the marriage of Domitian and Domitie, while the two title characters put policy ahead of passion and continue to renounce each other.

Robinet definitely belonged to the party backing Corneille.¹⁶⁴ On November 22 he begins his *Lettre en vers* with the news that Corneille’s “nonpareil” poem would open the following Friday. A week later he has managed to see it, although too ill to see Racine’s play, finds it “a marvel” and “divine,” and pronounces the Troupe du roi every bit as good at the heroic as at the comic. On December 20 he gives Molière’s troupe yet another boost: 52 lines of doggerel detailing the cast and insisting that the play has been *fort suivi*, “very well attended,” and “praised.”¹⁶⁵

Unfortunately, nothing has survived except Robinet’s banalities to describe the performances of the two actresses who played Bérénice. The quarrel of the two Bérélices, however, suggests a way to think about what kind of demands Racine was making and how those demands positioned Mlle Champmeslé to be a new kind of actress and star. Gérard Defaux, exploring Racine’s Preface to *Bérénice*, notes that the playwright was formulating a new tragic system which would employ simplicity of action, grandeur of character, violence of passion, beauty of sentiment, and elegance and elevation of style.¹⁶⁶ The product of this system is a play that has almost no incidents and that relies for its effect on psychological action, emotional mimesis, and verbal skill. Racine sets a difficult task for an actress.

Racine’s Bérénice is essentially a victim, all reaction and emotion, discarded by the man she loves for reasons of state and glory that she fails to understand. The actress must move from ecstatic happiness in Act I, when she thinks she is about to marry Tite, to hopeless despair in Act V,

¹⁶⁴ I have long wondered whether the gazetteers were paid by the troupes for publicity and “reviews.”

¹⁶⁵ Brooks, *Le Théâtre*, p. 52.

¹⁶⁶ Gérard Defaux, “The Case of *Bérénice*: Racine, Corneille, and Mimetic Desire,” trans. Michael Metteer, *Yale French Studies* 76 (1989), 212–13.

even though her medium is restricted. Although her physical presence is, of course, essential to the nature of performance, the words she speaks matter more. To the playwright they may be all that matter. The character has little or no influence on the course of events. The role contains almost no action, little rhetoric, and very little subtext. She conceals nothing, she reveals everything, and she has no history except a history of loving Tite.

Defaux makes the point that Racine is directly confronting Corneille with this play. As he wrote in the Preface, "It is not necessary to have blood and deaths in a tragedy; it is enough that the actors are heroic, that their passions are aroused, and that everything in it is characterized by that majestic sadness that produces all the pleasure of tragedy."¹⁶⁷ This – and the play – is his answer to Corneille's famous 1662 statement on tragedy in his *Discours du poème dramatique*.

When one puts on the stage a simple intrigue of love between kings, and they run no risk of losing their lives or their kingdoms, I do not think that, even though they are illustrious persons, the action can be elevated to the level of tragedy. Its dignity demands some great interest of state or some passion more noble and more masculine than love, like ambition or vengeance, which inspires more fear of greater catastrophes than the loss of a mistress.¹⁶⁸

Corneille did not call his *Tite et Bérénice* a tragedy; he sub-titled it a *comédie héroïque*. In his version of the story, Bérénice has returned incognito to Rome. Domitie is plotting to marry Tite, although she loves his brother, Domitien. Domitien has been advised to reawaken Tite's love for Bérénice. This is already substantially more complicated than Racine's simple plot, and it continues to evolve. Corneille's Bérénice has a mind of her own. She makes the decision that it would be a mistake for Tite to marry her, caring, according to Lancaster, more for her own glory than for his.¹⁶⁹

My point is not that either Racine or Corneille has written the better play; Racine's version is canonical, Corneille's is not. My point is rather that Racine has written a play – with a specific actress in mind – that makes an entirely new set of demands. Mlle Molière, an excellent actress, can take the stage in her accustomed way, identify her action, dominate her scenes, especially the final scene, and exit to well-deserved applause. Mlle Champmeslé must move from duet to aria to duet, following the verbal score so carefully devised by Racine. Given the radical novelty of

¹⁶⁷ Jean Racine, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Raymond Picard (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), vol. I, p. 465.

¹⁶⁸ Corneille, *Œuvres*, vol. I, p. 24.

¹⁶⁹ H. C. Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century. Part III. The Period of Molière, 1652–1672* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936), vol. II, p. 576.

this kind of tragic writing, Racine may well have found it necessary to retrain some actors to perform his plays as he wanted them performed.

We have many reasons to distrust what Louis Racine has said about his father. Only 6 when his father died, he could have had few personal memories of him, and no memories at all of his life as a working playwright – which ended long before Louis was born. Being himself excessively pious and a convinced Jansenist, he was extremely touchy on the subject of his father's relationships with women, preferring to believe that his father “never was the slave of love,” never was in love with Mlle Champmeslé, never wrote his tragedies “conforming to the style of declamation of this actress.” Although it is easy to dismiss the sanctimonious Louis as a hagiographer, perhaps there is something to be learned from his insistence that Jean Racine felt obliged to give his actresses lessons in how to declaim his verse. Louis Racine writes:

That woman was not a born actress. Nature had given her only beauty, a voice, and a memory: for the rest, she had so little intelligence, that he had to explain to her the verses she had to say, and teach her the proper intonations of them. Everyone knows the talent that my father had for declamation, the taste for which he gave to actors capable of apprehending it.¹⁷⁰

Louis Racine's assertion may include one grain of truth. According to Boileau, Racine also taught Mlle Du Parc the role of Andromaque and “had her repeat it like a pupil.”¹⁷¹ Perhaps what these anecdotes reflect is Racine's desire to create a new style of tragic acting for plays that depended far more for their emotional affectivity on the appropriate inflection and melodious intonation of his carefully crafted verse than did the action-centered tragedies of Corneille and those who followed his prescription. The actor Jean Poisson supports this possibility when he notes that Mlle Champmeslé “sang a little” when she enchanted the court as Racine's heroines, but that “elsewhere she recited the Tragedies of the Celebrated M. de Corneille excellently & in a totally different manner.”¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Louis Racine, *Mémoires*, in Racine, *Œuvres*, ed. Mesnard, vol. I, p. 40. Louis Racine's brother, Jean-Baptiste, who was fourteen years older and who was one of his important sources, did advise him to say nothing about Mlle Champmeslé. “You are thinking of speaking there of la Ch. . . I know more than you do about that item, but I will restrain myself from soiling the life of my F. with such names and by reciting the follies of his youth.” Jean-Baptiste seems perfectly aware that the relationship was sexual. See Jean-Baptiste Racine, “Les Papiers de Jean-Baptiste Racine,” ed. Louis Vaunois, *Cahiers raciniens* 2 (1957), 50–94.

¹⁷¹ Boileau was very likely the original source of Louis Racine's observations.

¹⁷² Jean Poisson, *Réflexions sur l'art de parler en public*, in *Sept Traités sur le jeu du comédien*, ed. Sabine Chaouche (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), p. 402.

If Racine took it upon himself to reform acting, this could have made him unpopular with some actors. Raymond Poisson may have had Racine in mind when he created his *Poète basque* in 1668, a few months after the great success of *Andromaque*. Among Poisson's provincial poetaster's ideas for improving the Hôtel de Bourgogne is the following:

I am going to read it [his play *La Seigneuresse*] to you presently,
And this reading will be like your musical score.
I will mark there all the tones and the mutations,
The facial expressions and the actions:
When I'm not speaking observe my face,
You will see me pass from love to fury,
Then, by marvelous art, in a surprising return,
I will pass from fury to love.
In brief, I am going to show the right way to satisfy,
And what a great actor must do to be great.
Don't miss my least movement,
For even the least is worth applause.¹⁷³

Of course, Racine may not have been the only playwright who thought he was a better actor than the actors.

From the audience's point of view, there seems little doubt that Mlle Champmeslé, whether because of or in spite of Racine's tuition, was considered the finest actress of her day even by those, like Mme de Sévigné, who preferred Corneille's plays to Racine's. In January 1672 she wrote to her daughter that Mlle Champmeslé,

seemed the most marvelous actress that I have ever seen. She surpasses la Des Œilletts by the distance of a hundred leagues; and I, who am thought rather good on the stage, I am not worthy to light the candles when she appears. She is nearly ugly, and I am not astonished that my son was suffocated by her presence; but when she speaks verse, she is adorable.¹⁷⁴

She is speaking of Mlle Champmeslé's performance as Atalide in Racine's *Bajazet*. Giving the lie, however, to Louis Racine's remark that the actress was never as good in other playwrights' plays, Mme de Sévigné reserves her most effusive praise for Mlle Champmeslé's appearance in the title role in Thomas Corneille's *Ariane*. The actress is "so extraordinary that in your life you have never seen the like; it is the actress one goes to see and not the play; I saw *Ariane* only for her: that play is insipid, the actors are

¹⁷³ Raymond Poisson, *Ceuvres de M. Poisson* (Paris: T. Guillain, 1687), p. 219.

¹⁷⁴ Sévigné, *Lettres de Mme de Sévigné*, vol. II, pp. 468–9.

damnable; but when Champmeslé enters, there's a murmur; everyone is transported, and we weep at her despair."¹⁷⁵

We also owe Mme de Sévigné for our reasonable assurance that Racine was in love with Mlle Champmeslé. Writing about *Bajazet*, which she liked, although not very much, she added: "Racine writes plays for la Champmeslé: it is not for the centuries to come. If ever he is no longer young, and ceases to be in love, it will not be the same thing."¹⁷⁶ If fact, she was absolutely right. He grew older, grew disenchanted with the theatre, lost Mlle Champmeslé to other lovers, and reinvented himself, but not before he had written for her Monime in *Mithridate* and the title roles in *Iphigénie* and *Phèdre*.

By "for her" I do not mean to suggest that Racine wrote these plays either because he was in love with her or because he wanted her to love him. Rather, I want to underscore once more the likelihood that because he knew what she could bring to a role, both as an artist and as a stage persona, he chose certain stories and developed them in certain ways. This might be especially true of *Iphigénie* and *Phèdre*.

From the beginning of her career as Racine's leading actress, Mlle Champmeslé was known for her ability to bring an audience to tears. Forestier quotes a British diplomat, Francis Vernon, who wrote that "all the entertainment of the town are the two new plays, both of them called *Bérénice*. . . of which that of Racine seems to take much, and the ladies melt away at it and proclaim them hardhearted who do not cry, so much they are concerned for the unfortunate *Bérénice*."¹⁷⁷ This ability was nowhere more famously employed than in *Iphigénie*. Robinet paints the picture of the play's opening at Versailles on August 18, 1674, noting of *Iphigénie* that:

No Mortal Man or Woman,
No Prince or Princess,
No God or Goddess,
Who found themselves there,
At this rare spectacle,
Could have held back their tears,

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* vol. III, p. 3. Sabine Chaouche, in comparing the various roles known to have been played by Mlle de Champmeslé, has discovered that Ariane was by far the largest. Ariane's lines constitute 46.2 percent of the total play, in contrast to the largest role Racine wrote for her, *Phèdre*, whose lines constitute 28.7 percent. *L'Art du comédien*, p. 379.

¹⁷⁶ Sévigné, *Lettres de Mme de Sévigné*, vol. II, p. 536.

¹⁷⁷ Cited by Forestier, *Racine*, pp. 399–400 from Raymond Picard, *Nouveau Corpus Racinianum* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1976), p. 57.

Seeing her, with all her charms,
By the order of a barbarous fate,
Destined to death.
The pathetic, & and the verisimilar
Hold the stage, instead of the veritable,
So perfect is this drama,
Producing such an effect:
That the *Court*, all filled
With those who weep, is another stage
Where we see many beautiful eyes,
Even the most imperial ones,
Weep, without artifice,
At this fabled sacrifice.¹⁷⁸

Of course, Robinet's praise is primarily for the "master-piece of the great genius of Racine," but as Boileau later reminds his readers, it was with the help of the actress that Racine achieved his effects on the audience:

How well you know, RACINE, with the help of an Actor,
How to move, astonish, delight a Spectator!
Never did Iphigénie sacrificed in Aulis,
Cause as many tears to flow in the assembled Greece,
As were at the happy spectacle to our eyes unfolded,
Caused to flow by la Champmeslé as Iphigénie.¹⁷⁹

Even when *Ariane* was reprised at the Guénégaud in 1679, Donneau de Visé was moved to write in the *Mercurie galant* that "Mademoiselle Champmeslé, that inimitable actress who has transferred to the Faubourg Saint-Germain troupe, on several occasions drew tears from many of her spectators."¹⁸⁰

Two years later there was a new play: *Phèdre*. Opening on January 1, 1677, it was faced with a competing play on the same subject – Pradon's *Phèdre et Hippolyte* – and a cabal led by the duchesse de Bouillon that reduced the audiences during the first run. Perhaps because his experience of this play in production was not so happy, perhaps because he had bigger fish to fry, having been admitted to the Académie Française and named Treasurer of France, Racine stopped writing for the commercial stage. At roughly the same time – and we should not fall into a fallacy of *post hoc propter hoc* here – Mlle Champmeslé appears to have taken a new

¹⁷⁸ Brooks, *Le Théâtre*, p. 151. ¹⁷⁹ Quoted by Forestier, *Racine*, p. 501.

¹⁸⁰ Quoted by Jan Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris. Volume III (1673–1680). The Demise of the Machine Play* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), p. 56. Trans. Clarke.

lover, the very aristocratic comte de Clermont-Tonnerre. This has been memorialized by the anonymous author of *La Fameuse Comédienne*, who added "Portraits of the Actresses of the Hôtel de Guénégaud" to his *libelle*. Of Mlle Champmeslé he wrote:

To the most passionate love she was destined
Which long took *Root* in her heart,
But by a singular misfortune
A *Thunder* came and uprooted it.¹⁸¹

The wit here, such as it is, rests on two puns: *tonnerre* means "thunder," of course, and *racine* means "root."

A few other men were linked with Mlle Champmeslé in gossip and in various popular verses and epigrams that circulated underground in Paris, but not finally to an extent that would suggest to us that she was actually notorious. The most damaging reference to her is to be found in Jean-Nicolas de Tralage's *Recueil*, a collection of notes and clippings and quotations, probably put together around 1695. Tralage made a list of actors "who lived well, regularly and even like Christians"; this included Molière, but not his wife, La Grange *and* his wife, the Beauvals, Floridor, Raisin the elder, the wife of Raisin the younger, the senior Poisson and his wife, and various members of the Italian troupe. His other list, "the chief debauched actors," was shorter and included Baron, a "satyr," Mlle Molière—Tralage certainly had read *La Fameuse Comédienne*—and both Champmeslés, "separated from each other by their debauchery. The woman is pregnant by her lover and her servant is pregnant at the same time by the Sieur Champmeslé. Their amorous adventures would make a thick volume."¹⁸² It seems unlikely that Mlle Champmeslé was openly adventurous in 1695, when she was 53 years old, and though she may have been pregnant in her lifetime, she never had a child.¹⁸³ Tralage is probably drawing on a famous epigram, attributed to Boileau, which supposedly refers to the irregular household of the Champmeslés at the time when Racine was a regular there:

¹⁸¹ Garboli, *La Famosa Attrice*, pp. 232–3.

¹⁸² Jean-Nicolas Du [sic] Tralage, *Notes et documents sur l'histoire des théâtres de Paris au XVII^e siècle, extraits, mis en ordre et publiés d'après le manuscrit original*, ed. Paul Lacroix [Le Bibliophile Jacob] (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1880), pp. 13–14. The manuscript at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal is clearly inscribed *de* Tralage, although Lacroix insists on "Du."

¹⁸³ Louis Racine makes this claim, part of his defense against the rumor that Racine had fathered a child by Mlle Champmeslé.

Of the six lovers, content and not jealous,
 Who, in turn, served¹⁸⁴ madame Claude,
 The least fickle was Jean her spouse.
 One day, however, a little too hot to trot,
 He was grappling the maid, who'd been making sheep's eyes at him,
 When one of the six said to him: What are you doing?
 The game's too risky with that bawd.
 Do you want, Jean-Jean, to spoil it for all of us?¹⁸⁵

According to Antoine Adam, editor of the Pléiade edition of Boileau, "this epigram must have dated from 1671 at the time when Racine, Boileau, and Charles de Sévigné frequented the Champmeslés." That seems a stretch, considering how brief a time young Sévigné was part of this circle, at least according to his mother. Adam continues: "[it] was first published by Brossette in 1716 in [Boileau's] *Œuvres complètes*." According to Brossette, "Madame Claude hides a well-known person who is not named here," and Adam adds that "it is generally agreed that this is a question of la Champmeslé."¹⁸⁶ It may be generally agreed, but why this epigram should refer to the Champmeslés and Racine is not clear to me, especially since it was Racine who was named Jean and Champmeslé's given name was Charles. Mlle Champmeslé was obviously not celebrated for being faithful to her husband, and a certain amount of gossip circulated about her, enough to add spice to her reputation without suggesting the sort of gross sexual appetites attributed to Mlle Molière. The fact that she played roles characterized by extreme sexual passion added to the credibility of the gossip.

More interesting, however, or so it seems to me, and rarely noted by those writing about her, is that she was accepted by a literary coterie that included, along with Racine, both Boileau and La Fontaine. Although Boileau makes a favorable reference to her in his *Épître* dedicated to Racine, La Fontaine wrote letters and dedicated a *conte* to her, the tale of Belpégor:

With your name, I adorn the frontispiece
 Of the last verse that my muse has polished.
 O charming Phyllis, may our fame outlast the darkness of time!

¹⁸⁴ The word in French is *servaient*, from *servir*. This has a certain meaning in the language of gallantry: An *amant* serves his *amante* on the model of the medieval *roman*. However, in this instance, one might add the secondary, less romantic meaning of *servir*, "to service," as a bull.

¹⁸⁵ Nicolas Boileau, "Epigramme III: Sur une personne fort connue." See Boileau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 1038 n.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Mine by writing, yours by acting.
 Our names united will pierce through the black shadow;
 You will reign for a long time in our memory
 After you have reigned here
 In our minds and hearts.
 Who does not know the inimitable actress
 Playing Phèdre or Bérénice,
 Chimène in tears, or Camille in a fury?
 Is there anyone who is not enchanted by your voice?
 Who finds another as moving,
 Is there another who can go as straight to the heart?
 Don't wait while I make a eulogy
 Of everything perfect to be found in you:
 Since there is nothing in you that is not perfect,
 You would wait forever; I would never finish.
 Of all my Phyllises you would have been the first,
 You would have had my whole soul,
 If I had pressed my suit:
 But who, when loving, does not want to be loved?
 Not hoping to please you with my passion,
 I call myself only your friend, but
 A friend who is more than half a lover:
 If only I had been able to do better.¹⁸⁷

Mlle Champmeslé may have been involved in the clandestine publication and distribution of La Fontaine's *Nouveaux Contes* in 1675. These naughty tales were published outside of France, since they had been interdicted by La Reynie, the *lieutenant-général* of the Paris police, on April 5, 1675. According to Antoine Furetière, in a *factum* published as part of his quarrel with the Académie Française over the publication of his dictionary, "an actress was the worthy agent who distributed this contraband merchandise."¹⁸⁸ He also suggested that La Fontaine's dedication of *Belphegor* to her was her reward.

Two letters from La Fontaine to the actress testify that their friendship was real. In that same year, 1675, he wrote: "I am at Chaûry [Château Thierry], Mademoiselle, and judge if I am thinking of you, I who would not forget you, not even in the midst of the most brilliant court."¹⁸⁹ His purpose in writing would seem to be that he has not heard from Racine, but if he had, Racine would, of course, have sent him news of her, "loving

¹⁸⁷ *Ceuvres de J. de La Fontaine*, ed. Henri Regnier (Paris: Hachette, 1892), vol. IX, pp. 91–2.

¹⁸⁸ Jean Orieux, *La Fontaine, ou La Vie est un conte* (Paris: Flammarion, 1976), p. 380.

¹⁸⁹ La Fontaine, *Ceuvres*, vol. IX, p. 361.

nothing so much as your charming person." La Fontaine, himself, is in a state of advanced melancholy that can only be relieved by his return to Paris, since the instant cure for the *atrabilaire*, the "black bile," is a dose of Champmeslé.

In 1678 he wrote from the country:

Since you are the best friend in the world, as well as the nicest, and since you like to share in whatever your friends are doing, it's appropriate to send you the doings of those with whom you are out of touch. They drink, from morning to night, water, wine, lemonade, etc; light refreshments for those deprived of seeing you. The heat and your absence cast us all into insupportable torpor. As to you, Mademoiselle, no one needs to tell me what you are doing; I can see it from here. You enjoy yourself from morning to night, and accumulate hearts.

Racine is gone, but La Fontaine inquires after "M. Tonnerre" and "M. de la Fare."¹⁹⁰

"M. de la Fare" was Charles-Auguste, marquis de La Fare, for several years the beloved of Mme de La Sablière, who also took La Fontaine into her household in 1672 when the old duchesse d'Orléans, whose dogsbody he had been, died.¹⁹¹ Mme de La Sablière's circle, libertine in thought and deed, also included La Fare's great friend, the abbé Chaulieu, Ninon de Lenclos, Molière's friends Chapelle and Bernier, and many others connected to Epicureanism. La Fare was the last of Mlle Champmeslé's known lovers, a former military man who sold his commission to Charles de Sévigné and gave himself up to a life of laziness, gambling, and gluttony.¹⁹² The actress's association with La Fare, La Fontaine, Ninon, and others of this coterie looks forward to the connection of many later actresses – Mlle Lecouvreur, Mlle Quinault, Mlle Clairon – to the literary and libertine bohemian world of the eighteenth century.

In 1679, with Racine no longer active, M. and Mlle Champmeslé allowed themselves to be lured away from the Hôtel de Bourgogne by the troupe of the Guénégaud for a full share each and an extra 1,000 *livres* a year. They brought their repertory with them. In the months between their arrival and the merger of the troupes in August 1680 Racine's plays

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 363–4.

¹⁹¹ Among La Fontaine's duties at the Luxembourg Palace was to look out for Mignon, the duchesse's dog.

¹⁹² La Fare was also a poet and the author of a celebrated memoir: *Mémoires et réflexions sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis XIV*, published in 1715. See Harold Wade Streeter, "M. De la Cochonnière – Apostle of Laziness," *The French Review* 8 (March 1935), 301–10. See also Agnes E. Mackay, *La Fontaine and his Friends* (London: Garnstone Press, 1972), pp. 128–31 and Roger Duchêne, *Ninon de Lenclos* (Paris: Fayard, 1984), pp. 248–55.

were given thirty-four performances, but the most frequently performed of Mlle Champmeslé's roles was Ariane.

On August 25, 1680 the new Comédie-Française, with twenty-seven actors, opened at the Théâtre de Guénégaud with a performance of *Phèdre* and a new afterpiece by Champmeslé entitled *Les Carrosses d'Orléans*. Mlle Champmeslé reigned as the tragedy queen of the new national theatre. The *Répertoire* of 1685 assigns to her the leading female roles in all of Racine's tragedies, as well as in six of Corneille's and in eleven by other playwrights. She continued, as well, to originate leading roles in such plays as Longpierre's *Médée* (1694), La Fosse's *Polixène* (1696), and – her final role – La Grange-Chancel's *Oreste et Pilade* in December 1697. She died a few months later, while the play was still in its first run. Her status was not perhaps as elevated as it had been, since tragedy lost much of its importance in the last two decades of the seventeenth century. As Lancaster puts it: "Comedy now becomes again the leading dramatic genre, a position it lost while, after Molière's death, Racine continued to produce."¹⁹³

Racine had one of the final words on his former mistress. On May 16, 1698 he wrote to his son Jean-Baptiste that he had heard from a M. de Rost two days before that:

La Champmeslé is dying, by which he seemed to be very much distressed; but what is the most distressing is what apparently did not bother him, I mean the obstinacy with which that poor miserable woman refuses to renounce the theatre, having declared, so I have been told, that she would find it very glorious to die an actress. One must hope that, when she sees death approach, she will change her language, as ordinarily most people do who make such boasts when they are in good health. I had this piece of information yesterday from Mme de Caylus, who was very frightened by it, and she heard it from, I think, the vicar of Saint-Sulpice.¹⁹⁴

Of course, the lady had been dead for a day when her condescending ex-lover wrote this.

Two months later Racine was happy to report to his son that he owed amends to Mlle Champmeslé,

who died with reasonably good [*assez bons*] sentiments, after having renounced the theatre, very repentant for her past life, but especially distressed to die. At least so M. Despréaux [Boileau] told me, according to the vicar of Auteuil,

¹⁹³ H. C. Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century. Part IV. The Period of Racine, 1673–1700* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1940), vol. II, p. 487.

¹⁹⁴ Racine, *Œuvres*, ed. Mesnard, vol. VII, pp. 243–4.

who was there at the death; for she died in Auteuil, in the house of a dancing master, where she had come to take the air.¹⁹⁵

Jean Donneau de Visé seems to have agreed with Mlle Champmeslé, before the priests terrified her into renouncing her profession, that to be a star actress was a wonderful thing. He wrote in the May 1698 *Mercur*e *galant*:

It is glorious to those who embrace a profession to so distinguish themselves in it that their name is known by all the earth. That is what happened to Mademoiselle Champmeslé who has just died. She made herself admired on three French stages, where she has always received such great applause that it seems that she began where others ended. She introduced the *premier* roles in most of the tragedies of the illustrious M. Racine. So we must not be astonished if these plays, which have always merited the praises that they have received from the public, have passed for masterpieces, since they were both beautiful and beautifully acted.

So there, Racine!

A lesbian nightclub in modern Paris is named for her.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 264.

CHAPTER 6

“Embellished by art”: 1680–1720

All the arts being linked by intimate rapports and secret analogies, it is perfectly simple that those who cultivate them show the same defects and the same perfections in the different genres: and thus the orator, the poet, the painter, the musician, and the actor will show, in the exercise of his art, more or less *génie* and more or less *goût*; he will appear to owe more or less to *la nature*, more or less to *l'étude* and *la réflexion*. If his acting, full of *chaleur* and of *vie*, full of sublime *traits* and irresistible *mouvements*, is not sustained throughout, if lack of energy succeeds the liveliest expression, if frequent irregularities corrupt its purity, then we admire his *génie* and regret that *goût* has not better regulated its use; if, on the contrary, we observe that the development of his *moyens naturels* is always directed by, always under the surveillance of, that wisdom which prevents the fall, the failure, the vertigo of *le génie*, which stops it on the edge of the precipice. . . or which keeps it going when it is not prompted by inspiration, then we will taste the pure and sweet pleasure of the happy agreement of art and nature; that agreement which alone constitutes the true perfection of human production and which is so rarely found.¹

This passage, from an 1823 “Preface” to the polemical ghost-written “memoirs” of Mlle Dumesnil, published in 1798, sums up many of the issues that arise during a study of acting in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France. Nature or art? Inspiration or control? Dumesnil or Clairon? It also introduces some of the critical vocabulary that can block the way to our understanding not only how acting was perceived but how it was achieved as well. *Génie, goût, nature, art, réflexion, traits, mouvements*—such terms are complex and require a gloss, as do many

The phrase “embellished by art” in the title of this chapter is taken from Voltaire, “Eulogy for Michel Baron,” in Bert Edward Young, *Michel Baron: Acteur et auteur dramatique* (Paris: Albert Fontemoing, 1905), p. 139.

¹ “Notice,” *Mémoires de Mlle Dumesnil*, ed. Jean-Joseph Dussault (Paris: Chez L. Tenré, 1823), pp. 1–2. Reprinted from Charles-Pierre Coste d’Arnobat, *Mémoires de Marie-Françoise Dumesnil, en réponse aux Mémoires d’Hippolyte Clairon; suivies d’une lettre du célèbre LE KAIN, et de plusieurs anecdotes curieuses relatives au Théâtre Français* (Paris: Dentu, an VII [1798]). Authorship attributed according to the bibliographer Antoine-Alexandre Barbier. See the *Catalogue-général*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

more that we find in the descriptions of and critical responses to acting.² I propose to gloss each term at the first encounter and then continue to use the French, since most English equivalents are misleading. *Génie* is, of course, "genius," but the usage is not as restricted as in modern English. Here it refers to innate talent, a natural disposition for something. This is opposed to *art*, something learned through *étude* and *réflexion*, that is, study and what results from thought and judgement. *Réflexion* can also be the process of thought and judgement, as it is in modern English. *Goût* used in reference to acting can mean "an innate or acquired faculty that enables one to discern whether something violates the *bien-séances*, or what is appropriate." In the passage above, however, *goût* is the necessary ability to restrain the excesses of inspiration run amok. *Chaleur* is ardor and vehemence; more commonly, we find the synonym *feu*. This was much prized in the actor, when tempered with *goût*. *Traits*, on the one hand, refers to the facial features, and we find that usage frequently, especially because large, distinct facial features were considered to be an advantage. In this case, however, *traits* refers to the vocal delivery of the *beaux traits*, the beautiful passages of the text. *Mouvements* are the gestures that accompany the vocal delivery; the actor's walk or gait is his *démarche*. The *moyens naturels*, or sometimes the *dons de nature*, gifts of nature, include the actor or actress's physical appearance, voice, memory, and intelligence. *Nature* itself is a major player in all discussions of actors and acting, one I will address later in this chapter.

Of all the arts of the theatre, acting is the most difficult to write about, especially as something accomplished, since it is ephemeral. Before the twentieth century, it left few traces; before the eighteenth century, it was rarely discussed or even described in France. When it became a phenomenon of interest in the eighteenth century, most of those who wrote about it had little or no experience of the working theatre, but were theorists trying to create a system of acting that may or may not have been based on what actors actually did when they rehearsed or performed on stage.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, treatises appeared in France that mentioned acting as subordinate to the arts of oratory, a form of behavior that, like preaching or arguing in court, was governed by the rules of *pronunciatio* or *actio*, the proper use of voice and gesture by those who wished to move or persuade their auditors and spectators.³ This affiliation

² These glosses are based on definitions in the *Dictionnaires d'autrefois* available on ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>

³ One of the five great arts of rhetoric, along with invention, disposition, style, and memory, delivery was occasionally the subject of individual treatises in the early modern period. See introductory material in Sabine Chaouche, ed., *Sept Traité sur le jeu du comédien* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001).

of acting and oratory continued into the early eighteenth century, and it was only in 1717 and 1738 that actors published their own ideas about their art. However, Jean Poisson and Luigi Riccoboni respectively entitled their works *Réflexions sur l'art de parler en public* (*Reflections on the Art of Public Speaking*) and *Pensées sur la déclamation* (*Thoughts on Declamation*) and aimed them at a readership, in the first instance, of lawyers and preachers and, in the second, of those who practice “the different professions with which men are charged in civic life.”⁴

Kristen Gram Holmström notes, in a book published more than forty years ago, that “the source material on eighteenth-century acting is both abundant and fascinating” and observes that “the period has therefore received much attention from theatrical historians. It is a field that has been dealt with in a number of books and articles of very high quality.”⁵ In her view, the basic work on the subject is Hans Oberländer’s *Die geistige Entwicklung der deutschen Schauspielkunst im 18. Jahrhundert*⁶ which views acting first “against the background of the philosophical and psychological climate of the period (Descartes, Locke, Hume, Home).”⁷ This is followed by a discussion of the aesthetics of Dubos, Batteux, Diderot, Mendelssohn, and Lessing, while the literature of dramatic theory (by which she means acting theory), as promulgated by Grimarest, Luigi and Antoine Riccoboni, Rémond de Sainte-Albine, Diderot, and Noverre, “is analyzed in relation to the actual practice of acting.”⁸ Ah, but there is the rub. The only actor whose practice appears to be included is the English David Garrick.

Gram Holmström and the scholars she appreciates – Elisabeth Burglund, Lily B. Campbell, Bertram Joseph, and so forth – all rely primarily on rhetorical/theoretical writings, as do many more recent scholars. The exceptional work of Sabine Chaouche in collecting, editing, and interpreting seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises on *actio*

⁴ Luigi Riccoboni, *Pensées sur la déclamation*, in *ibid.* p. 449. See also Jean Poisson, *Réflexions sur l'art de parler en public*, in the same collection. Sabine Chaouche has also edited two large collections of *Écrits sur l'art théâtral, 1753–1801* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005). Vol. I collects the writings of *Spectateurs*, vol. II of *Acteurs*, both volumes handsomely annotated and amplified with complementary texts. Chaouche has published two monographs as well, which focus on theoretical material: *L'Art du comédien: Déclamation et jeu scénique en France à l'âge classique, 1629–1680* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001) and *La Philosophie de l'acteur: La dialectique de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur dans les écrits sur l'art théâtral français, 1738–1801* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007).

⁵ *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion, 1770–1815* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967), p. 13.

⁶ Hamburg and Leipzig: *Theatergeschichtliche Forschungen* 15, 1898.

⁷ Gram Holmström, *Monodrama*, p. 243 n. 3. ⁸ *Ibid.*

and acting has revolutionized the field of study, but it remains the case that her work, along with such excellent books as Joseph Roach's *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*⁹ and Angelica Goodden's *Action and Persuasion: Dramatic Performance in Eighteenth-Century France*¹⁰ use theoretical materials as their principal sources. This is understandable, given their particular research interests, the paucity of material about acting practice, and the difficulty of interpreting what there is. On the other hand, using Grimarest's *Traité du récitatif dans la lecture, dans l'action publique, dans la déclamation et dans le chant* (*Treatise of Recitation in Reading, in Public Action, in Declamation, and in Singing*)¹¹ as a way to describe and understand acting at the turn of the eighteenth century is rather like using Charles Le Brun's *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* as a guide to understanding Baroque art, assuming none of the paintings of the period had survived. Actually, since Le Brun was a painter, while Grimarest was *not* an actor, using the *Traité du récitatif* might be even more disconnected from actual practice.

I do not mean to suggest that a knowledge of rhetorical theory or of treatises on *actio* is of no value in reconstructing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century acting. Some of those who worked to create a theory of acting tried, at least, to find congruities between, let us say, the precepts of Quintilian and the acting they experienced on the Paris stage. In addition, the efforts made to construct a systematic theory that can be applied to acting illuminate the relationship of acting to the prescriptive dramatic theory that dominated tragic playwriting. Both acting theory and dramatic theory rely on such normative ideas as *vraisemblance*,¹² usually applied to action, and *décence*, *bienséance*, and *convenance*, that is, appearance and behavior appropriate to a category, in the construction and representation of characters.¹³ I propose to examine the effects of this categorization below, beginning with a discussion of actors' *emplois*, but I want to avoid the temptation to overuse theoretical writings – along with certain kinds of visual information – to create templates for eighteenth-century acting. This temptation has not always been resisted.

⁹ Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1985.

¹⁰ Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1986. ¹¹ Chaouche, *Sept Traités*, pp. 279–381.

¹² *Vraisemblance* is "the appearance of truth." In the theatre, an action is *vraisemblant* when the audience can fully believe it because it satisfies a predetermined expectation.

¹³ According to the *Litttré* dictionary (ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>), *la décence* designates what is honorable, *la bienséance* what is suitable or appropriate, *la convenance*, what is proper. "A woman is dressed with *décence* when she is not immodest; with *bienséance* when her dress is what is expected in the circumstances; with *convenance* when there is nothing that offends in her clothing." All of these judgements rest on the age, the social condition, and the moral character of the wearer.

One good example of unresisted temptation is the work of Dene Barnett, an Australian professor of philosophy, who took it upon himself to select from various sources, widely separated in time and space, “instructions... that would be directly useful to an actor or director seeking to re-create an eighteenth-century acting technique.”¹⁴ Barnett’s work, reported first in four articles in *Theatre Research International* in 1977–80,¹⁵ was expanded into a book entitled *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18th Century Acting*.¹⁶ More recently, Helga M. Hill of Melbourne, who refers to Barnett as “the founder of the modern-day gesture movement,” has established an Australian Gesture Workshop that teaches his Art of Gesture to actors and singers. Hill’s website statement amply demonstrates the problem that the use of *actio* to reconstruct period acting poses for both scholars and performers:¹⁷

Gesture comes in infinite variety – large gestures for dramatic moments, smaller for the intimate ones; gestures at various levels (down, horizontal, elevated, zenith). Gesture can involve one hand or both in prone, supine or vertical positions (that is palm down, up, or raised). The whole body is involved – placement of feet, the curve of the body, positioning of arms, hands and fingers, a turn of the head and glance of an eye are all part of gesture, as is a moment of stillness. In all of this, the use of facial expression to show passions, such as grief, anger, joy or fear, demands vigorous study and constant practice. Classical paintings depicting such passions are a major source of inspiration.¹⁸

Quite honestly, this well-meaning system, based on Barnett’s compendium of excerpts from Cicero and Quintilian, Renaissance and Baroque treatises on *actio*, manuals for preachers, Jesuit writings for scholar/actors, and even a few comments written by actual professional actors, is designed to encourage the most formal and formulaic sort of acting imaginable, supposedly based on the actual practice of eighteenth-century French

¹⁴ “The Performance Practice of Acting: The Eighteenth Century. Part I: Ensemble Acting,” *Theatre Research International* 2 (1977), 158.

¹⁵ Includes the above plus Part II: “The Hands,” *Theatre Research International* 3 (1977), 1–19; Part III: “The Arms,” *Theatre Research International* 3 (1978), 79–94; Part IV: “The Eyes, the Face, and the Head,” *Theatre Research International* 5 (1979–80), 1–13.

¹⁶ Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1987.

¹⁷ Other disciples of Barnett include Andrew V. Jones, founder of the Cambridge Handel Opera Group (see his “Staging a Handel Opera,” *Early Music* 34 [2006], 277–87) and singer/freelance director Ian Caddy (see his website at www.baroquegestures.com). In France, the leading adherent of rhetorical, gestural acting has been American ex-pat Eugène Green, who has directed several of Pierre Corneille’s early plays as well as Racine’s *Mithridate*. Although the productions aroused some interest, especially among academics, M. Green eventually gave up the theatre and has had success as a film director.

¹⁸ See <http://home.vicnet.au/~earlyart/stroke.html>

acting.¹⁹ It has the virtue of being teachable, but must inevitably produce stage behavior that lacks many of the characteristics that late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century critics most valued in actors: passion, fire, spontaneity, animation. Its results might well resemble what Dumas d'Aigueberre wrote in 1730 of the celebrated Mlle Duclos, who remained on the stage past her prime:

Mlle D. C. [Duclos], say our elders, was in her time a perfect Actress; I would like to believe it, but permit me to judge by the taste of our time, & to examine, not what she was in her youth, but what she is today. I admit that she still brings much of grace and of what gives pleasure on the Stage. She soars, she is enflamed, she laments and moans appropriately. But she. . . never produces the same effects in the hearts of those who are present. Her *feu*,²⁰ her *passion*, her *sentiment* is never truthful, she does not appear to feel anything, but she recites with emphasis and with the necessary gestures. In a word, it's art, method, and habit and not nature that one sees when she acts.²¹

"An actor without *feu* in the tragic and without vivacity in the comic is a body without a soul," says Dumas d'Aigueberre in conclusion, an observation that those who teach Barnett's method might want to keep in mind. Since, however, almost no French tragedies written between 1680 and the Revolution are produced currently, this Art of Gesture has been primarily inflicted upon students wanting to sing Baroque opera.²²

For someone who wants to study and try to reconstruct French acting in the last decades of the seventeenth century and the first of the eighteenth, much of the material included by Barnett is suspect, not relevant, not French, too late. Instead of foraging far and wide for rules articulated by theorists wanting to govern vocal and physical behavior on the stage, I propose to look at what was said by those who wrote about their experience of actors and acting, and occasionally by actors themselves, to see if it is possible to get an idea of actual stage behavior. I will draw necessarily on descriptions of both men and women; where possible,

¹⁹ Barnett, "for methodological reasons," takes French acting as his paradigm because it "was the most systematic and the most characteristic" (Barnett, "Performance Practice," pt. I, 157).

²⁰ According to the *Littre*, *feu* refers to the emotions, the "movements of the soul." *Feu* also suggests: liveliness of the mind and the imagination; inspiration; and liveliness of action, movement, and gesture. In this instance, I suggest that "*feu*, *passion*, *sentiment*" all refer to the expression of emotions, forming a kind of repetitive stress. See ARTFL, *Dictionnaires d'Autrefois* <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/17>

²¹ J.-D. Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Seconde Lettre du Souffleur de la comédie de Rouën au garçon de caffè, ou entretien sur les défauts de la déclamation* (Paris: Tabarie, 1730), pp. 20–1.

²² A more useful effort to affect the singing and staging of Baroque opera has been underway in France. See http://ranumspanat.com/wordmusic_relationships.html, for instance, for Patricia Ranum's description of her participation in the *Thésée* project of *Les Arts florissants*.

I have given the women downstage center, but the available information is not so extensive that I can afford to ignore a large amount of it.

The most useful source of information about acting at the Comédie-Française in the eighteenth century is a substantial pamphlet entitled *Seconde Lettre du Souffleur de la comédie de Rouën, au garçon de caffè, ou entretien sur les défauts de la déclamation*. It is attributed to J.-D. Dumas d'Aigueberre, who was not the prompter of the theatre in Rouen but a *conseiller* of the Parlement de Toulouse and the author of a turducken play (one act of tragedy, one of comedy, one of pastoral) entitled *Les Trois Spectacles* that was performed at the Comédie-Française twenty times in July and August of 1728. When he published his "conversation" in 1730, he was reflecting on his own recent experiences with the actors, almost all of whom he had worked with, given the multi-generic nature of his play. His writing suggests a devoted amateur of the theatre who has given considerable thought to acting. Jules Bonnassies, a nineteenth-century scholar who edited the *Seconde Lettre* in 1870, argues that "what is missing in Aigueberre is science; as a man of taste, it was enough for him to have true impressions; as a critic, it was up to him to learn the grammar of the art before writing about it; & know the philosophical bases in order to deduce the principles."²³ My response: thank goodness he did not. Dumas d'Aigueberre describes what he has seen and how he has responded without the apparatus of the theorists. Other contributors to my efforts include Mlle Clairon, Voltaire, Charles Collé, the abbé d'Allainval, Nicolas Boindin, Luigi Riccoboni and his wife Elena Balletti, various writers in the *Mercure galant* and the *Mercure de France*, Godard de Beauchamps, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, François and Claude Parfaict, all to be cited at the appropriate time, and other writers of the eighteenth century who are used, mostly without attribution, in the *Galerie historique des acteurs du théâtre français* of P.-D. Lemazurier.²⁴ Oh, and our old friend "Anonymous." While I do not pretend to vouch for the individual reliability of my sources, I believe it is fair to say that taken all together

²³ Preface to abbé d'Allainval, *Lettre à Mylord *** sur Baron et la Dlle Le Couvreur*, ed. Jules Bonnassies (Paris: L. Willem, 1870) and Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, p. 8.

²⁴ P.-D. Lemazurier, *Galerie historique des acteurs du théâtre français depuis 1600 jusqu'à nos jours*, 2 vols. (Paris: Joseph Chaumerot, 1810). Although H. C. Lancaster finds Lemazurier "discredited," I think that judgement is needlessly harsh. I would not use this as a reliable source of dates, but what Lemazurier is usually doing is mining whatever is available to him from eighteenth-century sources and often reprinting it word for word. When I know his source, I have gone to it. When I do not know it, I have used Lemazurier, occasionally with some qualification.

they provide a lively and rather credible account of acting practice between 1680 and 1730.²⁵

I propose to begin with those pesky *emplois*, those "lines of business" that supposedly locked actors into predefined categories of roles. Those who have studied actors and acting have not, I think, given enough attention to the *emplois*, too often taken at face value, their subtleties and variations ignored. Martine de Rougemont notes, in her important *La Vie théâtrale en France au XVIIe siècle*, "that [the eighteenth century] distinguishes. . . clearly, within each genre of acting, the *emplois*, which barely exist today except in television series or boulevard theatre. These fundamental conventions. . . furnish us with an imposed frame."²⁶ She then drops the subject almost completely, yet it is that "imposed frame" that gradually came to dominate troupe composition and casting practices in the eighteenth century.

I believe that the system was somewhat more flexible than at first glance it appears to have been, although evidence is lacking to pin down exactly how it worked from day to day. We know that certain roles were played by certain actors, but these are usually the principal roles in new plays, cast by their authors.²⁷ We have far less information about the routine casting of the standard repertory. While we know from the *registres* of the Comédie-Française which plays were presented on any given day, and from the *feux* (the lists kept to reimburse actors for heat and light) who performed, we do not know which role in which play was played by which actor. Ideally, we would be able just to tick off a certain role as belonging to a certain *emploi* and thus necessarily played by the actor or actress who held that *emploi*, if he or she was on the list. But the system of having multiple actors in the same *emploi* makes that difficult. For instance, an actress might or might not have played a certain tragic role that she sometimes played, but might have appeared in the comic afterpiece, or in both. Finally, the whole subject is complicated by the fact that roles could subtly shift from one *emploi* to another, depending on who the actors were in the troupe at any given time.

²⁵ Diderot is missing from this list, although his *Paradox sur le comédien* is more or less the touchstone of writing on mid-eighteenth-century acting. Rather than consult Diderot to discover how Mlle Clairon approached rehearsal and performance, I have preferred to consult Mlle Clairon herself.

²⁶ Paris: Honoré Champion, 1988, p. 115.

²⁷ This information comes from various places: internal documents, reviews in the *Mercur*, especially after 1720, playwrights' prefaces, and comments by critics and observers. Some of it has been collected, principally by Georges Monval in Adrienne Lecouvreur, *Lettres d'Adrienne Lecouvreur* (Paris: H. Plon, 1892), by Jean-Jacques Olivier, *Voltaire et les comédiens interprètes de son théâtre* (Paris: SFIL, 1900), and by E.-D. De Manne, *Troupe de Voltaire* (Lyon: N. Scheuring, 1877).

A quarrel over casting between Mlle Balicourt and Mlle Lecouvreur suggests how delicate the negotiations over roles could be, in spite of the system. Mlle Balicourt was assigned to *rôles forts*, an *emploi* also known as *reines*; Mlle Lecouvreur specialized in *rôles tendres*, or *jeunes princesses*. We might distinguish them in Aristotelian fashion as roles that evoked fear from the audience versus roles that evoked pity. When Piron explained to Adrienne Lecouvreur that he had cast Mlle Balicourt in his new play because the role was in her *emploi*, or, as he put it, he needed an Athena and not a Venus, the offended star argued that in the days when she had competed for roles with Mlle Desmares and Mlle Duclos, she had played Roxane, Athalie, Phèdre, Elisabeth, Pauline, and Cornélie “without the public complaining that I was weak or lacked courage.” “*Âme*,” she argued, “is more important than height.”²⁸ Piron stuck to his guns.

Before the formation in 1680 of what became the Comédie-Française, the established troupes in Paris were small. In the 1630s the two French troupes had as few as eight members each, while in later years, but before 1680, no troupe had more than fifteen. Although most of the actors in these troupes specialized in certain kinds of roles, very few could confine their appearances to their specialties. The troupe at the Palais-Royal and, following Molière’s death, at the Guénégaud was celebrated for comedy, but performed tragedy as well, while the actors who joined them in 1673 came from the Marais, where they specialized in spectacle plays, but not exclusively. The actors at the Hôtel de Bourgogne were well known for tragedy, but were not restricted to it.

The 1680 merger created a company of twenty-seven actors, fifteen men and twelve women, permitting much greater specialization. At the beginning, many of the actors and actresses “owned” certain roles, usually because they had played them in the original production. Problems arose, however, since many of the actors had performed in more than one company, and many of the plays had been performed by several companies. When, for instance, the Champmeslés left the Hôtel de Bourgogne for the Guénégaud, “taking with them” the plays of Racine, nothing prevented the Hôtel from continuing to perform those plays with the roles recast. Alternatively, when Mlle Beauval left Molière’s troupe after his death, her roles – which included the important role of Toinette in the new *Le Malade imaginaire* – had to be filled by someone else who then also “owned” the role. To alleviate the confusion and eliminate conflicts, a new *Répertoire* was drawn up in 1685, assigning to

²⁸ Lecouvreur, *Lettres*, pp. 171–4.

the actors then in the company the major roles in the plays considered to be the troupe's repertory. This confirmed "ownership" as a principle and also permits us to observe the degree to which the *emploi* concept affected casting late in the seventeenth century.²⁹

In 1685 many of the most important *première* female roles in tragedy belonged to Mlle Champmeslé, who never or rarely played comedy or secondary roles; in her case, both genre and status were fixed. Many of the male comic performers did not appear in tragedy, but they did play across type and status lines. Raymond Poisson, for instance, was granted roles in thirteen plays in the *Répertoire*, but in only four of these was he to perform Crispin, the stock character for which he was celebrated. He also was listed as Le Marquis in Quinault's *La Mère coquette*, Cliton in Pierre Corneille's *Le Menteur*, and the title role in Scarron's *Dom Japhet*, and he was assigned to a *Rôtisseur* in *La Rapinière*, hardly a *premier* role.

Some actors did cross genre lines. Michel Baron, who owned a number of important tragic heroes, later played comic *premiers*; although he did not retrieve in 1685 the roles he had played in Molière's repertory between 1670 and 1673, he did perform Alceste in the *Misanthrope* and Jupiter in *Amphitryon* after his return to the stage in 1720.³⁰ He apparently did not compromise his *premier* status. The leading female comic star of the troupe, Mlle Molière, did play second roles in certain tragedies and in comic afterpieces, bound neither by genre nor by status.

Jeanne Beauval may have had the widest range of anyone in the troupe. Joining Molière unexpectedly in the summer of 1670 to replace Madeleine Béjart, she took over the *suivantes* like Dorine in *Tartuffe*, while Molière took advantage of her infectious laugh as the gypsy Zerbinette in the *Fourberies de Scapin* and as Nicole in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. However, she apparently also could fill the roles in tragedy left vacant by Mlle Béjart. After Molière's death Mlle Beauval left the Palais-Royal for the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where she continued to play Lisettes and other servants, but also *reines* in tragedy. She even "doubled" Mlle Champmeslé as Hermione in Racine's *Andromaque*. Late in her career she was featured in a number of society comedies by such playwrights as Baron, Brueys, Palaprat, and especially Regnard.

²⁹ See H. C. Lancaster, *Actors' Roles at the Comédie-Française according to the Répertoire des Comédies françaises qui se peuvent jouer en 1685* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953) and Roger Herzog, *The Original Casting of Molière's Plays* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press), 1981.

³⁰ Baron retired in 1691 for reasons that have never been entirely clear, but returned to the stage in 1720, where he played heroes and *jeunes premiers* into his 70s.

La Grange, who was originally celebrated as the young lover in many of Molière's plays, had accumulated the ownership of a wide range of roles by the time of his death in March 1692. Although he retained such juvenile leading roles as Horace in *L'École des femmes* and various Valères and Clitandres, he was also playing Tartuffe, M. Jourdain in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and Sganarelle in *L'École des maris*, three roles that would eventually belong to three different *emplois*. A company document records the decisions of his colleagues reassigning his repertory to eight different actors.³¹

Gradually the structure of the *emplois* became more orderly. The actors of the 1680 company, with their wide ranges, were replaced by more specialized actors, the increased size of the troupe making this possible. When systematic try outs known as debuts were instituted in 1685, the postulants were, however, still required to demonstrate that they could play both comedy and tragedy.³² Those accepted into the troupe after this time were contracted to play one or more specific *emplois*, sometimes in only one genre, but often in both. Actresses who played both usually acquired the same status in both: *première* in comedy and tragedy, *confidente* in tragedy and *caractère* in comedy, *jeune princesse* in tragedy and *amoureuse* in comedy. Many actors, including some of the most celebrated, were originally accepted in subsidiary capacities, *en second*, to *double*, or understudy, the person holding the *premier emploi*, or even *en troisième*, far down the status ladder. Some climbed that ladder in their original *emploi*, others proved to be disappointing after reception and never acceded to *premier* status, some found their true *emploi* after months or even years in the company, while still others changed *emplois* as they grew older.

As the eighteenth century progressed, some actresses and actors continued to play both genres. Mlle Desmares, who succeeded her aunt, Mlle Champmeslé, in 1698, was truly protean, playing *soubrettes* and *amoureuses* in comedy and *premières* in tragedy. Early in her tenure she appears to have played mostly tragedy, along with comic afterpieces, which, as the company child Lolotte, she had played even before officially entering the troupe. Her turning point was a much praised appearance in Mlle Molière's role in a new production of *Psyché* in

³¹ William D. Howarth, ed., *French Theatre in the Neo-classical Era: 1550–1789* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 313–15.

³² See La Grange, *Registre*, ed. Édouard Thierry (Paris: J. Claye, 1876), for 1685, where he notes in the margin the debuts of Dancourt, Desmares, and Rochemore, and Milles Du Rieu and Desbrosses.

June 1703.³³ Like her predecessor, she was not flawlessly beautiful, but her face and her voice were "charming," and she had "intelligence, a lively imagination, volubility, and gaiety in her comic roles."³⁴ She – along with Adrienne Lecouvreur and a few others – was one of the actresses of the eighteenth century to break through the limits that defined each *emploi*; she was especially *goûtée*, tasted, in *soubrette* roles.

The great Adrienne Lecouvreur, who was received in 1717, succeeded her as a *première* in *rôles tendres* and *amoureuses*, although not *soubrettes*. Mlle Gaussin continued in that tradition from 1732 to 1763, and also sang and danced in the *divertissements*. Mlle Duclos, whose early appearances were mostly in comedy and musical afterpieces, became celebrated in tragedy, but did continue to appear occasionally in comedy. In general, however, actresses did not play multiple *emplois* or across genres. In the season of 1700–1, for instance, the *grande troupe*, which included all the *premières*, was at Fontainebleau for six weeks in the fall. The *petite troupe*, those left behind, played only comedy. It included Milles Champvallon, Clavel (Fonpré), Desbrosses, Dufey, and Dangeville *tante*, along with the young Dancourt sisters, Manon and Mimi.³⁵ Of that group, only Mlle Desbrosses might have been playing tragedy, although according to Lemazurier she gave it up when she took over the *caractère* roles of Mlle La Grange in 1692.

Casting offers some insight into the *emplois*. An actor or actress could not be deprived of a role that he or she "owned," but roles became open when someone gave up a role voluntarily or retired. When that occurred, the troupe as a whole deliberated and reassigned the role. For instance, on February 19, 1700 the role of Armande in *Les Femmes savantes* was given to Mlle Dancourt, the Suivante de la Reyne in *Oreste et Pilade* to Mlle Beaubourg, and Marine in the *Mari sans femme* to Mlle Mimi Dancourt, all conforming to each actress's normal *emploi*.³⁶ On April 5, 1701 the Petit Marquis (Acaste?) in *Le Misanthrope* was also given to "Mlle Mimi"; a week later, however, the troupe – having reflected – took the role back from her, afraid that turning Acaste into a *travesti* role to show off the legs of the adorable Mimi might "blesser la bienséance," that is, violate propriety.³⁷

When a play was reprised after many years out of the repertory, it had to be newly cast, and this was also done by the troupe in deliberation.³⁸

³³ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 160. ³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 165.

³⁵ Archives of the Comédie-Française, *Registres*, season of 1700–1.

³⁶ Archives of the Comédie-Française, *Feuilles d'Assemblée*. ³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ For instance, the cast for a reprise of Molière's *La Princesse d'Élide* was approved by the assembly on November 15, 1701. See *Feuilles d'Assemblée*.

However, new plays were cast by their authors, and the system of *emplois* necessarily had implications not only for the actors but for the playwrights who provided their vehicles. Playwrights, especially tragic playwrights, already limited by the rules of classicism imposed in the seventeenth century, found themselves further restricted by the *emplois*, which, by the middle of the eighteenth century, were relatively fixed.

Tragic *emplois* are a bit easier to define than comic, largely thanks to Hippolyte Clairon, who played *premières* in tragedy from 1743 to 1766. Her *Mémoires... et réflexions sur l'art dramatique* were published late in the century, thirty-two years after the author had retired from the Comédie-Française.³⁹ When they were written is unknown, although the editor of an 1822 edition opts for 1791–2, when the aging actress returned to Paris after seventeen years at the court of Anspach.⁴⁰ Although she did not stop acting when she left the Comédie-Française in 1766, her first debut had been in 1737, and her prime was between 1743 and her retirement; her thoughts on acting clearly reflect her own experience. Among those reflections are a number of comments on the *emplois* which make clear the significance of these categories and the importance of physical and vocal characteristics in the juxtaposition of actor and *emploi*, especially for the men who specialized in tragedy. She writes:

English manners permit the most repulsive realities on the stage; Richard III is represented there with all the deformities he had from nature... The French *parterre*⁴¹ will accept in tragedy only what is elegant and noble. It will laugh at seeing a hunched back and distorted limbs on a character meant to excite terror and pity. Everyone knows that the greatest monarch can be as ugly, as badly made, with as common an air as the lowest peasant of his kingdom and that bodily needs, physical ills, and bad habits seem to render all men equal; but however that may be, the respect that his rank imposes, the feeling of fear or love that he inspires, the pomp that surrounds him always renders the monarch imposing.⁴²

Mlle Clairon articulates a very clear and commonsensical definition of the *bienséances* that ruled casting in her day. Although everyone knows that theatre is only an illusion, in performing tragedy, which deals with “the

³⁹ Paris: F. Buisson, an VII [1798].

⁴⁰ *Mémoires de Mlle Clairon actrice du Théâtre-Français, écrits par elle-même*, ed. François Andrieux (Paris: Ponthieu, 1822; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1968), p. lxx.

⁴¹ The standing male audience in the pit was often characterized by French theatre artists as the final judges of theatrical value, perhaps because they came armed with whistles, which they were only too willing to blow.

⁴² Clairon, *Mémoires*. I quote throughout from the 1822 edition, here pp. 247–8.

masters of the world," all must be noble and stirring and sumptuous, or the illusion will fail and the audience will lose the pleasure of being deceived.⁴³ To perfect the illusion and keep the audience in this pleasant state of deception, the actor's physical appearance and vocal quality must conform to the ideal of the *emploi*. Just as the language and behavior created by the playwright had to conform to the character's social category, just as tragic kings and heroes had to speak a certain kind of noble French, so the actor had to represent that speech in a certain kind of voice while appearing appropriately majestic.

Mlle Clairon is happy to describe the external gifts required for each male *emploi*. An actor who plays tyrants must be very tall, lean, with hollow eyes, thick eyebrows, a dark face; he speaks and gestures with an air of contempt. "I think," she adds, stressing the importance of physical appearance, "that an actor who looks like that will only have to speak the verse; three-quarters of his work will be done." To play kings – by which she means what was also called the *emploi* of *père noble* – an actor must be majestic in size, have a venerable face, and an imposing sound, but a voice that can be both pleasant and severe. His *démarche* and his *mouvements* must be noble and measured, and he must suggest the habit of command, experience, and virtue. The male *premier*, who plays those all-important heroes and princes, should be "taller than the average, neither fat nor too thin: fatness is ignoble on stage and thinness looks petty. He must be well-built and have no noticeable defects, must appear strong and elegant. If he is handsome, so much the better, provided his beauty is male; delicate features would be a defect."⁴⁴ Why is that so? Not only because what is feminine is weak, but because of the absolute importance of facial expression. "This *emploi*," she notes, "demands the greatest degree of expressiveness, the greatest mobility of the face: it must be able to express everything. . . But the face is not expressive except with large features, a wide-open eye, a marked eyebrow, a prominent mouth and dark hair."⁴⁵ Actors could succeed in this *emploi*, however, without the gift of beauty. Beaubourg, who replaced Michel Baron in the *premiers emplois* in tragedy and comedy, was not handsome or well-built, but "one forgot his ugliness and his knock-knees" because of his expressive face.⁴⁶ She continues in the same vein through *jeunes premiers* and *confidants*, regretting that *confidants* are too often cast with neophytes or anyone available, pointing out rightly that actors in this *emploi* must often perform *récits*, those long

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 249. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 253. ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. I, p. 124.

descriptive passages that inform both the audience and the other characters of the dark deeds that have taken place off stage so that *les décences* would not be violated. At the least, a *confident* needs a voice that is “susceptible to all *tons*.”⁴⁷

Women’s roles in tragedy Mlle Clairon divides into *mères*, *rôles forts*, *rôles tendres*, and *confidentes*. She is less specific about the necessary physical gifts, but does insist that actresses who play *mères* should not be in their “first youth,” which she defines as less than 20: “The study of the human heart, and the different passions that fill it, requires a mind formed by time, reflection, examples, finally experience.”⁴⁸ The *emploi* of *mères* is not, however, a collection of impotent elderly ladies; also labeled as *reines*, it includes Cléopâtre, Agrippine, Andromaque, Médée, and other great tragic heroines, and Mlle Clairon thinks an actress playing this repertory should be no younger than 25, have at least “the remains of beauty,” and be above the median in height.⁴⁹ “Little women,” she adds, “are rarely imposing,” an odd comment, since she herself was small. On the other hand, women who are too tall are often not graceful and appear “disproportionate in the ensemble.” And the theatrical *convenances* do not permit the women to be taller than the men. Some things in casting never change.

Mlle Clairon’s *rôles forts* include the more aggressive young women like Électre and Hermione (in *Andromaque*), her *rôles tendres* the more pathetic like Ariane and Iphigénie. Mlle Clairon was herself *première* in *rôles forts*, although she also played *mères*. Her description of her own *emploi* is more psychological than physical; nothing is mentioned about height or beauty, not even its “remains”:

I want to see in the whole ensemble the greatest pride, the most mobile face, the most imposing voice; and that the *démarche*, the *regard*,⁵⁰ all the *mouvements* indicate courage and even intrepidity; although one must not confuse an air of intrepidity with an air of recklessness. The first is often born from the elevation

⁴⁷ Clairon, *Mémoires*, pp. 254–5. *Ton* is often used as an umbrella term to include everything involving the management of the voice: pronunciation, intonation, pace, rhythm, etc. For a fuller investigation of this important term, see n. 79.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 258.

⁴⁹ Mlle Clairon may be reflecting on her predecessor, Mlle de Balicourt, who – according to Lemazurier – was “a little too young for some roles that require maturity” (*Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 12). She seems, however, to have offered considerable relief to patrons who were really tired of Mlle Duclos, going on for 60. Or, Mlle Clairon may have had in mind more recent actresses like Mlle Camouche, who made her debut in 1759 at the age of 16 in the role of Médée (*Ibid.* vol. II, p. 168).

⁵⁰ That is, the use of the eyes, considered of prime importance.

of the soul, and the other almost never indicates anything but degradation. Nobility of blood, moral purity, female modesty must never disappear; one must remember them in the greatest transports of love, despair, and vengeance.⁵¹

Rôles tendres, also *princesses*, require "a sweet face, vocal sounds that are touching, easy tears, infrequent and gentle gestures, everything modest, a measured *démarche*, an elegant figure, a middling height, if possible." Little women retain their youth longer, or so says one of them, and the young *première en tragédie* should try to hold on to youth, since the characters are mostly young, inexperienced girls who are timid, barely able to admit to the love they feel or the love they inspire. "Never lose that air of purity, of candor, that [the character's] age and rank require," advises the veteran actress, and absolutely avoid *volupté*, sexiness. "The *ton*, the *maintien*, the *regard* of a *coquette* or *femme galante* is never suited to innocence."⁵² This is as close as Mlle Clairon comes to discussing the comic *emplois*, and could be a warning to those who play *premières* in both genres that their two sets of characters must be approached very differently. *Confidentes* get short shrift; they should look decent and *sage*, be of an age to inspire confidence, and – advice to those whose *emploi* is not of high status – never let their eyes drift to the audience or forget their place in the *tableau*.⁵³

Others who wrote about actors may have used slightly different categories or other terminology, or may have divided the pie slightly differently, but the tragic *emplois* appear to have been relatively fixed in broad outline, although the very act of creating a catalogue usually involves generalization. Unfortunately, no one has so neatly documented what an actor was meant to bring to the comic *emplois*; information about those must be gleaned from multiple sources.

Molière's comic invention was to some extent foundational for the comic *emplois* in France, and the Comédie-Française was under the necessity of continuing to cast his plays, at least until they fell out of favor in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁵⁴ Although Molière's

⁵¹ Clairon, *Mémoires*, p. 259.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 261. *Maintien* refers to posture, bearing, and – more generally – presence.

⁵³ Although I do not agree with those who think that the actors always formed a semi-circle with the principals at the center, I do think there was an etiquette that influenced the *tableau*, the stage picture, and that woe probably betided the *confidente* or even the *seconde* who upstaged the *première*.

⁵⁴ In 1746 the *premiers gentilshommes de la chambre*, the courtiers who had authority over the state theatres, issued an order to the Comédie-Française forbidding them to produce even Molière's best-known plays, now "entirely abandoned by the public." Quoted by Otis Fellows, *French Opinion of Molière, 1800–1850* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1937), p. 11.

characters include the usual fathers, daughters, lovers, *soubrettes*, and *valets*, he also invented characters that were more particularly his own: the *raisonné*, the *petit marquis*, the *précieuse*, the *prude*, and all the many eccentrics that people his plays.

Thus, actresses could be categorized as *grandes coquettes*, a type that probably began with Célimène in *Le Misanthrope*, but grew to include Elmire in *Tartuffe*, and certain female characters in the *haut comique*, the society comedies by Regnard and others that were so popular late in the seventeenth century and early in the eighteenth. Comic *emplois* for women also included the *soubrette*, and this type was subdivided into the Moliéresque *soubrette*, sharp tongued and manipulative, as played by Mlle Beauval, and the *soubrette* with greater finesse, represented by Mlle Desmares who succeeded her. The other major female comic *emploi* was the *caractère*, which included the *mere comique*, the *vieille ridicule*, and a host of other roles that did not fit within the boundaries of the major *emplois*.

Men's comic *emplois* included the standard *pères*, *jeunes premiers* and *seconds*, and the *valets*, both clever and dim-witted. From the Molière repertory, however, developed some peculiarly French types: the *rôles à manteau*, which included both the bourgeois starring roles Molière wrote for himself – Arnolphe, Organ, Harpagon, Argan, *et al.* – and assorted councilors, financiers, and other middle-aged, middle-class men, who gained importance in comedy as the Paris audience gained influence over the repertory. Also Moliéresque, although based in long farce tradition, was the *niais* – Thomas Diafoirus and Pierrot are good examples – and the *petit-maître* based on the ridiculous marquis. I am not at all certain what accounts for one rather strange *emploi*, played by several actors across genre lines, and known as *rois et paysans*. The two types would seem to have very little in common, but the tradition may have been established by La Thorillière *père* who, in the time of Molière, played both the tragic hero-king Tite in Corneille's *Tite et Bérénice* and Lubin, a peasant clod, in Molière's *George Dandin*. Unlike the women, few of the men made a career of a single comic *emploi*; Dancourt played *jeunes premiers* in *haut comique* as well as *raisonnés*, rational characters like Chrysalde and Cléante who counter-balance their obsessed bourgeois relatives and friends. La Thorillière *fils*, although *chef d'emploi* of *manteaux*, often played *valets* and servants, and the protean Villiers played at least three *emplois*: *petits-maîtres*, *manteaux*, and *niais*.

Physical appearance was the paramount *don de nature* for *jeunes premiers* and *premières* in comedy. The two actors best known for their

remarkable good looks were Baron and Quinault-Dufresne, who also played *premiers* in both genres. Baron's son Étienne, "who like his father had the most handsome face and was perfectly well-proportioned,"⁵⁵ played *premiers* in the *haut comique*; perhaps fortunately, he died before Michel Baron rejoined the troupe in 1720, or he might have had to defer to his father. Grandval, who succeeded to *jeunes premiers* when Quinault-Dufresne moved up the ladder after the elder Baron's death, possessed the "rare talent and the beautiful physique indispensable" to that *emploi*. The beautiful physique was not, however, indispensable when it came to *premiers* in tragedy, and those roles that Grandval had accumulated he lost to the superior genius of Lekain, who did not count beauty among his gifts of nature. On the other hand, Lekain never played comedy.

Apparently, actors in low-comedy *emplois* were expected to be at least relatively ugly. Dumas d'Aiguebierre wonders why Montmény (the son of Alain-René Lesage) failed to please the audience, although "no one was more exact, more regular, more natural" than he in his *emploi* of *valets* and *paysans*. The conclusion: The actor has "a physiognomy that is too pleasing for low-comedy characters," and that this lack of *vraisemblance* serves to destroy the impression he could make.⁵⁶

Among the women, beauty was essential for those who played high comedy. Mlle Raisin was one of the earliest to hold the *emplois* of *jeunes princesses* and *premières amoureuses*, having made her debut in 1679, just before the merger that created the Comédie-Française. She was the model: tall, beautiful, with an excellent figure, and "sparkling with natural attractions. Her eyes were charming, and although her mouth was a little large, her smile was so agreeable, and discovered such white and perfect teeth that no one noticed this defect. Nature had given her the most marked talent for the *haut comique*."⁵⁷ Mlle Dancourt, also a celebrated beauty, succeeded Mlle Raisin in high comedy. Another potential *amoureuse*, Mlle Brillant, although sensitive and intelligent, was not tall, not beautiful, had big breasts, and ended up playing *confidentes*. Still, beauty alone was not enough to succeed in the *emploi*. Mlle Dangeville *tante*, although known as La Belle Hortense, did not capture the fancy of the audience when she doubled Mlle Desmares.

The *emploi* of *soubrette* was perhaps even more vital to the health of the theatre than was that of *première*. Other famous *soubrettes* besides

⁵⁵ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. I, p. 119.

⁵⁶ Dumas d'Aiguebierre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, pp. 44-5.

⁵⁷ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 545.

Mlle Desmares were Mlle Mimi Dancourt, Mlle Dangeville *la jeune*, and Mlle Beauménard, better known as Mlle GoGo. Mimi Dancourt, who sang in the *divertissements* and originated a number of roles in plays written by Regnard, Dufresny, Voltaire, and her father, was said to have been as beautiful as her mother; otherwise, she excited little comment. She was succeeded by Mlle Dangeville, perhaps the greatest of all the *soubrettes*, who made her debut in 1730 at the age of 16 in eleven *soubrette* roles.⁵⁸ "Beauty," we are told, "was the least of her advantages." She was "very pretty," her face was charming, her features were lively and animated, and altogether she seemed "marked by nature" for her *emploi*.⁵⁹ Bachaumont wrote of her in 1762: "Nature was as lavish in her gifts to you as if art had refused you everything, and art endeavored to enrich you with her perfections as if nature had given you nothing at all."⁶⁰ Mlle GoGo found this a hard act to follow. Whether pretty or not, she was celebrated for her sexual attractions off the stage; on it, she was best in the more vigorous roles created by Molière and Regnard, who had destined their *soubrettes* and *suivantes* for the talents of Mlle Béjart and Mlle Beauval; she was found less effective in the more mannered roles of the later eighteenth century. Still, she "had received from nature the gifts appropriate to her *emploi* that she occupied for a long time with great success. Her face was charming; her features, lively and animated, naturally suited to the expression of gaiety."⁶¹ The same words tend to reoccur: "charming," "lively" or "animated," "expressive," and "gaiety."

Perhaps one of the best descriptions of the eighteenth-century *soubrette* is from Alain-René Lesage's *Gil Blas*, usually thought to be a portrait of Mlle Desmares.

I am enchanted by the actress who plays the *suivante* in the *intermèdes*.⁶² Ah, how perfectly natural! With what grace she occupies the stage! Is it the moment for some witty remark? She seasons it with a smile so sly and full of charm that it gives it new importance. One might reproach her that she sometimes is a little too intense, and passes the bounds of decent boldness; but there's no need to be so severe. I would only want her to correct one bad habit. Often she suddenly stops the action in the middle of a scene to give in to a mad need to

⁵⁸ *Feuilles d'Assemblée*, January 16, 1730.

⁵⁹ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 130.

⁶⁰ Louis Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France depuis MDCCLXII jusqu'à nos jours*, ed. Paul Lacroix (Paris: Garnier frères, 1874), pp. 10–11.

⁶¹ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 59.

⁶² Lesage uses this word to suggest Spain, where his tale takes place. By it he means short comic plays, not *intermezzi* or interludes.

laugh that overtakes her. You will tell me that the public applauds her in those moments. So be it.⁶³

Apparently, Lesage did not appreciate these *lazzi* of laughter – copied no doubt from Mlle Beauval, whose special talent it was – and written into certain characters by both Molière and Dancourt.

The women who played *caractères* were not burdened by the need to be beautiful; often they had been found wanting in *premières*, or were so far down the status ladder, doomed to *troisième*, that *caractères* were preferable. Mlle La Grange was the model for this *emploi*. A *gagiste* in Molière's troupe until she married La Grange in 1672, she had been used occasionally in *nécessaire* roles. In 1671, however, Molière cast her as the Comtesse d'Escarbagnas, a *vieille ridicule* in the *caractère emploi*, followed by Bélise in *Les Femmes savantes*. She originated a number of roles after the founding of the Comédie-Française, also helping to establish the comic *mère*, a type which Molière did not use.

According to Lemazurier, Mlle La Grange was very ugly, although he does not tell us how he knows that. She was, however, succeeded by – among others – La Belle Hortense, the charming Mlle Dangeville *tante*, who was still beautiful enough twenty-five years after her debut to be cast as Venus in the Prologue of *Le Pastor fido*. The *emploi* was shared by Mlle Desbrosses, who abandoned tragedy after the retirement of Mlle La Grange in 1692 and became "one of the most perfect actresses" to play older women's roles in comedy, highly regarded for her naturalness and vivacity, the two keys to success in comedy. Another important actress in *caractères* was Mlle Lamotte, who also moved from tragedy, "for which she had little talent or taste. . . There was nothing ridiculous about her face or her figure; her voice was rather high and sharp, however, the only gift she received from nature for the *emploi* she filled."⁶⁴ This is a rare comment bearing on the vocal requirements of comedy.

If an actor or actress were good enough, however, the implicit requirements of an *emploi* – height, beauty, nobility, sonority of voice, whatever – could be overlooked. Perhaps the best example of this was Lekain, described by Mlle Clairon, who shared the stage with him for some fifteen years:

Lekain, simple artisan [his father was a goldsmith, so not so simple], having nothing but a dark, disagreeable face, an insignificant body, a heavy, inflexible voice, and a weak temperament burst from the workshop onto the stage;

⁶³ Alain-René Lesage, *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (Paris: Charpentier, 1857), p. 175.

⁶⁴ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 275.

and with no other guide but genius, with the help only of art, showed himself to be the greatest actor, the most handsome, the most imposing, the most interesting of men.⁶⁵

She contrasts him to Quinault-Dufresne, who had nothing but “the supreme beauty of his person and his voice.”⁶⁶

Other gifts of nature thought necessary to success as an actor were less specific to a particular *emploi*. Mlle Clairon lists a powerful, certain, unalterable memory as one essential, along with an excellent constitution. “No profession is more tiring,” she insists, and someone with “bad nerves or bad lungs or a delicate stomach will not survive tragedy.”⁶⁷ A voice that is *fort et sonore*, “strong and sonorous,” is indispensable if an actor wants to be heard throughout the auditorium. If the voice is to give full value to the nuances of what it expresses it must also be proportionate to the *emploi* the actor holds, be full with nothing in it that is disagreeable to the ear, be produced naturally and without any sense of difficulty, and be flexible enough to achieve the necessary intonations.⁶⁸ Comic actors could succeed with voices that were less melodious, but the other requirements remain the same.

The greatest vocal flaw was *grassement*, the misarticulation of certain consonants, especially the difficult French “r.” The *Encyclopédie* describes it as a “defect of the voice,”⁶⁹ and Mlle Clairon and others seem to believe that it was a natural flaw, difficult to correct. “Grandval,” she writes, “this charming actor, attractive, witty, and warm... was forced to retire before he was fifty, by the distaste of the public... for his *grassement*. Youth and beauty make it attractive in society; but it is an intolerable defect on the stage.”⁷⁰

Other natural talents that actors needed in order to succeed can be more difficult to define. In the *Seconde Lettre du Souffleur*, one of the conversationalists, a “man who is sensible and has good taste,” tries to develop some principles for judging the merit of an actor. He mentions what seem to be basic attributes of the tragic actor: *âme* and *feu*, two qualities that are distinct but related. Speaking of the actor Sarrazin, the author adds in a note that “some people sustain that this Actor does not lack *feu*, that he even has a great deal of it; but that his *feu* is not perceptible, because he has no *âme*. First of all, I believe that one can have *âme* without *feu*, but one cannot have true *feu* without *âme*.” And

⁶⁵ Clairon, *Mémoires*, pp. 242–3. ⁶⁶ *Ibid.* ⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 233.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 230. ⁶⁹ “grassement,” *Encyclopédie*, ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>

⁷⁰ Clairon, *Mémoires*, p. 232.

then, to make matters even more complicated, he adds, "I find it hard to believe that this Actor does not feel what he says: it is true that his face is mute and indicates nothing. But this is not proof that he lacks *entrailles*."⁷¹

All of this is a way of talking about the actor's ability to feel and express emotion, which may be nature's most important gift, but one that must be perfected by art. Talents come from nature, to be sure, but so do flaws. Dumas d'Aigueberre writes of Quinault-Dufresne, for instance, that "the *feu*, which is his principal talent. . . never abandons the Actor; but it often moves him beyond the limits. He rushes, he exaggerates, he is deafened, he loses the meaning of things."⁷² The tragic actor, then, must be armed with sensitivity, must be inspired to great and appropriate emotions by the situation in which the character finds himself and by the words he speaks, but must express those emotions artfully, refining his performance, as we have seen earlier, with *goût*.

In the comic actor, the words most often used in appreciation are *vivacité*, *gaieté*, *volubilité*, *le beau naturel*. Dorat's verses praising Mlle Dangeville sum up the consummate comic actress:

I seem to see her, her eyes alight with gaiety,
Speaking, acting, walking so lightly.
Vivacious without affectation, alive without grimaces,
Discovering a new grace with every movement,
Smiling, expressing herself clearly even when silent,
Joining her mute play to the sparkle of her speech,
Adding nuance to all her tones, varying her face,
Rendering art natural while ornamenting nature.⁷³

Dumas d'Aigueberre uses a similar vocabulary to describe Mlle Quinault *la cadette*: "What charms us in her. . . is that volubility of the tongue, that obstinate air when she contradicts someone, that cheeky something in her voice and gestures, and finally that great vivacity that supports and animates everything she does and says."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, pp. 41–2. According to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* in 1762 when "one says 'An actor has *entrailles*,' this means that he is affected by the action of the play and renders it with *chaleur* and truth." Grimarest's definition is more technical: When an actor does not know or feel what he is saying, he has no *entrailles*. Poisson defines *entrailles* more generally as "the sensitivity of the soul." *Âme*, soul, may here refer to the "sensitive soul that presides over the emotions" or to the soul as the motive force, the agency, that gives rise to emotions. Thus, an actor without *âme* cannot have true *feu*, because his emotions will be feigned. ARTFL, *Dictionnaires d'Aurefois* <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/17>

⁷² Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, p. 43.

⁷³ Reprinted in Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 151.

⁷⁴ Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, p. 46.

The actor's expressive tools described in such remarks – the face and body in action, as well as the act of speech – are seen as both natural and as honed by art. Natural physical and vocal attributes can mark someone as attractive and/or as suitable to his or her *emploi*, but the ability to read a text and from that text to represent a character, to distinguish one character from another, to impersonate, to bring to life through the imagination – all that requires a different set of talents and skills. Another writer commenting on Mlle Dangeville leads us to consider what these talents and skills may be:

With intelligence, with study and with reflection, one can perfect one's *goût* and become a very brilliant actress; but the actress of genius⁷⁵ is very rare, and there is the same difference as between Molière and an author who has only a certain wit. We have seen Mlle Dangeville play the most distinctly opposite characters, and grasp them in such a way that we are still unable to say in which one we liked her best. It is hard to imagine that the same person was able to play with equal facility so many... different roles.⁷⁶

Marie-Anne Botot, Mlle Dangeville, was born for the stage, a member of one of the dynasties that dominated the Parisian theatre in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Her father was Antoine-François Botot-Dangeville, a dancer, dancing master, *maître de ballet* at the Académie de Musique, and member of the Académie de Danse. Her mother, who was the sister of Mlle Desmares, was Anne-Catherine Desmares, known at the Comédie-Française as Mlle Dangeville *mère*. The younger Mlle Dangeville was also the niece of Charles-Claude Botot-Dangeville, *doyen* of the troupe, and his wife, known as Mlle Dangeville *tante*. Finally, she was the grand-niece of Mlle Champmeslé. Mlle Dangeville was also very carefully trained for her profession. Mlle Clairon includes in her memoirs a charming picture of the young star having a dance lesson: "Mademoiselle Dangeville lodged just opposite me; her windows were open; she took a dancing lesson: all the charms that nature and youth could unite emanated from her; I did not miss a single one of her movements. She was surrounded by her family; the lesson finished, everyone applauded, her mother embraced her." The 11-year-old Clairon tried to imitate what she had seen, and she continued to observe her idol. "The fine weather favored me: I saw the whole room of my divinity. I studied her as much as I possibly could; and as soon as she

⁷⁵ Here the word *génie* has its modern meaning.

⁷⁶ Germain-François Poullain de Saint-Foix, *Essais historiques sur Paris* (Paris: Duchesne, 1777), vol. VII, pp. 255–9.

disappeared, I did everything that I had seen her do."⁷⁷ Later, Mlle Clairon was to write about the importance to actors of learning to dance.

Dumas d'Aiguerre, who describes Mlle Dangeville in 1730, shortly after her debut and acceptance into the troupe, makes clear that her natural talents and her training have only brought her so far. "There is something imperfect in her play... but she is still very young... we recognize the lessons of her mistress [Mlle Desmares] in everything she does, the same *tons* and the same *mouvements*, but it is to be hoped that she will become, through imitation, as perfect as her so perfect model."⁷⁸ To do this, however, she must also become herself. The author adds, in a note, that "she has great talents; most of her faults are very easy to correct." Apparently, she did so, and met all the requirements for a *soubrette*.

Tragic actors, whatever the natural talents they brought to the enterprise, were expected to attain a very high standard in what was called, variously, *déclamation* or *récitation*, that is, in the art of speaking the playwright's verse. This is also that aspect of the actor's art which has created the greatest challenge to scholars, especially in the contested area of the relationship of the rhetorical art of *actio* to the theatrical art of acting. What is not contested is that the success of the tragic actor or actress relied heavily on his or her emotional expressiveness, both vocal and physical, with vocal expressiveness as the gold standard by which an actor was judged.⁷⁹

The actor/rhetoricians have more to say about the training of the voice than do the actors themselves or their critics. Jean Poisson, for instance, drawing from the practice of the good actor, lists the characteristics of model speech – all of which can, presumably, be learned. "Pronunciation must be... according to the rules of the Language and good Usage."

⁷⁷ Clairon, *Mémoires*, p. 13.

⁷⁸ Dumas d'Aiguerre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, pp. 47–8.

⁷⁹ One word frequently used to describe the voice is *ton*, which can imply all the attributes of vocal expression, as when Marmontel, in his article on "*Déclamation*" in the *Encyclopédie* (<http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>), notes of comic actors that they must achieve a faithful representation of the *ton* and the outward appearance of the characters whose manners are imitated in comedy. Elsewhere in the *Encyclopédie* ("*Ton*") the term seems to include both the appropriate speech act and the words spoken, *ton* not only as an attribute of speech but as something innate in written language: "the colors, nuances of style, language that belongs to each work." A *ton* is often distinguished by an adjective that embodies the speaker's social rank or moral *caractère*. A *ton* can be proud and vigorous or soft, elevated or low, heroic or familiar. The *Dictionnaire de Littré* sums up these and many other implications of the word *ton* in acting with the following proverb: *C'est le ton qui fait la musique*, "it is the tone that makes the music," it is the way things are said that denotes the intention of the speaker (ARTFL, *Dictionnaires d'Autrefois* <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/17>).

Articulation must be smooth, clear, and *insinuante*.⁸⁰ He also includes under Articulation the rate of speech, which should be neither too slow nor too precipitous. For those who mangle their “r’s” in the back of the throat, Poisson advises Demosthenes’ old trick of slipping pebbles under the tongue while practicing. Like much of what is said in the rhetorical treatises on *actio*, his advice is hardly controversial.⁸¹

What is controversial, however, and was controversial then, and is certainly relevant to understanding early eighteenth-century acting, is the distinction made between *le naturel* and *déclamation*, especially when the latter was qualified as *chantante*. Most of the spectators who wrote about acting in the 1720s took sides on this issue, often expressed as a rivalry between Mlle Duclos and Mlle Lecouvreur. Most, although not all, favored the natural.

The playwright and early theatre historian Pierre-François Godard de Beauchamps was especially clear about where he stood. In his 1725 *Épître à Mlle Lecouvreur, à propos de la dispute qui s’est élevée depuis quelque temps au sujet de la déclamation des demoiselles Duclos et Lecouvreur* (*Epistle to Mlle Lecouvreur, apropos of the dispute that broke out some time ago on the subject of the vocal delivery of the demoiselles Duclos and Lecouvreur*), Beauchamps wrote:

So foolish was the obstinacy of Paris,
We gave everything to art and nothing to feeling,
And the theatre, a prey to the *déclamatrices*,
Offered to the spectators only *froides actrices*. . .⁸²
I do not contest that actors must know how to declaim;
But what reaches the heart when a forced voice
Renders neither the Author’s thoughts nor meaning? . . .
One word comes after another word and erases it.
Must we then, to be moved, need clamorous yelps,
Convulsive gestures, the wild abandon of the Bacchantes?
Do they think I am deaf? Please, calm down.
You can’t even breathe. What’s the good of this fury?
Is this the way a young princess expresses herself?
When seized with fear? when shaking with sorrow?

Obviously, Beauchamps does not think so. Instead, he proposes the new and natural style of Adrienne Lecouvreur:

⁸⁰ When something is *insinuante*, it penetrates and persuades; why that is a function of articulation is mysterious.

⁸¹ Chaouche, *Sept Traités*, pp. 409–10.

⁸² *Froid* in this usage is the opposite of *chaleureux*, hence lacking true emotion.

Finally the true triumphs, & the tragic furor
Gives way, on the Stage, to the *tendre*, the *pathétique*.⁸³
You have made us know and feel
The beauty of simplicity and its pleasures.⁸⁴

In spite of praise from Beauchamps and others, the assumption often remains that although Mlle Lecouvreur, along with Michel Baron, attempted to reform French acting in the 1720s and replace *déclamation* with something closer to normal speech, the attempt was largely unsuccessful, and their style not imitated by other actors. This leads to the further assumption that *déclamation*, acting that highlighted the voice and was centered on a vocal model drawn from treatises on *actio*, was the prevalent mode of tragic performance in the eighteenth century, at least until the coming of Lekain, the "French Garrick."

A frequently repeated anecdote has Jean-Baptiste Lully, the creator of the French opera and of the French style of recitative, basing the latter on the performance of Mlle Champmeslé; the full anecdote is rather instructive. According to the "Marquis," one of the characters in a dialogue about music by Jean-Louis Le Cerf de La Viéville, published first in 1704, Lully sent some of his female singers to study their scores with his father-in-law, Michel Lambert. Lambert apparently allowed the singers to embellish their parts, which annoyed Lully at the next rehearsal. "*Morbleu*, Mesdemoiselles," he is said to have said, "rising impetuously from his chair. There is nothing like that on your score, & *ventrebleu*, no embroidery; my Recitative only represents speech, I want it to be perfectly plain." Another participant adds:

He wanted it so plain that it is claimed that he went to the Comédie to form it on the *tons* of la Champmeslé. He listened to la Champmeslé declaim, remembered her *tons*, then gave them the grace, the harmony, and the degree of force that they needed to have in the mouth of a Singer, in order to make what he had appropriated in that way suit the music.⁸⁵

⁸³ Two more words that have to be glossed rather than merely translated. *Tendre* can mean "tender," but it can also refer to the "tender passion," that is, to love, and sometimes to sexual passion. Context is everything. *Pathétique* is not synonymous with "pathetic," but is the adjectival form of *pathos*, one of the three great means of persuasion in rhetoric, along with *ethos* and *logos*. *Pathos* is persuasion through emotion, so an actress who brings to the stage the *tendre* and the *pathétique* is one who is emotionally expressive rather than one who uses declamatory formulae.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Allainval, *Lettre*, pp. 60–1.

⁸⁵ Jean-Louis Le Cerf de La Viéville, *Comparison de la Musique italienne et de la musique françoise*, 2nd edn. (Brussels: François Foppens, 1705), pt. II, p. 204. The credibility of this anecdote is slightly enhanced by the fact that it was published only a few years after the death of Mlle Champmeslé, although seventeen years after Lully died. Nonetheless, *on prétend*, "it is claimed," is no better a truth claim than *on dit*, "it is rumored."

As Patricia Ranum notes in *The Harmonic Orator: The Phrasing and Rhetoric of the Melody in French Baroque Airs*,⁸⁶ what the anecdote suggests is not that acting was based on singing, but rather the reverse, and that the recitative devised by Lully was “plain” and not “embroidered” with the usual Baroque ornaments. Other scholars have been less observant and have used this anecdote, however questionable, to suggest that French tragic acting used a sing-song delivery that could even be notated.⁸⁷

As to *déclamation chantante*, in 1709 Jean Poisson – in the first version of his *Réflexions* – uses the word *chanter* to describe a certain kind of “declamation,” but his discussion of it is nuanced:

The word “Declaimer” is never taken, I think, in good part: in Rhetoric it signifies an Orator who speaks in grand, inflated words, that mean nothing, & have no solidity: but we call “Declaimer” an Actor who always recites in an emphatic *ton*, what we call “singing.” Beautiful voices are sometimes subject to this sort of delivery; & sing a little. This manner pleases when it is not affected, & has its partisans: it is striking when it is well-managed & is not always a fault. The tragedies of M. de Racine are performed in part in this taste: it was somewhat the manner of that illustrious author; & Mademoiselle de Champmeslé, who charmed the Court and Paris as Hermione, as Iphigénie, as Phèdre, sang a little, if I dare to say so: but as she made this delivery seem natural, & since elsewhere she performed the roles of the celebrated M. Corneille excellently, & in another manner, she passed justly for an accomplished actress.⁸⁸

Poisson’s perception is also supported by the anonymous author of the *Entretiens galans*⁸⁹ who has one of his characters, Berelie, propose that there is a relationship between acting and singing, exemplified by Mlle Champmeslé. She argues that:

declamation is another kind of music; & in my sense a musician, who knows how to deliver verse, will have great advantages. . . The delivery of actors is a kind of singing, & you will certainly admit that la Champmeslé would not please so much if she had a less attractive voice. But she knows how to use it with a great deal of art, & her inflections are so appropriate and so natural that it seems that she has truly in her heart an emotion that is only in her mouth.⁹⁰

The emphatic mode of delivery practiced in the early eighteenth century and known as *déclamation chantante* was not considered “natural,” but

⁸⁶ Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2001.

⁸⁷ See, for instance, Louis Rosow, “French Baroque Recitative as an Expression of Tragic Declamation,” *Early Music* (October 1983), 468–79, esp. 472.

⁸⁸ Chaouche, *Sept Traités*, p. 422. ⁸⁹ Paris: J. Ribou, 1681.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 89. The issue of whether or not an actor needed to feel an emotion in order to express it and communicate it will be considered below.

might have been a degraded development of what had been originated by Mlle Champmeslé, guided by Racine himself. As I noted in the last chapter, Racine, according to Boileau, "taught" Mlle Du Parc her role of Andromaque and "had her repeat it like a pupil,"⁹¹ while Louis Racine presents his father as a kind of Professor Higgins, teaching Mlle Champmeslé, his Eliza Doolittle, her dialogue, word by word, stress by stress. Louis Racine also gives an account of how his father's lessons were passed down and transmuted on the stage of the Comédie-Française. He writes:

Everyone knows the talent that my father had for declamation, the taste for which he gave to actors capable of learning it. Those who imagine that the declamation he introduced on the stage was inflated and *chantante* are, I think, in error. They judge it by la Duclos, student of la Champmeslé, and pay no attention to the fact that la Champmeslé, when she had lost her master, was not the same, and that aging, she used her voice in great bursts of sound, which gave a false model to the actors. When Baron, after twenty years of retirement, had the weakness to return to the stage, he did not play with the same liveliness as before, according to those who had seen him in his youth... however, he repeated still all the same *tons* that my father had taught him.⁹²

Louis Racine was probably wrong about the source of Baron's *tons*; he was not at all the sort of actor to humbly imitate a playwright, however good a "declaimer" that playwright might have been.

The accusation that Mlle Champmeslé's performances had deteriorated was not based on personal experience – Louis Racine was only 5 when she died – but his mention of Mlle Duclos as Mlle Champmeslé's student may be a vital clue as to how a certain tragic acting style developed at the turn of the century. Mlle Duclos, the embodiment of the emphatic style, who first understudied and then succeeded Mlle Champmeslé as *chef d'emploi*, certainly may have imitated her, while lacking the ability to achieve the nuances developed originally by Racine and his star actress.⁹³ Along with her colleague Beaubourg, Mlle Duclos practiced *le style chantant*, possibly contributing to the near financial ruin of the Comédie-Française before the return of Michel Baron and the rise of Adrienne Lecouvreur in the early 1720s.⁹⁴ Beaubourg, as noted above,

⁹¹ André Chagny, "Vie de Marquise Du Parc," *Cahiers raciniens* 7 (1958), 456–7. Boileau may have been Louis Racine's source.

⁹² In Jean Racine, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Raymond Picard (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), vol. I, pp. 40–1.

⁹³ Sabine Chaouche's analysis of "La déclamation 'chantante' racinienne" is a valuable effort to reconstruct Racine's idea of how his verses were to be spoken. See *L'Art du comédien*, esp. pp. 315–51.

⁹⁴ See H. C. Lancaster, "The Comédie Française: 1701–1774. Plays, Actors, Spectators, Finances," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* N.S. 41 (1951) for the seasons 1717–18 and 1718–19, pp. 654–8.

did not have all the gifts of nature expected of a leading tragic actor. Like many members of the troupe, he was caricatured by Alain-René Lesage in *Gil Blas*. Because Lesage was at odds with the actors of the Comédie-Française, where his plays had not been as successful or profitable as he had hoped they might be,⁹⁵ his portraits are not entirely trustworthy. In the case of Beaubourg, however, other evidence supports what Lesage writes:

"You must have been charmed," said Segiar, "with the one who played the character of Énée. Did he not appear to you to be a great *comédien*, an original actor?" "Very original," answered the critic; "he had some *tons* that were peculiar to him; he had some that were very shrill. Almost always unnatural, he rushes through the words that contain the emotion, and stresses the others; he even bursts forth on the conjunctions. He entertained me very much, and particularly when he expressed to his *confident* the violence he would do to himself in abandoning the princess; no one could show sorrow more comically."⁹⁶

According to Lemazurier, Beaubourg "made a great reputation, perhaps because there were no actors in his time that were equal to him; however, his acting was excessive, his gestures forced, his declamation unnatural, his inflections disagreeable." On the other hand, "when by chance or habit he hit on true expression, he was admirable, and all his faults disappeared."⁹⁷ Maupoint thought Beaubourg was brilliant in the title role of Regnard's *Le Joueur*, a comedy that opened in December 1696, and he was popular with the public for a long time, "although subject to confusing the most beautiful parts of the play with the least beautiful, which he declaimed with equal enthusiasm."⁹⁸ Boindin goes even farther in praising Beaubourg: "without being either handsome or well-built, he performed well on the stage, and had a noble and imposing air. The way in which he delivered his lines was more singing than declamation; he had some very moving *tons* that went straight to the heart." While agreeing that Beaubourg "was not always in agreement with the meaning," Boindin adds that when his mind was on what he was doing, "he made as much from his lines as could be made." He also suggests that Beaubourg was a better

⁹⁵ Two of Lesage's plays, *Le Point d'honneur* and *La Tontine*, were total failures. *Don César Ursin* had six performances and was never reprised; *Turcaret*, Lesage's comic masterpiece, also had six performances in 1709 and was not seen again until 1730, when the author's shares were no longer in effect.

⁹⁶ Lesage, *Histoire*, vol. I, p. 200. ⁹⁷ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. I, pp. 125-7.

⁹⁸ Maupoint, *Bibliothèque des théâtres, contenant le catalogue alphabétique des pièces* (Paris: Laurent-François Prault, 1733), p. 179.

actor when the audience was small. "He played negligently, he approached the *nature*, and pleased infinitely."⁹⁹

Beaubourg had a long career, twenty-six years from 1692 to 1718; his colleague Mlle Duclos outdid him, holding the stage for forty-three years, from 1693 to 1736, when she finally retired, much to the relief of all. She was a *première* in *rôles tendres*, her triumph being the abandoned daughter of Minos in Thomas Corneille's *Ariane*, one of Mlle Champmeslé's most popular roles. Unlike Beaubourg, who had no competition to speak of until the debut of Quinault-Dufresne in 1712, Mlle Duclos shared the stage first with Mlle Champmeslé, then with Mlle Desmares, who technically understudied her, and then with Mlle Lecouvreur. In spite of this heavyweight competition, Mlle Duclos was the *chef d'emploi* after 1698 and a major figure at least until the 1720s. Lesage had a fine time with her as well as with her partner in tragedy. Once more the interlocutor asks:

Don't you agree that the actress who played the role of Didon is admirable? Did she not represent that queen with all the nobility and all the charm that fits the idea we have of her? Did you not admire with what art she connected to the spectator and made him feel all the passions that she expressed? Can one not say that she is consummate in the refinements of declamation?

The critic is less complimentary about those refinements. He agrees that she has *entrailles*, that she knows how to move an audience, but a few things about her acting shock him a little:

When she wants to show surprise, she rolls her eyes in an exaggerated way, which doesn't suit a princess. Add to that that in raising her voice, which is naturally low, she distorts its sweetness and makes a rather disagreeable sound. Moreover, it seems to me that in more than one place one might suspect that she does not understand very well what she is saying.¹⁰⁰

His companion would prefer to believe that she was distracted rather than accuse her of a lack of intelligence.

Still, Mlle Duclos also had many admirers, largely because she could move the audience. The playwright Houdar de La Motte, author of *Inès de Castro*, in which she made an important success, wrote praising her ability to express and communicate emotion:

Ah! how I love to see you as an abused beloved,
Face swimming with tears,

⁹⁹ Nicolas Boindin, *Première lettre historique sur la Comédie Française* (Paris: Paul Prout, 1719), pp. 42–3.

¹⁰⁰ Lesage, *Histoire*, vol. I, p. 199.

Touch us, carry away all our hearts,
 Except for the inflexible heart of the foresworn Thésée.¹⁰¹
 But what new spectacle? ah! it is Phèdre herself
 Giving herself up to the most passionate outbursts:
 Thésée is her husband, and it is his son she loves!
 Gods! what love! but what remorse!
 Are you then the mistress of all our emotions?
 Do you hold our hearts in your hands?
 You feign despair, hatred, passion,
 And I feel whatever you feign.¹⁰²

That Houdar de La Motte should use *feindre*, “feign,” to describe Mlle Duclos’s process is illuminating. Whether the actor must feel or may only “feign” to feel the emotion he or she is expressing becomes an issue for theorists later in the eighteenth century. In earlier years, however, the consensus was that nothing was more important than *sensibilité*, the heightened ability to feel. As Poisson puts it: “we can never express well what we do not feel deeply.”¹⁰³ Dumas d’Aigueberre adds that “it is not enough to feign sorrow, hatred, joy, anger, & to adopt some facial expression suitable to what you are saying to stimulate & touch the hearts of those who listen. In order to genuinely move, an emotion must really imitate nature and be *vraisemblable*.”¹⁰⁴ He warns against pretense, writing of an English actor he calls “Waltniq” who, “persuaded that one must be moved in order to move others, shows that he is not by his continual effort to appear to be.”¹⁰⁵

Mlle Duclos, however she achieved it, apparently was emotionally compelling as long as she was not distracted. The editors of the *Mercur* were almost always favorable to her, remarking that in reprising *Hypermetre* in 1726 she “gave it everything she had,” and, in February 1719, as Longepierre’s *Électre*, that “no actress has ever gone farther than she, nor played with as much force and grace.”¹⁰⁶ The great Lekain, many years later, was supposedly reproaching his colleague, Mme Vestris, for being too detached. “Madame,” he said, “I remember Mlle Duclos, who I saw, fifty years ago, make a numerous assembly weep by speaking a single word. A ‘my father!’ or ‘my beloved!’ spoken by her would make all the

¹⁰¹ He is referring to her performance as Ariane.

¹⁰² Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 185. ¹⁰³ Chaouche, *Sept Traités*, p. 413.

¹⁰⁴ Dumas d’Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, pp. 18–19.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 15. This must be James Quin, the English equivalent of Beaubourg. If not a perfect anagram, “Waltniq” does include three letters and a phoneme from “Quin.”

¹⁰⁶ Charles Gueullette, *Acteurs et actrices du temps passé: La Comédie-Française* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1881), pp. 135–7.

spectators dissolve in tears."¹⁰⁷ Her vocal style may have been what Marmontel, who had never seen her, called "Mlle Duclos's melodious lamentations,"¹⁰⁸ but either her *déclamation chantante* was effective or something other than her delivery of the verse was responsible for the link she created between herself and those who watched and listened to her.

Granting then that the *style chantant* had its admirers, what is the best approach to understanding what it was like, if that is what one wants to do? Several scholars take the view that the best avenue of approach is via the opera, based on the assumption, mentioned above, that the founder of French opera, Jean-Baptiste Lully, derived his principles of recitative from the practice of Mlle Champmeslé. And, indeed, Patricia Ranum's study of certain notational devices that, she argues, weave rhetoric into musical performance, can help us to see how an actor – lacking a notated score, but having learned a few rules of *prononciation* – might rely on conventional patterns of stress.¹⁰⁹ Presumably, if the poet followed the rules of grammar and prosody laid down for his instruction, the actor should have been able to follow the same rules and express the poet's meanings, although that perfect synchronicity was probably rare, and actors were not necessarily *au courant* with every distinction made by the grammarians.¹¹⁰

Briefly, and also forgoing most of those distinctions, the basic rules were as follows: The tragic *vers*, or single line of poetry, was normally written in twelve syllables with the strongest stresses placed on the final syllable of the line, the *rime*, and on the sixth syllable, at the *césure*. When the final word ended in a mute "e," the "e" was pronounced but not stressed or counted in determining the number of syllables in a line. Theoretically, at least, this poetry is not metrical, and stresses are to be created not by the rhythm of various metrical feet, nor by raising the pitch of the voice or making it more forceful, but by the duration of the vowels. In *déclamation chantante*, however, stresses were often created by *éclats de son*, bursts of sound, at the caesura and the rhyme, a kind of delivery which was inexpressive of meaning and monotonous in the extreme.¹¹¹ The abbé Dubos writes that:

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 140.

¹⁰⁸ Marmontel, "Déclamation," *Encyclopédie*, <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.

¹⁰⁹ See Ranum, *The Harmonic Orator*.

¹¹⁰ Mlle Lecouvreur, however, was close to the great French grammarian Mersenne.

¹¹¹ Sabine Chaucouche points out that in the theatre *chantante* could also refer to "declamation in which the intonations were close to those of singing." *Sept Traités*, p. 822.

we do not say of an actor that he sings except when he sings inappropriately, when he throws himself without discernment into exclamations that are not suited to what he is saying, and when with *tons* that are pompous and delivered with an emphasis that the sense of the verse does not admit, he puts into his declamation without reason a pathos as ridiculous as it is false.¹¹²

Although I disagree with Patricia Ranum that we can depend on Le Cerf de La Viéville's anecdote about Lully's reliance on Mlle Champmeslé, her analysis of Lully's recitative – whatever his model – is a useful summary of how lyric poetry (and by extension some tragic poetry) could avoid the transgressions described by Dubos that sometimes marked Beaubourg and Mlle Duclos.¹¹³ In her work with singers, Ranum points out the subtleties of rhythm, the varieties of accents, and the diversity of *tons* to be found in Lully's music. A similar analysis of, let us say, Racine, would lead us away from the stereotypical pattern that Poisson calls “a kind of song,” when “every sentence is always the same.”¹¹⁴ “One must change the *ton*,” he advises, but “without observing a certain method and a certain didactic order, as some do.” That leads to “a refrain that they reprise from time to time and from phrase to phrase.” “Nothing,” he concludes, “is more likely to put a Listener to sleep.”¹¹⁵ Poisson may be thinking of Michel Baron, who, according to Collé, always “broke the rhythm of the verse so that one never felt the insupportable monotony of the alexandrine.”¹¹⁶ Nor did he specially mark the *beaux traits*, as so many actors did, hoping to arouse *le brouhaha*, cheers and applause. Grimarest also insists that “to recite verse well, one must not stop at the rhyme nor at the caesura, when the meaning is not completed and there is no period.”

¹¹² Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (Paris: P.-J. Mariette, 1733), vol. III, pp. 133–4.

¹¹³ I am grateful to Patricia Ranum for calling my attention to her website, http://ranumspanat.com/declamation_lessons.htm, where she replicates some helpful instruction sheets that she created for singers and instrumentalists. These sheets summarize the essential points made in her book.

¹¹⁴ Sabine Chaouche, in her chapter entitled “Ponctuation et déclamation: Au cœur de ‘chant’ racinien” (*L’Art du comédien*, pp. 301–59), studies “Racinian declamation and the role played by punctuation” that signals the intonations of the voice. Racine, she argues, “invented a declamation founded on the specific use of the question, more apt to keep the spectator in suspense, to move him, and to give the appearance of a real conversation” (p. 324). Another French scholar, Julia Gros de Gasquet, has offered a study of tragic acting styles from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries (*En disant l’alexandrin: L’acteur tragique et son art, XVIIe–XXe siècle* [Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006]). She has also worked as an actress with Eugène Green.

¹¹⁵ Chaouche, *Sept Traités*, p. 414.

¹¹⁶ Charles Collé, *Journal et Mémoires sur les Hommes de lettres, les ouvrages dramatiques, et les événements les plus mémorables du règne de Louis XV*, nouvelle edn. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1868), vol. I, pp. 139–40.

There is no doubt that the acting of tragic poetry in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries could be influenced by the rules of poetry devised by theorists and followed by certain playwrights. In thinking about comic acting, however, we should be careful not to assume that vocal delivery and physical action were formulaic. The existence of certain catalogues of vocal or physical behavior, combined with the overall tendency of the period toward thinking normatively, can mislead us into believing that actors simply learned the attributes of various classes of characters and applied them on stage. The model for such cataloguing is invariably classical, which gives it additional cachet.

Grimarest, for instance, creates a catalogue of vocal features suitable to certain comic characters. The Old Man requires a voice that is feeble and trembling, the Fop or Petit-Maître's voice is high, with a bit of a drawl, the Valet's voice is irregular in tone and duration (in order to surprise the audience), the Gascon's voice is light and he speaks in a lively, precipitous way, the Norman, the Flemish, the Swiss speak slowly, but with unequal stress on certain syllables, the Peasant's speech is heavy with slipshod pronunciation, and so on with the Drunk, the *Précieuse*, and so forth.¹¹⁷ This kind of thing is reminiscent of high-school plays where 15-year-olds imitate old age by drawing heavy dark lines on their faces for wrinkles and making their voices quaver. I simply do not believe that good actors then, any more than good actors now, actually thought this way or prepared their characters according to such monumentally uninteresting templates, even when burdened by the *emplois*.

Recent brain science is making it clear that the face, the voice, and the body are naturally expressive of emotions;¹¹⁸ catalogues that list the emotions and show or describe how to express them are not only unnecessary, they can be damaging to the actor, teaching a kind of unsubtle mimicry.¹¹⁹ Grimarest does his best on the model of the rhetoricians he revives; he does not just characterize love or hatred or desire, but

¹¹⁷ Chaouche, *Sept Traités*, pp. 351–2.

¹¹⁸ In recent years, a vast literature has been developed by neuroscientists on such matters as facial expression, empathy, and many other aspects of the relationship between emotions and their expression. Much of this research has major implications for understanding both how actors do what they do and how they communicate with audiences. I leave it to the interested reader to investigate. Research on mirror neurons is of particular interest. See Marco Iacoboni, *The New Science of How We Connect to Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008) and Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions, Emotions, and Experience*, trans. Frances Anderson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹⁹ Charles Le Brun's *Conférence sur L'Expression* has been used to document a model for actors who wanted to express emotions appropriately. It should be noted, however, that painters in this period did not always or even usually paint from a live model, so especially for history painting Le Brun's

divides each emotion into smaller parts and tries to describe how each should be expressed vocally. Love, for instance, can have three diverse situations: when one feels the sweetness of love, one must use a voice that is caressing and tender; when love is pleasurable, the voice should be gay; but when one suffers love, one must use *tons* that are insistent and plaintive. Hatred requires a rough voice, or a menacing voice, or a voice that is hard and firm. Desire can be violent, moderate, or languishing, and so forth with joy and sadness, hope and despair.¹²⁰ An actor who tried to carry out such instructions would probably achieve nothing very useful, since the adjectives are not especially discriminating. Compare, for instance, Grimarest's list to Dumas d'Aigueberre's description of Michel Baron.

When this actor sighed, lamented, loved, became furious, all his *mouvements* were such that his love, his fury, his fear appeared to be truthful. He knew how to characterize all the passions because they are specific, and not only did he not confuse one with the others, he distinguished them by a thousand circumstances appropriate to the characters he was representing.¹²¹

A modern actor trained in the school of Stanislavsky would have no trouble understanding the importance of circumstance in creating the representation of a dramatic character.

In fact, several accounts of actors and acting confirm that many of the qualities we prize in modern performers were noticed and appreciated by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critics and audience members. The earliest extended description of French actors on stage is to be found in the *Entretiens galans*, published in 1681. In the sixth dialogue, as the three friends Berelie, Celine, and Philemon discuss music, Berelie describes two actors performing a musical scene from Molière's *Malade imaginaire*:

That beautiful scene. . . that Celine has just mentioned to us, has it not always been, on the stage of the Guénégaud, more appealing than it would ever be on the stage of the Opéra? Mlle Molière & La Grange, who sing there, do not have the most beautiful voices. I rather doubt that they understand the subtleties of music, and although they sing by the rules, it is not with their singing that they attract such general approbation. But they know how to touch the heart, they paint the emotions. The painting that they make is so truthful & their art so well hidden in what is natural, that it is not possible to distinguish truth from

sketches would be useful. Roger de Piles, however, objected to them. He thought the painter should just look in the mirror.

¹²⁰ Chaouche, *Sept Traités*, pp. 333–5.

¹²¹ Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, pp. 28–9. But according to Young, this is from Titon de Tillet. I give priority to the first published.

appearance. In a word, they understand the stage excellently and their roles never succeed as well when they are not played by them.

Philemon adds that anyone with a taste for the theatre would agree, but that there is more to acting than the delivery of the verse:

The actress and the actor of whom you speak do not owe their greatest success to the refined manner in which they deliver their lines. Their exterior inspires belief, they have an air that wins us over, their behavior is expressive and their acting. . . imitates nature so well that they sometimes play whole pantomime scenes, which are admired by everyone.

Berlie concurs:

La Molière and La Grange show a great deal of judgement in their performance and they continue to act even when their lines are finished. They are never ineffective on the stage. They act almost as well when they listen as when they speak. Their gaze is never distracted. Their eyes do not scan the boxes. They know the house is full, but they speak and they act as if they see only those who share their action. They are appropriate and magnificent, without being in the least affected. They are perfectly well dressed. They take care of their appearance before they show themselves. And if La Molière sometimes smoothes her hair or arranges her ribbons or her jewels, her little mannerisms hide a judicious and natural satire. She is able, by doing that, to ridicule the women she is making fun of. But finally, with all these advantages, she would not please so much if her voice was less moving. She is so persuaded of that herself, that she uses as many different *tons* as she has different roles, & although a play is a spectacle, I have always believed that in the theatre as elsewhere, cultured people often prefer the pleasure of hearing to that of seeing.

Philemon's reply is politic; he agrees that this is true, provided the verses are delivered "with a grace and a natural air that render them infinitely agreeable. . . Nothing pleases us so much as what is natural."¹²²

This term "natural," often employed as a noun, *le naturel*, is frequently opposed to the more formal *déclamation*; actors and actresses are very often praised for their *naturel*, especially in comedy. *Le naturel* is not restricted, however, to a style of delivery. As we shall see, the "natural" actor in tragedy not only delivered the verse in a manner that avoided the conventional patterns of declamation, he or she also moved and gestured less formally on stage. We must guard, however, against taking this to be synonymous with what we now mean by "realistic." Leaving aside its social and political connotations, "realism" implies attention to the

¹²² Anon., *Entretien galans*, pp. 89–91.

specific and the individualistic, while both theory and practice at the turn of the eighteenth century endorsed what was essentially generalized and normative. What was natural was also what was verisimilar, not like reality but like truth. As Marmontel wrote, in asking where the actor should look to find models:

The world is the school of the actor; an immense stage where all emotions, all social and moral conditions are represented. But, as most of the models lack nobility and correctness, the imitator can make a mistake, if he is not enlightened in his choice. It is not enough to paint after nature, one must deeply study beautiful proportions and the great principles of design in order to be able to correct the model.¹²³

This does not, I insist, mean that all elderly characters in comedies must speak in fluting, quavering tones, any more than Shakespeare played old Adam according to his own description of the “lean and slippered Pantaloon with pipes and whistles in his sound.” What it does suggest, I believe, is that the “natural” actor was one who avoided both the limitations of the conventions attached to each *emploi* and the eccentricities of individualism.

Mlle Molière, who is praised for distinguishing her characters by using different *tons* for each, played Célimène, Elmire, and Angélique (in *George Dandin*), all roles that were later included in the same *emploi*: *grandes coquettes*. All three characters are young and beautiful, all have admirers and enjoy success in society, but they are also distinct. Their circumstances are widely divergent, their situations are very different, and their *caractères*, their moral and ethical qualities, have little in common. Nonetheless, all are generalized in comparison with “realistic” characters on the modern stage.

Was Mlle Molière *naturel*? Sabine Chaouche, in a glossary appended to her *Art du comédien*, has mined both Furetière’s dictionary (1690) and the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie-Française* (1762) for the following definitions of “*naturel*”: what is created by Nature, and opposed to what is artificial and counterfeit; what is free as opposed to what is forced; what is sincere, naive, without affectation; what is not disguised, altered, concealed, but as Nature made it.¹²⁴ From these adjectival entries, she concludes that *naturel* can signify acting that is free from the constraints of art and theatrical conventions; or that gestures are carried out without difficulty

¹²³ “Déclamation,” *Encyclopédie*, <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu>

¹²⁴ Chaouche, *L’Art du comédien*, p. 400.

by an actor who is accustomed to them; or that an actor has so mastered and perfected his art as to give an impression of the natural; or that acting is close to customary and ordinary ways of speaking and moving.¹²⁵

These are all logical inferences from the dictionary definitions, and accurate glosses for many uses of the term, especially when applied to comic acting, but the *naturel* in tragic acting is more complex. The two great practitioners of *le naturel* were Baron and Mlle Lecouvreur; nonetheless, although she was in some sense his disciple and both were "natural," there were differences as well as similarities in their style of performance. Critics and commentators struggle to describe those differences.

The most detailed account of Baron as an actor was written by Charles Collé in March 1750, twenty years after the actor's death. After remarking that the aging actor did not have the *feu* he must have had as a young man, Collé continues:

He made up for this defect with an intelligence, a nobility and a dignity that I have seen only in him. He excelled especially in the details of a role; he was natural almost to the point of being familiar, even in tragedy, without ever forgetting his grandeur. He was no less superior in comedy. . . there was such great truth in his acting and so much of the natural, that he made you forget the actor; because of the illusion he created, you imagined that the action happening in front of you was real. . . He never performed the verse, but the situation, the emotion; he took such long pauses, and played so slowly that the spectacle lasted a half-hour more when he had a role.¹²⁶

The key phrase here is "he performed the situation." This suggests that the illusion of the natural arose not just from vocal and physical behavior that the audience could recognize and relate to as normal or everyday, but from the actor's immersion in the action of the play, taking his time, listening, observing, reacting to the moment.

Another word often employed to describe Baron's acting is "simple." Dumas d'Aigueberre, for instance, gushes in comparing him to Beaubourg: "What simplicity, what *vraisemblance* in [Baron]! But how majestic was that simplicity! It seemed that grandeur was natural to him, given the ease with which he sustained his august characters. One would even have taken him for a Prince in the middle of his Palace."¹²⁷ He continues by describing the actor's vocal style:

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Collé, *Journal*, vol. I, pp. 139–40.

¹²⁷ Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, p. 28.

Far from stressing each verse and each word and affectedly emphasizing what was striking and beautiful, he showed thoughts as feelings, or if he elevated some meaning or some expression, it was one of those that seem hidden and which do not reveal themselves by themselves. When this actor sighed, lamented, loved, became furious, all his movements were such that his love, his fury, his fear appeared to be true.¹²⁸

"Simple" here would seem to indicate an actor who was relaxed, not trying too hard, not conscious of himself as a presence on the stage or of what effect he might be having on the audience.

Thanks to Luigi Riccoboni, who played Lelio at the Comédie-Italienne, but who believed that any departure by tragic actors from the most dignified and regal speech and action was an unforgivable violation of the *bienséances*, we possess several detailed descriptions of Baron on stage. The first is of a scene in Houdar de La Motte's *Inès de Castro*, when Alphonse, played by Baron, must confront the punishment of the son who has led a revolt against him. Riccoboni was shocked that Baron had "copied the manners of the *petit peuple*, ordinary folk."¹²⁹ He gives the following account of the moment in his *Dell'arte rappresentativa*:

I have seen on the stage a King assemble his council to examine an important case: it is a question of the trial of his son, & whether he should be put to death in observance of the law. The King, who was seated, put his elbows on his knees & appeared to hold his jaw between his hands. In truth, I imagined I was seeing one of those Pagodas that come from China; a real Pagoda in flesh and bone. What effect did the cleverness of this actor produce? The enlightened laughed; but the ignorant admired him: O empty-headed race!¹³⁰

His second example, even more shocking, was behavior "lower than that of a *valet*":

A Monarch is seated vis-à-vis the Great Men of his court, dressed in a magnificent cloak, with a majestic air that demands respect; this Monarch receives an Ambassador, and while he listens to the Ambassador's discourse, he crosses his legs, and amuses himself biting his glove. I heard the fools cry: "O, how natural! That's what we do every day." This is a "natural," O Beasts of burden, that is worthy only of you, & that is appropriate only to you, who haven't a grain of salt in your head.¹³¹

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 28–9.

¹²⁹ Quoted by Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines, *Lettre d'un comédien français au sujet de l'histoire du théâtre italien écrite par M. Riccoboni dit Lelio* (Paris: Veuve Pissot, 1728), p. 51.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 52–3. The final phrase is, in Italian, "*O razza berrettina*."

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p. 53. Riccoboni addresses those whose taste he wants to disparage as *animali da Cesta*, that is, beasts who carry burdens in baskets. The phrase is certainly not meant to flatter those members of the Parisian audience who applauded Baron.

Riccoboni's poor opinion of Baron may have begun when the French actor reappeared at the Comédie-Française in 1720. Riccoboni's wife – Elena Balletti *dite* Flaminia – wrote in that year a *Lettera* to Antonio Conti in which she also damns Baron with faint praise. She found him to be acceptable in "modern" tragedies like *Le Cid*, but far too familiar when he played the heroes of antiquity:

I find M. Baron's style of acting certainly to be always true and natural; but since nature is not always beautiful, nor is all truth suitable to the tragic stage, it sometimes seemed to me that this style was not in all points adapted to the subject. There is no contradiction in the fact that the hero of a tragedy, it being a given that he is a man, must not stray from nature; but it is also true that the grandeur of the action, and the elevation of the birth or rank of the tragic hero, requires a nature that is worthy and majestic.¹³²

How did Baron violate this? In *Horace*, for instance, he took the hand of Curiace and placed it over his own heart "to encourage virtue in Curiace" and demonstrate the extent of his own feelings. This was, according to Balletti, true to the nature not of a hero but "of a citizen, a merchant or a simple foot soldier." "I think," she adds, "that a hero could say the same thing with the same force when he finds himself more than 6 feet away from the person to whom he speaks, by adapting his gaze and his tone of voice." Of his performance in *Mithridate* she complains that he performed an important discourse with a "trivial familiarity" which would have persuaded no one, did not move the audience, and "in the passages where even the most mediocre actors are always applauded and acclaimed, Baron was surrounded by a glacial silence."¹³³ Dumas d'Aigueberre notices the same response, but attributes it to a very different cause. "It often happens that the spectator is so charmed by what [Baron] has just recited that he forgets to applaud. We remain immobile, we hear only a murmur, people speaking under their breaths, and with admiration: "Oh that was beautiful! How well declaimed!"¹³⁴

The abbé Desfontaines's response to Luigi Riccoboni's polemic is a lively counterpunch. If Riccoboni was "shocked" by Baron, Desfontaines was no less appalled by Riccoboni. Speaking of the latter's objection to

¹³² Elena Virginia Balletti Riccoboni, *Lettera della signora Elena Balletti Riccoboni al signor abate Antonio Conti gentiluomo veneziano, sopra la maniera di Monsieur Baron nel rappresentare le tragedie francesi* (c. 1720), published in *Raccolta d'opuscoli scientifici e filologici*, ed. Angelo Calogerà (Venice: Christoforo Zane, 1736), vol. XIII, pp. 495–501. Transcribed and translated by Valentina Gallo for *Les Savoirs des acteurs italiens*, www.irpmf.cnrs.fr/Savoirsitaliens/Elenia%20virginia%20riccoboni.pdf, p. 7.

¹³³ *Ibid.* ¹³⁴ Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, p. 29 n.

Baron's behavior on stage in *Inès de Castro*, the abbé writes: "[Riccoboni] supposes that this pose violates *les décences*, & is practiced only by people of low condition. In truth, it is too bad that the majority of Princes have not been raised by our Italian; he would have taught them. . . never to rest their elbows on their knees."¹³⁵ Desfontaines has such a good time mocking Riccoboni that he fails to defend Baron, although he does ask what the philosophical reason might be for forbidding elbows on knees, "since the proprieties are always founded on some moral principle." Or not.

Riccoboni sent a copy of his little treatise to Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, then exiled in Belgium. Rousseau was far more polite than Desfontaines, but also far more specific in his defense of Baron's style on stage:

In reading the precepts that you give so judiciously on the art of reciting on the stage, I remembered with pleasure, I confess, what I saw in the past executed on ours by the greatest actor that France has ever produced.¹³⁶ You will realize that I am speaking of our illustrious Baron. . . To speak truly, that actor is the only one of all those that I have known, who has truly captured nature; and what I have never seen except in him is the gift that he has of ennobling all his actions, even the most familiar, and of often drawing the greatest emotions from his acting, with a gesture or a posture that would appear base in anyone who tried to imitate him. You remark on one of these in part three, that I suspect is meant to be him, because I remember having seen him do something similar in the character of Antiochus in the fifth act of *Rodogune*, and I can assure you, monsieur, that this action aroused in the soul of the spectators as much emotion as the whole scene. . . Such an action, taken by a common actor, would arouse, as you say so well, the laughter of the spectators; but, being accompanied by the graces and the nobility that an excellent actor brings to it, it is impossible that the eyes not be struck by it and the heart softened.¹³⁷

Riccoboni is not persuaded by this paradoxical argument that Baron could be both familiar, or simple, and noble. He responds that an actor who can "express perfectly well the nobility of a noble action" can never "ennoble an action that is base or too familiar." He concludes that if any actor should behave with scorn for *les décences*, "he would betray nature, and put a frightful mask on *la vraisemblance*."¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Desfontaines, *Lettre d'un comédien*, pp. 53–4.

¹³⁶ Rousseau was condemned to perpetual exile in 1712 and did not return to Paris in Baron's lifetime, so he is remembering Baron before his retirement in 1691, when Rousseau was 20.

¹³⁷ Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, "À M. Louis RICCOBONI, dit LÉLIO," in *Œuvres* (Paris: Lefèvre, 1820), vol. V, pp. 260–1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 553.

An anecdote may suggest something of how Baron himself thought on stage. He was playing Agamemnon in *Iphigénie en Aulide* in 1724. When he opened the play in hushed tones, saying "Yes, it is Agamemnon, it is your king who awakens you,"¹³⁹ someone shouted from the *parterre*: "Louder!" "If I spoke louder, I would speak wrong," was Baron's response.¹⁴⁰ This is the first line of the first scene, the time is before dawn, and Agamemnon is waking his confidential servant, about to send him to Clytemnestra and warn her to keep Iphigenia away from Aulis. Since this action is opposed to the will of the oracle, and of his comrades, it would hardly be natural for the actor to use full voice from 6 feet away; rather, the circumstances positively demand that the actor bend over the sleeping man and speak into his ear while, perhaps, shaking his shoulder. The intimate nature of the scene is underscored by its final line when Agamemnon hears footsteps: "It's Achilles. Go, leave. Gods! Ulysses is with him."¹⁴¹

Baron also appeared on stage with his costume adjusted appropriately to the circumstances, at least when the play was "modern" and did not require the elaborate *habit à romain*. Mathieu Marais, in his memoirs, describes Baron on November 16, 1720 in the title role in *Le Comte Essex*, one of those modern tragedies. "He played the character of a man condemned to death; he appeared without a hat, without a sword, without a cane, but without any of the embarrassment conventionally appropriate to his state."¹⁴² Mlle Lecouvreur added a touch of realism on the same occasion by appearing on stage as Élisabeth in court dress wearing the sash of the Order of the Garter.¹⁴³ These costume choices speak to the differences between Baron and Mlle Lecouvreur in their approach to *le naturel* on the stage. She made a slight move toward the realistic, but remained "queenly." He appeared *deshabillé*, dressed negligently; his costume was appropriate to the circumstances, but violated *les décences*.

Dumas d'Aiguebierre, who praised Baron to the skies for his simplicity on page 27, found the *naturel* of the incomparable Mlle Lecouvreur to be preferable to Baron's simplicity on page 35. "We must not confuse the *simple* with the *naturel*," he writes:

¹³⁹ Racine, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Picard, vol. I, p. 675.

¹⁴⁰ Young, *Michel Baron*, p. 128. ¹⁴¹ Racine, *Iphigénie*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Picard, vol. I, p. 679.

¹⁴² Mathieu Marais, *Journal et mémoires de Mathieu Marais... sur la régence et le règne de Louis XV, 1715-1737* (Paris: Firman-Didot frères, 1863-8), vol. I, pp. 495-6.

¹⁴³ Lecouvreur, *Lettres*, p. 28.

The one consists... in imitating nature, and following her in... the different emotions that she arouses in our hearts; to come as close as we can to the Hero, to copy faithfully his character, to metamorphose into him, & appear as he was, or as the Poet made him. The *simple* consists in reducing the gravity of the cothurn & the majesty of Kings, to making them as close as possible to the ordinary practice of other men, to rendering them a little more “popular,” so to speak, by removing from the gesture, the voice, the pronunciation a certain brilliance that one presumes to find in the person of Kings... Finally that simplicity was to the personal taste of the Sieur Baron... Mlle Lecouvreur, who modeled herself on Baron, was content to be natural without affecting simplicity. She avoided bombast, but she never descended below heroic grandeur. She was simple, if you will, because there is something at ease in what is natural which approaches simplicity but is not simple... The foundation of her acting was natural, she rejected everything that could appear excessive, overly refined, pretentious, but she did not refuse a certain ornamentation capable of rendering the action more brilliant & more majestic.¹⁴⁴

In other words, Adrienne Lecouvreur found a happy medium between a style that was too oratorical, formal, and artful and one that was too natural, informal, and mundane. Once again, the idea of “ease” forms an important part of the description. An actor is “natural” when she does not appear to be working at acting or to be aware of herself as an actor.

Unfortunately, descriptions of Mlle Lecouvreur lack the specificity of Riccoboni’s descriptions of Baron. Her career was relatively short, thirteen years at the Comédie-Française. Although she was never the *chef d’emploi*, she definitely had the status of *première* in many important roles, and there is no doubt that she was the reigning star. Boindin sums her up two years after her debut: she has an attractive face, a good figure, but could stand a little more *embonpoint*. Although not tall, she has a noble air and is as pleasing as anyone could be. Her acting is “new, natural, and all the more agreeable for it.” Her voice was not strong at the time of her debut, but she has learned to handle it adroitly and, if anything, her “defect” has contributed to her artistry. Among her strengths: She understands completely everything she says, her gestures are especially moving, and her eyes speak as much as her mouth does.¹⁴⁵ Collé adds that:

Mlle Le Couvreur, having less talent from nature [than Baron] and with more art, renders nature truly; she develops all the details of a role, and makes us forget the actress. We see nothing but the character she represents; she excels more in

¹⁴⁴ Dumas d’Aiguebierre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, pp. 37–8.

¹⁴⁵ Boindin, *Première Lettre*, p. 21.

the places that require finesse than in those that require *force*. No one has ever played like her the first act of *Phèdre* and the role of Monime.¹⁴⁶

One writer who tries to account for her stage presence goes beyond the conventional words of praise and takes us to a place where early eighteenth-century commentary on acting rarely went. Although lacking a ready word for it, Dumas d'Aigueberre does his best to describe something that is true of all great actors. He uses *pénétérée*, "filled up, filled with": "She never presented herself on the stage that she did not appear *pénétérée*."¹⁴⁷ Whatever this was, Dumas d'Aigueberre makes it clear that it was something beyond the gifts of nature or the usual arts of acting. "Mademoiselle Lecouvreur seemed to be born for the profession," he begins:

We admired her *grâces*; her *attitudes* were noble & natural; nothing was more varied than her *tons*, she used her arms with inimitable charm. All those things depend on Art and are enough to please when one knows how to use them appropriately, but she had other talents to move us: her eyes announced what she was going to say, her fear and her sorrows were painted on her face. What's more, she was able to dispose at will of her heart and her emotions. She passed without difficulty from violence to perfect tranquility, from the passion of love to fury, from a sudden fright to the artifice to disguise it, etc. . . The spectator followed without resistance all her emotions, as moved as she was herself. . . we were afraid, we trembled with her, we wept even before we saw her tears flow.

She was, in a word, "filled." With the character? With the circumstances? With the language as she spoke it? With the emotions she felt? Or appeared to feel? She was, as we now say, "in the moment." She was not preaching or arguing in court or making a public speech. She was acting. To this, Dumas d'Aigueberre opposes "an actress who takes no part in what she says or does, who merely puts on her role like her make-up, and discharges what she has memorized."¹⁴⁸

Baron and Mlle Lecouvreur were not the only performers found praiseworthy for characteristics that we still identify as "good" acting. One of these is what we now call "concentration," a failure of which was often noticed by eighteenth-century critics who complained of a lack of attentiveness or a roving eye, that is, an actor too busy counting the house to be responsive to what was happening on stage. We have seen above that La Grange and Mlle Molière, for instance, were praised for

¹⁴⁶ Collé, *Journal*, p. 140.

¹⁴⁷ Dumas d'Aigueberre, *Lettre du Souffleur*, p. 31.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 18.

their ability to focus on the action and each other. Good actors were also praised for their responsiveness to each other and their *jeu mûte*, what they did when they were listening and not speaking. Dumas d'Aigueberre criticizes the actor Sarrazin for his poor *jeu mûte*: "his eyes say nothing, his face is always the same, he never accompanies what he says with this *jeu de théâtre*, which gives *vraisemblance* to the words, & even eloquence to silence; he has nothing of that mute action that declares what is happening in the depths of his heart, and reveals anxiety, grief, impatience." His biggest problem: "this Actor does not pay enough attention to the one who is speaking to him."¹⁴⁹ Dene Barnett suggests that no actors in the eighteenth century paid attention to each other, that "all acting must be addressed to the all-powerful onlookers, there being no concentrated attempt by the actor to pretend that the audience did not exist."¹⁵⁰ Perhaps. But Luigi Riccoboni – who may have disliked Baron, but did know a thing or two about the theatre – writes that "the great point about the Stage. . . is to make an illusion for the spectators, & to persuade them, as much as one can, that the Tragedy is not a fiction, but that these are the Heroes who act & who speak, & not the Actors who represent them."¹⁵¹ Granted, there are moments of metatheatricity in the plays of this period, especially the comedies, but the occasional aside to the spectators does not give the actors license to ignore the fictional action in general.

Barnett also writes that "the actor did not pretend to be the character so much as to act out, to externalize the passions, for the benefit of the onlookers."¹⁵² This is a more difficult statement to challenge, but I think Barnett is also wrong about this. Did the seventeenth- or eighteenth-century actor "pretend to be" the character? I would argue "yes," although not in exactly the same sense as the modern actor does. I suppose it is possible that an actor with the right voice and body, who is playing a role in an *emploi* suited to his or her natural gifts, who has learned how to use that voice and that body advantageously, who can express emotion freely, and who is intelligent enough to understand what the character is saying and feeling, has little or nothing else to do. Mlle Clairon, however, would not agree. She writes:

I have found along the way many young authors and beautiful women who think that nothing is easier than to play Mahomet, Mérope, etc.; that the author has

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 40.

¹⁵⁰ Barnett, "Performance Practice," pt. I, 160.

¹⁵¹ Chaucouche, *Sept Traités*, p. 463.

¹⁵² Barnett, "Performance Practice," pt. I, 160.

done everything; that all the actor needs to do is learn the verses and abandon himself to nature. *Nature!* how people use the word without knowing its extent! Every sex, every age, every estate, is it not a part of nature? The difference in time, in country, in manners and usages, do they not have the greatest influence? What does one study first in order *to cease to be oneself?* in order *to identify with each character?* [my emphases]¹⁵³

She also advises the actor to read incessantly and become deeply familiar, in the smallest detail, with the history of all the peoples of the world. Again, her thinking is normative: "Each estate," she notes, "has different modifications. The shop assistant does not have the same *maintien* as the bourgeois who employs him; the bourgeois is timid before a great lord; a nobleman approaches those who command him only with an air of subordination, and all, without exception, lower their eyes respectfully before the master."¹⁵⁴ The emphasis on categories, however, should not lead us to conclude that the actor is not "pretending to be" the character.

But just as we must not fail to recognize the many ways in which acting then was like acting now, so we must grant the many ways in which it was not. In general, the process of acting seems to have been, at least for some actors, very like our process,¹⁵⁵ while the product, the way the voice and body are used to express thoughts and emotions, was rather different. But then, our theatres are different, our plays are certainly different, and the conventions we accept as "true" or "natural" are based on different assumptions about nature, human nature, the individual, social norms, and so on down an endless list.

It would also be far too simple to conclude, based on our own taste, that in the early years of the eighteenth century the Comédie-Française put two kinds of actor on the stage: the bad ones, who declaimed pompously and repetitively, paid little attention to the meaning of what they said, and were supported by the playwrights who preferred to let the words speak for themselves, and the occasional good ones who played naturally and expressively, avoided excessive emphasis, attended carefully to the multiple meanings of their lines, and were supported by enlightened members of the audience. Or to suppose, on the other hand, that *déclamation*, *chantante* or otherwise, was the

¹⁵³ Clairon, *Mémoires*, pp. 233–4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 259.

¹⁵⁵ Baron, for instance, prepared to go on stage, as many actors do today. He would go through his scene in pantomime in the wings, he would breathe in such a way as to stir himself up, he would often enter speaking in low tones to a fellow actor, so he would seem to be in the midst of some action. He was also unpleasant to anyone who interrupted him while he was thus occupied. Young, *Michel Baron*, p. 151.

standard and preferred style of performance, and that one revenant and one revolutionary tried to change it, ultimately without success. The thought of two totally incongruous styles holding the stage together for years is, however, bizarre and not to be seriously entertained. Obviously, there were stylistic differences, but from night to night the audience saw alternating distributions: Baron with Mlle Lecouvreur or Mlle Duclos or with both, or one or the other of the actresses with Quinault-Dufresne, or Quinault-Dufresne with Mlle Balicourt, and so forth. They must have made some sort of concessions to each other. Elena Balletti Riccoboni writes, for instance, that under certain circumstances:

Monsieur Baron... lets himself be transported by the need to speak verse and express the emotions of the situation of the hero; this is why, very often, he declaims as much as the others and shouts as loud as he can. This need makes of him an actor with multiple facets, sometimes in the sustained register, sometimes in the familiar style.¹⁵⁶

Unless we want to envision a theatre completely at odds with itself, we must wonder if most of the actors at the Comédie-Française in the 1720s could not do something of the same.

Finally, we should not necessarily assume the superiority of *le naturel* in what was, after all, a *querelle du théâtre*, although I must admit I probably have done so. Sides were taken, “*chantante*” was a call to arms, and the fact that most of the commentators preferred Baron and Mlle Lecouvreur to Beaubourg and Mlle Duclos should not blind us to the fact that some people, especially some playwrights, preferred the *force* of declamation. The abbé Augustin Nadal, author of several plays that were not especially successful, regretted the retirement of Mlle Desmares, an actress whose tragic style apparently tilted toward the declamatory, although her comic style was considered natural. Nadal writes in the Preface to his *Antiochus, ou Les Machabées*, which opened on December 16, 1722, that a play’s destiny being tied to the circumstances of its performance, this play owed its lack of success to its cast, which included Mlle Lecouvreur as Zoraïde:

Mlle Desmares was still on the Stage when I was working on my Play. I had her in view for the Role of Zoraïde; & by her retirement I lost the advantage of seeing [the role] played in all its *force*, & I dare say in all the beauty that the novelty of the character of Zoraïde would give. A great resource remained in Mlle

¹⁵⁶ Riccoboni, *Lettera*, in Gallo, *Les Savoirs*, p. 8.

Duclos, & the Role of Salmone, although less interesting, had in her hands a superiority owing only to herself.

That lively expression of the emotions, formed with the glory of the Corneilles and the Racines, these *tons*. . . inspired by these two great Poets, & consecrated, to speak, on the Stage, have passed, by a happy tradition, to the Actresses I have just named, & the graces, the truth, and the precision that they bring to their acting, each with different gifts of Heaven, are the model of declamation. It is not enough for them to please, they show themselves only under a marvelous aspect, or rather they disappear in some sense themselves, & the illusion is complete. The Spectator, moved, finds himself transported to the place the Stage represents, & sees only in them Andromaque or Hermione, Ariane or Émilie.

Such is the effect of these superior talents who arouse the admiration of the Public, or at least of the most rational part of it, whose judgement can only be challenged by those who think the taste for declamation is a fad.¹⁵⁷

So, according to the abbé Nadal, Mlle Desmares and Mlle Duclos could also act.

The publication in France of the books written and edited by Sabine Chaouche should stimulate more scholarship on the subject of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century acting. While this would be an excellent and much anticipated result, we should remember that the controversy about tragic acting was and remains polemical. We should pay more attention to comic acting than we have done in the past. Finally, we should recognize that, although we might find the sights and sounds of eighteenth-century acting strange and hard to read, from the actor's point of view the physical gifts, talents, and training he or she needed in order to succeed and the process he or she went through in order to represent character and express emotions were perhaps not all that different from what they are now. Jean Poisson was speaking of the orator, but his description of the actor is still worth repeating:

When an Actor is gifted with some Qualities of Mind and some natural Bodily graces, & when he has that Soul susceptible to the Passions (a rare Talent, but absolutely necessary. . .), when such an Actor is to be found, I say, this is a model for all people who speak in public.¹⁵⁸

And for all those who appear on the stage?

¹⁵⁷ Augustin Nadal, *Théâtre de Monsieur l'abbé Nadal* (Paris: Briasson, 1738), pp. 148–9.

¹⁵⁸ Chaouche, *Sept Traités*, pp. 406–7.

CHAPTER 7

Lives and afterlives: 1700–2010

LIVES

Between 1700 and 1750, the Parisian theatre underwent many significant changes. Actresses were less likely to be born into theatrical families, less likely to be married to fellow actors (or, indeed, married at all). Some were enthusiastic participants in *le monde*, the famously libertine social, artistic, and literary milieu that developed in Paris after the death of Louis XIV in 1715. Although their sexual adventures were greatly exaggerated by the gossip-mongers and the morals police, some actresses had affairs with noblemen and even royals, others built irregular marriages and long-lasting relationships with important men. One result was the reinforcement of the old stereotypes, a growing habit of generalizing “the actress,” and increased hostility toward “public” women. More is known about eighteenth-century actresses than about earlier ones, but the evidence can be contradictory, and certain narratives need to be challenged.

Actresses were important to the survival of the theatre in the eighteenth century. The Comédie-Française often sailed on perilous financial seas, and the women played an important role in keeping it afloat, their star power as great or greater than that of the actors. But as the troupe became ever more institutionalized under the agents of the monarchy, the women lost even more control than the men did of the management of what had once been their “republic.”

In the season of 1700–1, twenty years after the merger that created it, the troupe of the Comédie-Française included fourteen women. Who they were and how they profited from their profession had not yet changed greatly from the previous period. By and large, like their predecessors, they were daughters and wives of actors. Four belonged by marriage or birth to the Pitel family: Jeanne Beauval, probably the illegitimate daughter of the actor Filandre and the wife of Jean Pitel *dit* Beauval; their daughter Louise Pitel *dite* Mlle Beaubourg; and his two nieces, Mlle Raisin and

Mlle Godefroy. Mlle Dufey was the daughter of Villiers and the niece by marriage of Mlle Raisin. Mlle Dancourt, the wife of Florent Carton *dit* Dancourt, was the daughter and sister of the La Thorillières, *père* and *fils*, and the mother of Manon and Mimi Dancourt. Mlle Desmares was the great-granddaughter of Montfleury on her mother's side and the niece of Mlle Champmeslé on her father's. Mlle Duclos was probably the daughter of Augustin-Pierre Patissier *dit* Châteauneuf and of Catherine de Ruffin, but supposedly took the name of her grandfather, a celebrated Duclos who played at the Marais.¹ Mlle Grandval, later known as Mlle Dangeville *tante*, was the daughter of a provincial actor, as was Mlle Champvallon. Only Mlle Fonpré and Mlle Desbrosses appear to have had no connection to a theatrical family, although not enough is known about either to be certain. Of the fifteen men in the troupe in 1700–1, ten were definitely or probably from theatrical families, and five were definitely or probably not, although in several cases their antecedents are not entirely known.

Ten of the women married into the profession, and all but Mlle Desbrosses, whose actor husband remained in the provinces, married actors who were *sociétaires* of the Comédie-Française. Three married outside the profession: Mlle Godefroy's husband was a well-known dancing master, Manon Dancourt's was a *commissaire des guerres*, and Mimi Dancourt's was a *financier*. Mlle Desmares was the only one of the fourteen who never married. In 1700, then, the professional theatre in Paris remained essentially a family business of husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, children, nieces, godchildren, and the like.

In contrast, in 1750 the troupe had eleven actresses, only two of whom, Milles Dangeville and Lavoy, were definitely from theatrical families, although Mlle Gaussin was the daughter of Michel Baron's valet and a theatre usher, and the antecedents of Mlle Beauménard (later Bellecour) are not clear.² These various actresses came to the theatre in various ways.

¹ See P.-D. Lemazurier, *Galerie historique des acteurs du théâtre français depuis 1600 jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Joseph Chaumerol, 1810), vol. II, p. 183. Little evidence supports this. Georges Mongrédien and Jean Robert (*Les Comédiens français du XVII^e siècle: Dictionnaire biographique, suivi d'un inventaire des troupes, 1590–1710: D'après des documents inédits*, 3rd edn. [Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981]) do include a Mlle Duclos who was in the troupe of the Marais that played at Nantes in 1654.

² Henry Lyonnet cites a record of Mlle Beauménard's baptism as the daughter of François Michel Le Roy at the church of St. Jean in Lamballe (*Dictionnaire des comédiens français* [Paris: Librairie de l'Art du Théâtre, 1904], vol. II, p. 135); François and Claude Parfaict indicate that she was the daughter of an actor named Beauménard (*Dictionnaire des théâtres de Paris* [Paris: Rozet, 1767], vol. I, pp. 397–9), while Émile Campardon concludes that the actor Beauménard and the nobleman Le Roy were the same person (*Les Spectacles de la foire* [Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1877], vol. I, p. 117).

Mlle Beauménard was only 12 when she appeared as the character GoGo in a one-act opera, the *Fontaine de Sapience*, at the Opéra-Comique. She had an enormous success, becoming known as Mademoiselle GoGo for the rest of her long career. She was 18 when she made her debut and was accepted at the Comédie-Française. Mlle Gaussin first appeared in the celebrated private theatricals produced by the duc de Gesvres at Saint-Ouen; at 17 she was playing *jeunes princesses* in tragedy and *premières* in comedy in Lille; at 19 she made her debut in Paris. Mlle Dumesnil, one of the great tragic *premières* of the eighteenth century, was born Marie-Françoise Marchand, the daughter of François-Robert Marchand, who with his father kept a livery stable in Paris.³ She was in a troupe in Strasbourg and Compeigne before her debut at the Comédie-Française in 1737. Mlle Clairon, the other great tragic diva of mid-century, was the illegitimate daughter of a soldier and a village girl. She discovered the theatre by spying on Mlle Dangeville *la jeune*, who lived across the street. At 13, she performed at the Comédie-Italienne in Paris, then for several years in the provinces. She returned to Paris, this time to the Opéra, and finally, in 1743, she made her debut at the Comédie-Française as Phèdre.⁴ Mlle Lamotte came from a more distinguished military family; her father was an officer, her mother was “well-born.”⁵ According to legend, the young woman “consented to allow herself to be kidnapped from her convent by her lover.”⁶ As a result of this Don Juanish escapade, she was “constrained to embrace a state for which she was not born.” Mlle Brillant came to the Comédie-Française after a success at the Opéra-Comique and several years in the provinces. Mlle Connell’s father was a “squire,” according to Lemazurier, who also proposes that she began her theatrical life in the society theatres, although the website devoted to French *théâtres de société* in the eighteenth century has no record of her performing.⁷ Like many others, she failed in her first debut attempt, went to the provinces, returned two years later, and was accepted. Mlle Gautier – Mlle Drouin after her marriage – was the daughter of a music master who attracted the attention of Voltaire; he saw her play Palmyre in

³ Émile Campardon, *Les Comédiens de la troupe française pendant les deux derniers siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1879), p. 101. Although the father’s profession is not given in the baptismal notice, the child’s godmother was her grandmother, wife of Robert Marchand, *loueur de chevaux*, and her godfather was yet another *loueur de chevaux*, so logic suggests that the father was also in the business of renting horses.

⁴ See *Mémoires de Mlle Clairon, actrice du Théâtre-Français, écrits par elle-même*, ed. François Andrieux (Paris: Ponthieu, 1822; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1968), p. x.

⁵ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 274. ⁶ *Ibid.* p. 275.

⁷ See www.chass.utoronto.ca/~trott/societe/societe.htm

his *Mahomet* in Lille and arranged for her debut.⁸ Finally, Mlle Grandval took the more traditional route to the stage; the daughter of a Parisian clockmaker, she married the actor Grandval, then made her debut, and succeeded as a *grande coquette*.

Only three of the eleven women married actors, two of the three – Mlles Bellecour and Drouin – after their careers were established. Mlle Brillant married a musician and Mlle Lavoy a M. Poinot.⁹ The six other actresses, Mlles Dangeville, Dumesnil, Clairon, Connell, Gaussin, and Lamotte, never married. Of the eighteen men in the troupe in 1750, only three were married to actresses. The theatre was no longer a family business.

The preponderance of unmarried women in the mid-century troupe points to one of the greatest differences in the lives of actresses between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Although rumors and anecdotes accuse many seventeenth-century actresses of extramarital encounters, the accusations are often unverifiable or can be accounted for as part of the general tendency to assume that women in the theatre were innately corrupt. Toward the end of the century, however, matters began to change. As we have seen, Mlle Champmeslé was cheerfully unfaithful to her husband, who apparently took his own pleasures where he found them. Still, although a young nobleman or two were rumored to be enamored of the actress, her most famous lover was Racine, also tainted by the theatre. In the eighteenth century, on the other hand, some actresses participated in the highest levels of *la galanterie*.

Mlle Raisin, the widow of Jean-Baptiste Raisin, was the first to land a big fish. Around 1693 she became a mistress of Monseigneur, the Grand Dauphin, heir to the throne of France, and had a daughter with him. Or maybe two. Once again, as is so often the case when an actress's sexual behavior is at issue, it is difficult to sort out the truth. In this instance, the best testimony is probably that of Elisabeth-Charlotte, duchesse d'Orléans, the fearless princess Palatine. According to Liselotte, writing in 1701, the dauphin, then recently struck with an apoplexy, had given up his actress, while awarding her a yearly pension of 10,000 *livres* if she would agree to quit the stage.¹⁰ An often-repeated variant is that the king, Louis XIV, believing that it was inappropriate for his son to have

⁸ Émile Campardon, *Les Comédiens du roi de la troupe française* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1879), p. 87 n.

⁹ This according to Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 278, no source given.

¹⁰ Elisabeth-Charlotte, duchesse d'Orléans, *Correspondance complète*, trans. M. G. Brunet (Paris: Charpentier, 1855), vol. I, p. 268.

a working actress as his mistress, bribed Mlle Raisin to leave the theatre, offering her the option of a lump sum of 150,000 *livres* or the yearly dole she chose.¹¹ The pension was abandoned when the dauphin died in 1711, but partially restored by the regent, Philippe d'Orléans, after the death of Louis XIV.

It would seem probable that Mlle Raisin did bear the dauphin one daughter, Anne-Louise de Fleury, born in 1695 in Meudon; both the duchesse d'Orléans and the duc de Saint-Simon mention her.¹² Liselotte explains that the dauphin did not recognize his daughter because he had suffered too much from his father's legitimized bastards. She adds that after the death of Monseigneur, the princesse de Conti looked after the girl and saw her safely married to a gentleman. She died in 1716, at the age of 21, without children.

According to several online genealogy sites, there was a second daughter, Charlotte de Fleury. The Worldroots website has her born on February 6, 1697, although with a query.¹³ According to Jal, however, she was born February 6, 1692,¹⁴ meaning that either she was the daughter of Jean-Baptiste Raisin – probable – or that her mother's affair with the dauphin began before her husband's death. If so, they were abnormally discreet. It was not until the actress's pregnancy became known in 1694 that a street musician celebrated the "actor of importance" and "child of France" presently growing in her belly.¹⁵

A better-documented relationship between an actress and a royal was that of Mlle Desmares and Philippe d'Orléans, the son of the duchesse d'Orléans and the regent of the kingdom from 1715 to 1723 during the minority of Louis XV. The regency period in France had certain similarities to the Restoration in England; a time of social restraint and at least superficial piety gave way to liberty and license. The regent, like his predecessor Charles II in England, denied himself nothing when it came to bedding beautiful women. His forced marriage to one of Louis XIV's legitimized daughters by Mme de Montespan had been a blow both to

¹¹ Charles Gueullette, *Acteurs et actrices du temps passé: La Comédie-Française* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1881), pp. 107–8. I have been unable to find the original source of this anecdote.

¹² In, respectively, *Mémoires, fragments historiques et correspondance de Mme la duchesse d'Orléans*, ed. Philippe Busoni (Paris: Chez Paulin, 1832), p. 199 and *Mémoires Complètes et authentiques du duc de Saint-Simon*, ed. Chéruel and Ad. Régner fils (Paris: Hachette, 1874), Vol. XIII, p. 98.

¹³ See <http://worldroots.com/brigitte/famous/h/henri4francedesc.htm>

¹⁴ Auguste Jal, *Dictionnaire critique de biographie et d'histoire*, 2nd edn. (Paris: H. Plon, 1869), entry *Raisin*, pp. 1034–5.

¹⁵ Pierre Mèlèse, *Le Théâtre et le public à Paris sous Louis XIV, 1659–1715* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1976), p. 174. Quoted from the *Chansonnier Maurepas*, 27, fol. 131.

him and to his mother, who never forgave her brother-in-law for the humiliation and dishonor of the match. The regent called his wife "Madame Lucifer," but still managed to produce eight children with her.

He also produced several children without her, making up for the indignity of his marriage with innumerable mistresses, among whom was Charlotte Desmares, niece of Mlle Champmeslé and daughter of the Sieur Desmares, also a *sociétaire*. She made her début on January 30, 1699 as Iphigénie in the *Oreste et Pylade* of La Grange Chancel, the role Mlle Champmeslé had been playing at the time of her death, and was accepted at a quarter share on May 26, "for the *emploi* of her aunt."¹⁶

What followed is instructive in terms of the company's ability to manage its own affairs in the face of the *pouvoir*, the *bureaucracy*. Although ultimate authority over the theatres after 1680 had been given by Louis XIV first to the *dauphine* and then to the *dauphin*, four *gentilhommes de la chambre*, all from the highest nobility, served under him. They exercised administrative surveillance, although up to this point they did not normally occupy themselves with routine matters like casting. In fact, Mlle Champmeslé's roles had already been redistributed by the assembly to Mlle Raisin, Mlle Beauval, and Mlle Duclos, and the neophyte Mlle Desmares was given very little to do. But then the duc de La Trémoille, the *gentilhomme de la chambre en exercice* in the season of 1700–1, issued the following order on April 17, 1700:

Monseigneur being informed that Mlle Desmares will not be able for a long time to perfect herself on the stage if she does not perform more often, grants to her for this purpose the roles of Pauline [in *Polyeucte*], Émilie [in *Cinna*], Bérénice, Laodice [in *Nicomède*], Iphigénie and Hermione [in *Andromaque*], which Mlle Duclos and Mlle Beauval have played heretofore; the which roles the said Mlle Desmares will play in the future *en première*, that is to say, to the exclusion of any others. And so that she has the occasion to appear more often on the stage and perfect herself in declamation, monseigneur wishes that the said demoiselle Desmares play *en seconde* all the roles that she will get from Mlle Duclos when the said Mlle Duclos is not able to play them either by absence or incommodity.¹⁷

In fact, these roles were performed only nineteen times in 1700–1, and Mlle Desmares appeared in them only thirteen times.¹⁸ In that season

¹⁶ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 160. ¹⁷ Campardon, *Les Comédiens*, pp. 69–70.

¹⁸ These figures are not entirely secure. According to the *Registre* of 1700–1, Mlle Desmares played on certain days that these plays were given, but the listing unfortunately does not indicate what specific role or roles were played by each actor or actress. However, these were the roles that La Trémoille officially gave her.

Mlle Beauval, who played tragic *reines* and *soubrettes*, performed 163 times; Mlle Raisin, who played tragic *princesses* and *amoureuses* in high comedy, performed 148 times; Mlle Duclos, who played *rôles tendres* in tragedy and only occasionally played comedy, performed 76 times; and Mlle Desmares, although available for tragedy, comedy, and musical afterpieces, performed a meager 26 times.¹⁹ Nonetheless, La Trémoille reports on December 21 that the dauphin is satisfied that Mlle Desmares has had sufficient opportunities to perfect herself and has awarded her another half share. Nor was the *pouvoir* finished interfering. Not only did Mlle Desmares receive some of Mlle Beauval's tragic roles, she also received an order to learn Mlle Beauval's comic roles and be prepared to understudy her, at which the offended *première soubrette* announced that "I see perfectly well that this order is meant to make me understand that I am no longer capable of filling my *emploi*; so, I shall retire."²⁰ And she did.

Charlotte Desmares was not an interloper; she was "Lolotte," one of the children who grew up performing in the troupe of her father and her aunt. The troupe's resistance to casting her must have been a response to the assiduous efforts of the *pouvoir* to force them to feature her. Someone with a good deal of influence was looking out for her, and this someone was very likely Philippe d'Orléans. This is the first time, so far as I know, that a powerful lover tried, although with limited success, to impose his will on the troupe's autonomy.

A daughter was born to Charlotte Desmares and Philippe d'Orléans, in 1702 according to his mother.²¹ The child, known as Philippe-Angélique de Frowsy, was brought up under the auspices of her father and married in 1718 to the comte de Ségur, who was the owner of the Château Latour, the Château Lafitte, and the Château Mouton, and who was known, not unnaturally, as the Prince of Wine. Their grandson was Philippe-Henri de Ségur, a marshal of France. A charming watercolor drawing by Carmontelle shows the elderly comtesse Philippe-Angélique, with a very large, grinning, gray-striped cat on her lap, peering quizzically through

¹⁹ Archives of the Comédie-Française, *Registre* 1700–1. To these numbers for the senior actresses should be added at least thirteen performances at Fontainebleau between September 23 and November 14, 1700. See Paul F. Rice, *The Performing Arts at Fontainebleau from Louis XIV to Louis XVI* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), pp. 97–8.

²⁰ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 26.

²¹ Liselotte wrote on July 26, 1716 that her son had a 14-year-old daughter by the actress Desmares. Elisabeth Charlotte, duchesse d'Orléans, *Letters of Madame*, trans. Gertrude Scott Stevenson (London: Arrowsmith, 1925), vol. II, p. 127.

her lorgnette at her grandson, “the little rascal.” Not a royal life, but the image of a pleasant one.²²

No other actresses of the eighteenth century approached the heights reached by Mlles Raisin and Desmares, but many others had or were rumored to have had notable and sometimes notorious liaisons. As the century progressed, the *premiers gentilshommes* were very often accused of taking advantage of their privileged position, especially the infamous duc de Richelieu. One of his conquests was Thérèse Boutinon Deshayes, the wife of financier and arts patron Alexandre Le Riche de La Pouplinière (or Poplinière; the name is spelled both ways), one of the forty tax farmers who had bought the privilege of collecting French taxes in return for a healthy cut of the gross.²³ She was the daughter of Mimi Dancourt, a celebrated *soubrette* at the Comédie-Française for nearly thirty years. I propose to dwell at some length on the story of Richelieu and Mme de La Pouplinière, even though its heroine is not an actress but the daughter of an actress, because it can be verified,²⁴ and because it so nicely reflects the mixture of money, art, high society, sex farce, and personal tragedy that seems to have been characteristic of the life led by some theatre women in the eighteenth century.

Richelieu’s biographer assumes Thérèse was a professional actress,²⁵ presumably because her mother was, and because she was from a theatrical family. Her grandfather was Florent Carton *dit* Dancourt, an actor playwright from a “superior” background. He was a gentleman, well-educated, and a nascent lawyer when he became enamored of Thérèse Le Noir, the lovely teenage daughter of La Thorillière. The younger Thérèse’s own father was Samuel Boutinon Deshayes, a former lieutenant of the dragoons at the court of Denmark, and an elderly cousin of her grandfather’s.

In spite of these *honnête* connections, Thérèse Deshayes was considered a misalliance for La Pouplinière, who – *on dit* – took her as a mistress and was later shamed into marrying her by Mme de Tencin and the

²² Collection of the Louvre Museum, www.photo.rmn.fr/cf/htm/CPiCz.aspx?E=2C6NUoNT0YTZ

²³ For a summary of La Pouplinière’s life, see J.-G. Prod’homme and Theodore Baker, “A French Maecenas of the Time of Louis XIV: M. de La Pouplinière,” *The Musical Quarterly* 10 (1924), 511–31.

²⁴ Marmontel, the original source of this story, was an important literary figure in eighteenth-century Paris. His *Mémoires* are considered to be a charming and illuminating picture of his life and times, although like many memoirs of the period, not always perfectly accurate. In this instance, however, as a frequent visitor *chez* La Pouplinière he had reason to know the inside story. See Jean-François Marmontel, *Mémoires*, ed. Maurice Tourneaux (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1891). In any case, his version is verified by the record of the La Pouplinière divorce. See Émile Campardon, *La Cheminée de Mme La Pouplinière* (Paris: Charavay frères, 1879).

²⁵ Hubert Cole, *First Gentleman of the Bedchamber: The Life of Louis-François-Armand, maréchal duc de Richelieu* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), p. 160.

cardinal de Fleury.²⁶ But there was considerably more to Thérèse Deshayes than her marriage or her arrangement with Richelieu. La Pouplinière is perhaps best known for his patronage of Jean-Philippe Rameau, who became the music master of Thérèse. She was a fervent admirer of the composer and even published, in 1737, a defense of his music theory during the quarrel between the *lullistes*, defenders of the status quo in French opera, and the *ramoneurs*, excited by the complexity and novelty of Rameau's first operas in the 1630s.²⁷

La Pouplinière had a town house on the rue de Richelieu and a country estate in Passy, where he converted a ballroom into a concert hall and an *orangerie* into a private theatre. Not the least of the attractions that drew *le monde* to the self-aggrandizing musical and dramatic performances produced by La Pouplinière was his charming wife. Marmontel claims that of all the critics he had ever encountered, she was the best. After a reading of his play *Aristomène*, "she made an analysis [of it] with clarity, surprising precision, went through with me the course of the action from scene to scene, noted the places that had seemed beautiful to her as well as those that seemed weak; and in all the corrections she asked me to make, her observations struck me like so many strokes of genius." The lady's performance was praised as much as, or even more than, the playwright's, although this was not entirely to the taste of her husband, "who had wanted to retire her from the great world."²⁸

Marmontel includes the tale of Madame de La Pouplinière and the duc de Richelieu to demonstrate that what Richelieu wanted, Richelieu pursued without mercy. And, after all, the woman was only the daughter of an actress, and La Pouplinière and his wife were not getting along. As Marmontel puts it, "that was when I learned what happens in a household where jealousy on the one side and hatred on the other slither like two snakes."²⁹

On November 28, 1748 – Marmontel is quite precise about the date – La Pouplinière, alerted by anonymous letters claiming that his wife was receiving Richelieu every night, waited until she was out and then visited her bedroom with Jacques de Vaucanson, a celebrated inventor and mechanical genius. Noticing that the fireplace was devoid of wood or ash, even though it was cold, they discovered that the fireback was hinged

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ See article entitled "Thérèse Boutinon des Hayes: Madame La Pouplinière" on Le Site Rameau (<http://jp.rameau.free.fr/>), as well as the article on La Pouplinière in Grove Music On Line.

²⁸ Marmontel, *Mémoires*, vol. I, p. 231. ²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 235.

and opened into the music room of the neighboring house, which the ingenious Richelieu had rented. The result was a scandal and a divorce, followed by her painful death from breast cancer a few years later. The duc de Richelieu did not desert her during this crisis; *on dit* that he behaved admirably toward her and continued to see her until her death.³⁰

A more extensive story, a mixture of myth and verifiable information, has grown over the years about the famous actress Adrienne Lecouvreur, the daughter of an artisan, Robert Couvreur, a hatter by trade, who brought his family to Paris when Adrienne was 10, lodged them near the Comédie-Française, and sent her to a convent to be educated. According to a legend that has attached itself to this actress, she was discovered at the age of 14 when she performed Pauline in an amateur production of Corneille's *Polyeucte* under the auspices of the wife of a president of the Parlement. Le Grand, a *sociétaire* of the Comédie-Française, saw and was impressed by the young Adrienne Couvreur, who turned out to be the niece of his washerwoman. He took her on as a pupil, and after a long apprenticeship in the private theatres of Paris and in the provinces, she returned to Paris – with two young daughters – in the spring of 1717 and made her debut at the Comédie-Française.³¹

There is no doubt that Adrienne Lecouvreur was one of the best actresses of her day, but that is not the reason for the plays, the movies – one starring Joan Crawford, another Yvonne Printemps – the opera, and the heap of “biographies” that sustain her legend. The reasons for her continued presence in the popular imagination are, first, her long and romanticized relationship with the very noble and very important Maurice de Saxe, second, her tragic death at 37 amidst rumors that she had been poisoned by a noble rival for his favors, and, third, the quick disposal of her corpse on a building site, so that her failure to recant her profession before death would not become another public issue.³²

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 242.

³¹ The details of the life and legend of Adrienne Lecouvreur can be found in any one of a number of books written about the actress. I hesitate to call them biographies. I have read Georges Rivoller's *Adrienne Le Couvreur* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925), Jack Richtman's *Adrienne Lecouvreur: The Actress and the Age* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), Catherine Clément's *Le Cœur transporté: Adrienne Lecouvreur* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1991), and Catherine Marciano-Jacob's *Adrienne Lecouvreur: L'Excommunication et la Gloire* (Strasbourg: Éditions Coprur, 2003). All are written for the popular market. Probably the most useful information is to be found in the “Notice biographique” by Georges Monval, archivist at the Comédie-Française, written as an introduction to Adrienne Lecouvreur, *Lettres de Adrienne Lecouvreur* (Paris: H. Plon, 1892), pp. 9–78.

³² Actors were required to recant their profession before death if they wanted to be buried in “sacred ground.” The refusal by the curé of St.-Eustache to bury Molière had been a huge scandal; here the *lieutenant-général* wanted to avoid a repetition.

Because she *was* a public issue, in a way that even Mlle Champmeslé had not quite managed in the previous century, perhaps because Paris society was then still restrained to some extent by Versailles. Adrienne Lecouvreur was not only a celebrity, she was also, like Mme de La Pouplinière, very much part of *le monde*; her correspondence, fortunately preserved, is filled with the lively social chatter of someone who was perfectly *au courant* with the libertine side of social and literary Paris. Several of her early letters were written to Charles-Augustin de Ferriol d'Argental, then a boy, later her *légataire universel*.³³ In January 1720 she reports to him that she has seen his mother out in public and that "she enlisted me to write to you."³⁴ The mother in question was the sister of Mme de Tencin, famous novelist, mistress of cardinal Du Bois, the prime minister, and salonnière, who a few years earlier had deposited her newly born illegitimate son on the steps of Notre Dame. Fortunately rescued from the Enfants Trouvés by his father, Louis-Camus Destouches, he grew up to be the *encyclopédiste* Jean d'Alembert.³⁵

On February 9, 1720, in one of her habitually chatty letters, Mlle Lecouvreur wrote to her young friend that M. le D. de S. has the gout and the Petit La. . . has the chicken pox, while Mme C. has a fever, and Mlle de V. (Mlle de Valois, the daughter of the regent) fainted and lost consciousness for more than two hours when she was informed that she was to be engaged on Monday, married on Tuesday, and sent off to her new husband in Modena on Thursday.³⁶ Actresses were not impervious to gossip.

In one of her most famous letters, to an unidentified M. *** and written on May 5, 1728, Mlle Lecouvreur paints a picture of her social life. She begins: "It is true that it has been a long time since I have written to you. . . but you know the dissipations of Paris."³⁷ She simply cannot "cultivate the ancients" or "occupy herself at home as she would like." It has become the fashion to dine and sup with her, because "several duchesses have done me the honor of doing so." She must respond to all those who want to know her or be thought impertinent. If she refuses an invitation or misses a social event: "That's because we aren't titled"

³³ As her *légataire universel*, he oversaw her estate and made sure her money was used for the benefit of her two illegitimate daughters, both born during her years in the provinces.

³⁴ Lecouvreur, *Lettres*, p. 100.

³⁵ An excellent summary of Mme de Tencin's very checkered life and career can be found on Wikipedia France.

³⁶ Lecouvreur, *Lettres*, pp. 103–4.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 151.

or “Don’t you see how she disdains us? You have to know Greek to please her.”³⁸ Many of her friends did cultivate the ancients; some even knew Greek. They included the grammarian Du Marsais, the philosopher Fontenelle, and Voltaire himself, who, like his friend d’Argental, loved her.

But the center of her life was Maurice, comte de Saxe, her “hero.” A fine-looking man in both street clothes and armor, at least in his portraits by Quentin de La Tour, he was not, during the years of their affair, set on any obvious route to become marshal of France. He was the illegitimate son of Frederick-Augustus I, the elector of Saxony, who became August II of Poland. He was trained as a soldier, recognized by his father in 1711, and married off into the lesser nobility of Saxony. The marriage proving unsuccessful and the military career less than promising, his father sent him to France in 1721, where he bought a regiment – and met Adrienne Lecouvreur. Their idyll was interrupted in 1725 when the ambitious comte de Saxe saw an opportunity to be elected duke of Courland, an autonomous vassal state of Poland, located in what is now Latvia. When the effort turned sour and he came into conflict with his father, the king of Poland, the comte wrote back to his friends in Paris for money. Mlle Lecouvreur sold or pawned her jewels and sent him 40,000 *livres*, but in spite of her generosity the ducal crown of Courland went elsewhere.³⁹ In October 1728 Maurice de Saxe returned to Paris, and the curtain went up on the final act of their romantic tragedy, with its jealousy, its quarrels, and its rumors of poison.⁴⁰ That “romantic tragedy,” which I will discuss at length later in this chapter, has completely dominated our impressions of Adrienne Lecouvreur, at the expense of her artistic life.

After the death of Mlle Lecouvreur in 1730, the next great tragic diva was Mlle Dumesnil, who made her debut in 1737 and was received in 1738. Supposedly, her life off the stage was completely different from the worldly life led by her predecessor. Although her *emploi* was *reines*, her

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 152–3.

³⁹ When Adrienne Lecouvreur died in 1730, the inventory made after her death suggests that the comte de Saxe had made no effort to pay her back or retrieve her jewels. Although a jeweler estimated the worth of her jewelry at a not insignificant 4,827 *livres*, most of the inventory was made up of snuff boxes, patch boxes, medallions, and the like. Included were only one necklace, one bracelet, one pair of diamond earrings, and five rings, worth in total 2,200 *livres*. See Monval, “Notice,” in Lecouvreur, *Lettres*, p. 247.

⁴⁰ Because of the intense romanticizing of this part of Mlle Lecouvreur’s life and death, it is almost impossible to sort out the truth. I refer the reader who wants to pursue the matter to the works cited in n. 31. Internet sites are completely useless.

off-stage persona was thoroughly middle-class; she wore house dresses to rehearsal and sat knitting in the wings. She was not the subject of scandalous rumors, her name does not appear in the records of the morals police, and her place in history arises not from a romantic love affair or a scandalous death, but from her appearance in Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* as the exemplar of inspirational acting.

On the other hand, her unexceptional life may be as legendary as Mlle Lecouvreur's supposed death by poison. At least, some aspects of Mlle Dumesnil's life do arouse a certain curiosity. She lived for many years with her colleague Grandval, whose marriage to Marie-Geneviève Dupré, Mlle Grandval, ended in an early separation. In his will, Grandval made Mlle Dumesnil his universal legatee, claiming that he had lived *en pension* with her and that she had paid for everything – food, laundry, heat, light, etc. – for more than thirty years.⁴¹ Where they lived is a little suspicious. Most actors and actresses lived close to the theatre, then established on what is now the rue de L'Ancienne Comédie, just off the boulevard St.-Germain near the Buci market. Grandval and Mlle Dumesnil, however, lived far from the theatre on the Right Bank, at the foot of Montmartre, just then becoming a center for night life, drinking, and prostitution. In 1752 she bought a property at the Barrière Blanche, near the present Moulin Rouge; he followed with a neighboring property in 1754.⁴² Grandval was also the author of a number of short, indecent plays, eight in all according to one recent work.⁴³ Some were produced in a private theatre at the Barrière Blanche belonging to Mlle Dumesnil.

Did Mlle Dumesnil appear in any of Grandval's plays? The marquis de Paulmy d'Argenson wrote in 1779, remembering a performance at the

⁴¹ Georges Bertin, "Testament inédit et documents sur Charles Racot Grandval," *L'Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et Curieux* 385 (May 25, 1884), 318–20. Unfortunately, the *chercheur* in this instance reveals only that he found the documents in the archives of a Paris notary, without identifying the notary's name.

⁴² According to a police report of 1758, "two little houses without numbers, once belonging to the sieurs Dourlan and Molière [not that Molière], have been sold to the sieur Grandval, French actor, who has joined them into one, which communicates by the garden with the one belonging to Mlle Dumesnil, actress at the same spectacle, on the rue Blanche, with whom he has lived for several years," Georges Bertin, *L'Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et Curieux*, 249 (September 25, 1878), 550. G. Capon and R. Yve-Plessis, in *Les Théâtres clandestins* (Paris: Plessis, 1905), citing documents from the Archives, claim Grandval bought his property on September 17, 1754 and Mlle Dumesnil hers in 1752. See p. 228.

⁴³ Gaëtan Brulotte and John Phillips, eds., *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, 3 vols. (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), vol. I, p. 567. Some of the plays were published anonymously or pseudonymously, like much other fodder that satisfied the eighteenth-century's appetite for erotica, so their authorship is not fully established.

Barrière Blanche by another actress, Mlle Gaussin,⁴⁴ but nothing survives to indict Mlle Dumesnil. The authors of the *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature* describe the plays as filled with raunchy dialogue and “pervasive, strictly sexual eroticism.” Several of them feature parodies, especially of *Le Cid*, designed to discredit the seventeenth-century models for tragedy.⁴⁵ While it is tempting to think of Mlle Dumesnil subverting her own *emploi* by participating in an indecent entertainment satirizing it, there is no concrete evidence she did so. On the other hand, the plays were performed at her house.

The long alliance between Mlle Dumesnil and Grandval was essentially a marriage; so, too, were several long-lasting relationships between an actress and a nobleman or rich *bourgeois*. Mlle Quinault *l'ainée* may have actually been secretly married to the duc de Nevers after a brief liaison with the son of the regent. In any case, she lived for many years in an apartment in the Louvre and entertained lavishly, with Nevers always in attendance.⁴⁶ Mlle Desmares, after her early fling with the regent, settled in for a long affair with a *financier*, Antoine Hogguer, who built for her two splendid mansions, the Folie Desmares in Châtillon and the Hôtel Desmares-Villeroy on the rue de Varenne in Paris, now the Ministry of Agriculture. According to the official website of that ministry, Hogguer wanted to marry Mlle Desmares, but was afraid of the scandal. In order for them to live together as if married, but without public acknowledgment, he had a house built for her separated by a garden from a property he already owned, the Hôtel Rothlin, now the residence of the Minister of Commerce.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, scandal found the baron anyway. He was accused of a number of financial transgressions and ruined in 1726.⁴⁸ Fortunately, the Hôtel Desmares was her property, at least until she was forced to sell it to pay debts in 1735. The lovers fled to St.-Germain-en-Laye, where she supported him until the end of his life on her pension from the theatre.

Mlle Dangeville apparently had a long relationship with the duc de Praslin. According to the *Mémoires secrets*, they lived together for more

⁴⁴ Capon and Yve-Plessis, *Les Théâtres clandestins*, p. 230.

⁴⁵ Brulotte and Phillips, *Encyclopedia*, vol. I, p. 567.

⁴⁶ Judith Curtis, *Divine Thalie: The Career of Jeanne Quinault* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007), pp. 23–4. Mlle Quinault *l'ainée* retired from the Comédie-Française in 1723 and lived to enjoy her pension for seventy years, dying at the age of 96 in 1793.

⁴⁷ See http://agriculture.gouv.fr/histoire/8_hotel_villeroy/desmares_2.htm.

⁴⁸ For a detailed account of the baron and his dealings see Bernard Alis, *Mademoiselle Desmares de la Comédie-Française* (Paris: Editions S.d.E., 2004). In spite of the title, most of this book is devoted to Hogguer.

than fifty years, and the actress was inconsolable when he died.⁴⁹ The only scandal resulting from this unsanctified union was the unshakeable conviction on the part of the duchess that her children were not hers, but bastards produced by Mlle Dangeville and substituted for her own children. When she died, she cut them off without the proverbial *sou*, but they were able to have the will overturned on the grounds that their mother was insane.⁵⁰

Mlle Clairon, whose life in *la galanterie*, both real and imagined, has been well and truly belabored, also had a long and seemingly devoted liaison with the comte de Valbelle, a Provençal nobleman, who was described as the best-looking man in the province, but who had none of the political and social *éclat* of men like the duc de Praslin or the duc de Nevers. I described in [Chapter 1](#) the gossip and slander that swirled around Mlle Clairon, and I propose to discuss her fate at the hands of her biographers in the second half of this chapter; here it seems appropriate to note that she, like other actresses whose lives did not conform to the seventeenth-century model elaborated by Chappuzeau, was a talented, thoughtful, hard-working artist, still and inevitably devalued because of her profession, whatever the realities of her personal life.

Many of these women accumulated treasure, partly from the men who “entertained” them, partly from their own hard work. Unlike married women, whose property was largely under the control of their husbands, these *filles majeures*, women who were unmarried and older than 25, were permitted full legal autonomy. They controlled their property and their income, and they could make legal commitments without anyone’s permission. That, in itself, may have been one reason actresses did not marry. Those who did, like Mlle Dancourt, sometimes had to apply for a separation of property when the husband proved to be profligate, often with his wife’s money. And then there was poor Mlle Duclos, who married, at the age of 55, the young Pierre Duchemin, barely 17, who had just made his debut at the Comédie-Française. Along with other indignities, acts of violence, and sordid adventures, he claimed that “his quality of husband” made him the master, that she was nothing, owned nothing, that everything was his, and that “he could dispose of it as

⁴⁹ November 16, 1785.

⁵⁰ I read about this in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* for 1847, pp. 714–15, the internet being the wonder that it is. The source was the *Mémoires secrets*, November 16, 1785, which reported the results of the legal action. The lady left her husband only a bronze statue of Henri IV on horseback, a not so subtle allusion, perhaps, to the late king’s reputation for gallantry.

seemed apropos to him.”⁵¹ This terrible marriage lasted for six years before a merciful separation was agreed to.

Money could be a problem for actresses. Their income was very uneven, and it declined substantially in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. In 1701–2, the daily profits from a full share added up to 4,352 *livres*; in 1711–12, 2,629 *livres*; in the worst season, 1718–19, 2,011.⁵² Those with a half or quarter share made proportionately less. In the season of 1718–19 the actors went 195 days straight without earning anything. The number of spectators was as low as twenty-six, but even when the house was comfortably full, the actors were unable to pay themselves a living wage.⁵³ Beginning in the following season, they decided to take 4 *livres* a day from income for each actor, whatever the box-office. Those without a full share still received at least 4 *livres*.

Actors did have some other sources of income, although arriving at more than a rough estimate would require a Herculean effort and would vary from actor to actor depending on size of share as well as number of performances, attendance at the assembly, fines assessed, and so forth. The monarchy provided an annual subsidy, usually of 12,000 *livres*, for twenty-three full shares, but some years there was an additional amount, and some years the subsidy was not paid on time or at all. Some of the actors also received a private pension from the crown, usually as a reward for either quality or quantity of service. All of the actors who attended the weekly assembly where business matters were discussed, repertory decided, and new plays voted in or out, received a *jeton* or token worth between 30 *sous* and 6 *livres*, depending on the rules in force. Each actor who performed on a given day received a *feu*, that is, money meant to pay for heat and light in his or her dressing room; the amounts were not great – 20 *sous* raised to 2 *livres* in 1760 – but important for the actors who played the non-starring *emplois* and performed many more times per season than did the *premiers* and *premières*. Actors who played at court at either Versailles or Fontainebleau received varying amounts for room, board and candles, at most 1 *pistole*, or 10 *livres*, a day. After 1739 the

⁵¹ Campardon, *Les Comédiens*, p. 96.

⁵² All these figures are derived from H. C. Lancaster, “The Comédie-Française, 1701–1774: Plays, Actors, Spectators, Finances,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 41 (1951), pp. 593–849.

⁵³ Actors’ shares were awarded only after the poor tax, the daily expenses, and the author’s share (in the case of a new play) had been subtracted from the daily receipts. The poor tax varied but finally settled at one-ninth of the gross income to the Hôpital Général and one-tenth to the Hôtel-Dieu after 300 *livres* had been set aside for ordinary daily expenses.

actors left behind in Paris, usually the younger and/or less able members of the troupe, received 5 *livres* a day in addition to their shares.⁵⁴ However, many, many fines, both large and small, could be assessed for various infractions of the increasingly complex rules periodically imposed by the *premiers gentilshommes*, thus reducing the actors' income.

Actors also had professional expenses. For the women, especially those who played *premières* in tragedy, costumes were an enormous burden, literally and financially. An effort was made in 1700 to relieve some of that burden when the suggestion was made to the assembly that anyone who performed several roles in the same play should be permitted to use the theatre's wardrobe. The answer: absolutely not – all actors and actresses, without exception, will furnish the costumes and accessories necessary for the performance of all roles.⁵⁵ Even more expensive for the neophyte than accumulating a professional wardrobe was buying a share in the *fonds*, the common property of the troupe. In the 1730s a whole share cost 13,130 *livres*. This could be paid off over a number of years, but actors could also borrow back some of what they had already paid in. In 1734 and 1735, none of the women then in the troupe had paid in full. It took the famous Mlle Dangeville eight years to pay for her share, Mlle Gaussin eleven, Mlle Dumesnil only three, while Mlle Grandval had nothing on account in 1743, after eleven years.⁵⁶ Ah, and then there was the pension fund, to which every actor had to contribute, and the burden of the playwright's share when a new play was offered. The only thing that saved the troupe in 1718–19 was Voltaire's *Oedipe*, which opened on November 18, 1718 and had thirty-two performances before the end of the season. Each full-share actor made 951 *livres* from this play, but Voltaire made 3,520 – well deserved, to be sure, but a charge on the actors nonetheless.

In the seventeenth century the annual profits had been better and less variable, the actors were mostly married to each other, and their style of life was bourgeois. In 1685 La Grange and his wife, with one and one-half shares, earned 8,758 *livres*, without counting what they received for playing at court.⁵⁷ While the early eighteenth-century actor still could

⁵⁴ Jules Bonnaissis, *La Comédie-Française: Histoire administrative (1638–1757)* (Paris: Didier et Cie, 1874), pp. 219–54. Another work focused on the finances of the troupe is Claude Alasseur, *La Comédie-Française au 18^e siècle* (Paris, La Haye: Mouton, 1967). Also see Martine de Rougemont, *La Vie théâtrale en France au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1988), pp. 175–247.

⁵⁵ Archives of the Comédie-Française, *Feuilles d'assemblée*, May 3, 1700.

⁵⁶ Archives of the Comédie-Française, *Registres*, 1734–41.

⁵⁷ Charles Varlet *dit* La Grange, *Registre*, ed. Édouard Thierry (Paris: J. Claye, 1876), p. 348.

rely on several thousand *livres* a year, if he or she had a full share, debutants and early-career actors were not so fortunate. In that bad year of 1718–19, the young Jeanne Quinault, just admitted at a half-share, would have been hard pressed to pay into the *fonds*, contribute to the pension fund, and begin to accumulate costumes. Perhaps it is not, then, so surprising that young actresses sought relief and enjoyed a style of life that was far beyond what they could manage on their own. Not all of them made this choice, of course, and perhaps it was easier for the actresses who played *secondes* and *troisièmes* and *caractères*, who were not so sought after, to avoid noble sponsors as well as gossip and the lascivious gaze of the morals police.

Yet another reason some actresses were perhaps not always *sage* may have been youth and lack of family supervision. As the eighteenth century got older, actresses got younger and younger. Some very young women had begun their careers at the Comédie-Française in the late seventeenth century – Angélique Du Croisy and Charlotte Desmares were 16, Manon and Mimi Dancourt were 13 and 14 – but all of them joined their parents in the troupe. Between 1700 and 1730 the average age of female *débutantes* was 20. Between 1750 and 1790, on the other hand, it was 17 and included girls of 13, 14, 15 and 16, only one of whom – Mlle Dubois – had a parent to look out for her. Of the seventeen women who joined the Comédie-Française in the second half of the century, ten were under 18 and essentially on their own. This increasing focus on youth may remind us that the eighteenth century had something of a problem with pedophilia. I am thinking of Greuze and those young girls with dead birds and broken jugs, mourning the loss of their innocence. Whatever the reason, however, age had become an issue, and the gifts of nature, so important in judging women on the stage, were now the gifts nature gave only to the young.

Unlike the seventeenth century, when the audience in 1685 demanded the presence of Mlle de Brie, then in her mid-50s, on stage to play the teen-age Agnès in *L'École des femmes*, the eighteenth century became aware of age disparities between actors and characters. It may have been Baron's decision to return not only to the stage but to some of his young leading roles as well that brought the matter to consciousness. There was an outburst of laughter when he recited those lines of the Cid:

I am young, it is true, but to well-born souls
Valor does not wait for age.

He began a second time; the audience laughed even louder. Finally, he came downstage and addressed the *parterre*. "Gentlemen, I am going to

begin for the third time, but I warn you that if you laugh again, I will leave the stage and I will never mount it again in my life.”⁵⁸

The age of the women was an even greater issue. Some of the stars of the early eighteenth century had gone on longer than they should have. The *Mémoires secrets* is less than kind to Mlle Gaussin in the thirty-first year of her tenure: “She does not sense that the time has come to withdraw from applause before the applause withdraws from her. Her genre does not ally itself with the wrinkles of age; a *vieille poupée* [old doll] should never appear in *L’Oracle* or *Les Grâces*; Zaïre must bear on her brow all the innocence of her soul.”⁵⁹ Probably stung to the heart by that *vieille poupée*, Mlle Gaussin retired the following year.

Some actresses were less oblivious. Mlle Dangeville, for instance, was described in the same *Mémoires secrets* article in 1762 as “Inimitable Dangeville! Always fresh, always new. . . Continue to be the delight and the admiration of the French stage.”⁶⁰ However, she was 47, and she too retired a year later, by choice. Mlle Desmares was also among those who “did not imitate those actors who seemed to want to perpetuate themselves on the stage when everything invites them to retire.”⁶¹ All of these actresses had youthful *emplois*: *jeune princesse*, *soubrette*, *première* in the *haut comique*. Actresses who played *confidentes* or *caractères* were less pressured to end their careers when the bloom of youth was gone.

Another change that affected everyone, not only actresses, was the radically increasing dominance of the *pouvoir*, the royal administration, over the management of the troupe. From its inception, the Comédie-Française was a creature of the state. Chappuzeau’s “republic,” so celebrated by historians of seventeenth-century French theatre, was transformed, giving up its unique power to manage itself in return for a small annual subvention. Not that it had any choice. Beginning four years after the 1680 merger of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Guénégaud, a series of *règlements* was issued by the state. The early *règlements* were largely concerned with the number of shares and the rules governing pensions. Later *règlements* took up the vexed and increasingly complicated issue of who got free entry into the theatre. Gradually, however, as the *premiers gentilshommes* got more and more involved, the *règlements*

⁵⁸ Cited in Bert Edward Young, *Michel Baron: Acteur et auteur dramatique* (Paris: Albert Fontemoing, 1905), p. 118, from *Récréations littéraires*, p. 49.

⁵⁹ Louis Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l’histoire de la république des lettres en France depuis MDCCXLII jusqu’à nos jours*, ed. Paul Lacroix (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1874), January 30, 1662, p. 31.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 31–2. ⁶¹ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 165.

began to override the company's own documents of control, until finally the most minute matters were the subject of decrees and directives. A bureaucratic hierarchy evolved, with the actors at the bottom wriggling under the heavy fist of the *intendant des menus plaisirs*, a court functionary, who reported directly and frequently to the *gentilhomme en exercice*.

After the near-bankruptcy of the Comédie-Française in 1756,⁶² the full weight of authority fell on the troupe. First, the king's council had its say,⁶³ and after the council had spoken the actors signed their own Acte de Société, agreeing to the *règlement* to be proposed by the *premiers gentilshommes*. On September 7, 1761 *lettres patentes* were registered with the Parlement that included this *règlement*, which more or less disposed of any shreds of control the actors might still have had. It was read aloud to the assembled troupe, entered into the *registre de délibérations*, and copied for each actor or actress. The first order of business was the choice of *semainiers*, the men responsible for day-to-day management, and the apportioning of their responsibilities. Especially notable was the role to be played by the third *semainier*, whose job was to spy on everyone else and report to the *intendant* about what went on during the weekly assembly. The assembly was highly regulated. It was to be held on Monday at 11am in "the room with the big table." The *semainiers* were to be seated at one end, and the others arranged around the table in order of reception. So that there would be no arguments about who was on time and deserved a *jeton*, each actor or actress was to write his or her name on a piece of paper, and at exactly 11.15am the first *semainier* was to draw a line under the last name, date the paper, sign it, and give it to the cashier. Anyone who left early was to be crossed off the list. And so on in exhaustive detail for pages. The actors were to vote with white beans for yes, black beans for no. When the issue was the reception of a new play, actors would be given a third, mottled bean, which they could cast for "revision." The first *semainier* was to count the beans. Votes were to be taken after each actor or actress gave an opinion on the topic under discussion in order of *ancienneté*. Anyone who interrupted or used strong or thoughtless words was to be turned out of the assembly, have their names crossed off the list, and be fined 6 *livres*.

⁶² The troupe owed 486,930 *livres*, according to an *État* drawn up on April 1. The king contributed 276,023 *livres*, which eased the situation but gave the *pouvoir* more rights to interfere.

⁶³ See *Arrêts du conseil d'état du roi, lettres patentes, actes de société, et règlements de messieurs les Premiers Gentilshommes de la Chambre du Roi, concernant les Comédiens François* (Paris, 1761).

Almost everything the assembly decided then had to be approved by the *intendant* and the *premiers gentilshommes*, including the recasting of plays in the repertory when an actor or actress retired or died. All financial transactions, including contracts for materials or equipment, had to be approved. Any play accepted for performance had to be submitted to the *premier gentilhomme en exercice*. Just remembering all the rules must have been exhausting. And then there were the fines: fines for missing the assembly, fines for missing or coming late to rehearsal, fines for coming late to a performance or missing an entrance. There were huge fines for missing a whole performance, on the assumption that the actor or actress was trying to avoid a role he or she did not want to play. And then there were fines for not paying fines and fines for not reporting fines and more fines for not informing on the *semainiers* for being lax about collecting fines. There was a whole system in place designed to force members of the troupe to inform on each other and betray each other for minute infractions of these limitless rules.

As one might expect, the women lost authority even faster than the men did,⁶⁴ as more responsibility was given to fewer people, all of them men. Still, for much of the eighteenth century, some women made their voices heard. Indeed, it may have been the voice of Mlle Clairon, who was not a shrinking violet, and who led a campaign to regularize the civil status of the actor, that led to the formation of the *comité* in the year she retired. An earlier proposal to form a committee in 1762 had named three women, Mlles Dumesnil, Gaussin, and Clairon, the tragedy queens of the troupe, as members, although there is no record in the *Feuilles d'Assemblée* that this committee ever met. In 1766, however, the *comité* was established for real to serve as a buffer between the actors and the *pouvoir*, mostly Papillon de la Ferté, then *intendant*, who was totally fed up with the troupe. This committee was composed of six men named by the *pouvoir* and was charged with all the business of the troupe, bypassing the assembly. Anyone who objected or created obstacles for the committee was to be severely punished. All deliberations and decisions of the

⁶⁴ This conflicts with the view expressed by Lenard R. Berlanstein in "Women and Power in Eighteenth-Century France: Actresses at the Comédie-Française," *Feminist Studies* 20 (1994), 475–506. A reading of company documents suggests that a view derived from ideal seventeenth-century practices as described by Chappuzeau is not necessarily relevant to what took place in the eighteenth century, although I agree that women *sociétaires* of the Comédie-Française, especially those who were unmarried, had somewhat more power, both professionally and personally, than most of their contemporaries.

committee were to be reported to the *intendant* and approved by the *premiers gentilshommes* before being executed, and all orders from the *intendant* were to be executed by the committee.⁶⁵

The story of the Paris theatre between 1680 and 1760 is in part a story of how several bands of actors, freely and legally associated to perform what they liked (although not always when and where they liked), became institutionalized, infantilized, and marginalized. Whatever the causes of that process, whether particular to the objectives of Louis XIV and his minister Colbert or a reflection of greater social and economic tendencies, its result was an establishment theatre that lost energy, imagination, creativity, and even the power to attract an audience. New plays continued to inspire arguments among the Parnassians and long, elaborate critiques in the press, but very few of them were successful when performed and even fewer survived their century. Conversely, the Paris *monde* went theatre mad, and amateur actors – men and women, the bourgeoisie, aristocrats, nobles, even royals – took to the boards and showed off their often considerable talents and at times some of their less decorous preoccupations. *Les décences* were everything, except when they weren't, and society theatre was often synonymous with erotic theatre. Professional actors and especially actresses became objects of public attention, public criticism, and public condemnation in a way that had not been seen before, while the art of actor, long scorned as mere apéry, became a subject of intense interest. But for the Comédie-Française, much of the eighteenth century was economically disastrous.

While the modern fascination with the actor and actress was in play, so was a development that still haunts the theatre. Although, as has ever been the case, actors are at the center of what is theatrical, beginning in the eighteenth century they were brought to their knees before the playwrights, the producers, and eventually the directors. Playwrights fought the actors for years over ownership and profits and the control of productions, and well they should have, but for every inch the playwright gained, an inch was lost by the actor. Modern producers bring their capital to the theatre; they use their money to hire and fire and make a great many very consequential decisions. The *premiers*

⁶⁵ See Denis Papillon de la Ferté, *Journal des Menus plaisirs du roi* (Clermont-Ferrand: Paleo, 2002) for the *intendant's* view of this process of encroachment.

gentilshommes were producers, too; their capital was the power they had over debuts, receptions, the awarding of shares, the assigning of roles, and the regulation of working conditions, once the purview of the actors. The *gentilshommes* may not have invented the casting couch, but they certainly appear to have made good use of it. It would be another century before the modern director began to appear, so at least the actors of the Comédie-Française in the eighteenth century, once the playwright was out of the way, could in theory interpret their roles as they liked, although the hand of tradition was heavy and the idea of “interpretation” as we understand it was barely nascent.⁶⁶

Nonetheless, the theatre managed to stagger on somehow, and the actresses bore no little responsibility for keeping the poor thing on its feet. Many of those who have written about the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century actresses, occasionally in France, but mostly in England, have concentrated on their sexual appeal to a male audience,⁶⁷ and certainly images of the coquettish *soubrette*, the seductive wife, and the pathetic *jeune princesse*, her limpid eyes swimming with tears, are iconic. In 1994, when early feminist theory dominated, and everyone saw sexual commerce in every human activity, James Peck wrote about the actress Silvia, star of the Comédie-Italienne, whose genius may have “transcended the tawdry commodification of women so apparent in the lives of her contemporaries.”⁶⁸ The century was saturated with sexuality, to be sure, and while it may be hard to attribute the appeal of the actress to anything else, a more nuanced view than “tawdry commodification” should be possible.

⁶⁶ One anecdote illustrates a certain degree of interpretation. Quinault-Dufresne, who was only 19, was making his debut as Oreste in Crébillon’s *Électre* and asked the playwright to “permit him to render this role as he understood it.” Crébillon replied, “But, my boy, you must understand it as I do.” “Yes, sir,” was the response, “in so far as I can renounce myself.” E.-D. De Manne, *Troupe de Voltaire* (Lyon: N. Scheuring, 1877), p. 10.

⁶⁷ The English actresses of the Restoration and eighteenth century have been studied exhaustively, beginning with John Harold Wilson’s *All the King’s Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). His “Ladies” have been superseded by Kristina Straub’s *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton University Press, 1992), and more recently by Kirsten Pullen’s *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Gilli Bush Bailey’s *Treading the Boards: Actresses and Playwrights on the Late-Stuart Stage* (Manchester University Press, 2006). The sexuality of the English actress has also been addressed recently by Sarah Burton in a PhD thesis written for Royal Holloway College, University of London, entitled “The Public Woman: An Investigation into the Actress–Whore Connection.”

⁶⁸ “The Economy of Coquetry: The Failed Bank Note and the Figure of the Actress in Regency France,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 7 (1994), 20.

The subject matter of tragedy in France in the early eighteenth century was often sexual. H. C. Lancaster writes of 1701–15 that “sexual love is found in all the tragedies except Longpierré’s *Électre*” and, additionally, that “love between persons who are not married to each other was considered essential and was at times lugged in where it might better have been omitted.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, some men did use the theatre and its actresses as a source of sexual stimulation. The eighteenth-century writer, printer, and pornographer Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, who wanted to reform the stage because he claimed to be unable to attend the theatre without disgracing himself, is one example. According to his confessional autobiography, *Monsieur Nicolas*, the actress Anna-Maria Veronese, Coraline of the Comédie-Italienne, “caused such a lively feeling in me that at the sight of her I committed a misdemeanor that is almost always repeated when I go to a play.”⁷⁰ But Restif was either sexually perverse or enjoyed claiming to be – he admitted to incest with his daughter – and surely most other male audience members were not affected so literally, but were also aesthetically and emotionally moved.

The discourse describing the performances of eighteenth-century tragic actresses in France is not much concerned with their being seductive on stage. Emphasis is on their ability to feel, express, and transmit emotion, although one of those emotions is *tendresse*, which can have sexual implications. As the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* (1694) delicately puts it, “*tendresse* sometimes is taken to mean the passion of love itself.”⁷¹ But many *rôles tendres* are like Zaïre, whose love is both innocent and requited but still the source of her tragic fate. Voltaire called *Zaïre* his “tender and interesting tragedy” and his “story made for the heart.” “In this age of most lively passions,” he wrote, “what’s called for is tenderness and feeling.”⁷²

Zaïre, featuring Mlle Gaussin, was a huge success. Voltaire wrote an *épître* in her honor which reflects on the relationship between the sexuality of the actress and her ability to inspire other kinds of audience response:

⁶⁹ H. C. Lancaster, *Sunset: A History of Parisian Drama in the Last Years of Louis XIV, 1701–1715* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1945), p. 33.

⁷⁰ Restif de la Bretonne, *Monsieur Nicolas*, quoted in Pierre Testud, *Rétif de la Bretonne et la création littéraire* (Geneva: Droz, 1977), p. 318. For more information on Restif and the general topic of theatrical reform see Virginia Scott, “The Actress and Utopian Theatre Reform: Riccoboni, Rousseau, and Restif,” *Theatre Research International* 27 (2002), 18–27.

⁷¹ ARTFL, *Dictionnaires d’Autrefois*, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/17>

⁷² Quoted and translated by Caroline Weber, “Voltaire’s *Zaïre*. Fantasies of Infidelity, Ideologies of Faith,” *South Central Review* 21 (2004), 42.

*To Mademoiselle Gaussin
 who performed the role of Zaïre with much success.*
 Young Gaussin, receive my *tendre* homage,
 receive my verses, applauded on the stage;
 protect them: Zaïre is your work;
 it is yours, since you embellish it.
 Because of your eyes, those eyes so full of charms,
 your touching voice, and your enchanting sound,
 the critics have laid down their arms;
 the sight of you softens the censorious.
 Illusion, that queen of hearts,
 Walks in your wake, inspires alarms,
 feeling, regrets, sorrows,
 and the pleasure of shedding tears.
 The god of poetry, that we used to disdain,
 is, by your voice, today sure to please;
 the god of love, to whom you were more dear,
 is, with your eyes, even more sure to reign;
 between these gods from now on you will live.⁷³

Voltaire is obviously well aware that the actress's appeal is shared by the god of poetry and the god of love, but it is "illusion, that queen of hearts" that inspires the emotional responses in the audience, moved by the power of theatrical illusion in complicity with their own imaginations.

Awareness of the composition of that audience is also necessary to any discussion of the appeals of sexuality and the erotic in the theatre. Much of what has been written centers on the male spectator and the male gaze, but in the eighteenth century the female audience was also key. Henri Lagrave writes, apropos of the aristocratic women who watched from the *loges*, that eulogies of the female spectators are to be found everywhere and that "it was often the judgment of the women that decided the success of the play."⁷⁴

Jean I. Marsden's analysis of the English she-tragedy⁷⁵ may be useful in helping us reflect on how a French female audience might have responded to plays featuring *rôles tendres* or *pathétiques*, in plays that Geoffrey Brereton calls "romanesque tragedy." Brereton discusses Thomas Corneille's *Ariane* as

⁷³ Voltaire, *Épître* 38, 1732. See ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>

⁷⁴ Henri Lagrave, *Le Théâtre et le public à Paris de 1715 à 1750* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972). Other works that concern themselves largely with Parisian theatre audiences are Mèlèse, *Le Théâtre* and John Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford University Press, 1957). See also Rougemont, *La Vie théâtrale*, pp. 221–31.

⁷⁵ Jean I. Marsden, *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality, and the English Stage, 1660–1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

an exemplar of this French subgenre. First performed by Mlle Champmeslé in 1672, it became a showpiece for Mlle Duclos throughout the first thirty years of the eighteenth century and continued to be performed frequently until at least 1774.

In the play the young Thésée, after killing the Minotaur, escapes from Crete to the neighboring island of Naxos with the two daughters of the king, Ariane and Phèdre. Although Ariane and Thésée are about to be married, he has fallen in love with Phèdre, and Ariane, who loves him obsessively, begins to suspect that Thésée is betraying her. She confides everything to her sister at the end of Act II and demands that Phèdre bring her his heart. More scenes of terrible jealousy ensue, as Ariane tries to trick Thésée into revealing the name of the woman he is in love with so that she can kill her. Thésée and Phèdre escape from Naxos together, leaving Ariane to suffer, with no chance of revenge. She falls on a convenient sword.

While perhaps not exactly a she-tragedy – the heroine is hardly passive, and the play not sentimental in the way tragedy was to become in the eighteenth century – it does concentrate on a woman's undeserved suffering. Marsden suggests that the appeal to the female audience of such a character was one of identification, of a tearful response to the expressed distress.⁷⁶ But in France, at least according to almost every critique of acting describing women in the *emploi* to which Ariane belongs, tragic actresses are praised for evoking male tears, suggesting that the effect on the two sexes was not all that different. Of course, a man is unlikely to have written: "I truly enjoyed watching the actress play Ariane, which appealed to all my sadistic tendencies, since nothing turns me on like seeing a really sexy woman suffer."

More pertinent, I believe, is Marsden's suggestion that women in England enjoyed the she-tragedies because they were centered on women,⁷⁷ unlike the political and historical tragedies of the earlier period. The same might be said of France where, succeeding to the heroic tragedies of Corneille, the tragedies of Racine overflowed with the suffering endured by women, sometimes from the necessities of politics, as in *Bérénice*, sometimes from the exigencies of love, as in *Phèdre*. Eighteenth-century tragedies continued to feature female victims.

In comedy, although sexual intrigues have their place, sexuality can be both dramatized and satirized, as it is in Regnard's *Les Folies amoureuses*,⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 68. ⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 69.

⁷⁸ Jean François Regnard, *Les Folies amoureuses*, in *Théâtre choisi*, ed. Georges Roth (Paris: Bibliothèque Larousse, 1924), vol. I, pp. 169–222.

played first on January 15, 1704 with a Prologue and Divertissement, and then consistently until the Revolution as a three-act afterpiece. The title would appear to have been chosen in order to arouse audience expectations of something slightly improper, but Mlle Beauval, as a character in the Prologue, starts the play off by claiming that the title is deceptive and advising the public to demand its money back. In a way, she is perfectly right. The “madness of love” is a feigned madness, borrowed from the Italian comedy and Isabella Andreini’s *Finta pazza* of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Here the heroine, Agathe, only 15 years old, as we are told no fewer than three times, is being held prisoner by her elderly guardian, who plans to marry her. The author had obviously been to the *écoles de Molière*.

What is interesting is how the play arouses and deflects expectations of something provocative. Although she does flirtatiously lead Albert on and get him to declare his plans for her, Agathe’s mad scenes are totally decorous when compared with Isabella’s a hundred years earlier. Isabella used feigned madness as an excuse to show off both her skill at dialects and her beautiful bosom; madness led to bodice-ripping. Agathe, on the other hand, has three separate “mad” entrances and exposes nothing. For her first entrance, she borrows her guardian’s robe and skullcap, and appears on the stage *en Scaramouche* with a guitar. Surely the next time. . . But no. When she returns she is an old lady, covered to the chin and wearing a gray wig. For her third entrance, she dons a fantasy uniform and plays a *capitano*. The play promises a far more sexually explicit event than it provides, and the end is a *divertissement* celebrating the marriage of Agathe to an appropriate young man.

Even Dancourt’s *Les Trois Cousines*, a play that is, according to several scholars, implicated in Watteau’s *L’Embarquement pour Cythère*, is far from Watteau’s sensuous interpretation of the path that leads to the domain of Venus.⁷⁹ Dancourt was an actor and also the most prolific and popular French playwright of the day who wrote some sixty plays between 1685 and 1718. *Les Trois Cousines*, which opened in October 1700, was written to show off the talents of the newly received Hortense Grandval (Mlle Dangeville *tante*) and the two little Dancourts.⁸⁰ The central

⁷⁹ According to Georgia Cowart, “Watteau’s ‘Pilgrimage to Cythera’ and the Subversive Utopia of the Opera-Ballet,” *The Art Bulletin* 83 (2001), 477 n. 39, “Dancourt’s play has been mentioned in almost all serious treatments of the Cythera theme” since an article by Fourcaud in 1904.

⁸⁰ Like many others, I originally assumed that Mlle Desmares, Lolotte, originated the role of Colette. However, I discovered from the *feux*, the list of actors and actresses in the house that night, that Mlle Desmares was not present. Mlle Grandval, newly received, young, and very beautiful, was. Therefore I have awarded the role to her.

character, the one who is ambitious for a second marriage, is La Meunière, widow of the miller, mother of two of the cousins and aunt of the other.⁸¹ The niece Colette, played by La Belle Hortense, is a large, featured role. Colette's suitor, Blaise, has the idea of organizing a pilgrimage to the shrine of Cupid for all the village young people who are tired of elders interfering in their affairs. The place of pilgrimage? Why, Cythère, of course, which is somewhere in the suburbs of Paris. That's where girls go to get married to boys and boys to girls, and although they go separately, they will return together. The play is filled with innuendoes, but of the most inoffensive kind.⁸²

These examples illustrate a domain in which certain actresses were indispensable to the prosperity of the theatrical enterprise in the eighteenth century, perhaps even more so than the tragedy queens. Tragedy was serious business to the playwrights and critics, but what survived on the stage, year after year, were the afterpieces, perfectly charming, silly, mindless little one-act or three-act plays that brought life and color, song and dance to the Comédie-Française, as well as to the Comédie-Italienne and the minor theatres that grew up around the fairs. These plays had stars of their own, with gifts of their own, like Mimi Dancourt and her sister who joined the troupe to enliven the frivolous diversions written by their own father to feature them. No doubt some performances of some afterpieces were sexually charged, although the texts do not require anything explicit, but what mattered in the performer, even more than her natural or artful sexual appeal, was a talent for comedy and ability as a singer or dancer.

Robert J. Ellrich illuminates a paradox that might be said to characterize the eighteenth-century actress as well as the culture that formed her:

Heir to the tyrannical *bien-séances* of the recently triumphant polite society (*le monde*), yet philosophically dedicated to Epicureanism, governed by an authoritarian complex of political institutions, yet driven by a "modern" ethos of freedom and individualism, the culture exhibits nearly everywhere the same isomorphism: a visible, official orthodoxy overlaying, but not quite hiding from view, the scandal of a heterodoxy attempting always to emerge.⁸³

⁸¹ A *vieille ridicule*, her heritage goes back to the farce and plays like *Alizon*.

⁸² Florent Carton Dancourt, *Les Trois Cousines*, in *Les Œuvres de M. Dancourt* (Paris: E. Foulque, 1706).

⁸³ Robert J. Ellrich, "Modes of Discourse and the Language of Sexual Reference in Eighteenth-Century French Fiction," in *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment*, ed. Robert Purks Maccubbin (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 217.

The “doxy” in our instance being the actress, confined by the rules of her institution and her *emploi*, free-living in her private life. A petty bourgeois or worse by heritage, a princess by training and the power of illusion; a slave to the *décences* and the *convenances* on the stage, off the stage liberated from the shackles of marriage and motherhood. Those who rose to the top of the profession and became *sociétaires* of the state theatres often were celebrated, lived well and even splendidly, had control over their private lives, and even enjoyed some limited authority in their professional lives. Below them in the hierarchy, hundreds of other women made their living performing on the stages of France and Europe. Because it employed women, the theatre remained a morally contested site. The centuries-old idea of the libertine actress was given new impetus by the tabloid press and – it is fair to say – by the decision of some actresses to lead their lives as they chose, and publicly.

AFTERLIVES

The only early actress who has left us an account of her life and loves is Hippolyte Clairon, and perhaps for that reason her life has become archetypal, although in fact it was rather singular. Not exactly a Cinderella story, since she reached the pinnacle with hard and determined climbing, Clairon’s published account begins with romantic elaboration and ends with self-congratulation and self-pity. The illegitimate daughter of a sergeant and a seamstress, Clairon became exemplary of the guttersnipe who slept her way to stardom. No other actress of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries was so degraded by the popular press, no other actress was treated with such contempt. Because of her base beginnings, when she dressed, spoke, and lived like the queens she played on the stage she was considered unbearably pretentious; because she was outspoken, antagonistic to the *pouvoir*, and unwilling to defer to the men in the troupe, she was found to be far too aggressive and masculine. Because she remained unmarried and enjoyed her liberty, she was subject to the attentions of the morals police and vilified as a whore. But above all, Mlle Clairon was liable to attack because she wrote an account of her life and her profession.⁸⁴ She provided the evidence against herself.

⁸⁴ *Mémoires d’Hippolyte Clairon, et réflexions sur l’art dramatique; publiés par elle-même* (Paris: F. Buisson, an VII [1798]). A new edition with additional material and a *Notice* by François Andrieux was published in Clairon, *Mémoires*.

Writing one's memoirs was not an unusual thing for a star to do at the end of the eighteenth century. Lekain, Prévile, Dazincourt, and Molé all did it, or had it done for them, but they were men, and less forthcoming about their private lives, and somewhat more discreet in revealing their opinions of their colleagues. Nor did they expose the secrets of the assembly. Mlle Clairon did. Her memoir, combined with many, many references to her and anecdotes about her in the press, in letters, and in other memoirs, made a full shopping basket for the unpalatable feast that nineteenth-century biographer Edmond de Goncourt spread out for the pleasure of his readers.⁸⁵ Goncourt also had the so-called *Mémoires* of Mlle Dumesnil at his disposal, written by Charles-Pierre Coste d'Arnobat, an anecdotalist, as a point-by-point refutation of Mlle Clairon's own work.⁸⁶

The image that Goncourt created is what lives on as Mlle Clairon. Even a biography that appeared in 2003, to "celebrate" the 200th anniversary of her death, repeats all the old anecdotes and all the old scandals, and still makes no effort to evaluate the information it repeats. Unsurprisingly, Goncourt is one of the author's primary sources, although often without attribution.⁸⁷

Edmond de Goncourt was the survivor of two brothers famous for their misogyny, their anti-semitism, and their generally bizarre attitudes. Several modern scholars attempting to evaluate them have instead turned to psychoanalyzing them. Anne Ubersfeld suggests they were latent homosexuals, possibly incestuous, who enjoyed sharing together the bed of an expensive prostitute. The "monotonous violence against women" featured in their novels could, she argues, arise from fear that the other brother might find happiness with one of those "feminine beings."⁸⁸ Peter Gay begins his analysis with a dream that Edmond recounts in his journal for July 14, 1883. As he was celebrating the National Day, he encountered an actress, whom he knew but whose name he did not remember. She was naked, dancing on a table, and displaying to him

⁸⁵ Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon, d'après ses correspondances et les rapports de police du temps* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1890).

⁸⁶ *Mémoires de Marie-Françoise Dumesnil, en réponse aux Mémoires d'Hypolite Clairon; suivies d'une lettre du célèbre LE KAIN, et de plusieurs anecdotes curieuses, relatives au Théâtre Français* (Paris: Dentu, an VII [1799]). According to the Larousse *Grand Dictionnaire Universel* (vol. V, p. 245), the author was Charles-Pierre Coste d'Arnobat, who was also the author of *Anecdotes curieuses et peu connues sur différents personnages qui ont joué un rôle dans la Révolution*, published in Geneva in 1793.

⁸⁷ Jacques Jaubert, *Mademoiselle Clairon, comédienne du roi* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

⁸⁸ Anne Ubersfeld, "Les Goncourt et les animaux machines," *Francofonia* 10 (Autumn 1990), 103.

her vulva enhanced by a set of gnashing teeth,⁸⁹ a vision of the *vagina dentata*.

We should not be surprised, then, to discover that Goncourt set out to write a biography of Mlle Clairon that would show her character in its "crude reality" and would paint her with all her "jealousies, intolerances, tyrannies... weaknesses, vices," and so forth. He accomplished his goal with material taken from the *libelles*, the files of the morals police, and various clandestine gazettes, as well as some letters and journals of the period. He affects to assess his sources, but not in a way that suggests any effort to be objective. His "evaluation" of Inspector de la Janière's summary report on Mlle Clairon's past is a good example of his method: "This report, excessively indiscreet, which is the complete history of the actress's love affairs during her early debutant years, certainly does contain some errors on her family and place of birth, but seems perfectly informed on the facts of the erotic life of the woman."⁹⁰

According to Anne Ubersfeld, for the Goncourts "toute femme est la femme," that is, any woman stands for all women.⁹¹ In the same sense, I suspect that for Edmond "toute comédienne est la comédienne," so whatever is said or thought about an actress needs no verification but the seal of the stereotype. In telling the story of Mlle Clairon's application to make a debut at the Comédie-Française, he has recourse to a pamphlet that supposedly circulated at the time.⁹² After noting that "her scandalous adventure flaunted throughout the kingdom" naturally made her reception at the most prestigious of theatres "an extremity of abomination," Goncourt then goes on to discuss the tone of the document, while adding more than a little "tone" of his own:

The ironic brochure... put comically in relief the pretensions to virtue of the actors, taking pity on the ingenuous Mlle Clairon, presenting herself to this world where decency and chastity were so jealously guarded that the conduct of its members was examined with the most religious care, and admission, after receiving information on the life and manners [of the applicant], was granted only to persons "of unblemished reputation."

It castigates her audacity in risking the attempt to succeed the chaste Labat, the austere Duclos, the severe Mlle Lamotte, who, ten years recovered from the

⁸⁹ Peter Gay, "Psychoanalysis and History," *Poetics Today* 9 (1988), 244–5. Goncourt was not the only one to equate the theatre and the *vagina dentata*. See my "The Actress and Utopian Theatre Reform" for Jean-Jacques Rousseau's version.

⁹⁰ Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 34 n. 1. ⁹¹ Ubersfeld, "Les Goncourt," pp. 104–5.

⁹² Anon., *Mémoire pour le sieur Lanoue, la demoiselle Gaussin et consorts, opposans à la réception de la demoiselle Cléron* (s.d., s.p.).

vanities of the century, consecrated the rest of her days to the honorable function of procuress of the pleasures of the public, with the reserve of the demoiselle Legrand, whose lewd orgies profane the greenroom.⁹³

Goncourt has no sources for these accusations, except perhaps the pamphlet itself. None of these women starred in any anecdotes that I know of;⁹⁴ none of them seem to have been in any way notorious. Mlle Legrand was at the Comédie-Française only briefly, from 1625 to 1630; she moved after five years to the Opéra-Comique. Mlle Labat had been a dancer at the Opéra and came to the Comédie-Française to sing and dance in after-pieces. Mlle Lamotte, who played *caractères*, was close to Adrienne Lecouvreur and remained in touch by letter with Maurice de Saxe after her friend's death, but was not one of his many lovers. Mlle Labat did play the role of La Vertu in a heroic comedy, and Lemazurier remarks, in an unusual flash of wit, that he does not know if she played it "after nature."⁹⁵ Mlle Lamotte played La Vérité in the same piece.

Goncourt's Mlle Clairon, impoverished like most of her surviving colleagues by the Revolution (and in his view deservedly so), remained egocentric and pretentious, saying to a small child who had come to visit: "Let the child come near, he will be very happy one day to say that he saw Mlle Clairon and she spoke to him."⁹⁶ In her last year, or so he proposes, "Mlle Clairon still liked to be heard, loving to speak, with her toothless mouth and her feeble voice, bits of verse that enabled her to revive, for a moment, her glorious past."⁹⁷

At least Mlle Clairon, although fictionalized in the guise of biography by Goncourt, has been spared the mortification of being further fictionalized in a novel, play, opera, or film. The same has not been true of Adrienne Lecouvreur, who has been the subject of plays, films, biographies, and an opera still in the active repertory. While she was all of the things a star should be – fabulous on stage, beautiful, popular, sought after, and apparently available – her lasting fame rests largely on her love affair with Maurice de Saxe and the scandal surrounding her early death. Romanticized and made palatable to the prudish nineteenth century, her illicit love affair was transmuted into hero worship and undying devotion in the most famous of the plays written about her, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*,

⁹³ Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 51.

⁹⁴ Except for Mouhy's absurd *on dit* accusing Mlle Lamotte of debauching little boys. See p. 29.

⁹⁵ Lemazurier, *Galerie historique*, vol. II, p. 270. L'Amour was played by Mlle Gaussin, for whom – as we have seen – *l'amour* was a regular pleasure.

⁹⁶ Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 471. ⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 472.

by Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé. Yet an English critic, writing in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1880, even objected to that play as “departing from the truth of history” and being “repulsive to anyone who knows the true Adrienne. . . not only a great actress, [but] a good, tender-hearted, high-minded woman.”⁹⁸

Scribe and Legouvé’s play, which is also the source of Colautti’s libretto for Cilea’s opera (1902), concentrates on the rivalry between Adrienne and the princesse de Bouillon over Maurice de Saxe. Act I begins with the princesse de Bouillon, who is quickly established as the one who is sexually obsessed with the handsome hero. Adrienne does not appear until Act II, scene 3, when she enters quietly from the side, studying her role, violating expectations. She has met and fallen in love with a brave young officer named “Maurice”; she would not have fallen in love if “Maurice” had been rich or noble, but “poor, but unfortunate, only dreaming like me of power and glory, he was irresistible.”⁹⁹ Of course, she then must discover that “Maurice” is the noble and powerful Maurice de Saxe himself.

While her rival is motivated by erotic longings, Adrienne’s passion for Maurice is driven by his glory and his fame as a warrior, almost as if she is one of the heroines she played in Corneille’s heroic tragedies. When she thinks he is merely a simple officer, she praises him for “following the perilous route, the high road to fame.” “When I listen to you, when you tell me, laughing, about one of your actions in war. . . I foresee that you will be a great man, a hero.”¹⁰⁰ When she discovers that her “Maurice” already is renowned as a warrior, she addresses him as “My hero, my God,” and, according to the stage direction, “reveals her heart.”

Here is where I will keep my intoxication and my pride; I will not boast of your love and your glory; I will admire you only from afar, like everyone! they will celebrate your exploits, but you will recount them, to me! they will talk of your titles, your greatness, and you will tell me your troubles! The enemies born of your success, the jealous hatreds that attack great heroes, as they do us, the other artists, you will confide everything to me; I will console you, I will say to you: Courage, march on to the fate that awaits you! Give back to France the glory that she gives to you! Give her your talents and your genius, I ask nothing of you but your love.

⁹⁸ Reprinted in the *New York Times*, July 3, 1880.

⁹⁹ Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé, *Adrienne Lecouvreur* (Paris: Beck, 1850), p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 15.

And Maurice presses her to his heart, saying: "Oh my protectress! Oh my good angel. Always defend me."¹⁰¹

This Adrienne sells her jewels – carefully described as a gift from the queen – to save the comte de Saxe from debtors prison, so that he can continue his quest for glory.¹⁰² Believing that he has betrayed her and loves someone else, she explains her motives to her faithful *confident* Michonnet, who asks her: "Why sacrifice everything for an ingrate?"

Why? You ask me that! Is vengeance forbidden to me? Am I not allowed to choose it? Didn't you just hear that he must now go to battle, to vanquish, to win a duchy. . . perhaps a crown. . . And think, my friend, think. . . if he owes it to me! If he has it from my hand! King, because of the love of the one he has abandoned and betrayed! . . . King, because of the devotion of a poor actress! . . . Ah! Do what he will, he can never forget me! He may not love me, but his glory and his power will ever speak to him of me! Now do you understand my revenge?

Scribe and Legouvé confirm that their actress has been ennobled by her supposedly ignoble profession and inspired by the words, the actions, and the emotions of the poetry she enacts.

Oh, my dear Corneille! Come to my aide! Come and sustain my courage, come and fill my heart with these generous impulses, these sublime emotions that you have so many times placed in my mouth. Prove to them all what we, the interpreters of your genius, gain from contact with your noble thoughts.¹⁰³

When the plot complications are unraveled, and Maurice learns the truth, he offers to marry Adrienne, who has the heart of a queen, who is worthy to reign, who has so improved his mind, purified his emotions, and introduced into his breast the genius of those great men whose plays she has performed. Unfortunately, she has already kissed the flowers poisoned by her rival.

After performing Scribe and Legouvé's *Adrienne Lecouvreur* for twenty-five years, Sarah Bernhardt wrote an *Adrienne Lecouvreur* of her own. It premiered in London in July 1905 and opened in New York on December 13, 1905, when its author-star was 61. The nameless *Times* reviewer found it "difficult to surmise what the motive could have been" for replacing the "old-time despised melodrama" which was "not as bad." His conclusion was that she was showing off, that the play – while it included

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 26.

¹⁰² The real Adrienne Lecouvreur, we remember, also sold her jewels – provenance unclear – and gave the profits to the comte de Saxe to fund his effort to claim Courland.

¹⁰³ Scribe and Legouvé, *Lecouvreur*, p. 33.

the one “astonishingly sympathetic” character – was “vague, halting, and uncertain” and “rambles along with no particular purpose.” He particularly disliked the introduction of Voltaire as a character, calling it a bit of “theatrical fictioning.”¹⁰⁴

Voltaire’s friendship with Mlle Lecouvreur was, of course, not fictional, but his inclusion in the play is symptomatic of the structural problems its author encountered because, unlike Scribe and his partner, she used far more of what information was available about the actress.¹⁰⁵ Her most important source was a long essay by Gustave Larroumet that appeared in his *Études de littérature et d’art* in 1893,¹⁰⁶ provoked by the *Lettres d’Adrienne Lecouvreur*, edited with a biographical essay by Georges Monval, the archivist of the Comédie-Française, that appeared in 1892. According to *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique*, 1907, it was Larroumet’s “very complete and very historically exact” study that gave Bernhardt the idea for a “very dramatic” play.¹⁰⁷

She uses her source effectively at times. For instance, Larroumet quotes a servant and a cousin who were deposed during a case brought by Mlle Lecouvreur’s sister, offended that Argental had been named residuary legatee. Argental, according to these testimonies, “had a great deal of control over [Mlle Lecouvreur’s] mind, was her principal advisor, conducted all her business, passed for the master of the house, and was spoken of only as ‘Monsieur,’ without adding his surname.”¹⁰⁸ Madame Bernhardt takes this material and creates a rather moving speech for Voltaire, who tells the disappointed Argental to be happy with what he has:

She does nothing without consulting you. She receives you at any hour... And, funny thing, the servants, the tradespeople, the whole neighborhood know you only as “monsieur.” At Adrienne’s house, for them you are “monsieur.”

¹⁰⁴ *New York Times*, December 14, 1905.

¹⁰⁵ Bernhardt’s play was described in 1907, after it finally opened in Paris, as “interesting and very well documented” in the *Intermédiaire des chercheurs et curieux*, vol. LVI, no. 1157 (August 20, 1907), 219.

¹⁰⁶ Paris: Hachette, 1893.

¹⁰⁷ Edmond Stoullig, *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique*, 1907 (Paris: Paul Ollendorf, 1908), p. 272. Bernhardt, of course, had more information available to her than did Scribe and Legouvé. An essay by Maurice Paléologue had appeared in his *Profilis de femmes* in 1895 (Paris: Calman-Lévy). Bernhardt also could have read one of Sainte-Beuve’s *Lundis*, which he devoted to Mlle Lecouvreur in December 1849, shortly after the first performance of Scribe and Legouvé’s play (Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi*, 4th edn. [Paris: Garnier frères, s.d.]), as well as an appreciation of Mlle Lecouvreur by the actor who had played the role of the stage manager Michonnet in the production starring Rachel (Pierre Regnier, *Souvenirs et études de théâtre* [Paris: Paul Ollendorf, 1887]).

¹⁰⁸ Larroumet, *Études*, p. 177. He is quoting from Campardon, *Les Comédiens*, pp. 196, 199.

Monsieur who? I don't know, but "monsieur." That's something, a title for a lover. I had hope of it when I was in love with Adrienne, but I remained "monsieur de Voltaire."

And Argental, cheering up, notes that the beloved Maurice remains also "monsieur le comte de Saxe."¹⁰⁹

In spite of her ingenious use of sources, Bernhardt's play continued to suffer in comparison with its tightly structured predecessor. Her Act I invokes the conflict over who will play the leading role in Piron's new tragedy and represents the discord between the Quinault faction and Mlle Lecouvreur, all supported by the letters, but without consequences in the action. More important is the play's focus on the 19-year-old hunchbacked abbé Bouret, whose confessions to involvement in a plot by the duchesse de Bouillon to poison Mlle Lecouvreur were mined from the Archives de la Bastille by Frantz Funck-Brentano, given to Monval, and quoted by Larroumet.¹¹⁰ Acts IV and V are almost entirely concerned with Bouret, who was played, incidentally, by an actress, Blanche Dufrène. The abbé is much given to hysterics and the vapors.

The character Adrienne, however, is not so dependent on the letters or on other sources; rather, the author has given herself the opportunity to speak through the character, at least at certain points. Oddly, she rarely shares the stage with Maurice de Saxe: a few pages in Act I and a few in Act VI, when she dies in his arms. In the Act I scene, she seems to be writing a refutation of the Scribe character she had so often played. Far from being the inspiration or the teacher of Maurice, she describes herself as his "repose" and insists that to be "your repose" is "my only ambition, my only pride." "You are not made, my hero," she says, "to huddle in the skirts of an actress."¹¹¹ Her most active moments are in her scenes with the duchesse de Bouillon, where she defends her love for Maurice de Saxe, and in the final scene with Père Dominique, when she defends both her life and her profession.

The love affair is still tricky in 1905, but Bernhardt's Adrienne is so devoted, so faithful, her love so entrenched and deep-rooted, so sexual and beyond the sexual, that it puts married love to shame. "I have been, I am, and I remain the lover of Maurice de Saxe! He alone can dispose of my life! He alone can break these ties!" she tells her rival. Responding to the

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Bernhardt, *Adrienne Lecouvreur* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1908), p. 22.

¹¹⁰ For Monval's *précis* of this material, see Lecouvreur, *Lettres*, pp. 40–60.

¹¹¹ Bernhardt, *Lecouvreur*, p. 42.

contempt of the noblewoman for “that daughter of the people! that slut who has mounted from the straw mattress of a brothel to the drawing room divan,”¹¹² she says that unlike the “great ladies who belong to a husband, to a caste,” she is a simple actress who belongs only to herself and who gives that self, body and soul, to the one she has chosen as her master. “He will never be betrayed, because I am not his equal, I am his slave! I am not his wife, I am not duty, I am love.”¹¹³

The high point of the play is probably the scene in the last act between the dying Adrienne and the priest who hopes to confess her and absolve her, if she will give up both Maurice de Saxe and her profession of actress. Some sources suggest that a priest may have come to the real deathbed of Adrienne Lecouvreur; if one did, she must have refused to renounce her profession, unlike her predecessor Mlle Champmeslé, since the curé of St.-Sulpice refused to permit her to be buried. In the play, she says first to the priest:

I love and I am faithful to my love. I cannot marry the man I love, because the laws of society oppose it! But is it God who has created these difficulties, these obstacles that separate one being from another? No! A thousand times no! I love in spite of the social laws, but I love according to human law. I am not in conformity with the world, I know that, but I am in conformity with my conscience, for my love is neither venal nor self-interested, nor sensual; it is above and beyond all that!¹¹⁴

Along with this perfect and spiritual love, Adrienne defends her life as an actress against the priest’s demand that she renounce her profession.

What profession? My art? You want me to renounce my profession of artist? You want me to trample underfoot, to burn or cast to the four winds all the divine emotions I have lived? I, one of the priestesses of this art, you want me to renounce it? But do you know this art that you damn, father? It is noble, it strengthens, it educates! It preaches sweetly what you preach with severity! It conjures up vice, that is true, but only to unmask it! It sings of the beauty of things! It glorifies God! It arouses patriotism! It strikes all minds and all hearts! It moves them, transports them, electrifies them. It castigates, it condemns, it pardons.¹¹⁵

In this instance, Sarah Bernhardt, twentieth-century actress, joins her voice to the chorus of all those who have defended the French theatre through the centuries.

Bernhardt and Scribe–Legouvé create Adrienne Lecouvreur that are positive images of Goncourt’s negative one of Mlle Clairon; none of them

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 115.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 66, 68.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 208.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 209.

is historical, since all three authors have rhetorical intentions, although Scribe and Legouvé seem largely concerned to write a well-made, melo-dramatic, and popular play. In both plays, the negative female stereotype is diverted onto the villainess, the princesse or duchesse de Bouillon, and the actress is transformed into one of the sanctified courtesans of nineteenth-century fiction.

Mlle Lecouvreur has also been the subject of a number of modern biographies, one as recent as 2003.¹¹⁶ Others have appeared about Mlle Du Parc, Mlle Champmeslé, Mlle Clairon, Mlle Desmares, and Mlle Quinault,¹¹⁷ a flurry, as it were, of little books written for the popular reader, with the exception of Judith Curtis's book on Mlle Quinault and her place in the literary society of the eighteenth century. None of the other books have very much to offer beyond the conventional anecdotes. Too often, what is stressed is whatever is lurid or sensational, and not the actresses' professional accomplishments. None of this is at all surprising; we are back where we started, in the land of the anecdote.

Films have also appeared that feature actresses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially those who were members of the troupe of Molière.¹¹⁸ Besides Ariane Mnouchkine's *Molière* (1978), which does not challenge the received opinion of Armande Béjart, another *Molière* (2007) is largely fictional. Yet another recent film puts one of Molière's actresses at its center. This is *Marquise*, released in 1997, and notable for the quarrel that broke out after its release between its director, Véra Belmont, and its star, Sophie Marceau. *Marquise* is a high-budget costume melodrama that unites the specific clichés attached to Mlle Du Parc and those attached to actresses in general. Marquise, a dancer-prostitute, attracts the attention of the king's brother, even though he was famously homosexual, thus leading to the success of Molière's troupe. In the end she is done in by her scheming maid, Marie, whom she herself has taught to act and who turns out to be the aggressively ambitious Marie Desmares, Mlle de Champmeslé. A convenient box of poisoned

¹¹⁶ Marciano-Jacob, *Lecouvreur*. The most recent media version of her life was a radio play on France Inter, "Le Tombeau d'Adrienne Lecouvreur," aired on November 11, 2007. The cast included the adamant priest and the hunchbacked abbé who are featured in Bernhardt's play.

¹¹⁷ Nadine Audoubert, *Mademoiselle Du Parc, prénom Marquise, reine de Théâtre* (Paris: Publibook, 2001), Alain Couprie, *La Champmeslé* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), Jaubert, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, Alis, *Mademoiselle Desmares*, Alain Couprie, *Marquise, ou la "débranchée" de Racine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), Curtis, *Divine Thalie*.

¹¹⁸ Adrienne Lecouvreur has also been the subject of several films, including a silent version of Sarah Bernhardt's play, unfortunately lost. Joan Crawford starred in something entitled *Dream of Love* in 1928, and there have been some French films as well.

chocolates, originally bought by Racine from the celebrated poisoner la Voisin so he could poison the sieur Du Parc, is retrieved by Marie and left where the despairing Marquise, who has lost both her starring role and her lover to the little snake in the grass, can find it. She eats the poisoned chocolates, killing herself and her unborn child. Of course, she confronts her rival and dies on the stage.

Sophie Marceau found this a bit much. Evidently she refused to promote the film, and she told *Le Parisien*: "Sincerely, I am not eager to defend this film." To *Télérama* she said: "The *mise en scène* appeared to me to be absurd." According to the director, Sophie Marceau was a "bébé-star" who did not like being directed by a woman and who "saw Marquise as much more *petite bourgeoise* than I imagined her."¹¹⁹ Perhaps Mlle Marceau made the error of researching the historical character and discovering the facts of her parentage and her marriage, but any protest would have made little impression.

Alain Couprie refers to the film near the beginning of his biography of Marquise Du Parc:

One of the first sequences of *Marquise*... shows her prostituting herself; if her father does not encourage it, at least he is indifferent to it. Nothing attests to this, no later confidence by Marquise about her past, no allusion by a former lover or a rival after she became famous. However, nothing excludes it.¹²⁰

To be sure, nothing does. Except perhaps common decency.

One final film might suggest a more defensible way to represent an early modern actress about whom we know little for certain. *Ce que mes yeux ont vu* (*What My Eyes Have Seen*) was released in 2007. Its central character is a young graduate student in art history who is dedicated to proving that Watteau was in love with and obsessively painted Charlotte Desmares. A connection between the painter and the actress has long been established through the existence of a print entitled *Mlle Desmares jouant le rôle de Pèlerine* (*Mlle Desmares playing the role of Pilgrim*). The print was engraved by Desplaces from a drawing by Watteau. A similarly costumed woman appears in the lower left corner of Watteau's 1717 *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*. The features of that figure are sufficiently like those of the central female figures in *L'Amour dans le théâtre français* and *Fêtes vénitiennes* that some art historians have suggested that Mlle Desmares was Watteau's model for these and other paintings. Perhaps she

¹¹⁹ All of these quotes from [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marquise_\(film\)](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marquise_(film))

¹²⁰ Couprie, *Marquise*, p. 11.

was, but as the student's major professor points out on numerous occasions, evidence is lacking.

The theatre historian will observe that the film is filled with errors. In order for the heroine to triumph over her advisor, who has failed in the same quest, she must find that non-existent evidence, and she does, although all of it is false, invented: the theatre program, the floor plan showing a dressing room assigned to Charlotte Desmares, the surviving architecture – all nonsense. Even greater nonsense than Mlle Du Parc's supposed career as a prostitute.

Charlotte Desmares, however, is not a character in this film: She is an idea, a vision, a cynosure posed at the vanishing point. She is wholly beautiful, radiantly sexual – if we assume, as the film does, that she also posed for Antiope – and ultimately unreachable and unknowable, locked into the past as the deaf and mute mime in the film is locked into silence.

The real Charlotte Desmares may have been Watteau's exquisite "actress": an early painting of her by Santerre in the collection of the Comédie-Française reveals a lovely young woman, dressed for comedy. But she was also the plump, double-chinned matron of 50, known from an engraving by Lépicié after Coypel. She was, as we have seen, the niece of Mlle Champmeslé, the mistress of Philippe d'Orléans and mother of his child, who was taken away from her at birth, but she was also the loyal mistress of the banker Hogguer and the mother of two other children whom she raised and to whom she was devoted. Her life was both splendid and frugal. She was one of the rare actresses who played tragedy and comedy equally well, and who also sang and danced with professional skill. She was, in other words, something far more substantial than the object of a painter's gaze, but beyond our power to recreate her as she was.

In the introduction to her brilliant book *L'Actrice et ses doubles*, Sylvie Jouanny suggests that writing about actresses can only lead to increasing the stereotype that has so long shadowed them:

The "portrait of the actress" arises, in many cases, from an initially realistic ambition. However... the more the discourse on the actress develops, and initially the discourse of the actress about herself, the more the myth is elaborated, the image more and more disincarnated from the person. The answer is paradoxical: the realistic discourse contributes, in short, to elaborating an unrealistic image of the actress.¹²¹

¹²¹ Sylvie Jouanny, *L'Actrice et ses doubles: Figures et représentations de la femme de spectacle à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2002), p. 34.

My ambition has been realistic: to provide detailed and relatively credible information about the personal and professional lives of the women who performed tragedy and comedy (and sometimes farce) in France and in Paris for some two hundred years. Beyond that, however, I have tried insofar as possible to challenge the constantly iterated and reiterated stereotype, or at least to temper one set of images with another. The bourgeoisie Mlle Dumesnil, wearing her house dress, clicking her knitting needles, observes the rehearsal of her lover's obscene play. The beautiful, red-haired courtesan, Mlle Béjart, invests in a tannery. The magnificent Mlle Desmares takes in her bankrupt lover and supports him for life.

But like all myths and stereotypes, the myth and stereotype of the actress has a certain relationship to reality. Not all actresses, by any means, were from the lowest levels of society; a few were. Not all actresses had relationships with men other than their husbands; some did. Some of those relationships were for pleasure, and some were for profit. Mlle Quinault *l'ainée* was the life companion of a duke, to whom she was not openly married. She lived in a luxurious apartment in the Louvre and entertained constantly. She did not pay for that with her pension from the Comédie-Française. Mlle Lecouvreur loaned the money she got from selling her jewels to her beloved Maurice de Saxe to fund his military adventure. She did not buy thousands of *livres* worth of jewels with her share in the profits of the theatre.

For the most part, the story of the early modern French actress is a story of acts and not words. We can know that someone was married, had so many children, joined this troupe or that troupe, played this role and that role, rented this apartment, bought that house, accumulated these possessions, and so forth. We do not know very much about what she thought, how she felt, whom she loved and hated, what it was like for her to be on the stage.

Only in the eighteenth century do actresses begin to have a voice. Sometimes that voice can be rather unexpected. A letter written by Mlle Dumesnil is a wonderful comic contrast to the crotchety voice imposed on her by the author of her supposed *Mémoires*. Addressed to "Monsieur and dear comrade," the *semainier* of the Comédie-Française, she apologizes for missing the assembly. She had a sore throat which was the forerunner of a cold: "Oh, what a cold. I cannot sleep or eat; my head is in pieces and my voice. . . Ah, yes, you call this a voice! When I speak, it frightens my dogs. Think of the effect it would make on the assembly!" In a postscript she returns to her voice, perhaps concerned that she would not be believed. "I have the voice of an angry dog, but I do not bite; so

those of my comrades who would do me the kindness of accepting my soup, can be certain they would give me great pleasure.”¹²²

Many of Adrienne Lecouvreur's letters have survived, and they have provided a basis for that idealized Adrienne discussed above. “It's enough to leaf through [her correspondence] to lay bare the moral being who was Adrienne,” says Gustave Larroumet.¹²³ “The foundation of her character is loyalty; all the actions of her life prove it.” Her business letters showed that she was attentive, scrupulous; her ambition was “to earn the esteem of *honnêtes gens*, decent, well-born people,” and she displayed the “uprightness of a man.” Finally, “the dominant inclination of her soul, her true passion, much more than love, a passion she sought with ardor as she fled the other with horror, for she had proved the sweetness of the one and the bitterness of the other, was friendship.”¹²⁴ Although a woman, although an actress, she nonetheless believed in pure friendship.

Well, maybe she did, but a twenty-first-century reading of her letters might be less inflected by nineteenth-century prurience and more likely to observe the mechanisms by which Mlle Lecouvreur was constructing of herself. At least, the contemporary reader will not have to wrestle to the ground Voltaire's statement that he had been “her admirer, her friend, her *amant*, her lover.” “It is hardly permitted to think, to attenuate the indiscreet crudity of that last word, that it assumes here the platonic sense of the seventeenth century,” says Larroumet, hopefully. “But if it expresses a positive reality, let us admit that, in spite of her grudge against love, in spite of the resolutions taken upon arriving in Paris, Adrienne had given in, in favor of a dramatic poet, to the usages of her profession.”¹²⁵ Oh, poor dear Adrienne. Just like all those other demoiselles.

To my mind, the most remarkable voice that reaches us from the eighteenth century is that of Mlle Clairon, who in her old age wrote with surprising clarity and frankness about her life and her profession. Of course she exaggerates, of course she does whatever she can to display herself as the heroine of her own life, but she nonetheless deserves to be read thoughtfully. She also deserves a biography of her own. In lieu of

¹²² Jal, “Dumesnil,” quoted in Henri d'Alméras and Paul d'Estrée, *Les Théâtres libertins au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: H. Daragon, 1905), p. 273.

¹²³ For some reason, most of the people who write about Mlle Lecouvreur call her Adrienne. Perhaps this is because of the Scribe and Legouvé play, where she is often addressed or referred to as Adrienne. At least she is not usually referred to as “la Lecouvreur”.

¹²⁴ Larroumet, *Études*, pp. 159–64. ¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 166.

that, I will give her the last word. She is speaking of actresses and, I think, of herself and her own route to the stage:

It is more difficult to find good actors than good actresses. . . Women have more advantages. Education is more or less the same for anyone female who is not decidedly of the people; a little intelligence, some beauty and decency almost always get them the protection of the women and the homages of the men; indulgence and polite society encourage them; the arts, the talents, crowd to offer themselves to the emulation of young girls; they are more easily admitted to the society of literary men and of what one calls *good society*; they look, they listen, they compare: their ideas become less confused, their knowledge grows, and when mind and beauty second them, their style, their sensibility, the finesse and liveliness of their perceptions, and that innate feeling in them which is not something that can be feigned, will give them the power to appear to be whatever they want to be.¹²⁶

And that may be the ultimate power of the actress.

¹²⁶ Clairon, *Mémoires*, p. 238.

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