The salon and the stage: women and theatre in seventeenth-century France
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THE SALON AND THE STAGE

Women and Theatre in Seventeenth-century France

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THE SALON AND THE STAGE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the links between female emancipation and the theatre in seventeenth century France. Since both were considered problematical by some religious moralists, the discussion is situated in the context of religious criticism. The approach is broadly chronological and focuses in particular on the work of women playwrights.

The religious background is summarized in the Introduction. Part One surveys the cultural climate, discussing links between salon society and the theatre including women's involvement as patrons; their presence in the auditorium and on stage; and the concept of 'bienséance', examined here in the context of the 'querelle du Cid'.

Part Two considers the function of the stage as a place where women could literally try out different roles. It examines ways in which women were portrayed in a selection of plays from the 1630s to the 1670s (including works by Mairet, Rotrou, Corneille and Molière), discussing the images of 'la femme forte' and 'la précieuse', and the contribution made by playwrights to the contemporary debate on female emancipation.

Part Three is devoted to the work of six women playwrights who had their work published or performed in France between 1650 and 1691 (Madame de Saint-Balmon, Marthe Cosnard, Françoise Pascal, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, Madame Deshoulières and Catherine Bernard) and one whose only play was performed in England (Anne de La Roche-Guilhen). The discussion focuses not only on the plays themselves and their inspiration, but on what is known of each author's background and literary career, her contacts in literary society and the reception of her work.

The involvement of women in the theatre proved of mutual benefit, contributing to its popularity and providing opportunities for their greater freedom and intellectual development.
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ABBREVIATIONS

OC  Oeuvres complètes (Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade)—Corneille, Pascal, Molière, Racine

GEF  Grands Écrivains de France (Hachette)—Corneille, Molière
INTRODUCTION

The seventeenth century was a period of great change both in the theatre and in the lives of women, and the two areas are interconnected. The private realm of the salon and the public world of the stage opened up new opportunities for women to participate in cultural life, and the theatre gave them a chance to explore non-traditional roles both in real life as actresses and spectators and in the fictional discourse of characters on stage. But this participation brought them into conflict with traditional views of a woman’s place in society, and into the debate on the morality of the theatre which divided contemporary religious opinion. The growing popularity of the theatre alarmed those strict religious moralists who saw it as a dangerous 'divertissement' and considered it especially unsuitable for women.

Religious opposition to the theatre was not confined to France. In Spain, the Inquisition had the power to censor plays, and a committee of theologians caused theatres to be closed for five years from 1646. In England it was the Puritans who closed the theatres from 1642 to 1660. In France, religious attitudes to the theatre ranged from Cardinal Richelieu's active support in the 1620s and 1630s to violent attacks by theologians including the Jansenist Pierre Nicole in the 1660s and Bossuet in the 1690s. This seems paradoxical until we realize that the extremes of patronage and attack both recognize the powerful potential of drama to attract and influence its audience.

Some members of the clergy shared the Cardinal's enthusiasm, and Bossuet himself was a regular theatregoer in his earlier years. Antoine Godeau, a poet and a protégé of Richelieu who became Bishop of Grasse and later of Vence, envisaged a 'purified' theatre which would serve to instruct as well as to entertain its audience, though
he later changed his mind. The Abbés d’Aubignac and de Pure were closely involved in theatrical activities and argued in their writings that serious contemporary drama could fulfil a moral purpose and did not merit the condemnation originally applied to licentious pagan spectacle. But for critics of the theatre, even serious plays with apparently morally instructive subjects were a distraction from Christian duty and presented images of heroes and heroines whose conduct was far removed from Christian ideals of modest piety. Although plays were used in Jesuit colleges to teach the art of rhetoric, public stage performances were often deplored, and the most glorious age of French drama was marked by attacks declaring that the theatre was a place of infamy and corruption and that actors were as unfit to receive the sacraments as witches and blasphemers. Jean Dubu considers the dispute to have 'empoisonné tout un siècle et causé sans doute à notre littérature dramatique un dommage irremédiable', which seems an astonishing judgment on the period which produced the greatest works of the French classical repertoire. Although it is now impossible to assess precisely the impact of criticism on contemporary theatre practice, we shall see that it did inspire some writers to a vigorous defence of drama and stimulate interest in controversial plays.

In the early part of the century the dominant Catholic teaching was the Christian humanism of Saint François de Sales, taking an optimistic view of human capacity for virtue and not excluding worldly pleasures. Plays and other forms of entertainment were not wicked in themselves, although excessive attachment to them was to be avoided: 'avoir de l’affection à cela, c’est chose contraire à la dévotion et extrêmement nuisible et périlleuse'. His opinions were upheld by many Jesuits, but more rigorous views gained ground among both Protestants and Catholics. Cornelius Jansen’s *Augustinus*, published in Paris in 1640, set out an extreme interpretation of the doctrine of Saint Augustine and
condemned all worldly pleasures as essentially sinful. His work became widely known, and the influence of Port-Royal and its so-called Jansenist teaching extended to polite society, but also provoked hostility, notably from the Jesuits.  

The reasons for religious mistrust of the theatre have been discussed in detail by Henry Phillips in his study of *The Theatre and its Critics in Seventeenth-century France*. More recently Laurent Thirouin has re-examined the theological basis of the 'querelle de la moralité du théâtre' in *L'Aveuglement salutaire*, underlining the range and diversity of the arguments presented against dramatic performances. Some critics condemned all forms of drama, some objected only to particular plays, and Thirouin shows that opposition to the theatre cannot be simply dismissed as a blinkered or reactionary attitude, but arose out of serious moral considerations in the context of seventeenth-century religious thought. He redresses Phillips’ disregard for chronology by identifying three phases of the 'querelle', and his study focuses principally on the 1660s, when Corneille, Molière and Racine were all implicated in the controversy. He has also edited a useful collection of relevant texts dating from this period.

The first phase began in 1639 when a Protestant theologian, André Rivet, published his *Instruction chrétienne touchant les spectacles publics* in The Hague, and Georges de Scudéry responded in his *Apologie du Théâtre*, published in the same year. Rivet enlists the authority of the Church Fathers in condemning all theatrical performances, and the same sources were later used by Conti, Voisin and Bossuet; as Thirouin points out (p. 80), rigorist Catholic attitudes to the theatre were closer to a Protestant view than to that of Rome. Scudéry, on the other hand, anticipates the arguments of d'Aubignac and de Pure in drawing a distinction between the pagan drama condemned in patristic texts and the work of contemporary French playwrights, 'puisque

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l'une n'était que médisance et saletés et que l'autre n'est que pudeur et modestie', and he cites Montaigne's approval of theatre as part of a communal social life (p. 81). But during the 1640s the theatre began to be criticized in sermons and other theological writings, and despite the royal edict of 1641 aimed at their rehabilitation, actors were excluded from the sacraments in some diocesan rituals. By 1654 Godeau had decided that although 'le théâtre jamais ne fut si glorieux', nonetheless 'pour changer leurs moeurs, et régler leur raison, Les Chrétiens ont l'Eglise, et non pas le théâtre'.

The decade 1660-70 was a period of high prestige for the theatre as the favoured Court entertainment, but of intensive criticism from religious sources, much of it directed at Molière. One general attack was the Traité de la Comédie et des Spectacles (1666) by his former patron the Prince de Conti, who had become secretary of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement. Some members of this organization were actively opposed to the theatre, though Thirouin points out that others thought plays might be used as a form of moral instruction. The Compagnie did attempt to suppress Tartuffe before its first performance in 1664. In 1667 the Jansenist theologian Pierre Nicole published his own Traité de la Comédie, reprinted several times in the next ten years, and Conti's work was supplemented in 1671 by Joseph de Voisin. In the third phase, a defence of drama by the Italian Père Caffaro, Lettre d'un théologien illustre, prompted Bossuet's eloquent Maximes et Réflexions sur la comédie, still attacking Molière, which appeared in 1694.

The arguments of seventeenth-century critics echo the opinions of the Church Fathers: the theatre is a manifestation of worldly vanity and a diversion from spiritual concerns; a form of deception, since plays convincingly present events that are not really taking place; and the depiction of crime and immorality on stage is tantamount to condoning them in real life. They emphasize that the apparent social respectability of

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contemporary theatre does not alter the fact that it is incompatible with Christian devotion. In his Preface Nicole deplores ‘le soin que l'on a pris de justifier la Comédie, de la faire passer pour un divertissement qui se pouvait allier avec la dévotion’; in his view ‘la piété et l'esprit du monde' cannot be reconciled. For Bossuet, the glitter and excitement of the theatre ‘font oublier [...] tout le sérieux de la vie chrétienne’ (p. 206). Above all, religious critics focus on the portrayal of human passions in drama, and in particular the prevalence of stories about passionate and often illicit relationships between men and women, even more deplorable on the public stage than on the page in novels and especially unsuitable for a female audience. For the most austere Christians, sexual desire was an affliction to be suppressed and overcome, and since virtuous women should know nothing of passion, those who disapproved of theatre on religious grounds specifically condemned the presence of actresses on stage and women in theatre audiences, as well as attacking the allegedly immoral conduct of some female characters. Some critics of the theatre (Rivet, Nicole) also expressed reservations about education for women, and the same images of temptation and seduction are applied to both. This leitmotif of anti-feminism in the writings of Rivet, Conti, Nicole and Bossuet has not been highlighted in studies of the 'querelle du théâtre'.

In addition to the stated reasons for religious hostility to the theatre, it was surely no coincidence that attacks intensified after the establishment of theatres in buildings as permanent as churches, with regular performances by professional companies attracting a growing audience. Paradoxically, as the popularity of the theatre increased, preaching styles became more theatrical: Camus, Caussin and others evolved a rhetorical style of preaching which used poetic imagery to reinforce the spiritual message. La Bruyère
(1688) deplored the fact that 'le discours chrétien est devenu un spectacle [...] une sorte d'amusement entre mille autres'.

By adopting a broadly chronological approach, this study aims to follow the course of developments in drama and in women's social circumstances and to assess the extent to which the theatre contributed to a re-evaluation of the feminine in seventeenth-century society. The first section will review the cultural context within which women themselves would eventually begin to write plays, beginning with the development of salon society and increased educational opportunities for women and considering the evolution of the theatre as a social activity and a career opportunity for women from approximately 1630 onwards; the second section will consider various portrayals of women in plays written by men from the 1630s to 1670s, and Section Three will discuss women's own writing for the theatre between 1650 and 1690. The focus will be mainly on tragedy as the dominant genre for much of the period (see Chapter Two) and the one in which women dramatists achieved public recognition.

Chapter One will consider the situation of women in society and review the continuing debate over their role and status in the seventeenth century. Ian Maclean and Marc Angenot have both documented the 'querelle des femmes', mainly in terms of theoretical writings by men about women. Claude Dulong and Wendy Gibson have written useful general studies of women in seventeenth-century France, but with limited discussion of the doctrinal basis of social attitudes to women, and little mention of women's own writing. The development of salon society in the seventeenth century will be summarized briefly, as it has been fully documented by Roger Picard, Carolyn Lougee and Linda Timmermans, but it has generally been treated as a separate

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phenomenon from developments in the theatre and the aim here is to identify links between the two.

Chapter Two will focus on women's activities in the theatre as audience and as actresses, drawing together material from various sources including Léopold Lacour and Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer. Apart from two informative articles by Jan Clarke, there is surprisingly little recent material on actresses of the period. Here we shall examine the specific criticism of women's involvement in theatre by religious opponents. In Chapter Three we move on to a secular debate, the 'Querelle du Cid', which raised the whole question of how plays should be judged. In particular the dispute foregrounded the concept of 'bienseance', closely concerned with women's sexual conduct, and revealed the extent to which underlying tensions about a woman's role applied as much to a stage heroine as to real women in contemporary society. In response to criticism of his play, Corneille argued that, since plays are written to be performed, the judgment of the audience must be of paramount importance—a view later reiterated by both Molière and Racine—but the implication that the theatre-going public had as much right to determine what was acceptable or unacceptable on stage as any priest or moralist was bound to upset those who wished to exercise control over the drama.

The second part of this study will focus on ways in which women were portrayed in a selection of plays by men, beginning with plays of the 1630s and 1640s, before women themselves had begun to write for the theatre. This section makes no attempt to present a comprehensive survey of dramatic images of women during the century, but to consider the function of the stage as a place where women could literally try out different roles, and where men's imagination often created transgressive female characters to surprise or challenge their audiences. Chapter Four examines female characters in some
of the most popular plays of the period, as well as those singled out for criticism by religious moralists, who paid their authors the compliment of treating their fictional creations as real women whose behaviour required modification. It may seem surprising that the characters they found most unacceptable appeared in tragedy, supposedly the form of drama with the highest moral status, and that as Corneille was largely responsible for the establishment of tragedy as the dominant genre in the 1630s and 1640s, it was his characters above all who were criticized for their unchristian conduct.

Chapter Five looks at the image of 'la femme forte' both in feminist panegyrics and on stage, drawing again on the work of Ian Maclean, and re-examining texts in praise of heroic women of history or legend to reveal underlying attitudes sometimes at odds with their apparent aims. Chapter Six considers plays from the 1650s and 1660s on the subject of 'préciosité' and related questions of female education and emancipation; women themselves did not write plays on these topics, so we have to look at the work of male playwrights to see how they were treated on the stage. Molière provoked religious hostility by writing comedies which satirized contemporary figures of authority and ridiculed some aspects of religious practice; he also showed a sympathetic attitude to women, often portraying them as intelligent and articulate, but unjustly controlled or exploited, and his most ridiculous characters are men. The plays of Racine are not central to this discussion: although he created exceptional female characters, his plays do not contribute to a re-evaluation of women's position and capacity to the same extent as the work of other playwrights.

In Part Three we come to the work of women dramatists themselves. Religious opponents of the theatre did not specifically criticize women playwrights, perhaps because there were so few of them. Much more has been written about women's fiction and
poetry than about plays by women, presumably because their novels continued to be read in later centuries, whereas only one seventeenth-century play by a woman was revived after its initial run of performances. There are no plays by women in the three Pléiade volumes of *Théâtre du XVIIe siècle*. The *New Oxford Companion to Literature in French* lists Madame de Villedieu, Madame Deshoulières and Catherine Bernard, but not the first three women who had plays published or performed in France. Madame de Villedieu (Marie-Catherine Desjardins) is considered mainly as a novelist, although she was the first woman dramatist to achieve success in Paris; Madame Deshoulières’ poetry is discussed, but not the fact that her tragedy *Genséric* was produced at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Even plays which were quite successful at the time have sometimes been unkindly dismissed by (male) critics such as Henry Carrington Lancaster. What is of interest here is the fact that women chose to write plays at all, and how they started; what contacts they made in literary circles and what models they chose to follow. Despite women’s supposed preference for lightweight romance, most of their work is serious historical drama. By choosing to write tragedy or tragi-comedy they were demonstrating their competence within an existing form and dramatic vocabulary, so the language of these plays may not distinguish them from the work of male writers, but we shall find some differences of emphasis in terms of themes and characterization.

In recent years more interest has been shown in their work, and a number of plays are now available in modern editions. Cecilia Beach has produced an exhaustive list of plays by French women before the twentieth century, though some attributions are doubtful.22 The work of Perry Gethner in bringing women playwrights to the notice of a wider audience has been invaluable: the first volume of his *Femmes dramaturges en France* includes plays by Françoise Pascal, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, Anne de La
Roche-Guilhen and Catherine Bernard, and three more plays by seventeenth-century women writers will appear in Volume Two. Carmeta Abbott and Hannah Fournier have edited Les Jumeaux martyrs by Madame de Saint-Balmon; Franco Piva has prepared a modern edition of the works of Catherine Bernard, and her two plays appear in the second volume.

Art and religion have found expression in every known human society; tension between them has been a feature of the whole Christian era, and the public nature of dramatic performance has caused particular problems. Although they were once a part of religious worship, plays came to be condemned as frivolous and sometimes obscene, and even mystery plays were banned by the Paris Parlement in 1548. And since the days of the early Church, Christianity has also viewed women with suspicion, as inferior beings in need of masculine guidance. Chapter One begins by investigating the reasons for this attitude.

4. Saint François de Sales, Introduction à la Vie dévote, p. 68.
5. For a full discussion see Jean Rohou, Jean Racine, Chapter 2.
6. For historical background see also Albert Reyval, L'Eglise et le Théâtre; Urbain & Levesque, L'Eglise et le Théâtre.
8. Pierre Nicole, Traité de la comédie et autres pièces d'un procès du théâtre, ed. by Laurent Thirouin.
10. For details see Jean Dubu, ‘L'Église catholique et la condamnation du théâtre.’

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11. Sonnet 'Sur la Comédie' (1654); see Laurent Thirouin's edition of Pierre Nicole, Traité de la Comédie et autres pièces d'un procès du théâtre, pp. 121-24.


13. See Francis Baumal, Molière et les Dévots, Chapters 5 & 7.

14. Both texts are included in Urbain & Levesque, L'Eglise et le Théâtre.


16. 'De la Chaire', Les Caractères, p. 376.

17. Ian Maclean, Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature 1610-1652; Marc Angenot, Les Champions des femmes.


22. Cecilia Beach, French Women Playwrights before the Twentieth Century, A Checklist.


CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN IN SOCIETY

‘La Querelle des Femmes’

At the heart of the ‘querelle des femmes’ lay the fundamental mistrust of women, and their relegation to a subsidiary role in all respects, inherited by the Christian religion from the Greek philosophers and formulated by the early Fathers of the Church. From earliest human history and mythology, women have been held responsible for bringing disorder into a harmonious world: Pandora’s opened box releasing affliction upon the human race, Eve’s bite of the forbidden apple causing mankind to be cast out of Paradise. Aristotle thought that a woman was a defective and incomplete male, and widespread acceptance of his authority ensured that the view persisted. Saint Augustine formulated the Christian doctrine of the Fall, identifying women as the source of sin, and sex as the means of transmitting it from one generation to the next. His teaching established the patriarchal Christian tradition in which women’s sexuality is seen as a threat, undermining men’s self-control and distracting them from the goal of salvation. The concept of women as inferior and in need of masculine control became enshrined in law, and in France the Salic law of ancient Gaul was invoked in the fourteenth century to exclude women from succeeding to the throne, although they were permitted to act as regent to their infant sons.

By the seventeenth century some writers in France had promoted a more favourable view of woman’s nature. Gustave Reynier’s study of *La Femme au XVIIe siècle* (Chapter I) usefully retraces the arguments used on both sides, and has been
followed by Ian Maclean's *Woman Triumphant* and Marc Angenot's *Les Champions des femmes*. Among the defenders of women Henri-Corneille Agrippa, whose *Déclamation de la Noblesse et préexcellence du Sexe féminin* appeared in France in 1530, suggested that women were born as free as men but were enslaved by domestic responsibilities; Antoine Héroët, poet and later Bishop of Digne, published *La Parfaite Amie* in 1542, inspired by Italian neo-Platonic views of female beauty as 'une émanation de la bonté divine' and platonic human love as a glimpse of Heaven. Angenot records that Agrippa's writings were very popular but were attacked both by Catholics and by Calvin. Reynier discusses the role of such influential women as Marguerite de Navarre, Diane de Poitiers and Catherine de Medicis in altering perceptions of a woman's intelligence and capabilities, but these were rare examples of women with independence and power.

Catholic doctrine consistently defined a woman's role as one of subservience to masculine authority, whether to a husband or to God. According to the Council of Trent (1545-63), a pious woman should be either a mother or a nun, and women's religious communities set up for charitable or educational purposes in the seventeenth century came under pressure to accept monastic enclosure. Convent life had certain advantages, and for some women it provided a rare career opportunity and even a degree of autonomy, as well as spiritual fulfilment. Angélique Arnauld was sent to a convent at the age of seven, became Abbess of Port-Royal des Champs aged ten and instituted her own ideas for reform, which were to have a lasting influence throughout the century, although she was still subject to the authority of her local bishop. But Pierre Coton's *Institution catholique* (1610) emphasized that women were not to speak in church, nor to teach or to 'exercise any function of a man and much less one of a priest'. And in his

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Introduction à la Vie dévôte (1619), Saint François de Sales reiterated that ‘Dieu [...] a voulu que la femme fût une dépendance de l'homme [...] qu'elle doit être sous la main et conduite du mari’.  

Some members of the clergy took a more liberal view, but the most violent attacks on women, expressing real hatred and fear, were written by priests or members of religious orders, using quotations from the Bible and from the early Church Fathers to support their arguments—the same sources used by opponents of the theatre to justify their hostility to dramatic performances. These attacks and their refutations have been comprehensively documented by Ian Maclean in the second chapter of Woman Triumphant.

One of the most popular anti-feminist works was Jacques Olivier’s Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes, published in Paris in 1617 and reprinted at least eighteen times by 1650, which provoked many refutations and kept the ‘Querelle des femmes’ alive for several decades. It was still being reprinted in 1683, when two editions appeared in Rouen. All editions except the first, which is anonymous, give the author as ‘Jacques Olivier, licencié aux Loix et en droit canon’, but according to Maclean (p. 31) he was almost certainly a Franciscan monk, Alexis Trouset, who had published other works at around the same time. His book is a vicious attack on what he perceived as the coquetry, vanity, hypocrisy and inconstancy of the female sex, subscribing to the view that women are sexually more voracious than men and using this prejudice to undermine altogether their moral and intellectual status:

[...] il est hors de controverse que la femme ne soit plus lascive & plus insatiable de l'impure volupté que l'homme, & par consequent moins judicieuse & moins capable de raison en tous ses comportemens [...]
Women are castigated for spending time and money on clothes, jewellery and cosmetics, and on frivolous pursuits such as dancing. (Female interest in dress and appearance was the subject of constant attack from ecclesiastical sources throughout the century and there were numerous books and pamphlets on the subject.) Men are cast as the victims of female deceit and depravity:

L'Homme n'a point au monde un plus cruel ennemy que la femme, & qui plus sensiblement endommage sa vie, son honneur, & toute sa fortune [...] (p. 49)

and women are variously described as 'la source de querelles [...] un monstre en nature', 'la plus imparfaite creature de l'Univers, l'escume de nature, le seminaire de malheurs'. But Olivier does reluctantly acknowledge that there are some virtuous women, though they are in a minority, and he describes the Christian ideal:

[...] telle doit estre une bonne femme, douce, humble, sans bruit, & obeissante à son mary, come la brebis au Pasteur (p. 230).

Olivier's attack immediately provoked defences of women by both male and female writers, whose titles speak for themselves: Sieur Vigoureux's *La defense des femmes* in 1617, Madame Liébaut's *Misères de la femme mariée* in 1619, Marie de Gournay's *Egalité des hommes et des femmes* in 1622, and many more, listed by Maclean: between 1617 and 1629 over twenty refutations or counter-refutations of Olivier's work were published. It is difficult to know how far this was due to public interest: Maclean notes that some of these publications were reprints of earlier pamphlets and supposes that the debate was at least partly stimulated by printers who were keen to make as much capital as possible out of a controversial topic. He also suggests that this type of polemic did not always represent sincere beliefs, but was often 'written to amuse its readers rather than persuade them' (p. 25), though one wonders whether female readers were amused by outpourings of hatred and revulsion.

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Those who wrote in favour of women used the same sources for quotations supporting their arguments for equality between the sexes, although they found less help in the Scriptures. But Vigoureux counters the author of the *Alphabet* by quoting historical and Scriptural examples of sinful men and admirable women, and also puts forward the interesting argument that since virgins are universally regarded as pure and virtuous, alleged female corruption can only occur as a result of their relations with men:

> Les femmes premier que d'estre conjointes avec l'homme, sont pures, nettes, sans macule, & sans tache: comme vierges, estimees de Dieu, & des hommes [...] il s'ensuit que ceste conjonction les rend telles qu’elles deviennent & que leur corruption ne provient que de l’homme, & non d’elles.\(^{12}\)

Men are thus responsible for women’s moral development: ‘si la femme avec l’homme devient de mauvais naturel, elle l’apprend de luy, & les femmes sont telles que les hommes les rendent’ (p. Aiiij). This is a point which will be relevant to discussion of female dramatic characters in Chapter Four.

Theological arguments could also be used in favour of female equality, and are summarized by Maclean. The role of woman as mother of God was particularly accentuated in ‘Marian’ literature, in praise of the Virgin, which flourished throughout Catholic Europe after the Council of Trent. Le Peletier wrote in 1635: ‘La femme est mère de toute Religion, fontaine de toute dévotion’, Christianity having come into the world through the birth of Christ, and L’Archevesque’s *Grandeurs de la mère de Dieu* (1638) emphasized the special relationship of women to Christ (Maclean, p. 73).

But the Christian patriarchal tradition was underpinned by legal constraints which excluded women from holding any civil or public office and gave fathers and husbands effective power over their wives and daughters. An unmarried woman was considered a minor until the age of twenty-five, and even beyond that age she remained under the
guardianship of her father or nearest male relative. Wendy Gibson's *Women in seventeenth-century France* tells some chilling stories of women's virtual enslavement by men. Marriages were arranged primarily for financial or social gain (sometimes when the children were as young as twelve or thirteen) and had to be endured: for Catholics there was no divorce, although judicial separation or the annulment of an unconsummated marriage could sometimes be obtained. And while a wife had no legal redress against a philandering husband, an adulterous wife could still be publicly humiliated and her husband had the power to banish her to a convent, temporarily or permanently, and to confiscate her dowry, or even murder her with 'virtual impunity' (p. 65). Not until she became a widow could a woman achieve financial and social independence, and control over the upbringing of her children. Madame de Sévigné wrote candidly of the freedom a woman might acquire on the death of her husband and many seventeenth-century salon hostesses were widowed or had obtained a legal separation from their spouses.

Confined by religious doctrine and the law to a position of subservience in society, women were also restricted by their lack of education. In the course of the seventeenth century the subject of education for women was much discussed, and some progress was made: the very fact that by the 1640s women were beginning to write novels and poetry indicates increasing levels of literacy. Following the recognition of the importance of education by the Council of Trent, the first Catholic day schools for girls were opened in Lorraine between 1598 and 1613; later in the century day schools were established by teaching orders such as the Ursulines.

From the moral and theological point of view, there were two opposing schools of thought: on the one hand it was argued that women did not need any education beyond basic religious instruction and practical domestic skills in order to fulfil their duties as
wives and mothers. Molière’s Arnolphe caricatures this attitude by declaring that his bride need only ‘savoir prier Dieu, m’aimer, coudre, et filer’ (L’Ecole des Femmes, I, 1). The opposite view was that women should acquire some learning and some occupation for their leisure time, which might otherwise be frittered away in useless or even immoral pursuits. Père Jacques Du Bosc explains in L’Honneste Femme: ‘Les ignorantes sont sujettes aux mauvaises pensées, pource que ne sçachant rien de loisible pour occuper leur esprit.’

Carolyn Lougee has pointed out that the case of the first Biblical woman could be argued either way: for some theologians it was Eve’s pursuit of knowledge which caused the downfall of mankind; for others it was her ignorance which led her into sin.

Ian Maclean presents L’Honneste Femme as a ‘feminist’ work, defining his use of the term in a seventeenth-century context as ‘a reassessment in woman’s favour of the relative capacities of the sexes’ (Preface, p. viii), as does Carolyn Lougee, but although Du Bosc presents a generally positive view of women, he sets clear limits to the scope of their learning. Countering the misogyny of Olivier and others, he praises female virtue and argues for greater equality between the sexes, but his stipulation that women must follow Christian precepts automatically keeps them in a subordinate position. And although he claims that his purpose in writing is ‘plustost pour vous faire des remerciemens & des excuses, que pour vous prescrire des loix, ou pour oser vous faire des Règles’, the very first section, ‘De la lecture’, lays down rules as to what women should or should not read. He recommends classical texts, poetry and philosophy, but not novels, which will poison the mind: ‘La malice entre insensiblement dans l’ame avec les belles paroles, & sous les appas des avantures’ and reading these ‘histoires lascives’ will lead unavoidably to ‘les pernicieux effets de la corruption’, putting undesirable ideas into women’s heads: ‘elles n’y apprennent pas seulement le mal, qu’elles devroient ignorer,
mais les plus delicates façons de le commettre [...] je ne puis comprendre avec quelles raisons [...] on pourroit justifier une si dangereuse lecture' (pp. 14-16). We shall find the same images of fiction as poison, and as incitement to sin, in Nicole’s condemnation of drama. Du Bosc does advocate an extension of women’s education beyond the purely domestic, recommending the study of music, history, philosophy ‘& d’autres pareils exercices’ (p. 115), but warns against over-emphasis on learning: ‘les Dames doivent penser, qu’il vaut mieux estre bonnes que sçavantes’ (p. 20). Moral education is as important for women as for men; in his third section he points out the anomaly that ‘ceux qui disent que le sexe des femmes est le plus infirme, ne leur permettent point d’estudier, ny de chercher des remedes à leur foiblesse’ (p. 348); but despite his statement that ‘les hommes n’ont point de vertus, ny de sciences naturelles, non plus que les femmes’ (p. 348), the underlying assumption throughout his writing is that men do have the right to set limits on women’s reading and learning.

This assumption was shared by other religious writers who appear to be supporting greater educational opportunity for women, while placing restrictions on what they may learn. Even apparently enlightened advocates of female education tended to assert only that women were capable of study, rather than actually promoting it as desirable. There was general agreement that women’s moral instruction should take precedence over other subjects, and that this would be formulated by men. Père François Dinet (1642) considers women as capable of study as men, but he sees learning principally as a means of encouraging chastity: ‘Elles sont armées comme des Pallas, quand elles possèdent la Science [...] la Science est le bouclier qui destoume les dards de l’amour.’ There is no question of a woman forming her own opinions: ‘elle doit estre conduite de l’homme’ (p. 74). The Jesuit Pierre Le Moyne, in his *Gallerie des Femmes Fortes* of 1647, asserts
that men and women are equal in intelligence, and praises the Marquise de Rambouillet and her daughter as ‘rares & sçavantes Personnes’, but then declares firmly:

Quoy que j’aye dit neantmoins, mon intention n’est pas d’appeler les Femmes au College [...] ny changer en des Astrolabes & en des Spheres, leurs aiguilles & leurs laines. Je respecte trop les bornes qui nous separent: & ma question est seulement de ce qu’elles peuvent, & non pas de ce qu’elles doivent, en l’estat où les choses ont esté mises, soit par l’ordre de la Nature, soit par une coutume immemoriale, & aussi vieille que la Nature. (p. 253)

(Le Moyne’s praise of ‘la femme forte’ will be discussed in Chapter Five.) In his Essais de Morale (1671), Pierre Nicole similarly recommends education for girls in order to strengthen their reason and overcome their natural weakness and susceptibility to passion. Although Poullain de la Barre concluded in De l’Education des Dames (1673) that the inequality of the sexes was due only to prejudice and had no basis in reason, his ideas were not followed up until the eighteenth century.

Meanwhile women writers were challenging the right of men to decide what they should and should not learn, arguing in favour of equal educational opportunities and a modification of traditional expectations concerning a woman’s role in society. One of the foremost female scholars of the century was Anna van Schurman; born in 1607 in Cologne and educated by a devout Dutch Protestant father who taught her Latin, Greek, arithmetic and music as well as French and German, she was well aware of the prejudices and obstacles facing most women who wished to acquire some learning. In 1615 the family moved to Utrecht, where Anna continued her studies. For the opening of the university in Utrecht in 1636 she composed and recited a Latin ode, and also improvised verses in French, but in order to study Hebrew and theology she had to attend lectures concealed behind a curtain, since no women were admitted as students. She was renowned in France as a model of an educated woman; she corresponded with Marie de
Gournay and attracted the admiration of many eminent men and women including Richelieu, Descartes, Chapelain, Guez de Balzac and Anne of Austria. Somaize listed her in his *Dictionnaire des Précieuses* as 'une des plus sçavantes pretieuses qui ait jamais esté'.

Anna van Schurman presented her arguments in favour of education for women in her debate with the Protestant theologian André Rivet, *Question celebre*, which was published in Paris, first in Latin in 1638 then in a French translation by Colletet in 1646. (Rivet had by this time published his *Instruction chrestienne touchant les spectacles publics*, which will be discussed in Chapter Two.) She begins by thanking him for his practical help in supplying her with books and offering assistance with her studies, then goes on to ask his opinion on the question of 'le veritable devoir & le juste employ d'une fille bien née' (p. 4). Her own position is clear: she accepts that the duty of a wife and mother must take precedence, but argues that since women have the same capacity for learning as men, it is unreasonable for those who are not 'attachées au soin d’un mesnage ny accablées d’affaires domestiques' to be confined to household duties. Like Descartes, she preferred reason to custom:

Nous devons escouter la voix de la raison, & non pas celle d’une mauvaise coutume; par quelle loy je vous prie nous oblige t’on a de si viles occupations? est-ce par la loy divine, ou par la loy humaine? quoy que l’on face on ne nous pourra jamais prouver, que cet Arrest qui borne & qui ravalle ainsi nostre condition ait esté prononcé par les oracles du Ciel (p. 14).

She underlines the danger of idle women succumbing to 'les cajolleries des hommes' and argues that the desire to learn—'cet ardent desir de sçavoir'—was bestowed by God on both men and women and that the search for truth and enlightenment is a Christian pursuit; greater understanding of the wonders of the world will enhance love for the divine Creator.

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Rivet's answer reveals that Protestant views on the subject could be as ambivalent as Catholic ones; first he praises her own scholarship while firmly declaring that 'le souverain Autheur de la Nature [...] a destine les hommes à une chose, & les femmes à une autre'. Most women, he says, are fully occupied in domestic duties and 'il y a fort peu de femmes de qui l'esprit se porte à d'autres occupations' (p. 49). For the exceptional few who do wish to study, limits must be set on their learning, 'afin qu'elles n'embrassent que les choses qui leur sont propres, bien seantes, & necessaires' (p. 51). He raises practical problems about education for girls, since in his view 'les femmes ne sont pas de leur nature toutes propres à enseigner' and 'la bien sêance ne leur permet pas de se trouver avec les jeunes garçons pesle-mesle dans les escholes des hommes' (p. 62). Learning, he says, is not necessary in order to worship God, and indeed 'ceux qui semblent avoir une parfaicte cognoissance de ces oeuvres miraculeuses de Dieu, s'esloignent de Dieu mesme' (p. 65).

Anna van Schurman's response was written in 1640 and included in the French edition. She expresses gratitude to Rivet and disclaims any intention of suggesting that women were in any way intellectually superior to men, a proposition which, she says, is 'directement contraire à la modestie d’une fille, & a cette pudeur que la Nature a mise sur mon front' (p. 73). In a very different tone from the one she used two years earlier, she says she has no intention of contradicting his opinion and will submit to his superior judgment, but she does not actually withdraw her own arguments. Although she remained unmarried and continued her own studies, towards the end of her life she rejected scholarship, joined an anti-Calvinist sect and devoted herself to charitable works.

But her question was taken up by Madeleine de Scudéry, whose own education was provided by a scholarly uncle after the death of her parents. The earliest expression
of her feminist point of view occurs in the final section of *Les Femmes Illustres* (1642), which is assumed to have been written by Madeleine even though the whole work was published under the name of her brother Georges. In the guise of 'Sapho' she echoes Anna van Schurman in arguing that restrictions on women's learning are due to social custom determined by men, and not to any inherent intellectual deficiency: 'par un usage que les hommes ont establY, de crainte peut-estre d'estre surmontez par nous; l'estude nous est aussi defendue que la guerre'—even though women have more time to devote to study, since they are not occupied with public affairs. She cannot accept that there is any doctrinal reason for women to be kept in ignorance: 'Les Dieux n'ont rien fait d'inutile en toute la Nature [...] pourquoi veut-on, dis-je, que nostre Esprit soit ou indignement employé, ou eternellement inutile?' (p. 401). And it does men no credit to deny women the opportunity to improve their minds: 'c'est rendre leur domination peu glorieuse, que de reynier sur des stupides & sur des ignorantes' (p. 402). She emphasizes the pleasure and satisfaction to be found in study and in writing, urging women to have confidence in their capacities, and in her own work and her own salon she gave encouragement to generations of women to use their minds. Jacquette Guillaume and Marguerite Buffet both paid tribute to her in their studies of learned women, and echoed her assertion that, given the opportunity, women can equal the intellectual achievements of men.

Fortunately for women, it was generally agreed in the climate of the Catholic Reformation that they should be able to read, in order to study the Scriptures and to instruct their children, and H.-J. Martin notes that from the 1620s on, Parisian publishers produced an increasing number of pious works expressly for women. As a greater variety of books began to be published, their reading began to extend beyond the

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recommended devotional texts and literacy became in itself a form of liberation. In view of their limited freedom of action in real life, it is hardly surprising that many women welcomed the opportunity which novels and plays provided for them to escape into the world of fiction and romance, and to identify with autonomous heroines who attracted masculine passion and adoration rather than being subjected to domination and repression. As Claude Dulong puts it: ‘Face à des parents tyranniques, à des maris détestés, à des amants trop souvent brutaux, quelle revanche pour les jeunes filles recluses et pour les mal-mariées de s’évader dans ces royaumes imaginaires […] Elles étaient esclaves, elles devenaient reines.  

Salon society

Against the background of theoretical debate over their role in society, women themselves took the initiative of inventing a meeting-place where they would have freedom to learn and to discuss, to exchange ideas, eventually to develop their own talents as critics and as writers; so the literary salon came into being in the early seventeenth century. Claude Dulong suggests that the inspiration for these gatherings around influential women may have come from the Court of Queen Elizabeth I in England, and an early example in France was the salon established by Marguerite de Valois in about 1605, but she also notes that the establishment of a meeting-place for both men and women which was outside the Court, and therefore provided an opportunity for greater freedom of speech and a wider range of participants, was a peculiarly French phenomenon. There were no salons in Spain, where women were subjected to greater religious and social restrictions, nor in England until the eighteenth century. Contemporary comment underlined the greater social freedom of French women by
comparison with Italy and Spain where, according to Bishop Huet, 'elles sont presque recluses [...] et séparées par tant d'obstacles qu'on ne leur parle presque jamais'. The Abbé Arnauld, an habitué of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, noted during a visit to Italy the reserve and silence of women on social occasions. In France the salon movement was to have far-reaching consequences for women and for French society as a whole.

Such an initiative could only begin among women who already had some measure of education and independence. One of the first salons was that of the Vicomtesse d'Auchy, but the most influential was that of the Marquise de Rambouillet, which was established by about 1613 and continued until her death in 1665, and the first women to participate were her aristocratic friends. The men invited to take part in these gatherings—aristocrats, writers and men of letters—had to justify their presence by the wit and erudition of their conversation, by providing subject matter for discussion and criticism in the form of readings or poems, or by giving instruction in subjects the women had never had a chance to learn, such as Latin. They were expected to meet high standards of taste and refinement: Michael Moriarty notes the importance for Faret's 'honnête homme' of mixing with high-ranking women, not at Court but in the salons, where they set their own standards. Suzanne Relyea describes the salon as a refuge for women from a society which treated them as inferior beings: the salon hostess presided over her own domain in her own right, not in her role as wife or daughter, and she could refuse admission to men whose conduct displeased her. Roger Picard relates an incident in which Richelieu sent his protégé Boisrobert to report on conversations at the Hôtel de Rambouillet and the indignant Marquise banned him from attendance (Picard, p. 27). As a friend of Richelieu's niece Madame de Combalet, she was presumably one of the few women in a position to defy the Cardinal's wishes.
This anecdote highlights the fact that salon society provided a social activity outside the home for mothers and daughters, as it was in fact the Marquise’s daughter Julie d’Angennes who had first introduced her friend Madame de Combalet to the chambre bleue. She shared her mother’s enthusiasm for entertaining and Roger Picard (p. 42) notes her influence in bringing a younger generation of women to her mother’s salon, including Anne de Bourbon, the future Duchesse de Longueville, and Marie de Rohan, future Duchesse de Chevreuse, who would later become heroines of the Fronde. Somaize’s Dictionnaire des Précieuses lists a number of mothers and daughters who took part in salon life: the mothers brought their daughters to these gatherings as part of their education and social upbringing and as a means of introducing them to cultivated people of both sexes. It was an important extension of their lives beyond home and Church. Madame de Sévigné’s letters to her daughter in the 1670s and 1680s show the extent to which they had developed shared cultural interests and a shared circle of friends in the Parisian salons.

The educational possibilities of the salons were not confined to formal lessons. These meetings provided women with an unprecedented opportunity to engage in intellectual conversation on equal terms with men—not merely everyday gossip, but serious discussion of literary or philosophical topics, including what we would now call feminist issues of women’s freedom and their role in society. Wendy Gibson suggests that the subject matter of salon conversation was less important than the chance for intelligent young women to exercise their minds by meeting a variety of people of both sexes with differing points of view (p. 30). Christoph Strosetzki’s detailed study of the conversational theory and practice of the period defines the importance of conversation as an intermediate stage between functional communication and literary expression
most, though not all, of the first women writers in France had a background of conversation in salon society. Theodore Zeldin suggests that 'conversation changes the way you see the world, and even changes the world'; for many women in seventeenth-century France, it certainly helped to extend their horizons.

Since conversation was the principal occupation of the salon, language itself naturally became a subject of interest and attention, and the women themselves imposed standards of taste and clarity. In 1646 Gerzan wrote in *Le Triomphe des dames* that 'Paris est maintenant tout remply de Dames [...] qui accordent tres-judicieusement et delicatement, la science avec l'éloquence, les Muses avec les Graces, et l'Art avec la Nature' and by 1647 Vaugelas was describing women as arbiters of contemporary usage in his *Remarques sur la langue française* (Maclean, pp. 148-50). As the French language increasingly came to equal Latin as the language of intellectual theory and debate, women were able to outdo men in their elegance of expression in their native tongue; Wendy Ayres-Bennett comments that, to some extent, women's very ignorance allowed them to be arbiters of good usage. The ideal of *honnêteté* in social conduct demanded fluency and eloquence in conversation, as explained by Damien Mitton in his *Pensées sur l'honnêteté*: 'Il faut aussi savoir bien sa langue, en connaître toutes les finesses, tous les biais et toutes les délicatesses.' Since women are naturally inclined to be 'plus polies et plus galantes,' he declares that 'c'est principalement auprès d’elles qu’on apprend à être agréable'. As Strosetzki points out (p. 207), a new conversational hierarchy became possible, in which a poet of modest origin could outshine an aristocrat.

In addition to literary figures, some members of the clergy were regular visitors to the Hôtel de Rambouillet: Antoine Godeau, Bishop of Grasse and later of Vence, who was one of the first members of the Académie Française, and later the Abbés d’Aubignac.
and de Pure. Literary criteria were applied to religious writing too: in his youth Bossuet preached a sermon there, which was then subjected to critical discussion and analysis. According to Linda Timmermans, d'Aubignac also attended the salon of the Vicomtesse d'Auchy, who took a particular interest in the theatre.

As salon society evolved, there were also some enterprising initiatives by men, at least in Paris, to provide instruction for women in the new developments and discoveries of science and philosophy. Théophraste Renaudot, editor of the Gazette, established his Bureau d'adresse in 1632, where lectures and discussions took place on all kinds of medical, scientific and literary topics. Questions on the status of women and on relations between the sexes were debated, and as the meetings were conducted in French they were equally accessible to men and to women. Reynier and Gibson both underline the influence of Descartes in the movement towards greater educational opportunity for women: he wrote in French as well as in Latin, he believed that the capacity for reason was common to all men and women, and he enjoyed philosophical discussions and correspondence with educated women such as Anna Maria van Schurman, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and Queen Christina of Sweden.

Renaudot's initiative was continued by Louis de Lesclache, who between 1635 and 1669 organized courses in 'philosophie et morale' which were very popular with a largely female audience, and by Richesource's 'Conférences académiques et oratoires', established in 1655 and attended by Poullain de la Barre, whose ideas on education for women were also strongly influenced by Descartes' reasoning. At an elementary level these courses were free. More advanced classes were held in philosophy, physics and chemistry, and private lessons were also increasingly available for women: for example Madame de La Fayette and Madame de Sévigné were both taught Latin by Ménage. Many aristocratic
Frenchwomen would already have mastered Spanish and Italian but few had had an opportunity to study the classical languages, though Marie de Goumay had taught herself Latin, and Madame de Brassac, who became governess to the young Louis XIV, had learned the language by the ruse of sitting in a corner during her brothers' lessons. Anne Lefevre, the future Madame Dacier, was even taughtGreek by her father.

The topical interest in women's education and literary activities is reflected in several plays of the period. One of the most successful was Desmarets' Les Visionnaires of 1637, featuring two young women who are more interested in literature and plays than in marriage; it will be discussed in Chapter Four. Samuel Chappuzeau dramatized the concerns of contemporary salon society in Le Cercle des femmes, published in Lyon in 1656, which he revised in verse under the title L'Académie des femmes for performance in Paris in 1661. Both these writers provided Molière with ideas for Les Précieuses ridicules (1659) and Les Femmes savantes (1672); the question of a woman's education also features in L'Ecole des femmes (1662). These plays will be discussed in Chapter Six.

It is hardly surprising that women who wanted to learn had to contend with mockery or hostility from those who thought that they were wasting their time. Jacquette Guillaume, clearly an educated woman, may have been recalling criticism she herself had encountered when she wrote in 1665: 'Les ennemis de nos Dames disent qu'elles n'apprennent pas pour sçavoir, ou pour bien faire, mais seulement pour se faire admirer & pour ravir les compagnies par la langue, aussi bien que par leurs attraits [...].' Even Carolyn Lougee suggests that women were motivated less by a love of learning itself than by a desire to enhance their social skills, and she quotes Madeleine de Scudéry's definition of educated women in Le Grand Cyrus: 'Je voudrais qu'elles ne fussent ni trop savantes ni trop ignorantes [...] et qu'elles eussent autant de soin de parer leur esprit que
leur personne’ (p. 30). But at a time when the notion that they might pay any attention at all to improving their minds was still controversial, this is a positive encouragement to women to apply themselves to learning, and the fact that salon women went on to put time and effort into writing and publishing their own work implies that their sights were set rather higher than merely acquiring social status.

Women as patrons

The benefits of salon society were reciprocal. The men who attended offered learning and culture; in return the ladies of the aristocracy had social standing, influential contacts, and money, all of which they could use to further the careers of writers and artists by commissioning a portrait or a sculpture, keeping a retinue of musicians, or providing board and lodging for an impecunious young writer as well as effecting useful introductions. And a writer’s praise in verse or prose could enhance the social prestige of his or her patron, as well as the patron advancing the writer’s career, in what Alain Viala describes as ‘un échange d’affirmations de la gloire de chacun’.

The salon provided a useful source of contacts and a network of support for many writers, both male and female.

The role of artistic patron was one which many women assumed with enthusiasm. Wendy Gibson comments that patronage was one of the ‘least resented and most appreciated’ ways in which a woman could participate in cultural life (p. 168). Many plays were read in salons before their first performance, and playwrights who frequented the Hôtel de Rambouillet included Mairet, Rotrou, Desmarets, Corneille and Molière. Mairet’s Sophonisbe was performed in 1636 at the Château de Rambouillet by an amateur company which included one of the Marquise’s daughters in the title role and the young

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Abbé Arnauld as Scipion. Desmarets' *Les Visionnaires* was first read at the Hôtel de Rambouillet and found favour with a select audience before achieving success with a wider public. Roger Picard quotes several instances of Molière trying out his new plays on a female audience: he read *L'Ecole des maris* and *L'Impromptu de Versailles* at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and later read *Les Femmes savantes* to Madame de Lafayette and her circle of friends (p. 115). They apparently enjoyed the play and did not see in Molière's caricatures any criticism of their own erudition, since Philaminte, Bélise and Armande are not true scholars but merely parrot learned jargon, and clearly lack taste and judgment. When Molière was writing *Le Malade imaginaire* he enlisted the help of learned members of Madame de La Sablière's salon to ensure the authenticity of the final farcical scene of Argan's 'reception' to the Faculty of Medicine (p. 106).

Permission to dedicate the published text of a play to a royal or aristocratic lady known for her virtue or her piety was a useful means for a playwright to counter criticism of the theatre. These dedications generally appear with early works, when the author had greatest need of a patron's financial support or influence, and often express gratitude to a female patron in the most fulsome terms. So in 1631 Mairret dedicated *La Silvanire* to the duchesse de Montmorency, 'une des plus vertueuses et des plus parfaites dames de la terre' and assured her that his play, having been written especially for her, was decorous enough to ensure that 'votre modestie n'en puisse appréhender la représentation, ni rejeter la lecture'. Six of Corneille's plays were dedicated to women, the first being *La Veuve* (1634), and in his letter addressed to Madame de la Maisonfort, who had apparently provided the inspiration for the piece, Corneille praised as nothing less than miraculous 'des vertus et des qualités si peu communes que les vôtres'. The status of his dedicatees rose steadily: *Le Cid* was dedicated to Richelieu's niece Madame de Combalet (the future...
duchesse d'Aiguillon) and *Polyeucte* to the Queen Regent, Anne of Austria. These two were among his staunchest supporters, especially at the time of the 'Querelle du Cid' (see Chapter Three) and were influential in obtaining both financial assistance and noble status for the author's family. Molière dedicated one of his most controversial plays, *L'Ecole des femmes*, to the King's sister-in-law, Henriette d'Angleterre, and *La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes* to the devout Anne of Austria—a considerable coup after the accusations of impiety provoked by the earlier play.

When women themselves began to write and publish, their work was often dedicated to female patrons. Some of the first women playwrights in France had the support of influential women: Marie-Catherine Desjardins was introduced into Parisian literary society by the Duchesse de Montbazon, Madame Deshoulières belonged to the circle of the Duchesse de Bouillon, and Catherine Bernard benefited from the protection of both Madame de Maintenon and Madame de Pontchartrain, wife of the influential minister and future Chancellor. (Though her literary career eventually came to an end as a result of her friendship with Madame de Pontchartrain, who rescued her from poverty and granted her a pension only on condition that she give up writing plays; see Chapter Nine.)

It seems surprising that, according to Wolfgang Leiner's listing, only one work was dedicated to Madame de Rambouillet herself: Claude Boyer's *La Porcie romaine* (1646), but she was nonetheless a valuable patron and the approval of her salon was a matter of some importance. Tallemant records that Montdory was awarded a pension by the Cardinal de la Valette as a result of a private performance of Mairiet's *Virginie* at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and that the actor was always grateful to the Marquise for advancing his career in this way. According to Fontenelle, before the first performance...
of *Polyeucte* Corneille read the play at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, 'souverain tribunal des affaires d'esprit en ce temps-là. La pièce y fut applaudie autant que le demandaient la bienséance et la grande réputation que l'auteur avait déjà.' But afterwards, he says, Voiture tactfully informed the author that in fact *Polyeucte n'avait pas réussi comme il pensait, que surtout le christianisme avait extrêmement déplu*. Corneille was sufficiently alarmed to try to stop rehearsals, but one of the actors persuaded him to let the production go ahead. This is a curious story in more ways than one: it is hard to believe that the Marquise and her friends, well used to expressing their opinions by 1641, would have hesitated to give an honest response to a new play even by a celebrated author; it seems equally surprising that Corneille had so little faith in his own work that he tried to withdraw the play at such a late stage. But as we shall see, the question of religion on stage was a delicate one and the Abbé d'Aubignac would conclude in his *Pratique du Théâtre* that any dramatic presentation of a religious subject was inadmissible. It was presumably to counter criticism of *Polyeucte* from the 'parti dévot' that Corneille obtained permission to dedicate the play to Anne of Austria, an enthusiastic theatregoer and one of his most loyal supporters, but also 'une reine très chrétienne'.

**Salons and social change**

As well as believing that women's learning should be controlled by men, some religious moralists expressed their disapproval of specifically feminine areas of interest. In the salons women were associating with men, practising the art of conversation, and acquiring greater knowledge of the world: these could all be seen as undesirable and subversive activities which challenged social convention and actually infringed the rules of conduct traditionally laid down for the ideal Christian woman, who was strictly

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supposed to devote herself exclusively to her family and to God. And salon conversation frequently addressed questions of love and courtship, subjects which were particularly deplored by religious moralists. Even religious writers who seemed to be expressing more liberal views of women had reservations about their social activities. For Du Bosc, the spiritual and the worldly lives are not necessarily incompatible and a virtuous woman may be pleasing both to God and to polite society; without Christian morality there can be no ‘civilité parfaite’ (pp. 373, 377). But he disapproves of the fact that ‘on prend bien moins de plaisir au Sermon qu’à la Comedie’ and criticizes women who talk too much. Conversation in salon society was often the starting-point for women who wished to acquire some learning, but in his section on conversation Du Bosc recommends above all ‘la discretion, le silence, & la modestie’ (p. 30). Similarly Dinet’s Chapter Eight concerns ‘la discretion en paroles, que la Dame doit avoir dans les compagnies’ and his prescriptions for ‘la Dame chrestienne’ make clear that the ideal state for a virtuous woman is that of a virgin, in retreat from the world: ‘Jamais la femme ne jette tant de splendeur d’honneur, & ne se fait si avantageusement estimer, que quand elle fuit les yeux du Monde, & se plaist en la retraite des compagnies: moins on la void, plus on l’estime’ (p. 17)—this at a time when women were becoming increasingly visible in public, appearing in theatre audiences and on stage.

After the Fronde, the number of salons increased rapidly, some founded by friends of the Marquise de Rambouillet as offshoots of her establishment (Madame du Plessis-Guénégaud, Madame de Sablé, Mademoiselle de Scudéry); all these literary salons revolved around the central figure of a woman, and she was usually unattached. Although the Marquise de Rambouillet benefited from the support of her husband, few of the later salon hostesses had to concern themselves with marital duties: Mademoiselle de Scudéry
remained unmarried; Madame de Sablé was a widow by the time she opened her salon in about 1650 and Madame de La Sablière was legally separated from her unfaithful husband, as was Madame de La Fayette. Plays concerning attitudes towards marriage at this period will be discussed in Chapter Six.

As the number of salons increased, so too did the diversity of their participants. From their beginnings in aristocratic circles, salons were now attended by men and women from a wider social background, including wives and daughters of wealthy financiers and men who had bought their way into the new nobility. But these women were assessed on their own merits, not as appendages of their husbands. Madame Cornuel, wife of a financier, opened her own salon with her two daughters in about 1650, having previously attended the Hôtel de Rambouillet. Brilliant and witty, she was praised in salon literature, while her husband was denounced for his financial greed and accused of corruption. His reputation apparently had no adverse effect on his wife and daughters.

In salon society, shared interests created friendships between men and women from different social strata and sometimes led to romance. Carolyn Lougee notes that anti-feminists criticized the ambitious marriages of some salon women (p. 78) and calculates how many women enhanced their social status by marrying men of higher rank than their own fathers: 39% of the women listed by Somaize in his *Dictionnaire des précieuses* of 1661 (Lougee, p. 162). The shared cultural interests of salon society enabled members of the new nobility and wealthy bourgeoisie to acquire the manners and in some cases the titles of the old aristocracy, and they emulated royalty and aristocracy in becoming enthusiastic patrons of writers and artists.

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Another significant development was a change in the status of the female participants. When the Marquise de Rambouillet established her salon early in the century, eminent men of letters came to instruct and entertain the ladies, whereas by the middle of the century women themselves were literary figures, celebrated for their own achievements not for their social status. Women needed to acquire the confidence to write, as well as the expertise, and Madeleine de Scudéry’s epic novels might never have been written without the network of support and encouragement provided by the Marquise’s salon and later continued in her own.

In addition to the proliferation of literary salons, women acquired another source of information and forum for the circulation of ideas with the arrival of the first periodicals. Jean Loret’s weekly gazette *La Muse historique* began to appear in 1650 and included social and arts news and reviews. The *Journal des savants* was launched in 1665 to provide up-to-date news of developments in science and the arts, then in 1672 the playwright Jean Donneau de Visé founded *Le Mercure galant*, a periodical designed to appeal particularly to women. As well as coverage of current affairs, theatre reviews and literary topics, he included items of specifically feminine interest such as society events, fashion news and romantic short stories. Wendy Gibson remarks (p. 32) that many readers became active contributors and that the journal offered its readers ‘the useful service of establishing a nascent literary reputation or enhancing one already achieved’. And by this time increasing numbers of books were being published in French, including translations of the classics; 1649 was the first year in which French titles outnumbered those published in Latin.52

In the course of the century the salon movement came to be associated with ‘libertinage’—the discussion of philosophical and theological questions in a spirit of
enquiry, if not actual scepticism. Bussy-Rabutin and Saint-Evremond both frequented the Hôtel de Rambouillet before they were exiled for their allegedly subversive satirical writings. In Madeleine de Scudéry’s salon, women indulged in imaginary adventures in the Royaume de Tendre and rejected the real-life ties of marriage, while Madame de La Sablière’s guests were engaged in science and philosophy as well as literature, and she took a particular interest in physics and astronomy. In 1675 François Bernier wrote for her an *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi*—priest, philosopher and professor of astronomy, whose defence of Epicureanism and scepticism earned him a reputation as a free thinker. (Other educational texts written especially for women include René Bary’s *Rhétorique française* and *La fine philosophie accommodée à l’intelligence des dames*.) Ninon de Lenclos was a brilliant salon hostess who made no secret either of her love affairs or of her atheism, for which she was briefly imprisoned in 1656, and towards the end of the century the duchesse de Bouillon, with her nephew Philippe de Vendôme, presided over a circle of free-thinking intellectuals.

All these were reasons for some theologians to disapprove of women’s social and literary activities. Even some men of letters regarded learned women with suspicion, and La Bruyère could still report in 1688: ‘On regarde une femme savante comme on fait une belle arme: elle est ciselée artistement, d’une polissure admirable et d’un travail fort recherché; c’est une pièce de cabinet, que l’on montre aux curieux, qui n’est pas d’usage [...].’ Boileau’s anti-feminist Satire X of 1694 revived religious criticism of women for their vanity, extravagance and idleness, and also vented his personal animosity towards Madame de la Sablière (‘cette savante’) and Madame Deshoulières (‘une précieuse’). His conclusion that the ideal woman should be ‘noble, sage, modeste, humble, honnête, touchante’ is worthy of Jacques Olivier. On literary grounds he satirized the style of

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Madeleine de Scudéry in his *Dialogue des Héros de roman*, but had the grace not to publish it until after her death.

So there was ongoing tension between the efforts of women (supported by many men) to achieve some degree of learning and freedom, and entrenched attitudes which invoked 'la Nature', 'la coutume' or 'la bienséance' to restrict them to a subordinate role. Women were emerging from centuries of silence and seclusion, becoming literate and learning to express their own opinions; their growing participation in cultural life presumably increased the hostility of some men to their presence and influence. Against this background, the progress of women towards social emancipation and freedom of expression seems all the more remarkable. It required exceptional determination for women to pursue a career in the theatre, which was a particular target of attacks as a place where women could be seen and admired in public. In Chapter Two we move on to discuss their activities in the theatre and the specific criticism they provoked.


6. See W.H. Barber, 'Martha Versus Mary: Two Ways of Holy Living in Seventeenth-Century French Catholicism'.

7. See Racine, *Abrégé de l'histoire de Port-Royal*, in *OC*, II, p. 45.


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19. See Catherine F. Daniélou, "C'est une étrange chose que la science dans une tête de fille", Pierre Nicole et l'éducation des jeunes filles'.


21. For biographical details, see Una Birch, *Anna van Schurman—Artist, Scholar, Saint* (1909). Astonishingly, there appears to be no more recent study of her life and work.


23. *Question celebre, s'il est necessaire, ou non, que les Filles soient savantes.*

24. Georges de Scudéry, *Les Femmes Illustres*, pp. 399-400; references are to the Courbé edition of 1655.


33. Christoph Strosetzki, *Rhétorique de la conversation*, p. 17.


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38. Linda Timmermans, L'Accès des femmes à la culture, p. 73.

39. See Reynier, Chapter 7, and Gibson, Chapter 2.

40. Gibson, p. 38; see also Erica Harth, Cartesian Women.

41. Dulong, La Vie quotidienne, p. 129.

42. Jacquette Guillaume, Les Dames Illustres, p. 197.

43. Alain Viala, Naissance de l'écrivain, p. 55.

44. See Jean Mairet, La Sophonisbe, ed. by Charles Dédéyan, p. 129.

45. See H. Gaston Hall’s Introduction to Les Visionnaires, pp. IX, XXXI.

46. Dedication of La Silvanire in Théâtre du XVIIe siècle, I, p. 475.

47. Wolfgang Leiner, Der Widmungsbrief in der französischen Literatur, p. 63.


49. See Fontenelle, Vie de Corneille in Oeuvres complètes (Seuil), p. 23.


51. Picard, p. 66.

52. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Creighton Lecture at the University of London, November 1997.

53. See Dulong, La Vie quotidienne, pp. 210-11.

54. La Bruyère, Les Caractères, p. 127.

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FROM THE SALON TO THE STAGE

Women in theatre audiences

If women’s activities in private salons gave rise to concern among religious moralists, it is hardly surprising that this opposition was intensified by their appearance in public, whether on stage or in theatre audiences. As Parisian women gradually began to explore new avenues of learning and culture, the theatre had a significant role to play in the process of expanding their social and artistic horizons; it was another forum for the dissemination of ideas in the French language, enhanced by visual spectacle. But religious opponents of the theatre specifically objected to women attending plays, to actresses performing in them, and to particular female characters.

Despite this opposition, the seventeenth century saw the establishment of theatre as we know it today in Paris. In London, permanent theatres had been established much earlier: by the end of the sixteenth century there were at least six purpose-built theatres in London, as well as numerous converted premises and courtyards used for public performances, and Shakespeare’s plays had attracted large audiences. But at the beginning of the 1600s the only theatre in Paris was at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where the Confrérie de la Passion had earlier produced mystery plays. The first permanent company was established there in 1629, and the following year the actor Montdory installed his company at the Théâtre du Marais, where Corneille’s major plays were first performed. Both companies were granted royal patronage in 1635. Shortly afterwards Richelieu commissioned the first purpose-built theatre, opened in 1641 at his Palais-Cardinal, which
subsequently became the Palais-Royal, and this was the theatre used by Molière's company from 1660 onwards.¹

As the theatre gained in prestige, thanks to the support of Richelieu and the King, plays were also reaching a wider audience. Both in Paris and in the provinces, theatre companies had previously performed mainly in converted ‘jeux de paume’; these had been provided for the recreation of young noblemen, but under Louis XIII sport had declined in popularity and so the owners were only too glad to let out their premises to groups of actors. Colette Scherer has pointed out that this change of use created a social venue open to women as well as men.²

In 1666 the Abbé d’Aubignac wrote: ‘Il y a cinquante ans qu’une honneste femme n’osoit aller au Theatre, ou bien il falloit qu’elle y fut voilée, & tout à fait invisible [...]’.³ John Lough is sceptical of this claim, pointing out that there are records of the Queen and ladies at the court of Henri IV attending performances at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and of the enthusiasm of Marie de Médicis both for visiting Italian companies and for French troupes.⁴ But d’Aubignac’s assertion is supported by Tallemant: ‘La Comedie pourtant n’a esté en honneur que depuis que le Cardinal de Richelieu en a pris soing, et avant cela, les honnestes femmes n’y alloient point.’⁵ There are no records of plays performed early in the century and Lough assumes that many were licentious in tone; Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer also notes the continuing popularity of farce in the 1620s.⁶ And yet the plays of Garnier, Montchrestien and Hardy were written for educated audiences and were presumably enjoyed by women as well as men.

Tallemant’s comment suggests that more women began to attend plays from the early 1630s, and at the same time playwrights began to dedicate their work to influential female patrons, who also helped to enhance the prestige of the theatre. But it was not

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only noblewomen who attended performances; although Lough states that women sat in theatre boxes and that the *parterre* was an exclusively masculine domain, Colette Scherer reproduces an illustration attributed to Abraham Bosse, dating from about 1640 and clearly showing women standing among the (presumably middle-class) men in the *parterre*. Jacques Scherer underlines the democratic appeal of the theatre, accessible even to members of the audience who could not read, and women were more likely than men to be illiterate. Such was the demand for seats for *Le Cid* in 1637 that extra places had to be provided on the stage itself, and usually these were occupied only by men, but Lough notes (p. 115) that performances of Abbé Boyer's *Judith* in 1695 were so popular with women that they sat on the stage as well.

The increase in female audiences coincided with the increasing popularity of tragedy as a dramatic genre, steadily gaining ground from 1610 onwards and rising to a peak in the decade 1640-49. Tragic drama was seen as an intellectual entertainment with a moral dimension beyond the intrigue and excitement which predominated in tragicomedy, or the vulgarity of farce, and therefore as a more serious and seemly form of drama for women. Their early theatre-going also coincided with the growing influence of the salons and their emphasis on *bienséance* both of language and of content. And women who were acquiring a taste for literary debate in the 'chambre bleue' evidently preferred to see plays which provided material for those discussions, to judge by the popularity of, in particular, the plays of Corneille.

The fact that women began to attend the theatre in greater numbers in turn encouraged playwrights to develop elegance and nobility in their style to appeal to this new audience, and to attract the patronage of influential aristocratic ladies. Dramatists themselves took pains to emphasize the increased respectability of the theatre: we have
already noted Mairet’s dedication of *La Silvanire* to the Duchesse de Montmorency in 1631 with an assurance of its ‘pureté d’actions, & de paroles’ (see Chapter One). In his dedication of *Les Galanteries du duc d’Ossonne*, he rejoices that the theatre has become ‘le divertissement du prince et de son principal ministre, avec tant de gloire et de profit pour ses acteurs que les plus honnêtes femmes fréquentent maintenant l’Hôtel de Bourgogne [...]’—though ironically, as Wendy Gibson points out, the play was criticized for its immorality. Corneille ended *L’Illusion comique* (1636) with a defence of his chosen profession, emphasizing how much things had changed:

A présent le théâtre
Est en un point si haut que chacun l’idolâtre,
Et ce que votre temps voyait avec mépris
Est aujourd’hui l’amour de tous les bons esprits,

Les délices du peuple, et le plaisir des grands: (V, v)

—‘les grands’ including the King himself.

For much of the century the prestige of the theatre was indeed enhanced by support from members of the royal family. Louis XIII attended plays from an early age and his wife Anne of Austria was one of the keenest theatregoers of the period, presumably giving encouragement to other women of the Court to take an interest in drama. She provided much-needed support to Corneille at the time of the ‘Querelle du Cid’ and may have been influential in his family’s advancement to noble status. Her enthusiasm extended to attending the theatre secretly when she was in mourning following the death of her husband, and once the customary year was up, she resumed her public appearances. In 1646 she was reproached by the curé of Saint-Germain l’Auxerrois for attending public stage performances. She consulted some (unidentified) bishops for their opinion, which was that plays dealing with ‘des histoires sérieuses’ were harmless, and indeed that ‘les courtisans avaient besoin de ces sortes d’occupations pour en éviter de

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plus mauvaises’. When the curé persisted in his criticism the Queen sent the Abbé Beaumont de Péréfixe (her son’s tutor and the future Archbishop of Paris) to the Sorbonne for a definitive judgment on the subject and he returned with a declaration signed by ten or twelve theologians who had decided that ‘la comédie était chose indifférente et pouvait être vue sans péché’.

This must have been something of a blow to those who were totally opposed to the theatre. In the early part of the reign of Louis XIV the prestige of the theatre rose even higher, with royal command performances, commissions for Court entertainments and pensions for playwrights. Royal patronage also ensured the backing of wealthy aristocrats, who emulated their sovereign in supporting writers and arranging private performances of plays.

Theatre managers were keen to stress the propriety of the plays on offer in order to attract a female audience. Wendy Gibson cites a brochure of 1634, *L’Ouverture des Jours Gras*, advertising the programme at the Hôtel de Bourgogne as being suitable for ‘les Femmes les plus chastes et modestes’ and referring to the fact that husbands had earlier forbidden their wives to attend theatrical performances. In 1646 the anonymous author of *Les Songes des hommes éveillés* reiterated the point that plays were no longer what they had been in the past: ‘[...] la comédie est devenue belle en vieillissant, et sa beauté est aujourd’hui d’accord avec son honneur [...] je ne crains point de dire qu’elle est tellement épurée qu’une fille la peut voir avec moins de scandale qu’elle ne parlerait à un capucin à la porte de son couvent.’

But in their writings against the theatre Rivet, Conti, Nicole, Voisin and Bossuet all specifically criticize the presence of women in theatre audiences, using the recurring image of an insidious poison emanating from the stage to infect and corrupt spectators. The anti-feminist aspect of their attacks links with religious views of a woman’s place in
society discussed in Chapter One, and the perceived need to restrict women’s knowledge of the world, but it has scarcely been mentioned in discussions of the ‘querelle du théâtre’: in his chapter on ‘Morale’ Laurent Thirouin refers only briefly to disapproval of mixed audiences and the alleged immorality of actresses. For religious opponents of the theatre, plays could never be acceptable entertainment for decent Christian women who should know nothing of violent human passions. Rivet declared that although tragedy might seem to be a more serious form of drama, it was nonetheless filled with ‘des amours impudiques, & des passions indecentes’ so that ‘les assistants, & nommement les femmes & les filles, oyent & voyent ce qui ne leur est ni convenable ni decent’. In the Jansenist view, mankind was inescapably corrupted by all forms of ‘concupiscence’—including curiosity of mind as well as sensual desires—and devout Christians must close their eyes to all things of the world in what Nicole describes as an ‘aveuglement salutaire’, in order to contemplate and worship God.

Some theologians and moralists took a more positive view of secular love: neo-Platonist ideas have already been mentioned in Chapter One, as has Du Bosc’s suggestion in L’Honneste Femme that there is no necessary contradiction between a woman’s Christian virtue and her attractiveness to men. In 1644 the Abbé Colas de Portmorand, a deeply pious member of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, suggested in a pedagogical work that God created men and women to feel affection for each other, and that it was actually dangerous to attempt the suppression of natural desires, since ‘la Nature a de merveilleuses industries et des ressorts inexplicables pour trouver son compte tôt ou tard’. He recommended that marriage be advocated within the Church to accommodate these desires, but his book was condemned and he was expelled from the Compagnie.
If love itself was considered sinful, any depiction of love relationships on the public stage was to be doubly deplored. Nicole describes profane love as ‘la plus forte impression que le péché ait faite sur nos âmes; ce qui paroît assez par les desordres horribles qu’elle produit dans le monde [...]’, but he points out that in plays and novels it is celebrated: ‘cette passion y paroit avec honneur & d’une manière qui au lieu de la rendre horrible, est capable au contraire de la faire aimer’, and the audience is actually encouraged to share the passionate feelings described or portrayed on stage. Even love legitimized by marriage is ‘le honteux effet du péché [...] une source de poison capable de nous infecter à tous momens’. For Conti, human love was a form of idolatry, displacing love of God and therefore ‘le plus grand péché qu’on puisse commettre’. The original aim of tragedy may have been laudable (moral education and edification) but it was now corrupted by the inclusion of love, and ‘la Comédie, en peignant les passions d’autrui, émeut nostre ame d’une telle maniere qu’elle fait naître les nostres’. Bossuet saw the aim of drama as ‘de flatter ces passions qu’on veut appeler délicates, mais dont le fond est si grossier’ and described human passion as ‘une déplorable maladie de notre coeur’.

In Nicole’s view, the particular danger for women was that they would identify with heroines on stage and thereby become dissatisfied with their own lives:

Non seulement les Comedies & les Romans rendent l’esprit mal disposé pour toutes les actions de Religion & de pieté, mais [...] on y prend insensiblement une disposition d’esprit toute Romanesque, on se remplit la tête de Heros & d’Heroïnes, & les femmes principalement prenant plaisir aux adorations qu’on y rend à celles de leur sexe [...] s’impriment tellement dans la fantaisie cette sorte de vie, que les petites affaires de leur ménage leur deviennent insupportables. Et quand elles reviennent dans leurs maisons avec cet esprit évapore, elles y trouvent tout désagreable, & sur tout leurs Maris, qui étant occupuez de leurs affaires, ne sont pas toujours en humeur de leur rendre ces complaisances ridicules qu’on rend aux femmes dans les Comedies & dans les Romans. (pp. 61-62)
Nicole acknowledges that there is some justification of ‘divertissement’ as rest and recuperation after work, ‘seulement pour rendre l’âme plus capable de travail’, but women who go to the theatre do not have any ‘occupations sérieuses’, and spend their lives in the frivolous pursuit of pleasure (chapter 8, p. 60). In any case the theatre is too corrupt to provide a legitimate source of ‘divertissement’. If they see passion represented on stage, even women who think themselves virtuous will take pleasure in sharing the characters’ feelings and will enjoy inspiring similar devotion themselves, thereby becoming ‘très-criminelles devant Dieu, parce qu’elles sont bien aises de tenir dans le coeur des hommes une place qui n’appartient qu’à Dieu seul’ (Chapter 5, pp. 49-50).

The approval and enjoyment of plays by royal and aristocratic ladies could be used to support arguments for the theatre as an innocent form of entertainment. Writing in answer to Conti, the Abbé d’Aubignac pointed out that ‘les femmes d’honneur & de qualité s’y trouvent en foule avec toute liberté’²³, and the Abbé de Pure declared that he would defer in matters of theatrical judgment ‘aux Dames, qui aujourd’hui décident du mérite de ces choses’.²⁴ (As we shall see in Chapter Three, this was also one of Corneille’s main defences against critics of Le Cid.) But Conti sees the apparent propriety of contemporary theatre as an added danger, attracting respectable women only to undermine their virtue:

[... l’état present de la Comedie ne faisant aucune peine à la pudeur attachée à leur sexe, elles ne se défendent pas d’un poison aussi dangereux & plus caché que l’autre qu’elles avalent sans le connoître [...] (p. 26).

Not only do plays and novels excite passion, ‘elles enseignent aussi le langage des passions, ce qui n’est pas un petit mal’, as Nicole puts it in Chapter 11. This image of the theatre as a source of undesirable knowledge recurs in other attacks. Rivet describes

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it as 'une eschole d'intemperance' (Rivet, p. 72); Conti quotes Saint Cyprian’s description in the third century: ‘l’Eglise des Demons, l’Escole d’impureté’ (Conti, p. 102); Voisin quotes Saint John Chrysostom’s description of ‘une Academie d’impureté’.25 Bossuet specifically argues that the passionate feelings expressed by female characters set a bad example to young women in the audience: ‘Ce qu’on ne voit point dans le monde, ce que celles qui succombent à cette faiblesse y cachent avec tant de soin, une jeune fille le viendra apprendre à la comédie’ (p. 182). Against the arguments of playwrights and defenders of the theatre that it was a source of moral enlightenment, critics objected that it was a means of educating the audience in vice, and this particular accusation was presumably in the mind of Chappuzeau when he asserted that ‘la Comedie qui est une peinture vivante de toutes les passions, est aussi une école severe pour les tenir en bride, & leur prescrire de justes bornes’.

There was another aspect of attendance at the theatre which both increased its popularity and attracted criticism: it was a place of entertainment but also a place of social display, where the audience went to see and to be seen; a meeting-place and an ideal location to show off the latest fashions, expensive jewellery or a new uniform. Colette Scherer describes Paris in the 1630s as ‘cette société du “paralitre”’ and the theatre as ‘un lieu où on se montre’,27 and those who condemned drama on moral grounds also disapproved of theatregoing as a social spectacle. For Rivet, one of its most shocking aspects was that ‘les femmes & filles extraordinairement parées, y viennent, non seulement pour voir, mais aussi pour estre veuës [...] & allumer par mesme moyen le feu de la convoitise’.28 The same point was made by Père Bernard Lamy in his Nouvelles Réflexions sur l’Art poétique of 1678: ‘La première pensée qu’on a en ces lieux, qui sont l’Eglise du Diable [...] c’est de voir et d’être vu.’29 To a devout Christian, dressing up
for a social occasion emphasized the frivolity and triviality of this diversion from the contemplation and worship of God. In his *Maximes et Réflexions* Bossuet was quoting the authority of the early Church Fathers, but presumably also recalling his own personal experience of theatregoing in his attack on

les passions excitées, la vanité, la parure, les grands ornements, [...] le désir de voir et d'être vu, la malheureuse rencontre des yeux qui se cherchent les uns les autres, la trop grande occupation à des choses vaines, les éclats de rire qui font oublier [...] tout le sérieux de la vie chrétienne.\(^{30}\)

In addition to its function as a social venue, the theatre had long had a reputation as a place of assignation. Conti quotes Clement of Alexandria, writing in the year 204:

*Ces assemblées ne fournissent que trop de sujets d'impureté, où les hommes & les femmes estant ensemble, s'occupent à se regarder: c'est là où se tiennent de pernicieux conseils, lorsque les regards lascifs excitent de mauvais desirs, [...]* (Conti, p. 96).

In Desmarets' *Les Visionnaires* (1637) the theatre-lover Sestiane cites as one of her reasons against marriage the fact that a husband would have misgivings about her attendance at plays:

*Il pensent que c'est là que se void le galant; Que se donne l'oeillade, et le poulet coulant: (V, 5)*

Presumably many husbands in real life would have shared Nicole's fear of the dissatisfaction with domestic routine which might arise from their wives' contact with imaginative literature, and the possible consequences of visits to the theatre. But even churches could provide opportunities for amorous encounters, and Claude Dulong points out that they were one of the few places where young people could meet.\(^{31}\) Boisrobert's play *La Jalousie d'elle-mesme* (1650) included a romantic encounter in church, which was condemned by Voisin as 'honteux & sacrilege'.\(^{32}\) In 1686 the abbé Faydit condemned the use of churches as meeting places for couples.\(^{33}\)
By the time most of these attacks on the theatre were published, its popularity was well established in Paris, providing respectable women with a regular cultural and social venue and a new source of intellectual stimulus. It is interesting to note the topicality of *Les Visionnaires*: as well as satirizing women’s developing taste for fiction and their ambitions towards education and independence, Desmarets created in Sestiane—so devoted to the theatre that she has no interest in marriage—a fictional character built on the basis of a relatively recent real phenomenon. The author may have intended to ridicule her for her unbecoming enthusiasm and her lack of interest in conventional female occupations, but she is well-informed and able to hold a serious discussion on theories of dramatic technique (II, 4), even if her own ideas for a play take the form of a wildly improbable melodrama. Desmarets notes in his Argument prefacing the play that ‘il s’en trouve beaucoup, comme elle, amoureuses de la Comédie, à présent qu’elle est si fort en regne, particulièrement de celles qui se meslent d’en juger, d’en sçavoir les regles’. In conjunction with salon discussions and other opportunities for education and intellectual advancement, the theatre gave women the opportunity to develop their own critical faculties and their own aesthetic judgment. Presumably this was at least part of the reason that religious moralists were so opposed to the presence of women in theatre audiences. The plays of Corneille in particular challenged audiences to debate the moral issues raised and encouraged them to exercise their own judgment, and this might bring them into conflict with accepted Christian doctrine.

Theatre managers and playwrights emphasized the suitability of drama for respectable women but also recognized the appeal of love stories for female audiences. In his dedication to *La Place royale* of 1637, Corneille expresses the hope that the cynical character of Alidor has not offended ‘la plus belle moitié du monde’, and that ‘si les
dames trouvent ici quelques discours qui les blessent, je les supplie de se souvenir [...] que par d'autres poèmes j'ai assez relevé leur gloire et soutenu leur pouvoir'. And although in his Discours du Poème dramatique he asserted that a tragedy must be concerned with 'quelque passion plus noble et plus mâle que l'amour' he went on to add: 'Il est à propos d'y mêler l'amour, parce qu'il a toujours beaucoup d'agrément et peut servir de fondement à ces intérêts et à ces autres passions dont je parle; mais il faut qu'il se contente du second rang dans le poème'. In fact the love of one character for another is a key element in many of his tragedies, and not always relegated to the second level of interest. He says himself of Le Cid: 'Rodrigue et Chimène [...] ne sont malheureux qu'autant qu'ils sont passionnés l'un pour l'autre' (p. 146). If they were not in love, there would be no conflict of interests between them. Camille (in Horace) is destroyed because she asserts the value of her love for Curioce over her duty to her father and her country. In both Sertorius and Suréna the downfall of the hero is caused by his refusal to sacrifice his love to political expediency. Love is, after all, a means of exercising individual will and freedom of choice, and the pursuit of an amorous objective is a form of self-realization. Corneille's recognition in his plays that the role of love in human history is sometimes of primary importance coincided with the interests of his female audiences.

Actresses

In 1864 the younger Dumas wrote in the Preface to his play L'Ami des femmes:

C'est l'amour [...] qui est l'élément du théâtre, c'est l'émotion qui en est le but, c'est donc la Femme qui en est le principe. [...] C'est pour elle que l'auteur dramatique écrit, c'est pour elle que le public vient.
But two hundred years earlier, with Parisian theatres packed for performances of plays that have remained in the repertoire ever since, some religious opinion strongly disapproved of women appearing on stage. This disapproval was part of the general condemnation of the acting profession by some leading theologians, but it also revealed fixed preconceptions about women’s behaviour. Jan Clarke comments on the ‘dual standard’ in operation: ‘One of the chief delights of the theatre was seen to reside in the attractiveness of its actresses, yet when they did attract they were criticised for arousing impure thoughts in the minds of male spectators.’ If men in the audience found themselves thinking lascivious thoughts, women must be to blame.

The moral status of actors was frequently questioned by critics of the theatre. With his Edict of 1641 Louis XIII (and Cardinal Richelieu) intended to remove the stigma attached to the acting profession since the days of the early Church: the King and the first minister had both demonstrated their active interest in the theatre, and it seemed inappropriate for the participants in an art form which had become so popular and so acceptable in the most elevated circles of polite society still to be classed as unregenerate sinners. So the King decreed that as long as actors avoided all ‘actions malhonnêtes’ on stage and their performances were free of ‘paroles lascives ou à double entente’, they should be free to exercise their profession without fear of punishment by the Church: ‘nous voulons que leur exercice, qui peut innocemment divertir nos peuples de diverses occupations mauvaises, ne puisse leur être imputé à blâme’. But some bishops subsequently amended their diocesan rituals to exclude actors from taking the sacraments, and actors had to renounce their profession before death in order to receive a Christian burial. There was a standard formula used for this purpose:
Je promets à Dieu, de tout mon coeur, avec une pleine liberté d'esprit, de ne plus jouer la comédie le reste de ma vie et quand même il plairait à son infinie bonté de me rendre la santé.  

The actor Floridor was bound by this proviso when he recovered from a grave illness, having made the required renunciation in anticipation of his death. The most famous example of the rule being implemented is at the death of Molière in 1673, when the priest summoned after his collapse failed to arrive in time to hear the actor's renunciation, and he was initially refused a Christian burial, until an appeal by his widow to the Archbishop led to the personal intervention of Louis XIV. (Georges Mongrédien suggests that the reluctance of some members of the clergy to perform a Christian ceremony may have had more to do with Molière the playwright, author of Tartuffe and Dom Juan, than with his acting career.)

The Church's exclusion of actors was not formally ended until the Council of Soissons in 1849, and even then the clergy reserved the right to refuse the sacrament to actors appearing in plays which were 'impies ou obscènes'.

There is no record of French actresses in Paris until the early seventeenth century, although in Spain and Italy, actresses were performing in public by the end of the sixteenth century. In England, female roles in the theatre were played by boys, and women did not appear on stage until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Léopold Lacour's 1921 survey remains a valuable source of information on the careers of the earliest actresses in France; there are also useful details in Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer's histories of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and Théâtre du Marais. It seems likely that women performed regularly in the provinces during the sixteenth century, but their moral and social status was evidently questionable: a local councillor in Bordeaux recalled in his memoirs that in 1592 an unnamed actress in the town was much respected and received in 'les plus honnêtes maisons de Bordeaux', as though this was an exceptional honour.
During the tenure of the Confrérie de la Passion at the Hôtel de Bourgogne (1548-78), actors probably played the female roles in their mystery and morality plays, and Lacour thinks that they would certainly have done so in farces (p. 6). By the early seventeenth century, actresses in visiting Italian companies were being fêted in Paris—in particular Isabella Andreini, who was celebrated in verse by French poets—and perhaps their success encouraged French companies to employ actresses too. But when English theatre companies visited France in 1598 and 1604, the female roles were of course played by boys, and English audiences were apparently shocked when French companies visiting England included actresses; an English critic in 1633 described their performance as 'impudent, shameful, unwomanish, graceless'.

The first professional actress known to have appeared in Paris was Marie Venier, wife of the actor Laporte: it seems that all the early actresses in France were married to actors. According to Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer she was one of two actresses in Valleran Le Conte's company, performing plays by Hardy from 1610 onwards. She continued to act even after the retirement of her husband from the stage in 1619. Lacour thinks she may have been the object of a letter written by Tristan l'Hermite in 1620 to a 'belle comédienne', commiserating with her real-life poverty in contrast to her splendid appearance on stage. Evidently it was not easy to make a living as an actress. Mademoiselle Laporte probably appeared in plays by Garnier, Hardy, Montchrétien and Nicolas de Montreux. She may even have created the role of Thisbé in Théophile de Viau's Pyrame et Thisbe, which was first performed in about 1617 and published in 1623. Lacour points out that this highly successful play, with its elegant language and poetic expressions of tenderness, was particularly suitable for performance by actresses, and the development of a dramatic repertoire which could be unblushingly performed by and for

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women was an important element both in the establishment of actresses in female roles and in the rehabilitation of the theatre as a respectable part of the cultural scene.

Another actress who may have played Thisbé was Mademoiselle Le Noir (Isabelle Mestivier), wife of the actor Charles Le Noir, who belonged to the Prince of Orange’s highly-regarded troupe of actors in the provinces. Le Noir and Montdory subsequently established their own company in Paris, which would become the Théâtre du Marais, with Corneille’s Mélite in 1629. Mademoiselle Le Noir is the first French actress known to have had roles written for her: Mairet’s patron, the Comte de Belin, admired her so much that he instructed the playwright to create principal roles especially for her, and she was probably the first to play the title roles in Chryséide et Arimant, Sylvie and Silvanire. She may also have created the role of Mélite in Corneille’s first success, and she played the title role in Mairet’s Sophonisbe. David Clarke suggests that it was her success in this role which inspired other dramatists to seek tragic subjects providing similar scope for the talents of actresses. He notes that Benserade’s Cléopâtre (1635) was ‘specifically written as a star vehicle for Mlle Bellerose’ and that her presence in La Calprenède’s La Mort de Mithridate (1636) was acknowledged by the author as a major asset (p. 209, notes 3 and 5). And with regular employment, acting was by this time becoming a well paid profession. The Le Noirs were among the first actors to do well financially: when Le Noir died in 1637 he left his wife a wealthy widow. Tallemant notes that she then retired from the theatre to bring up her children.

In order to embark on an acting career, a girl presumably needed some elementary education. Lancaster notes that actresses’ names seldom appeared on theatre contracts, but that some signatures do survive, and he draws the conclusion that ‘some of the actors and actresses seem to have possessed a certain culture’, since they were at least capable

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of writing their names. The implication that they were barely literate seems rather dubious: how would an illiterate actress have learned her lines? And as they learned the art of performance they would have acquired good diction and social sophistication. Wendy Gibson points out that a successful acting career could in itself provide a woman with an education, as well as a means to social advancement and financial independence. Most actresses were, she says, 'of modest origins', but once they had completed a period of apprenticeship, playing small parts, they were regarded as the equals of male actors and earned equal pay. As early as 1609 Valleran Le Conte's company included three young apprentice actresses who were provided with board and lodging as well as instruction in 'la science de comédiens'.

The number of roles for actresses increased steadily; in 1634 the Marais company consisted of eight actors and two actresses, and by the end of 1641 there were still only eight actors, but the number of actresses had increased to five. And this period saw the birth of the theatrical star. Besides Mademoiselle Le Noir, one of the first actresses to gain a personal following with audiences was Mademoiselle Villiers (Marguerite Beguin), who appeared in early plays by Corneille, almost certainly creating the role of Médée, and achieved an unprecedented success with Montdory in Le Cid. From that time on, says Lacour, audiences would come to the theatre to see a particular actress, regardless of the play she was appearing in. Successful actresses had long careers: Mademoiselle Bellerose spent thirty years at the Hôtel de Bourgogne; Mademoiselle Beauchâteau began her career at the Marais in the 1630s, moved to the Hôtel de Bourgogne and was still acting in 1674. Lacour notes (p. 108) that she gave elocution lessons to Parisian society women, and it is likely that other actresses did the same.
Racine advanced the careers of two Parisian actresses by writing leading roles for them and rehearsing them in the art of playing tragedy: Marquise Du Parc achieved her greatest success in the title role of *Andromaque*, and Mademoiselle Champmeslé (Marie Desmares) succeeded Mademoiselle Du Parc as Racine’s mistress and created the roles of Bérénice, Atalide, Monime, Iphigénie and Phèdre, as well as Thomas Corneille’s Ariane. Madame de Sévigné testified to her status as a star, attributing the success of this last play more to la Champmeslé’s acting than to the quality of the writing: ‘c’est la comedienne que l’on cherche et non pas la comédie; j’ai vu Ariane pour elle seule’ (1 April 1672). She even thought the same was true of Racine’s plays: ‘Racine fait des comédies pour la Champmeslé; ce n’est pas pour les siècles à venir’ (16 March 1672). The popularity of individual actors and actresses presumably augmented the number of spectators but also increased the hostility of critics opposed to the ‘idolatry’ of the theatre, and the success of these two actresses coincided with a period of concentrated attack.

The moral status of actresses remained dubious, and the terms in which they were condemned by religious moralists underlines the complex ambiguity of some men’s attitudes towards women: frail creatures in need of protection as long as they played the submissive role, but wicked and dangerous temptresses as soon as they stepped on to a public stage. The spectacle of a woman appearing on stage had been condemned by the Church Fathers, and Conti quotes Saint John Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century:

> On y void des femmes qui ont essuyé toute honte, qui paroissent hardiment sur un Theatre devant un Peuple; qui ont fait une estude de l’impudence, qui par leurs regards, & par leurs paroles répandent le poison de l’impudicité dans les yeux & dans les oreilles de tous ceux qui les voyent, & qui les écoutent, [...] tout y est plein de poison, tout y respire l’impureté. (p. 129)

The stage is seen as a sacrilegious parody of the altar:

> [...] n’avez-vous point horreur de regarder cette sainte Table des mesmes yeux dont vous regardez ce lit qui est dressé sur le Theatre, où l’on represente les
Actresses are seen as sirens, flaunting their charms on the public stage to capture men's attention and distract them from a life of virtue, in the same way as the playwright was thought to be beguiling women in the audience into an unreal world of love and chivalry, away from their domestic duties. Rivet describes them as 'capables [...] d'attirer & arrêter les yeux des hommes, qui sont d'ailleurs graves & prudents' (p. 21) and Nicole refers to 'la maniere dissoluë dont les femmes paroissent sur le Theatre' (Chapter 2, p. 41). They were blamed for the part they played in arousing men's passions, even though they were performing roles written for them by men.

Actresses were also blamed for setting a bad example to other women. Even playing stereotypical female characters, they were defying social convention by appearing and speaking in public, and thus, as Eric Nicholson suggests, 'sometimes belied the models of inferiority and subservience they were supposed to represent'. Their appearance was often criticized; in particular they were accused of starting the fashion for low necklines which became popular from the 1630s on. The wearing of revealing dresses was repeatedly denounced by ecclesiastics such as Pierre Juvernay, whose *Discours particulier contre les femmes desbraillées de ce temps* first appeared in 1637; there were plenty of precedents for Tartuffe's outrage at Dorine's décolletage. Rivet deplores the appearance of 'des filles & des femmes, parées & desguisées d'habits somptueux' (p. 21); Voisin describes the actress's costume, make-up, and generally seductive appearance as 'des filets où les plus résolus se trouvent pris' (p. 476). The recurring overall theme is the fear of women's sexual attraction, which will inflame in the audience 'les appétits de la chair [...] la convoitise [...] les passions desreglées'.
At the end of the century Bossuet seemed unable to decide whether actresses were victims or vamps, and his paradoxical view of women’s weakness but also of their power over men seems to correspond to Jacques Olivier’s. In Chapter 8 of his *Maximes et Réflexions* he demands:

> Quelle mère, je ne dis pas chrétienne, mais tant soit peu honnête, n’aimerait pas mieux voir sa fille dans le tombeau que sur le théâtre? [...]

but from being weak slaves they become pagan priestesses:

> [...] voilà qu’elles s’étalent elles-mêmes en plein théâtre avec tout l’attirail de la vanité, comme ces sirènes dont parle Isaïe, qui font leur demeure dans les temples de la Volupté, dont les regards sont mortels, et qui reçoivent de tous côtés par cet applaudissement qu’on leur renvoie le poison qu’elles répandent par leur chant (p. 192).

Henry Phillips records the hostility of other representatives of the Church: Coustel thought that actresses offended against ‘la pudeur du sexe’ in portraying passionate, angry or coquettish characters, and, if they were married, against the sacrament of marriage, by inciting admiration from other men.56 There is a constant confusion of the real woman and the role, with an apparent inability or reluctance to distinguish between the two.

There is also evidence in non-religious texts of attitudes towards the acting profession, and in particular the prevalent reputation of actresses as immoral or promiscuous. Tallemant’s *Historiette de Montdory* describes them as promiscuous, without supplying any evidence.57 In Scudéry’s *Comédie des Comédiens* of 1635 an actress defends her profession and deplores the fact that actresses are generally thought to be as unprincipled or lascivious as the characters they play in farce: ‘c’est une erreur où tombe presque tout le monde’.58 One of Scarron’s characters in *Le Roman comique*
(1651) comments on the general low opinion of actresses’ virtue: ‘elles en sont moins chargées que de vieille broderie et de fard’.59

Such prejudice was strongly contested by Samuel Chappuzeau in his Théâtre françois of 1674. Perhaps the recent episode of the death of Molière was in his mind as he countered negative public opinion by claiming that actors and actresses were good citizens and virtuous Christians, devoted to their families, their audiences and their King. Du Tralage, writing at the end of the century, similarly defends the acting profession and includes Molière, though not his wife, in a list of actors who ‘vivoient bien, régulièrement et même chrestiennement’.60 Chappuzeau refers to criticism of women appearing on stage, but thinks it even more immoral for men to play women’s parts:

Je ne sçais s’il est moins blâmable de voir des hommes travestis en femmes & prendre l’habit d’un autre sexe que le leur, ce qui hors de pareilles occasions, & des termes acordez aux rejoissances publiques, est punissable & defendu par les Loix.61

(Cross-dressing was in fact forbidden by canon law.) He also considers it ironic that the Church should condemn alleged licentiousness in the theatre, but tolerate works of art which are less than decorous—‘ces nuditez & ces postures peu chastes dont les Palais sont remplis’ (p. 34). Presumably the sight of an actress in the flesh was considered more inflammatory than even the most erotic painting.

Chappuzeau provides much invaluable information about the practicalities of women’s involvement in theatre production in the mid-seventeenth century. He observes that actresses dislike playing older women and that for this reason playwrights avoid writing such parts. Sons should be young, so that their mothers need not appear over forty (p. 85). He makes clear that the female members of the company had the same right as the actors to take part in the democratic process of selecting plays for production from those submitted, although he explains that they often ‘par modestie, laissent aux hommes...
le jugement des ouvrages, & se trouvent rarement à leur lecture’ despite the fact that ‘il y en a asseurement de tres capables entr’elles & même qui peuvent donner des lumieres au Poète’ (p. 66). Apart from the actresses themselves, there was work for women in the theatre as usherettes and drinks vendors. (The first refreshment stall in the Parisian theatre had been started by a woman in 1621, when a visiting company of Italian actors allowed the Veuve Dollin to set up in business at the Hôtel de Bourgogne selling wine and food in the parterre.62) Jan Clarke notes that Madeleine Béjart played ‘a major administrative role’ with Molière’s company, that Madame Provost was box office manager for Molière and at the Guénégaud, and that retired actresses sometimes worked front of house.63

Some members of the clergy were evidently on friendly terms with actors, and Claude Dulong notes that the archdeacon of Lyon acted as godfather to one of Marquise Du Parc’s children.64 But religious writers who specifically defended the acting profession were rare. D’Aubignac, in his Dissertation sur la Condamnation des theatres of 1666 (written in answer to Conti’s treatise), argued that even in antiquity tragedians and comedians were not the same as ‘Mimes, Histrions & Basteleurs’, since they appeared on a raised proscenium stage, whereas the less elevated performers were literally at a lower level, in the orchestre. Present-day ‘acteurs du Poème Dramatique’, he said, should not be classed as infamous along with these lesser entertainers (p. 190). Abbé Michel de Pure was an ordained priest who wrote in defence of the theatre.65 In his Idée des Spectacles Anciens et Nouveaux of 1668, he defends actors in general: ‘un bon Acteur fait tousjours honneur au Poète, & plaisir au Spectateur’, and actresses in particular, to whose charms he was clearly susceptible:

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Il seroit aussi à souhaitez que toutes les Comediennes fussent & jeunes & belles, & s'il se pouvoit, toujours filles, ou du moins jamais grosses. Car [...] la fécondité de leur ventre couste à la beauté de leur visage & de leur taille [...] going on to argue that youth and beauty are ‘les deux sources d’agrément qui ne tarissent point’ and that these qualities enhance even plays which are not particularly edifying in themselves (p. 170). The pleasure of watching an acting performance may even serve as an aid to moral enlightenment: ‘la persuasion de l’esprit est aisée après la satisfaction des sens’. His view links with more positive and neo-Platonist views of secular love, but it is unusual, and in direct opposition to those critics who thought that the satisfaction of the senses was to be avoided at all costs.

In his defence of drama in general, de Pure followed d’Aubignac in drawing a clear distinction between plays of antiquity and modern French drama: ‘nous pouvons sans trop de presomption, nous vanter d’avoir élevé le Theatre beaucoup au de-là des vieilles Idées, & des efforts des anciens Poètes’ (p. 163), and he gives particular credit for this achievement to Corneille: ‘Que le grand Corneille a honoré nostre siècle de tout ce que les honnestes plaisirs & la belle curiosité pouvoient attendre de l’Art & de l’Esprit.’ Among other ‘excellens Poètes’ who have produced ‘de nouvelles & admirables Productions & Tragiques & Comiques’ he mentions Mademoiselle Desjardins (p. 165). He also makes some practical suggestions which show his concern that acting troupes should be well organized and theatre performances well regulated, with earlier performance times—3.30 in the winter, 4.30 in summer—to attract larger audiences. In expressing his belief that there is no harm in the ‘honnête plaisir’ of drama, he echoes the arguments presented by Corneille, Molière and Racine in their own defence. But his was a rare attempt by a cleric to reconcile secular drama and the practice of Christianity. A
similar defence by Père Caffaro in 1694 cost him his living and provoked Bossuet's condemnation of the theatre in his *Maximes et Réflexions*.66

We can only speculate on what women themselves made of religious criticism of their theatrical activities. The subject would surely have been discussed in the salons by women such as Madame de Sévigné, who was both deeply pious and an enthusiastic theatre-goer. Linda Timmermans notes that Madame de La Fayette circulated a critique of Nicole’s *Traité de la comédie*, but no copy has survived.67 It seems surprising that some of the women most active in literary society were known to have Jansenist sympathies, despite Jansenist criticism of fiction and drama.68

As well as condemning women for appearing on both sides of the footlights, religious opponents of the theatre attacked some female dramatic characters whose conduct did not conform to the traditional Christian view of a woman’s place in society, and these will be discussed in Chapter Four. Fictional they might be, but they were considered to be setting a bad example to the women in the audience by their outspokenness and their defiance of masculine authority. For similar reasons, Corneille’s Chimène was censured by the Académie Française, and the next chapter will examine the history of the ‘Querelle du Cid’ and how this episode revealed underlying tensions and fears about increased freedom for women in contemporary society.


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7. Comédie et société, Plate 1, p. 44.

8. Introduction to Théâtre du XVIe siècle, I, p. XXI.


13. 'Women and the Notion of Propriety', p. 2.


15. L'Aveuglement salutaire, pp. 182-84.


17. Pierre Nicole, Traité de la Comédie, p. 73; all references are to the Couton edition. See Laurent Thirouin's discussion of this point in L'Aveuglement salutaire, pp. 240-41.


19. Nicole, Traité de la Comédie, pp. 42-44.


22. Fénélon, 'De l'éducation des filles' in Oeuvres, I, p. 95.

23. D'Aubignac, Dissertation sur la condamnation des theatres, p. 244.


29. Quoted by Raymond Picard, La Carrière de Jean Racine, p. 526, note.


32. Voisin, p. 344.


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34. Corneille, OC, III, p. 124.


44. See Marie-Claude Canova-Green, *La Politique-spectacle*, p. 192.

45. *Le Théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne*, I, pp. 77-78.


49. Lancaster, Part 1, II, p. 750.


53. See Dulong, *La Vie quotidienne*, pp. 177-81.


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63. Jan Clarke, 'Women Theatre Professionals', p. 29.

64. Dulong, *La Vie quotidienne*, p. 167.

65. According to Emile Magne (Preface to *La Prétieuse*, p. xx) he took holy orders and held the unpaid but prestigious post of Conseiller et Aumônier du Roi.


CHAPTER THREE

'LA QUERELLE DU CID'

When we examine in detail the question of literary authority, we find that in their concern with bienséance literary critics, like religious critics of the theatre, are often expressing concerns and anxieties about the role and status of women. The first major literary row of the century, the so-called 'Querelle du Cid', highlighted disagreement on the role of women in two different ways. What began as a dispute between rival authors developed into a confrontation of opinion between, on the one hand, the salons and the theatre-going public, which included many women, and on the other the all-male scholars of the Académie Française, called upon for the first time since its inception two years earlier to pass judgment on a literary question. And although the controversy involved accusations of plagiarism and alleged deficiencies in the author's dramatic technique and versification, it was principally focused on one aspect of the play, the character and conduct of its heroine Chimène, and this is the aspect to be discussed in this chapter.

The quarrel is also significant in the history of the conflict between the theatre and some representatives of the Church. The increasing popularity of the theatre could be seen as a threat to the influence of the Church, which had by this time lost its powers of censorship. In the early days of printing, the Sorbonne had been granted the right to censor publications and theologians were thus able in some measure to contain the spread of ideas, especially after the Reformation, but early in the seventeenth century this role was taken over by the State. Although the first royal censors were appointed from the Sorbonne, Alain Viala points out that by 1628 censorship was entirely in secular hands and the censors whose privilège had to be obtained for every publication were no longer

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theologians. Before the first performance of *Le Cid*, Guez de Balzac wrote to the actor Montdory, who created the role of Rodrigue, praising him for having ‘réconcilié la comédie avec les dévots’, but in view of the attacks on the theatre which were to emanate from ecclesiastical sources later in the century, his optimism was unfortunately premature.

The controversy also demonstrated the extent to which the aesthetic concept of *bienséance*, although deriving from antiquity, reflected Christian standards of morality and the traditional view of a woman’s place in society (discussed in Chapter One). The character of Chimène was later singled out for attack by some of the men who opposed the theatre on religious grounds: in the eyes of Conti and Bossuet, writing many years after the play was first performed, she still epitomized everything that was scandalous and immoral in this form of entertainment.

The arguments over this particular play led on to a broader reappraisal of the writer’s status and precipitated discussion of the whole concept of literary authority, and how much freedom a playwright should have in his dramatic treatment of an existing story. There had already been considerable discussion of the classical doctrine derived from Aristotle and its implications for modern authors. Was the writer bound by imposed constraints to follow existing formulae or was he free to explore his own ideas in creating a dramatic work which did not fit neatly into a particular category? By this time a playwright was no longer merely the servant of a troupe of actors (Corneille was one of the first authors to write plays without being commissioned and to have his name printed on theatre posters) but there were other people who thought they were justified in telling him what to write. Among the contributors to the debate the priest and poet François Ogier argued for greater freedom, while one of the chief participants in the

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‘Querelle du Cid’, the critic and theorist Jean Chapelain, remained on the side of classical doctrine. The question of literary authority formed part of the wider debate about the nature of the human intellect: was it to be confined to learning about the past and following existing authority, or was it, as Descartes thought, within each person’s capacity to find new ways of reasoning? We now take it for granted that creative writers are free to explore new forms of expression, but this idea would have outraged many scholars in the seventeenth century.

There was also the question of the status of the audience: were they mainly, as Corneille and other playwrights thought, intelligent and cultivated men and women, capable of making up their own minds on ethical questions, or an ignorant and stupid herd (La Mesnardière’s ‘vile populace’ or Scudéry’s ‘multitude ignorantе’), able only to understand the simplest moral message conveyed in black and white? Did the public have a right to choose what they wished to see, or were they to follow a prescribed diet of moral instruction? A modern audience which probably included a considerable proportion of women did not necessarily accept as infallible the rules of dramatic composition. Intellectual assumptions were changing along with transformations in social structures, and the increasing social and intellectual activity of women was both a catalyst and a consequence of changing attitudes.

The success of Le Cid was immediate and phenomenal. Pellisson recalled its impact in the following terms:

Il est mal-aise de s’imaginer avec quelle aprobation cette piece fut receуé de la Cour & du public. On ne se pouvoit lasser de la voir, on n’entendoit autre chose dans les compagnies, chacun en savoit quelque partie par coeur, on la faisoit apprendre aux enfans, & en plusieurs endroits de la France, il etoit passé en proverbe, de dire, Cela est beau comme le Cid.4
It was one of the first plays known to have been especially popular with a female audience. Montdory wrote to Balzac on 18 January 1637: 'Le Cid a charmé tout Paris. Il est si beau qu'il a donné de l'amour aux dames les plus continentes, dont la passion a même plusieurs fois éclaté au théâtre public.' Montdory and Mademoiselle Villiers, who played Chimène, were the stars of the company and had already achieved a major success in Corneille's Médée two years earlier. Three performances of the play were given at Court and two at the Hôtel de Richelieu, and Corneille later cited the approval of the Queen and ladies of the Court in his own defence against critics of the play. Having opened at the Théâtre du Marais on 4 January 1637, it was still playing to full houses in March—at a time when a run of only twenty or so performances of a new play represented a considerable success. Such was the demand for seats that additional ones had to be provided on the stage for the first time. The extraordinary popularity of the play in performance provided Corneille with his main defence against those who attacked it on literary and moral grounds.

The first criticism of the play came from fellow-dramatists and it is hardly surprising that Corneille should have been subject to a certain amount of professional jealousy as well as public approbation. There is no record of adverse reactions from ordinary members of the audience. Both sides of the debate have been usefully documented by Armand Gasté. The first attack was launched by Scudéry in his Observations sur le Cid, soon followed by Mairé's L'Auteur du vray Cid Espagnol. Pellisson suggests that Scudéry may have been motivated by a desire to please Cardinal Richelieu, who was himself becoming envious of his protégé's success, and made his appeal to the Académie Française with the Cardinal's approval (p. 80). Fontenelle claims that Richelieu initiated the attack: 'Il souleva les auteurs contre cet ouvrage [...] et il se
mit à leur tête', but adds that 'il récompensait comme ministre ce même mérite dont il était jaloux comme poète'—a reference to the ennoblement of Corneille’s father in the same year. (Although this was officially in recognition of his public service as Maître des Eaux et forêts for over twenty years, it was seen at once as a tribute to the talent of his son: the anonymous author of ‘Le Souhait du Cid’ described the play as ‘procurant à son auteur la noblesse qu’il n’avait pas de naissance’ and Mairet referred to ‘le Cid, qui d’abord vous a valu l’argent et la noblesse’.9)

Mairet’s criticism was triggered by Corneille’s poem ‘Excuse à Ariste’, in which he unwisely vaunted his freedom and independence, failing to acknowledge his debt to Guillem de Castro, the Spanish author of Las Mocedades del Cid. Mairet accused him of arrogance and insolence, and Corneille’s impudent retort ‘Qu’il fasse mieux’ did nothing to calm his opponents. Scudéry’s criticisms were more wide-ranging and focused on the play itself, rather than the attitude of the author; he emphasized that ‘j’attaque le Cid, et non pas son auteur’. As well as echoing Mairet’s accusation of plagiarism, he condemned the subject and structure of the play, its infringement of the classical rules of drama and particular instances of irregularity in the versification. But the main object of his attack was the character of Chimène, and it was this aspect of the play which produced the most heated argument and the first instance of a documented debate about the conduct of a dramatic character, which demonstrates both the extent to which the aesthetic concept of bienséance is concerned with ideas about the status and behaviour of women, and Corneille’s achievement in creating a heroine of such interest. The vraisemblance of her conduct on stage might be called into question, but she was real enough to her admirers and to her critics alike to be discussed as if she were still alive.

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Scudéry’s principal objection concerns Chimène’s eventual marriage to Rodrigue, which does not in fact take place within the action of the play, and underlines the difference between historical fact and aesthetic acceptability, originally defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (Chapter Nine). ‘Il est vrai que Chimène épousa le Cid; mais il n’est point vraisemblable qu’une fille d’honneur épouse le meurtrier de son père. Cet événement étoit bon pour l’historien, mais il ne valoit rien pour le poète.’ Scudéry then argues that the story is intrinsically unsuitable for a dramatist ‘parce qu’étant historique, et par conséquent vrai, mais non pas vraisemblable, d’autant qu’il choque la raison et les bonnes moeurs, il ne pouvoit pas le changer, ni le rendre propre au poème dramatique’ (p. 444). The principle of *vraisemblance*—in his view ‘la fondamentale de tout l’ouvrage’—required the writer to conform to a generally accepted vision of how things ought to be and how people should behave. D’Aubignac later made the same point: ‘La scène ne donne point les choses comme elles ont été, mais comme elles devaient être.’ So plays were to reflect a set of existing moral ideals, rather than the complexities of human nature.

Apart from the historical fact of the marriage itself, Scudéry considered that the requirements of *vraisemblance* and of *bienséance* were violated by Corneille’s inclusion of the two scenes in which Chimène receives Rodrigue—although unwillingly—after he has killed her father, and openly admits her love for him even as she swears to avenge her father’s death (III, 4). According to Scudéry, his appearance at her house directly after the duel ‘choque directement le sens commun’, and Rodrigue should have determined never to see Chimène again. Her public confession of her continuing love for Rodrigue in Act V is condemned even more strongly than her private declaration to him alone, but both are considered improbable and unseemly. D’Aubignac formulated the rule
as follows in *La Pratique du Théâtre*: 'Il ne faut jamais qu’une femme fasse entendre de sa propre bouche à un homme qu’elle a de l’amour pour lui, et moins encore qu’elle ne se sent pas assez forte pour résister à sa passion' (p. 329).

The question of *vraisemblance* is closely linked to the concept of *bienséance*, which in turn reflects prevailing ideas of morality at a particular point in time and in practice is chiefly concerned with masculine notions of how women should behave. A woman’s conduct is considered convincing only if it is decorous, unless she is shown to be entirely wicked, and from ancient Athens to seventeenth-century France the prevailing view of women was that they should be modest, unassuming and obedient to the men who controlled their lives. Writing in 1640, shortly after the ‘querelle du Cid’, La Mesnardiére followed Aristotle in setting out the principles of appropriate conduct for a female character in *La Poétique*. His Chapter Eight on ‘Les Moeurs’ gives a list of the attributes required of each sex, and women are to be, among other things, ‘douces, foibles, delicaces, modestes, pudiques, courtoises’ (p. 124), as in the Christian ideal discussed in Chapter One. It was considered inappropriate to show a learned woman, because they were so rare, and he quotes Aristotle’s criticism of Euripides for introducing the character of Ménalippe—‘une folle et jeune beauté’—who engages in a discussion of the ideas of a philosopher ‘dont à peine les plus sçavans peuvent comprendre les visions, qui sont si fort éloignées de la capacité des femmes’.

The concept of ‘bienséance’ embraces both this ‘bienséance interne’, as René Bray has described it, giving consistency and historical coherence to dramatic characters, and ‘la bienséance externe’ whereby the playwright must ensure that his characters behave with proper decorum and do not shock their audience. This particularly applies to the conduct of women, since their range of acceptable behaviour is so restricted, but also
precludes the appearance of physical brutality on stage, which had still been present in the plays of Alexandre Hardy and even in Corneille’s *Clitandre*. La Mesnardière deplores ‘des spectacles hazardeux ou horribles’, criticizing Euripides again for choosing to dramatize the story of Medea, ‘cette Fable excessivement inhumaine’. The fact that Rodrigue appears before Chimène with his sword stained with her father’s blood added to the impact of this scene and increased the outrage of critics who already thought it was intolerable.

Although La Mesnardière does not name any modern authors or plays, some of his criticism of his contemporaries seems clearly aimed at *Le Cid*. In his discussion of ‘Les Sentimens’ he deplores the immodest behaviour of some contemporary female characters, and seems to be thinking of Chimène in particular: ‘Ailleurs les Beautez malheureuses & accablées de misères, écoutez des cajoleries au milieu de leurs infortunes’ (p. 244), which is presumably directed at the scenes between Rodrigue and Chimène. His section on ‘Les Sentimens Deshonnestes’ is all about female sexual conduct: a woman may not openly declare her feelings to her lover, nor make any reference to sexual pleasure, even within marriage: such things may only be hinted at discreetly by ‘une expression couverte’. Again it is considered a matter of vraisemblance, since no respectable woman would be likely to behave in a way so remote from ‘ces pudiques manieres que doivent avoir les Filles qui paroissent sur le Théatre’ (p. 307), and again Chimène breaks the rules. What makes Corneille’s portrayal of his heroine unacceptable is the fact that she is presented as a virtuous woman and is clearly intended to attract the sympathy of the audience.

Because Chimène’s conduct as an apparently virtuous heroine does not conform to the prevailing moral code, it is considered by Scudéry to be unconvincing and the play
aesthetically unacceptable: ‘Ce sujet ne peut être vraisemblable, et par conséquent il choque une des principales règles du poème’ (p. 444). Michael Moriarty explains Scudéry’s reasoning thus: ‘The poet’s task is to purify his material of the dross of historical contingency, [...] he is to consider what is proper for a young woman in general rather than what Chimène actually did’. If historical fact conflicted with an idealized view of the correct way for human beings to behave, then it was inadmissible on stage. The *Sentiments de l’Académie*, formulated by Chapelain, upheld this view. It is worth noting that when Corneille wrote his *Discours du Poème dramatique* in 1660, giving his interpretation of Aristotle’s precepts, he suggested only that ‘Le poète doit considérer l’âge, la dignité, la naissance, l’emploi et le pays de ceux qu’il introduit’, with no mention of confining the possibilities of dramatic characters according to their sex.

For Scudéry, Chimène’s continuing love for Rodrigue after he has killed her father is impious as well as unnatural. He denounces her as ‘une fille dénaturée’, mourning the loss of her lover ‘lorsqu’elle ne doit songer qu’à celle de son père’, receiving him in her home and ‘pour achever son impiété’ accepting the King’s decision that she should marry him (pp. 446-47). The use of the term underlines the religious framework of the patriarchal moral code within which she is being judged. Even the status of the King as a divinely-appointed temporal authority does not entitle him to contravene this code. Scudéry and Chapelain both describe his ruling as an ‘injuste ordonnance’ contrary to reason, and criticize the ending of the play as an unsatisfactory denouement both from a moral and from an aesthetic point of view.

Throughout the *Observations* Scudéry’s language about Chimène becomes increasingly violent: from ‘une fille dénaturée’, ‘cette impudique’, ‘ce monstre’, to ‘cette criminelle’ uttering ‘cent choses dignes d’une prostituée’, and her feelings for Rodrigue
are described as ‘l’infâme passion qui la possède’ and ‘ses folies dénaturées’. And yet, as Corneille makes clear in the opening scene of the play, she is engaged to Rodrigue and has obeyed her father’s wishes in agreeing to marry him, and far from allowing herself to be swayed by passion, her first reaction to the news of her father’s death is an appeal to the King for justice.

Before the publication of the *Sentimens de l’Académie* in December 1637, Chapelain’s draft was corrected by Richelieu himself, so the sentiments finally expressed were those of the Cardinal as well as the members of the Académie, and represented a compromise between his conflicting interests in the matter of Corneille’s play. Richelieu’s position was one of exceptional influence: as a senior figure in the Church, a political leader and a patron of writers, he was in a strong position to promote his personal enthusiasm for the theatre. The author was his protégé and he had arranged two private performances of the play. But he may have felt that he could not publicly condone the appearance on stage of a heroine presented as virtuous, who nonetheless transgressed conventional morality; he may have been displeased by the choice of a Spanish subject at a time when France was at war with Spain; or perhaps he simply wished to use the opportunity to demonstrate his control of cultural events in the capital. Whatever his reasons, he needed the opinion of a supposedly impartial body to deliver a conclusive judgment.

As we have seen, the Cardinal had failed to exercise any control over the Marquise de Rambouillet’s literary salon, but he did succeed in taking over a private circle of men of letters who met to read and discuss their work, and transforming it into an official body. Pellisson tells the story of the origins of the Académie Française in his *Histoire de l’Académie Française*, which was published in 1653. The first meetings in the early

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1630s, at the home of Conrart, were kept secret, but in time others came to hear of them and were invited to attend: Faret presented a copy of *L'Honneste Homme*, Desmarets gave a reading of *Ariane* and invited Boisrobert, who of course reported back to Richelieu. The Cardinal promptly suggested the formation of an official organization and offered his protection.

From the start there was suspicion of Richelieu's motives and resistance to this extension of his influence, and hence state control, in the literary world. According to Pellisson, some members regretted that 'l'honneur qu'on leur faisoit, vint troubler la douceur & la familiarité de leurs conferences', but Chapelain and others were of the opinion that 'ils avoient affaire à un homme qui ne vouloit pas mediocrement ce qu'il vouloit, & qui n'avait pas accoītumé de trouver de la resistance'. In due course he also overcame the objections of the Paris Parlement, resistant to the establishment of yet another instrument of the Cardinal's control, and the royal edict signed by the King in 1635 was finally ratified by Parlement in 1637. The Académie thus became an official body under royal protection, and remained an exclusively male preserve for almost 350 years, until the election of Marguerite Yourcenar in 1980, in contrast to the informal and independent spirit which prevailed among the mixed company in the *chambre bleue*.

By the time the Académie was called upon to deliver its judgment on *Le Cid*, many of Richelieu's favourites had been promoted to membership and the organization had acquired the nickname of 'L'Académie Eminente', indicating the extent to which it was considered an instrument of his influence. Pellisson notes the initial reluctance of some academicians to deliver an official opinion of Corneille's play, partly because it seemed presumptuous to pronounce on a work which had already achieved such success on stage, and partly because the statutes of the Académie provided for such criticism to
be made only at the author’s request (p. 81). ‘Mais le Cardinal avoit ce dessein en tête’, and so Boisrobert was deputed to write to Corneille and obtain his consent. Not surprisingly, Corneille was unwilling to submit his most successful play to the scrutiny of a body of censors, and his letter of 13 June 1637 firmly states his objection to the procedure for the following reasons: ‘que cette occupation n’était pas digne de l’Académie. Qu’un libelle qui ne méritait point de réponse ne méritait point son jugement. Que la conséquence en serait dangereuse, parce qu’elle autoriserait l’envie à importuner ces Messieurs’, but his final dismissive comment that in view of the Cardinal’s wish to obtain an official judgment ‘Messieurs de l’Académie peuvent faire ce qu’il leur plaira’, could just about be interpreted as an expression of consent, and so three academicians (de Bourzey, Chapelain and Desmarets) were appointed to examine both the play itself and Scudéry’s criticisms.

Of the three judges, Desmarets’ career was most closely connected with Corneille’s at this time, as a successful fellow-dramatist and fellow-protégé of Richelieu. His comedy Les Visionnaires had followed Le Cid at the Marais theatre and also gave a starring role to Montdory as the poet Amidor: these were among the actor’s last roles before his illness and retirement from the stage. Chapelain, who drafted the Sentimens de l’Académie for Richelieu’s approval, had to overrule his personal feelings in his official capacity, as Barbara Krajewska has discovered in a study of his correspondence. His first reaction to Le Cid was expressed in a letter to a friend of 22 January 1637: ‘Depuis quinze jours le public a été diverti du Cid à un point de satisfaction qui ne se peut exprimer. Je vous ai fort désiré à la représentation.’ On 13 June he wrote to Guez de Balzac: ‘La manière, les beaux sentiments [...] les ornements qu’a ajoutés notre poète français, ont mérité l’applaudissement du peuple et de la Cour.’ His doubts about the judgment required of...
the Académie were expressed in another letter to Balzac of 21 August: 'C’est odieux de reprendre un ouvrage que la réputation de son auteur et la bonne fortune de la pièce a fait approuver chacun.' But his scruples did not prevent him from formulating a judgment strongly critical of Corneille.

The Sentimens de l’Académie were published in December 1637 and the three official judges largely upheld Scudéry’s objections to the play, although their language was a good deal less violent. Fontenelle considers that the Académie succeeded in striking a balance between the opposing points of view: 'Elle satisfit le cardinal en reprenant exactement tous les défauts de cette pièce, et le public en les reprenant avec modération, et même souvent avec des louanges.' In the opening paragraph the judges claim to be representing public opinion:

Ceux qui abandonnent leurs Ouvrages au Public ne doivent pas trouver estrange que le Public s’en face le Juge. Ils perdent tout le droit qu’ils y ont aussi tost qu’ils l’exposent à la lumiere [...] La reputation n’en depend plus de leur suffrage.

yet their criticisms are at odds with the play’s popularity with audiences, and Corneille himself would repeatedly argue that the judgment of the audience was to be preferred to a pedantic and theoretical view. He begins his Discours du Poème dramatique by reminding readers that ‘selon Aristote, le seul but de la poésie dramatique [est] de plaire aux spectateurs [...] selon les règles’ and explains that this aim will only be achieved if the play is in some way morally edifying, since pleasure and profit go together (OC, III, pp. 117-19).

Although the Sentimens do discuss other aspects of the play, they focus to a great extent, like Scudéry’s Observations, on the conduct of Chimène. The Academicians agree with him that the subject of the play is unacceptable:
and that if a dramatist chooses a historical subject ‘il la doit reduire aux termes de la bienseance mesme au despens de la verité’. In his edition of the *Sentimens* Georges Collas points out (p. 22) that in fact, in Spain at the time of the historical event, Chimène’s marriage to the victor in a duel would have been seen as entirely ‘bienséant’, but that of course the Académie was judging according to the standards of seventeenth-century France. In the case of *Le Cid*, measures suggested by the academicians to change the story in order to render it acceptable include a discovery that the Count is not Chimène’s real father; that he is not really dead; that the safety of the kingdom is absolutely dependent on the alliance of Rodrigue and Chimène; but ‘le plus expedient eust esté de n’en point faire de Poème Dramatique’—hardly an expression of popular opinion. Chapelain’s terms are more moderate than Scudéry’s but he reiterates the view that Chimène owes more to her father than to her lover, concluding that she is an ‘Amante trop sensible et sans pudeur contre la bienseance de son sexe et Fille de mauvais naturel contre ce qu’elle deveit à la memoire de son Pere’, and ‘ses moeurs, si on ne peut les appeler meschantes se doivent au moins avoier scandaleuses’ (pp. 36-37). Filial duty is thus seen as more ‘natural’ than attachment to a lover. Interestingly, Chapelain considers that Chimène’s surrender to her love would be excusable in a man, but ‘l’honneur de son sexe exigeoit d’elle une severité plus grande’ (p. 40), since chastity was considered the cardinal virtue for a woman and any acknowledgment of her passionate feelings, even towards a fiancé, could be seen as a step towards the loss of self-control.

So once again we find embedded in the notion of propriety the masculine desire to keep female sexuality under control. A female character who infringed the dominant
moral code by honestly expressing her emotions was deemed to contravene the aesthetic requirement of bienséance. But how far could this code be retrospectively applied to a real woman who had lived in a very different society 600 years earlier? And what of the dramatist’s own wish to focus on a particular aspect of a historical subject? The innovation of Corneille’s drama was his interest in examining systems of values, rather than merely operating within them: in this he belonged to the spirit of the age of Galileo and Descartes. One of the most effective elements in the play is his dramatization of the conflict between the values of different generations, and the sincere desire of both Chimène and Rodrigue to make the impossible reconciliation between their respect for their fathers and their love for each other, but for literary purists this true human dilemma should have been replaced by a strict and dramatically sterile single-minded devotion to filial duty. All dramatic theorists agreed that crime must always be punished, but it is only possible to make such simple judgments when vice and virtue can be clearly distinguished, and Corneille was interested in the difficulties which arise when the issues are not so clear-cut. Although he would later describe part of the moral utility of drama as ‘la naïve peinture des vices et des vertus’¹⁰, there are not many instances in his work of characters who can be neatly painted black or white; the most interesting dramatic situations evolve out of more ambiguous (and therefore more believable) characters attempting to reconcile the tensions of conflicting values.

For Corneille, drama lay not in recounting a series of events, but in exploring the reaction of human beings to the situations in which they may find themselves. In creating an extreme situation on stage and presenting his characters with an impossible dilemma, he was encouraging the audience to ask themselves what they might do in such circumstances. His legal training had equipped him to present conflicting arguments and
weigh up the consequences of different courses of action: he was not interested in simply presenting an empty moral ideal, but in exploring the complex possibilities of human emotion and behaviour. And if audiences liked his plays they presumably liked being encouraged to think about moral questions for themselves, rather than being presented with simple answers.

As one of the first generation of independent professional playwrights, Corneille asserted his own claim to literary authority. The word derives, after all, from the Latin 'auctor', meaning an author, one who causes or originates, and Corneille considered that his own original talent gave him sufficient authority to write as he pleased, so long as he also pleased his audience. In his 'Excuse à Ariste' he refuses a request for a libretto because his ability to write poetry cannot be constrained by the demands of musical form, but 'veut pour se produire avoir la clef des champs'. He relishes his independence and expresses pride in his own achievement:

Je sais ce que je vaux, et crois ce qu'on m'en dit. [...] Je satisfais ensemble et peuple et courtisans, Et mes vers en tous lieux sont mes seuls partisans, Par leur seule beauté ma plume est estimée, Je ne dois qu'à moi seul toute ma renommée, [...] (these were the lines that angered Mairêt). The final image is of his Muse breaking free of restriction:

Laissez-la, toujours libre, agir suivant son choix, Céder à son caprice, et s'en faire des lois. (OC, I, pp. 779-81)

While accepting the classical rules as far as the structure of his plays was concerned, he stressed the freedom of the writer to treat a dramatic subject in his own way. In his dedicatory letter to La Suivante, which was published in the course of the 'Querelle du Cid', he asserts that 'Chacun a sa méthode: je ne blâme point celle des autres, et me tiens à la mienne [...] Les jugements sont libres en ces matières, et les goûts divers. [...] j'aime
à suivre les règles, mais loin de me rendre leur esclave, je les élargis et resserre selon le besoin qu’en a mon sujet’. He makes here the point he will frequently reiterate: ‘Notre premier but doit être de plaire à la Cour et au peuple et d’attirer un grand monde à leurs représentations [...] surtout gagnons la voix publique.’ (OC, I, pp. 385-87) For Corneille, the taste and judgment of his audience were to be trusted—not surprisingly, since they had shown such enthusiasm for his own plays. Perhaps Chapelain and Scudéry would have taken a more favourable view of the level of intelligence of the theatre-going public if their work had achieved anything like Corneille’s degree of success in the theatre. Both Molière and Racine expressed similar confidence in the judgment of their audiences, once their plays had already proved popular.21

Corneille first defended Chimène herself in terms of the play’s favourable reception. His Lettre apologetique, published in response to Scudéry’s Observations, counters the latter’s criticism by asking:

[...] ne vous êtes-vous pas souvenu que Le Cid a été représenté trois fois au Louvre, et deux fois à l’Hôtel de Richelieu? Quand vous avez traité la pauvre Chimène d’impudique, de prostituée, de parricide, de monstre, ne vous êtes-vous pas souvenu que la Reine, les Princesses et les plus vertueuses Dames de la Cour et de Paris l’ont reçue et caressée en fille d’honneur?22

But after the judgment of the Académie he did make some significant changes to later editions of the text. In the Avertissement of 1648 he pointed out that his portrayal of Chimène’s character was determined by considerations of historical accuracy, but the final scene of the play was altered to leave the audience with a different impression of her attitude to the forthcoming marriage. In the first version, Chimène’s last speech expresses compliance with the King’s decision and she asks only that the marriage be delayed for a period of mourning. In the later version of the text she speaks of her union with Rodrigue as a sentence, and ends with a series of questions:
which leave us with the impression that she is at the mercy of circumstances and that the choice is not her own. In his Examen of the play in the collected edition of 1660 Corneille explained that this uncertain ending was the only way to 'accorder la bienséance du théâtre avec la vérité de l'événement', but he did not change the two scenes between Rodrigue and Chimène which had so shocked Scudéry and the Académie, and explained that their inclusion was justified by their dramatic impact. He recalls that at the first performances, when the couple faced each other, 'il s'élevait un certain frémissement dans l'Assemblée, qui marquait une curiosité merveilleuse, et un redoublement d'attention pour ce qu'ils avaient à se dire dans un état si pitoyable' (OC, I, p. 702). The playwright's talent for capturing his audience's interest would always take precedence over dramatic convention.

Other participants in the 'querelle' were keen to defend Corneille's heroine. The anonymous author of Le Souhait du Cid en faveur de Scudéri discusses the character of Chimène at length and concludes that, far from departing from vraisemblance, Corneille has in fact depicted his heroine most realistically by showing her divided feelings: 'Chimène desire avec passion ce qu'elle ne peut esperer par raison [...] chercher la raison dans la passion, c'est ne sçavoir pas que les Aigles ne nagent point en mer, [...] une passion violente ne seroit pas telle si la raison la gouvernoit' (Gasté, p. 24). The author of L'innocence et le veritable amour de Chymene, published in 1638, used a different argument, echoing the distinction between 'passion' and 'amour' which Corneille himself had explained in his dedication to La Place royale. Passion 'rend esclave la raison' whereas 'le veritable Amour' brings 'complaisances & agreemens d'esprit [...] sans
Since ChimÈne reacts with sorrow to her father's death, and then appeals to the King to punish Rodrigue, her reason in seeking vengeance takes precedence over her attachment to her lover, and she is therefore not guilty of contravening the rules of biensÈance. There is also a practical consideration: 'Mais aprÈs avoir satisfait aux loix de la nature & È tout ce que l'humanitÈ exige des enfans, voulez-vous qu'ayant perdu son Pere, elle perde encore son Amant?' (p. 24). And the author seems to be countering criticism from religious sources when he argues that if her actions had offended Heaven, divine intervention would have ensured that she died of shock or grief, 'mais le Ciel ayant destinÈ Chymene È Rodrigue pour Ètre son Epouse, luy rend la vie' (p. 29). The judgment of the King, 'un rayon de leur DivinitÈ', also carries divine authority and should not be questioned. Corneille himself returned to the debate in his Discours de la tragÈdie of 1660 to make the point that ChimÈne has in fact done all she can to avenge her father's death—'elle y fait son possible' (OC, III, p. 153). Short of killing Rodrigue herself, which would hardly have pleased the purists, there is nothing more she can do, and she cannot be criticized for her own powerlessness.

In a letter to ScudÈry of 27 August 1637, Guez de Balzac sums up all the practical arguments in favour of Corneille's play against the theoretical objections raised by his critics:

ConsidÈrez, Monsieur, que toute la France entre en cause avec lui [...] c'est quelque chose de plus d'avoir satisfait tout un royaume que d'avoir fait une piÈce rÈgulierÈ [...] Ainsi vous l'emportez dans le cabinet, et il a gagnÈ au thÈatre. Si le Cid est coupable, c'est d'un crime qui a eu rÈcompense; s'il est puni, ce sera aprÈs avoir triomphÈ; [...] Ne vous attachez point avec tant de scrupule a la souveraine raison. Qui voudrait la contenter et suivre ses desseins et sa rÈgularitÈ serait obligÈ de lui bÈtit un plus beau monde que celui-ci.23

As he makes clear, the controversy over Corneille's play demonstrates the existence of two different criteria for judging works of literature: popularity with the reading or
theatre-going public, which was welcomed by successful practitioners, and acceptability on aesthetic grounds by a much smaller literary establishment, consisting of men of letters who were principally theorists and who wrote to please each other, rather than the general public. Alain Viala describes the latter as ‘réussite’ as opposed to popular ‘succès’, which for the elite minority was seen as irrelevant, and there was a certain contempt for those who actually made money out of their writing. When Corneille attempted to maximize revenue from his plays he was accused of being mercenary and it was only in 1653 that Quinault became the first playwright to obtain a percentage of the box office takings.24 For the theorists the popularity of Le Cid on the public stage was unimportant; their criterion of success was the extent to which dramatic characters could be seen to conform to a moral code so deeply enshrined as to seem unquestionable, and in the case of Chimène this meant a requirement that a woman should submit her feelings to her social duty, constituted first and foremost by obedience to her father. In their view, her obligation to avenge her father’s death must override her love for Rodrigue: she must suppress her own desires and hopes for the future and effectively end her own life by adhering to the requirements of her father’s generation.

So an opinion of theatre audiences very different from that of Corneille was expressed by Scudéry in his Apologie du théâtre of 1639,25 and by La Mesnariède in La Poetique (1640). In their view, only an educated minority of spectators was capable of understanding and judging serious drama: Scudéry described them as ‘doctes’ or ‘savants’ and La Mesnariède as ‘les grandes Ames’. While insisting that drama must convey an approved moral message, they claimed that ‘la vile populace’ was incapable of understanding it. Scudéry’s image of ‘la comédie’ is of a seductive siren, enticing men for their own good: ‘Elle conduit les hommes vers l’instruction, feignant de ne les mener
qu’au divertissement: ainsi cette charmante maîtresse travaille à les rendre sages eux-mêmes lorsqu’ils pensent qu’elle ne songe qu’à leur plaire’ (p. 81). As women may wear ‘les ornements proportionnés à leur condition, mais non pas les habits indécents des courtisanes’, so the theatre may display ‘toutes les richesses dont elle est capable, mais non pas de ces dangereuses maximes qui peuvent corrompre les bonnes moeurs’ (p. 82). But ‘cette multitude ignorante que la farce attire à la comédie’ cannot appreciate ‘les bonnes choses’ and may not even pay attention to a tragedy (p. 93).

La Mesnardière’s view of ‘le peuple’ is similarly dismissive. If the common people go to the theatre it is only for the spectacle, as they would go to stare at royalty. In his opinion ‘le profit des Spectacles exposez dans la Tragédie, est reservé aux grandes Ames; [...] la multitude grossiere ne peut treuver aucun plaisir dans un discours serieux, grave, chaste & vraiment Tragique; [...] pour ressentir les effets de la Science theatralle, il faut estre fort élevé au dessus de la populace’.26 His view of authorship is equally exclusive and in his Introduction he attacks ‘ceux de nos Ecrivains qui n’ont pas beaucoup de science’ for presuming to write for the theatre. In the aftermath of the ‘Querelle du Cid’ his criticism seems to be directed in particular towards Corneille when he speaks of ‘l’étrange temerité d’un tas de foibles esprits, qui [...] attirez par le profit dont la stupidité du peuple recompense leurs péchez, montent hardiment sur la Scéne’.

For La Mesnardière, Aristotle’s guidelines for dramatic composition are a prescription to be followed to the letter, and only the initiated within an elite circle may write dramatic poetry, in accordance with these rules, or express judgment on it. The current popularity of theatre is seen as an invasion of this exclusive territory and he insists on the importance of acquiring specialist knowledge—‘les choses qu’il faut sçavoir pour juger avec connoissance de nos Poèmes de Théâtre’ (p. 4). Although he did not

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specifically exclude women from writing plays, his prerequisite of learning would have tended to do so in practice. The point is reiterated in his section on 'Les Moeurs': 'nous travaillons pour les Poètes judicieux, dont l'esprit disciplinable fait gloire de s'assujettir à tous les Préceptes de l'Art, & ne se contente pas du vil applaudissement d'une populace ignorante' (p. 109). This is the exact opposite of Corneille's view that rules are for guidance only, Aristotle's definitions being descriptive rather than prescriptive, that each playwright must interpret them in his own way and that full houses are the best measure of success.

In the case of Le Cid, the audiences who filled the Théâtre du Marais were not drawn from 'une populace ignorante'. Montdory's letter to Balzac shortly after the opening of the play, already quoted above, emphasizes that the play was enthusiastically received by the highest members of society:

On a vu seoir en corps aux bancs de ses loges ceux qu'on ne voit d'ordinaire que dans la chambre dorée et sur le siège des fleurs de lys. La foule a été si grande à nos portes et notre lieu s'est trouvé si petit, que les recoins du théâtre [...] ont été des places de faveur pour les cordons bleus et la scène a été d'ordinaire parée de croix de chevaliers de l'Ordre.

As we have seen, Corneille used this argument to defend his heroine against her detractors, reminding them that Le Cid has been praised by high-ranking audiences, having been performed three times at Court and twice at the Hôtel de Richelieu, and in his dedication of the play to Madame de Combalet, he declares that 'le jugement que vous en faites est la marque assurée de son prix'. André Stegmann emphasizes Corneille's role in extending the appeal of theatre to a wider audience: 'Il fixa un public nouveau, grands seigneurs et honnêtes gens, qui lui demanderont plus qu'un divertissement.'

It can be no coincidence that increased concern with bienséance became evident at a time when increasing numbers of women were attending the theatre. La Mesnardière
ends his section on ‘Les Sentimens Deshonnestes’ with a reference to female members of the audience:

Et il seroit à désirer pour la pureté de la Scène, que tout le monde publiât que les Ecrivains de Théâtre sont d’autant plus condamnables pour leurs Sentimens deshonnestes, qu’ils les exposent en un lieu où les Dames doivent trouver des instructions salutaires parmi le divertissement. (p. 313)

Recent plays by Rotrou and Mairet had featured heroines of dubious virtue, including prostitutes and unmarried mothers, or with the effrontery to declare their love and pursue the men of their choice. Even Scudéry’s own Dido in 1635 had openly declared her passion for Aeneas and in the same year Mareschal’s Le Railleur had been suppressed after a performance at the Hôtel de Richelieu because of its implication of lesbian relations, possibly directed at the Cardinal’s niece Madame d’Aiguillon.28 There was evidently great sensitivity to the way in which women were presented on stage. In highlighting the issue of bienséance in the ‘Querelle du Cid’, and in wanting to restrict what was available for women to see in the theatre, moralists and men of letters were revealing their own unease about the changing role of women in their own society.

As it became socially acceptable for women to attend the theatre and to take part in salon discussions, and there were many more playtexts being published, it was possible for female members of polite society to develop their own literary judgment and to disregard the opinion of the scholars who considered that their classical learning and understanding of dramatic theory gave them authority over the opinion of the general public. Boileau’s comment on Le Cid in his ninth Satire of 1668 records the impossibility of controlling public taste in this way—perhaps he was also thinking of recent criticism of the play by Conti and Nicole:

En vain, contre le Cid un ministre se ligue;  
Tout Paris pour Chimène a les yeux de Rodrigue:
Audiences at the Marais were happy to accept Corneille's version of the story and applauded the performance of Mademoiselle Villiers; presumably Chimène’s behaviour stimulated a great deal of discussion, but there is no record of women expressing moral objections to the character dramatized by Corneille. The theorists might prefer women on stage to conform to an abstract ideal, but audiences responded to a heroine with real and complicated feelings.

The judgment of the Académie concludes with a reproof to Corneille for his vanity, hoping that criticism will 'servir de frein à ceux qui [...] sont trop enclins à s’enfler de leurs bons succès' (Sentimens, p. 69), but grudgingly acknowledges that despite all its faults the play has an 'agrément inexplicable' which gives it 'un notable avantage sur le commun des Poèmes qui ont paru sur la scene francoise jusques à present' (p. 79). Corneille took careful note of the criticisms made of his work and engaged in a long series of counter-attacks which appeared in the Prefaces to his subsequent plays and culminated in the three Discours published in 1660. His chief argument was always the continuing popularity of his plays and his trust in the taste and judgment of his audiences. As David Clarke puts it, Corneille considers every spectator 'naturally capable of discriminating between qualities of behaviour as he is capable of perceiving the difference between light and dark in the physical world'. Since Le Cid is still a popular play, while the opinions of his judges at the Académie Française have been largely forgotten, his faith in his audience was justified.

The activities of the Académie were satirized in La Comédie des Académistes, which began to circulate in manuscript soon after the judgment of Le Cid. It was probably compiled by several young writers, including Saint-Évremond, who revised the
text for publication in 1650. In the anonymous author's ironic dedication 'Aux Autheurs de l'Académie', he acknowledges that 'vous estes seuls capables de bien juger' and mocks their attachment to classical rules: 'Je n'ay point voulu consulter les morts ny tirer des règles qu'ils nous ont laissées les satisfactions que j'attens.' Chapelain is one of the chief characters in the play—presumably reflecting his leading role in compiling the *Sentiments de l'Académie*—and he is shown as untalented, self-important and ridiculously pedantic.

The controversy over *Le Cid* continued long after the play's first run at the Marais, and many years later those who opposed the theatre on religious grounds were still citing Corneille's play as an example of how immoral drama could be, presumably because it was so well known and still popular, and because its success had contributed to the increased popularity and prestige of the theatre earlier in the century. The Prince de Conti attacks *Le Cid*, giving its leading characters as examples of idolatrous lovers whose adoration of each other takes precedence over their duty to God, and condemns what he calls the idolatry of secular love because its object receives the sacrifice and adoration due only to God. Perhaps he was also thinking of the 'idolization' of leading actors by their audiences, and the personal success of Montdory and Mademoiselle Villiers in the principal roles. In the course of his general condemnation of drama for concentrating so much on love stories, he cites Chimène as an example of a shameless woman, denouncing her open declaration to her lover:

> [...] peut-on appeller tout à fait honnestes des ouvrages dans lesquels on voit les filles les plus severes écouter les declarations de leurs amans, estre bien aises d'en estre aimées, recevoir leurs lettres & leurs visites, [...] qui voulût que sa femme, ou sa fille fust honneste comme Chimene, & comme toutes les plus vertueuses Princesses du theatre? (Conti, p. 26)
Nicole refers to *Le Cid* in the course of discussing 'les passions vicieuses' and seems to think that Corneille was supporting the principle of revenge and encouraging the practice of duelling, rather than opening a debate on the whole concept of honour. Over half a century after its first performance, Bossuet uses the example of *Le Cid* in his *Maximes et Réflexions sur la Comédie* to condemn the dramatic portrayal of passion which in turn will excite similar feelings in the spectator:

"... que veut un Corneille dans son *Cid*, sinon qu'on aime Chimène, qu'on l'adore avec Rodrigue, qu'on tremble avec lui, lorsqu'il est dans la crainte de la perdre, et qu'avec lui on s'estime heureux lorsqu'il espère de la posséder?"

It is the only play specifically criticized, a testimony to its continuing popularity, and its disturbing effect on the Bishop of Meaux is a clear if indirect tribute to Corneille's skill in creating a complex woman rather than a female stereotype.

In view of the receptivity of audiences to the questions raised in *Le Cid*, Corneille and other playwrights continued to explore the dramatic possibilities of reassessing the feminine role. Inevitably, some of their characters also upset strict religious opinion. The next chapter will look at some other plays of the period which focus on transgressive female characters.

3. Chapelain, ‘Lettre sur la règle des vingt-quatre heures’ (1630); Mairet, Preface to *La Silvanire* (1631); Corneille, Preface to *Clitandre* (1632).
7. Armand Gasté, *Documents relatifs à la Querelle du Cid*.

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8. Vie de Corneille par Fontenelle in Oeuvres complètes (Seuil), pp. 22-23.


10. Georges de Scudéry, Observations sur le Cid in GEF, XII, pp. 441-61 (p. 443).

11. D'Aubignac, La Pratique du Théâtre, p. 68.

12. La Mesnardière, La Poétique, p. 137.


17. Barbara Krajewska, La vérité sur Jean Chapelain, révélée par lui-même dans sa correspondance. Autour de "la querelle du Cid".


21. For example, Molière’s Prefaces to Les Précieuses ridicules, L'Ecole des femmes, Tartuffe; Racine’s Prefaces to Andromaque, Bérénice and Iphigénie en Aulide.


23. Corneille, GEF, III, p. 44.


26. La Mesnardière, La Poétique, Introduction (no page numbers).

27. Introduction to Le Cid in Oeuvres complètes (Seuil), p. 215.


29. Boileau, Oeuvres complètes, p. 54.

30. David Clarke, Pierre Corneille, Poetics and political drama under Louis XIII, p. 79.

31. In Théâtre du XVIIe siècle, II.

32. Conti, Traité de la Comédie et des Spectacles, p. 23.

33. Pierre Nicole, Traité de la Comédie, pp. 55-57.

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34. Urbain & Levesque, p. 176.
The success of *Le Cid* showed that Corneille had engaged the interest of his audience in his creation of a dramatic character presented as virtuous, but whose conduct did not conform to general ideas of virtue in a woman, who aroused controversy because she raised profound questions about morality and values. Whether or not he had consciously set out to contribute to the ongoing debate about the role and status of women, there was evidently a readiness among Parisian theatre-goers to consider these questions by seeing, reading and discussing his play.

But the qualities which attracted large audiences proved less popular with some religious moralists, who preferred that these questions should not be raised. Although Corneille was widely respected as the most successful playwright of the first half of the seventeenth century, he later attracted the most specific criticism from religious opponents of the theatre. His plays drew such large audiences, among them many women, that this very popularity made him suspect in the eyes of those for whom theatrical entertainment of any kind was wholly unchristian: he was enticing large numbers of people to neglect their religious duties for mere ‘divertissement’ and corrupting their tastes by showing them undesirable models of human passion and ambition.

This criticism was directed in particular at female characters who challenged the boundaries of stereotype and *bienséance*. As well as deploring the conduct of Chimène, the Prince de Conti singled out Cornélie in *La Mort de Pompée*, Pierre Nicole castigated Camille in *Horace*, and the heroines of *Polyeucte* and *Théodore* also attracted criticism.
It seems extraordinary that they chose as examples plays which had been in the repertory for twenty or thirty years, but they were presumably selecting characters so well known as to be familiar to any reader, even to a non-theatregoer. Such specific criticism of female characters gives us a useful insight into the minds of those who opposed the theatre, revealing their expectations of what a woman should be.

Conversely, commercial success can provide some clues to the taste of seventeenth-century audiences. If a play achieved a substantial run of performances, or sold in large numbers after publication, the story and characters were clearly of interest to the public, even though some members of the audience might have been attracted initially by the presence of a particular actor or actress in the cast. In this chapter we shall therefore look at other popular plays of the period, before considering those which were attacked on moral grounds.

The images of women in legend and fiction often tend to extremes: angel or temptress, goddess or witch, to be either feared or worshipped. In seventeenth-century French drama, female characters are not limited to these extremes, although they are still for the most part passive figures, in the sense that they respond to the actions of men and do not initiate events themselves. Whereas the heroines of tragedies by Jodelle and Garnier had tended to confine themselves to lamenting their fate, and often committed suicide (Dido, Cleopatra, Lucretia), some playwrights of the 1630s and 1640s were beginning to explore the dramatic possibilities of heroines who dared actively to challenge the values by which men operate, and sometimes survived.

As they were restricted in real life, most women on stage are limited in their capacities for action—physically confined within the walls of houses or palaces, waiting at home while male protagonists go out into the world to fight duels or battles. Hanna
Scolnicov describes ‘the classical division of the theatrical space into a male outdoors and a female indoors’ and underlines the symbolic implications of the indoor space for a woman: the house is the centre of her world, a place of safety and also the guardian of her reputation, since venturing outside the home (or indeed allowing strangers in) might endanger her chastity.\(^1\) Very few female characters of the period are seen outside their own homes. In tragedy, especially, there are many scenes of women waiting for the outcome of a male confrontation on which their own future will depend: Chimène and the Infanta, Camille and Sabine, Jocaste and Antigone. Men are usually free to make their own decisions: armies await their orders, ships ride at anchor in the port, ready to sail at a moment’s notice, but the heroine must stay at home and wait for her fate to be decided for her.

But she need not remain silent. If she was powerless to take decisions, a woman could still make the best possible use of words, and some of the most powerful poetry in seventeenth-century drama conveys the feelings of women learning to express themselves, whether in love, in anger or in supplication. Words themselves become a form of action, voicing opinions and feelings which undermine the actions of men. ‘Parler, c’est agir’, said d’Aubignac, and considered that Corneille’s achievement lay in his discours—‘la manière d’exprimer les violentes passions qu’il y introduit’\(^2\). The strongest female characters respond passionately to events, rather than accepting them; so Horace’s victory is diminished by his sister’s condemnation, César’s triumph by Cornélie’s threats of vengeance. They verbally challenge the actions of men, criticizing male values rather than massaging male egos, and it is their outspokenness which gives them dramatic force.

As Pierre Nicole recognized, the qualities of an effective dramatic character are far removed from Christian virtues: ‘Le silence, la patience, la moderation, la sagesse, la
pauvreté, la penitence ne sont pas des vertus, dont la représentation puisse divertir les spectateurs; [...] Ce serait un étrange personnage de Comédie qu’un Religieux modeste & silencieux.' This reinforces his theory that the theatre is bent only on ‘une représentation des passions vicieuses’, so that even a Christian saint like Théodore must be made ‘un peu galante’ for theatre audiences.³ The dramatic heroines who attracted criticism from religious moralists were those whose characters were most clearly in conflict with the traditional ideal of womanhood: instead of being silent, submissive and obedient to patriarchal authority, they assert the right to express their own feelings and their own judgment. Camille cares more for her lover than for her brother’s reputation or for Rome; Emilie (in Cinna) and Cornélie (in La Mort de Pompée) are strong, assertive and vengeful women who are not afraid to give orders to men.

Most female characters are still defined in terms of their relationship to men—as maîtresse, wife, daughter or mother—and they seldom display interests outside the domestic sphere. Fulfilment for a woman is generally to be found in her conventional sexual role: both in comedy and in tragedy, marriage to the object of her affection is usually presented as a woman’s ultimate realization of happiness. Desmarets’ Sestiane, who prefers theatre-going to the prospect of marriage and motherhood, is a rare exception in comedy. Only a very few women are shown to be more interested in political power than in their personal relationships (Corneille’s Cléopâtre, in Rodogune, and Pulchérie are rare examples.) Eric Nicholson has pointed out that women are usually categorized in drama by their sexual identity—virgin, wife, widow, adulteress—and it is their transgression of such an identity which often provides the dramatic plot.⁴

As the destinies of these women are shaped by their fathers, brothers or husbands, their characters are established by male playwrights, so in both senses ‘les femmes sont
telles que les hommes les rendent', as Vigoureux pointed out (see Chapter One). Why did Corneille and some of his contemporaries choose as heroines strong women with minds of their own? Was this a conscious bid by the writers to please their female audiences, to support the efforts of women in the salons to find their own voices and develop their own judgment? We have seen how important the female audience had become by the 1630s, wooed by playwrights and theatre managers alike, and that as early as 1632 Du Bosc was already describing women as arbiters of literary taste. Eric Nicholson is surely right to suggest (p. 303) that there is often a fantasy element in male playwrights' creation of unconventional female characters, but then the same could also be said of their male characters. It seems fair to say that some plays of the period reveal their authors' awareness of moral questions which were being raised at the time, and that in writing for an audience which included increasing numbers of women, playwrights were taking into account—consciously or not—how that audience would view the heroines on stage in the light of the contemporary debate on standards of female behaviour. In presenting women prepared to think for themselves and challenge masculine opinions, playwrights were, however intentionally, questioning the traditional view of a woman's role in society. Robert Horville has suggested that these challenges to masculine authority occurred mainly in comedy, but we shall find some significant examples in tragedy too.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the development of tragedy was a significant factor in enhancing the prestige of the theatre, and by the time Le Cid was first performed the genre had proved popular with audiences. The first French tragedy to conform to a classical model was Mairet's Sophonisbe (1634), which exemplified his advocacy of the classical rules as set out in the Preface to La Silvanire. As the story of a passionate woman in an impossible situation, the play may well have provided some inspiration to
Corneille in writing *Le Cid*, and it was immensely successful. Rotrou’s *Hercule mourant* of the same year contributed to the renewed interest in tragedy but was apparently less of a commercial success, although Scudéry in his *Observations sur le Cid* mentioned it favourably in comparison with Corneille’s play.

The success of *Sophonisbe* was at least partly due to the fact that it pleased a female audience; Mairet notes in his dedication to Pierre Séguier that his tragedy ‘se peut vanter d’avoir tiré des soupirs des plus grands coeurs, & des larmes des plus beaux yeux de France’. Perhaps women took a particular interest in a heroine whose sexuality is not concealed, who confesses her desire for Massinisse while still married to the ageing Syphax, and whose enjoyment of their wedding night delights her second husband (IV, 1). Massinisse’s definition of female virtue is an unusual one:

> Quand les chaînes d’Hymen étreignent deux esprits,  
> Un baiser se doit rendre aussitôt qu’il est pris.  
> De sorte que toujours la plus honnête femme  
> Est celle qui témoigne une plus vive flamme;  
> C’est là que sa vertu se montre en son ardeur, (IV, 1)

But despite her passionate nature, Mairet’s heroine sees herself as a victim of circumstance. She constantly invokes ‘le destin’, ‘le sort’ and ‘la nécessité’ to avoid assuming responsibility for her own actions, and sees her illicit love for her political enemy as ‘chastiment’ and ‘crime’. She regrets deceiving her husband Syphax and betraying her country, but seems to be anticipating Phèdre in feeling that the matter is beyond her control:

> O funeste rencontre! O mal-heureux moment,  
> Où le sort me fit voir ce visage charmant! (II, 1)

She attempts one decisive action, daring to write a letter to the man she loves, but when the document falls into the hands of her husband, she lacks the courage to tell him the
truth and takes refuge in lies. Even when Massinisse proposes marriage after her
husband’s death, her joy is overwhelmed by her sense of guilt and remorse:

Syphax n’a pas encor les honneurs du tombeau,
Et d’un second Hymen j’allume le flambeau;
Certes son amitié jointe à la bien-seance,
Me donne du remords & de la repugnance. (III, 4)

And passion is soon overruled by political reality; the marriage is declared invalid by the
Roman commander Scipion, who decrees that Sophonisbe shall be taken to Rome as a
captive. She has declared a wish to die rather than suffer such indignity, but it is only
when Massinisse sends her poison that she takes her own life in obedience to his wishes,
and thus co-operates in protecting his own dignity as well as hers. She does display a
heroic pride in accepting her fate, and dies expressing ironic contempt towards Rome:

Delivrons les Romains de la peur & du mal
Que leur pourroit causer la fille d’Asdrubal. (V, 5)

Thirty years later Corneille would create a more forceful Sophonisbe, but in Mairet’s
version she repeatedly expresses confusion and fear, tormented by remorse, anxiety and
fateful premonitions.

In this first representation of Romans in French classical theatre, Mairet
characterized them as ambitious, inflexible and unfeeling, qualities which reappear in
Corneille’s Horace six years later. The shared passion of Massinisse and Sophonisbe is
contrasted with the cold discipline of the Roman conquerors, who repeatedly refer to
Massinisse’s ‘aveuglement’, so unlike their own clear-sighted self-control. Scipion
anticipates both Don Diègue (Le Cid, III, 6) and Le Vieil Horace (Horace, IV, 3) when
he tells Massinisse:

Sophonisbe n’est pas la derniere des fâmes,
Assez d’autres encor sont dignes de vos flames. (V, 6)
Massinisse's own passion is also expressed in his angry outburst to the 'cruel Senat', anticipating Camille in *Horace*, before he follows his bride in committing suicide—an ending justified by Mairet on the grounds of *vraisemblance*, although in reality Massinisse lived on into old age:

Cependant en mourant, ô Peuple ambitieux!
J'appelleray sur toy la cholere des Cieux.
Puisses-tu rencontrer, soit en paix, soit en guerre,
Toutes choses contraire, & sur mer, & sur terre. (V, 8)

As in the later play, political success is shown to be incompatible with fulfilment in love.

In Rotrou's *Hercule mourant*, which was performed in February 1634 and possibly earlier, Déjanire also kills herself at the end of the play, to expiate her crime in unwittingly poisoning her husband. She resembles Medea in her fury at her husband's infidelity, but the steps she takes are intended to regain Hercule's love, not to punish him. When she realizes that she has caused his death she is immediately overcome with remorse, taking all the blame and condemning herself as a 'femme trop credule' deserving a 'juste supplice'. Rotrou presents no argument in her favour, no suggestion that it is her husband's conduct in deserting her for another woman which has precipitated his own downfall. Hercule expresses no remorse and sees his death as divinely inflicted:

O Ciel! O Dieux cruels! O severe destin!
[...] il estoit resolu par les arrests du sort
Que ce sexe impuissant fust autheur de ma mort, (III, 2)

His mother Alcmene castigates Déjanire as a 'detestable femme' for her 'lasche trahison', with no mention of her son's own betrayal. Despite his deceitfulness, his arrogance, and his spiteful cruelty in ordering the execution of a rival, the play ends with Hercule's apotheosis and a chorus of praise in his favour. Déjanire has only added to his glory and brought about her own destruction.
Corneille followed the example of Mairet and Rotrou to write his first tragedy, *Médée*, in 1635, but his treatment of a tragic heroine differs significantly from theirs, as well as departing quite markedly from the legend as recorded by Euripides and Seneca to accentuate Medea's human qualities and her suffering rather than her cruelty. George Steiner has suggested that Greek tragic drama may actually have evolved as an outlet for expressing 'the rights of femininity' in a society where women had no political voice, and comments on the range and eloquence of its heroines: 'No literature knows of more audacious or compassionate insights into the condition of womanhood.' Corneille went further than the classical dramatists in presenting Medea's side of the story, adapting his source texts to underline the complex nature of his heroine and to dramatize the inner conflict of a tragic hero who combines elements of guilt and innocence, vice and virtue, and therefore cannot be easily categorized and judged.

In his version of the story, Corneille makes clear that the source of Médée's criminal actions is her unjust treatment at the hands of men, and that her desire for vengeance is understandable. His dedication of the play, published in 1639, begins: 'Je vous donne Médée, toute méchante qu'elle est, et ne vous dirai rien pour sa justification. [...] Ici vous trouverez le crime en son char de triomphe [...]’ (*OC*, I, p. 535). But the play is dramatically effective precisely because the author does set out to justify Médée's actions, at least to some extent, as he later acknowledged in his Examen of 1660. This retrospective discussion differs considerably from the dedicatory letter, and takes into account his experience of the play's success and audience reaction. He now describes Médée as 'cette magicienne, offensese au dernier point', and as a victim of injustice, qui attire si bien de son côté toute la faveur de l'Auditoire qu'on excuse sa vengeance après l'indigne traitement qu'elle a reçu de Créon et de son mari et qu'on a plus de compassion du désespoir où ils l'ont réduite que de tout ce qu'elle leur fait souffrir (p. 540).
Far from being ‘evil incarnate’, as Lancaster suggests, the character created by Corneille is entirely human in her devotion to Jason, her love for her children and her suffering when she is rejected and condemned to exile; and in her clear-sighted awareness of her intolerable situation she is a tragic figure to be pitied.

However, she is also an outspoken and determined woman who breaks all the rules of female submissiveness. She refuses to accept the authority of her husband or the King, she arranges a savage retribution for Jason’s infidelity, she has the freedom to make her own decisions (with the help of her magical powers) and she escapes punishment for her crimes—even gaining divine assistance. Cornelian tragedy is so closely associated with male heroes and their ‘masculine’ qualities of honour, integrity and self-esteem summed up in the concept of gloire, that it is surprising to realize that the first example of a Cornelian tragic hero is actually a heroine—and one of the most immediately repellent characters of Greek legend—while the conduct of the principal male character is here distinctly unheroic. Larry Gregorio points out that Médée is the only one of Corneille’s heroines who succeeds in her reaction against the status quo of patriarchal authority: in other cases it is ‘either repressed or simply dissipated’. How does Corneille explain her conduct?

From the start it is clear that Jason has made use of Médée for his own political ends. He acknowledges to Pollux in the first scene of the play that ‘love’, for him, has never been more than a means of furthering his own ambition: ‘J’accommode ma flamme au bien de mes affaires’, and he now sees the political advantage of marriage to a king’s daughter. By contrast, Médée’s love for Jason is presented as entirely sincere. Even after she has sworn vengeance on him for his treachery she confesses to Nérine:

Mon courroux lui fait grâce et ma première ardeur Soutient son intérêt au milieu de mon coeur.
and goes on to voice the self-deluding hope so characteristic of the tragic hero:

Je crois qu'il m'aime encore [...] (II, 1).

Similarly, in her confrontation with Jason at the pivotal point of the play (III, 3), in the midst of her rage and frustration at her inability to alter his resolve, she suddenly bursts out: 'Je t'aime encor, Jason, malgré ta lâcheté'. Her very first speech emphasizes her commitment to the marriage vow and magnifies the scale of Jason's betrayal by declaring that his change of heart is not only a personal affront to her, but an injustice and an offence against the gods; for this reason she appeals for their help in punishing him:

    Souverains protecteurs des lois de l'hyménée,
    Dieux garants de la foi que Jason m'a donnée, (I, 4)

It is clear that, while her desire for vengeance may be excessive, it is not unnatural. She also appeals to the Furies—fières soeurs—female avengers of crime, especially crimes against the bonds of kinship, expressing her own fury that the man she loves, and for whom she destroyed her own family ties, has rejected her in favour of another woman. Later in the play she regrets that she has to summon her magical powers to effect her revenge:

    Mais je hais ce désordre et n'aime pas à voir
    Qu'il me faille pour vivre user de mon savoir. (IV, 5)

Corneille makes clear that her emotional responses are entirely human.

In his Examen Corneille explains that some of his modifications to the source texts were in the interests of vraisemblance, but they also serve to make the character of Médée less calculating. 'J'ai cru mettre la chose dans un peu plus de justesse', he says (p. 537): and so it is Créuse who demands the fatal dress, not Médée's idea to give it to her; it is Créon who grants her a day's grace before her exile, not Médée who asks for it. She
takes the opportunity for revenge when it presents itself, but her actions are not coldly calculated in advance.

Even when she has decided to kill her children in order to complete Jason’s punishment, she hesitates, torn between maternal love and her determination to repay the suffering his betrayal has caused her. The dramatization of her inner conflict is Corneille’s own invention: there is a moment of hesitation in the Senecan text, but it is overshadowed by Medea’s cruelty and callousness in killing her second son in front of Jason, exulting in his despair and throwing the children’s bodies at his feet before she escapes. Corneille’s Médée, faced with an impossible choice, is far from exultant:

De l’amour aussitôt je passe à la colère,
Des sentiments de femme aux tendresses de mère. [...]  
Je n’exécute rien, et mon âme éperdue
Entre deux passions demeure suspendue. (V, 2)

There is nothing cold-blooded about her final decision.

Unlike most tragic heroines, many of them driven to suicide, the heroine chosen by Corneille for his first tragedy is one who survives the catastrophe. At the end of the play she invokes her magic powers one last time to escape from Corinth and Jason’s fury: she has carried out her plan and taken her revenge, but she must live for the rest of her life with the knowledge that she murdered the children she loved. Eric Bentley defines the basic pattern of tragedy as one of suffering and endurance\(^{13}\) and often the tragic characters who arouse the greatest compassion in the audience are those who survive the catastrophe and must endure the memory and the consequences of what has occurred.

Corneille returned to the character of Médée in his *Discours du Poème dramatique* and acknowledged that a playwright must accept the fundamental nature of a legendary or historical character as portrayed in classical sources, and that ‘Qui peindrait [...] Médée en femme fort soumise, s’exposerait à la risée publique’ (*OC*, III, p. 132). So his Médée

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is consistently ‘fière et indomptable’, proudly declaring her independence and self-sufficiency, and her actions are those described by Greek legend. But in order to create a more complex and more dramatically interesting character, Corneille modifies or elaborates the circumstances which have created her present situation and shows the extent to which Médée may be seen as the victim of a terrible injustice. She is not simply the ‘exécrable tigresse’ of Jason’s epithet: the playwright who was first a lawyer sees the need to present both sides of the story, and he has made her more human and more moved by conflicting emotions than she is in the versions of Euripides and Seneca. In later plays Corneille shows a similar ability to convey a woman’s point of view.

As Wendy Gibson has pointed out, the demands of bienséance obliged the dramatist to regularize the moral position of his characters at the end of the play, with misdeeds punished or atoned for by death. Scudéry declared in his Apologie du théâtre:

[…] il est bon d’opposer le vice à la vertu, pour en relever d’autant plus l’éclat; mais il faut toujours établir le trône de cette Reine sur les ruines de ce tyran si dangereux […]

and d’Aubignac later stated that this was the principal requirement of a play:

La principale règle du Poème dramatique, est que les vertus y soient toujours recompensées, ou pour le moins toujours louées, malgré les outrages de la Fortune, et que les vices y soient toujours punis, ou pour le moins toujours en horreur, quand même ils y triomphent.

But this is not the case in Médée. There is no example of virtue to be praised—all the characters are acting selfishly in their own interests—and although Médée is a murderess she triumphs and escapes. The story of Medea was criticized by La Mesnardière for this reason, and he presumably had Corneille’s recent dramatization in mind. In place of the theorists’ neat solutions, Corneille aimed to open a moral debate, presenting characters in
a particular dilemma as they might appear in a courtroom, each arguing their case, and leaving the audience to make their own judgment.

In his introduction to the text, André de Leyssac emphasizes that the story of Médée is not simply a marital row, but a confrontation of principles (p. 44). For André Stegmann, Médée epitomizes ‘cet amoralisme fonciier de tout héroïsme’ which would characterize Corneille’s drama.17 But her principles are personal rather than political, and she is not really a typical Cornelian hero, since she is not serving any cause other than her own gloire—except that from a modern perspective she could be said to be striking a blow for the rights of women against exploitation by men, challenging the masculine assumption of prerogative over the wishes of their female partners. Médée is no ordinary woman, but her treatment at the hands of selfish and domineering men is all too commonplace. Was Corneille consciously using the Greek legend to make this point? By showing her in a more human light he leads the audience to reflect on the question of a woman’s right to oppose masculine injustice, on her status as an individual apart from her role as wife and mother. Strong, eloquent, ruthlessly logical in sacrificing her children to carry Jason’s punishment to its ultimate conclusion, Médée displays a sense of self-worth and a concern for self-preservation lacking in either Déjanire or Sophonisbe, who see themselves only in relation to men.

Corneille also makes clear the danger of underestimating a woman’s capacity and determination. Jason anticipates only that Médée will ‘soupire, pleure et me nomme inconstant’ (I, 1) and later in the same scene he brushes aside Pollux’s warning of her ‘courage offensé’: ‘Mais son bannissement nous en va garantir.’ Créon similarly dismisses Pollux’s fears:

Par son bannissement j’a fait ma sûreté,
Elle n’a que fureur et que vengeance en l’âme:
Mais en si peu de temps que peut faire une femme? (IV, 2)

It is this dismissive attitude to a woman which brings about their downfall.

The audience, meanwhile, is encouraged to appreciate Médée’s tenacity and strength of purpose. Explaining his views on morality in drama (Discours du Poème dramatique), Corneille set out what he saw as the essential elements of the dramatic hero: ‘le caractère brillant et élevé d’une habitude vertueuse ou criminelle’ (OC, III, p. 129). Even a criminal may have such ‘grandeur d’âme’ that ‘en même temps qu’on déteste ses actions, on admire la source dont elles partent’. (‘Admiration’ in the seventeenth century could also mean simply ‘étonnement’, but Corneille’s own comments on his heroine indicate that he did intend her to be impressive, if not admirable in the modern sense.) Médée may have murdered her children, but one is forced to admire her determination and her courage in refusing to tolerate her husband’s treatment of her. David Clarke suggests that Corneille ‘challenged the audience to reflect on right and wrong in a way which stretched their understanding beyond narrow and received social orthodoxies’ and his first tragedy certainly encouraged them to reflect on hitherto accepted views of a woman’s rights and duties. But the suggestion that Medea might be in any sense admirable is incompatible with traditional views on female conduct.

The play was apparently a success: it remained in the repertoire of the Hôtel de Bourgogne in the 1640s and was still being performed in Paris in 1677, although Pierre Martino suggests that d’Aubignac may have been referring to Médée when he claimed in La Pratique du Théâtre that ‘histoires d’horreur et les cruautez extraordinaires’ had never been ‘veuë de bon oeil, ny par le peuple ny par la Cour de France’. Corneille’s brother Thomas wrote the libretto for Charpentier’s operatic version in 1693, which was applauded by Louis XIV. There is no record of specific criticism on religious grounds,
although we shall see that the profoundly unchristian desire for revenge in some of his other female dramatic characters attracted explicit condemnation from religious moralists.

Other playwrights shared Corneille's interest in exploring the dramatic possibilities of transgressive female characters, and two plays which achieved popularity with audiences after the success of Le Cid in 1637 suggest that their authors were aware of contemporary discussion of what we would now call feminist issues. Rotrou's tragedy *Antigone*, first performed in 1637 at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and published the following year, has been described as 'un grand succès devant un public devenu plus délicat par la représentation du Cid'. It differs from his *Hercule mourant* and follows the example of *Médée* in focusing on the question of a woman's capacity for action and right to assert her own opinion. Like Corneille, Rotrou chose to retell a well-known Greek legend with a central female character defying masculine authority, although he chose a virtuous heroine, at the opposite end of the spectrum from Medea, and did not need to restructure the story of Antigone to present her sympathetically. But his choice of characters and his use of language underline the strength of her opposition, and the extent to which Sophocles' play highlights the conflicting views of women themselves towards their role in society.

By taking dramatic subjects from Greek tragedy, playwrights of the 1630s were resuming an ancient debate in giving a voice to strong female characters. George Steiner's comment on the 'feminist' dimension of these plays has already been noted, and writing about Antigone, he comments that writers and artists have repeatedly returned to the Antigone myth more than any other: 'Since the fifth century BC, western sensibility [...] has felt women in the face of arbitrary power and of death to be [...] the Antigones of the earth.' It is perhaps surprising that Racine, who would excel in creating
memorable female characters, took the inspiration for his first play from Rotrou but chose
to deny Antigone her timeless heroic status. His concern with unity of action led him to
focus on the story of the ‘frères ennemis’ and to exclude the subsequent conflict over the
burial of Polynice, so at the end of La Thébaïde Antigone merely follows her mother in
committing suicide.

Rotrou had already demonstrated in earlier plays an interest in examining women’s
strengths and weaknesses. His tragi-comedy Les Deux Pucelles of 1636, for instance,
features two spirited and passionate heroines chafing against convention. Léocadie
bemoans her helplessness when she is abandoned by her lover:

Hélas! qu’il est bien vrai, chétives que nous sommes,
Que nos affections passent celles des hommes, […]
Et que leur passion est toute en leurs discours!
Ils parlent de la bouche, et nous parlons de l’âme;
Ils ne sont qu’éloquens et nous sommes de flamme;  (I, 3)

The innocent heroine of Laure persécutée (1637) is at the mercy of a tyrannical king who
wants to prevent her marriage to his son, and threatens her with rape and murder if she
persists in her attachment to him. Like Corneille, Rotrou was a lawyer, and skilled in
presenting alternative points of view in the pursuit of justice.

In his version of the Antigone story, adapted from both Sophocles and from
Euripides’ Phoenician Women, he highlights the question of a woman’s proper role by
including the tormented figure of Jocaste and introducing the character of Argie, wife of
Polynice, who takes the side of Antigone in challenging Créon. By contrasting these two
defiant and outspoken women with Jocaste and her second daughter Ismène, who see
themselves as helpless, the playwright underlines the extent of Antigone’s rebellion and
heightens the sense of conflict between the characters. The difference in the women’s
own view of themselves is summed up by their reaction to their own tears. Argie is
determined to make her voice heard, to be clear and strong, and she impatiently tries to overcome the conventional display of female weakness, exclaiming:

Cessez, pleurs et soupirs qui m'étouffez la voix. (I, 6)

whereas Jocaste takes refuge in her tears because she does not know what to say:

Faites ici, mes pleurs, l’office de la langue,
Mes sanglots, mes soupirs, commencez ma harangue. (II, 4)

The two sisters are similarly contrasted. In response to Antigone’s defiant cry:

Or il est temps, ma soeur, de montrer qui nous sommes,

Ismène, fearful of confrontation with Créon, seeks to avoid responsibility by escaping into female helplessness and standard notions of propriety:

Mais, ma soeur, l'impuissance excuse le devoir. [...] 
Filles, pour dire assez que nous ne pouvons rien,
Un peu d’abaissement aujourd’hui nous sied bien. (III, 5)

In her view, women must accept their subservient role and put up with the suffering inflicted on them by men.

But for those who do choose to resist, mutual support is invaluable. In a highly dramatic and original scene (III, 7), Rotrou brings together the two women prepared to challenge Créon’s order: Antigone and Argie meet on the battlefield at night, both searching for the body of Polynice in order to conduct the ritual burial. They have never met before: their initial mistrust disappears when they realize that they are united in their love for him and in their determination that he shall not be unjustly disgraced. It is an impressive display of female solidarity: these women have no men to help them, but they are prepared openly to defy Créon, the man who embodies both domestic and political authority, the head of the family and of the state. They have left their allotted indoor space and their subservient role to challenge masculine authority on male territory. Antigone is no longer an isolated figure; in providing her with an ally, Rotrou has

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strengthened her case for honouring family ties and duties instead of obeying Créon’s callous order. (In his Iphigénie he similarly emphasized the strong mother/daughter bond between Clytemnestre and Iphigénie.)

Both women care more for principle than for their own safety. Argie has less to lose, since her husband is already dead; but Antigone values a clear conscience above her future with Hémon, telling her sister that she prefers ‘une honorable mort qu’une honteuse vie’ (III, 5). She chooses to honour family duty rather than seek fulfilment of her sexual role, and will sacrifice her own happiness for the repose of her brother’s soul. She is stronger and more self-sufficient than tragic heroines such as Déjanire and Sophonisbe, who see themselves as having no independent existence outside their marital status. Like Médée, she has learned to oppose harshness with harshness; in her desire for justice she is forced to appear unfeeling towards her fiancé, but she is actually motivated by love and compassion, whereas her uncle and brothers are driven by hatred.

Captured and brought before Créon, Antigone and Argie also emphasize that they are motivated by respect for the gods: proper burial of the dead is a pious duty, and Steiner notes that it is the particular province of woman (p. 34). In response to Créon’s question, ‘Vous faisiez donc vertu de transgresser mes lois?’, Antigone answers: ‘Oui, pour servir les dieux qui sont plus que des rois,’ and Argie adds, ‘Pour faire honneur au ciel au mépris de la terre.’ (IV, 3) Their conviction that they are obeying divine law gives them the courage and the right to defy a mortal ruler. Calm and unrepentant, Antigone makes an eloquent speech to Créon, justifying her position:

Ici la faute est juste et la loi criminelle; 
Le prince pêche ici bien plus que le rebelle. 
J’offense justement un injuste pouvoir 
Et ne crains point la mort qui punit le devoir; (IV, 3)
Only when her voice can no longer be heard, when Créon has ordered her incarceration in solitude, does she escape his vengeance by taking her own life. Jocaste has already killed herself in despair at the death of her sons, but the two younger women are resolute in maintaining their opposition to injustice, even though they know that punishment is inevitable.

Antigone's unconventional behaviour gives rise to contrasting revelations of the ways in which gender differences are perceived. Her extraordinary courage is admired by Créon's courtier Ephise, who considers that the highest form of praise is to liken her to a man:

O mâle coeur de fille! ô vertu non commune,

while Cléodamas sees danger in a woman who has ceased to behave like one:

O sexe dangereux! étrange dureté!
Du crime et du supplice elle fait vanité. (IV, 3)

and exposes men's deep-rooted fear of a woman whose strength of determination matches that of a man. Créon asserts that a woman must submit to the decisions of men as subjects must yield to the judgment of the King (IV, 5). But nothing shakes the women's resolve: Argie echoes Rodrigue in Le Cid:

Je le ferois encor si je ne l'avois fait.

and Antigone declares that words alone are not enough, but must be translated into action:

Je servirai de coeur et non pas de paroles;
L'un produit des effets, les autres sont frivoles. (IV, 4)

In both words and action, she has stepped outside her woman's role and transgressed the code of obedience to the male head of her family who is also head of state, to be met with the mixed reactions of admiration, anger and fear.
Conversely, a man’s attachment to a woman may be considered a sign of weakness. Créon echoes other fathers when he tells his son:

Il ne faut pas, Hénon, que l’amour d’une femme
Jusqu’à ce point nous gagne et nous aveugle l’âme, (IV, 5)

Faced with Hénon’s support of Antigone, and his assertion that public opinion ‘accuse votre arrêt d’offenser la nature’, Créon’s ultimate insult is to accuse his son of womanly weakness:

Vil esclave de femme, esprit lâche et débile! [...]  
Parler pour une fille est ton plus digne emploi.  
Va, coeur efféminé; va, lâche, sors d’ici! (IV, 5)

In an attempt to justify his own inhumanity, he is here treating the values of family loyalty and compassion as mere female fancy, and his own desire for punishment and control as superior. His dismissal of a woman’s love as unimportant is reminiscent of Don Diègue in Le Cid (‘Nous n’avons qu’un honneur, il est tant de maîtresses!’) and anticipates Le Vieil Horace. The misogynist cliché is repeatedly challenged by women asserting the right to be treated as individuals, and valuing true human feeling over men’s political ambition and military strength.

One characteristic element in women’s argument is their ability to look ahead to the future and imagine the reality which may ensue from the masculine rhetoric of gloire. Both Rotrou and Corneille created female characters with a clear-sighted capacity for seeing beyond the moment of triumph and anticipating the consequences of violent or inhuman actions. In vain Antigone appeals to Polynice:

Ne vous acquérez pas, par votre dureté,  
Un renom odieux à la postérité. (II, 2)
While men are motivated by abstract ideas of heroism and superiority, women foresee the reality of physical pain and emotional distress. Before the combat between the Horatii and the Curiatii, Sabine pictures its aftermath:

Je verrai les lauriers d’un frère ou d’un mari
Fumer encor d’un sang que j’aurai tant chéri! (Horace, II, 5)

In her description, the conventional emblem of victory is soiled by its contamination with kindred blood. And after Horace’s triumph she shrinks from its physical consequences:

Quelle horreur d’embrasser un homme dont l’épée
De toute ma famille a la trame coupée, (V, 2)

whereas for Horace himself it is the moment of victory which counts, and the achievement of personal renown has greater value for him than domestic harmony.

In 1640 Rotrou followed the success of Antigone with another subject taken from Greek tragedy and chose in the heroine of Iphigénie en Aulide (1640) an innocent girl who is literally sacrificed by her father for the success of a military campaign whose purpose is to assuage masculine self-esteem. Here it is Clytemnestre who clearly perceives the essential triviality of the origin of the Trojan war—‘c’est mettre à haute estime une femme adulte’—and urges Agamemnon to look ahead and imagine the welcome he will receive from his family on his return:

Peut-être espérez-vous qu’après le sac de Troie,
On vous vienne au-devant recevoir avec joie,
Et vous féliciter de vos faits triomphants:
Mais qui? sera-ce moi? seront-ce vos enfans?
Serez-vous désiré dedans votre famille,
Ayant meurtri leur soeur, ayant tué ma fille? (IV, 3)

She accurately predicts that the sacrifice of their daughter will destroy their family, but he will take that risk for the chance of a glorious military victory.

As in Antigone, Rotrou again underlines a close bond between women, in this case mother and daughter. Act III begins with an unusual scene of confidences between

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Clytemnestre and Iphigénie, not found in Euripides. The girl is apprehensive about her forthcoming marriage, but her mother gently reassures her that she will adapt to her new role:

D’abord le changement fait un peu de contrainte,
Et le joug le plus doux se reçoit avec crainte;
[...]
Mais l’hymen est un dieu familier et charmant
Avec qui la pudeur s’accoutume aisément;
La fille s’enhardit aussitôt qu’elle est femme,
Et, de glace qu’elle est, elle vient tout de flamme.

Ironically, Clytemnestre soon finds herself at odds with her own husband over the question of attending her daughter’s ‘wedding’, and firmly asserts to Agamemnon her right to be present:

Vous conduisez les Grecs, moi je conduis ma fille,
Une mère est aussi le chef de sa famille: (III, 3)

Once she has discovered his true purpose she makes a forceful claim to a say in her daughter’s fate, and reduces his political rhetoric about ‘nécessité’ to a blunt summary of the situation:

Quelle effet produira cette mort inhumaine?
Le repos d’un jaloux et le retour d’Hélène. (IV, 3)

Iphigénie herself protests at the injustice of her father’s decision, while remaining calm and dignified:

D’avoir recours aux pleurs, d’implorer votre grâce,
Un si vil procédé sent trop son âme basse. (IV, 3)

and earning the admiration of Achille: ‘O mâle coeur de fille!’ (IV, 5), echoing Ephise in Antigone. Like Antigone and Argie, the two women clearly occupy the moral high ground, and see the facts and the consequences of the situation more clearly than the man who is supposed to be in control.

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Many of Rotrou's plays feature strong heroines challenging male brute force with superior moral argument, often in violent and dangerous situations, although they frequently describe themselves as 'chéline' even when they are struggling to overcome the disadvantages of their sex. David Clarke suggests that one reason for the prevalence of sexual violence in tragedy was the emergence of 'star' actresses after 1630, and in the course of his discussion of Rotrou's *Crisante* (c. 1635) he mentions other plays which gave popular actresses 'opportunities to enliven the austerities of historical tragedy as they invade a world of political decision normally reserved for the menfolk'.

*Crisante* is captured, raped, and then rejected by her husband; eventually she commits suicide, but only after she has seen justice done by destroying her violator and shaming her husband. Clarke explains that she retains her self-respect and moral advantage throughout, refusing to acquiesce in the roles assigned to her by men. 'For all her ferocity and pride, [she] never forfeits the audience's sympathy' (p. 110); and yet, however great the provocation, her brutal revenge on her oppressors could not be said to conform to traditional concepts of appropriate female conduct. If audiences of the mid-1630s did indeed approve her behaviour, ideas about women were certainly undergoing radical change.

In addition to these roles in tragedies, there is one comedy of the period featuring three highly unconventional female characters which evidently pleased its audiences and became a great success. The first performances of *Le Cid* at the Théâtre du Marais were followed by Desmarets' comedy *Les Visionnaires*, also starring Montdory. It is described by H. C. Lancaster as the most widely known and the most successful French comedy before Corneille's *Le Menteur*.

Although comedy was not charged with the same moral responsibility as tragedy, and the characters were not judged by the same standards, it is instructive to look at a play which would have been seen and read by large numbers
of Parisian women. Its popularity is indicated by the fact that four editions of the text were published between 1637 and 1640, and seven more between 1647 and 1676.\textsuperscript{24} Revived at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1646-47, the play was also given 21 performances by Molière’s company between 1659 and 1666, including a private performance for Louis XIV, and inspired at least one of his own characters. It remained in the repertoire of the Comédie-Française until 1695.\textsuperscript{25}

At one time it was suggested that the three sisters in the play were intended to satirize real salon women—Madame de Sablé, Madame de Chavigny and Madame de Rambouillet—but as Hugh Gaston Hall points out in his introduction to the text, this seems unlikely, since the play was read at the Hôtel de Rambouillet before its first stage performance, and Desmarets would hardly have wished to offend his hostess.\textsuperscript{26} However, in their enthusiasm for poetry, fiction and the legendary heroes of antiquity, and in their rejection of a traditional marital role, the three sisters do share many characteristics of the members of the Marquise’s circle.

In his Argument prefacing the play the author claims that they, as well as the four young men, are all typical of contemporary society: ‘[...] attaints chacun de quelque folie particulière: mais c’est seulement de ces folies pour lesquelles on ne renferme personne; et tous les jours nous voyons parmy nous des esprits semblables, qui pensent pour le moins d’aussi grandes extravagances, s’ils ne le disent.’ They are not, however, typical heroines of comedy. The father of the three girls is, as usual, on the lookout for suitable husbands for them, but far from being the traditional authoritarian father of many comedies, Alcidon is sincerely trying to do his best for his daughters and has an unusual regard for their feelings, as he explains to Lysandre in I, 7:

\begin{verbatim}
[...] J’aimerois mieux un gendre
Qui cherist sa moitié d’une amour aussi tendre,
\end{verbatim}
Despite his concern for their happiness, the girls themselves resist the idea of marriage altogether, and against all expectations, the comedy ends with all three of them deciding to remain single. They may be fantasists, but they know their own minds, and they are unusually fortunate in having a father who tolerates this setback to his plans and will evidently not attempt to force them into marriage, allowing them to choose their own roles rather than conforming to the expectations of society. One wonders how many real-life fathers at the time acknowledged their daughters’ right to refuse a husband.

How seriously are we to view these characters? Robert Horville suggests that the girls are presented ‘sous un jour franchement ridicule’, but this is not entirely the case, and they were taken seriously enough by one opponent of the theatre to attract his criticism. In preferring fantasy to mundane reality, all three girls epitomize the ‘disposition d’esprit toute Romanesque’ which Nicole condemned in women who read novels and attend the theatre, filling their heads with romantic fantasies and becoming dissatisfied with their daily domestic routine (‘les petites affaires de leur ménage’) and with their husbands. Evidently this was one of the plays he had in mind when he formulated his criticism, since Les Visionnaires was regularly performed by Molière’s company during the period when Nicole was in the process of writing his polemic, and his attack on anti-Jansenists in 1665, directed towards Desmarets in particular, was entitled ‘Les Visionnaires’: ‘Un faiseur de romans et un poète de théâtre est un empoisonneur public, non des corps, mais des âmes des fidèles.’ It seems that he thought women’s minds were especially vulnerable to the writer’s subtle poison.
It is not surprising that a rigorous Christian moralist should find these three characters unacceptable, since none of them wishes to be a wife and mother. Their enjoyment of worldly pleasures is not unique in comedy, but their refusal of a traditional domestic role is very unusual. Sestiane, as we have already seen, is so enamoured of the theatre that she rejects any domestic commitment which would interfere with her attendance at plays. Hespérie is convinced that every man in the world is in love with her—she was evidently the inspiration for Molière's creation of Bélise in *Les Femmes savantes*—and this fantasy pleases her more than any real-life romance. She justifies her refusal of marriage by claiming that if she accepts a husband, her rejected suitors will all commit suicide:

Que mon sort est cruel! je ne fay que du mal;  
Et ne puis faire un bien sans tuer un rival, (I, 6)

Mélisse has fallen in love with a portrait of Alexander the Great and prefers to devote herself to the memory of his glory rather than accept any real-life substitute for the only hero she considers worthy of her affection. Of the three, Hespérie and Mélisse are certainly suffering from some degree of delusion, but Sestiane's 'folie particuliere' takes the form of enthusiasm rather than fantasy, and her 'madness' is confined to inventing an extravagant plot for a play, which includes every conceivable element of intrigue and surprise. (Since no women had yet published plays, it could be said that Desmarets was ridiculing the over-creative imaginations of some male playwrights, in the same way as he was satirizing 'poètes extravagants' in the characters of Amidor and the gullible Filidan, rather than casting aspersions on female taste: the four suitors are at least as eccentric as the girls themselves.) And Sestiane is a realist in her clear-sighted assessment of the other disadvantages marriage might bring, in addition to a husband's suspicion:

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In an age when childbirth placed women in real danger, there is a comic effect in her anxiety at the perceived threat to her own pleasure, but it is also a rational objection to the role society expects her to play. Merely to hear such views expressed, even from a comic character, would have been a considerable surprise for audiences of the time, and we may now see her as a woman capable of re-evaluating society's expectations of her and expressing an opinion all her own. Sestiane's character is in complete contradiction to the conventional model of domestic passivity: she has interests outside the home, she is thinking of herself, not of other people, and she says what she wants. She is a true 'visionary' in the sense that she can see an alternative reality to the conventional female domestic role and has the courage to reject its constraints, anticipating the 'précieux' rejection of confinement within marriage. Unlike her sisters, she has an identity which has nothing to do with her relation to men. She is capable of informed criticism and she enjoys friendship with men which does not involve romance; these were characteristics of women who attended literary salons—and indeed the theatre.

The play was evidently intended to appeal to a cultivated audience. Desmaret's mentions in his Argument prefacing the published text that 'quelques-uns ont voulu reprendre ceste Comedie, de ce que [...] ceux qui n'ont aucun scâvoir, n'en pouvoient entendre beaucoup de mots'. But he defends his use of obscure terms to satirize obscurity, and emphasizes his desire to please 'les personnes raisonnables': 'Ceux qui ne composent des ouvrages que par un honeste divertissement, ne doivent avoir pour but que l'estime des honestes gens; [...] Le peuple a l'esprit si grossier et si extravagant, qu'il
n'ayme que des nouveautez grotesques.' His comments anticipate the dismissive remarks of Scudéry and La Mesnardière about less cultivated members of the public (see Chapter Three), but judging by the number of performances and editions of the text, the play must have attracted a wide audience at the Marais and a large number of readers.

Did female members of the audience recognize themselves in Sestiane? Hall discusses the possible allegorical dimensions of Les Visionnaires, but seems less interested in the reception of the play by contemporary audiences. But in his comments on Desmarets' novels and tragi-comedies he underlines the 'energetic, independent and redemptive' nature of heroines such as Ariane and Roxane, and the fact that, unlike many of Corneille's heroines, they are not forced to submit to male authority (p. 14). The same is true of his comic trio. Nicole's use of the title in the context of his attack on the immorality of the theatre indicates that he considered the play potentially subversive, presenting an undesirable image of femininity to its audience. Desmarets himself saw no conflict between Christian devotion and 'les pures delicatesses de l'art', although after the death of Richelieu, who had personified a reconciliation between the two, he stopped writing for the theatre and turned increasingly to devotional poetry, often dedicated to Anne of Austria.

The success of Les Visionnaires undoubtedly contributed to the ongoing discussion of a woman's place in society, and stimulated some lively debate in the salons of the time. It was soon followed by Mairet's lesser-known play Athénaïs (probably first performed in 1638, published in 1642), which also features two women who do not wish to marry, although in this case the heroine is not allowed to determine her own future, but must accept a destiny shaped by men.
The play is described as a 'Tragi-comedie Spirituelle & Moralle'. The story is taken from the history of the Byzantine Empire, and like Tristan's Mariane it had featured in Caussin's La Cour Sainte. (Caussin had become confessor to Louis XIII in 1637 and also wrote plays for performance in Jesuit colleges.) Mairet compresses the events of 23 years (421-444) into ten days and focuses on the character of the learned young woman Athénaïs, 'fille sage, docte et vertueuse', left destitute after the death of her father and rejection by her brother. She is obliged to accept patriarchal authority in three forms: her father's will, the wishes of the Emperor who wants to marry her, and the Christian religion.

Historically, the Emperor Theodosius was a weak ruler and for many years the Empire was effectively governed by his sister Pulchérie. In one of his last plays Corneille would tell the story of this Christian princess who preferred to retain political power rather than marry the man she loved. In Mairet's version, Pulchérie is shown to have influence over her brother and strong personal authority, which provides a contrast with the powerlessness of Athénaïs, but Théodose is characterized as impulsive rather than weak and he apparently holds the reins of power himself. Mairet's choice of title shows that his interest is in the predicament of an educated and intelligent woman who is powerless to determine her own destiny: a good subject for debate in the salons, and it is a pity that no contemporary comment on the play appears to have survived.

Mairet also places a topical emphasis on Athénaïs' enthusiasm for study and her desire to lead an independent life, rather than focusing on the question of her religious conversion, which was presumably the reason for Caussin's interest. Her philosopher father has provided her only with an extensive education and has left his material wealth
to her idle brother, but she does not begrudge this bequest: in fairness she merely asks him to provide her with board and lodging so that she may pursue her life of scholarship:

Le bien-fait du couvert & de la nourriture;
C'est de tout nôtre bien qu'il a tout aujourd'hui
La seule & moindre part que j'exige de luy, [...]
Avec la liberté d'appliquer mon esprit
A l'étude des arts que mon Pere m'appris. (I, 3)

Much as she appreciates her father's devotion to her education, she cannot survive without a roof over her head: her claim seems to anticipate Virginia Woolf's plea for 'five hundred a year and a room of one's own'. She comes to the Emperor's palace to ask for help, making an impassioned protest against the injustice of her poverty:

Mais à quoy ce partage à mon sexe honorable,
Qui parmy les savans me rend considerable,
Si par un coup fatal à tant de vertueux,
L'extrême pauvrete le rend inutile?
Que me sert de connoistre & le Ciel & la Terre
Si la necessité me declare la Gueffe? [...] (I, 3)

Pulchérie's response is not to offer material help, but to engineer an encounter between the beautiful Athénaïs and the Emperor, who has hitherto shown no interest in marriage: he obligingly falls passionately in love. This is not a straightforward solution, since Athénaïs does not welcome his declaration:

J'en souhaite l'estime, & non pas l'amitié: [...] Son Palais me plaist moins que ne fait le Lycée, (II, 1)

But she is not to be allowed the freedom to continue her solitary life of study. Paradoxically, her father has given her intellectual freedom, only to increase her dependence on others for her material needs, and eventually, unlike Desmarets' 'visionnaires', she is obliged to accept marriage, despite her equally clear-sighted anticipation of its potential disadvantages.
Furthermore, in order to marry Théodose she must also abandon the pagan religion and embrace Christianity, accepting the highest patriarchal authority and renouncing the pagan deities which include goddesses as well as gods, among them her namesake Athene, goddess of wisdom. Although Mairet’s Théodose claims to support religious freedom—‘Dans la Religion la contrainte est un crime’—he urges his friends to convert Athénaïs to the truth of Christianity, and is rewarded by her eventual capitulation—‘mon abus rend les armes’—as she tells him that she must adore him ‘comme un visible Dieu’ (IV, 5). Christian patriarchy triumphs over pagan polytheism.

Male critics have seen the resolution of the play as ‘triumphant’ (B. Kay), and as a reconciliation of ‘les beautés de l’antiquité païenne’ with Christianity (J.D. Hubert).31 Giovanni Dotoli sees it as a primarily religious play and a precursor of Polyeucte.32 But in its sympathetic treatment of the heroine, the play can also be read from a modern feminist perspective as an indictment of male tyranny, and as a plea for women to be allowed to choose their own future, instead of having to conform to the expectations of men.

When we come to consider plays whose female characters attracted specific criticism, we see that Corneille places a similar emphasis on the subjection of Pauline in Polyeucte (1640-41?). The Prince de Conti criticized the inclusion of a love story in a play about religion: ‘Dieu n’a pas choisi le théâtre pour y faire éclater la gloire de ses martyrs’,33 and it is easy to see the reasons for his objections to a character who engages the sympathy of the audience while opposing her husband’s wish to die as a Christian martyr. Although the play supposedly centres on the conversion of its hero, we cannot see into Polyeucte’s soul to share his certainties of divine truth, whereas we clearly witness the suffering of Pauline. In the first scene of the play she is treated with
suspicion and contempt by Néarque, who dismisses her fears for her husband’s safety as
‘quelques soupirs’ and equates her claim on Polyeucte’s affection with temptation by the
Devil. ‘Laissez pleurer Pauline’, he urges, ‘Fuyez un ennemi’; and after his conversion,
Polyeucte too regards his bride of two weeks as an enemy: ‘ses larmes’ become ‘de plus
puissantes armes’ (IV, 1); she is ‘un obstacle à mon bien’ (IV, 2) and as he prepares for
his moment of glorious martyrdom he dismisses her brutally:

Vivez heureuse au monde, et me laissez en paix. (IV, 3)

The attitude expressed by Néarque is the same as that of Jacques Olivier: the power of
a woman to attract a man is seen as a dangerous distraction, and man’s only defence is
to flee. Although Polyeucte tells his wife that he is seeking her salvation as well as his
own, his treatment of her seems unjustly harsh.

Pauline herself remarks ruefully how little influence a woman has over her
husband and even implies that there is something fraudulent in the process of courtship:

Tant qu’ils ne sont qu’amants, nous sommes souveraines,
Et jusqu’à la conquête ils nous traitent de reines;
Mais après l’hyménée ils sont rois à leur tour. (I, 3)

And men are impossible to please, since they are liable to change their minds about what
they want from a woman. She describes her sacrifice of her love for Sévère to marry
Polyeucte in obedience to her father’s wishes:

Mon père et mon devoir étaient inexorables. [...]
Je donnai par devoir à son affection
Tout ce que l’autre avait par inclination. (I, 3)

but in the following scene her father, finding that Sévère is about to arrive and fearing his
reprisals, reproaches her for this very obedience:

Ah! Pauline, en effet tu m’as trop obéi,
Ton courage était bon, ton devoir l’a trahi.
Que ta rébellion m’eût été favorable,
Qu’elle m’eût garanti d’un état déplorable! (I, 4)

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Corneille’s juxtaposition of the two scenes heightens the sense of injustice and he shows clearly the inequity of a sincere and virtuous woman being subordinate to a man who is motivated by base self-interest and who cares little for her feelings, even insisting that she must receive her former lover in order to ‘Ménage en ma faveur l’amour qui le possède’ (I, 4), despite her pleas to be spared such a painful interview:

Mon père, je suis femme, et je sais ma faiblesse,
[...]
Il est toujours aimable et je suis toujours femme,

Her bitter acceptance makes clear her resentment of her own helplessness:

C’est à moi d’obéir, puisque vous commandez, [...]
Oui, je vais de nouveau dompter mes sentiments
Pour servir de victime à vos commandements. (I, 4)

She is expected to adjust her feelings to suit her father, and to compromise her own values which place constancy in affection above his self-seeking raison d'état and her husband’s determination to die for the cause of the Christian faith. At the end of the play Polyeucte’s attitude to his wife is vindicated by his service to this cause and the prospect of salvation for both of them, but not before Corneille has fully exploited the dramatic potential of Pauline’s situation.

Corneille ensures the audience’s sympathy for Pauline by contrasting her openness and honesty with her father’s cynical manipulation. She speaks ‘à coeur ouvert’, ‘avec une âme ouverte’, while he talks of deception and tactics. Her constancy is contrasted with his changeability and with Polyeucte’s betrayal of his marriage vows, treating her as an obstacle to his personal salvation and as an object to be handed over to another man when he has no further use for her (IV, 4). The emphasis is on her status as an entirely virtuous and innocent woman: unjustly treated but unable to act, reduced to pleading with all three men, she is a poignant figure to any audience, but especially to one including

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women to whom the necessity of subjection to a father's or a husband's will was all too real. We shall see in Chapter Seven that Corneille's treatment of the subject of martyrdom inspired three women to write plays on the same theme.

The Prince de Conti also objected to the inclusion of a love story in Cinna, suggesting that the relationship between Cinna and Emilie was the focal point of interest to the audience, rather than the moral message of Auguste's pardon (p. 28). And if ambition and vengeance are deplored as unchristian qualities in men, they are even more unseemly in female characters. The character discussed in the greatest detail by Conti is another woman seeking vengeance, Cornélie in La Mort de Pompée (1642). Forceful and eloquent, she is unafraid to challenge and threaten the victorious César, determined to fulfil her obligation to Pompée not simply by mourning him, but by avenging his murder. She speaks of 'l'ardeur de le venger', 'la haine où mon devoir me lie', and tells César that she will 'soulever contre toi les hommes et les Dieux', foreseeing his own eventual downfall as Camille would foresee the fall of Rome. What is unacceptable is that the audience is clearly expected to admire her courage and her determination:

[...] c'est par cette vengeance qu'il pretend rendre Cornélie recommandable, & de la relever au dessus des autres femmes, en luy faisant un devoir, & une espece mesme de pieté, de sa haine pour Cesar, qui attire le respect, & qui la fasse passer pour une personne heroique (p. 33).

In creating such characters, the playwright's skill is judged to have been exercised to an immoral purpose. In the interests of bienséance, conventional morality should determine female conduct, and a woman who was suitably 'douce, humble, obéissante' would have no right to express her personal feelings.

Conti also deplores Cornélie's impiety and describes as blasphemous her reproaches to the gods of antiquity, who in her view have failed to dispense justice:

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Car vous pouvez bien plus sur ce coeur affligé
Que le respect des Dieux qui l’ont mal protégé, (V, 1)

Ces Dieux qui t’ont flatté, ces Dieux qui m’ont trompée,
Ces Dieux qui dans Pharsale ont mal servi Pomée, (V, 4)

He considers it no excuse that Cornélie is pagan: if she imputes divinity to ‘des choses qui ne la possedoient pas’, she should treat them with proper respect (p. 33). Divine authority, in whatever context, is not to be challenged. But both Cornélie and Emilie are presented as strong and admirable women and both survive at the end of the play, unpunished for their unfeminine political ambitions.

Other characters created by Corneille are criticized for a similar refusal to accept a passive role and allow the decisions of men to go unchallenged. The character of Camille in *Horace* (1640) was singled out by Nicole and denounced as a ‘fille insensée, à qui une folle passion fait violer toutes les loix de la nature’. In exploring and questioning the values embodied in the concept of ‘la vertu romaine’, and presenting events from a woman’s point of view, Corneille once again portrayed a heroine who offended against the code of *bienséance* and accepted views of suitable female conduct.

In Camille we observe the process by which a virtuous and dutiful daughter is driven to challenge the ‘natural law’ of patriarchal authority. The first duty of an unmarried woman was seen as obedience to her father, but Corneille recognized the dramatic potential in the difficulties and conflicts that the relationship between father and daughter could bring. Having accepted Curiacé as her father’s choice, Camille’s love for her fiancé comes to overrule both her family loyalty and her allegiance to Rome. After his death her status is ambiguous: cheated of her sexual role and her rightful status as the widow of the man she loves, she is once again subject to her father’s control, yet she

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cannot change her feelings to suit the changed circumstances. In her sorrow and despair, words are her only weapons.

Nicole cited Camille's declaration of love for Curiace and her imprecations against her brother and against Rome (IV, 5) as an example of 'les passions vicieuses' being presented for the approval of the audience, and he denounced her in the following terms:

[...] on ne sçauroit s'imaginer rien de plus detestable que la furie de cette fille insensée [...] Cependant cette même disposition d'esprit si criminelle en soi, n'a rien d'horrible, lors qu'elle est revêtue de ces ornements: & les spectateurs sont plus portez à aimer cette furieuse qu'à la hâir. (Chapter 7, pp. 57-58)

In his view the danger lies in the fact that Camille is presented as honourable and virtuous, and he pays an indirect tribute to Corneille in describing her fury as 'une passion qui ne pourroit causer que de l'horreur si elle étoit représentée telle qu'elle est', but which the playwright has rendered acceptable 'par la manière ingenieuse dont elle est exprimée' (p. 57). Her denunciation of Roman values echoes that of Massinisse at the end of Mairêt's Sophonisbe, but presumably gained dramatic impact by coming from a woman.

Perhaps if Camille had committed suicide, her act of self-sacrifice would have rendered her more acceptable to her critics. But she refuses to leave Horace in peace; having finally found her voice, she will not be silent, and only physical force can suppress the torrent of accusations and curses she hurls upon her family and Rome. In David Clarke's view she functions in the play 'as a primary moral conscience consistently ignored by patriots who dare not listen to the voice of humanity', but in the end she forces them to listen, and to silence her challenge Horace must compromise his cherished renown. It is an extraordinary subversive role for a woman. Apparently the part of Camille was a favourite for young actresses to play, her imprecations 'une épreuve décisive pour les jeunes tragédiennes'.

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So women who went to the theatre saw their sex portrayed as intelligent, eloquent and determined, clear-sighted and with a strong sense of justice, sometimes displaying unfeminine and unchristian sentiments such as anger and the desire for revenge. The fact that (male) dramatists could create such unconventional characters suggests a climate of opinion in which a more liberal view of a woman’s role could exist—a climate formed by the members of polite society who went to the theatre and frequented the salons. And women in the audience presumably compared the circumstances of historical or fictional heroines with their own situation. Mairet’s *Athénaïs* provided a timely reminder that even the most intelligent and educated woman was ultimately subject to masculine authority. In contemporary France women were subject to the control of fathers, husbands and the Church, and as in fifth-century Athens, a female scholar was seen as transgressing the condition of her sex—La Mesnardière echoed Aristotle’s criticism of such an oddity, as we have already seen. But before long it would become possible for some women to choose alternatives to a domestic role and become writers or scholars.

Audiences enjoyed seeing these transgressive characters on stage, and actresses relished the challenge of playing such roles, but later in the century they were quoted by critics of the theatre as evidence of its immorality. There is one group of characters which might seem likely to reconcile these opposing points of view: the popular image of ‘la femme forte’, dramatized by playwrights and also celebrated by religious moralists. In the next chapter we shall examine this image a little more closely.


7. See Introduction to Hercule mourant by Derek A. Watts, p. XX-XXI.

8. Georges de Scudéry, Observations sur le Cid in GEF, XII, p. 441.


15. Georges de Scudéry, L’Apologie du théâtre (1639) in Corneille critique et son temps, ed. by Robert Mantero, pp. 79-94 (p. 83).


18. David Clarke, Pierre Corneille, Poetics and political drama under Louis XIII, pp. 64-65.

19. La Pratique du Théâtre, p. 147 and note p. 408.

20. Introduction to Antigone in Oeuvres de Jean Rotrou, IV.


22. David Clarke, ‘"User des droits d’un souverain pouvoir": sexual violence on the tragic stage (1635-40)’, p. 103.


27. Horville, 'Le féminisme dans le théâtre', p. 221.

28. Nicole, Traité de la comédie, p. 61; see above, Chapter One.


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30. References are to the Godes edition of Athénaïs (1700).


CHAPTER FIVE

'LA FEMME FORTE': FICTION AND REALITY

During the 1630s the theatre had gained steadily in prestige and by the beginning of the 1640s was at a high point. Corneille’s great tragedies were filling the Théâtre du Marais, and the social acceptability of the theatre was assured by royal patronage and the support of Cardinal Richelieu, uniquely placed as a figure of political authority and the most influential member of the Catholic Church in France. The enhanced status of the theatre was confirmed by the royal Edict published on 16 April 1641, following soon after the splendid inauguration on 14 January of the Grand’Salle in Richelieu’s Palais-Cardinal—the first purpose-built theatre in Paris—an event which Hugh Gaston Hall describes as ‘a culmination of Richelieu’s rehabilitation of the theatre’.1 The opening production was Desmarets’ tragi-comedy Mirame, which made full use of the state-of-the-art stage equipment and lighting effects and in which the author made a feature of what Hall describes as ‘the redemptive quality of feminine beauty’ (p. 188), perhaps as a tribute to the Queen, Anne of Austria. Hall gives an account of the gala first night before the Cardinal, the King and Queen and an invited audience of about 1400 people. On this occasion bishops and priests acted as ushers, and at the banquet which followed the performance, the Bishop of Chartres even led the presentation of refreshments to the Queen. The ecclesiastical presence was apparently criticized by the Bishop of Toulouse.2

A parallel increase in the prestige of women is reflected in the image of ‘la femme forte’ which became popular during the 1640s, marking a shift away from the anti-feminist attacks earlier in the century to present women in a more positive light. Ian
Maclean has pointed out that the proliferation of ‘feminist’ writing at this period partly coincided with the regency of Anne of Austria (1643-1651), to whom many of these works were dedicated. We have already seen that the Queen set an example of Christian devotion while being a keen theatregoer and patron of playwrights, and after the deaths of Louis XIII and Richelieu she also provided a model of female political power. Many of the heroines of history and legend who were praised by religious moralists (and some laymen) also featured in plays of the period, demonstrating the interplay between the theatre and the prevailing cultural climate.

Some general texts in praise of women counter the hostility of Jacques Olivier (whose Alphabet was still circulating) by asserting the innate virtues of women against his accusations of their sinfulness. We saw in Chapter One that ‘Marian’ literature exalted the figure of the Virgin Mother to enhance the reputation of all Christian women, but there were secular arguments as well. In 1640 Saint-Gabriel described his vision of a peaceful world ruled by women, in place of the disorder caused by men waging war on each other. Louis Machon, Canon of Toul, published a ‘Discours ou sermon apologetique en faveur des femmes’ in 1641, following a neo-Platonist view in declaring women’s beauty to be ‘un signe exterieur de la perfection de leurs ames’. The playwright Gabriel Gilbert, in his Panegyrique des dames of 1650, put forward some unusual claims for the superior qualities of women, though it is hard to know how serious his observations are, or to what extent he was simply flattering his dedicatee, ‘Mademoiselle’, the Duchesse de Montpensier. (In view of her later exploits during the Fronde, some of his arguments seem particularly inappropriate to her.) He remarks that the chief attribute of men is their physical strength, in which they are surpassed by many animals, whereas women’s beauty is unsurpassed in nature. And their fragility is a sign.

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of their worth: as crystal is more precious than rock, flowers than trees, the most delicate things have the greatest value. He considers that women have a particular aptitude for learning, and innate good taste: ‘elles ont par la naissance ce que les hommes n’acquierent que par le travail, & par les années’ (p. 14). It is this natural aptitude which causes men to fear that they will be overtaken by women, and therefore to discourage them from study (p. 16). Men wage war, but women promote peace, both in the home and on the political front, and are capable of living peacefully without men, whereas men without women are ‘peu sociables, rudes & farouches’ (p. 31). Finally, the greatest masculine virtue is courage, which is only rarely required, while women display the everyday virtues of ‘la douceur, la modestie, & la chasteté, qui ont un usage plus frequent, & qui se peuvent pratiquer à toute heure’ (p. 34). These are only a few of the many and varied arguments put forward by men in favour of women.

The particular image of ‘la femme forte’ was presented by two religious writers who chose the legendary achievements of classical or Biblical heroines to illustrate female virtue, Abbé Du Bosc in La Femme Heroique (1645) and the Jesuit Pierre Le Moyne in La Gallerie des Femmes Fortes (1647), both dedicated to Anne of Austria. The term ‘femme forte’ is taken from the description of a virtuous woman in the Book of Proverbs (Chapter 31), but these heroines are praised for more than their domestic skills. Both authors honour the Queen Regent by recognizing that women may be capable of political leadership and by celebrating exceptional examples of female courage and fortitude, and both stress that women have the same capacity for virtue as men. Du Bosc set out to demonstrate that ‘les Dames sont capables de la Morale la plus heroïque’, and countered Olivier’s attacks with Saint Basil’s reading of Genesis, which affirmed that man and woman were both created by God and judged therefore
Le Moyne declares that ‘l’Esprit peut bien estre aussi fort, & la Raison aussi vigoureuse & aussi adroite, dans la teste d’une femme que dans celle d’un Homme’.\(^8\) Both books are highly prestigious publications; Le Moyne’s *Gallerie* in particular is a magnificent folio edition, and both are illustrated with splendid engravings of the heroines in question. But however sincerely the authors wished to compliment the Queen Regent—and perhaps defend her against her critics—by celebrating the achievements of female political figures in history and legend, they do not extend the boundaries of bienséance for ordinary women.

Du Bosc, while crediting men with ‘la vaillance, l’invention des Arts, la Politique, la Philosophie, & toutes les grandes Vertus & les grandes lumieres de l’esprit humain’, praises women for their more passive virtues of ‘modestie, douceur, clémence, miséricorde, pudeur, patience, propreté, chasteté, dévotion’ (p. 44). These are not in fact ‘les mesmes Vertus’, nor are they the chief qualities one might expect to find in the queen to whom his work was dedicated. Le Moyne’s Epistre Panegyrique describes the Queen Regent as ‘Heroine Chrestienne [...] Femme Forte [...] Conquerante’, but he sees her principal weapons as faith and prayer: ‘La vraye & la grande force, est de défaire des Armées [...] de faire tomber des citadelles & des places fortes, en pliant les genoux, & levant les mains au ciel [...]’ (p. aiij). As a leading member of the ‘parti dévot’, the Queen Regent was in fact involved in a conflict between piety and politics, criticized for putting ‘raison d’Etat’ before religious considerations and continuing the war against fellow-Catholics in Spain instead of negotiating for peace after the French victory at Rocroi in 1643. Having opposed Richelieu’s ‘politique de gloire’ during his lifetime, she
chose once in power to pursue his objective of establishing French supremacy in Europe in order to consolidate the power of the French throne for her son. As Claude Dulong puts it: ‘La fonction avait saisi la femme’, and from her earlier role as peace-loving victim of the opposing ambitions of her husband and her brother, she came to be seen as a tyrant in her turn.¹

Like Du Bosc, Le Moyne extols the virtue of heroic women of history and legend, listing them under the headings of ‘Les Fortes Juives’, ‘Les Fortes Barbares’, ‘Les Fortes Romaines’ and ‘Les Fortes Chrestiennes’, and duplicating several of Du Bosc’s examples: the Biblical heroines Judith and Deborah, the warrior queen Zenobia, the Roman heroines Lucretia and Porcia. But despite their exceptional status and unorthodox conduct, these heroines are frequently praised for conventionally passive female virtues including chastity, piety and modesty. According to Le Moyne’s vivid description, even as Judith takes up Holofernes’ sword to kill him, ‘son courage est sans fierté; & son assurance paroit modeste & soumise’ (p. 41), and Du Bosc emphasizes that she has spent the years of her widowhood living in seclusion, occupied in prayer and household duties (p. 502). In a section headed ‘Pourquoi il ne faut pas affecter les vertus d’un autre sexe’, he also explains that Deborah, Judith and Zenobia ‘ont paru vaillantes’ but only out of extreme necessity, ‘pour le salut de la Patrie’ (p. 243); in other circumstances ‘la vaillance’ is incompatible with ‘la pudeur’.

Even when their conduct transgresses the requirements of their sex, these heroines do not challenge masculine or divine authority. Some are female warriors, adopting the ways of men in warfare and the use of force in the service of their countries or of God (Judith, Deborah, Zenobia and Joan of Arc), while others (Panthea, Porcia) are praised for their exemplary devotion to their husbands. Panthea commits suicide after the death of
Abradate in battle because she has no wish to survive him; Porcia’s fidelity to Brutus extends to keeping the secret of his conspiracy, even though she disapproves of his action, and to taking her own life after his death (Du Bosc, pp. 391-431). Marianne is unjustly condemned to death by her husband, but she bears her fate with ‘serenité’ and ‘constance’ (Le Moyne, p. 72).

Noémi Hepp has suggested that the attributes in these heroines praised by religious moralists are quite different from the qualities of a male hero: they are women who are devoted to one man, or to God; they inspire men to virtuous deeds; and they modestly conceal or suppress their own feelings. The ideal woman has often been seen as one whose function is ‘servir d’appui à la faiblesse de l’homme’, as Du Bosc put it, playing a supporting role to the activities of the hero, or carrying on his purpose after his death. Her duty may be to provide domestic stability, whereas the hero’s ‘gloire’ must be achieved in his activities outside the home. In his description of the ideal Christian woman in 1642, Dinet noted that man was traditionally likened to the sun and woman to the moon; so a woman must reflect the brighter splendour of the man, as the moon reflects the light of the sun: ‘elle doit imiter cét Astre de la nuit, lequel ne paroist jamais tant, que quand il respand ses rayons dedans les tenebres; le jour l’obscurcit, et la nuit le met en son jour’.

Apollo and Diana; the Queen Regent preparing the way for the Sun King.

Hepp does not mention that nearly all these ‘femmes fortes’ meet an untimely death, often by their own hand. Some commit suicide after the death of their husbands (Panthea, Porcia), others to avoid subjection (Zenobia, in some versions of the story, and Porcia again) or dishonour (Lucretia). For Christians, suicide is a sin, but for heroines of legend or fiction it is often the only means of escape from an unwanted fate. A
readiness to die for his cause is characteristic of the male hero, and he frequently declares that he is ready to take his own life rather than suffer dishonour, but he is not necessarily required to put his words into action. (Paul Bénichou points out that in all Corneille’s theatre, for example, no hero dies by his own hand.\textsuperscript{12}) It seems that the fundamental role for a woman, however courageous, may be one of self-sacrifice. Le Moyne explicitly states that it is the duty of a wife to give her life to save that of her husband: ‘ce dernier & supreme devoir, que l’Amour conjugal impose aux Femmes’ (p. 295).

How do the qualities of these heroic figures relate to women in the real world? Ian Maclean has suggested that praise of exceptional women may imply that most women are not capable of similar virtue (Maclean, p. 67). Le Moyne follows his accounts of his heroines’ exploits with suggestions as to how his female readers might profit from their example, and these reinforce the traditional expectations of a woman’s role, with much emphasis on piety, modesty and chastity. After his admiring description of Judith’s success he reminds women of more commonplace dangers: ‘Les Femmes n’ont pas tous les jours des Holofernes à défaire; Mais tous les jours elles ont à combattre le Luxe, la Vanité, les Delices, toutes les Passions agréable & toutes les fascheuses’, and to instruct them in the conduct expected of a widow: ‘Qu’elles en apprennent [...] à se mettre sous le joug de Dieu, aprez qu’elles sont déchargées du joug des Hommes’ (p. 46). From the story of Panthea they may learn ‘que leur principal ornement, se fait de la gloire de leurs Marys’ (p. 88) and from Camma that a woman’s chief duties are chastity and fidelity to her husband (p. 106). Most women, declares Le Moyne, ‘se doivent tenir à la distribution que la Nature et le Droit ont faite, et que la Coustume a receuë: et se contenter de la part qui leur a esté assignée dans l’oeconomie et dans le ménage’ (pp. 153-54). But the activities of women in salon society showed that confinement to a domestic role was just
what they were trying to escape. Contemporary women were seeking the chance to shine in their own right, and the freedom to challenge the authority of men.

Le Moyne does include the real ‘Muse guerriere’ Madame de Saint-Balmon in his ‘Ode Premiere’, stressing her piety and her feminine qualities of ‘grace’ and ‘pudeur’ as well as her noble courage, but he makes quite clear that her ‘vertu violente’ is exceptional and that for most women

La crainte de Dieu, la constance,  
La pudeur, la fidelité,  
D’une Femme de qualité,  
Sont les armes, font la vaillance.

In his second Ode he scornfully evokes the spectacle of certain ‘molles Poupées’ who concern themselves with nothing beyond their own appearance and spend their days dallying with clothes, ribbons and hairstyles, in order to assert the superiority of ‘la Femme Forte’, who has better things to do, although he does not actually explain what these might be:

Loin de ces molles Affétiées,  
La Femme Forte a ses emplois:  
Sur les devoirs et sur les loix,  
Ses actions sont concertées.  
Tranquille sans oysiveté,  
Active avec serénité,  
Elle sçait allier le Labeur et les Graces.

Elle est l’Esprit de sa maison;  
Elle en fait l’ordre & l’harmonie. [...]  

This portrait of a capable and responsible mère de famille presiding over a happy home seems a positive one, but the picture changes slightly when we read the lines that follow:

Le devoir gouverne ses pas,  
Et la tient dans la biensure. (iii)

Clearly the woman has no choice in the matter: the ‘devoir’ of her domestic role sets a limit on her activities and it is a requirement which she must fulfil in order to conform

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to the expectations of society (‘la bienséance’). The concept of self-fulfilment outside the home is non-existent.

Many of the ‘femmes fortes’ selected by Du Bosc and Le Moyne had also been chosen as dramatic heroines: Tristan l’Hermite’s *La Marianne* (1636) was one of the great successes of the century, and in the same year Chevreau and Du Ryer had each written a play about Lucretia; Du Ryer’s *Esther* was probably performed in 1642-43; d’Aubignac (1640) and Benserade (1641) had written plays about Joan of Arc; Panthea had already been dramatized by Daronnière, Billard and Hardy when Tristan and Durval each produced a *Panthée* in 1639. Tristan’s version was reprinted in the same year, which suggests that it found favour with readers, although his preface to the text laments the fact that it was not a great success at the Théâtre du Marais. Mary Queen of Scots had been the subject of a recent play by Regnault (1639), following the version by Montchrestien published in 1601, only a few years after her death. Abbé Claude Boyer’s first play was *La Porcie Romaine*, published in 1646 and dedicated to the Marquise de Rambouillet, and d’Aubignac’s *Zénobie* followed in 1647. Antoine Bouvot’s *Judith, ou l’amour de la patrie* was published in Langres in 1649. Thomas Corneille’s *Camma* of 1660 was to be one of his greatest successes. All these heroines were eulogized as ‘femmes fortes’, but they seldom have power to control their own destiny.

As a keen theatregoer, Anne of Austria would have seen many of these plays, but it is unlikely that she would have chosen to identify with these examples of female virtue, since most of them suffer indignity or imprisonment and die a violent death. The situation of a queen in these plays seems to be a particularly unhappy one, even if she occupies a position of moral superiority to her oppressor: Marianne has to endure a forced marriage to Herod, who eventually has her executed; the widowed Zenobia fails in her
attempt to defeat the forces of the Roman Empire; Mary Queen of Scots spent most of her adult life in captivity, separated from her son, before being sentenced to death. One queen who did achieve power—by murdering her husband—was Semiramis, the heroine of plays by both Gilbert and Desfontaines in 1647, but she was rejected by Le Moyne as 'impudique' and an unsuitable model of female conduct for his *Gallerie* (Maclean, p. 84). Canima succeeds in avenging the death of her husband by poisoning the assassin who usurped his throne, but at the same time she takes her own life.

On closer examination these 'femmes fortes' are less challenging figures than some of the heroines discussed in Chapter Four (Médée, Antigone, Athénaïs, Camille), and represent a conventionally limited type of feminine virtue, embodying above all a capacity for patient endurance and a readiness to sacrifice their lives. As dramatic heroines they arouse the sympathy of the audience by their innocence, but also by their helplessness, rather than their defiance. Reading these plays now, one feels that these authors are projecting ideals of female devotion which flatter men, rather than imaginatively identifying with a woman's point of view, as Corneille and Rotrou were able to do. Tristan's *Marianne* actually focuses more on the character of the tyrant Herod, who appears in almost twice as many scenes of the play as the eponymous heroine, as Jacques Scherer has pointed out\(^\text{15}\), and it is his decisions which determine the action of the play. The innocent Marianne describes her husband as 'monstre cruel, âme dénaturée, tigre inhumain', but she does not complain of his injustice towards her. Regretting only that she must leave her children in his care, she accepts with dignity Herod's sentence of death:

\[
\text{Mène-moi sans scrupule affronter le trépas;}
\text{Hérode le désiré, et je ne le crains pas. (IV, 5)}
\]

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It is a portrait which focuses on the feminine capacity to bear suffering rather than on the right of women to oppose injustice. Although she hates and despises her husband, she does not challenge his right to decide her fate. And yet it was precisely this assumption of masculine authority which some women of the period were beginning to question.

In order to save or redeem their honour, many of these women commit suicide, although they may be innocent of any crime. Panthée has been described as ‘l'exemple même de la femme vertueuse, prête à suivre son époux jusqu'à la mort’ and Tristan's play ends with the heroine's orgy of self-reproach, blaming herself for her husband’s death because she encouraged him to join forces with Cyrus:

Il est vray, t'inspirant un funeste dessein
Je pratiqué le fer qui t'a percé le sein;
Il faut le confesser, je suis ton homicide,
J'attentay sur ta vie en te rendant perfide,
Je fus l'occasion de ce funeste effet, (V, 4)

Panthée's guiding principles are fidelity to her husband and gratitude to the king who has protected her reputation:

Pour obliger Cirus qui m'avoit asservie,
J'engageay laschement ton honneur & ta vie:

When Abradate is killed in battle, she declares that she too must die 'pour reparer ce crime', although the crime was Araspe's in trying to seduce her. Her suicide is the ultimate proof of marital devotion: 'au moins je n'ay peu vivre un seul jour apres toy'. She sees no role for herself beyond that of a faithful wife. Similarly Boyer's Porcie, seeing the failure of the republican cause, resolves to die with her husband.

For Lucretia, suicide is the only escape from a life made intolerable by the violation of her chastity. Before she dies she ensures that her assailant will be punished, but she accepts the sacrifice of her own life. Du Ryer's Lucrèce considers that she has already ceased to exist after her dishonour, even before she commits suicide: 'Voyez-la
sans honneur, voyez-la violée [...] Lucrece n’est plus rien’ (V, 2). Similarly his Esther sees her identity as totally dependent on her husband’s choice, and although she has a claim to the throne in her own right she tells him: ‘Je n’apporte à vos pieds qu’un coeur obeyssant’ (III, 1) and accords him full control over her future: ‘Esclave s’il le veut, & Reyne s’il luy plaist’ (III, 3). These are not women choosing their own destiny; they are responding to their treatment by men and accepting a subordinate role. What they may call ‘fate’ is in fact masculine authority.

In at least one case the author himself seems unsure whether or not the conduct of his heroine is praiseworthy. It may seem that the Abbé d’Aubignac was presenting a flattering portrait to Anne of Austria in his Zénobie of 1647, as Ian Maclean has suggested (p. 193). As a widowed Queen, Zénobie is a worthy and admirable ruler, but she is wholly dependent on her devoted generals (as Anne depended on Mazarin). The Emperor Aurelian expresses conflicting views of her military prowess: although he admires her courage, he considers himself dishonoured ‘d’avoir esté frappé par une femme’ (II, 1) and his attack on her kingdom is motivated by the desire for revenge. During his scene of confrontation with the Queen (IV, 3) he criticizes her for engaging in war: hers is ‘un sexe à qui la Nature n’a permis de faire des conquestes qu’avec les yeux’. She retorts that men may claim a monopoly of warfare, but ‘est-ce un droit de la Nature ou bien une vieille usurpation?’—echoing the question asked by Anna Van Schurman and Madeleine de Scudéry on the subject of women’s education. Although Aurelian wishes to spare her life, it is Marcellin who decides her fate with his dismissive comment: ‘après tout, c’est une femme’ (IV, 6). Having failed in her attempt to escape, Zénobie resolves the situation by committing suicide to avoid the humiliation of captivity—‘Mourons souveraine’—thus leaving her kingdom to be taken over after all by the Romans. The

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impression is of a woman trying to do her best, who is nevertheless incapable of surviving in the masculine world of politics and war, which was surely not a happy thought for a Queen Regent. Perhaps d'Aubignac had in mind the wisdom of Salic law, which prevented a woman from becoming Queen of France in her own right.

So ostensible praise of 'la femme forte', whether by religious moralists or by playwrights, often served in fact to reinforce the status quo and underline women's dependence on men. These characters do not directly subvert the values of a patriarchal society, as some of Corneille's tragic heroines had done, though they do display courage and integrity, and attract sympathy for their unhappy situation. By contrast, there is another group of controversial female characters in plays by Corneille and Rotrou of the 1640s, figures of authority quite unacceptable as models of female conduct, but effective as dramatic roles. Corneille created three unusually forceful female characters who transgress all expectations of how a woman should behave to show themselves as ruthlessly ambitious as any man. All have real political power, but use it for selfish ends. Cléopâtre in Rodogune (1644), Marcelle in Théodore (1645) and Arsinoé in Nicomède (1650) are all cruel and devious women lacking in compassion and moderation. Although they are not defended or presented as in any way virtuous, they display great strength and determination.

In each case the absence of a strong male ruler has enabled the woman to take control: Valens and Prusias are too weak to assert their authority, and the widowed Cléopâtre has kept her sons in subjection. So they are not 'telles que les hommes les rendent' but have freely chosen their own course of criminal action. The misuse of their power brings fatal consequences both to others and to themselves: Marcelle and Cléopâtre defiantly take their own lives when they realize they are defeated, and only Arsinoé shows...
any remorse and survives at the end of the play. These are genuinely strong women, but they lack any moral authority, and they could be seen as an awful warning of the dangers of political power in female hands.

In dramatic terms their energy and determination make them highly effective characters. Corneille himself explained that although Cléopâtre is extremely wicked, ‘tous ses crimes sont accompagnés d’une grandeur d’âme qui a quelque chose de si haut qu’en même temps qu’on déteste ses actions, on admire la source dont elles partent’. But unlike Médée she is not the victim of any injustice; she simply hates Rodogune for having attracted her husband, and she has already punished him for his desertion of her by arranging his death. Corneille presents no defence of her actions: the ‘admiration’ is for her performance of her chosen role, splendid in her villainy. She is more like Lady Macbeth in consciously suppressing any womanly feeling in order to pursue her selfish aim: ‘Sors de mon cœur, nature,’ she exclaims, preparing to assassinate her own sons rather than hand over the power which is her sole passion and allow Rodogune to reign in her place:

\[
\text{Trône, à t’abandonner je ne puis consentir,} \\
\text{Par un coup de tonnerre il vaut mieux en sortir, [...]} \\
\text{Tombe sur moi le ciel, pourvu que je me venge! (V, 1)}
\]

Her inhumanity and her self-obsession are unfeminine in the extreme. She has no interest in the future of her kingdom, since she is prepared to murder both her sons and leave no successor. Marcelle is at least motivated partly by ambition for her daughter, and her hatred of Théodore as a Christian has some rational basis. She does in fact succeed in her determination to destroy the innocent Théodore, and since her death is not an efficacious martyrdom like that of Polyeucte, Marcelle has achieved her revenge before taking her own life: ‘je meurs vengée,’ she exclaims as she dies. This triumph of evil at

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the end of the play, and the absence of any surviving hero or heroine, was perhaps one reason for its lack of success.

These powerful but selfish and wicked figures are contrasted with innocent heroines who have no practical power but personify heroic virtue, with justice on their side, and who also differ from the more usual pattern of female heroism by their consciousness of their status and capacities as individuals. Rather than seeing themselves as appendages to men, they are sure of their own ability to follow a chosen course of action. Rodogune declares ‘Il est temps de me faire connaître’ as she decides to challenge Cléopâtre on her own terms (III, 4) and Laodice in Nicomède proudly states:

Je suis Reine, Seigneur, et Rome a beau tonner,
Elle ni votre Roi n'ont rien à m'ordonner: (I, 1)

Similarly in Héraclius (1647), the young princess declares, ‘Mais connais Pulchérie [...] voilà quelle je suis, et quelle je veux être’ (I, 2). These are women of genuinely strong character, who are prepared to challenge an existing but tyrannical political order. Each is allied to a man with a legitimate claim to power; united both by their love and by a shared political goal, the heroic couple succeed in defeating the usurpers of their rightful place.

Corneille’s Rodogune may have been inspired by Rotrou’s Cosroès, which had appeared two years earlier in 1648 and includes a spectacularly wicked queen contrasted with an innocent princess who, to cause maximum complication, is assumed for much of the play to be her daughter. Like Arsinoé, Syra has taken advantage of her husband’s age and infirmity to assume control of the state and attempt to disinherit the legitimate heir. Here her rash determination and ruthlessness are also contrasted with the hesitations of the legitimate heir Syroès, who hates violence, doesn’t particularly want to reign, and only with difficulty overcomes his unmanly feelings of ‘faiblesse’, ‘tendresse’ and ‘pitié’.
actually weeping when he is obliged to condemn his own father to death and then reprieving him at the last moment. Only by suppressing his 'feminine' emotions is he able to defeat the 'masculine' ambitions of Syra.

Jacques Scherer has suggested that the play's limited success may have been partly due to the general disorder of 1648 at the beginning of the Fronde. This was a period of interrupted theatrical activity in Paris, and an opportunity for real-life 'femmes fortes' to take centre stage, adopting active political roles which bore little relation to the ideals of feminine docility projected by men. One wonders how admirers of legendary and historical heroines responded to the real-life exploits of aristocratic women at this time—women who refused to be bound by sexual conventions and, far from playing a passive or supportive role, dared to defy the supreme masculine authority of the King himself. Joan DeJean gives an account of their activities, describing how Condé's sister the Duchesse de Longueville led a Spanish army on the road to Paris, and later disguised herself as a man to evade capture by Mazarin; the King's cousin the Duchesse de Montpensier ('la Grande Mademoiselle') conquered Orléans and led a confrontation between the rebels and the royal army at the gates of Paris in July 1652, ordering the cannons of the Bastille to fire on the King's troops. For this she was exiled after the restoration of royal power, and when she first attempted to publish her memoirs they were suppressed by royal decree. The Duchesse de Chevreuse was already known as an intriguier against Richelieu and Mazarin: she too had to escape royal justice in masculine disguise. Unlike many of the much-praised heroines of history and legend, these were women with a strong instinct for survival, who wanted to make things happen. 'For a brief time women, in effect, governed France' says DeJean, but points out that their political actions were individual attempts to claim sexual equality in the political arena,
and did not lead to long-term success. In the same way the actions of the heroines praised by Du Bosc and Le Moyne could be said to be isolated efforts, which did not affect the underlying structures of masculine authority.

Although Judith and Joan of Arc were praised for their participation in war, Noémi Hepp points out that real-life women who violated the codes of female conduct were liable to be regarded with mockery or suspicion, and that the heroines of the Fronde achieved notoriety rather than renown, Retz describing Madame de Longueville’s daring exploits as those of a mere ‘aventurière’ (p. 14-15). But appreciative accounts of Madame de Chevreuse’s escapades were published in Paris in 1649. Wendy Gibson plays down the importance of the political objective and suggests that many women were simply taking the opportunity to ‘escape from the tedium of daily routine into the kind of world they had read about in novels’, in which case it seems surprising that they were prepared to risk their lives. Joan DeJean has suggested that the literary activities of French women in the second half of the seventeenth century were a continuation of women’s political activities in the first half, another means of challenging the ‘discourse of magnificence’ and absolute rule of Louis XIV—women writers appearing as transgressive as female warriors. It could equally be argued that their political involvement arose out of their intellectual background: these aristocratic Amazons were habituées of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and their motivation to act politically must have stemmed at least in part from their earlier experience of intellectual debate and discussion of women’s capacities and role in society.

One ‘heroine’ of the period who did attract widespread admiration in her lifetime was also one of the first women to have a play published in France. Madame de Saint-Balmon was a native of Lorraine, well known for her skilled horsemanship and courage.
in combat, but also for the generosity of her charitable works and her exemplary piety—hence her inclusion in Le Moyne's *Gallerie*. Her story is told by Père Jean-Marie de Vernon in *L'Amazone chrestienne*, published in Paris in 1678, nearly twenty years after her death.²⁹ It is not clear whether the author was personally acquainted with his subject but he shows a detailed knowledge of her life, and he takes constant pains to reiterate her success in reconciling 'les exercices de la guerre' with her 'parfaite piété' while admitting that her activities were criticized by people who did not know her personally (perhaps implying that he did). Born in 1607, her name was Alberte-Barbe d'Ernecourt; her father was the Seigneur de Neuville-en-Verdunois, in the service of the Duke of Lorraine, and her mother came from an equally distinguished Lorraine family. Alberte-Barbe was educated by an aunt until her father arranged her marriage to the Seigneur de Saint-Balmon in 1624. Of their three children only one survived to adulthood. Her husband taught her to ride, hunt, shoot and fight with a sword; Vernon is perhaps forestalling disapproval when he says that she co-operated in order to please him ('pour obeir à l'autorité d'un époux, qui le vouloit absolument'—p. 22) although he also says that she enjoyed all these activities. Saint-Balmon left her to defend her own property, inherited from her father, when he joined the forces of the Duc de Lorraine in the service of the Emperor at the start of the war between France and Spain in 1635. Most of her exploits concerned the protection of her land and cattle against enemy raiders—pillage being their only means of obtaining supplies—but she and her men also took part in skirmishes, and in 1643 she helped to repel an attack on the French garrison at Verdun. At about this time she earned the admiration of the young Duc d'Enghien (future Prince de Condé) who was leading the French forces in the region. According to Vernon, she was also praised by the Duc d'Angoulême and had earlier attracted the attention of Louis XIII, who had

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expressed a wish to meet her and had offered her 'une Compagnie de Cavalerie & une d'Infanterie', but she politely conveyed her thanks, 'se contentant de ses gens ordinaires' (p. 148). Although her husband served under the Emperor, Madame de Saint-Balmon herself remained loyal to the French King—an unusual example of a woman making her own political choice, independently of her husband. She evidently tried to persuade him to change his allegiance, but without success: '[elle] eut grande peine a supporter le choix que son mary faisoit & fit tous ses effort [sic] pour l'attirer dans les interests de la France' (p. 25).

Although Vernon includes detailed accounts both of her soldierly exploits and of her pious and charitable works, he does not mention the fact that she was also a published writer, one of the first women playwrights in France. Her only surviving work is the pious tragedy *Les Jumeaux Martyrs*, which was printed in Paris in 1650. He notes only that she had 'une puissante inclination pour les Lettres. Son genie estoit penetrant, sa memoire heureuse, son jugement solide. L'histoire fut son estude principale [...] elle estudioit encore plus les maximes de la piété, les joignant adroitement avec les regles de la bienséance [...] ' (p. 18). In his *Gallerie Le Moyne* had described her as 'Muse guerriere & sçavante Bellonne' who allied 'les arts de la Campagne aux arts du Cabinet', which suggests that her writing was already known in 1647. The fact that she was included in his collection would have brought her name to the attention of readers in Paris, and perhaps explains how her play came to be published in the capital.

There is no mention of her taking part in fighting after the death of her husband in 1644; in that year her son also died, aged fourteen, and she devoted herself increasingly to charity and prayer. Perhaps at this time she found additional consolation in writing. (The Treaty of Westphalia also brought peace to the region in 1648.) Despite the

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admiration recorded by Vernon, her unconventional way of life also attracted criticism; Micheline Cuénin notes the suggestion made by a Capucin monk that she was responsible for the death of her son by her transgressive behaviour, especially wearing men’s clothes (forbidden by canon law), and her ‘directeur de conscience’ disapproved of her fighting. Towards the end of her life she entered the convent of Sainte Claire in Bar-le-Duc, but her health deteriorated in the austere convent regime and she died in 1659. She was mentioned by Jean de La Forge in Le Cercle des Femmes savantes (1663) and listed by Jacquette Guillaume in Les Dames Illustres of 1665 as one of the ‘Dames Françaises recommandables pour leur eminent savoir’. Her writing will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

Without going so far as taking part in military campaigns, many women were extending the range of their activities. Although some Christian moralists sought to persuade them that their place was in the home, their reading, conversation and theatregoing had opened their minds to literature and ideas and stimulated their desire for knowledge and for independence, both of which were still unusual for women. They had recognized that education and especially literacy were the key to emancipation, and soon discovered that an aptitude for using language opened up an avenue of freedom to express themselves in writing. Letters, memoirs, novels and plays began to flow from women’s pens as never before. In the next chapter we shall look at the activities women chose for themselves in the context of the movement called ‘préciosité’, what they chose to write, and some of the reactions they provoked from men.

1. H. Gaston HaH, Richelieu’s Desmaretts and the Century of Louis XIV, p. 141.


5. Maclean, p. 52n.


14. These details taken from H. Carrington Lancaster and from Maclean.


18. Introduction to his edition of *Cosroès*, p. VII.


20. ‘L’illustre conquérante ou la généreuse constance de Madame de Chevreuse’ and ‘L’amazone française au secours des Parisiens’; see Maclean, p. 77.


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The concept of ‘la femme forte’ was a masculine construct and could be said to reflect not so much the qualities of women themselves as their willingness to accept the superiority of men. But, as Ian Maclean has pointed out, the movement known as ‘préciosité’ was initiated by women themselves and born of their own demands for education and emancipation. By participating in social and intellectual activities of their own choosing, they sought an independent identity beyond the domestic role. Instead of the respect and admiration shown to the fictional ‘femme forte’, these real challengers of the status quo were sometimes greeted with hostility and ridicule.

Already in 1635 Du Bosc had anticipated such a reaction: ‘si plusieurs Dames de qualité entreprenoient d’escrire, elles en feroient recevoir la coutume: mais sans cela, celles qui commencent, sont plus en danger d’estre moquées, que d’estre imitées’ (quoted by Maclean, p. 55). In polite society, women were expected to tread a fine line between the extremes of a frivolous preoccupation with dress and appearance on the one hand, and on the other an ‘unfeminine’ interest in intellectual matters; and any initiative by women to pursue interests outside the conventional boundaries of home and family was liable to be labelled ‘mal-séant’ by traditionalists, so women constantly risked ridicule and censure. (As social rules evolved, men also developed a horror of appearing ridiculous, and commentators including Faret and Bellegarde issued guidelines on how to avoid it.)

The question of women’s emancipation was one which exercised the minds of playwrights as well as religious moralists, and in the late 1650s and 1660s there was a
proliferation of plays which satirized the social activities and educational concerns of contemporary women. All were comedies and all were written by men; it was not a subject chosen by women themselves when they began to write plays. Molière’s work provides the most familiar examples, but other playwrights before and after Molière chose to focus on these topics, and on related questions about a woman’s role and social attitudes to marriage. This chapter examines the dramatic treatment of ‘ préciosité’, and since the movement formed part of a broader debate on ‘feminist’ issues, we shall also mention women’s own writing of the period on the subject of female education and emancipation.

There is no doubt that the criticisms of women’s aspirations made by religious moralists were meant to be taken seriously. The idea that a woman should have freedom to use her mind and to enjoy herself was anathema to extreme misogynists of the Jacques Olivier school, and even more moderate opinion considered that women needed to be constantly supervised by men. But what are we to make of comic dramatic treatments of the same subject? Were playwrights taking sides in the debate? In highlighting a current phenomenon, they knew that audiences would be provoked to laughter by seeing exaggerated versions of themselves on stage, but they were also giving a voice to contemporary feminist claims. By taking up the subject of women’s cultural and intellectual aspirations, playwrights were both responding to changing patterns in society and airing views which were seen in some circles as dangerously subversive; perhaps the choice of topic was a factor in provoking the criticisms of Conti and Nicole, with their specific disapproval of women in the theatre.

It is debatable whether ‘ préciosité’ can be considered as a distinct movement, since the term ‘ précieuse’ in the seventeenth century was applied to individuals, and it was used
by men rather than by women themselves. Initially it carried no pejorative implication; in his novel *La Prétieuse* (1656) Michel de Pure begins by defining ‘pretieuses’ as ‘certaines personnes du beau sexe, qui ont sceu se tirer du prix commun des autres, et qui ont acquis un espece et un rang tout particulier’. But the word already had associations of affectation, as is clear from Saint-Évremond’s note to his poem *Le Cercle* (also c. 1656) that ‘le Corps des Précieuses n’est autre chose que l’union d’un petit nombre de Personnes, où quelques-unes veritablement délicates ont jeté les autres dans une Affectation de délicatesse ridicule’. By the time Molière wrote *La Critique de l’Ecole des femmes* seven years later, Climène could be described as ‘ce qu’on appelle précieuse, à prendre le mot dans sa plus mauvaise signification’ (scene 2). According to Furetière (*Dictionaire universel*, 1690) it was only when they were imitated that the meaning of the word became debased: ‘*Precieuse* est aussi une epithete qu’on a donné cy-devant à des filles de grand merite & de grande vertu, qui scavoient bien le monde & la langue: mais parce que d’autres ont affecté & outré leurs manieres, cela a descrié le mot [...]’. It was above all ineffective bourgeois imitation of aristocratic manners and learning—by both men and women—which attracted ridicule.

The application of a label may also be an attempt to confine a source of anxiety, and Domna Stanton sees men’s ridicule of women’s ambition as a defensive process, a strategy for mastering their unacknowledged fear of women’s power. She identifies the paradox within polite society of considering women as the source of refinement but the ‘précieuses’ as a threat, challenging the supremacy of the male by their rejection of the traditional female domestic role, their desire for knowledge and especially by their acquisition of authority in matters of language. An interest in language and literature was seen as the defining characteristic of ‘les précieuses’, but it could be seen as trespassing...
on masculine territory. At the beginning of his *Dictionnaire des Précieuses* (1660) Baudeau de Somaize betrays some suspicion of 'celles qui se meslent d'escrire ou de corriger ce que les autres escrivent, celles qui font leur principal de la lecture des romans, et sur tout celles qui inventent des façons de parler bizarres par leur nouveauté et extraordinaires dans leurs significations' and implies a certain mistrust of women taking an innovative role. But the fact that he chose to compile such a record of women active in literary society, for commercial publication, is evidence of contemporary interest.

Similarly, the fact that men began to satirize their literary activities was in itself a testimony to women's increasing influence. Somaize declares that there have always been 'des femmes d'esprit' but that they have only recently made their opinions known:

*C'est, dis-je, en ce temps que ces sortes de femmes appelées prétieuses, après avoir esté dans les tenebres et n'avoir jugé des vers et de la prose qu'en secret, commencèrent à le faire en public, et que rien n'estoit plus approuvé sans leurs suffrages. (p. 22)*

He emphasizes that not all of these 'femmes d'esprit' are genuine; some merely 'affectent de paroistre en avoir'. The obvious dramatic examples of this category are Magdelon and Cathos in Molière's *Précieuses ridicules*, a play which—whatever the author's intention—contributed to a view of women with literary aspirations as prudish, pretentious and affected.

Molière's was not the first play about 'précieuses' to be seen in Paris: he was accused by Somaize of plagiarizing de Pure's play *La Prétieuse*, performed by the Italian troupe in Paris in 1656 but subsequently lost. (Somaize himself wrote a feeble imitation of *Les Précieuses ridicules* entitled *Les Véritables Prétieuses* in 1660.) Since de Pure's novel of the same title presented feminist claims in a sympathetic light, reporting some of the radical proposals he had heard women suggest in salon conversation, including trial marriage, equal rights for husbands and wives and the legalization of divorce, it seems
probable that his dramatic treatment of the subject would not have been less sympathetic. As evidence that the topic continued to appeal to audiences, in May 1660 Molière’s company presented nine performances of a full-length comedy by Gilbert entitled *La Vraye et Fausse Prétieuse*, but it has not survived.⁸

Molière probably also knew Samuel Chappuzeau’s *Le Cercle des femmes*, published in Lyon in 1656; it is even possible that the play was written for his company. It was substantially based on Chappuzeau’s translation of the Colloquia of Erasmus, but reflected topical concerns in its dramatization of a group of women with strongly feminist opinions on the unfair prerogatives of husbands, and with ideas about the superiority of women which recall encomiastic texts such as Gilbert’s *Panegyrique des dames*. Rewritten in verse as *L’Academie des femmes*, it was performed in Paris at the Marais in 1661.⁹ The heroine Emilie is a young widow and a classical scholar, better educated than either her father or her would-be suitor and more interested in what we would now call consciousness-raising with a circle of like-minded female friends than in the prospect of remarriage. Their aim is to establish nothing less than ‘un monde tout nouveau/ Et pour tout notre sexe une autre destinée’ (III, 3) and they ask questions which were being seriously asked by intelligent women of the period about the respective roles of men and women:

Pour nostre unique employ, pour tout nostre partage,
N’aurons-nous donc jamais que les soins du menage,
Et sans faire valoir nostre capacité,
Auront-ils dans l’estat toute l’autorité? (III, 3)

Chappuzeau does not seem to be suggesting that they are ridiculous, although a great deal would depend on the style of performance. But in his Argument prefacing the first version of the play, he makes clear that the chief target of satire for Erasmus was the affectation of would-be noblemen, ‘sortis de bas lieu, & n’ayans aucune education [...] &
se couvrent d’un faux manteau de Noblesse’ (p. 2). There is no mention of satirizing women, and they are not for a moment taken in by the disguise of the servant dressed as a Marquis, but enjoy laughing at his expense.

In the male characters, Chappuzeau caricatures a fear of women’s learning similar to the misgivings expressed by some religious moralists. Hortense, who prides himself on his own scholarship, is at first impressed to discover that the young widow he is wooing is an educated woman:

Jamais Espouse n’eut un plus conforme Espoux,
Nous ferons des enfans habiles comme nous, (1, 4)

until she tells him bluntly that she has very different ideas about her future:

Depuis mon mary mort, je fais la nique aux hommes,
Je leur feray bien-tost sçavoir ce que nous sommes,
Et nous avons assez souffert de leur humeur,
Pour leur montrer, enfin, que nous avons du coeur.

In a comically abrupt reversal, his attitude changes and her learning becomes a threat:

Dieu me garde d’avoir jamais dans mon dongeon
Une femme qui lit Des Cartes, Casaubon!
[...]  
Lorsque ce Sexe croit en sçavoir plus que nous,
De nostre authorité d’abord il est jaloux.
[...]  
Si nous n’y donnons ordre, apres cette équipée,
Bien-tost avec un livre elle prendra l’espée:
Non, non, resolument, jamais femme qui lit.
Quand j’en devrois mourir, n’entrera dans mon lit. (I, 5)

Presumably he considers her reading of philosophical texts even more dangerous than fiction. Emilie’s father is afraid that reading will drive her to madness:

Et je crains de la voir enfin à lire trop,
Aux petites Maisons aller au grand galop, (II, 2)

and when her husband, supposed dead, unexpectedly returns, he banishes all books from the house. The attitudes of the three men towards an educated woman are clearly
presented as comical, yet even some men in a Parisian audience probably sympathized with their anxiety over the ideas women could acquire from reading.

In using some of the same ingredients for his own play, Molière completely changed the characters of the women. Magdelon and Cathos have no real learning, and unlike Desmarets’ three sisters in Les Visionnaires, they appear to have no cultural interests: to Mascarille’s question ‘A quoi donc passez-vous le temps?’, Cathos replies ‘A rien du tout’ (sc. 9). This would obviously not have been true of real ‘précieuses’. As Andrew Calder has pointed out, the girls are obsessed by physical appearances, while pretending that their minds are on higher things. They show no inclination to discuss anything more serious than the latest fashions or society gossip; they lack sufficient judgment to distinguish a gentleman from a servant, imagine that life can really be like a novel and delude themselves that the cream of Parisian society is beating a path to their door; in their ignorance they are pathetic as well as ridiculous.

Although the title indicates Molière’s prime target, he was also satirizing the selfishness of men. Gorgibus complains of the girls’ preoccupation with clothes and make-up but he is himself responsible for their ignorance, having failed to provide them with a proper education. (Once again we may recall Vigoureux’ observation that ‘les femmes sont telles que les hommes les rendent’.) Having abandoned them in the provinces, he now brings them to Paris only to marry them off so as to save the cost of supporting them; if his plan fails, he threatens to dispatch them both to a convent (sc. 4)—an all-too-real threat to many girls of the period. Is it their fault if they are ‘esprits oisifs’, as he describes them in the last scene? Like many other fathers of Molière’s creation, he treats women as objects to be acquired or disposed of at a man’s convenience.
In later plays Molière underlines the selfishness of such fathers (or guardians) and the difficulties faced by their daughters. Another Gorgibus appears briefly in *Sganarelle ou le Cocu imaginaire* (1660), complaining that his daughter reads *Clélie* rather than works of piety and calling her ‘sotte’, ‘mutine’ and ‘impertinente’ for daring to protest at her father’s choice of a husband. In *L’Ecole des maris* Molière contrasts the pleasure-hating Sganarelle, who intends to keep his wife ‘enfermée au logis’ and wholly engaged in household tasks, with the enlightened Ariste, who thinks that ‘il nous faut en riant instruire la jeunesse’ and looks forward to seeing his young bride enjoying herself (I, 2). Arnolphe in *L’Ecole des femmes* is the archetypal domestic tyrant, expecting his wife to be a devoted slave and to have no life outside the home, and his obsessive fear of women with minds of their own must have caused great amusement to women in the audience. In each case Molière presents the blinkered male as unreasonable, and the woman’s right to have some control of her own life as justified.

In *Les Précieuses ridicules*—the first of his plays performed for Louis XIV—Molière mocked the pretentiousness of men aspiring to higher social status, and a similar undermining of masculine pretensions features in other plays which seem to be focusing on women: in *Les Visionnaires*, the men are at least as absorbed in their fantasies as the women are in theirs, and in Chappuzeau’s *Cercle des femmes* and *Academie des femmes* it is the male characters who are ridiculed—as pompous and pedantic (Hortense), gullible (Emilie’s father), or simply incompetent (the servant). As well as enjoying parodies of contemporary educated or ambitious women, audiences were expected to laugh at the pretentiousness or stupidity of men.

One of the supposed characteristics of ‘préciosité’ was affectation in the use of language, and this provided a source of comedy for Molière in *Les Précieuses ridicules*,

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but it seems likely that the ‘bizarre’ examples he used, if they ever existed in reality, were collected from light-hearted salon exchanges and were never meant to be taken seriously. He makes this point himself in La Critique de l’Ecole des femmes, when Uranie defends the ‘jargon obscur’ of salon conversation by assuring Elise that ‘la plupart de ceux qui affectent ce langage savent bien eux-mêmes qu’il est ridicule’ (sc. 1). Livet carried out a survey of contemporary ‘précieux’ literature and found nothing to compare with the pretentious phrases used by Magdelon and Cathos or in Somaize’s imitation of Molière’s play. In La Prétieuse the Abbé de Pure, clearly sympathetic to the women he is discussing, describes their concern with language as an honourable attempt to ‘conserver dans l’Empire des Conversations un juste temperament entre le stile rampant et le pompeux’ and emphasizes their wish to avoid pedantry (pp. 71-72). Christoph Strosetzki notes (p. 54) that clarity and naturalness of expression were the declared aims of the ‘précieuses’.

Linguistic pretentiousness had already been ridiculed by Saint-Evremond in La Comédie des Académistes, written in 1638 and published under his name in 1650, but most of his targets were pompous and opinionated men, including ‘l’orgueilleux Chapelain’ and ‘le stérile Godeau’. Marie de Gournay is the only woman in the cast and she appears in only one scene (III, 2), an elderly scholar mocked for her use of antiquated terms and reproving the young men for their ‘stérile labeur’ of reforming language. It is the male Académistes who ‘passent deux ans à réformer six mots’ (I, 1). Chappuzeau’s Emilie impatiently tells Hortense:

Je n’entends pas trop bien ces termes précieux,
Parlez plus clairement. (I, 4)

In Les Femmes savantes, both men and women are ridiculed for their linguistic affections.

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Molière's plays proved popular with audiences which included women, and the author considered his public 'le juge absolu de ces sortes d'ouvrages' as he reminded his critics in his Preface to *Les Précieuses ridicules*. In this Preface he also emphasized that his 'satire honnête' was aimed not as 'les véritables précieuses' but only at 'les ridicules qui les imitent mal', and that such imitation was a traditional subject for comedy. Clearly he succeeded in pleasing his audiences and they did not take exception to his satire, although according to Donneau de Visé some spectators did recognize themselves:

> Et, de fait, après que l'on eut joué *les Précieuses*, où ils estoient et bien représentez et bien raillez, ils donnèrent eux-mêmes avec beaucoup d'empressement à l'auteur [...] des mémoires de tout ce qui se passoit dans le monde, et des portraits de leurs propres défauts, et de ceux de leurs meilleurs amis, croyant qu'il y avoit de la gloire pour eux que l'on reconnût leurs impertinences dans ses ouvrages.  

As further evidence that the play did not upset 'les véritables précieuses', the young writer Mademoiselle Desjardins was asked to produce an account of the first performance in November 1659 for the benefit of Madame de Morangis, who had been unable to attend; it was quickly circulated in manuscript among her friends and then published, presumably helping to stimulate interest in the play (see Chapter Eight). At one time it was suggested that Molière might have been attacking Madeleine de Scudéry, particularly in view of his teasing references to her *Carte de Tendre*, but he was invited to give private performances of the play for Madame du Plessis-Guénégaud, one of her closest friends, and for Fouquet, who belonged to the same circle and was himself a poet and participant in salon diversions.

> Mademoiselle de Scudéry, unusually well educated and a protégée of Madame de Rambouillet before she opened her own salon, is often seen as the archetypal 'précieuse' and her influence in the mid-seventeenth century was considerable through the enormous popularity of her novels. Like other women writers of the period she was concerned with

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the question of women’s education: from Marie de Gournay and Anna van Schurman to Marguerite Buffet and Jacquette Guillaume, the claim to equal educational opportunities is a recurrent theme (discussed in Chapter One). In Madeleine de Scudéry’s view, the best occupation for a woman is in study and in writing, to establish her own literary identity, and in the final section of *Les Femmes Illustres* Sapho urges Erinne: ‘ [...] si de vostre propre main, vous laissez quelques marques de ce que vous estes, vous vivrez tousiours avec honneur, en la memoire de tous les hommes [...]’.

Nicole Aronson notes that in her own novels Mademoiselle de Scudéry raised questions about the status of women and especially the constraints of marriage, in which she thought men all too likely to become tyrants; she suggested that divorce should be possible and she encouraged her readers to use their minds. It seems ironic that most of her work was published under the name of her brother Georges, since it was still not socially acceptable for a well-born woman to be known as a writer, although she did acknowledge authorship of her novels in correspondence. But she advocated education and independence for all women and her own salon undoubtedly broadened the horizons of many. While playwrights used transgressive female characters to surprise and entertain their audiences, and religious moralists wrote eulogies of ‘femmes fortes’ or ‘femmes héroïques’ to flatter women in their traditional roles, women’s own writing on feminist issues was seriously recommending a change in social attitudes towards ordinary women.

Although educated women urged men to consider the injustice of female inequality and encouraged other women to follow their example in questioning social tradition and seeking independence, Ian Maclean notes that both Marie de Gournay and Anna van Schurman had concurred with male writers in condemning the reading of novels and in deploring the ‘misuse of learning’ to challenge a husband’s authority. In accommo-
dating women's taste for fiction but using it to air radical feminist views, Madeleine de Scudéry seems a more subversive writer: not only would her female readers welcome the escape she provided from daily reality into a world of female fantasy, and admire the author's achievement in producing many volumes of colourful narrative, they would also be directly encouraged to reflect upon their own lives and to aim for some personal literary achievement of their own. And her salon provided a support network for aspiring women writers including Madame de La Fayette and Madame Deshoulières, presumably creating a sense of solidarity which provided some defence against the kind of ridicule Père Du Bosc had anticipated.

As well as voicing women's claims to equal educational opportunity, 'les précieuses' enjoyed the pleasure of each other's company. Salon society had liberated them from exclusively domestic concerns and provided the opportunity for light-hearted games and conversation as well as serious discussion and self-improvement. In her study of Madeleine de Scudéry, Nicole Aronson stresses her delight in verbal games and practical jokes as well as her formidable intellect, and underlines her dislike of pedantry. In Les Femmes Illustres Sapho makes the point to Erinne that study should be pleasurable: 'Je ne veux pas que vous passiez toute vostre vie, dans les importunes recherches [...] qui mettent des rides sur le front; & qui rendent l'humeur sombre & inquiete. Je ne veux point que vous fuyez la société ny la lumiere [...]’ (p. 403)—which seems to confirm de Pure's comment on anti-pedantry. It was doubtless disconcerting for some men to observe women independently enjoying intellectual pursuits, and it is easy to see why the tendency developed to categorize 'les précieuses' as either extremely frivolous or intolerably earnest: Magdelon and Cathos at one extreme, Philaminte and Armande at the other.
One source of enjoyment was in the creation of their own fantasy worlds. For the first time women could read fiction and poetry written by other women and share in each other’s romantic dreams, and to enthusiastic readers the adventures of Cyrus and Mandane were as real as the lives of soap-opera characters today. The Carte de Tendre, devised in Madeleine de Scudéry’s salon and immortalized in her novel Clélie (1654), mapped out an idealized world of faithful suitors and pure devotion, untrammelled by the practical problems of sex, married life and running a home. But thus publicly exposed, the fantasy world became a source of satire (as well as provoking criticism from Nicole; see above, Chapter Two) and the Carte de Tendre was made to appear absurd by Molière in Les Précieuses ridicules when taken seriously by the two girls who are incapable of distinguishing fiction from reality. (Desmarets had similarly made fun of Mélisse and Hespérie for confusing fantasy and real life in Les Visionnaires.) Yet the fact that the audience was clearly expected to understand the reference testifies to the widespread popularity of the novel.

The desire for freedom to learn and to amuse themselves also entailed a reluctance among the ‘précieuses’ to submit to the constraints of marital duty, and their rejection of marriage as the prime aim of a woman’s life became another target of ridicule when reduced simply to prudishness (Cathos in Les Précieuses ridicules, Armande in Les Femmes savantes). Love was another matter, and much salon conversation was devoted to questions of courtship and romance, but women were to be as free as men to bestow their affections as they chose. Saint-Evremond explains that for ‘les précieuses’ love is on a higher level than sexual passion, and in Le Cercle he draws a distinction between ‘la prude’ and ‘la précieuse’: the former is ‘soumise au devoir légitime’, the latter ‘occupée aux leçons de Morale amoureuse’ and motivated by ‘un dégoût honnête de la

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Sensualité'. In his Preface to Somaize's *Dictionnaire* (p. xvi), Livet suggests that many young women were following a fashion in imitating Julie d'Angennes, who kept her devoted suitor the Marquis de Montausier waiting for fifteen years before finally agreeing to their wedding in 1645, when she was nearly forty. Livet points out that in fact not many marriageable 'précieuses' remained single, but their lack of enthusiasm for domestic responsibilities showed an unconventional independence of spirit. Madeleine de Scudéry represented her own ideal of independence by remaining unmarried, as did other women writers including Anna van Schurman, Françoise Pascal and later Catherine Bernard.

This resistance to matrimonial subjection could be seen not merely as ridiculous but as subversive. As we saw in Chapter One, the duty of a lay Christian woman was focused on motherhood: Saint François de Sales had described marriage as 'la pépinière du Christianisme'. Without identifying his source, Emile Magne reports an attack by the Abbé d'Aubignac on those dangerous women 'qui ne visent qu'à désorganiser les foyers [...] elles lancent depuis quelque temps des opuscules impudents et que l'on devrait mettre au feu, car ils ont pour but de susciter la rébellion des femmes. Elles prétendent rendre à celles-ci une liberté que la sagesse humaine jugea bon de circonscrire.' Whether or not this accurately reflects d'Aubignac's feelings, it was probably the opinion of many traditionalists. But some women wanted to achieve a personal and intellectual fulfilment which was generally considered incompatible with duty to a husband.

The disadvantages of marriage from a woman's point of view feature in numerous comedies of the 1650s and 1660s. Samuel Chappuzeau's two plays presented women's own views on the unfairness of their subjection to their husbands. Molière, having ridiculed the prudish attitude towards marriage of Magdelon and Cathos in *Les Précieuses ridicules*, presents arguments in *L'Ecole des maris* against domestic tyranny and for a
woman’s right to choose her own husband, and turns his mockery on the reactionary Sganarelle, who thinks that wives should be kept closely under control. In Le Mariage force (1664), Dorimène sees marriage as an opportunity of escape from a tyrannical father and tells Sganarelle that he had better not be one of those ‘maris incommodes qui veulent que leurs femmes vivent comme des loups-garous’, as she is looking forward to ‘le jeu, les visites, les assemblées, les cadeaux et les promenades; en un mot, toutes les choses de plaisir’ (scene 2). All these remarks could be seen as ripostes to the restrictive views of religious moralists on a woman’s proper place.

Other plays celebrate the advantages of widowhood, reflecting a topical interest in the changing status of widows. As noted in Chapter One, many salon hostesses were widows, or were separated from their husbands, and their initiative in pursuing an active social life was unusual at a time when widows and separated wives often retreated to convents for the sake of propriety.²² (Père Dinet stated that the first requirements of a widow were piety and continence; Le Moyne recommended her to withdraw from society and devote herself to religion and the memory of her husband.)²³) Chappuzeau’s Emilie explains why she found life with her late husband intolerable:

J’avais avec le mien la même peine à vivre,
Il me plaignoit l’argent pour acheter un livre;
Mon occupation luy donnoit de l’ennuy
Et je n’avois jamais de paix avecque luy. [...] 
Qu’une veuve est heureuse. (III, 3)

For her, the pleasures of scholarship are greater than the pleasures of marriage. Lucrece agrees, and suggests that every woman should be granted her ‘brevet de veuve’ at the age of twenty:

Qu’elle soit sa maistresse, & suive son humeur,
Et ne dépende plus d’un pere ou d’un tuteur.
Joan Crow notes that this idea is Chappuzeau’s own, not found in Erasmus, and that it reflects ‘les revendications plus osées des précieuses de l’époque’ (Introduction, p. XXII). These are indeed daring ideas, contrary to the Christian tradition, but they are not presented as unreasonable, and when at the end of the play Emilie’s husband reappears and confiscates her books, we share her strong sense of injustice that an intelligent woman with a genuine love of learning should be subject to the arbitrary control of a philistine:

Quel est nostre malheur! maudite obeissance!
Et que l’homme a sur nous une injuste puissance!
Adieu Plutarque adieu Seneque, adieu Platon,
Adieu Campanella, Des Cartes, Casaubon.
Rentrons puis qu’il le faut, rentrons dans l’esclavage;
Que tu m’as peu duré trop aimable veuvage! (III, 7)

Dorimène in Le Mariage forcé confides to her lover that she is marrying the ageing Sganarelle only for his money and looking forward to achieving ‘l’heureux état de veuve’ (sc. 7). And in Donneau de Visé’s La Veuve à la mode (1668) Miris, whose elderly husband has just died, is comforted by her maid Béatrix (sc. 11):

Loin de vous affliger, songez que le veuvage,
Madame, a ses plaisirs comme le mariage;
N’ayez plus désormais l’esprit inquieté:
Vous verrez tout le monde avecque liberté.24

But de Visé also depicts the bitter reality of a widow left penniless because she has no children: before long Miris will have to accept another husband simply in order to survive. The salon hostesses were more fortunate in being able to retain their independence.

The attractions of widowhood feature in two plays with the provocative title La Mère coquette which appeared in October 1665; Donneau de Visé’s was performed by Molière’s company and Quinault’s at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.25 The basic plot, taken from a Spanish source, is the same in both versions: a woman presumed a widow after the disappearance of her husband is competing with her daughter for the attentions of a
young man, and self-interest overrides her maternal feelings. According to Lancaster, the subject of rivalry between a mother and a daughter was a daring theme; a widowed mother was not expected to see herself as a sexual competitor. Although in each play the mother is presented as vain and self-deluding, arguments are put forward against the subjection of women to their husbands, and in favour of a woman’s right to lead an independent social life.

There are differences of emphasis in each play: de Visé’s Lucinde forcefully outlines to her daughter the disadvantages of marriage, which she describes as ‘un pompeux esclavage, un charme dangereux [...] une prison ouverte [...] le plus grand des maux, & le plus ordinaire’ (I, 3) as well as the ageing effects of childbearing and the problem of men’s inconstancy, concluding that ‘On meinte dans un cloître une plus douce vie’—though only as the lesser of two evils. These negative points are not highlighted in Quinault’s version, which places more emphasis on Ismène’s preoccupation with retaining her looks and on her desire to enjoy herself. The unkind remarks made by the valet Champagne in II, 3 are a reminder of the frequency with which religious moralists criticized women’s interest in their own appearance. As a second-generation ‘précieuse’, Ismène is accustomed to leading a busy social life and wants to go on enjoying ‘des Promenades, Jeux publics, Bals, Balets, Mascarades’, having no wish to retreat into a quiet life: ‘Le grand monde me plaist, je hay la solitude.’ (II, 2) In each play the unexpected return of the husband who had been presumed dead restores the status quo, enables the young couple to marry and returns the ‘mère coquette’ to her traditional domestic role, but not before she has had a chance to express her opinions and make her claim to greater freedom. Even if male playwrights were using the subject of women’s
emancipation for comic purposes, they were giving voice to women’s own arguments and adding to the contemporary debate on a woman’s role in society.

All these plays were produced in Paris and reflect the interests of salon society in the capital, but salons also flourished in the provinces. By the 1650s salons organized by women were established in Arles, Bordeaux, Poitiers and Aix, according to Livet. Fernand Baldensperger has described the flourishing ‘société précieuse’ of Lyon at this period and notes that theatre in particular thrived in the town, which was Molière’s provincial base from 1653 to 1657. It was the home of Françoise Pascal, the first Frenchwoman to write more than one play, and to have her work professionally staged (see Chapter Seven). But here there were apparently no separate salons and intellectual conversation took place in the context of more general ‘assemblées’ (p. 266), so Chappuzeau’s Cercle des femmes was not drawn from a local model.

As discussed in Chapter One, the social diversity of the salons provided some women with an opportunity to improve their social status by marriage. As well as provoking criticism of women’s social and cultural aspirations, this social mobility also provided playwrights with grist to their satirical mill: Chappuzeau’s heroine in Le Cercle des femmes deplores marriages in which ‘l’on ne regarde nullement les conditions [...] Une fille de naissance épousera un Marchand, un Gentil-homme prendra une petite merciere, & de-là vient qu’il nous naist tant de metifs’ (p. 45). In Molière’s George Dandin it is the husband who soon regrets his attempt at social advancement, outwitted by a clever young wife who has no intention of becoming a domestic slave. The pretentious Comtesse d’Escarbagnas, widowed with three grown-up sons and failing to inspire passion in an eligible young nobleman, eventually settles for the bourgeois Monsieur Tibaudier. And as members of the new nobility and wealthy bourgeoisie

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became assimilated into the cultural sphere, they followed royalty and aristocracy in becoming enthusiastic patrons of writers and artists. In *Le Cercle des femmes* the upwardly-mobile Germain is instructed in the value of paying an author for a dedication as a means of getting one’s name known: ‘Comme il fourmille par tout, & particulièrement en France de jeunes gens qui ont une démangeaison enragée d’écrire, & qu’il ne manque non plus d’Imprimeurs affamez [...] sollicitez-en quelques-uns des premiers à mettre au jour des livres sous votre nom, où vous soyez nommé dans la Preface, en gros caracteres, le Pere de la Patrie, le Protecteur de ses loix, le foudre de la guerre, les délices des humains’ (p. 35). It was this kind of bourgeois imitation of aristocratic style which provided the basis for satire of ‘la préciosité’ in general.

Another aspect of women’s education was highlighted by Molière with his association in *L’Ecole des femmes* of a religious upbringing with female sexual repression. Arnolphe has had Agnès educated in a convent ‘pour la rendre idiote’ and declares that his bride should be ‘d’une ignorance extrême’ and need only ‘savoir prier Dieu, m’aimer, coudre et filer’—all, by implication, equally mindless activities. His choice of educational establishment is motivated not by religious convictions but by his obsessive terror of being cuckolded, and he actually wants Agnès to devote herself to him, not to God; for him the convent is simply a convenient place to keep a woman in a state of subjection. When Agnès begins to oppose his wishes he threatens to return her there:

> Vous rebutez mes voeux et me mettez à bout;  
> Mais un cul de couvent me vengera de tout. (V, 4)

The audience laughs at his misogyny, but for many daughters of the period the threat was all too real.

For Arnolphe, any degree of freedom for women is dangerous. They are not to be trusted or treated as equals, but to be strictly controlled. His ten ‘Maximes du

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Mariage' are similar to the Ten Commandments and similarly, as Noël Peacock has pointed out, a list of prohibitions. They echo religious guidelines for female conduct (outlined in Chapter One) by preaching chastity, modesty and self-effacement, forbidding make-up, pretty clothes and social engagements, and even, ironically, prohibiting writing—when Agnès has already written her first love letter to Horace. As Jürgen Grimm puts it, 'Ce que Molière dénonce ici, c'est l'abus que l'on faisait de la religion, utilisée pour intimider l'individu et réprimer la liberté [...] la religion comme entrave à l'émancipation de la femme et à tout progrès social.' Although Molière was clearly attacking the exploitation of religious constraints for selfish ends, some critics objected that these satirical references to religion 'choquent même le respect que l'on doit à nos mystères', as Lysidas declares in La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes (sc. 6), and the play reinforced the hostility of the 'parti dévot' to the theatre in general. It was specifically criticized by Conti as 'scandaleux', described as an 'école d'impureté' by the author of the 'Observations sur Le Festin de Pierre', and presumably included in Bossuet's sweeping denunciation of 'les impiétés et les infamies dont sont pleines les comédies de Molière'.

Arnolphe's anxieties in fact revolve around the kind of women who would have been in the audience at the Palais-Royal. He explains to Chrysalde that he could never trust 'une femme habile' and doesn't want

[...] une spirituelle
Qui ne parlerait rien que cercle et que ruelle,
[...]
Non, non, je ne veux point d'un esprit qui soit haut;
Et femme qui compose en sait plus qu'il ne faut. (I, 1)

His last words in I, 3 are addressed to the house:

Héroïnes du temps, mesdames les savantes,
Pousseuses de tendresse et de beaux sentiments,
Je défie à la fois tous vos vers, vos romans,
Vos lettres, billets doux, toute votre science,
De valoir cette honnête et pudique ignorance.

In outlining the subservience required of an ideal wife he specifically warns Agnès against
imitating ‘les femmes d’aujourd’hui’ (III, 2) and conjures up a picture of the flames of
hell which will consume ‘les femmes mal vivantes’—again using religion as a means to
his own ends. But his view of the dangers of learning and the desirability of ‘ignorance’
is comically anachronistic. In this as in other plays, Molière spells out the futility of men
trying to resist social change by keeping women in a state of subjection.

Responding to criticism of his play (by men), Molière presented a positive portrait
of ‘précieuses’ in La Critique de l’Ecole des femmes: two intelligent and witty female
characters who may be taken to represent the best type of educated woman in polite
society—especially as they appreciate his plays—in contrast to the prudish and affected
Climène. It is another woman, Uranie, who ridicules Climène’s horror at anything
remotely suggestive: ‘cette délicatesse d’honneur qui prend tout en mauvaise part, donne
un sens criminel aux plus innocentes paroles, et s’offense de l’ombre des choses’. She
also mocks some women’s public displays of shocked prudishness during the performance,
‘leurs détournements de tête et leurs cachements de visage’ (scene 3). There is no record
of members of the audience actually walking out—or indeed of any criticism by
women—so this detail recalls de Vise’s comments on the play’s reception: ‘Tout le monde
l’a trouvée méchante et tout le monde y a couru. Les dames l’ont blâmée et l’ont esté
voir.’33 We may wonder whether this reaction by female members of the audience was
hypocrisy, or whether they felt that they had to put on a show of being shocked for the
sake of propriety. But it is not only women who display such over-sensitivity, and the
Marquis is equally ridiculed for his prejudices and his inability to present any kind of

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argument in support of his own opinion of the play: ‘Elle est détestable, parce qu’elle est détestable’ (scene 5), and his refusal even to listen to Dorante’s reasoning in scene 6. Uranie astutely makes the point that those who take offence are betraying the fact that they recognize themselves as targets: ‘Toutes les peintures ridicules qu’on expose sur les théâtres doivent être regardées sans chagrin de tout le monde. Ce sont miroirs publics, où il ne faut jamais témoigner qu’on se voie,’ (sc. 6)—a neat way for Molière to strike back at his critics.

Like Corneille, Molière trusted in the good judgment of his audiences, and since L’Ecole des femmes was his greatest success to date, adverse criticism clearly did no harm to business at the box office. The support of Anne of Austria, despite her attachment to the ‘parti dévot’, also provided some defence against religious opponents: in January 1663, shortly after the play’s premiere at the Palais-Royal, a royal command performance was given at the Louvre, and when La Critique was published Molière obtained permission to dedicate it to the Queen Mother and thus confirm that she had no objection to the original play. He took this opportunity to make the point that Her Majesty’s favour ‘prouve si bien que la véritable dévotion n’est point contraire aux honnêtes divertissements’ and that she herself ‘ne dédaigne pas de rire de cette même bouche dont Elle prie si bien Dieu’ (OC, I, p. 641).

In later plays Molière continued to create female characters who challenge the limits of bienséance by becoming progressively more outspoken and forcing men to listen to them, as contemporary women were learning to express their own opinions. Célimène in Le Misanthrope presents the topical figure of a salon hostess determined to enjoy the freedom of widowhood and prepared to remarry only on her own terms; Angélique in George Dandin openly tells her husband that she has no intention of being a docile wife,
and argues that she is not bound by marital duty, since the marriage was arranged between her husband and her parents 'sans consulter mes sentiments' (II, 2). In *L'Avare* Elise openly defies her father from the start, refusing his choice of a husband, and in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (III, 3) Madame Jourdain bluntly tells her husband that he is mad. The effect is comic, but like the female characters in tragedy discussed in Chapter Four, these women are ready to challenge patriarchal authority and to resist a subservient role.

The conduct of female servants may be even more scandalous, transgressing both sexual and social codes. As Jean Emelina has pointed out, they are often characterized by their frankness and even insolence—Dorine arguing with Orgon and mocking Tartuffe's prudishness, Nicole laughing openly at Monsieur Jourdain's extravagant costume—but in challenging the authority of their masters they are arguing on the side of common sense, and in particular supporting the right of a daughter to choose her own husband. In alerting tyrannical fathers to the dangers of parental constraint, they go so far as to make open reference to the possibility of female sexual infidelity, and to blame it on men. Lisette in *L'Ecole des maris* warns Sganarelle that his mistrust of women's virtue is likely to backfire:

C'est nous inspirer presque un désir de pécher,  
Que montrer tant de soins de nous en empêcher;  
Et, si par un mari je me voyais contrainte,  
J'aurais fort grande pente à confirmer sa crainte. (I, 2)

In *Tartuffe*, Dorine similarly warns Orgon of the consequences of forcing his daughter into an unwanted marriage:

Sachez que d'une fille on risque la vertu,  
Lorsque dans son hymen son goût est combattu; (II, 2)
although she does not actually succeed in changing his mind; it is Elmire who eventually forces her husband to recognize his errors of judgment. In *Le Malade imaginaire* Toinette is given a more decisive role. She explicitly criticizes her master’s judgment: ‘Quand un maître ne songe pas à ce qu’il fait, une servante bien sensée est en droit de le redresser’ (I, 5), and in Act III she herself takes charge of the action, devising a plan whereby Argan’s eyes will be opened to the reality of his wife’s scheming and his daughter’s true affection, and disguising herself as a doctor to undermine his faith in his own physician. These are clear-sighted and sensible women seeking not to outwit their masters for their own advantage, but to serve the long-term interests of the family.

Throughout his work Molière used his female characters to raise questions about the status and role of women in society, often presenting them as more realistic, more competent and less pretentious than men. Another means of challenging gender stereotypes in comedy was the use of cross-dressing, a device particularly favoured by his counterpart at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Its resident comic writer was Montfleury (Antoine Jacob), son of the actor Montfleury and son-in-law of Floridor, and one of his most successful plays was *La Femme juge et partie*, which presents arguments both in favour of female emancipation and in defence of the theatre against its religious opponents. Montfleury clearly enjoyed testing out the boundaries of *bienséance*: in his earlier play *Le Mary sans femme* (1663-4) he had risked a plot which hinges on the abduction of a bride immediately after her marriage, before its consummation, and there are fairly overt references to the sexual side of marriage. *La Femme juge et partie* was based on a Spanish play and produced at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in March 1669, a month after the opening of *Tartuffe* at the Palais-Royal.
The title alone is a startling improbability: in the seventeenth century a woman
could not even take independent legal action, let alone become a part of the judicial
establishment. Like Corneille and Molière, Montfleury had a legal training, and here he
uses the format of a judicial hearing to contribute to the current debate about the morality
of the theatre and its suitability as entertainment for women. His heroine Julie (the part
written for his sister, Mademoiselle d'Ennebault) has been abandoned on a desert island
by her husband Bernadille, who wrongly thinks her unfaithful. She has escaped and
returned home, disguised as a young man under the name Frédéric, and as such she is
appointed to the position of prévôt and empowered to question her husband about her own
disappearance (IV, 2). In this role, transgressing both legal and social boundaries, she
expresses some highly unconventional views. When Bernadille complains that his wife

Faisait la précieuse et la spirituelle,
Aimait les violons, le régal, le cadeau, [...] 
Courait la nuit le bal, le jour la comédie.

Julie (as the Judge) replies:

Et qu'importe? Ces lieux ont été de tout temps
Le centre du beau monde, et des honnêtes gens.
La scène a des appas que tout le monde approve,
Et c'est un rendez-vous où la vertu se trouve:
On y traite l'amour, mais c'est d'une façon
Moins propre à divertir qu'à servir de leçon;
Et ce dieu qui n'y plaît que par son innocence
N'y règle ses transports que sur la bienséance.

This is clearly an answer to recent attacks by critics of the theatre such as Conti (1666)
and Nicole (1667).

In the person of the Judge, Julie also justifies women's interests in clothes,
 jewellery, company and conversation, and even declares (like Chrysalde in the first scene
of L'Ecole des Femmes) that wives' infidelity is only 'un malheur commun, dont souvent
on est cause', echoing Molière's reiterated warning that imposed constraints will only

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increase women’s desire for freedom. She is presented as an intelligent woman with a strong sense of justice and also a sense of humour, so often lacking in dramatic husbands. Jacques Truchet sees in the play ‘un féminisme latent’, since by the end Julie ‘aura moralement dominé son mari de la manière la plus absolue’. The ending of the play may re-establish the status quo, as she (rather implausibly) resumes her position as his wife, but she has created an opportunity to challenge the traditional view of a woman’s place, to voice her own opinions and teach her husband a lesson.

Montfleury’s later plays include La Fille capitaine, which was a great success at the Comédie-Française in 1671, and La Dame médecin (1678), both featuring heroines in masculine disguise, and the element of cross-dressing became increasingly popular in comedy during the latter half of the century, adding to the complexity of the intrigue as well as undermining traditional ideas about men and women. Jan Clarke has discussed other plays of the period in which women disguised as men find a means of asserting their freedom of action and a chance to step outside a conventional female role. She notes that in most cases the woman is using her disguise to pursue a conventional purpose—to get married against her parents’ wishes, to regain a husband or a lover—and abandons it once her aim has been achieved, though in La Devineresse by Thomas Corneille and Donneau de Visé (1679) the credulous Madame de Troufignac actually begs Madame Jobin to turn her into a man, since she finds life much more exciting in her male attire, and ‘la condition des femmes est trop malheureuse’. Her feelings are echoed in Fatouville’s La Fille savante (1690) by Isabelle, who enlists as a soldier to escape from the boredom of domestic life, and who perhaps reminded audiences of real-life heroines of the Fronde. (Her sister Angélique, the ‘fille savante’ of the title, declares herself equally opposed to marriage, but her love of learning proves no defence against the
Cross-dressing also features in plays by Dancourt, including *La Folle Enchère* (1690), which was probably written in collaboration with his mistress (see Chapter Eight).

Above all the device of cross-dressing created frequent opportunities for the comedy of sexual innuendo, and this was deplored by some critics. Montfleury's own one-act comedy, *Le Procès de la femme juge et partie*, indicates that his original play was attacked as indecent. André Blanc notes that Dancourt was criticized by contemporaries for his 'bassesses', and that Voltaire later dismissed his comedies as 'pleines d'ordure'. Jan Clarke records that in the climate of increased austerity at Court later in the century, the actors of the Comédie-Italienne were repeatedly warned about the 'obscenity' of their productions, many of which included female characters dressed as men, before finally being expelled from the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1697. Parisian audiences evidently enjoyed *La Femme juge et partie*; at one time it was claimed that 'le succès de cette pièce a balancé celui du Tartuffe', although Truchet treats this assertion with scepticism. *Tartuffe*, like *Le Cid*, was a spectacular commercial success which aroused bitter controversy: attacked for treating the subject of religious hypocrisy on stage, the play also highlights questions of female emancipation. Although attention is focused primarily on the two leading male characters, their treatment of women forms an essential part of the story; again Molière presents the case for women’s freedom to choose their own husbands, and he also shows the hypocrisy of men supposedly wanting women to be chaste and pure, while doing everything they can to corrupt them. Tartuffe preaches piety and chastity, but what he actually wants is a woman, and one who is already married. In his attack on religious hypocrisy, Molière may also be said to be criticizing the duplicity of traditional male attitudes towards

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women—praising the virtue they actually hope to undermine, while denying them basic freedoms.

As in the case of the ‘querelle du Cid’, the dispute about this particular play may also have been motivated partly by anxiety about the position and status of women and their increasingly visible role in society, especially in the Parisian salons and at Court. The first performance of Tartuffe in 1664 was part of a royal entertainment at Versailles, given in honour of the King’s mistress, Louise de La Vallière, so a controversial play was performed in a context whose status was socially high but morally dubious. As Hugh Gaston Hall has suggested, the vociferous attacks the play provoked from religious moralists may also be seen as censure of Court culture and indirectly of the King himself.44 Bossuet had preached a Lent sermon in 1662 declaring that ‘il n’y a rien de plus opposé que Jésus-Christ et le monde; et de ce monde […] la partie la plus éclatante, la plus dangereuse, chacun sait assez que c’est la Cour’.45 The material splendour of Versailles rose like a cathedral for the pursuit of earthly pleasure rather than the glory of God, and dramatic performances were part of the conspicuous consumption of the pleasure-loving Court. Throughout the ‘querelle du Tartuffe’ Molière enjoyed the support of the King, who had reason to resent the moralizing of ‘les dévots’, having been criticized by some ecclesiastics for openly conducting extra-marital liaisons,46 and on 14 August 1665, after the playwright had been violently attacked for both Tartuffe and Dom Juan, Louis XIV demonstrated his personal favour by inviting Molière’s company to become ‘la Troupe du Roi’ and granting them a subsidy of 6000 livres.47 But by this time Molière had forfeited the approval of the Queen Mother, and Tartuffe was not performed in public until after her death.48
By the time Molière returned to the subject of women's learning in *Les Femmes savantes* (1672), women were well established in society, many were educated and some were publishing their own work. Their achievements were praised by Jean de la Forge in *Le Cercle des Femmes savantes* (1663), a dialogue in verse about illustrious women of antiquity, intended to compliment learned women of the present day, and also expressing appreciation of their role as patrons of literary men. The list of patrons includes the Marquise de Rambouillet and Madame de Sablé; women writers include Marie de Gournay, Mademoiselle de Nerveze, 'Marie de Skurman', Mademoiselle de Scudéry, the Comtesse de la Suze, Madame de Sévigné and the playwrights Madame de Saint-Balmon, Mademoiselle Cosnard, Madame Deshoulières and Mademoiselle Desjardins. Heroines of the Fronde are also applauded: the Duchesse de Montpensier and Madame de Longueville. In general the terms of praise are rather vague, and some of these women are known to the author only by repute, but unlike the admirers of legendary 'femmes fortes' he is praising real women for their literary taste and talents rather than their moral qualities.

Women themselves were also writing in praise of their predecessors and contemporaries who had set an example of feminine intellectual achievement, and the qualities they applauded were not always the same as those praised by men. Jacquette Guillaume's *Les Dames Illustres* (1665) has already been mentioned; it bears the subtitle 'ou par bonnes & fortes raisons, il se prouve, que le Sexe Feminin surpasse en toute sorte de genres le Sexe Masculin'. This is a rare example of a woman claiming superiority rather than equality. The first part of the book is similar to praise of 'les femmes fortes', arguing that women excel in fidelity, gentleness and piety, while men are often faithless and responsible for war, cruelty and heresy, with examples taken from Roman history and
the Bible. The second part begins by presenting the case for a woman’s right to education and countering opposition from the Arnolphe school of thought with reasons already used by others:

Les ennemis de nos Dames disent qu’elles n’apprennent pas pour sçavoir, ou pour bien faire, mais seulement pour se faire admirer & pour ravir les compagnies par la langue, aussi bien que par leurs attraits [...] Ils ajoutent qu’il vaudroit mieux qu’elles fussent chastes & ignorantes, que d’estre sçavantes & impudiques. Voilà une impertinente consequence, de croire que les sciences fassent les impudiques: au contraire, je dis que c’est l’ignorance & non pas le sçavoir qui fait les Coquettes. (p. 197)

In Chapter Three the author argues that in antiquity sibyls were revered as prophetesses, while the nine female Muses invented all arts and sciences, and her examples of admirable women from classical literature are chosen not for their passive virtue but for their intellectual capacities as poets, philosophers, astrologers, scientists and teachers. As proof of women’s aptitude for learning, she points out that men are educated at colleges and universities and sent on educational journeys; women have none of these privileges but they are nonetheless as capable of reasoning as men (p. 215).

We do not know whether Jacquette Guillaume lived in Paris, or what her literary connections were, but she shows considerable knowledge of the cultural scene. In her final section she lists contemporary women both in France and abroad, with details of their individual achievements. She includes Queen Christina, praised for her wisdom and knowledge, especially her command of languages; Anna van Schurman also for her language skills and her knowledge of literature, philosophy and theology—‘elle passoit dans l’esprit des Sçavans pour un miracle de la Nature’; Marie de Gourmay for her ‘éminent sçavoir’; and Mademoiselle de Scudéry, ‘cette illustre Sçavante’ whose books sell at higher prices than those of ‘les plus renommmez Historiens’ (p. 293). Madame de Saint-Balmon is included among other literary women but, surprisingly, there is no
mention of Marie-Catherine Desjardins, whose plays had recently been performed in Paris and who was also known as a poet and novelist (see Chapter Eight). Anonymous women are described as experts in fields as diverse as ornithology, geography, rhetoric and mathematics. No man had written such a detailed account of women’s intellectual accomplishments. And whereas we saw in Chapter Five that women had been praised by men for their patient endurance or self-sacrifice, Guillaume adds at the end of her book only four pages on ‘Les Dames Infortunées’, including Anne Boleyn and Mary, Queen of Scots; an early example of avoiding over-emphasis on female victim status.

Three years later Marguerite Buffet published her *Nouvelles Observations sur la Langue Françoise, Avec Les Eloges des Illustres Scavantes*. The work was dedicated to the Queen, and in her Epistre the author describes herself as ‘une fille de condition qui s’est veu obligée de se soutenir par la profession des Lettres’. She must have been one of the first women to make an income from writing. Her guide to French usage was written principally for women, though without suggesting that they needed it any more than men: ‘Je sçay qu’elles aiment les belles choses, & qu’elles ne sont pas moins capables d’en bien juger que les hommes, [...] dans toutes les sciences où elles voudroient s’appliquer, elles s’y rendroient aussi habilles que les hommes’ (p. 9). The second part of the book follows Jacquette Guillaume in arguing for women’s intellectual equality, and selecting many of the same examples from antiquity and then from the present day; she includes Mademoiselle Guillaume herself and notes the response to her book: ‘cet ouvrage a receu une grande approbation [...] les femmes luy sont infinitely redevables d’avoir donné au public de si belles veritez’ (p. 278). All the women she gives as examples are praised for their creativity—their lively minds, judgment, eloquence and skill both in conversation and in writing—and for their knowledge of many different subjects. These

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were not the qualities usually praised by men. Presumably it was to counter criticism of women's frivolity—and caricatures of literary women such as *Les Précieuses ridicules*—that Mademoiselle Buffet also underlines their seriousness and their interest in 'des choses graves & sérieuses' (p. 280).

In the context of these celebrations of literary women, and the arguments in his own plays in favour of women's emancipation, Molière seems to be going against the grain of contemporary thought with his apparent hostility to the learned ladies in *Les Femmes savantes*. Was he really attacking women's efforts to educate themselves? Once again, despite the title of the play, his clearest target was a man. The Abbé Charles Cotin had earlier attacked *L'Ecole des femmes*, describing it as immoral and irreligious, and as the author of the poems ridiculed in Molière's play he was immediately identifiable as Trissotin. Vain, pedantic and pretentious, he and Vadius display their greatest fluency in insulting each other (III, 3), and in the final scene of the play he is revealed by Chrysale's trick to be a base fortune-hunter.

None of the female characters in the play is a true scholar. As Andrew Calder points out, they show no understanding of the science and philosophy they profess, merely repeating catch-phrases, and in their obsession with grammar they belong to 'the lunatic vanguard of linguistic reformers' (p. 151). The prudish and petty Armande is closely related to the 'précieuses ridicules', and the comically deluded character of Béline is derived from Desmaret's creation of Hespérie in *Les Visionnaires*, which had often been performed by Molière's company. Philaminte (originally played by a man) is a parody of a parody—Molière's own creation of tyrannical husbands and fathers such as Orgon and Harpagon—and a development of the character of Emilie in Chappuzeau's *Académie des femmes*, impatient with her servant for bringing her the wrong books; Philaminte and
Bélise cannot even bear to hear Martine utter a word. The judgment of all three is limited to appearances: Martine’s efficiency in her work is disregarded because her speech is ungrammatical; Trissotin acts the part of a literary genius and they cannot see that he is a fraud; it is enough for them that Vadius knows Greek, although he applies his learning only to the denigration of other writers. Philaminte resents Clitandre because he does not flatter her—‘jamais il ne m’a priée de lui rien lire’ (IV, 1). Like Magdelon and Cathos, these women lack discernment—the quality emphasized in the truly learned women praised by Jacquette Guillaume and Marguerite Buffet. They seem principally concerned to show off their learning, and despise those who cannot or choose not to do the same.

In describing them as ‘femmes savantes’ Molière was using a term which even women themselves had treated with some suspicion, usually preferring the word ‘illustres’. (With its connotation of pedantry, it was also used pejoratively of men.) Madeleine de Scudéry declared herself ‘ennemie de toutes les femmes qui font les scéavantes’ and went on to explain: ‘Je veux donc bien qu’on puisse dire d’une personne de mon sexe qu’elle sçait cent choses dont elle ne se vante pas, qu’elle a l’esprit fort éclairé, qu’elle connoist finement les beaux ouvrages, qu’elle parle bien, qu’elle écrit juste et qu’elle sçait le monde; mais je ne veux pas qu’on puisse dire d’elle: C’est une femme scéavante.’ As Clitandre makes clear, learning must be compatible with ‘le sens commun’ to maintain the balanced ideal of ‘honnêteté’. Taste and discernment are worth more than ‘le savoir obscur de la pédanterie’ (IV, 3).

The three ridiculous women are balanced by three equally ridiculous men. As well as mocking Trissotin and Vadius, Molière makes fun of Chrysale as a blinkered husband who takes his opposition to his wife’s scholarship to an opposite and equally ludicrous extreme. His tirade in II, 7 reveals him as a selfish comfort-lover, concerned only that
he should get his meals on time; as Andrew Calder explains, he and Philaminte represent the antitheses of body and soul, neither of which can exist independently (p. 145). Albert Bermel points out that there is no retribution on the three women: Molière's real victim was Cotin. There is no reason to assume from this play that Molière was targeting women in particular, and as it was a commercial success he cannot have alienated the female members of his audience.

Some critics have taken his satire at face value, Georges Couton referring to *Les Femmes savantes* as an attack 'd'une féroce exceptionnelle' on women's attempts to educate themselves. Maya Slater thinks that Philaminte and Bélice are modelled on real-life prototypes and that Molière's approach to women in his plays is 'dismissive' and 'consistently belittles women'. But Michael Moriarty suggests that although the play can be read 'as a satire on women's role in seventeenth-century culture', it can equally be perceived 'as pointing to the inevitable distortion of women's claims to cultural and ethical autonomy by a society that confines them to the roles of daughters and wives'.

The early attempts of women to acquire learning must indeed have seemed superficial to educated men. Molière's real targets were surely pretentiousness and self-delusion, and in his dramatic output there are more examples of delusion in men than in women, who are often presented as the only means of saving their husbands or masters from the consequences of their own absurdity. He often shows women to be more perceptive, more resourceful and less hypocritical than men—also with a greater sense of humour—and the audience is repeatedly invited to laugh at the spectacle of a foolish or deluded domestic tyrant vainly trying to exercise his authority over a wife or daughter, but in the end outwitted by the women he wants to control.

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It seems unlikely that in real life Molière harboured negative feelings towards women: he mixed with educated women in society, read his plays in the salons and gave performances at the homes of salon hostesses, and benefited from the patronage of Anne of Austria. He also advanced the career of one of the first women playwrights, Mademoiselle Desjardins, by producing her tragi-comedy *Le Favory* at the Palais-Royal and including it in a royal command performance at Versailles (see Chapter Eight). By foregrounding the problems faced by women in contemporary society, and presenting arguments for their greater freedom which contravened the traditional teaching of the Church, he and other playwrights were taking part in a social debate and contributing to the efforts of women themselves to expand their horizons beyond a domestic role.

By the time *Les Femmes savantes* was adding fuel to this debate there were indeed 'plusieurs Dames de qualité' engaged in writing, including Mademoiselle de Montpensier and Madame de Sévigné—though not for publication—as well as women of less distinguished birth who were glad to make money from producing works of literature and were prepared to face the ridicule or opposition of some men to their chosen activity. Increased confidence in their own opinions and their own taste in literature led more and more women to write, and publishers to recognize the appeal of their work to a feminine readership. Within a relatively short space of time, women had come to play a leading role in Parisian literary society. But we shall now go back in time twenty years and, perhaps surprisingly, leave Paris for the provinces in order to consider the work of the first women who chose to write plays.

2. See Christoph Strosetzki, *Rhétorique de la conversation*, pp. 42, 131, 146.

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5. Donna C. Stanton, 'The Fiction of Préciosité and the Fear of Women'.


7. In vol. 2 of *Le Dictionnaire*.


12. In *Théâtre du XVIIe siècle*, II.


24. In *Théâtre du XVIIe siècle*, II.

25. De Visé's *La Mère coquette* appears in Pierre Mélèse's edition of his *Trois Comédies*, and Mélèse discusses the rivalry between the two authors in his Introduction.


27. Introduction to Somaize, *Dictionnaire*, p. xv.

28. Fernand Baldensperger, 'La Société Précieuse de Lyon au milieu du XVIIe siècle'.


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35. In *Théâtre du XVIIe siècle*, II.


37. Jan Clarke, ‘Female cross-dressing on the Paris stage, 1673-1715’.

38. See *Théâtre du XVIIe siècle*, III, p. 232.


49. For further discussion of Marguerite Buffet’s work see Wendy Ayres-Bennett, ‘Women and Grammar in Seventeenth-century France’, pp. 15-19.


When we think of women writers in the context of 'préciosité' and seventeenth-century salon society, we think of the writers of poems, novels, letters and memoirs rather than plays. Joan DeJean records that between 1687 and 1699 no fewer than nineteen women published novels.¹ But the women playwrights whose work will be discussed here all achieved some distinction in their own time: Madame de Saint-Balmon, Marthe Cosnard and Françoise Pascal had their plays published or performed in France long before a play appeared under a woman's name in England; plays by Marie-Catherine Desjardins, Madame Deshoulières and Catherine Bernard were performed by leading companies in Paris. Though some of their plays were initially successful, none remained in the repertoire, and until recently they were largely forgotten.

There may have been good reasons why so few women ventured into dramatic composition. To write a play was no easy matter and required an exceptional level of learning for a woman of the time: drama is a less flexible form than the novel, and classical tragedy the most restricted form of drama. Micheline Cuénin and Wendy Gibson have both suggested that women may have found the form and the rules of drama too restricting and preferred the more loosely defined genre of the novel; Perry Gethner comments that although Madame de Villedieu’s plays contributed to her prestige, they would not have brought her much money, since playwrights seldom made enough to live on.² (We know that even Corneille experienced financial difficulties towards the end of his life.) Perhaps a woman writer would also have found the personal contact with a
theatre company difficult: Chappuzeau reports that it was usual for the author of a new play to read it to the actors for their comments. Although a number of actors were also playwrights, no plays written by actresses have survived. And the fact that the theatre and the acting profession had been directly attacked by representatives of the Church may also have been a deterrent.

The first women novelists in France came from the background of Parisian salon society, which provided a network of support and encouragement, but the first women who wrote and published plays lived outside Paris and we know very little about their literary contacts. Did they go to the theatre and see plays performed? Clearly they had at least made a study of dramatic literature and were acquainted with the work of Corneille, whose plays, as we have seen, were especially popular with female audiences and readers. Women writers showed the same interest in serious drama, and although women were conventionally supposed to be preoccupied with romantic love stories, most of the seventeenth-century plays by women are tragedies or tragi-comedies on serious historical subjects, derived from popular novels, from the lives of the saints or from classical history.

Not only did the first women playwrights choose the most difficult form, that of tragedy, they also chose to tackle the controversial area of religion on stage. Even Polyeucte displeased some members of 'le parti dévot', and Corneille's Théodore (1646) was a disaster. Many religious moralists considered that sacred subjects should be used only for educational purposes and were unsuited to public performance; the Abbé d'Aubignac would categorically exclude any dramatic treatment of religious subjects in his Pratique du Théâtre. But devotional texts and the lives of saints were consistently recommended as suitable reading for women, and H.-J. Martin notes the enormous...
expansion of hagiography in the first half of the seventeenth century, when many editions of the lives of saints appeared. This may be a reason why the first three published plays written by women were pious tragedies about Christian martyrs.

All three have been assigned to what H.C. Lancaster calls 'a curious group' of amateur religious plays, of antiquarian interest only, and Léon de la Sicotièrè calls 'un véritable déluge de pièces chrétiennes, pâles ou ridicules imitations de Polyeucte'. C.N. Smith notes that there was a 'brief vogue' for tragedies of the saints in the Parisian theatres in the 1640s, following the success of Polyeucte, one of the most successful being Rotrou's Le Véritable saint Genest of 1645. Religious drama had remained popular in the provinces, and Corneille noted in his Examen of La Suite du Menteur in 1660 that Théodore had been moderately successful in provincial theatres (OC, II, p. 100). If these women writers were aware of contemporary theatrical trends, these may have been additional factors to inspire the use of a religious subject. Corneille's plays would of course have been a dominant influence for any writer of tragedy at the time, but these three tragedies are far from being merely imitations of his work.

The first work by a female novelist was published in the 1640s, but Madeleine de Scudéry's identity was concealed at first behind the name of her brother Georges. Marthe Cosnard's Les Chastes Martyrs and Madame de Saint-Balmon's Les Jumeaux Martyrs both appeared in Paris in 1650 under their own names. The fact that they were published by Augustin Courbé, one of the leading publishers of plays, implies that the authors may have had useful contacts in the capital. There is no record of performance of either play, although it was unusual for plays to be printed if they had not been performed. Les Chastes Martyrs was reprinted in a second quarto edition by Nicolas & Jean de la Coste in 1650, and both plays were reprinted by Courbé the following year, which indicates CHAPTER SEVEN
considerable success in the bookshops. They were followed by Françoise Pascal's first play, *Agathonphile martyr*, published in Lyon in 1655.

The unusual career of Madame de Saint-Balmon has already been described in Chapter Five.10 Little is known of Mademoiselle Cosnard (or Conard) and this is her only surviving work. At one time the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale attributed two other martyr plays to her, but they have since been credited to other authors.11 She was born at Sées, near Alençon, in 1614, to a well-to-do local family which included doctors and lawyers, and she was still living there, unmarried, in 1659. The date of her death is unknown. In his introduction to her play Léon de la Sicotière notes the unusual fact that in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, successive Bishops of Sées (including the poet Jean Bertaut) had encouraged an exceptional level of literary and cultural activity in the region, especially in the field of drama12. This may help to explain her interest in drama and her choice of subject. It is worth noting that another of the first female dramatists, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, also came from an Alençon family and perhaps benefited from this local tradition.

The first edition of *Les Chastes Martyrs* included laudatory verses by Corneille and by Monsieur de Saint Nicolas, Maître des Eaux et Forêts, and a dedication to Anne of Austria, but by the time the play was reprinted the following year, all these had mysteriously disappeared. Even within the conventions of such tributes, Corneille's verses are highly flattering, and it is possible that he was personally acquainted with the author, and that he recommended her work to his own publisher. Perhaps they had met in the literary circles of Rouen? Léon de la Sicotière reports (p. xxv) that she gave a copy of her play to another lawyer and literary figure in Rouen, Mareste d'Alge, so she clearly had some contacts there, but no further evidence has come to light.

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The first woman dramatist in France to write more than a single play, and to have her work professionally performed, was Françoise Pascal. She was born in 1632 in Lyon and her father was a customs clerk who subsequently became a guard in the service of Marshal Villeroy. Lancaster suggests that her father’s employer may have been responsible for providing her with an unusually good education, and it seems likely that Françoise herself was also employed as a governess or teacher of drawing to the Villeroy family. They evidently supported her writing career: her second full-length play, L’Endymion, was dedicated to the Marshal’s daughter and her third, Sésostris, to his niece. According to Perry Gethner she was sending poems to Benserade by the time she was fifteen. She was included as a member of ‘la société précieuse’ in Lyon in Somaize’s Dictionnaire des Précieuses of 1661, and Fernand Baldensperger has suggested that she herself may have supplied the portraits for this section of Somaize’s work. This, he thinks, would explain the brevity and modesty of her own entry, in which she is described as ‘une vieille précieuse’, although she was only twenty-eight at the time (p. 243). She apparently earned her living by painting, and she describes her plays as ‘mes petits Ouvrages [...], l’occupation de quelques soirées, ou l’entretien de mon Genie quand il s’éveille avant le jour que j’employe plus-seriousement à la Peinture’. But six of her plays were published and at least two were performed, and her prefaces show that she did take her writing seriously.

She was also a keen theatre-goer. Lyon was a thriving theatrical centre where Molière’s Illustre Théâtre gave many performances between 1650 and 1658, and other French and Italian touring companies regularly played. In 1657 Françoise Pascal published a ‘Sonnet fait à la Comedie’, in which she expresses her admiration for actors but complains of the distracting behaviour of her fellow-spectators, ‘ces esprits

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importuns', who 'par leurs bruits indiscrets troublent ces Demy dieux'. We also know
from another poem in the same collection that she thought women ought to use their
minds. 'La Belle Stupide' is a scathing criticism of a beautiful but stupid woman who
makes no effort to acquire any learning and is incapable of intelligent conversation:

Vostre bouche ne sçait rien dire,
Qui puisse avoir de l'agrément,
Car elle donne à tout moment
Quelque nouveau sujet de rire.

She clearly agreed with Madeleine de Scudéry's view that a woman should aim for some
intellectual achievement (and had probably already read Le Grand Cyrus, from which she
derived her play Sésosiris). On the other hand she was well aware of the problems
women faced if they wanted an education. In her preface to Agathonphile she apologizes
for any faults in the play with a reference to 'mon sexe, le peu d'expérience que j'ay dans
cét Art', and in her preface to Sésosiris she regrets that 'la bien-seance de mon sexe ne
m'a pas permis de voir l'Academie'. In both cases she emphasizes that the plays are all
her own work, implying that critics had suggested otherwise, and this would be a recurrent
accusation against other women writers too, including Marie-Catherine Desjardins and
Catherine Bernard.

By 1667 Françoise Pascal had moved to Paris and it seems surprising that she gave
up writing plays once she was living at the centre of theatrical life. Perhaps she was
influenced by the level of religious criticism at this period. According to Gethner (p. 25)
she did not participate in salon society but preferred mixing in ecclesiastical circles.
(There was surely some overlap between the two.) She continued to write poetry, but
concentrated on religious themes and dedicated her work to eminent churchmen. She
remained unmarried and apparently self-supporting—very unusual for a woman at that

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time—painting portraits and perhaps giving lessons. A letter to her sister describes her
domestic life, living alone with a servant, a cat and a parrot. She was evidently still
alive in 1698, being listed in a *Catalogue des dames illustres vivantes* of that year, but
the date of her death is unknown.

Although the subject of these three plays is similar, the emphasis in each is
different, and they include elements not usually found in a martyr tragedy. Was this due
to lack of competence, or were these writers consciously seeking to differentiate their
work from existing models? In different ways, all three focus with surprising clarity on
the conflict in human nature between spirituality and sexuality.

It is possible that Madame de Saint-Balmon wrote *Les Jumeaux martyrs* as an
educational play to be performed by members of her household and the local community
at Neuville. She took a keen interest in the spiritual wellbeing of her servants and
neighbours, ensuring that her staff attended Mass at least once a day, arranging musical
instruction so that they could sing the offices, and providing for the upkeep of local
churches. René Muffat, who edited Vernon’s biography in 1873, states that the play
was performed in a convent in 1650, but without giving any source for his information;
Abbott and Fournier suggest that this could have been a convent of the order of Saint
Francis, to which Madame de Saint-Balmon belonged as a lay member. How did the
play come to be published in Paris? According to Courbé’s prefatory note it was not
written for publication—‘c’est contre son gré que je vous la donne’—and apparently
Madame de Saint-Balmon wrote it in a fortnight and did not undertake any corrections.
The reason given is an unusual one for any author, but especially for a woman: ‘Une
femme qui est tousjours à cheval pour la deffense de ses sujets, et a tous les jours des
Croates ou des Allemans à combattre, n’a pas le loisir de mesurer des rimes et de conter

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des syllabes, et ceux qui sçauront que ce n'est icy que le jeu de quinze jours de relasche
y trouveront plus de sujet d'admiration que de censure." No doubt the publisher was
well aware of the curiosity this detail would arouse in the potential reader, and was glad
to make use of his author's unconventional lifestyle in order to stimulate interest in her
work. There seems to be no suggestion that she had any help in writing the play, and the
fact that Courbé himself was keen to publish it demonstrates the extent of her
accomplishment.

It is also possible that her own experience of divided loyalties in family life
enabled Madame de Saint-Balmon to write with particular passion the roles of the women
who must suffer because of choices made by husbands and sons. Perhaps because she
was a woman writer, she chose to give even greater prominence to the female point of
view than Corneille had done in Polyeucte. Although one would expect her sympathy as
a devout Christian to be with the martyrs, her most vivid characters are their wives and
their mother, who plead passionately with them to renounce their faith and value human
happiness above the possibility of eternal life.

The twins of the title are the Romans Marc and Marcellin, who were martyred in
about 290 A.D., but the first characters to appear are their wives, Camille and Silenie; so
a story of Christian martyrdom actually begins from the viewpoint of two pagan women.
Unlike Corneille's Pauline, who is isolated among men, all expecting different things from
her, these sisters-in-law have each other for mutual support and comfort in their suffering
since the imprisonment of their husbands, and they also have an ally in the twins' mother
Marcie. In dramatizing the ordeal of these three women, the author is raising profound
questions about the duties and responsibilities human beings have to each other, and about
the implications of religious faith. There is no sub-plot of a separate love story, like the
attachment between Pauline and Sévère: here the question of the twins’ conversion, and the effect of their decision on their families, is the only subject of the play.

As wives and mothers, Camille and Silenie are concerned above all with the wellbeing and the future of their families. They see the human consequences of faith, the physical price to be paid for spiritual ideals. In the first scene Camille vividly describes Marc’s wretched state in prison, haggard and pale, his wrists bruised by fetters:

\[
\text{Il gemit sous les fers, ses mains en sont meurtries,} \\
\text{Je le voy desséché, ses lèvres sont flaistries.} \\
\text{Ses yeux qui pouvoient plus que le Soleil sur moy,} \\
\text{Languissans et ternis me donnent de l'effroy.}
\]

Such graphic physical detail is not found in other tragedies of the time. Later in the play Camille pleads with her husband to think of the consequences of his conversion for their children, to put their material interests before his abstract convictions. And yet, while deploring their husbands’ obstinacy, both women are fully committed to the promises they made of loyalty and fidelity in marriage, and they are both determined to do all they can to try to save their partners’ lives; if they fail they are ready to follow them in death.

Silenie spells out the duty owed by a wife to her husband:

\[
\text{Un Mary ne se doit jamais mes-estimer;} \\
\text{Quelque faute qu'il fasse on doit tousiours l'aymer.} \\
\text{L'affliction nous est une pierre de touche,} \\
\text{Où l'on preuve en effet ce que l'on dit de bouche.}
\]

They present a sympathetic combination of practicality and principle, and their virtues of constancy and loyalty contrast with their husbands’ apparent callousness in sacrificing the happiness of their families for the sake of their own salvation.

As well as highlighting the divisions created between husbands and wives, the author also raises questions about the duty of the Christian converts to their parents. Can it be justifiable for children to cause sorrow and suffering to their mother and father? The
eloquence of their mother Marcie convinces the Roman judge Cromace that he must try to help her sons (II, 2), and it is she who dominates the confrontation with them in Act IV. Both she and her husband Tranquillin argue that the twins owe them 'respect' and 'devoir', but she also underlines the biological bond with her children and invokes her own suffering in giving birth to them:

Est-il possible, ô Dieux! que ce soient ces enfans,
Qu'avec tant de douleurs j'ay porté dans mes flancs?
[...]
Que ne peris-je alors au plus fort de mon mal? (IV, 3)

Her attempts at persuasion are not confined to tears and pleading; she also challenges them with some awkward questions. Does her maternal care for them not give her a right to have her feelings considered? What do children owe to their parents? She accuses them of violating the laws of Nature as well as their marriage vows; they are 'enfans dénaturez' as well as 'infidelles espoux'. And is it God's will that families should be destroyed? When Marc tells her that they are guided by 'un Dieu tout veritable' and worship 'son amour, sa douceur', she retorts:

Vous a-t-il commandé de m'estre inexorable,
Rendant vostre maison pour jamais miserable,
Destruisant pere & mere? ô Dieux, l'injuste foy!
De forcer la Nature en sa plus belle loy!

which reminds us of the fifth commandment, 'Honour thy father and thy mother...' (And although according to St Luke's gospel (14:26) Christ commanded his disciples to abandon their families, according to St John (19:25-27) one of His last cares was for the future welfare of his mother.) Even wild animals, says Marcie, don't attack their own parents. And quite simply she cannot understand their desire for martyrdom; a woman's role is after all to give and preserve life, and to her a wish for death is madness:
Un homme veut mourir, ô dieux, quelle folie!
Au plus beau de ses jours, il en cherche la fin; (IV, 3)

For her, as for Camille and Silenie, life and family love are of the greatest value. But for her sons, who have set their sights on immortal glory rather than happiness on earth, 'nature' is the trap which would keep them bound to earthly preoccupations and prevent them from attaining salvation.

Here Madame de Saint-Balmon is raising the profound question of the nature of faith in relation to human reason. Are the two compatible? To their parents, the brothers' faith is unreasonable and incomprehensible, and their desire for martyrdom in order to gain salvation is unnatural. But to them, it is human attachment which is against reason: they have abandoned family ties to embrace what they see as a higher order of values, and a superhuman effort is required to rise above their animal nature to find spiritual fulfilment:

Il faut estre plus qu'homme en pareille avanture,
Pour ne pas ressentir l'effort de la Nature. (III, 4)

'Nature' is seen as an enemy and an obstacle to salvation; the life of the body as separate from human reason and the soul, and making incompatible demands. The brothers discuss their conflicting feelings and encourage each other to remain firm in their Christian conviction, but Marcellin is especially conscious of the impact that the sight of his family will have on his feelings, and the sense of his inner conflict is vividly drawn:

Mon esprit contre moy voudroit se revolter;
Mon coeur est emporté d'une mortelle crainte,
La Nature a des traits dont mon ame est atteinte. (III, 4)

At the end of Act III Marc declares:

Il faut de deux amours que le plus fort l'emporte,
Et qu'enfin la raison demeure la plus forte.
La Nature & le Ciel en nous font un combat,
Je crains nostre foiblesse en un si grand debat;

And faced with his mother’s tears, he urges her:

Cedez à la raison plustost qu’au sentiment.
Nous attendons du ciel des fortunes plus hautes; (IV, 3)

Their definitions of ‘raison’ are entirely different and their two points of view cannot be
reconciled: only divine grace can supersede the limits of human reasoning.

Is it possible that the desire for martyrdom is in itself a kind of weakness? Marc
tells his father:

Vous troublez nos esprits par vos tristes propos,
Et nous cherchons la mort pour les mettre en repos. (III, 5)

which suggests that the brothers may be seeing death as an escape from the complexities
of human commitment. Something of the same suspicion attaches to Polyeucte, who
declares that he doesn’t hate life, but resists any ‘attachement qui sente l’esclavage’, by
which he presumably means his marriage to Pauline. In both plays the straightforward
constancy and devotion of the female characters contrast with the restless and troublesome
aspirations of the heroes, whose spiritual concerns have come to override fulfilment of the
sexual role to which they have committed themselves in marriage.

Madame de Saint-Balmon presents Marcie as a strong and eloquent woman,
devoted to her children and certain of their obligations towards her. Her forceful
arguments modulate into an anguished despair and rejection which anticipates the final
reaction of Jocaste in Racine’s first play, La Thébaïde:

Perissez! perissez! Aussi bien desormais
Il faudra me resoudre à ne vous voir jamais.
Gardes, emmenez-les, leur presence me tué,
J’abhorre également & leur crime & leur veuë. (IV, 3)
And there are pre-echoes of other Racinian heroines in Marcie’s ‘stances’ which end Act IV. As a stylistic device this was already becoming old-fashioned by 1650, but Corneille had used ‘stances’ in Polyeucte (IV, 2), and in his Examen to Andromède of 1660 he was still defending the use of irregular lines to express ‘les irrésolutions, les inquiétudes [...] les attentions égarées’. Madame de Saint-Balmon uses the form to express directly and vividly the suffering of a mother, torn between her love for her children and her horror at what they are doing, wanting to save them but hurt by what she sees as their rejection of her. Like Phèdre or Hermione, she feels that fate is conspiring against her, that she no longer has any control:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tout m'est fatal, & bandé contre moy,} \\
\text{Ma raison égarée} \\
\text{Trouble mes sens [...] (IV, 4)}
\end{align*}
\]

The reader is made strongly aware of her conflicting feelings, resenting her sons’ obstinate attachment to their Christian faith, and the injustice of the way they are treating her:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mes sanglots ils ont dédaignez,} \\
\text{Et ne sont point touchez de larmes maternelles; [...]} \\
\text{A toutes mes raisons leur ame est endurcie,} \\
\text{Ils n’ont plus de respect pour le nom de Marcie: [...]} \\
\text{De deux desirs mon esprit balancé} \\
\text{Ne peut pas se resoudre;} \quad (IV, 4)
\end{align*}
\]

In her sense of impotence in her dilemma, she is a profoundly sympathetic figure.

Lancaster has described the piece as ‘a pious tragedy, based upon the life of Saint Sebastian’ as recounted in the Acta Sanctorum. But Sebastien does not appear until Act III and does not meet Marc and Marcellin until Act V, when they are almost ready to give in to the passionate pleading of their wives and their mother, and he is not fully realized as a dramatic character, since his faith is unwavering; the inner conflict experienced by all the other characters is at the heart of the tragedy.

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Although she was clearly a deeply pious woman and wrote her play to communicate a Christian message, Madame de Saint-Balmon demonstrates considerable skill in setting out convincingly the dilemma of choosing between human desires and the demands of faith. By Act V, faced with the arguments and the tears of their wives and their parents, Marc and Marcellin are almost ready to capitulate: ‘Ma raison se perd’, exclaims Marc; ‘La couronne m’échappe’, cries Marcellin. Only the arrival of Sebastien reaffirms their resolve to uphold their Christian beliefs, and his eloquent apologia for the Christian faith converts their families as well. Within the strict framework of dramatic form, the author discusses a profound ethical dilemma from a very personal and one might even say ‘feminist’ point of view, and asks serious questions about Christian faith in relation to human attachment and family duty.

In the plays by Marthe Cosnard and Françoise Pascal, the conflict between spirituality and sexuality is an external rather than an inner conflict. Both plays derive from the popular spiritual romance Agathonphile by Jean-Pierre Camus, Bishop of Belley, which was first published in 1621. It was no mean achievement for these writers to construct publishable plays out of the mass of incident in Camus’ 900 pages of narrative, with frequent digressions and spiritual reflections, and Lancaster’s dismissal of their efforts seems quite unjustified: he suggests that in place of talent and technique ‘the authors have only to offer their faith and their moral earnestness’. In fact both demonstrate sufficient awareness of dramatic technique to write plays considered worthy of publication, one of which sold well enough to be reprinted twice.

Marthe Cosnard’s play focuses on the conflict between the Christian ‘chastes martyrs’ of the title and the pagan characters who are challenging their faith. Agathon and Tryphine are a young Christian couple fleeing from Rome to escape religious persecution.
and Tryphine’s enforced marriage to an ageing Roman senator; the play is set in Sicily, where they have been shipwrecked and captured. Their chaste love both for each other and for God is contrasted with the adulterous desires of the Governor of Sicily and his wife, who have fallen in love with the two captives—a surprisingly risqué element in this kind of tragedy. Like Madame de Saint-Balmon, Mademoiselle Cosnard highlights the opposition between passion and reason, and equates reason with Christian faith. But whereas in *Polyeucte* and in *Les Jumeaux Martyrs*, women were identified with earthly attachment and opposed to the men seeking spiritual fulfilment, in Mademoiselle Cosnard’s play it is a woman who shows the greatest fortitude in upholding the Christian cause.

Again the author’s intention seems to have been sincerely pious. In the dedication to Anne of Austria she declares that only a pious work would be worthy of dedication to such a devout Queen. Her preface ‘Au Lecteur’ suggests that she was aware of the controversy over the use of religious subjects in drama, perhaps through contacts with Corneille. She expresses her hesitation in presenting *Les Chastes Martyrs* to the public, since some critics ‘sont si indulgens & si complaisans, qu’ils loüent bien souvent le Vice: & les autres sont si severes, qu’ils ne pardonnent pas mesme à la Vertu’. She explains the necessity of including ‘des personnes vicieuses’ in order to provide a contrast with Christian virtue, and hopes that her work ‘ne peut faire dans les coeurs que de saintes & genereuses impressions’.

Accordingly, the story is presented from a Christian perspective, beginning with a speech of praise and thanksgiving by the priest Philargirippe, who has fled with the young couple to Sicily from Rome, and Agathon and Tryphine are presented as an ideal Christian couple whose love for each other is merely one aspect of their devotion to God.

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United in their desire for martyrdom and salvation, they experience no divided loyalty between faith and family commitment. In their only scene alone (II, 4) they discuss the problems of their captivity and the unwanted amorous attentions of the Governor and his wife, who think that they are brother and sister. They do not discuss their love for one another; the most personal note is struck by Agathon telling Tryphine that her beauty is the cause of their misfortune:

Helas pour mon malheur le Ciel vous fit trop belle;
Pompone l’avoüera, l’atteinte en est mortelle:  
Il vivroit en repos, & vous en seureté,  
Moy sans aucun soucy: n’estoit vostre beauté.

When she expresses her fears about the future, Agathon reassures her that they must trust to divine protection:

Le Ciel, le juste Ciel, ne peut par ses bontez  
Abandonner les siens dans ces extremitez;

and when in the following scene they agree with Philargirippe to reveal their true identities and prepare if necessary for martyrdom, Agathon’s only regret is that Tryphine must suffer too, but all three remain steadfast in their faith, determined to die rather than compromise their Christian beliefs.

When the moment of martyrdom arrives, the lovers’ contest of generosity, each wishing to die first, runs the risk nowadays of creating a comic effect (V, 5), but underlines contemporary concern with correct form and equates with the desire of the Cornelian hero to achieve ‘gloire’ with ‘générosité’. Far from expressing any sorrow at parting, they use the language of love to claim precedence in death. Agathon exclaims:

Serez vous insensible à ma juste priere?

and Tryphine responds:

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Helas permettez moy de mourir la premiere!

Agathon: Que vous estes ingratte!
Tryphine: Et vous sourd à ma voix.
Agathon: Cruelle, voulez vous que je meure deux fois.
Tryphine: Ne vous opposez plus à ce que je desire,
Et souffrez, digne Amant. (V, 5)

Here the lovers experience no divided loyalty between family and God. Like the twins in *Les Jumeaux Martyrs*, Tryphine is faced with family pressure when her mother Pamphilie and brother Euplé arrive in the hope of obtaining her release, but unlike them she does not waver. Receiving her mother in prison and in chains she declares calmly:

Je ne suis point, Madame, un objet de pitié;
Dans l'estat où je suis je n'ay plus rien à craindre, (IV, 5)

Pamphilie is less forcefully portrayed than Marcie, and her preoccupations are practical as well as emotional. Her sorrow at Tryphine's imprisonment is augmented by her exasperation at the girl's refusal to marry the man of her parents' choice:

N'auras-tu point pitié des larmes de ta Mere,
Es tu donc insensible à l'Amour de Severe?
Decille un peu tes yeux, & qu'un aveuglement
Ne t'engage au mépris d'un si parfait Amant; (IV, 5)

She blames Agathon for leading her daughter astray and inciting her to disobey her parents, seeing her as the victim of a man's desire:

Infidelle Agathon, c'est toy qui l'as instruitte;
Cruel qui ne fut pas content de la ravir, (IV, 4)

and treating her conduct as a temporary aberration:

Quand l'amour te surprit tu perdis la raison;

But for Tryphine, disobedience to her father is obedience to divine will, and her love for Agathon is also her love for God, both compatible with 'raison'. She explains to her mother:

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and tells her that the flight from Rome was her own idea, not Agathon’s, and that it was an escape to religious freedom rather than a romantic elopement:

N’en accusez que moy, ce fut mon industrie;  
[...] je suis dans ce lieu,  
Moins pour son interest, que pour celuy de Dieu. (IV, 5)

She is unaffected by her mother’s pleading; she has made a rational decision in embracing Christianity, and calmly accepts the consequences of her own actions.

Not surprisingly, the ‘personnes vicieuses’ are more dramatically interesting characters than the steadfastly virtuous hero and heroine. Pompone, Governor of Sicily, in love with his captive Tryphine, provides the first example in a play by a woman of illicit and uncontrollable passion—what Corneille (and Scudéry) had described as ‘l’amour tyrannique’. In his anguish of unrequited love, and his recognition of his own hopeless situation, he becomes an effective and almost sympathetic character, much more complex than the original in Camus’ novel. At the start of Act III his confidant Acante points out the futility of imprisoning the lovers:

Jamais la volonté ne peut estre forcee,  
Toujours la liberté regne dans la pensee;

and in the Stances which follow (scene 2), Pompone is forced to recognize the impossibility of winning Tryphine:

Captif d’une Beauté que je tiens en prison,  
Luy pourray-je adresser une plainte amoureuse?

His emotions veer from remorse to anger:

L’ingratte à mon amour a fait un tel outrage,  
Que je n’escoute plus que la haine et la rage.

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then a moment later he is confounded by 'ma honte & ma confusion' and realizes that he can no longer reason with himself:

\[
\begin{align*}
J\text{'escoute la raison, mais je ne la suy pas,} \\
Elle est dans ce combat sans attraits & sans force, \\
Amour a beaucoup plus d'amorce, [...]
\end{align*}
\]

Mademoiselle Cosnard brings out clearly the irony in the situation of the political ruler who is powerless to conquer the object of his desire—a relationship which would later feature in the plays of Racine:

\[
\begin{align*}
Mais je tiens les captifs, je puis regler leur sort, \\
Je puis leur ordonner ou la vie ou la mort; \\
[...]
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
Je puis bien tout cela: mais helas je ne puis \\
Fléchir le bel Objet qui cause mes ennuis; (III, 4)
\end{align*}
\]

He cannot overcome either her Christian faith or her love for her fiancé Agathon, and his predicament anticipates that of, for example, Pyrrhus and Néron. Obliged by law to condemn Tryphine to death, he cannot bring himself to give the order, but neither can he set her free:

\[
\begin{align*}
Si libre elle s'esloigne, & sans me soulager; \\
Et pour comble de mes maux mon humeur inconstante, \\
Qui veut & ne veut pas sans cesse me tourmente. (III, 4)
\end{align*}
\]

When he offers to send the prisoners back to Rome if they will abjure their faith (III, 7) all three refuse and tell him that they are ready to die (IV, 3). In this scene there are echoes of *Polyeucte* in the terse exchange between Pompone and Philargirippe:

\[
\begin{align*}
Pompone: & \quad \text{Reverez Jupiter.} \\
Philargirippe: & \quad \text{Adorez nostre Maistre.} \\
Pompone: & \quad \text{Je ne le connois pas.} \\
Philargirippe: & \quad \text{Il vous a donné l'Estre.} \\
Pompone: & \quad \text{Je benis la Nature.} \\
Philargirippe: & \quad \text{Admirez-en l'Auteur.} \\
Pompone: & \quad \text{Il est imaginaire.} \\
Philargirippe: & \quad \text{Ah! le blasphématuer; [...]} \\
\end{align*}
\]

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In the face of their determination, Pompone must accept the fact that, despite his power over her, he cannot save Tryphine, since her love of God is stronger than any worldly passion:

Tryphine veut perir, & toute mon amour
Ne luy peut conserver la lumiere du jour; (IV, 4)

Even after her death, and the death of his wife, he is torn by conflicting feelings:

Je ne sçay qu'esperer, que resoudre ou choisir;
Quel remede appliquer à ma douleur profonde?

until, at the very end of the play, divine light dawns and he exclaims:

O grand Dieu des Chrestiens! voici de vos Ouvrages,
Il n'appartient qu'à vous de changer nos courage; [...] 
Agréez mes sanglots, & recevez mes larmes. (V, 8)

Although the character of his wife Elize is less vividly realized, Mademoiselle Cosnard introduces—long before Phèdre—the audacious and unusual element of a married woman consumed by adulterous desire, which is taken from her source but was rare in drama (it occurs nowhere in the plays of Corneille). She also provides a motive for this temptation by suggesting discord between the married couple; Act I scene 4 is a highly unusual scene of marital bickering, Elize telling her husband that he should listen to Porphire, Prefect de la Mer, who wants to take charge of the shipwrecked fugitives, and Pompone dismissing her advice contemptuously before marching out:

Esprit lasche & qui sçait plus craindre qu'esperer,
Ce n'est pas avec toy qu'il faut deliberer.

No wonder she has fallen in love with the gentle Agathon, and she is as incapable as her husband of listening to reason, or of taking the advice of her confidante:

Ne donnez point d'entrée à ce mortel poison,
A la force d’amour opposez la raison. (I, 5)

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When she discovers that Agathon is Tryphine’s fiancé, not her brother, she angrily agrees that he should be put to death. But at the end of the play her passion is converted to divine love, and she comes to join the Christians as they await martyrdom. It is the only time she and Agathon meet in the course of the play; although we see Pompone wooing Tryphine, the sight of a married woman pursuing a young man would have overstepped the bounds of bienséance, so she appears in Act V only to tell him:

Agathon, mon amour a changé de nature,
Le Dieu de pureté n’en reçoit plus d’injure. (V, 6)

Divine grace has enabled her to rise above her irrational and uncontrollable passion.

In contrast to Elize, Tryphine demonstrates the Christian and feminine virtues of constancy and steadfast determination which had been celebrated by admirers of ‘la femme forte’ such as Du Bosc and Le Moyne. She resists the advances of Pompone, telling him firmly:

Connoisiez moi Pompone, [...]
Vous sçavez attaquer, mais je me sçay deffendre, [...]
Ayez plus de raison. (II, 3)

and she is similarly steadfast in her faith, facing death with resolution and resisting all attempts at dissuasion by her mother and her brother, who are soon converted by her example. This element of constancy is present in Camus’ original, but Mademoiselle Cosnard chose to make Tryphine a stronger and more decisive character; in the novel it is Agathon who plans the escape from Rome, and there is no scene of direct confrontation between Pompone and his captive. In Polyeucte and in Les Jumeaux martyrs, women were shown to be opposing the Christian beliefs of men, but here (as in Théodore) it is a woman who exemplifies Christian virtue.

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More conversions follow: as in the ending of *Polyeucte* and unlike the inefficacious death of Théodore, the fortitude of the martyrs has a profound effect on those who witness their sacrifice. By the end of the play all the main characters except Pompone have been executed, and we are told that all those who were present at their deaths are themselves ready to embrace Christianity; at which point Porhire declares that he will join them, and Pompone, left alone for the last scene, sees a vision of Elize in heaven (reminiscent of Hérode's vision at the end of Tristan's *Marianne*) and finally recognizes the supremacy of the Christian God.

So the Christian message of the play is clear, but it also demonstrates Mademoiselle Cosnard's interest in characterization and dramatic structure. The scenes are linked and she observes the unities of time and place as well as showing an awareness of the need for *bienséance*.

It may have been Corneille's verses in praise of the author which ensured the success of *Les Chastes Martyrs* in Paris bookshops. He gives her every encouragement to continue writing:

- Que tes Chastes Martyrs te vont faire d'Amans,
- Que parmy leurs travaux tu semes d'ornemens,
- Et que ton coup d'essay si digne de memoire,
- Doit enhardir ta plume à redoubler ta gloire;
- Poursuy, divin Esprit, continue à charmer,
- Entretiens ce beau feu que tu viens d'allumer;
- Bientost à cet effort fait succeder un autre
- Qui couronne ton Sexe, & fasse honte au nostre;
- Des Muses nous prenons le Genie & la Loy,
- Qui ne sont apres tout que Filles comme toy.
- Je te dis de leur part que dessus le Parnasse,
- Au milieu de leur chœur elles te gardent place,
- Et que tes premiers Vers ont assez de douceurs,
- Pour faire la dixiesme entre ces doctes Soeurs.
- Moy mesme pour me faire admirer sur la Scene,
- Je te voudray pour guide au lieu de Melpomene; [etc.]²⁸

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Frédéric Lachèvre has suggested that Corneille may have had second thoughts about his extravagant sentiments and withdrawn the verses before publication of the second edition. But if he felt moved to praise her so warmly, it would seem surprising if he subsequently felt obliged to withdraw his praise.

The verses by Saint-Nicolas, Maître des eaux et forêts de Vire, are equally fulsome, comparing 'la Vierge de Sais' to 'la Pucelle d'Orléans'. He anticipates that she will be accused of usurping a man's place by writing dramatic verse, which may indicate how often women were accused of passing off the work of men as their own, but he suggests that if a woman can rule the country as Queen Regent, women should certainly be allowed to write. Lachèvre thinks that this reference may have given offence to Anne of Austria, her hold on political control tenuous at the time of the Fronde, and caused her to refuse permission for the dedication (pp. 159-60). Alternatively she may perhaps have disapproved of a woman writing for publication, or of the religious subject. We can only speculate.

Mademoiselle Cosnard did not achieve quite the fame anticipated by these patrons, though she was remembered by Jean de La Forge in his *Cercle des femmes scavantes* of 1663, in which she appears as 'Candace', listed simply as the author of *Les Chastes Martyrs*. If she did follow Corneille's advice and continue to write, the results were apparently never published.

Françoise Pascal used the same source for her first play, the tragi-comedy *Agathonphile martyr*, published in Lyon in 1655. (Although the play belongs to the genre of a martyr tragedy, it does not obey the unities of time, place or action.) She chose an earlier episode in the story and dramatized the actual escape from Rome, which in this case is Triphine's escape from her unwanted marriage to the Roman senator Cévère. The
play is principally a love story and religion plays only a minor part, but nonetheless the same conflict is present between sexual and spiritual love, and here the relationship between Agathon and Triphine encompasses both. Once again the author underlines the problematical nature of temporal attachment, in contrast with the fulfilment to be found in the love of God.

It seems likely that Mademoiselle Pascal was motivated to write her play less for pious reasons than out of a keen interest in drama. We know that she participated in the cultural life of Lyon and her enthusiasm for the theatre has already been noted. And in her prefaces she discusses her own work critically and shows her concern to improve the quality of her writing.

Lancaster considers that 'the author had little knowledge of the stage' when she wrote the play, but she constructed a publishable play out of the wealth of detail in Camus' novel, showing a taste for dramatic incident and an ability to create suspense, even if she had not quite mastered the rules of bienséance—or did she deliberately choose to break them? She forestalls criticism of her own dramatic technique in her Advis au Lecteur:

[...] je ne te donne pas cette Piece, comme une chose rare, & où toutes les regles de la Poésie de ce temps soient observées: Mon sexe, le peu d'expérience que j'ay dans cét Art, & la bassesse de mon esprit, ne me permettent pas d'avoir des pensées si hautes [...] 

She also forestalls any possible accusation of passing off another's work as her own: 'ma seule veine en a tous produits les vers'—a defence she felt obliged to repeat in her prefaces to later plays. Unusually, hers is a tragi-comedy with an unhappy ending: her later tragi-comedies would end happily, and the comic talent which is sometimes

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inappropriately evident in this first play would find full expression in her one-act comedies.

As in Madame de Saint-Balmon’s play, family conflict is a feature of the plot, though in this case it takes the form of parental tyranny, which is more often a feature of comedy. It is generational conflict which motivates Agathon and Triphine to escape from Rome: her father has promised her to Cévère against her will, but she is in love with her childhood companion Agathon. He in turn is threatened by the passionate advances of his stepmother. They are not fleeing persecution as Christians so much as the unwelcome attention of would-be lovers.

The adulterous and near-incestuous desires of Agathon’s stepmother Irénée provide a sensational start to the play and are presented with even more directness than Elize’s passion in Marthe Cosnard’s version of the story. Racine’s Phèdre needed to be persuaded by Oenone to a gradual revelation of her love for Hippolyte, but Mademoiselle Pascal’s play begins with Irénée impulsively telling her suivante Céliane the secret she has kept for eight years:

Que ma flamme est contrainte, & qu’il m’est mal-aisé
De cacher les ardeurs de mon coeur embrasé:

and the play’s first reference to martyrdom is in her own perception of herself as the victim of her adored stepson:

Ce divin Agathon qui cause mon martyre [...]  
Céliane! mon coeur ne peut plus resister.  
Ha! Dieu c’est trop long-temps me faire violence,  
Mon tourment me contraint à rompre le silence. (I, 1)

Like Elize, she is impervious to the reasoned arguments of her confidante, and having decided to speak, she becomes reckless enough to make a direct approach to Agathon as he lies asleep in bed, carrying a sword with the intention of killing him if he refuses her.

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(In Camus’ version she intends to kill herself, not him—p. 547—perhaps Mademoiselle Pascal had seen or read Rodogune?) This scene is startling enough on the page, and would surely have caused a stir if the play had ever been performed. Mademoiselle Pascal is surprisingly explicit in the expression of Irénée’s sexual desire:

```
Il dort, ce bel object, il ferme ses beaux yeux,
Dont les premiers regards me mirent toute en feux, [...] 
Ha! qu’il est ravissant, Dieux que d’attraits nouveaux!
Qui ne voudroit brusler pour des charmes si beaux?
```

and her open declaration to Agathon when he wakes:

```
Aymés, cher Agathon, & cedez à ces coups,
Ne cognoissete vous pas que je brusle pour vous?
[...] Je ne le puis plus taire,
Je languis, je me meurs. (I, 2)
```

As she tries to kiss him, he escapes her embrace and runs away, at which point her passion turns to anger and there is a reminder of Médée’s vengeful fury in her cry:

```
Demons, sortez d’Enfer, venez me secourir;
Sortez, noires fureurs de vos rivages sombres,
Venez à mon secours, quittez ces tristes ombres,
Punissez cet ingrat, que je n’ay pu toucher,
Et ne permettez pas qu’il trouve où se cacher;
```

but here she is protesting at what she considers the injustice of rejection by a stepson, not a husband, and the reader is unlikely to have much sympathy with her misdirected feelings, or with her false accusation against the innocent Agathon. (Such forceful expression of her anger is the playwright’s invention: Camus merely says she becomes furious.)

Her violent and unreasonable passion is contrasted with the pure love of Agathon and Triphine, childhood friends who fall in love as they grow up. At the start of the play they have not yet declared their new feelings, and we see each of them separately longing

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for the other, a device used by Mademoiselle Pascal to prolong dramatic suspense. Triphine sighs in II, 4:

Un certain feu nouveau commence à m’enflâmer,

and in the following scene Agathon says that he can no longer hide his feelings:

Il faut que malgré moy mon coeur s’y laisse prendre.

When they do declare their love in III, 1, it is in terms of loving friendship and constancy as much as physical passion. Triphine swears that she will always love Agathon and will never marry anyone but him:

Je fais voeux de n’aymer jamais autre que vous,
Non, je n’auray jamais qu’Agathon pour Espoux.

Agathon responds with the same promise, but emphasizes that they will remain friends as well as lovers:

En fin, je vous consacre un’amour éternelle,
Mais ne bannissons point cet amour fraternelle,

Although there is no mention of their religious beliefs at this point, the spiritual aspect of their union is underlined:

Je reçois cet anneau de vos divines mains,
Comme le plus heureux d’entre tous les humains, […]
Vivons donc constamment dans nos chastes amours,
Jusqu’à ce que la Parque en termine le cours.

And not until they are about to escape (IV, 1) does Triphine mention as an incidental detail that she is ready to join him in embracing the Christian faith. They form a heroic couple in the Cornelian pattern, united in their shared values as well as in their love.

Like Marthe Cosnard, Mademoiselle Pascal portrays Triphine as a strong character who makes things happen. (It would of course be fascinating to know whether she had read the earlier play before writing her own, or whether it was a coincidence that they

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both chose the same subject.) In *Agathonphile*, Triphine is the first to declare her love (again contravening *bienséance*, of course) and it is she who proposes the escape from Rome:

>Faites voir que vous estes un veritable Amant, (III, 6)

When Agathon hesitates, and suggests that perhaps she should after all marry Cévère, since he is an old man and can’t live long, she responds with indignation:

>Ha! cruel Agathon, tu veux donc que je meure, [...] Ne me proposez plus par des paroles vaines, De recevoir Cevere, & soyez asseuré, Que cét amour si pur que je vous ay juré Ne finira jamais, il est trop veritable, Scachez qu’a mes serments je suis inviolable, Et qu’avant que Triphine ayme un autre que vous La nature viendra A renverser sur nous, (III, 6)

Resolute and assertive, she would rather risk her life than accept a compromise. She plans an escape route and instructs Agathon in practical details about providing money for the journey and concealing their flight. After their shipwreck and capture, she calmly faces her father in Act V scene 3 and takes full responsibility for everything that has happened:

> [...] j’ay donné ma foy A ce cher Agathon, & vous dis que c’est moy, Qui suis cause de tout, ce fut par ma priere, Qu’il m’osta de ces lieux, & c’est moy la premiere Qui descouvrit [sic] mes feux, [...] [...] Qu’oultre que je suis sienne, Et qu’il est tout à moy, je suis encor Chrestienne.

Throughout the play she remains as constant in her faith as in her love for Agathon. As in the earlier plays, their conviction inspires the miraculous conversion of their families and witnesses, and illicit or unrequited passion is converted into religious fervour.

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The sub-plots of Triphine’s wealthy suitor Polydore, and the tribulations of Agathon’s friend Albin, provide comic elements which detract from the sense of tragic build-up to the catastrophe, but do reinforce the emphasis on the problematic and unsatisfactory nature of human love. For Irénée, Cévère and Polydore, love leads to frustration and unhappiness. Agathon and Triphine are truly in love, but there is no place for them in Rome, or in any pagan society. The only union they can achieve is a spiritual one, with the hope of eternal happiness in heaven. In all three plays, as in Polyeucte, the martyrs die efficacious deaths to disseminate a Christian message, but before arriving at this point all three writers effectively dramatize conflicts between spirituality and human passion, and the family tensions which can arise from religious faith.

Mademoiselle Pascal dedicated her play to ‘Messieurs Les Prevost des Marchands et Eschevins de la Ville de Lyon’ and it was prefaced by complimentary verses by P. Fayol, praising the author for her skill in painting as well as in writing and describing her as a ‘fille de Minerve’. Reactions to the play were evidently mixed, as she remarked in her preface to L’Endymion: ‘mon Agathonphile s’estoit autant acquis de censeurs, que d’incrédules’, and she shows her professional concern for the quality of her work by assuring the reader that ‘tu y trouveras moins de fautes, qu’au premier’ since she has now ‘un peu plus de connoissance qu’autrefois, tu le verras’. And once again she stresses that the play is all her own work—in fact it should be obvious, she says, that ‘ces vers ne sauroient estre sortis d’un grand genie; & qu’un homme est capable de produire quelque chose de plus fort’. She conveys an attractive impression of modesty coupled with pride in her own efforts and willingness to learn.

Mademoiselle Pascal demonstrated her versatility and her awareness of contemporary taste in her next play, L’Endymion, published in Lyon in 1657. This is a
pastoral fantasy concerning the adventures of Endymion in the service of the goddess Diana, adapted from Gombauld’s allegorical novel of 1624, and it is the only contribution by a woman to the vogue for machine plays such as Corneille’s *Andromède* of 1650. Mademoiselle Pascal used her strong sense of theatricality to create an ambitious piece with a large cast, elaborate settings, songs and spectacular effects. As in the case of *Agathonphile*, there is no record of performance.

Clearly the play depends very much on visual effect, but it is interesting to note some echoes of *Agathonphile*. Once again Mademoiselle Pascal highlights tensions between human desires and worship of a deity, but here emphasizing the fickle nature of the pagan goddess. Endymion reflects ruefully:

\[
\begin{align*}
L'on & \text{ voit regner dedans les Cieux,} \\
& \text{Aussi bien qu'icy bas, l'abus & l'inconstance;} \\
& \text{Trompant l'espoir de ceux qui suivent leur puissance. (I, 3)}
\end{align*}
\]

but, obedient nonetheless to her divine will, his willingness to die in her service recalls the steadfast devotion of the Christian martyrs:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{O! l'aggreable arrest, la souhaittable mort,} \\
& \text{Ne dois-je pas benir la douceur de mon sort?} \\
& \text{Enfin c'est pour Diane, mort chere & glorieuse,} \\
& \text{Qui sur toutes les morts sera victorieuse. (IV, 2)}
\end{align*}
\]

A dramatic contrast to the hero’s constancy is provided in the character of Sthénomée, powerless to resist the ‘tyrannie’ of her passion for Endymion and ready to renounce her vow of virginity and devotion to the goddess. The theme of the potentially damaging power of love recurred in later plays by women writers.

The valuable patronage of the Villeroy family is reflected in the dedication of *L'Endymion* to Mademoiselle de Villeroy, ‘un des plus beaux Astres de la Cour [...] un Miracle de nostre Sexe’ and in the dedication of Françoise Pascal’s next play, *Sésostris*
(published in 1661), to the Marshal’s niece, the Marquise de la Baume. In *Agathonphile Martyr* and in *L’Endymion*, Mademoiselle Pascal was perhaps revealing the influence of Thomas Corneille rather than his elder brother, but her third tragi-comedy marked a bold move by a woman writer into the realm of political drama so long dominated by Pierre Corneille, and there is evidence both in the subject and in the style that Mademoiselle Pascal had made a careful study of his plays.

The story is taken from *Le Grand Cyrus*, so it is the first play written by a woman and also derived from a woman’s novel, as well as being the first play by a woman known to have been performed, in Lyon, probably in 1660. The author focuses on the Cornelian theme of opposing values and the nature of power, legitimate or otherwise. Lancaster notes that all her five-act plays were derived from French novels of the time and suggests that this dependence on fictional sources indicates the limited scope of women’s education, but this seems a patronizing remark to make about a woman who clearly took her writing seriously and extended the territory of women’s writing into different dramatic genres. And male playwrights used the same sources; Lancaster himself groups a number of plays written around this time under the heading ‘Romantic Tragedies Derived from French Novels’, from which we learn that *Le Grand Cyrus* had already provided the basis for dramatic treatment by Thomas Corneille (*Bérénice*, 1657) and Quinault (*La Mort de Cyrus*, 1659); Boyer’s *Policrite* followed in 1662.

The preliminary verses to the published text testify to Mademoiselle Pascal’s growing reputation; a long ‘Portrait de Mad’moiselle Pascal par Tersandre’ and the ‘Sonnet A Mad’moiselle Pascal’ by Herluysen. Like Mademoiselle Cosnard, she is described as one of the Muses, or rather as three of them:

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Melpomeine, Thalie & l’illustre Clio,
Trouvent en vous ce beau Trio:
Et vous égalez bien ces trois doctes Pucelles,
[...]
Vous peignez, vous chantez, & vous faites des vers,
N’est-ce-pas valoir autant qu’elles?

The Sonnet again makes reference to criticism of the author’s work, and to allegations that
it is not her own:

Petits Esprits jaloux, jugements avortez,
Censeurs ambitieux d’une gloire immortelle,
Que merite PASCAL; stupides effrontez,
Cesserez-vous jamais de luy faire querelle?
Ses Oeuvres ne sont pas des tresors empruntez,
Ainsi que sans raison vous murmurez contr’elle;
Et ces justes honneurs que vous luy disputez
Vous couvriront le front d’une honte éternelle.

And again the author herself pre-empts criticism of her literary skills in her ‘Advis au
Lecteur’, which provides useful insight into the problems facing women writers at that
time. Mademoiselle Pascal points out the restrictions on women’s education and literary
ambitions, especially outside Paris:

[...] je connois-bien qu’il y a dans ma poésie des dictions provinciales, & des
expressions qui ne sont pas bien dans la pureté de la Langue, mais [...] je ne suis
coûtable que parce-que je suis Lyonnoise, & que la bien-seance de mon sexe, ne
m’a pas permis de voir l’Académie [...]34

As in the preface to Agathonphile, she also takes pains to emphasize that the work is hers
alone, and in her own defence against her critics she cites the success of the play in
performance—‘l’applaudissement universel que cette piece a receu dans la representation
publique qui s’en est faite icy’—that is, in Lyon.

The story is complicated and not always easy to follow, but the author does clearly
present the conflict between the characters who seek political power and those for whom
love is the first priority, and who also turn out to have legitimate claims to power.

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Sixteen years before the play begins, the throne of Egypt was usurped by Amasis from Apriez, and the rightful heir Sésostris, son of Apriez, has been brought up as the son of a shepherd; Amasis' own daughter, born shortly before the death of her mother, who had fled from the Court in the confusion of war, has been brought up as a shepherdess, and these two have fallen in love. Like Auguste in Cinna, Amasis is disillusioned with power, which has not brought him contentment:

Ce thrône si brillant où l'on me considère,
Ne paroist à mes yeux que comme une chimere,
Voyant que tous les jours ceux qui m'ont couronné,
Ne cherchent qu'à m'ôter ce qu'ils m'avoient donné; (I,1)

His political power has been won at the cost of his personal life. In a dream, the ghost of his wife tells him that Sésostris is alive and must be restored to the throne, and so is his own child, although she does not reveal whether it was a boy or a girl; if he does not ensure that the legitimate ruler is restored he will be afflicted by blindness and will never see this child.

As in Corneille's political drama, the opposing argument of 'raison d'Etat' is presented by the King's Machiavellian henchman Héracleon, who dismisses these predictions with a reminder that he has force on his side:

Mais, Seigneur, toute-fois dans ces vaines allarmes,
Ne vous souvient-il plus du succés de vos armes?
[...]
L'on vous éléut, Seigneur, pour Prince legitime,
Vous l'estes en effet, & vous l'estes sans crime: (I, 2)

Héracleon and his sister Lyserine, both motivated solely by political ambition, provide a colourful contrast to the characters of the virtuous heroes Sésostris and Thimarette, who are ready to renounce legitimate political claims for the sake of their mutual love. When
it is thought that she may be the legitimate heir to the throne, Thimarette declares that love is more important to her than status:

Tu crois que les Grandeurs charment déjà mon âme?
Et que ces feux brillants vont éteindre ma flamme? (IV, 4)

Similarly, Sesostris has no interest in ruling Egypt if he must give up his attachment to her:

Le Trône d'APRIEZ m'est bien moins précieux,
Que ces feux innocents qu'ont produits vos beaux yeux:
Où, divine Princesse, il n'est point de Couronne,
Que pour vous adorer SESOSTRIS n'abandonne. (V, 5)

As in Rodogune, Héraclius and Nicomède, true love is identified with a legitimate claim to political power, the one validating the other, and these are the values that triumph in the end with the defeat of base self-interest: Sesostris is reunited with Thimarette and nominated heir to the throne, Héracleon is pardoned and Lyserine leaves the court.

Although the various revelations and reversals in this complex tale of court intrigue are often highly improbable and sometimes not clearly explained, the audience's interest was no doubt held by the brisk pace, lively dialogue and moments of suspense occasioned by the usual devices of dreams, premonitions, false identities and incomplete messages. Despite her own modesty, Mademoiselle Pascal showed herself well able to construct a performable play on a serious subject.

She was also the first woman dramatist to write comedies. Two one-act 'pièces comiques' were published in her Diverses Poesies of 1657, and Le Vieillard amoureux appeared in a separate edition in 1664, having apparently been performed in Lyon in 1662 and in Paris the following year. These short pieces were popular in the provinces as an additional item of light relief after the main play: Perry Gethner points out (p. 27) that Mademoiselle Pascal was among the first playwrights to compose them. Molière may

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have seen or read her one-act plays in Lyon before he wrote his own and introduced them to Paris on his return to the capital.

Perry Gethner has included *L'Amoureux extravagant* (1657) in his anthology *Femmes dramaturges en France*, and produced an English translation, *The Lunatic Lover*, which gives its title to the English edition of the whole collection. He comments (pp. 28-29) on the affinities of the play with the comedies of Corneille; indeed the title was originally the subtitle of *La Place royale*. There is also an echo of *Les Visionnaires*: the central character of the title, Philon, is a literary fantasist who resembles a combination of two of Desmarets' characters (Amidor, 'poète extravagant' and Filidan, 'amoureux en tête'). Françoise Pascal would surely have known Desmarets' comedy, one of the most popular of the century and regularly performed by Molière's company. The plot is slight, centering on the ingenuity of a clever valet in extracting money from the foolish but wealthy Philon, who is induced to pay large amounts of cash to reclaim from the underworld the woman he believes to be dead (scenes 12 and 13); his naïve unawareness that all the other characters are plotting against him provides the comedy of the piece.

The central character of *L'Amoureuse vaine et ridicule* is equally unaware that she is an object of mockery, and recalls another of Desmarets' characters: like Hespérie, the vain and deluded Clorinde imagines that all men are in love with her. For their own amusement, the cousins Philis and Isabelle trick her into believing that their own fiancés are rivals for her attention, and such is the power of her fantasy that even at the end of the play, when the two young couples go off to get married, she does not realize that she has been deceived. Philon loses his money, but Clorinde does not suffer from being duped, since her illusions remain intact. The play's ridicule of her obsession with her appearance links with Mademoiselle Pascal's poem 'La Belle Stupide', already mentioned.
published in the same volume, and the theme of the ageing coquette reappears in the plays by De Visé and Quinault already discussed in Chapter Six. (We shall find a similarly scathing view of women’s vanity and coquetry from the next woman playwright, Mademoiselle Desjardins, in her play Le Favory.) In Françoise Pascal herself we may see a reincarnation of Desmarets’ Sestiane, passionate about the theatre and keen to write plays of her own, with no interest in taking on domestic responsibilities which could only curtail her social life and her literary ambitions.

Her last play, the one-act comedy Le Vieillard amoureux, was apparently performed in Lyon in 1662 and also in Paris at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1663, before being published in 1664. Written in octosyllables, it is neatly plotted, concise and witty, perhaps reflecting the influence of Molière as well as Mademoiselle Pascal’s continuing efforts to improve her dramatic technique, and the story is more substantial. Again there is a rather risqué element, this time of a lover dressing up as a woman to avoid detection by a tyrannical father, a ruse which appears to backfire when the father falls in love with this attractive stranger, but which then leads to a happy ending when he is shamed into recognizing his own selfishness and delusions of youthfulness. Like Molière, Mademoiselle Pascal chose in all her comedies to ridicule vanity, pretentiousness and self-deception, whether in men or in women.

The city council of Lyon apparently rewarded its ‘fille lyonnaise’ financially for Agathonphile martyr in 1655, and also made her a payment of two hundred livres for a play entitled La Constance victorieuse, which has not survived.36 Whether or not she earned much money from her plays, Françoise Pascal was one of the first women to have her work published and to consider herself a professional writer. It is clear from her own work that she had a good knowledge of contemporary repertoire, both tragic drama and

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comedy. By the time she moved to Paris another woman writer had also left her home town to lead an independent life in the capital, and had chosen to write plays. Did they know each other's work? Did they perhaps meet in Paris? Both knew the work of Molière, and in the next chapter we shall discuss the part he played in the theatrical career of Marie-Catherine Desjardins.

1. Joan DeJean, Tender Geographies, p. 128.
4. La Grange records three performances in January-February 1660 of 'D. Guichot ou les Enchantemens de Merlin, Piece recommandee par Mle Bejar', and Perry Gethner records that a one-act comedy by the actress Charlotte Pitel was performed in 1687 but never published (Femmes Dramaturges, p. 185).
5. See Marc Fumaroli's discussion of possible reasons in Héros et Orateurs, pp. 223-59.
11. Le Martyre de Saint Eustache (Paris, 1643) to Desfontaines; Le Martyre de Sainte Catherine (Caen, 1649) to d'Aubignac, acc. Cioranescu.
12. Introduction to Les Chastes Martyrs, p. xi.
15. Françoise Pascal, Sésostris, Advis au Lecteur, no page nos.
17. Françoise Pascal, Diverses Poesies, p. 3. This poem also appears in Deborah Steinberger's edition of Le Commerce du Parnasse, p. 45.

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22. Abbott & Fournier, p. 44.

23. *Polyeucte*, line 1516; cf. 'honteux attachements de la chair et du monde', line 1107.


25. By 1650 Camus had become vicar-general to the diocese of Rouen.


27. Marthe Cosnard, Preface to *Les Chastes Martyrs*; no page numbers.

28. Included in La Sicotière’s edition of *Les Chastes Martyrs*, also in Corneille, OC, II, p. 635.

29. Frédéric Lachèvre, ‘Corneille et Mademoiselle Cosnard’, p. 159.


36. See Deborah Steinberger, Introduction to *Le Commerce du Parnasse*, p. IX.

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Molière’s return to Paris in 1658 transformed the theatrical life of the capital. His comedies quickly became immensely popular but they also provoked a period of intensive attack on the theatre during the 1660s. These objections were sometimes specific—his undermining of authority and convention was bound to cause controversy—but we can infer that some religious moralists were also responding to a more subtle shift in the dramatic focus of his plays. In Corneille’s political drama which had dominated the French stage for two decades, love was not the most important element of the plot, and the hero’s pursuit of gloire, directed to upholding a higher system of values than individual happiness, could be aligned with Christian belief. Molière chose a comic format but also explored serious questions about human conduct, and consistently celebrated the value of individual happiness to be found here and now in the enjoyment of life, love, friendship and good family relationships. This emphasis could be seen as undermining religious principles of self-denial and service to God.

As we saw in Chapter Six, Molière’s plays both reflected his interest in the contemporary debate about the changing status of women and contributed ideas to that debate, broadly lending support to claims for women’s increased freedom of choice. And as a practical contribution to the cause of women’s independence, he used his position to give direct support to a young woman writer, the first to have her plays performed in Paris and one of the first to earn her own living from writing.¹

Marie-Catherine Desjardins, later known as Madame de Villedieu, was best known in her lifetime as a poet and novelist, and since her novels continued to be popular during
the eighteenth century, her twentieth-century biographers have concentrated on her prose
writing. But early in her career she wrote three plays, which were the first by a woman
to be professionally produced in Paris and reviewed in contemporary journals, and she
achieved the rare distinction of having one of them performed for Louis XIV at Versailles.
The first two belonged to the realm of Cornelian heroic drama, but the third, like
Molière’s plays, asserted the supreme importance of true love and friendship for human
happiness.

The first full-length study of her life and work was written by Emile Magne in
1907. Unfortunately this consisted largely of speculation and proved inaccurate in many
respects: for example a misreading of an anecdote by Tallemant des Réaux led him to
suppose that she had been an actress in Molière’s company in the provinces, although this
theory had already been discounted by Léon de la Siciotière in an article of 1883. More
recent research has established a factual basis for the study of Madame de Villedieu’s
work, but until recently little attention had been paid to her plays, which were not revived
after their initial performances. Bruce Morrissette’s critical biography prepared the ground
for Micheline Cuénin’s more substantial study, which is a valuable source of biographical
information but out of over 700 pages devotes only a dozen to Mademoiselle Desjardins’
theatrical career. Perry Gethner has helped to redress the balance by writing about her
work as a dramatist and presenting a modern edition of her best-known play, Le Favory,
together with a summary of what is now known of her life. Nancy Klein has included
Mademoiselle Desjardins’ first play Manlius in an anthology of her writings. Elizabeth
Woodrough has also discussed her career in the theatre, drawing comparisons with the
English playwright Aphra Behn, and discussion of her plays has appeared in various
journals.

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Mademoiselle Desjardins was born in 1640, probably in Paris, although her father came from Alençon. He was employed as an equerry by the Rohan-Montbazon family in Paris, and in 1637 he married a lady-in-waiting to the Duchesse de Montbazon. He subsequently obtained a 'charge des coupes et revenus de la forêt de Perseigne', near Alençon, and the family was living there by 1651. Nothing is known of Marie-Catherine's education; in 1667 she wrote to her publisher Barbin of her own 'ignorance'; 'moy, qui ne sçay aucune Langue estrangere, qui n'ay jamais lu d'Auteur plus ancien que Mr d'Urfé, & Mr de Gomberville, & qui n'ay pour toute science qu'un peu d'usage du monde, & une experience de vingt-sept années de vie'. But she showed an interest in literature and began to write poetry at an early age.

Her mother was evidently a woman of independent spirit, and perhaps life in the provinces bored her: in 1655 she obtained a legal separation from her husband and returned with her two daughters to Paris, where her former employer provided the young Marie-Catherine with an entrée into the literary salons of the capital and became her first patron. From these early contacts Mademoiselle Desjardins assiduously developed a large network of friends and patrons in the highest court circles, including the Comtesse de La Suze, the Duchesse de Chevreuse, the Duchesse de Montpensier, the Duchesse de Montausier, the Duchesse de Nemours, Hugues de Lionne and the Duc de Saint-Aignan. Her dedications and her substantial output of letters and occasional verse show how carefully she maintained this network. And the help and encouragement she received enabled her to lead a remarkably independent life for a well-born young woman of the time. According to Micheline Cuénin, she was the first woman to make her living from writing—'la première romancière qui non seulement signe ses œuvres, mais leur doit sa subsistance' (p. 715)—thanks largely, it seems, to the support of other women.
Both in her personal life and in her writing she soon showed an unusual disregard for conventional female modesty. Her first published sonnet was a demure speculation upon ‘Les plaisirs que l’on n’a point goustez’, but the maidenly tone did not last long, and in 1658 she achieved instant notoriety with a sonnet entitled ‘Jouissance’, an explicit celebration of sexual pleasure:

Aujourd’hui dans tes bras j’ay demeuré pâmée;  
Aujourd’hui, cher Tirsis, ton amoureuse ardeur  
Triomphe impunément de toute ma pudeur,  
Et je cède aux transports dont mon âme est charmée.

Ta flamme et ton respect m’ont enfin désarmée;  
Dans nos embrassements je mets tout mon bonheur,  
Et je ne connois plus de vertu ny d’honneur  
Puisque j’ayme Tirsis et que j’en suis aimée.

O vous, foibles esprits qui ne connoissez pas  
Les plaisirs les plus doux que l’on goustez icy-bas,  
Apprenez les transports dont mon âme est ravie.

Une douce langueur m’oste le sentiment,  
Je meurs entre les bras de mon fidèle amant  
Et c’est dans cette mort que je trouve la vie.9

These were startling sentiments from an eighteen-year-old girl, and according to Tallemant her pious patron Madame de Morangis was deeply shocked.10 Somaize also protested that such an explicit poem was ‘fort impertinent pour une fille’11 and Micheline Cuénin notes (p. 104) that such unequivocal enthusiasm for physical love was only supposed to be expressed by men, although Louise Labé had communicated a comparable sensuality in her poems one hundred years earlier.12

In her first novel, Alcidamie (1661), Mademoiselle Desjardins again created something of a sensation by reviving the scandalous history of Marguerite de Rohan, a relative of her patron the Duchesse de Montbazon, and an attempt was made by the family to suppress it. The author wrote a poetic plea to the Chancellor Séguier ‘pour luy

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demander mon Roman qu’il ait fait saisir’, in which she showed her command of the necessary hyperbolic tone, praising his ‘extreme prudence’ and ‘éclatante gloire’ and concluding:

J’ose vous supplier, Ministre magnanime,
De ne pas étouffer un Ouvrage naissant,
Dont les seuls ennemis ont causé tout le crime."

Séguier responded by releasing her novel for publication.

The lack of conventional restraint in her poetry extended to her private life. She lived openly for a time with Antoine Boësset de Villedieu, a young officer whose father was a musician at Court—another useful connection—and she later took his name although they were never legally married. In 1664 she used her advance payment from Molière for Le Favory to follow her lover to Provence, where he signed a promise of marriage, but in 1667 he asked her to release him from his engagement, sold her love letters to Claude Barbin for publication, and married instead a wealthy young widow. Perhaps Mademoiselle Desjardins felt some sense of poetic justice when he was killed in battle shortly afterwards, although she expressed great sadness in her letters and evidently wanted to perpetrate a link with him, since she took his name and published all her later work under the name of Madame de Villedieu.

Despite the continuing popularity of her novels (the Mercure galant in 1672 referred to ‘Madame de Villedieu dont les ouvrages font tous les jours tant de bruit’), she decided in about 1674 to abandon her literary career and enter a convent, but her retreat from Parisian society did not last long. According to Barbin’s account, ‘elle avait telle inclination pour la Poésie que, malgré la défense de ses Supérieures dans le couvent où elle était, elle ne pouvait s’empêcher de faire des vers’. Antoine Adam gives a different version of the story but without identifying its source: ‘Lorsque les religieuses
apprirent qu’elles avaient affaire à une femme décriée, elles la chassèrent. It is not clear whether they were more scandalized by her literary activities or by her personal life—after her separation from Villedieu she may have had other love affairs—but the titles of some of her novels suggest sufficient reason for their disapproval: *Le Journal amoureux, Les Annales galantes, Les Amours des grands hommes.* This was just the sort of reading matter so frequently condemned by religious moralists.

Back in Paris, she returned to writing and published her best-known novel, *Les Désordres de l’amour,* in 1675. The following year she finally received her pension of 600 livres from Louis XIV, a considerable reduction on the original amount of 1500 livres which had been awarded, thanks to Hugues de Lionne, in 1669. She and Madeleine de Scudéry were the first women writers in the seventeenth century to be granted royal pensions; Catherine Bernard became the third. In 1677 she finally made a respectable marriage to Claude-Nicolas de Chaste. The wedding took place in Notre-Dame and a son, Louis, was born the following year; his mother had clearly maintained her connections at Court, since he was baptized in the royal chapel of Saint-Germain and his godparents were the Dauphin and the Duchesse de Montpensier. De Chaste died in 1679; his widow returned to live with her mother at Clinchemore, near Alençon, where she died in 1683.

It was around the time of Villedieu’s wedding in 1667 that Mademoiselle Desjardins travelled to Holland and Belgium, where she was able to see for herself the greater constraints on women’s conduct in other countries. She found the women of Brussels intolerably straitlaced: ‘Jamais la Pruderie n’a eu de si belles Esclaves qu’elle en a dans ce lieu icy [...]. C’est un crime capital que d’avoir un homme dans son Carosse.’ She goes on to describe the restrained behaviour of young people at the Belgian court and comments on her own observations: ‘[...] vous serez surpris, peut-être,
de me trouver si sçavante sur cette matiè; & en effet j’avoué que cette étude est rare dans une personne de mon sexe.’ She was evidently criticized for having allowed her work to be published, but seems rather to have enjoyed her own notoriety, reporting that in Liège ‘peu s’en est falu que je n’aye esté regardée comme une perturbatrice du repos Public, parce que j’ay fait imprimer des Vers & de la Prose’ (letter 12). It is not surprising that Molière took an interest in this outspoken young woman who shared his own taste for controversy.

Her self-portrait which appeared in the Recueil Sercy of 1659 paints a candid picture; knowing that she is no beauty, ‘j’aurais bien plus d’avantage de montrer mon âme que mon corps, et mon esprit que mon visage’. She considers herself a discreet and loyal friend, preferring to give help rather than receive it, not swayed by passion (presumably she had not yet met Villedieu), enjoying Parisian society but also content to live a quiet life in the country; her virtue, she says, is of the kind ‘qui est également éloignée du scrupule et de l’emportement, dont la simplicité fait la force, et la nudité le plus grand ornement’. This sounds like another assault on prudishness. As far as her literary talent is concerned: ‘Je sais assez le monde et me tire assez bien d’une conversation […] quand il m’est arrivé de faire des vers, j’y ai passablement réussi’, but she claims that ‘mon âme n’est agitée ni par l’ambition ni par l’envie’. However, she clearly took her writing seriously and worked hard to achieve literary success.

By the early 1660s she was well established in Parisian literary circles, where her friends included the Boileau family, Henri Sauval, Olivier Patru, the Abbés du Buisson and d’Aubignac as well as Molière. She would later take pains to defend friends against criticism, writing in praise of Molière in 1664, at the time of the attacks on Tartuffe, and defending Boileau against Cotin’s attack on his Satires in 1667. She chose a
theatrical analogy and a witty formula for her expression of support in a letter to Gourville:

Vous m'avez causé une joye extrême, mon cher Monsieur, [...] en m'apprenant que ses Satyres ont le sort des ouvrages les plus achevez. Nous comptons jusqu'à trente Pièces de Théâtre du bon Hardy, sans qu'on se soit mis en peine d'en critiquer aucune, & on voit des Volumes entiers de Remarques contre le Cid.¹⁹

—additional evidence that Corneille’s play was still associated with controversy (having just been mentioned in attacks on the theatre by Conti and Nicole: see Chapter Three.)

She was known for salon readings of her poetry; Tallemant commented unkindly on her ‘ton languissant’ and ‘yeux mourans”, adding ‘Je n’ay jamais rien veu^ de moins modeste’ (II, p. 901). But he liked one of her poems enough to reproduce it in full, and praised her ‘Carrousel du Dauphin’ of 1662. Surprisingly, despite her connections, her first novel was dedicated not to a patron but to her readers:

C'est à vous que je m'adresse, Amis, et comme c'est votre approbation qui donne ou qui ôte du prix aux choses, je crois qu'il est plus à propos de vous la demander que de briguer le favorable regard de quelque personne de qualité à qui j'aurais pris la liberté d'offrir mon livre. Entre nous autres personnes de peu d'expérience, la haute réputation et les grandes pensions sont des biens à quoi nous ne devons pas élever nos souhaits, et le désir de la gloire étant le seul avantage que je puis [sic] raisonnablement attendre de mon travail, c'est à vous seuls à qui je dois faire ma cour.²⁰

Micheline Cuenin comments on her ‘belle audace et une désinvolture certaine’ and notes the similarity to Molière’s preface to Les Précieuses ridicules, trusting to his public as ‘le juge absolu de ces sortes d'ouvrages’. The tactic seems to have worked as well for Mademoiselle Desjardins as it did for him, though her subsequent novels and her plays were all dedicated to eminent patrons.

It was Molière’s play which provided the first evidence of the young writer’s interest in drama. Her Récit de la farce des Précieuses was written soon after the premiere of Molière’s play in November 1659 at the request of Madame de Morangis,
who had been unable to attend a performance. This was Molière’s first major success since his return to Paris in 1658 and as a satire on a contemporary social phenomenon, it caused a sensation. But after the first performance there were no more for two weeks—Somaize claimed that it had been withdrawn at the instigation of ‘un alcoviste de qualité’—hence the demand for the privately-circulated Récit, which aroused so much interest that the publisher Guillaume de Luyne brought out an unauthorised edition. At that point Mademoiselle Desjardins decided to entrust its publication to Claude Barbin, who would subsequently publish her novels, although de Luyne published Molière’s play. This may have been her first contact with Molière, or she may already have belonged to the same free-thinking artistic circles as he did: at any rate she chose to associate herself early in her career with the work of a radical satirist who would soon be set on a collision course with some members of the Catholic Church.

In her preface to the Récit, Mademoiselle Desjardins explains that she wrote it ‘sur le rapport d’autrui’, before she had seen a performance herself, and that this accounts for the discrepancies between her version and Molière’s play. If this was the case, it seems remarkable that she managed to include so much detail, but as Micheline Cuénin comments in her Introduction (p. XLII), there is no evidence to prove that she was not telling the truth. She clearly seized on the task with enthusiasm and wrote it at high speed, the day after receiving the request from Madame de Morangis, and her proficiency in writing verse is demonstrated by the fact that even in such a short time she transformed some of the prose dialogue into a mixture of octosyllabic verse and alexandrines. In her Récit, attention is focused mainly on the two girls; there is very little of Gorgibus and his remarks are given in reported speech only, whereas in versifying some of the girls’ speeches—and some of Mascarille’s too—she showed her ability to enter into the spirit

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and style of 'préciosité'. This is particularly evident in the 'Reigles de l'Amour' describing an ideal courtship, derived from Molière's scene 4.

In the dozen or so pages of the Récit, much of Molière's witty observation is inevitably missing, but Mademoiselle Desjardins does capably convey the satirical flavour of the piece. She includes a detailed description of Mascarille's elaborate costume, and the girls' admiration of it. If anything her account portrays the two girls as even more feather-brained than Molière's creations, since they show little interest in social events and are mainly preoccupied with questions of appearance. There is no mention of Cathos' prudish attitude towards marriage: perhaps the author knew that she could hardly mention a naked man to her pious patron. Mascarille's 'madrigal' is reproduced almost word for word from Molière, then the last scenes of the play with the arrival of Jodelet are briefly summarized in prose. The circulation of this short account presumably helped to stimulate interest in the play when performances resumed at the Petit-Bourbon: prices were doubled and forty-four performances were given in the following year.

Although she had demonstrated her acquaintance with 'précieux' style in the Récit, her candid behaviour and the directness of expression in her own poetry contrasted with the tone which prevailed among women writers in Paris in the late 1650s. As Antoine Adam says: 'Elle n'est galante, ni précieuse. Elle ose avouer ses désirs, son besoin de l'homme aimé, sa jalousie, la tristesse des séparations.' And her taste for controversy led her to begin writing plays herself, at a time when Molière's work was arousing renewed suspicion of the theatre and it was still a bold move for a woman to venture into what had hitherto been an exclusively male preserve, at least in Paris. As René Demoris says: 'Choisir le théâtre, c'était d'une certaine manière prétendre à entrer dans l'Histoire.' For many years no other woman followed her example.
Unlike women dramatists in the provinces, she had every opportunity to see plays as well as read them. Her first play was a tragi-comedy, *Manlius Torquatus*, written at the suggestion and probably with the help of the Abbé d'Aubignac, and clearly modelled on the tragedies of Corneille; in particular the recent success of *Sertorius* seems to have left a strong impression, and some lines are almost exact echoes. She must have seen it at the Marais, as it was not published until July 1662; *Manlius* was produced at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in May 1662 and published in the same year. It became notorious during the quarrel between d'Aubignac, Donneau de Visé and Corneille over the latter's *Sophonisbe* and the question of changing historical fact for dramatic vraisemblance: at the end of *Manlius* the Roman Consul changes character completely to forgive his son's disobedience to the orders of the Senate, reprieve him from the sentence of death and withdraw his own claim to the woman they both love.

The extent of d'Aubignac's assistance with *Manlius* cannot be known. It was Donneau de Visé who suggested that he had written the play himself, but the abbé stated in his fourth Dissertation: 'Je confesse bien qu'elle m'en a montré le dessein, et que je lui en ai dit mon avis en quelques endroits, [...] jamais un petit conseil n'a donné droit à personne de s'attribuer l'ouvrage d'autrui' and goes on to point out that Du Buisson had also read the play and expressed an opinion, without anyone suggesting that he was the real author. As we shall see again in the case of Catherine Bernard, at a time when plays were so often discussed in literary circles during their composition, it could be difficult to ascribe a work to a particular author with any degree of certainty.

Like Françoise Pascal, whose *Sésostris* had appeared in Lyon the year before, Mademoiselle Desjardins was moving into Corneille's own territory in choosing the field of political drama, and in the course of the 'querelle' d'Aubignac accused Corneille of

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reacting with jealousy to her work, writing in his fourth Dissertation: ‘Vous avez une
etrange aversion contre Mademoiselle Desjardins; il vous fache qu’une fille vous dame
le pion, et vous lui voulez dérober son Manlius par l’effet d’une jalousie sans exemple’
p. 137). (In fact neither she nor Corneille apparently took part personally in the quarrel,
and it seems rather that d’Aubignac himself developed an ‘étrange aversion’ towards
Corneille for the latter’s implied disparagement of his Pratique du théâtre.) The setting
of Manlius in republican Rome does recall elements both of Horace and of Sertorius, but
the theme of rivalry between father and son was an unusual one in tragedy and there are
no examples in Corneille’s plays, although Racine would use it in La Thébaïde (1664) and
in Mithridate (1674).

Despite textual similarities, the values pursued by the characters in Manlius are not
entirely Cornelian. The conflict between Torquatus and Manlius is both personal and
political, but it is the fictional element of their rivalry in love which is placed in the
foreground: both are in love with the captive Latin princess Omphale. In the Latin War
of 340 BC, Manlius has won an unexpected victory by disobeying the orders of his father
and the other consuls and engaging in single combat, and his father knows that he should
be condemned to death. According to Livy, Torquatus did indeed carry out the sentence
himself, but Mademoiselle Desjardins added another dimension to the story by inventing
the rivalry between father and son for the love of their captive Omphale. Manlius argues
that ‘quand on a vaincu, l’on a toujours bien fait,’ (I, 5), but the Consul declares that
obedience to the law is a Roman’s first duty:

A ce premier devoir ils feroient tout ceder,
Et sçavent obeîr s’ils sçavent commander. (II, 3)

He has no support for such an extreme punishment: Camille, widow of Decius, defends
Manlius and is ready to excuse ‘un peu trop de chaleur dans un jeune heros’ (I, 2);
Torquatus’ aide Junius considers that the young man showed only ‘un peu trop d’ardeur d’acquerir de l’estime,’ (IV, 4) and only the rigorous Consul insists that his son must realize ‘combien sur les Romains le Senat est le Maître’ (I, 2) and pay the price for his rashness. But is his prime motive the elimination of a rival? (We don’t know what his attitude was towards Manlius’ conduct before he knew of their rivalry, which is revealed to him in the first scene.) In his passion for Omphale he forgets both his political status and his promise to the dying Decius that he will marry Camille.

The first three acts are structured as a series of revelations, and Mademoiselle Desjardins effectively creates dramatic irony and suspense, so the audience knows—though Manlius does not, until the middle of the play—that Torquatus’ strict application of the law in fact conceals his own weakness and inability to control his passion. He may wish to appear a conscientious servant of Rome, but his desire to marry a foreign princess is totally incompatible with his status and his duty as a Roman. In exploiting the irony of the situation of a powerful politician who is powerless to win the heart of his captive (since Omphale is already in love with Manlius), the author was taking up a theme already explored by Marthe Cosnard in Les Chastes Martyrs, and one which would reappear in the plays of Racine.

Both Torquatus and his son experience the tension between their dedication to Rome and their personal feelings. Like Sertorius, they recognize the irony of the contrast between their military strength and their vulnerability in love, underlined by Manlius in I, 5:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Au camp j’estois vainqueur de cent mille ennemis,} \\
\text{Icy je ne suis rien qu’un esclave soùmis:}
\end{align*}
\]

His exclamation in III, 2 is an echo from Corneille:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Quoy! pour estre un Consul en a-t-on moins un coeur?}
\end{align*}
\]
(Sertorius: Ah! pour être Romain, je n’en suis pas moins homme: line 1194)

as is Torquatus’ line in IV, 4:

J’ay d’abord éprouvé, que le coeur d’un Romain  
Pour estre illustre & grand, n’en est pas moins humain,

But Sertorius tried to disregard his inappropriate love for a foreign queen, and made a heroic attempt to master his passion—‘J’ai cru pouvoir me vaincre,’ (1197)—whereas Torquatus has made no such attempt, and is trying to force the captive princess to accept him. His approaches to Omphale alternate between pleading and threats: at one moment he addresses her as ‘belle inhumaine’, ‘adorable insensible’, but faced with her steadfast refusal to accept his love, his tone changes:

[...] souvenez-vous de grace,  
Que vous ménagez mal les desirs de mon coeur,  
Et que malgré mes feux, je suis votre vainqueur. (I, 3)

Both father and son have allowed personal feelings to overrule their patriotic duty.

In the conflict between family feeling and political considerations, there are also reminders of Horace. Torquatus echoes Horace when he declares:

Tendresse, tes efforts sont icy superflus,  
Mon fils est mon Rival, je ne le connois plus. (IV, 1)

(cf Horace, 502: ‘Albe vous a nommé, je ne vous connais plus.’) But Horace was fulfilling the role assigned to him and carrying out his duty to Rome, while Torquatus’ reason for rejecting his son is as much personal spite as political retribution. And whereas Horace remained resolute, Torquatus immediately reverts to hesitation:

Je ne le connois plus; mais puis-je méconnoistre  
Un fils si glorieux & si digne de l’estre?

revealing the extent of his confusion and inability to make up his mind.

In her analysis of the play, Henriette Goldwyn has pointed out that although Torquatus seems to be expressing Cornelian heroic sentiments, his character is not in fact
at all heroic. She suggests that his confusion at the mercy of ‘amour tyrannique’
makes him more human (p. 425) but it also makes him display the unheroic qualities of
selfishness, hypocrisy and irresolution. Although his inner conflict is effectively
dramatized in the first scene of Act II, where he describes his feelings as torn between
‘l’amour de la patrie & l’amour paternel’, it is never clear whether either ‘amour’ is
sincere. And when he eventually acknowledges to himself at the end of this soliloquy that
he is motivated principally by jealousy:

Et je dois son trépas à mon propre interest;
Omphale me méprise & l’ingrate l’adore,
C’est mon rival, on l’aime, & je consulte encore;

this recognition actually precipitates his decision to condemn his son. His final act of
forgiveness and renunciation (V, 7), which resolves the conflict between his duty to Rome
and his love for a foreign captive, between his jealousy and his love for his son, may
seem to recall Auguste’s forgiveness and conciliation at the end of Cinna, but the decision
is forced on him by the rebellion of his army, and is not so much an act of compassion
as a desperate recognition that he is entirely without support.

If there is nothing heroic about Torquatus, Manlius does seem to possess the
qualities of a hero—courage, sincerity, devotion to his country—but as Torquatus remarks
significantly in I, 2, ‘il est né de mon sang’, and it is after all Manlius’ rash and impulsive
action which has created the present situation, giving rise to his father’s anger and
demonstrating that he too is less than fully in control of himself. And it is no more
appropriate for him than for Torquatus to be in love with an enemy princess, or to tell her
that

[...] vivre dans vos fers, c’est l’honneur où j’aspire
Et ce rang près de vous vaut ailleurs un empire. (I, 5)

Nor does he seem very heroic in pleading for her help when he cannot think what to do:
Accablé par le sort, par l'amour, par moy-même, [...] 
Je crains également de mourir & de vivre. (III, 4)

At the end of the same scene he sighs despairingly:

Comment puis-je accorder dans ce funeste jour,
Les desirs de ma gloire & ceux de mon amour?

but they are of course quite incompatible, and in inventing a happy ending with a wedding in prospect, Mademoiselle Desjardins was disregarding this fact. But in the final act she does allow Manlius to reveal some degree of heroism in his refusal to run away and in his calm resolution in the face of death.

By contrast, the two female characters in the play know what they want and behave with resolute determination. Like Tryphine, Omphale is well able to deal with her captor and meets his passionate advances with calm and reasonable argument, pointing out that the Senate would never sanction his marriage to her:

Que penserait de moy cette assemblee auguste,
Si je souffrois l'effet d'un amour si peu juste? (I, 3)

When he reacts with threats (quoted above), she remains calm:

Mais ce nom de vainqueur n'a rien qui m'épouvante,
On ne redoute rien quand on brave la mort:

and counters with a more subtle threat of her own:

Vous-même apprehendez l'inconstance du sort;
Cette audace, Seigneur, peut être reprimée,
Le ciel me laisse un frere & de plus une armée,
C'en est peut-estre assez pour sortir de vos mains, [...]

Yet she does not hesitate to confess her love for Manlius (I, 5), who is just as much a Roman and therefore an enemy, and who has himself won the decisive victory over her people. Perhaps the suggestion is that because both are young, their love can somehow transcend the conflicts initiated by the older generation? For her, father and son are entirely different, because their attitudes to her differ so much: whereas Torquatus

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'm'insulte, me menace & me traite d'esclave', Manlius treats her with respect and even shyness:

Ses seules actions m'aprennent qu'il m'adore:
   Il s'explique en tremblant, il me parle des yeux;  (I, 4)

She therefore seems quite ready to forget his military role and see only the ardent lover, valuing their mutual love above patriotic feeling. And yet she tells Manlius in III, 4 that she will not escape with him: 'La gloire & mon devoir me touchent plus que vous.' It is hard to know what exactly she sees as her 'devoir', since she already seems prepared to renounce family and nation for his sake.

We find another echo of Corneille in Omphale's furious outburst to Torquatus in V, 3, attacking him as a 'tigre affam6 du sang', 'barbare inexorable' and threatening the retribution of the gods on Rome in terms reminiscent of Camille's outburst to her brother in Horace (1301-1318):

   Il est des immortels, s'il me manque des hommes;
   Fallut-il au lieu d'une, abîmer mille Romes,
   Inventer des tourmens pour ta punition,
   Et confondre avec toy toute ta nation, [...] (V, 3)

But there is a key difference: Omphale is attacking an enemy conqueror, whereas the shock of Camille's invective derives from the fact that she is turning her anger on her own nation and her own family, so here the same vocabulary is less dramatically effective.

Whereas Omphale is seen only as an object of attraction to men, the Consul's widow Camille is not confined to a domestic identity. We saw in Chapter Four that most female characters are restricted to the home, but she clearly participates in public life and expresses political opinions as 'une Romaine'. Unlike many female characters who can only react to decisions made by men, she directly contributes to the dramatic action by

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telling Torquatus in I, 2 about Manlius’ love for Omphale, which provides him with an added motive for wanting to punish his son. She is more concerned with her status in Rome than with personal feelings: unlike Omphale, and unusually for a female character, she has no faith in the ‘vaines fictions’, ‘illusions’ and ‘pieges’ of love, and warns each of the other main characters in turn about its dangers. To her, marriage is a matter of politics rather than passion. We can imagine Nicole or Conti approving her sentiments when she tells Torquatus in I, 2:

Les pieges de Famour sont presque in6vitables,
Il remplit les esprits de vaines fictions [...]

and alerts Omphale to the hopelessness of her situation from both a personal and a political point of view:

Vous me faites pitié, dans ce peril extrême,
Vous aimez Manlius, vous souffrez qu’il vous aime;
Et vôtre coeur seduit troublant vôtre raison
Se remplit à longs traits d’un funeste poison,
[...]
On vous trompe, on vous donne une esperance vaine;
Pour avoir Manlius, il faut estre Romaine; (II, 6)

But when it comes to her interview with Manlius in Act III scene 2, she is prepared to compromise in order to save his life:

[...] bien que je sois Romaine,
Et que toujours mon ame ait conceu de la haine
Pour cette illusion que vous nommez amour;
[...]
Omphale a du merite, & je veux vous sauver:
Vous vous aimez, enfin, vous pouvez l’enlever: [...]

She appals herself with this idea as much as she shocks Manlius—‘ce seul discours me fait rougir de honte’—since she is effectively advising him to desert Rome and join the enemy, but we understand the reason for her change of attitude: she has realized the threat to her own future if Torquatus persists in executing his son and marrying Omphale. And
for Camille, her status is the most important consideration. Like Viriate in *Sertorius* (‘Je ne veux point d’amant, mais je veux un époux,’ line 1288), she will only accept a high-ranking husband: ‘Il faut estre un Heros pour regner sur mon coeur’, (IV, 2) and knows that she is entitled to be nothing less than a Consul’s wife. So although it is true, as Henriette Goldwyn comments, that ‘c’est Camille qui tient le discours cornélien du devoir’ and that ‘le discours héroïque se trouve placé dans la bouche de la femme’ (p. 432), self-interest plays a part in her actions too.

By inventing the love element and choosing to impose a happy ending, Mademoiselle Desjardins actually weakens her story. According to Livy, Torquatus at least had some dignity as a true Roman, ready to execute his own son for disobedience and with no other motive than that of upholding the rule of law. And the implausibility of his change of heart—an inadequate denouement, in Corneille’s view (*Discours du Poème dramatique*)—is compounded by the sense that he is reacting to events rather than being in control of them. The first part of the play is dramatically effective, as we learn more about each character in turn, but the second half is lacking in action, relying on the repeated effects of Torquatus trying to make up his mind and calling for his son’s arrest.

*Manlius* was the first play by a woman to be reviewed in contemporary journals. Although Tallemant later described its success as mediocre, Loret’s *Muse historique*, written each week since 1650 for the Duchesse de Nemours, described it on 13 May 1662 as an ‘Illustre tragi-comédie/D’une fille de Normandie/D’une fille de grand renom’, having ‘les plus charmants vers/ Don’t Paris sur un beau théâtre/Ait été jamais idolâtre [...]’ and claimed on 27 May that the play was ‘un grand succès’. It was published by Quinet in the same year with a dedication to the Duchesse de Montpensier.
Henriette Goldwyn sees the play as a parody of Cornelian heroic sentiment, ‘une coda au code cornélien déjà périmé’ (p. 435), and suggests that the author was anticipating Racine in underlining the helplessness of human beings, who cannot resist ‘la voix de la nature’ (p. 436) to overcome their emotions. But in her next play Mademoiselle Desjardins presents a heroine who shows herself capable of doing just that.

There seems to have been no suggestion that Mademoiselle Desjardins had any help in writing Nitétis, which was presented at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in April 1663 and published the following year. To emphasize the fact that she was quite capable of writing her own play, d'Aubignac adds to de Visé in his fourth Dissertation (p. 137): ‘sa seconde Pièce la justifie assez contre votre calomnie’. For her second play Mademoiselle Desjardins turned again to classical history, this time of an earlier period, and in choosing to dramatize Herodotus’ account of the downfall of Cambyses, son of the Persian King Cyrus, in 522 BC, she was probably encouraged by the success of Madeleine de Scudéry’s novel Le Grand Cyrus. As we have seen, this also provided the source of Françoise Pascal’s play Sésostris, which had been published in Lyon in 1661. It is possible that Mademoiselle Desjardins knew the earlier play, but there are no cross-references within the text, and no mention of the fact that Nitétis was the sister of Sésostris.

Once again the two principal female characters seem the most effective, and Cambise’s wife Nitétis, who considers her ‘gloire’ more important than her personal feelings, may be seen as a successor to Camille in Manlius. Like Camille, she has a public role to play and she makes her own decisions. But whereas the Consul’s widow required another husband to confirm her status, Nitétis sees Cambise’s wish for a divorce as her chance of freedom, and after his death she rejects marriage to her former fiancé not because she regards love as an illusion, but because she has experienced it and knows

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very well what it means for a woman to be emotionally dependent on a man. Critics including Perry Gethner have pointed out similarities to the situation of Pauline in Polyeucte, but Nitétis is also a precursor of the Princesse de Clèves.

To a modern reader, Nitétis may at first seem impossibly high-minded in refusing to marry the man she loves, even after the death of the husband she hated, who was planning to divorce her in order to marry his own sister against her will and whose cruelty is underlined by the fact that he has had his own brother executed for opposing his incestuous marriage. Lancaster suggests that she 'sacrifices herself to a standard of honor that is so peculiar that it wins no sympathy from the reader'. But a closer examination of the character reveals a greater complexity than mere peculiarity, and a positive side to Nitétis' decision, rather than wholly negative self-denial. Most unusually, and for the first time in a play by a woman, the secular concept of 'gloire' in a female character is separated from her emotional attachment to a man.

In Nitétis, Mademoiselle Desjardins created a new kind of 'femme forte': she does not see herself only in relation to men, and she values her independence more than marriage to the man she loves. (Eight years later Corneille's Pulchérie would share the same priorities.) In the first scene of the play she describes how her life has hitherto been controlled by men: daughter of the deposed and murdered Egyptian king Apriez, she was forced by the usurper Amasis to take the place of his daughter, who had died, and marry the Persian king Cambise; and her former lover Phameine is a prisoner at the Persian court. Now Cambise has discovered the deception and proposes to divorce Nitétis and marry his sister Mandanne. This has caused general horror and consternation in the court, but Nitétis tells her companion that she will give up her status as Queen without regret:

La plus belle Couronne est pesante à porter,
Quand elle est un present qu'on force d'accepter;

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Et l'on crût de tout temps la liberté si chère,
Que tout ce qui contraint perd le droit de nous plaire:
[...]
Et pour ce faux esclat d'une grandeur suprême,
On m'ôta le pouvoir de régnier sur moy-mesme. (I, 1)

She knows the price of worldly status, having been treated by men as an object to be exchanged or possessed, and places greater value on the freedom to make her own choices and take control of her own life.

For most female characters, reciprocal love and marriage to a worthy partner are the culmination of their 'gloire', but for Nitétis love is not the supreme value; her reputation, a clear conscience and peace of mind are more important to her than emotional fulfilment. Unlike Camille, she is not impervious to feeling and she knows what it is to be passionately in love, but her sense of identity is not dependent on attachment to a man. She makes an unusually clear distinction between her personal feelings and her public role, which she sees as a moral obligation imposed by the will of the gods. So although she despises her tyrannical husband, her self-respect demands that she fulfil her duties as his wife—the most important being of course fidelity—and the words 'devoir' and 'foy' recur throughout the play. She tells Cambise quite openly in I, 3 why she has no objection to a divorce—'cet ordre est le seul qui m'ait plû de ta part'—but explains to him in a long speech in III, 2 that although she did once love Pharnéine, she has no intention of compromising her own reputation by any unworthy conduct:

Une ame à qui la gloire est fortement connuë,
Sur tous ses mouvemens est toujours absoluë;
C'est l'honneur qui la regle & non ses passions,
Sans cesse elle resiste aux inclinations: [...] 
Ainsi malgré ta haine, & ma premiere ardeur,
Le devoir t'a rendu le Maistre de mon coeur: (III, 2)
To Phameine himself she is not quite so resolute: it is the only moment of the play when she seems in danger of letting slip her rigorous self-control. She has not been insensible to his renewed approaches and when he recalls their past happiness she confesses:

Mais enfin ce penser fut si doux à mon ame,
Que toute ma vertu ne scœurroit empêcher
Et qu'il n'y regne encor, & qu'il ne me soit cher. (III, 1)

But it is the gods, she says, who have decreed their separation:

Si les Dieux avoient crû nostre amour legitime,
Ils n'auroient pas souffert qu'on en eust fait un crime:

though in performance it would be clear that she is having to convince herself as well as Phameine, as she prepares to cut their meeting short:

Ma raison apprehende un plus long entretien;
Contre un puissant amour, le remede est la fuite,

She is determined to retain her self-control at all costs: 'nos coeurs sont nez pour vaincre'
and demonstrates her self-mastery to her husband in the following scene, when Cambise interrupts the interview and accuses her of infidelity. With perfect composure she acknowledges her feelings for Phameine: 'Ouy, je t'aimois, Cambise,' but assures him that she will never break her marriage vows or risk compromising her honour:

[...] c'est au nom d'époux que mon ame se donne,
Qu'en t'aimant comme tel j'abhorre ta personne, [...]
C'est en toy mon honneur & ma gloire que j'aime, (III, 2)

When he threatens to execute Phameine and punish her too, she calmly tells him:

Un coeur tel que le mien n'est pas né pour trembler,
[...]
A quelque excés d'horreur, où se porte ta rage,
Tu n'en peux tant avoir que j'auray de courage. (III, 2)

Yet after the death of Smiris she continues to support her husband to the extent of saving his life during the resultant uprising. Is this 'courage'? In answer to Mandanne's incredulity, Nitétis states that it is her duty:

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Il ne me souvient plus des injures du Roy,  
J’oubliais tout, Princesse, hors des loix de ma foy. (V, 2)

Whatever her personal feelings, she will do nothing which might induce a sense of guilt, or cause other people to suspect her of any treachery, and will not marry Phameine, even after her husband’s death:

N’attendez de ma main nul effet de foiblesse.  
[...]
Et si vous m’estes cher, j’aime encor plus ma gloire. (V, 4)

If she were to take advantage of the death of her husband to marry another man, she might wonder if she had actually wished him dead, and others might wonder if she had played any part in his downfall. It is an extreme moral standpoint which both anticipates the Princesse de Clèves and sounds very Cornelian; Elizabeth Woodrough likens her at this point to Chimène, making a clear distinction between what she wants and what she knows she must do.31 Marie-France Hilgar sees her as ‘indoctrinated about the rights of the king’, finding security in ‘blind adherence to a principle’,32 but her principles are actually born of her personal experience, and she seems unusually clear-sighted in making an entirely individual decision, though there is perhaps a paradox in her using her freedom of choice to conform very closely to social expectations.

Nitétis may have been a heroine ahead of her time: her austere integrity seems to have found little sympathy in Paris audiences, since the play was evidently not a great success. Women going to the theatre in 1663 may have judged the heroine to be improbably single-minded, or considered her too submissive, although it is worth noting that Tristan l’Hermite’s Mariane was still being performed in Paris by Molière’s company at that time, and there are similarities in the stoical acceptance by both heroines of their husbands’ inhumanity.
There is more passion in Cambise’s sister Mandanne, who cares equally for her ‘gloire’ but does not share Nitétis’ resignation, and more force in her speeches, from the first moment in I, 1 when she cuts short Nitétis’ polite compliments:

Ah! cessez ce discours, & me connoissez mieux,
[...] celles de nostre rang
Doivent tofijours montrer un coeur sincere & franc;
Qu’entre nous desormais la feinte soit bannie.

She argues furiously against the proposed marriage, prepared to kill herself rather than be forced to marry her brother, as she tells Smiris and her lover Prasitte:

Puis que, graces aux Dieux, la mort nous est permise,
Je puis tout sur moy-meme, & je brave Cambise,
A quelque extremité qu’il ose se porter:
Princes, qui peut mourir n’a rien à redouter. (II, 2)

After the execution of Smiris, she switches to threats, painting a vivid picture for Cambise of what he will suffer if he forces her into marriage:

Que j’aurois de plaisir à contempler ta peine,
A te voir jour & nuit redouter de ma part
Qu’en te flattant ma main ne te cache un poignard:
A te voir défer de mes propres tendresses,
Et craindre incessamment jusques à mes caresses.
Tien, je t’offre ma main, ose la recevoir...
Mais tu pâlis, Tiran, que redoute ton ame?
Qui ne craint pas les Dieux, craindroit-il une femme? (IV, 2)

The variety of her tactics and expression contrast with Nitétis’ rather monotonous reiteration of her ‘devoir’. But Mandanne is equally concerned with her ‘gloire’ and when she hears of the general uprising against Cambise she is afraid that Prasitte will kill the King and thereby compromise her position:

Ce n’est pas que mon coeur n’aspire à son trépas;
Mais il auroit voulu choisir un autre bras.
Je voudrois accorder ma haine avec ma gloire,
Concevoir des desirs sans souiller ma memoire; (V, 1)
Fortunately, Cambise commits suicide when he realizes that he is outnumbered, and unlike Nitétis Mandanne has no reason to refuse marriage to the man she loves. Both she and Nitétis are at the mercy of Cambise’s megalomania while he is alive, but after his death they are free to make their own choices. Nitétis will reign as Queen, but ‘Je n’écoute plus rien qu’en veuve de Cambise’. Self-sacrifice, or self-sufficiency?

Although Loret described the play as a ‘tragédie exquise’ (Cuénin, p. 120), Tallemant declared (p. 905) that it was even less successful than Manlius. It was published by Barbin in 1664, prefaced by a letter of thanks to the Duc de Saint-Aignan, who had evidently been of assistance to the author. He subsequently contributed to the success of Mademoiselle Desjardins’ third and last play, the tragi-comedy La Coquette ou Le Favory, in which she presented a much more flattering view of royal authority.

This was by far the most successful of her plays, and a considerable departure from the first two. It was presented by Molière’s troupe at the Palais-Royal in April 1665—the first time his company had produced an original play written by a woman—and, thanks to Saint-Aignan, who was in charge of royal festivities, it was chosen for a gala performance at Versailles two months later. There is evidence of the author’s status in the fact that Molière paid her an advance of 30 pistoles on receipt of the text in 1664. It was not a large sum, but according to Chappuzeau, only an established author would receive any advance at all. And she was still only twenty-five years old.

The choice of genre was an unusual one: by this time tragi-comedy was declining in popularity, and those that were produced tended to be filled with incident and surprise: duels, abductions, heroes in disguise. By contrast Mademoiselle Desjardins had written a play with a very simple plot, closely focused on character and the relationships between

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a King and his courtiers. Lancaster has shown that the story derives from Tirso de Molina's *El Amor y el Amistad*, but that she simplified the Spanish original, reducing the number of characters, and reshaped it to create dramatic suspense to the very end of the play. The structure of *Le Favory* in fact resembles that of a tragedy, although the play ends happily.

It is the first full-length play by a woman to make use of her own experience and her own observation of contemporary society, rather than being drawn from a historical or mythical source; like Françoise Pascal's comedies, *Le Favory* belongs to the world of Molière, and Corneille's early comedies rather than his heroic drama. Well-structured, with some lively scenes, witty dialogue and a surprise dénouement, the play is a celebration of the value of true love and friendship above wealth or status, and an attack on the hypocrisy of false friends. And the production involved Molière himself in several ways at a difficult stage in his career.

*Le Favory* is the story of Moncade, favourite of the King of Barcelona, but disillusioned and weary of the superficial life at Court, where there is such competition for status and favour and he cannot be sure who his friends are:

> [...] c'est d'un favory le plus pressant ennuy,
> Que d'avoir comme il a tant d'attraits hors de luy,
> Sa gloire a plus d'amis souvent que luy-même, (I, 4)

In scene 6 he tells the King:

> Ce n'est pas moy qu'on ayme, on ayme vos faveurs,

and dares to say that he cares more for true love than for his precarious status. The King denounces him as churlish and ungrateful and condemns him to exile.

The *Coquette* of the original title provides most of the comedy in the play: Elvire is a vain, ambitious and scheming rival and dramatic contrast to the faithful Lindamire.
She is matched by Moncade’s rival Clotaire, an exiled foreign prince but far from noble character who, instead of showing proper gratitude to Moncade for saving his life, would like to appropriate both the favourite’s mistress and his status. Moncade sees through these supposed friends, who fawn upon him while he basks in the glow of royal favour, but quickly desert him when it is withdrawn, and he is not surprised at their treachery:

Voylà de ses amis que la faveur produit;
Dans le fragile cours d’un bonheur chymerique
Tout porte son encens à l’Idole publique, [...] 
Et dés le premier coup que le destin luy donne,
Cet éclat se dissipe, & chacun l’abandonne. (II, 5)

Lindamire reflects ruefully on the supreme power of the King to determine the lives of his subjects:

Je sçavois qu’on doit craindre & qu’on doit obéir;
Mais [...] je commence à voir
Qu’un Roy peut ce qu’il veut, & n’a qu’à tout vouloir; (III, 1)

Edouard Thierry first suggested that this story of a disgraced favourite related to the disgrace and imprisonment of Nicolas Foucquet, Surintendant des Finances, which was a recent scandal at the time of the play’s first performance. The theory may seem plausible if the play was indeed written before Foucquet was sentenced in December 1664: he had been a patron of Molière, commissioning Les Fâcheux for the King in 1661, and we also know from her letters that Mademoiselle Desjardins was acquainted with his secretary Gourville and visited him in exile in Holland in 1667. It is not known when she wrote Le Favory, although Tallemant states that Molière paid her the advance for the play in June 1664, so that she could visit her lover Villedieu in Avignon before he sailed with the French fleet. But the parallel between a powerful financier and a modest courtier who wants only happiness with his true love seems unlikely, and the reinstatement of the favourite at the end of Mademoiselle Desjardins’ play could have been interpreted as a
plea for the disgraced minister—hardly appropriate for a royal gala performance. As Perry Gethner says, 'il est plus probable que Louis et la cour furent surtout sensibles à la louange de la perspicacité du roi au dénouement de la pièce'. In any case, by the time the play appeared on stage Foucquet had been sentenced and the case was closed.

There is a more topical link between the hero of Le Favory and Molière himself, who may well have played the role of Moncade. (Although he was most popular as a comic actor, he regularly played heroic roles in the tragedies and tragi-comedies which, with his own plays, formed the repertoire at the Palais-Royal.) At the time of the play’s production he was the King’s favourite playwright but also the victim of a determined campaign to suppress his work: the so-called ‘querelle du Tartuffe’. And one of the leaders of this campaign was a prince who had turned against him: his former patron the Prince de Conti, who in 1662 had become secretary of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, the organization which attempted to suppress Tartuffe even before its first performance. Molière would surely have enjoyed Lindamire’s humiliation of Prince Clotaire in one of Mademoiselle Desjardins’ liveliest speeches:

Esclave du destin, Prince indigné de l’être, [...]  
Allez, vil Courtisan, Cameleon de Cour, (III, 2)

It is possible that Molière played Clotaire, but the similarity of Moncade’s predicament to his own situation would have been especially striking if he took the leading role himself. Edouard Thierry first suggested that the part of Moncade ‘devait lui plaire’, and Emile Magne (p. 265) states unequivocally that Molière played the leading role. And in some respects the hero of Le Favory bears a resemblance to one of Molière’s own characters, Alceste, played by the author himself the following year: indeed Thierry suggests that Molière may have found his source for Le Misanthrope in Mademoiselle Desjardins’ play, although later critics have accepted Brossette’s statement (in connection

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with Boileau’s second Satire) that Molière’s play was actually begun before he had read Le Favory. Nonetheless Morrissette has identified some curious textual similarities. There are also comic possibilities in Mademoiselle Desjardins’ hero, stoically expecting the worst and liable to greet even good fortune with disbelief.

Even if he did not take the leading role himself, the subject of the play has particular relevance to the difficulties Molière was experiencing at the time of its first performance. The portrayal of a King who rules with absolute authority, but in the end shows himself to be fair and enlightened, was quite unlike the rulers Mademoiselle Desjardins had presented in her earlier plays, but made a fitting tribute from Molière’s company to its royal patron, who had made clear his support for the playwright after the banning of Tartuffe the previous year by granting the company a subsidy of 1000 livres and becoming godfather to Molière’s son. Soon after the gala performance of Le Favory, on 14 August 1665, he conferred on them the title of ‘Troupe du Roi’ and increased their subsidy to 6000 livres.

It is tempting to wonder whether Molière actually had a hand in the composition or revision of the piece: if Tallemant’s dates are correct he had the script for at least six months before the play went into production, and in both style and subject it is quite different from Mademoiselle Desjardins’ two tragedies. At the very least it seems likely that she had been influenced by Molière’s work, which she would have known well, and she echoes his appreciation of true love and friendship, and hatred of hypocrisy.

There is also something of Mademoiselle Desjardins’ own personality in her heroine Lindamire who, like Chimène, oversteps the bounds of conventional female modesty by publicly declaring her love for Moncade (V, 6), and who is ready to abandon her own place at Court to follow him into exile. In fact she positively welcomes his
disgrace, as she can now look forward to her lover’s undivided attention without the
distraction of his duties at Court:

Vous n’étiez pas à moy, Seigneur, avant ce jour;
Les soins de cet Estat vous occupoient sans cesse,
Et vous estiez à lui plus qu’à vostre maistresse.  (III, 6)

In real life it seems that the elusive Villedieu was much less devoted than Moncade and
more easily diverted from the company of his mistress by rival pleasures. In 1662 she
wrote a poem lamenting his preoccupation with court life:

Le désir des grandeurs étouffe votre flamme;
La Cour et ses appas me chassent de vostre âme; 43

and other poems repeat the theme of her longing for a peaceful rural idyll away from the
material preoccupations of the Court and the city; it is a motif we shall find again in the
poems of Madame Deshoulières.

In her creation of the coquette Elvire, the author was presumably incorporating her
own observations of the more frivolous female tastes and preoccupations. Unlike
Lindamire, Elvire is devoted to the Court and its pleasures:

Plaisons donc dans le temps d’une belle jeunesse,
Et laissons sans regret l’estime à la vieillesse. (II, 1)

She enjoys the attentions of her suitors but has no intention of becoming emotionally
involved:

Que le parfait amour est une sotte chose!
Vive l’amour commode et la bonne amitié! (V, 6)

Although she is shown up as a hypocrite, there is a certain sympathy with her
insouciance; Perry Gethner comments on her ‘franchise désarmante et sa gaîté de
coeur’ 44 and Nina Ekstein points out that ‘she does not accept the pliant and passive role
assigned to her by the patriarchal culture, or the male ethos of fidelity’. 45 But neither
does she share Nitétis’ sense of self-sufficiency, since she is constantly on the lookout for

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a new partner; it seems in fact that she is playing a traditionally masculine rather than feminine role in enjoying her independence to seek new conquests.

At the end of *Le Favory*, a neat twist (similar to the one Molière would use at the end of *Les Femmes savantes*) produces a happy ending: the King's dismissal of Moncade was a ruse to prove to him that Lindamire would remain faithful even in adversity, so after all the monarch was acting in the best interests of his loyal subjects and Moncade's true qualities were never in doubt. The fickle hypocrites are exposed though apparently not punished: Clotaire flees from the Court and Elvire defiantly sets out to find another suitor. All the characters in the play express their awareness of the King's absolute authority and in the end his judgment is shown to be wise and perceptive, although his treatment of Moncade appears unreasonable until his true motives become clear. He has demonstrated his total power over his subjects and sounds a warning note in the final scene by reminding them that 'nul ne voit bien clair dans le coeur d'un Monarque' (V, 6). Perry Gethner has suggested that 'the play leaves us with the disturbing feeling that the evolving political order has given a new legitimacy to tyranny, and that only the dedicated efforts of a conscientious monarch can keep his absolute power within the traditional moral bounds'. But ultimately Mademoiselle Desjardins' portrait of a wise ruler taking a friendly interest in his subjects' welfare must have been seen as highly flattering.

*Le Favory* continued in repertoire at the Palais-Royal to the end of May: altogether there were twenty-five performances during 1665-66, which was a respectable total. The takings were modest but not unduly low—comparing favourably with revivals of Molière's own plays at that time, though reaching nothing like the record sums taken at the box office for *Dom Juan*.

The text was published by Billaine & Quinet in the

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same year, with a dedication to the Minister of State Hugues de Lionne. Both in performance and in print the play appeared under the name of Mademoiselle Desjardins, though she had wanted to begin using Villedieu's name on her return to Paris after their engagement, and asked Molière to change her name on the posters for Le Favory. Tallemant reports the incident: 'Moliere luy respondit doucement qu'il avoit annoncé sa piece sous le nom de Mademoiselle des Jardins; que de l'annoncer sous le nom de Madame de Villedieu, cela feroit du galimatias' (II, p. 908), and indeed she continued to use her maiden name for publication purposes until after the death of Villedieu in 1667.

The high point of Mademoiselle Desjardins' theatrical career occurred on 13 June 1665, the day of the royal gala performance at Versailles. The choice of play was presumably Molière's own, but it would have been made in conjunction with the Duc de Saint-Aignan. He was well known as a benefactor to writers; Mademoiselle Desjardins may have met him originally through the Villedieu family at Court, and he had apparently encouraged her to continue writing for the theatre. According to La Grange, the performance at Versailles took place 'dans le jardin, sur un theastre tout garny d'orangers'. And for this occasion, which Mademoiselle Desjardins later recounted in her 'Description d'une des Fêtes que le Roy a faite à Versailles', Lully wrote musical interludes and Molière himself wrote a prologue, which was subsequently lost. We are left with La Grange's summary:

Mr de Moliere fist un prologue en marquis ridiculle qui vouloit estre sur le theastre malgré les gardes, et eust une conversation risible avec une actrice qui fist la marquise ridiculle, placée au milieu de l'assemblée (Registre, p. 74).

This was Molière's first performance at Versailles since the previous October. He had no new play of his own to present, Tartuffe having been suppressed and Dom Juan mysteriously withheld after its initial run of fifteen performances. Perry Gethner suggests

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that if Molière did not take part in the play, he may have written the Prologue because he felt obliged to make an appearance at a royal command performance. But we may wonder whether he was also using the occasion as a way of making an indirect appeal to Louis XIV, adding the Prologue to remind his most illustrious patron of his inimitable comic gifts and using Mademoiselle Desjardins’ play to present himself in the role of victim of a conspiracy, hounded by hypocrites and dependent on the King’s goodwill for his future survival.

Mademoiselle Desjardins’ own description elaborates upon the pastoral charm of the scene and the magical effects of lighting and music, while modestly declining to comment on the play itself. In mentioning the prologue, she takes the opportunity to praise Molière:

Ce Terence du temps que l'Univers admire,
Dont la fine Morale instruit en faisant rire [...]  

She had earlier complimented him as the favourite of the Muses in a Recueil de Poésies published in 1664:

A certain favori qu’on apelle Molière,
qui possède aujourd’hui sa faveur tout entière;
la Muse ne fait plus d’ouvrages que pour lui.  

but this later mention interestingly links the performance of her own play to the controversy over Tartuffe by repeating Molière’s claim for the usefulness of comedy as a means to ‘corriger les hommes en les divertissant’, as he had expressed it in his first Placet to the King the previous year. This argument in defence of Molière’s play was later expanded in the anonymous Lettre sur la Comédie de l’Imposteur in 1667. And his hatred of hypocrisy was echoed by Mademoiselle Desjardins in a letter of 1667: ‘Il y a tant d’Hypocrites sur la terre, dont l’extérieur dément la conscience; tant de Pecheurs &
de Pecheresses, qui cachent des actions criminelles, sous les apparences d’une intégrité convaincante.\textsuperscript{31}

The gala performance of \textit{Le Favory} was recorded by Robinet, who followed earlier panegyrics of women writers by placing the author among the nine Muses:

\begin{verbatim}
Pièce divertissante et belle  
D’une fameuse demoiselle  
Que l’on met au rang des neuf sœurs  
Pour ses poétiques douceurs.
\end{verbatim}

and by Mayolas, who approved of her ‘masculine’ mind:

\begin{verbatim}
Ouvrage parfait et chéri  
Intitulé \textit{Le Favori},  
Composé de la main savante  
De cette personne charmante  
Qui, dans un beau corps féminin  
Enferme un esprit masculin.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{verbatim}

She was listed by Somaize in his \textit{Dictionnaire des Précieuses} (as ‘Dinamise’) and by Jean de La Forge (as ‘Arethuse’) in his \textit{Cercle des Femmes scévantes} of 1663; she is the only woman dramatist mentioned in 1668 by Marguerite Buffet in her \textit{Eloges des Illustres Sçavantes}, which includes a mention of her social connections:

\begin{verbatim}
Tous les Sçavans du siecle ont donné une tres-haute approbation aux ouvrages de Mlle des Jardins [...] elle a l’invention belle & hardie, en prose & en vers. [...] Elle a eu cet avantage de faire admirer les productions de son bel esprit jusques dans le cabinet des grands Seigneurs [...] Sa Poésie s’est trouvée dans les regles, & une des meilleures d’entre les Poètes du siecle [...].\textsuperscript{33}
\end{verbatim}

She is also the only female writer mentioned by the Abbé de Pure in his survey of contemporary French theatre in \textit{Idée des Spectacles Anciens et Nouveaux} of 1668:

\begin{verbatim}
Nous voyons tous les jours éclorre [...] un nombre considerable d’excellens Poëtes & de grands Ouvrages. Messieurs Corneille le jeune, Desmarests, Moliere, Quinaut, Gilbert, Boyer, Racine, & Mademoiselle Desjardins ont droit aux plus justes louanges qu’on ait jamais données [...]\textsuperscript{34}
\end{verbatim}

and she is the only woman playwright listed by Chappuzau in his \textit{Théâtre français} of 1674:

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Qui s'est aquis beaucoup de réputation par ses Ouvrages galans en prose & en vers, & qu'il faut faire entrer dans la classe des Authieurs de nôtre sexe, à moins que de luy en donner une à part: Manlius.—Le Favori.—Nitets. (p. 78)

Mademoiselle Desjardins attracted praise from other literary figures, including Donneau de Visé in 1663: 'Il faut avouer que Mlle D. écrit bien. Ses vers sont partout également forts [...]55 and the libertin poet Saint-Pavin (reputedly an atheist although he held an ecclesiastical position):

Vous faites des choses si belles
Si justes et si naturelles
Que votre style est sans égal.

This poem was published in the Recueil Barbin of 1692, together with an appreciation of her work and some details of her life.56 Reference is made to the popularity of her novels, which continued to be reprinted into the eighteenth century. The author of the Recueil refers to her lack of beauty, which she had acknowledged in her own self-portrait, and sums her up as follows: ‘Madame de Villedieu ne possédait pas tous les avantages de son sexe, mais en récompense, elle possédait tous ceux du nôtre’, echoing Mayolas’ approval of her ‘esprit masculin’ and implying that the greatest compliment that can be paid to a woman is to liken her to a man, a sentiment notably absent from the eulogies in praise of Mademoiselle Cosnard (see Chapter Seven).

Even if Mademoiselle Desjardins’ plays did not bring in much money, they enhanced both her literary and her social standing. She achieved greater distinction than earlier women playwrights and succeeded in earning her living by writing. Lacking the social status and financial advantages of Mademoiselle de Scudéry or Madame de Lafayette, she made the most of her family connections and worked assiduously to maintain and extend her network of patrons and friends. After her death she was elected
to membership of the Ricovrati of Padua; with Mademoiselle de Scudéry she was one of the first French women to be so honoured.\textsuperscript{57}

Despite the success of \textit{Le Favory}, there was a gap of fifteen years before another play by a woman was seen in Paris, but during this period one play by a French woman was seen in England and it is one of the few comedies written by women. Anne de La Roche-Guilhen (1644-1707) came from a Huguenot family in Rouen and probably left France initially in the entourage of the Duchesse de Mazarin. She was a successful novelist and her only known work for the theatre is the comédie-ballet, \textit{Rare-en-tout}. It was not performed or published in France, but like Mademoiselle Desjardins the author did achieve the exceptional honour of a performance at Court, this time in London.\textsuperscript{58}

The play was commissioned by King Charles II and performed at the Theatre Royal, Whitehall, as part of his birthday celebrations on 29 May 1677, though after this one performance it was not seen again. The fact that the play was performed in French by French singers and actors evidently upset some members of the audience: the only surviving account of the occasion reports 'a French opera, most pitifully done, [...] some say it was not well contrived to entertain the English gentry, who came that night in honour to their king, with a lamentable ill-acted French play, when our English actors so much surpass; however the dances and voices were pretty well performed'.\textsuperscript{59} There are other possible reasons why it was not well received. Marie-Claude Canova-Green suggests that the Prologue praising the wisdom of the King and his peace-loving policies may have displeased those who wanted him to support William of Orange in the war between Holland and France.\textsuperscript{60} Perry Gethner notes that by this time the form of the comédie-ballet, invented by Molière with \textit{Les Fâcheux} in 1661, had declined in popularity even in France, and that Charles II's attempts to import French opera had already proved

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unsuccessful. And perhaps contemporary English taste found the style of the piece straitlaced: the current success on the London stage was Aphra Behn’s bawdy comedy *The Rover*, which had opened earlier in the year (March 1677). Both plays deal with the subject of men’s inconstancy, but by comparison with Mrs Behn’s racy plot, *Rare-en-tout* seems formally constrained in its alexandrines and lacking in action.

Like *Le Favory*, the play has a contemporary setting, though with allegorical musical interludes, and there are topical references to London as a centre of musical activity and to the presence in England of many French emigrés (like the author herself). The eponymous hero is a Gascon newly arrived in London in pursuit of a French singer, but soon distracted by another beauty; he echoes both Corneille’s Alidor in *La Place royale* and Elvire, the ‘coquette’ in *Le Favory*, in his determination to court as many women as he pleases but remain free, and Perry Gethner comments that he is an early example of the ‘petit-mâtre’, a type which later became popular with Parisian audiences. Of his two jilted mistresses, Isabelle appears in the play only to sing, and Clémène delivers just one speech in the final act, promising revenge on her faithless lover, so the only relationship which develops on stage is between *Rare-en-tout’s* valet La Treille and Isabelle’s suivante, Finette. Even for them, hopes of a happy outcome are dashed by discovery of the master’s inconstancy, and only the concluding *fête pastorale* ends with the triumph of love.

Anne de La Roche-Guilhen spent most of the rest of her life in London, probably in the service of the Duchess of Grafton, to whom *Rare-en-tout* was dedicated. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 she was joined by her two sisters, and all three received support from the Royal Bounty, established in aid of Protestant refugees in
England. She wrote some twenty novels, many of which were translated into English, but no other work for the stage has survived.

One other woman is known to have written a comedy: in 1687 *Le Voleur*, a one-act comedy by Charlotte Pitel (the actress Mademoiselle Longchamp) was given three performances at the Comédie-Française but it was subsequently lost. And one more comedy of the century may have been partly the work of a woman writer; in May 1690 the Comédie-Française presented *La Folle Enchère*, a one-act comedy in prose which appeared under the name of Florent Dancourt but was probably co-authored by him and his then mistress, Madame Ulrich, daughter of one of the King's violinists. The Preface to the published text includes the phrase 'je me suis étonnée moi-même que sans aucune connaissance des regles du Théâtre, j'ai pu faire quelque chose qui ait mérité du Public une attention favorable'. This indicates that the writer was a woman and was not already an established author, as Dancourt was, and although he collected the author's share of takings at the box office, the Privilège was granted to M*V*, which could indicate Madame Ulrich. André Blanc suggests that the play was probably the result of a collaboration between the two, with Madame Ulrich supplying ideas for the intrigue and Dancourt using his experience as a dramatist to create the characters and write the dialogue. There were nine performances in 1690 and seven in 1691.

The play continues the dramatic tradition of exploring gender roles by returning to the provocative theme of the older woman as sexual contender, which Dancourt had already exploited in *Les Fonds perdus* (1685), following the 'mères coquettes' of de Visé and Quinault, and by the inclusion of cross-dressing, which he used again in *La Femme d'intrigues* (1692). The financial intrigue is characteristic of comedy at this later period. Madame Argante opposes her son's marriage because she wants to appear...
younger than she is and cannot face the prospect of becoming a grandmother; in a reversal of the device used by Françoise Pascal in *Le Vieillard amoureux*, she has also fallen in love with his new companion, 'le petit Comte'—actually his beloved Angélique disguised as a young man. Like Molière's Harpagon, Madame Argante loses parental control through her avarice and gullibility. Taken in by a series of elaborate disguises and deceptions arranged by her son Eraste and his valets, she is forced to bid against a rival for the hand of 'le petit Comte' and duped into transferring a large sum of money to Eraste and signing an agreement to his marriage. Even her own maid Lisette takes the side of the young couple, conspiring to stage-manage a complicated series of interviews between invented characters impersonated by Eraste's two valets, and by the end of the play Madame Argante is a pathetic figure, defeated by her own selfishness and alone with her delusions. In the plays of de Visé and Quinault there is some argument in defence of the 'mères coquettes', but here there is none; it is as unsympathetic a portrait of an older woman as Françoise Pascal's 'Amoureuse vaine et ridicule'.

The fact that so few women wrote for the theatre, despite its popularity, and that those who did wrote so little in the way of comedy, may indicate the impact of religious criticism, much of it specifically directed at Molière. In August 1664, after the first performance of *Tartuffe*, he had been denounced by the priest Pierre Rouillé as 'un homme, ou plutôt un Démon vêtu de chair et habillé en homme', and shortly before the performance of *Le Favory* at Versailles the anonymous author of the 'Observations sur Le Festin de Pierre' had condemned his alleged atheism and impiety in *Dom Juan* and earlier plays.69 (These accusations placed him in real physical danger, since heretics, blasphemers or atheists could still be burned at the stake.) The irreverence of Molière's comedies exacerbated tensions between Church and theatre at a time of tension within the

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Church itself over the alleged heresy of Jansenism, with the expulsion of twelve nuns from Port-Royal also in August 1664. At the end of 1665, in the course of his quarrel with the anti-Jansenist Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin (‘la querelle des Imaginaires’), Pierre Nicole launched a general attack on writers of fiction: ‘Un faiseur de romans et un poète de théâtre est un empoisonneur public, non des corps, mais des âmes des fidèles, qui se doit regarder comme coupable d’une infinité d’homicides spirituels [...]’. This provoked an indignant response from Racine and led to his break with Port-Royal, while Nicole continued his attack in his Traité de la comédie; Conti condemned Molière in particular in his Traité de la comédie et des spectacles of 1666. When Tartuffe was performed at the Palais-Royal in August 1667, the Archbishop of Paris declared it ‘une comédie très dangereuse’ and expressly forbade anyone to read or see the play, in public or in private, on pain of excommunication (Recueil, p. 292).

The Abbés d’Aubignac and de Pure countered in the theatre’s defence, though even d’Aubignac, writing in response to Conti, expressed some anxiety that ‘depuis quelques années nostre Theatre se laisse retomber peu à peu dans sa vieille corruption’, due to ‘les Farces impudentes, & les Comedies libertines [...] contraires au sentiment de la pieté, & aux bonnes moeurs’—presumably thinking of Molière’s work. Other playwrights responded to these attacks: Corneille’s Preface to Attila described drama as ‘un divertissement honnête et utile’, Molière defended his own work and plays in general in his Preface to Tartuffe when it was finally published in 1669, and Chappuzeau maintained in Le Théâtre françois that theatre was a legitimate form of moral instruction. But for opponents of the theatre, Molière represented all that was immoral in this form of entertainment. As well as undermining traditional authority and attacking pretension and hypocrisy, he argues in his plays in favour of simple human pleasures. Jean Emelina has
countered Andrew Calder's view of Molière as 'moraliste' by underlining his sheer sense of fun and the hedonism in his writing: 'en dépit de tant de noircours [...] un formidable amour de la vie souffle dans cette oeuvre'. Such enjoyment of earthly life was at odds with the most austere view of 'tout le sérieux de la vie chrétienne'.

In view of the controversial status of the theatre, it is perhaps not surprising that Marie-Catherine Desjardins chose instead to concentrate on writing novels, and under a different name; that Françoise Pascal wrote no more plays after her move to Paris, or that later women playwrights chose to write tragedies, distancing themselves from writers of comedy by focusing on the problems of love rather than its pleasures. There was no French equivalent to the success of Aphra Behn in London; for the most part French women playwrights chose to show that they were as capable as men of writing serious drama, and we have seen that they created female characters capable of expressing their own opinions, reasoning and arguing with men (and even, in the case of Nitétis, doing without them altogether—reflecting the choice some women were making in real life). By the time the next full-length play by a woman after Le Favory appeared on the Parisian stage, Racine's tragedies had proved as popular with the theatre-going public as Molière's comedies, and political tragedy was the genre chosen by the two women playwrights whose work will be discussed in the final chapter.

1. As noted in Chapter Seven, La Grange lists 'D. Guichot ou les Enchantemens de Merlin' as an adaptation by Mademoiselle Béjart.

2. Léon de la Sicotiére, 'Madame de Villedieu et ses relations avec Molière'.

3. Bruce A. Morrisette, The Life and Works of Marie-Catherine Desjardins (Madame de Villedieu); Micheline Cuénin, Roman et Société sous Louis XIV: Madame de Villedieu.

5. Nancy D. Klein (ed.), *Selected Writings of Madame de Villedieu*.


7. Biographical details from Cuénin and Gethner.

8. *Recueil de Quelques Lettres*, Lettre VIII.


11. Quoted by Nancy D. Klein, *Selected Writings*, p. 16.


24. All Mademoiselle Desjardins' plays appear in vol. 2 of *Oeuvres de Madame de Ville-Dieu*.

25. See d'Aubignac, *Dissertations contre Corneille*.


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31. Elizabeth Woodrough, 'Aphra Behn & the French Astrea', p. 44.
34. Chappuzeau, Le Théâtre françois, p. 68.
37. Femmes dramaturges, p. 64.
38. See Francis Baumal, Molière et les Dévots.
40. See Mongrédien, Recueil, I, p. 219.
41. Morrissette, pp. 79-80.
42. See Mongrédien, Recueil, I, p. 242; La Grange, Registre.
43. Oeuvres de Madame de Ville-Dieu, II, p. 166.
44. Femmes dramaturges, p. 62.
47. See La Grange, Registre, February-March 1665.
48. Femmes Dramaturges, p. 68.
49. Nouveau Recueil de Pieces Galantes, in Oeuvres de Madame de Ville-Dieu, I, p. 400. The variant ‘Cet homme si fameux, que l’univers admire’ is quoted by P. Lacroix in ‘Le Prologue du Favori’, p. 5.
51. Lettre XXI, p. 199.
57. See M.E. Storer, ‘French Women Members of the Ricovrati of Padua’.

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58. See Perry Gethner, *Femmes dramaturges*, for biographical information (pp. 127-36) and for the text of *Rare-en-tout* (pp. 137-80).


62. See Fidelis Morgan, *The Female Wits*.

63. *Femmes dramaturges*, p. 131.

64. *Femmes dramaturges*, p. 185.


67. See discussion in Chapter Six.

68. See Marie-Claude Canova, *La comédie*, pp. 68-70; also Jacques Truchet’s *Introduction to Théâtre du XVIIe siècle*, vol. 3, p. XXXIV.

69. Mongrédién, *Recueil*, I, pp. 220, 236. See also Laurent Thirouin’s edition of Nicole’s *Traité de la Comédie*, pp. 145-166, for the text of the ‘Observations’ and discussion of its authorship; although previously attributed to the Jansenist lawyer Barbier d’Aucour, in Thirouin’s view it expresses the opinions of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement rather than those of Port-Royal.

70. Quoted by Jean Rohou, *Jean Racine*, p. 228.


CHAPTER NINE

PASSION AND POLITICS

If the first group of seventeenth-century plays by women (1650-65) is remarkable for its diversity, the three plays in the second group, performed in Paris between 1680-90, are remarkable for their similarities. Madame Deshoulières' *Genséric*, Catherine Bernard's *Laodamie* and *Brutus* are all political tragedies in the Cornelian mode, examining questions of legitimacy and of the uses and limitations of power. In each play the requirements of public duty and family loyalty are set against the desire for personal happiness in love, and all three plays carry a warning of the dangers of sexual passion and underline the problems of women's dependence on men.

Despite the success of Racine's tragedies, the genre had appeared to decline in popularity. From 1680 to 1689 only twenty-five new tragedies were published, compared with sixty-nine in the decade 1640-49, when tragedy was the most popular genre. But Lancaster points out that Corneille and Racine were still the most frequently performed playwrights in Paris, their most popular plays being respectively *Le Cid* and *Andromaque*; Jacques Truchet refers to their 'absolue domination' and estimates that they were responsible for about half the performances of tragedies in the last two decades of the century. Père Rapin and Saint-Évremond both expressed the fear that tragedy, which they considered the highest form of drama, would be displaced by opera, and two of the most popular dramatists, Quinault and Thomas Corneille, turned to writing opera libretti, but Truchet points out that these still drew on classical subjects and belonged to the tragic repertoire, and that 'on lisait les tragédies en musique comme on lisait les autres tragédies'.

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One difference lay in the attitude towards royalty. Truchet comments (p. XXVII) that the *raison d'être* of opera was to praise the King, both directly and indirectly, and every performance began with a prologue extolling his incomparable virtues. But the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, and their successors, focused on the problems of political power rather than its glory, and in the three plays to be considered in this chapter, it is the difficulties faced by rulers, the tensions between their public and their private roles and the constraints on their power, which are placed in the foreground.

By 1680 the religious and cultural climate in Paris was changing and the status of the theatre as royal entertainment was in decline. In that year Primi Visconti recorded the contrast observed by visitors who had not been to France for twenty years: 'Alors c'étaient partout bals, festins, banquets, concerts [...] A présent chacun vit retiré, peu de gens s'amusent, [...] le royaume paraît un séminaire.' But he was sceptical of the reasons for such a transformation: 'Tout le monde fait ici profession de dévotion, particulièrement les femmes, mais toute la dévotion consiste à observer les péchés d'autrui [...] Personne ne se fait dévot que pour des fins humaines.' Tartuffe was evidently alive and well. Similarly, La Bruyère commented in 1688 on the 'fashion' for piety among women. The source of greater austerity lay in the King's personal life, as Louis XIV came increasingly under the devout influence of Madame de Maintenon, and after his marriage to her in 1683 he attended the theatre infrequently and by 1690 had banned all performances on Sundays and during Lent. His interest in the theatre had in fact declined after the death of Molière; Adam notes that although the troupe at the Guénégaud still used the title 'Comédiens du Roi' they received no royal subsidy and there were few command performances. In 1687 Racine reported in a letter to Boileau that the company was
having difficulty in finding new premises: 'partout où ils vont, c'est merveille d'entendre comme les curés crient'.

As royal support declined, attacks on the theatre continued. A second edition of Conti's *Traité de la Comédie* had appeared in 1669, and it was followed in 1671 by a long and detailed *Défense du Traité de Monseigneur le Prince de Conti* by Joseph de Voisin, 'Prestre, Docteur en Théologie, Conseiller du Roy'. This begins with an absolute condemnation of all forms of theatre—'les écoles du vice'—and the author declares that 'le voeu que nous avons fait au Baptesme de renoncer au Demon [...] nous oblige aussi à renoncer à la Comédie' (p. aiiij). Voisin then makes a detailed point by point refutation of d'Aubignac's *Dissertation sur la condamnation des théâtres* (1667), written in response to Conti's attack, and expands Conti's references to the teaching of the Church Fathers, reinforcing his arguments with extensive quotations to show that their condemnation of theatre was unequivocal, and that their views have been upheld by canon law, which forbids ecclesiastics even to read plays, much less write them (p. 353). He then goes on to demonstrate a wide knowledge of recent drama, having evidently defied these interdictions by seeing or reading plays himself. Scenes from plays, mostly comedies, are quoted to support his view of the theatre as immoral; he condemns plays by Corneille including *Le Menteur* for its portrayal of 'un jeune débauché', *Théodore* for its 'fictions amoureuses' and *Cinna* for 'la haine d'Emilie', as well as comedies by Brosse, Rotrou and Boisrobert—the latter especially denounced for the scene in *La Jalousie d'elle-mesme* (1650) in which an assignation is arranged in church (p. 335). In most cases it is the allegedly immodest conduct of female characters which is deplored. Surprisingly, he does not mention *Le Cid*, the subject of detailed criticism by Conti (see Chapter Three) and still
one of the most popular plays in the repertoire. The volume also includes a reprint of Nicole's *Traité de la Comédie*.

The Jesuit Pierre de Villiers, whose *Entretien sur les tragédies* appeared in 1675, took a more lenient view and thought that the immorality of the theatre derived from its concentration on love, and that 'les plus belles tragédies que nous ayons vues depuis trente ans sont soutenues par d'autres beautés que celles qu'on trouve dans cette passion', but Bernard Lamy (*Nouvelles Réflexions sur l'Art poétique*, 1678) made no such distinction and condemned all plays as immoral and the theatre as 'l'Eglise du Diable'. In his *Traité des jeux et des divertissements* of 1686 Jean-Baptiste Thiers, curé de Champrond, was similarly uncompromising and made no distinction between serious drama & 'bouffonneries'. Père Soanen preached a sermon against the theatre, 'Sur les spectacles', in 1686. Jan Clarke notes the increasing persecution of actors in the 1680s and 1690s: in the parish of Saint-Sulpice the curé initially refused a Christian burial to the actor Rosimond, who died suddenly in 1686, and other actors were refused the sacraments. (Conversely, Pierre Mélèse records that over a thousand people attended the funeral of La Grange in the parish of St André des Arts in 1692.) In 1694 the Sorbonne decreed that theatre musicians and bill-stickers should also be excommunicated, and the Duchesse d'Orléans commented on the shortage of good actors, intimidated as they were by the hostility of the clergy. But two quotations from the *Mercure galant* suggest that theatre-going was as popular as ever with audiences in general: in February 1682 it was reported that 'Jamais il n'y eut autant d'affluence de monde à l'opéra et aux comédies' and three years later, in April 1685, that 'la comédie est plus à la mode qu'elle n'a jamais été'.

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Writing plays was still an unusual occupation for women; poetry and novels were the forms they more often chose and in which they were well established. Madame Deshoulières was best known as a poet, and received the first prize for poetry ever awarded by the Académie Française. (It seems ironic that women could win prizes but not be elected to membership.) Her only completed play was the tragedy *Genséric*, performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1680 and published by Claude Barbin in the same year. It was the last new play listed before the merging of the company with the Guénégaud to form the Comédie-Française. According to Madame Deshoulières’ friend Chambors, *Genséric* was a success, although it does not appear to have been revived after its initial run.¹⁹

It is as a poet that Madame Deshoulières has been remembered by posterity, and particularly for her association with ‘libertinage’. Frédéric Lachèvre included her in his 1924 study of ‘Les Derniers Libertins’²⁰ and this aspect of her poetry has been discussed by Antoine Adam²¹ and more recently in an article by Wendy Perkins,²² but there is as yet no substantial study of her work. The fact that she was also a playwright has been largely overlooked. *Genséric* is discussed by Lancaster (Part 4, I, pp. 186-88) but Adam does not mention that she wrote for the theatre. More recently, the play is among those discussed in an article by Perry Gethner on women playwrights²³ and it will be included in the second volume of his anthology, *Femmes dramaturges en France*.

Antoinette du Ligier de la Garde was born in Paris in 1637 and was unusually well educated, learning Latin, Italian and Spanish and studying Descartes and Gassendi. She was married at the age of thirteen to Guillaume de la Fon de Bois-Guérin, seigneur des Houlières, a lieutenant-general in Condé’s regiment, and she was immediately caught up in the events of the Fronde. After Mazarin’s victory, when her husband fled with Condé
to Belgium, she joined him in Brussels and was imprisoned there for a few months until her husband was restored to favour at the French Court. She returned to Paris in 1657.24 She was thus the first woman playwright in France to pursue a literary career as a married woman—although her husband was often away from Paris—and as a mother. (Madame de Saint Balmon also had domestic responsibilities, but she did not write for publication.) Despite her title and her connections she was not well off, and according to Adam her financial circumstances made it difficult for her to provide an education for her four children.

Madame Deshoulières soon became well known in Parisian literary circles. She was a friend of Madeleine de Scudéry; she was listed in Somaize's *Dictionnaire* in 1660 ('Dioclée'); Jean de La Forge mentioned in 1663 that 'de galants Autheurs' have dedicated their work to her and written verses in her praise. It must have been soon after this that she began to write poetry of her own, circulated at first in manuscript and then published in collections and in the *Mercure galant*. In 1671 she was awarded the first prize for poetry by the Académie Française. According to Adam (III, p. 176), she belonged to the group of 'modernes' including Pellisson, Perrault and Quinault. Adam describes her poetry as romantic and pastoral in character, showing a love of natural beauty which she shared with her friend Madeleine de Scudéry. He notes the metaphysical dimension of her poems, concerning the brevity and vanity of human life on earth and the uncertainty of existence after death (p. 177), and it was these elements in her work which led to her association with 'libertinage'. J.S. Spink comments that most of the lyric poets of the seventeenth century could be described as 'libertins', since the genre entails a conception of nature and human life unconstrained by religious beliefs,25 but she was closely associated with the poet Jean Dehénault, a friend of

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Chapelle and Molière who was known for his open expression of atheism, though at his death he displayed the requisite piety—perhaps, as Spink suggests, ‘in order to secure a peaceful end and a decent burial’ (p. 157). Madame Deshoulières herself was accused of atheism in the eighteenth century; Joan DeJean notes that the Abbé Batteux included some of her poetry in his anthology *Cours de belles-lettres* of 1747 but criticized her for expressing allegedly unchristian sentiments. Similarly the Abbé Goujet mentioned Madame de Villedieu in his *Histoire de la littérature française* of 1740-56, only to say that her works should not be read, and were especially dangerous for young men. In her lifetime Madame Deshoulières did deliberately contravene religious convention: Frédéric Lachèvre recorded that in 1666 she shocked Parisian society by not having her son baptized, and he described this as ‘une résolution inouïe pour l’époque et qui constituait une véritable provocation’, though the omission was rectified nineteen years later. According to Félix Gaiffe she did baptize her dog.

Her literary achievements were recognized in her lifetime, both in France and abroad. In 1688 she was elected to the Academy of the Ricovrati in Padua (as was her daughter, also a poet) and in 1689 her election to the Academy of Arles made her the first woman academician in France. She was awarded a pension by Louis XIV in 1693. But she had developed cancer in 1682 and suffered ill health until her death in 1694; this unhappy experience presumably contributed to her views on the vanity of life and the worthlessness of pleasure.

Catherine Bernard is the third French woman playwright of the seventeenth century whose work is discussed by Perry Gethner in his *Femmes dramaturges en France*, and her plays appear in Franco Piva’s edition of her collected works (Volume Two). In her case the changing religious climate directly influenced her literary career. She was born
in Rouen in 1662, the daughter of a well-to-do Protestant merchant, and biographers have claimed that she was related to Corneille, although no documentary evidence for this has been discovered. When she moved to Paris she established some extremely useful contacts at Court, including friendship with Madame de Maintenon and Madame de Pontchartrain, wife of the future Chancellor. But she was directly affected by an atmosphere of increasing religious intolerance, and in October 1685, shortly before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, she prudently converted to the Catholic faith. This pleased her patrons at Court but provoked a breach with her family, and she was disinherited by an aunt living in exile in England. She wrote three successful novels and won prizes for her poetry at the Jeux Floraux in Toulouse, also winning the poetry prize of the Académie Française three times, and like Madame Deshoulières she was elected to membership of the Ricovrati of Padua. She wrote two tragedies, both produced with some success: Laodamie in 1689 and Brutus in 1690. These were the first full-length plays by a woman to be performed at the Comédie-Française. But despite her literary achievements she did not earn enough to support herself. She was forced to write to Louis XIV requesting payment of her pension, without which she declared she could not survive (see below), and she eventually came to depend on a pension from Madame de Pontchartrain. Ironically, this was granted on condition that she stopped writing plays—the theatre was presumably a suspect milieu to her devout patron—so she gained financial security at the cost of ending her literary career, and had been virtually forgotten by the time she died in 1712.

The difficulties faced by women writers were not confined to lack of financial reward. Like other women writers, Catherine Bernard was accused of passing off the work of a man as her own. Gethner concedes the possibility of Fontenelle’s collaboration.
in the writing of *Brutus*—even if Mademoiselle Bernard was not related to Corneille, his nephew was a close friend of hers—which was actually included in his published works after his death in 1757. At one time the play was also attributed to Marie-Anne Barbier, although she herself denied the suggestion and refers to ‘les tragédies de Mademoiselle Bernard’ in the Preface to her own play *Arrie et Pétus* in 1702. In his biography of Fontenelle, Alain Niderst suggests that the writer’s association with Mademoiselle Bernard may have begun as a liaison when she was a young woman and both were living in Rouen, and that a family connection may have been claimed in order to conceal an illicit affair. Niderst assumes that Fontenelle collaborated in writing at least three of her novels, as well as her two tragedies, but there appears to be no clear evidence to support his suggestion. Franco Piva points out that the only source of the claim was Fontenelle’s biographer, Abbé Trublet, and that Mademoiselle Bernard’s work was recognized as her own in her lifetime. At a period when work in progress was frequently read and discussed in literary circles, a written text was often the work of more than one writer and it may be impossible to ascribe authorship with any certainty. There seems to be a particular problem where women writers are concerned. The debate about the contribution of the Abbé d’Aubignac to Mademoiselle Desjardins’ *Manlius* has already been mentioned (see Chapter Eight); no-one can be sure who participated in the writing of Madeleine de Scudéry’s novels, and the possible contribution of writers other than Madame de La Fayette to *La Princesse de Clèves* is still a matter of controversy.

Despite these continuing problems for women writers, they still had a valuable support network in the Parisian salons. Catherine Marin notes that by the late seventeenth century some literary salons had become meeting places for free-thinking intellectuals, mentioning in particular the circle of poets and writers gathered around Philippe de
Vendôme, who was described by Saint-Simon as 'sans principes et sans religion'; Adam confirms that 'incrédulité' was not unusual among aristocrats and men of letters. Both Madame Deshoulières and Catherine Bernard, along with other women writers, belonged to the same literary circles: 'elles se connaissaient bien et vivaient dans le même climat de libertinage intellectuel' (Marin, p. 478). Madame Deshoulières frequented the salon of the Duchesse de Bouillon, a niece of Mazarin, patron of writers including Pradon and Campistron, and an admirer of the defiantly atheist Ninon de Lenclos. Jacques Truchet describes her circle as 'un milieu brillant, turbulent, resté d'esprit frondeur, assez mal vu du pouvoir, passablement libertin'. But if Madame Deshoulières shared their scepticism in matters of faith, which was for her, as Adam puts it, 'l'acceptation d'une ignorance et non point une flamme illuminant la raison', she presumably did not share their principles of living for sensual pleasure, since she reiterated in her poems the dangers of passion and the futility of worldly success.

Despite her achievements as a poet, she expressed reservations about her choice of career. A 'Rondeau' of 1677 concerns the difficulty of making a living from writing poetry:

Le bel-esprit, au siècle de Marot,
Des dons du Ciel passait pour le gros lot;
[...]
Or est passé ce temps, où d'un bon mot,
Stance ou dixain, on payait son écôt;

and her 'Epître chagrine à Mademoiselle...', published in 1688, conveys an unusually direct account of literary disillusion; it is addressed to a would-be 'savante' and warns her of the disappointments in store:

Hélas! du bel esprit savez-vous les dégoûts?
Ce nom jadis si beau, si révéré de tous,
N'a plus rien, aimable Amarante,
Ni d'honorable, ni de doux.

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Personne ne lit pour apprendre,
On ne lit que pour critiquer.

Readers are taken in by superficial effects—'quelques faux brillants bien placés'—and no longer exert themselves to acquire true learning, for which 'la mode [en] est passée'. She wishes she had chosen a different path:

Jamais dans Hypocrène on ne m’aurait vu boire,
Si le Ciel m’eût laissée en pouvoir de choisir.
[...]
J’ai su faire des vers avant que de connaître
Les chagrins attachés à ce maudit talent.41

She seems here to be echoing Boileau’s second Satire of 1660, addressed to Molière:

Sans ce métier, fatal au repos de ma vie,
Mes jours, pleins de loisir, couleraient sans envie:
[...]
Et je serais heureux, si, pour me consumer,
Un destin envieux ne m’avait fait rimer.42

Although we cannot be sure that Madame Deshoulières was sincere in expressing these reservations, other poems treat similar themes of sorrow, loss and the implied futility of human endeavour in the absence of religious faith. Her view of 'la vie infortunée' at the mercy of capricious fate, and death as an end to human existence, a return to the 'néant d’où nous sommes sortis', could be interpreted as denying the possibility of Christian redemption.43

As a member of the Duchesse de Bouillon’s circle, Madame Deshoulières took an active part in literary politics on at least one occasion. Three years before her own play was produced at the Hôtel de Bourgogne she was part of the 'cabale' which attacked Racine’s Phèdre at the same theatre, and supported the rival play on the same subject by Pradon, dedicated to her friend the duchess. What was her motive? She is presumed to have composed a mocking sonnet which was circulated the day after the first performance
of Racine’s play in January 1677, in which the story is made to sound trivial by being reduced to factual banality:

Dans un fauteuil doré, Phèdre tremblante et blême
Dit des vers où d’abord personne n’entend rien.
Sa nourrice lui fait un sermon fort chrétien
Contre l’affreux dessein d’attenter sur soi-même. [etc.]

It would seem that she was objecting to acting style as much as to Racine’s verse, and also to the casting of Mademoiselle d’Ennebaut:

Une grosse Aricie, au teint rouge, aux crins blonds,
N’est là que pour montrer deux énormes tétons,
Que, malgré sa froideur, Hippolyte idolâtre.44

Louis Racine claimed that Madame Deshoulières ‘protégeait Pradon, non par admiration pour lui, mais parce qu’elle était amie de tous les poètes qu’elle ne regardait pas comme capables de lui disputer le grand talent qu’elle croyait avoir pour la poésie’45 and Adam assumes that ‘l’amitié lui fit faire cette sottise’.46 But if the sonnet was meant as serious criticism of the play and not merely professional jealousy, it was perhaps prompted by exasperation with the characters for their helpless capitulation to passion. In her own play *Genséric* she demonstrated the tragic consequences of feeling ungoverned by reason, and the sacrifice of political ‘devoir’ to the pursuit of happiness in love.

Whereas Racine’s plays tended to focus on female characters powerless to control their own destiny, at the mercy of men and of their own ungovernable feelings, Madame Deshoulières presents two female characters capable of self-control and political judgment. In contrasting the disorder of barbarian passions and the noble superiority of Roman virtue, Madame Deshoulières chose to personify the latter in two women, widow and daughter of the defeated Roman Emperor Valentinian. We shall see that their principles are in fact compromised, but even in captivity they retain courage, dignity and pride in their status, and survive, while the two characters who care only for love are destroyed.

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According to Lancaster, Madame Deshoulières’ source was d’Urfé’s novel *L’Astrée* and perhaps also Georges de Scudéry’s *Eudoxe*, but she altered the story of the Empress Eudoxia, captured by the Vandals after the sack of Rome, and invented an unhappy ending. And despite her earlier reservations about Racine’s work, she also invented a dramatically effective Racinian character, the African princess Sophronie. The action revolves around the conflict between Genséric, King of the Vandals, and his two sons, Trasimond and Hunéric. Love relationships are a key element of the plot, since he wants his sons to marry for maximum political advantage, regardless of their feelings; Hunéric is happy to accept his father’s choice, since he is impervious to love—‘J’ay de l’ambition, & non de la tendresse’ (II, 3)—but the case of Trasimond is more complicated. As a child he was betrothed to Sophronie, who is passionately in love with him, but he himself is now in love with the Empress’s daughter (also, confusingly, called Eudoxe) and she with him. Whereas in *L’Astrée* love could be morally enriching, enhancing reason and ‘générosité’, Madame Deshoulières presents it as a disastrous distraction from political ‘devoir’.

Genséric is presented as a Machiavellian ruler, without affection, concerned only to maintain his power. Lancaster describes him as ‘a cruel and capable monarch’, and Gethner as ‘a tyrant devoid of moral scruples’. But Madame Deshoulières also underlines the insecurity of his position: needing to consolidate popular support in Carthage while wanting to establish his influence in Rome, he is angry when his plans are thwarted by the refusal of Trasimond, the Empress and Eudoxe to co-operate. He declares that as soon as his army is assembled he will impose his wishes by force:

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Alors je seray maître, alors je choisiray
Pour le bien de l’état quel sang je répandray; (V, 6)
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In fact it is human passion which will determine the course of events in the play; a stronger force even than that of a tyrant.

The Empress and her daughter are characterized by their pride in their Roman heritage and their refusal to submit to the dictates of their captor. The young Eudoxe tells the King’s confidant in the second scene of the play:

Ma mere est en tous lieux la veuve de Cesar,
Et peut-estre qu’un jour on pourra vous apprendre,
A ce sublime rang quels respects on doit rendre.

and in III, 3 she asserts her status as the Emperor’s daughter to reject Genséric’s proposal of marriage to Hunéric. Madame Deshoulières underlines the isolation of the Roman women by omitting the characters in the novel who come to their rescue.51 There are echoes here of other captive heroines: Tryphine in *Les Chastes Martyrs*, Omphale in *Manlius*, Racine’s *Andromaque*. In their courage in adversity they seem to belong to the tradition of ‘femmes fortes’, but how heroic are their actions?

When Genséric himself offers to re-establish the Empress in Rome if she will consent to the marriage of her daughter with Hunéric (presumably her consent is not strictly necessary, since both women are captives, but desirable from Genséric’s point of view to legitimize his power), her refusal to compromise by accepting a favour from him appears heroic:

J’aime mieux la mort qu’une telle bonté. (II, 5)

She declares that her daughter will wish to avenge the fall of Rome, as she herself avenged the death of her husband by destroying Maxime who usurped his place, and seems to echo Cornélie in *La Mort de Pompée* when she proudly asserts:

Qui vit sans se vanger est indigne de vivre. (II, 5)
But the apparent nobility of her character is undermined in II, 7 when she reveals that her passion for vengeance has led her to deceive her own daughter. She feigns sympathy with Eudoxe’s love for Trasimond, but in reality her only aim is to take revenge on Genséric by encouraging discord between him and his sons, even though she feels no personal animosity towards Trasimond:

Pour être genereux autant qu’il est aimable,
En est-il moins fils d’un Prince detestable?
[...]
Si je feints d’aprouver le feu qu’il fait paroître,
Si j’engage ma fille à l’oser reconnoître,
Ce n’est que pour servir ma vengeance: & je veux
Qu’un long embrasement s’allume par leurs feux,
Par là je vais armer un frere contre un frere;
[...]
Je sçay que je trahis un Prince que j’estime,
Que de mes passions, ma fille est la victime. (II, 7)

Although a desire for political revenge may be considered admirable, deceitfulness is not. It would appear that the Empress herself has been contaminated by Genséric’s Machiavellian lack of scruple. Perry Gethner notes that this speech ‘reveals her betrayal of the heroic code’ and her lack of ‘générosité’, whereas in L’Astrée the Empress was the most impressive of the female characters, and he even suggests that there is some resemblance to Corneille’s power-crazed Cléopâtre in Rodogune.52

Is the young Princess Eudoxe any more impressive? Gethner describes her a ‘weak and weepy character who does little more than lament in the course of the play’, but this judgment seems to overlook her proud defiance towards Genséric, refusing marriage to Hunéric. She continues a type of Cornelian heroine—Rodogune, Pulchérie in Héraclius, Laodice in Nicomède—who though powerless refuses to show weakness:

Quelque droit que sur moy vous donne le bonheur
Je n’en seray pas moins fille d’un Empereur.
De cet illustre rang, de ce grand heritage,
Je n’ay que la fierté, c’est là tout mon partage,

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In fact, we know that her objection to the match is more personal than political, since she would be happy to marry Hunéric's brother, but there is perhaps a more heroic quality in the sincerity of her love and in her steadfast opposition to her captor than in her mother's deviousness. Although in the circumstances there is no place for their 'vertu romaine', both women are presented as admirable for their attachment to worthwhile political values.

By contrast, neither Trasimond nor Sophronie is politically motivated. His principal concern is to avoid marrying Sophronie, because his love for the young Eudoxe overshadows all other considerations, and Sophronie is determined to ensure that he doesn't marry anyone else. Trasimond is guided only by his passion, and he tells Eudoxe in III, 2 that he will oppose the wishes of his father and brother for her sake:

Vos beaux yeux dans mon coeur font taire la nature, [...]  
Et je ne connois plus de maître que l'Amour.

His preoccupation with love is echoed by Sophronie in V, 2:

Que le ciel a son gré dispose de l'Affrique.  
C'est l'Amour qui m'occupe & non la politique;

but they ignore political realities at their peril and their single-minded passion destroys them both.

Sophronie's Racinian oscillation between love and hatred for Trasimond, echoing the passion and fury of Hermione, is summed up in her acknowledgment 'tant qu'on hait beaucoup, on aime encore un peu' (II, 1).\(^53\) Her jealousy leads her to betray him to Genséric when she discovers that he plans to elope with Eudoxe and lead a popular uprising against his father and brother. Sophronie briefly regrets her betrayal:

C'est moy, dont la barbare & noire jalousie  
Par le fer des bourreaux va t'arracher la vie:  
Quelle marque d'amour viens-je de te donner?  
Est-ce t'aymer, helas! que de t'assassiner? (V, 1)\(^54\)
but her jealousy soon returns when Genséric appears to forgive Trasimond and releases him. It is only a ruse on the part of the king, who needs time to assemble his forces and crush the rebellion, but ironically it leads to Trasimond’s death. Seeing him with Eudoxe, Sophronie tries to kill her rival, but actually strikes Trasimond, and then immediately takes her own life:

Je touche sans regret à mon heure fatale,
Du moins dans le tombeau, je seray sans Rivale: (V, 10)

There is nothing heroic about her attack, motivated by jealousy rather than any higher purpose, and, unlike Hermione, she expresses no remorse for the death of the man she claims to love.

The play may be seen as a mixture of Cornelian and Racinian elements: a political tragedy which lacks an embodiment of gloire, and which illustrates the destructive force of passion as well as its incompatibility with political duty. The sense of disillusion and loss recalls similar themes in Corneille’s later plays, and his depiction of the compromise of Roman values in plays from La Mort de Pompée to Othon, as well as Andromaque’s mourning for the loss of Troy. Genséric’s raison d’état has conquered Roman principles, and the Empress and Eudoxe both lament the decline of Rome and its political values.

When Eudoxe asks:

Mais qu’est donc devenu le grand coeur des Romains?
Cette ancienne valeur que par tout on renomme? (II, 6)

and the Empress responds:

Rome que nous voyons, n’est que l’ombre de Rome;
Les Romains d’aujourd’hui cent & cent fois vaincus,
N’ont que de lâches coeurs, que de coeurs corrompus,
Il n’est plus de grandeur, plus de vertu Romaine, (II, 6)

we may perhaps read in these lines a nostalgia for the hopeful ideals of the Fronde, in which courageous women had played such a prominent part. The same undercurrent of
disillusion is also found in some of Madame Deshoulières' poems in which she deplores the frivolity of contemporary society, the hypocrisy of the age and the decline of cultural values. Wendy Perkins discusses this aspect of social criticism in her writing and quotes from 'Le Ruisseau':

Le monde n'est rempli que de lâches flatteurs;
Savoir vivre, c'est savoir feindre [...]55

It is a preoccupation shared with other writers of the period, including La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère. And there is no sense of divine intervention in human affairs: if there are no capricious gods making trouble for their human playthings, neither is there any expectation of divine providence. As Perry Gethner points out, Genséric cynically invokes 'le ciel' only to justify his own decisions.56 The Empress merely sighs at 'l'affreux destin' which has destroyed her world.

Significantly, Madame Deshoulières chose to ignore in her version of the story the element which was central to Perrault's treatment of the same subject. His Christian epic poem Saint Paulin of 1686 deals with the conquest of Italy and North Africa by the Vandals, but he presents Trasimond as a cultured and generous prince, fond of art, literature and gardens, who eventually converts to Christianity under the influence of Paulin. There is no love story. Perrault was perhaps thinking of Madame Deshoulières' play when he wrote his dedicatory letter to Bossuet, deploring the fact that some contemporary authors have changed the characters of heroes of antiquity 'et leur ôté cette fierté noble et hautaine, qui ne leur permettait de regarder l'amour, que comme un amusement frivole [...] pour leur donner une tendresse démesurée, dont le siècle s'est avisé de faire une qualité héroïque et dominante'. For this tendency he blames the expectations of a female audience:

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Les dames, qui par elles-mêmes et par le grand nombre de ceux qui les suivent, font l’affluence dans le théâtre, ne peuvent souffrir des héros s’ils ne ressemblent à leurs amants, et si ces héros ne leur touchent le cœur avec les mêmes choses tendres et passionnées qu’elles ont accoutumé d’entendre, ou qu’elles souhaitent qu’on leur dise.\textsuperscript{57}

Despite this criticism of women’s tastes, he did later defend them in his \textit{Apologie des Femmes}, written in response to Boileau’s anti-feminist \textit{Satire X} of 1694, in which the latter had specifically attacked Madame Deshoulières as a ‘précieuse’ and friend of Pradon.\textsuperscript{58} This Satire and Perrault’s \textit{Apologie} would have appeared at about the time of her death, on 17 February 1694.

In a posthumous edition of her works it was claimed that \textit{Genséric} had an initial run of forty performances in 1680; modern scholars have doubted this figure, but Perry Gethner comments that even half that number would still have constituted a respectable success.\textsuperscript{59} The play was published in the same year, but was not revived at the Comédie-Française. Although Madame Deshoulières demonstrates an understanding of dramatic technique in her use of suspense and surprise, her tragedy is encumbered with six main characters and lacks the sense of one story taking its course. The ending is inconclusive: Trasimond and Sophronie are dead, Genséric’s position of power is unchanged and the situation of the Empress and Eudoxe is unresolved. Presumably the young Eudoxe will be forced to marry Hunéric, though Gethner suggests (p. 24) that she may be assumed to follow her rival’s example in committing suicide. No successful action has been carried out in the course of the play, since Sophronie’s murder of Trasimond is an accident, though one which reinforces the portrayal of passion as dangerous and destructive; and one wonders what audiences made of a female killer acting merely out of jealousy and spite—hardly a Medea or a Judith. Madame Deshoulières never completed another play, leaving only a fragment of another tragedy entitled \textit{Jule Antoine}.  

\textbf{CHAPTER NINE}
An equally pessimistic view of love is found in the work of Catherine Bernard. In the ‘Avertissement’ to her second novel, *Eléonor d’Yvrée* (1687), she clearly stated that her intention was to convey in her writing a warning of the dangers of passion:

> Je conçois tant de dérèglement dans l’amour, même le plus raisonnable, que j’ai pensé qu’il valait mieux présenter au public un tableau des malheurs de cette passion que de faire voir les amants vertueux et délicats, heureux à la fin du livre. Je mets donc mes héros dans une situation si triste qu’on ne leur porte point d’envie.¹⁰

Two years later she reiterated her purpose in her Preface to *Le Comte d’Amboise* (1689):

> ‘mon dessein était de ne faire voir que des amants malheureux pour combattre, autant qu’il m’est possible, le penchant qu’on a pour l’amour’ (p. 239). Although this ‘penchant’ had been celebrated by earlier novelists including Madeleine de Scudéry, Mademoiselle Bernard was following the more recent example of women writers such as Madame de Villedieu and Madame de Lafayette in wishing to caution her readers against the dangers of passion. And yet in fact the ending of *Laodamie* is to some extent a happy one for two of the main characters.

By the time her first play was performed at the Comédie-Française in February 1689, Mademoiselle Bernard had already published three novels. Although her second play *Brutus* enjoyed a greater success on stage, Perry Gethner considers *Laodamie*, included in his *Femmes dramaturges* anthology, to be the more significant of Mademoiselle Bernard’s two plays: ‘*Laodamie* est plus innovatrice et exprime plus directement les idées de l’auteur sur la nature et les capacités de la femme.’¹⁶¹ In this first play she chose to dramatize a slight episode recounted by Justin, probably, as Gethner comments, ‘parce qu’il était si vague et parce que les personnages étaient si peu connus, se permettant ainsi l’occasion d’inventer une intrigue à son gré’ (p. 189). In the central character of Laodamie, Queen of Epirus, she created a virtuous and responsible

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monarch who is nonetheless not impervious to love. In Gethner's view she is 'un personnage admirable mais non extraordinaire, faisant voir ce qu'une femme normale peut accomplir dans un monde peu héroïque et dominé par des hommes' (p. 186). Engaged by her father's will to marry a neighbouring prince, Attale, she has fallen in love with Gélon, exiled Prince of Sicily, and in the hope of overcoming her own feelings for him she has arranged that he shall marry her sister Nérée. Conveniently, but unfortunately for her peace of mind, he and Nérée have fallen in love.

Whether or not Catherine Bernard was related to Corneille, she had clearly learned a great deal from his plays. One of the chief differences between Laodamie and Genséric is that, where Madame Deshoulières' play featured no truly sympathetic characters, Mademoiselle Bernard's contains no less than three, all inspired by Cornelian ideals of fidelity and magnanimity. As in Corneille's plays, the tragedy arises from the situation in which they find themselves, not from their own personalities.

Although all three are in love, they are not ruled by passion. There are, as we shall see, echoes of Racine in Mademoiselle Bernard's work, but in Laodamie this is a key difference. Accepting that she must marry the man of her father's choice, Laodamie has successfully concealed her love for her sister's fiancé, and only reveals it when she is freed from the prospect of an unwanted marriage by the death of Attale, and needs to find another acceptable consort to quell public unrest. Her concern for fairness and for her sister's happiness enable her to exert considerable self-control: 'Je sais bien m'imposer les plus dures contraintes' (I, 4), and it is only after a popular demonstration in favour of Gélon for King that she tentatively proposes an alliance to him. Nérée heroically offers to give him up for the sake of the Queen's personal happiness and political stability, but Gélon himself refuses to break his engagement, even for the sake of a throne.
We saw in Chapter Five that even reigning queens in tragedy usually find themselves in situations created by men. It is an unusual feature of Laodamie that the situation is at least partly of the heroine’s own making, since she herself has arranged her sister’s marriage. She is nonetheless dependent on men: she needs a husband and she is bound by her father’s wishes until the death of Attale leaves her free, in theory, to make her own choice: ‘Vous êtes libre et reine,’ says Nérée (II, 2). What Mademoiselle Bernard underlines is the fact that her independence is of little use, since she cannot make Gélon fall in love with her, any more than Pyrrhus could gain the love of Andromaque, or Roxane of Bajazet. And she dislikes and mistrusts the ambitious prince Sostrate, a claimant to the throne who wishes to marry her and whose response to her rejection of him will eventually precipitate her own death.

The most unusual feature of the play is the relationship between the two sisters. They are presented as sincere and conscientious, and their conduct is mostly governed by their affection and regard for each other, rather than their love for Gélon. This runs counter to the general supposition of the time that women were at the mercy of their passions. La Bruyère commented on the rarity of female friendship and Bossuet wrote of their ‘infirmité naturelle’ in his Maximes et Réflexions sur la Comédie. Perry Gethner regards the relationship as a notable innovation and claims that the play ‘contribute à une réestimation de la nature féminine’. He points out that in earlier plays on the theme of sisterly rivalry (of which Thomas Corneille’s Ariane of 1672 was probably the best known, and was still one of the most popular plays in the repertoire in 1689), one sister eventually puts her own interests first and betrays the other, whereas this is not the case in Laodamie. But if both sisters were entirely unselfish, their relationship would be dramatically ineffective. In fact the Queen does propose marriage to Gélon, not once but
twice, in the guise of political necessity but knowing full well that she would thereby
deprieve her sister of a happy marriage. If her greatest concern was for their happiness,
and for the security of the State, she could abdicate in Gélon’s favour when her people
call for him to become king, but this is never mentioned as a possibility. Laodamie is a
sympathetic dramatic character precisely because there is an element of selfishness in her
proposal, and a Racinian tension between her passion and her rigorous self-control.

This tension is fully revealed in the first scene of Act Three, which parallels the
first scene of Act Three in Phèdre but highlights the differences in character between
Racine’s protagonist and Mademoiselle Bernard’s by displaying Laodamie’s strength
rather than her weakness. The Queen reveals her inner conflict to her confidante,
hesitating before making her approach to Gélon because she is well aware of the effect
that his loss would have on her sister:

D’enlever son amant j’aurais la barbarie?
Je sais ce qu’il inspire, elle en perdra la vie;
Elle m’aime, et mon cœur soupirant en secret
De sa tendre amitié cent fois a vu l’effet;

but, like Phèdre, unable to resist the hope that the man she loves may accept marriage for
political reasons:

Hélas! je me reproche en vain ma trahison,
J’ai goûté de l’espoir le dangereux poison.

(Phèdre: ‘Et l’espoir malgré moi s’est glissé dans mon coeur’, v. 768). She is aware that
her feelings for him are in danger of overruling her love for her sister:

Quand je vois pour mes feux que tout se rend facile,
Je sens que je me fais un reproche inutile,
Que je vais étouffer l’honneur et la pitié;
Que l’amour dans mon coeur surmonte l’amitié.

and she appeals to Argire for help in controlling them: ‘Ramène ma raison en m’ôtant
l’espérance.’ Phèdre in a similar situation has given up trying to control her feelings:
Enfin tous tes conseils ne sont plus de saison:
Sers ma fureur, Oenone, et non point ma raison. (791-92)

but Laodamie is striving to retain the rational control of a Cornelian hero rather than capitulating to her emotional desires.

And yet, persuaded by her minister Phénix that Gélon is the only possible candidate for the throne, Laodamie does propose marriage to him. She may have convinced herself that she is motivated only by political considerations, but she does not convince us. She assures Gélon:

Je suis reine, et je veux aujourd’hui faire un roi;  
Mais la raison d’État est mon unique loi. (III, 2)

and tells her sister:

[...] ce n’est point mon amour,  
Ma soeur, qui réglera nos destins en ce jour. (III, 6)

but after Gélon’s second refusal it is not only the difficult political situation which causes her to exclaim:

Je sens tous ses mépris qui me viennent aigrir,  
Je ne puis pardonner, mais je ne puis haïr! (V, 3)

Néréée herself shows true magnanimity in her readiness to give up her own happiness for the sake of her sister and her country. She makes a speech of heroic renunciation to her fiancé in IV, 3 and prepares to retire to the temple of Diana, but Laodamie cannot accept her sacrifice, and sends guards to bring her sister back (V, 4). At the end of the play Néréée is rewarded with both lover and throne after the accidental (but perhaps providential) death of the Queen in the course of a rebellion led by Sostrate.

Unlike Phèdre, Laodamie expresses no self-hatred, and while recognizing her own weakness, she retains her dignity and self-control. In the second scene of the play she explains her dilemma to her confidante Argire:
Il faut que je subisse un cruel hyméne;
Mais mon cœur se révolte, et sans cesse combat,
Et les ordres d’un père, et la raison d’état.

and speaks of her love for Gélon as ‘l’amour forcé’, ‘cette secrète peine’, ‘une vaine erreur’, but it is only at the end of the play that she utters a protest to the ‘Dieux cruels’ responsible for her predicament (V, 5). Her proposals to Gélon are made in terms of a reasoned discussion of the political situation; there are no angry scenes of furious ‘tutoiement’ such as we find in Racine. At their second interview (V, 2) she calmly issues an ultimatum: ‘ou régnez, ou partez’ (an echo of Pyrrhus’ ultimatum to Andromaque in III, 8: ‘il faut ou périr, ou régner’, and perhaps of Roxane’s final dismissal of Bajazet: ‘Sortez’). Equally calmly, Gélon explains his own reasoning:

Par la foi, par l’honneur mon cœur est arrêté;
Je ne puis être à vous sans blesser l’équité.

His lack of political ambition may seem implausible, but in refusing to break his promise to his fiancée he is upholding his own concept of justice and gloire. He embodies the ideal of the perfect lover, resembling Mademoiselle Pascal’s Sésostris and Madame Deshoulières’ Trasimond when he tells Néréé:

[... ] que m’importe à moi de la paix, de la guerre,
De ce peuple indocile, et de toute la terre?
Je ne voulais que vous. (IV, 3)

When he does in fact gain the throne at the end of the play, the people of Epirus have the king they want and he will marry the woman he loves. The tragedy lies in the impossibility of a future for Laodamie herself.

The play had a respectable initial run of twenty-three performances in 1689, but only three further performances in the following year, and it was not published until 1735. Mademoiselle Bernard took a keen interest in business at the box office and its effect on her literary reputation: Franco Piva reproduces a letter she wrote to La Grange, asking the
company to delay adding a ‘petite comédie’ to performances of her play: '[...] il seroit fascheux pour moy qu’une pièce qui a l’approbation publique ne fut guère plus joüée que celles qui ne l’ont point eûe’. Although the success of her novels had been noted in the *Mercure Galant*, no reference was made to *Laodamie* until the occasion of her second play in December 1690, when it was noted that ‘il y a deux ans qu’elle fit jouer une autre Piece appelée *Laodamie*, qui couta des larmes à tous les coeurs tendres’.

Catherine Bernard’s second play *Brutus* contains echoes of other plays by women writers, in particular Mademoiselle Desjardins’ *Manlius* but also Madame Deshoulières’ *Genséric*, as well as continuing some of the themes from her own *Laodamie*. It was first performed at the Comédie-Française on 18 December 1690; Franco Piva comments that the date chosen for the first performance implies that the play was considered the most important of the season. There were twenty-four further performances in the next two months, making it one of the most successful plays of the decade, and it was the first seventeenth-century play by a woman to remain in the repertoire after its initial run, with eighteen more performances during the next eight years. Although it was not revived after 1699 it was not forgotten: when Voltaire’s play of the same title appeared in 1730, an unfavourable review in the *Mercure Galant* declared that Catherine Bernard’s was the superior play and suggested that Voltaire was guilty of plagiarism. Subsequently the Abbé Trublet and Voltaire himself claimed that her play was almost entirely the work of Fontenelle. Lancaster sees no reason to doubt her authorship, and although Alain Niderst’s more recent research leads him to suppose that Fontenelle collaborated in writing both her plays, his findings have been decisively rejected by Franco Piva (see above).
Other playwrights had recently chosen subjects from Roman history: Campistron for his first two plays, *Virginie* (1683) and *Arminius* (1684), and Pradon for *Regulus* (1688), his most successful play. The two plays by Campistron both focus on outspoken daughters resisting unwelcome marriages, but Mademoiselle Bernard chose to examine the situation of an otherwise obedient son refusing his father's choice of a wife. Whereas the story of *Laodamie* was almost entirely invented, the story of Brutus and his rebellious sons was taken from Livy and Plutarch, and we shall see that the author had to defend herself against accusations that she made unwarranted alterations to recorded history. Charles Mazouer has pointed out that the episode had also featured in Madeleine de Scudéry's novel *Clélie.*

The play has a sharper political focus than *Laodamie*. The dramatic conflict is principally concentrated on two male characters, father and son, but the development of the plot is precipitated by the actions of two women. The setting is Rome after the establishment of the Consulate and Brutus, who led the uprising against Tarquin after the rape of Lucretia, is one of the first two Consuls, determined to maintain democratic government in the city and resist attempts by Tarquin to re-establish the monarchy. The first two scenes consist entirely of political discussions between the two Consuls and Octavius, envoy of Tarquin, and the key question is that of legitimacy: Octavius argues that Tarquin is still the legitimate ruler of Rome, but Brutus and Valérius point out that he has forfeited the support of the Senate and the Roman people. Brutus tells the envoy:

> Un Roy qui le premier regne contre la loy  
> D'un peuple vertueux sera le dernier Roy. (1, 2)

Octavius dismisses the wishes of the people as no more than the 'caprice' of 'ce peuple inconstant', but for Brutus, committed to the republican ideal, it is the only legitimate source of authority.

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In the matter of marriage, too, the collective interest must take precedence over individual preference. Brutus (like Genséric) has arranged political alliances for his two sons: the elder son Titus is to marry Valérius’ sister Valérie, while the younger, Tibérinus, will ensure the allegiance of Tarquin’s relative Aquilius (or so Brutus thinks) by marrying his daughter Aquili. Tibérinus is happy to accept his father’s choice, but Titus protests that he is already in love with someone else. Brutus angrily dismisses this objection as an irrelevance:

Surmonte la faiblessse où ton coeur s’abandonne,
Plus j’estime Titus, & moins je luy pardonne;
Je haterois l’hymen dans l’espoir d’étouffer
Des feux dont un Romain doit toujours triompher.
[...]
L’amour dans vos pareils ne fait point l’hymennée,
Je n’écouteray rien; ma parole est donnée. (I, 4)

Marriage is a practical and political matter (Camille in Manlius had said much the same thing); a Roman must obey orders and his own feelings must be subjugated to his civic duty.

In addition to this question of filial obedience, there is a broader element of generational conflict: we learn in Act II that Aquilius is in fact conspiring with Octavius to restore Tarquin to the throne, and that he has gathered the support of 500 young Romans, including Tibérinus. He explains their enthusiasm for the return of the monarchy:

De nos Maîtres nouveaux l’inflexible rudesse
A choqué les esprits d’une libre jeunesse,
Et tous avec les Rois veulent voir de retour
Les plaisirs, la licence, & l’éclat d’une Cour; (II, 1)

Perhaps we may see in this contrast a parallel with the former pleasures and later austerity of the Court of Louis XIV.

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Within the political intrigue, love is used as a bargaining tool. Brutus' elder son Titus has always taken his father's side, but his loyalty to his father and to Rome is weakened by his love for Aquilius' daughter Aquilie. The conspirators seize on this weakness and persuade Aquilie to win him over to their side; at first he resists, shocked by the suggestion: 'Voulez-vous que l'Amour dans le crime m'engage?' (III, 1), but on reflection wonders whether he is right to accept his father's judgment of the situation:

Et que sçay-je après tout si la raison demande
Que de servir Tarquin, un Romain se deffende? [...] 
Et je suis incertain du vray bien des Romains,
Dans le doute où je suis, decide, Amour, decide,
Mais qu'il est dangereux de te prendre pour guider (III, 2)

Faced with the prospect of losing Aquilie to his brother, and of his own unwanted marriage to Valérius' daughter, he allows passion to overrule reason and deserts to the enemy, but when the conspiracy is discovered he comes at once to make a full confession to his father and declare his readiness to die. Unlike Torquatus in a similar situation, Brutus suffers a real conflict of priorities, but his loyalty to Rome has to take precedence over his love for his sons, and both are condemned to death.

Once again Mademoiselle Bernard succeeds in creating characters who engage the sympathy of the audience. Brutus' actions are dictated solely by what he sees as the good of Rome; he has no selfish motive. He loves his sons, but in his long soliloquy in V, 4 (comparable to Titus' self-interrogation in Bérénice, IV, 4), he tells himself that he cannot pardon them without freeing all the other conspirators and undermining the rule of law:

Reprends donc d'un Consul toute la dignité; 
De la mort de tes fils voy la nécessité. 
[...]

Si je sauve mes fils, cent traîtres chaque jour
Vont naître autorisez par mon timide amour. 
Prononçons; il le faut, en vain je delibere. 
Où la loy doit parler, c'est au sang à se taire. (V, 4)
Titus, according to the author herself, 'a toute la vertu imaginable' (Preface) and his downfall is precipitated by a momentary and uncharacteristic loss of judgment, as he tells his father in IV, 6: ‘Ma raison un instant, Seigneur, s’est égarée,’ (though it has actually taken him all five scenes of Act III, and much anguished reflection, to make up his mind to join the conspiracy.) His love for Aquilie is described as ‘des circonstances qui ne lui laissoient pas l’usage libre de sa raison’, but ‘si-tost qu’il est revenu à luy-mesme, il doit avoir horreur du crime où il est tombé’. Accordingly he makes no attempt to justify himself: he has quickly repented of his treachery and accepts that he must pay the price. His desire to expiate his crime overrules all other considerations and in Mademoiselle Bernard’s view elevates him to a heroic status, although some critics of the play evidently deplored his willingness to die:

[...] il ne peut se réconcilier avec luy-mesme qu’en effaçant à ses propres yeux, comme à ceux des autres, par un aveu public de sa trahison, l’infamie de ce qu’il a fait. Ceux qui ont trouvé de l’indignité à venir demander de mourir sur un échafaut, n’ont sans doute pas songé que cette honte même est ce qui fait sa gloire, puisqu’il la subit volontairement, parce qu’il la [sic] meritée, & qu’il veut servir d’exemple à ceux qui oseroient faire le même crime. Voilà l’utilité de son action [...] (Preface, no page numbers).

Her explanation of the ‘utilité’ of her work recalls Corneille’s Discours on the subject, and his careful evaluations of his own plays, and Titus’ clear-sighted recognition of his guilt is worthy of a Cornelian hero.  

Although the love of two brothers for the same woman recalls the love of two sisters for the same man in Laodamie, in this case there is no love lost between Titus and Tibérinus and no magnanimity: each brother wishes to prevent the other from possessing Aquilie. It is the prospect of her imminent marriage to Tibérinus which finally decides Titus to abandon his principles, to betray his father and his country (III, 3). The younger
brother is presented as entirely selfish, arrogant and spiteful, telling Aquilie that she must belong to him, regardless of his brother’s feelings:

Mais je sçaurai du moins les moyens d’empécher
Qu’on jouysse d’un bien qu’on pretend m’arracher.
[...]
S’il garde votre coeur quand j’aurai votre foy,
Il est en vous perdant plus malheureux que moy.

or of her own unhappiness:

Je vous suis odieux; il faut que votre peine
Soit d’épouser l’objet de votre injuste haine. (II, 6)

When the conspiracy is discovered, he tries to excuse himself and appeal to his father’s natural affection, but only succeeds in invoking Brutus’ contempt:

Lâche, tu crains la mort, & n’as pas craint le crime.
[...]
C’est en vain que pour toi parleroit la Nature,
Tu sçauois dans mon ame étoufer son murmure.
Je ne te connois plus, oste-toy de ces lieux,
Par ta vile frayeur n’offense plus mes yeux. (IV, 5)

The quotation from *Horace* is a reminder that for Brutus too, the collective good of Rome must always take precedence over family feeling. By contrast, he tells the repentant Titus:

Je te vois criminel; cependant je t’admire. [...]
Tu redeviens mon fils lorsque tu veux perir. (IV, 6)

Despite Titus’ lapse of judgment, father and son share the same values. In their devotion to Rome, there is some similarity with the single-minded commitment to Christianity which separates Marc and Marcellin from their families in *Les Jumeaux martyrs*.

As is usually the case, the two female characters are dependent on decisions made by men, and when they do take action the consequences are disastrous. The situation of Aquilie, in love with one brother and dreading marriage to the other, resembles that of the young Eudoxe in *Genséríc*. She promises obedience to her father but begs him not to
marry her to Tibérinus against her will (II, 2). When he realizes that she is in love with Titus, Aquilius forces her to try to enlist her lover’s help by issuing an ultimatum:

Engagez vôtre amant à servir vôtre Pere.
Si Titus n’est à vous, vous serez à son Frere. (II, 2)

Knowing Titus’ devotion to ‘son Pere, la Patrie, son devoir’, Aquilie hesitates to suggest that he conspire against his father, but eventually decides to speak, since she would rather die than marry his brother: ‘Parlons. Mourons plutôt des refus de Titus’ (II, 7). And she does indeed die at the end of the play by her own hand, having provoked his treachery and failed in her plea for clemency on his behalf to the Senate; in obeying her father she has destroyed the man she loves. The attempt to control her own destiny has proved futile.

Valérie’s direct action is equally damaging to her personal hopes, though beneficial for Rome, since it is she who unwittingly precipitates the discovery of Aquilius’ conspiracy. Devoted to Titus and engaged to be married to him at the start of the play, she is powerless to make him love her and tormented by jealousy of her rival. (The two women do not meet in the course of the play.) Like Racine’s Hermione, she veers between hope and despair, angry at the sense of her own humiliation:

Moy je l’épouserois, lorsqu’il sent d’autres feux!
Non, non, […]

but then allowing herself to hope for a change of heart:

Et que sçay-je, Plautine? il m’aimera peut-être;
Ma tendresse à la fin se fera reconnoître.
[...] 
Dans mes soins amoureux il lira son devoir. (I, 6)

In order to end her uncertainty, she asks her slave Vindicius to find out Aquilius’ intentions regarding the marriage of his daughter (I, 6), and in the course of his enquiries
Vindicius uncovers the conspiracy. At the beginning of Act IV (scene 1) he has reported back to her and she is gloating over the news:

Desormais tout separe Aquilie & Titus,
La fille d'un coupable, & le fils de Brutus.
De son indigne choix il rougira lui-même,
Pour en laver la honte, il faut enfin qu'il m'aime.

She feels no sympathy for Aquilie and even her confidante is surprised by her schadenfreude:

Jouïssons pleinement d'une juste vengeance.
Quoique souffre Aquilie, & dût-elle en mourir,
Hélas! j'ai plus souffert qu'elle ne peut souffrir,
(another echo of Andromaque and Pyrrhus' 'Brûlé de plus de feux...' in I, 4). Her triumph is short-lived; having informed Brutus of Aquilius' treachery, she is soon pleading with him to spare his son's life. This earns her a rebuke from Titus himself:

Quelle indigne pitié peut vous avoir saisie? [...] Je sçay ce qui m'est dû, Madame, & c'est en vain
Qu'on ose demander la grace d'un Romain. (IV, 6)

She clings to the hope that Roman patriotism can be reconciled with family feeling—'On peut estre Consul sans cesser d'estre pere'—but for Brutus and Titus there is no room for 'feminine' compromise in their rigorous devotion to a single cause.

Both women share the men's 'vertu romaine' to the extent of coming to see death as the only option. Valérie pours out her remorse when she realizes that her passion has indirectly brought about the downfall of the man she loves:

Par moy ce que j'adore est tout prest d'expirer.
Je prepare le fer qui doit trancher sa vie,
J'excite ses Boureaux, detestable furie,
Malheureuse, voila comme je sçais aimer. (IV, 7)

and begs Titus to take her life too:

Vange-toy du forfait d'une Amante odieuse.
Et me donnant la mort que j'ay sçu meriter,
Préviens le coup fatal que je t'allois Porter. (IV, 7)

When he tries to comfort her: 'Ne vous repentez point, par vous Rome est sauveé', she dismisses the fate of her country: 'Et je t'auray perdu pour l'avoir conservée?' The exchange reveals the extent of the difference in their priorities. Aquillie has also spoken in defence of Titus, but she retains her pride in her Roman status. She declares her readiness to die in his place:

[...] estre Romaine est mon seul avantage.
A ce nom glorieux si j'ay mal satisfait,
Il me rend digne au moins d'expier mon forfait. (IV, 8)

which she does by committing suicide after his death.

So the moral of the play seems clear: Titus' disobedience to his father and capitulation to his passion must be punished, reason must rule over love. But the cost is also made clear: Brutus loses not only his sons but his faith in his own priorities. Having pronounced the death sentence, he declares:

Je vais loin de ces murs pleins de mon infortune;
Je vais quitter le soin de la cause commune. (V, 6)

and in the following scene of farewell to Titus, he tells his son:

Je t'ay dû condamner; je ne m'en repens pas,
Mais je sens que ma mort va suivre ton trepas.

It is ironically Titus himself who urges his father to remain true to Rome:

Adoptez la Patrie au lieu de vos deux fils. (V, 7)

The claims of fatherhood and citizenship are incompatible, so one can only replace the other. If Brutus has a fault, it lies in his failure to recognize the power of human love and his assumption that each of his sons will accept his choice of a wife. So the play demonstrates both the danger of passion and the danger of ignoring its destructive potential for undermining human reason; it is a theme explored by Corneille in Sertorius.
Put in extreme terms, the freedom of human beings to fall in love is the freedom to destroy themselves. Valérian exclaims at the end of the play:

O tyrannique amour! O funeste journée!
A quel prix, liberté, nous estes-vous donnée? (V, 10)

There is a bitter realism in his recognition that political freedom is bought at the cost of subjugating individual feeling.

In choosing to write political drama, these two women playwrights showed themselves well able to write, as it were, against the grain of traditional 'feminine' values, and in all three plays there is a clear sense of the limits of female autonomy. Unlike some of the heroines discussed in earlier chapters, the female characters in these plays do not challenge the status quo of masculine authority, even when they attempt to subvert political structures, and there are no direct allusions to particular difficulties faced by women in general. But these women writers had come a long way from the pleasant fantasies of the Carte de Tendre: sexual love is shown as a source of unhappiness and a fatal distraction from political duty, and it is masculine values which in the end prevail.

In his enthusiastic review of the play in the Mercure Galant (December 1690), Donneau de Visé applauded the ability of a woman writer to dramatize Roman heroism:

Les Dames aujourd'hui sont capables de tout, et si la délicatesse de leur esprit leur fait produire sans peine des Ouvrages tendres et galans, Mademoiselle Bernard vient de faire voir qu'elles savent pousser avec force les sentiments héroïques, et soutenir noblement le caractère Romain. C'est elle qui a fait la tragédie de Brutus, dont les représentations attirent de si grandes Assemblées.73

Nina Ekstein has argued that there is in fact a female voice in the play and that the two female characters, in their total commitment to love, present 'an assault on male values', but her case is weakened by their readiness to die at the end of the play, accepting their own culpability within the framework of existing patriarchal authority. She also suggests that Aquilie and Valérie claim responsibility for Titus' betrayal and condemnation in order
to 'insist on their own role and their own centrality', but one could equally argue that they fall victim to the tendency of women to take the blame for events which are not entirely under their control. There is certainly, as she says, an implied questioning of Roman values, articulated above all in the choice Brutus must make between political duty and paternal feeling, but his final allegiance is to Rome. The terms in which the author herself discusses the action of the play, referring to Titus' 'crime', 'trahison', 'infamie', and her remarks elsewhere on the dangers of passion, leave little doubt of her sympathy with his decision.

Catherine Bernard's long and detailed Preface to Brutus shows that she had made a thorough study both of her source material and of the tragic genre. Her depiction of Brutus' inner conflict is justified, she says, by Livy's account of his 'douleur profonde' at the loss of his sons, although Plutarch described him as 'un homme barbare'. Charles Mazouer points out (p. 55) that this aspect of the Consul's character had already been shown in Mademoiselle de Scudéry's novel. Mademoiselle Bernard understood the dramatic necessity of showing his hesitation: 'l'action de Brutus n'est point une action de vertu, si l'on peut soupçonner qu'il y entre de la férocié naturelle, il faut pour être heroique qu'elle coûte infiniment' and like Corneille, she defends the freedom of the playwright within certain limits: 'c'est ce me semble la pratique commune du Théâtre, que pourvu que l'on conserve l'essentiel des actions on est assez maître des motifs & des autres circonstances'. After asserting the 'utilité' of the story she does imply some reservations about the system of values she has depicted in action by commenting that 'on sait jusqu'à quel excès alloit l'amour de la patrie chez les Romains' (Preface, no page numbers). However, unlike Mademoiselle Desjardins and the story of Manlius Torquatus, she did not choose to invent a different ending for her play.

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The question of patriotism was also in her mind when she composed her request to the King for payment of her pension. This rather impertinent poem was published in 1693 and voices the perennial complaint of artists that the relatively tiny sums required for their survival are not forthcoming, while vast amounts of money are poured into military enterprises for the sake of national prestige:

SIRE, deux cens ecus sont-ils si nécessaires
Au bonheur de l'Etat, au bien de vos affaires,
Que sans ma pension vous ne puissiez dompter
A vos armes, grand Roi, s'ils peuvent resister;
Si pour vaincre l'effort de leur injuste rage
Il falloit ces deux cens ecus
Je ne les demanderois plus.
Ne pouvant aux combats pour vous perdre la vie,
Je voudrois me creuser un illustre tombeau:
Et souffrant une mort d'un genre tout nouveau,
Mourir de faim pour la patrie. [...]75

It seems she was hardly exaggerating the extent of her poverty. Madame de Coulanges mentioned it in a letter to Madame de Sévigné in November 1694: 'malgré toute cette poésie, la pauvre fille n'a pas de jupe',76 and as we have seen, she was forced to give up writing for the theatre in order to obtain a regular income. And her unpaid pension is perhaps an indication of the decline in Louis XIV's interest in the theatre by this time. But even if her literary career was not financially rewarding, the success of her second play brought Catherine Bernard considerable acclaim. From the modest success of her early predecessors in the provinces, she had achieved distinction as a woman playwright at the centre of theatrical life in the capital.

In these three chapters we have seen that women's writing for the stage tended to create heroines rather than heroes, and while appreciating the dramatic effectiveness of Racinian heroines, all these writers seem concerned to show that women are capable of
the heroic qualities associated with the drama of Corneille. In many of the plays discussed, the dramatic focus highlights the moral superiority of female characters, showing them to be capable of intelligent reasoning and clear-sighted decision-making, while men are shown as weak or indecisive. (Béatrice Didier has commented on ‘l’effacement de l’homme dans les oeuvres féminines’ in which the male protagonist is often ‘dénudé de force et d’individualité’. 77) In nearly half of the plays discussed, six of the eight tragedies, the dramatic dialogue begins from a woman’s point of view, with a woman speaking first in the opening scene; this is also the case in nearly half of Corneille’s plays, though rare in plays by Molière and Racine. But at the same time women dramatists realistically depict women’s unavoidable dependence on men, and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of finding emotional happiness while retaining their independence.

Although it was no longer such a popular Court entertainment, the theatre was still coming under attack from religious sources. Bossuet’s Maximes et Réflexions sur la Comédie appeared in 1694, prompted by the publication of Thomas Caffaro’s modest defence of theatre in a collection of Boursault’s plays. We have already observed the anti-feminist bias evident in this as in other attacks on theatre, and the principal reason for condemning plays is that they focus on human passions and arouse unchristian feelings in the audience. It seems ironic that the last three plays of the century written by women also carry a warning of the dangers of those same passions. But whereas some theologians condemned secular love out of hand as an affliction and a distraction from devotion to God, playwrights created dramatic situations in which they could examine the tensions and conflicts arising from the most basic human feelings, and the part these play in shaping individuals and human society. In place of denunciation they offered
discussion, raising issues for debate by their audiences. And perhaps it was this questioning and exploring of ideas, undermining concepts of absolute authority and unchanging truths, which was the true reason for religious mistrust of the theatre.

5. Introduction to *Théâtre du XVIIe siècle*, III, p. XXVI.
8. See Jan Clarke, "The expulsion of the Italians from the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1697", p. 104.
19. Lancaster, Part 4, I, p. 188.
22. Wendy Perkins, "Madame Deshoulières: one of the "derniers libertins"?".

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23. Perry Gethner, 'Melpomene Meets Women Playwrights in the Age of Louis XIV'.

24. For biographical details see Lancaster, Part 4, I, p. 186, and Adam, III, pp. 175-78.


27. DeJean, p. 33.


30. M.E. Storer, 'French Women Members of the Ricovrati of Padua'.


33. Gethner, Femmes dramaturges, pp. 184, 259.

34. Niderst, Fontenelle, p. 33.


41. La Poésie Française, pp. 58-62.

42. Boileau, Oeuvres complètes, p. 18.

43. 'Le Ruisseau', quoted by Spink, p. 156.


45. Louis Racine, Mémoires sur la vie de Jean Racine in Racine, Oeuvres complètes (Seuil), p. 33.

46. Adam, III, p. 176.

47. See Lancaster, Part 4, I, pp. 186-188.

48. See A.H.T. Levi, "The Significance of the "Astrée"."

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53. Cf Hermione: ‘Ah, je l'ai trop aimé, pour ne le point haïr!’ (Andromaque, II, 1); ‘Ah, ne puis-je savoir si j'aime ou si je hais?’ (V, 1).

54. Cf Hermione: ‘Hé quoi! c’est donc moi qui l'ordonne? Sa mort sera l'effet de l'amour d'Hermione?’ (Andromaque, V, 1)


60. Catherine Bernard, Oeuvres, I, p. 177.

61. Gethner, Femmes dramaturges, p. 185.


64. Femmes dramaturges, p. 187.


68. See Gethner, Femmes dramaturges, p. 184; Oeuvres, I, p. 25, note 34. Nina Ekstein notes that Voltaire considered women to be incapable of writing tragedy ('A Woman's Tragedy: Catherine Bernard's Brutus', p. 127).


71. Rodrigue: 'Le trépas que je cherche est ma plus douce peine' (Le Cid, III, 6); Horace: 'La mort seule aujourd'hui peut conserver ma gloire' (Horace, V, 2).

72. Cf Hermione: 'Mais si l'ingrat rentrait dans son devoir; [...] Si sous mes lois, Amour, tu pouvais l'engager;' (Andromaque II, 1).

73. Quoted in Bernard, Oeuvres, I, p. 38.

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76. Oeuvres, I, p. 41.

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By the end of the seventeenth century the theatre was established as part of French cultural life, and despite the efforts of some religious moralists to keep them off the stage and out of the auditorium, women were playing an active role in theatrical life as actresses, playwrights, members of the audience, and patrons. The theatre had expanded their social and intellectual horizons and in reciprocation the support of female audiences had helped to increase the commercial success of the theatre, while influential women had given vital support to particular playwrights.

Despite Jean Dubu's assertion (quoted in the Introduction), it is doubtful whether criticism of drama actually had an adverse effect, since the popularity of the theatre grew steadily throughout the century. In 1639, when Rivet's *Instruction chrétienne* appeared, *Le Cid* had already taken Paris by storm and brought new audiences into the theatre. By the time the most virulent attacks were being published in the 1660s, Molière's plays were filling the Palais-Royal and the theatre was an important part of Court life, though royal support later declined. The tension between Church and theatre seems in fact to have provided a spur to creativity, with playwrights consciously pushing out the boundaries of what was acceptable on stage.¹

Some of the most commercially successful plays were also the most strongly criticized by religious moralists—*Le Cid, L'Ecole des femmes, Tartuffe*, all of which raised questions about the conduct of women—and this dichotomy is an indication of the growing split between religious and public opinion which would become increasingly apparent during the course of the next century, although Laurent Thirouin has pointed out
that Rousseau's secular arguments against the theatre were closely related to the views of Nicole and Bossuet. The very characters and types of female conduct which provoked criticism were evidently of particular interest to audiences—including women who were themselves challenging the most conservative notions of their role in society by going out in search of entertainment and intellectual stimulation.

Throughout this study of women's involvement in seventeenth-century French theatre, the name of one man recurs: Pierre Corneille. From the start of his long career he demonstrated his interest in exploring the dramatic potential in questions of a woman's role and status; in his early comedies, in his first tragedy, Médée, and in Le Cid. We saw in Chapter Three that the controversy over this play focused attention on the conduct traditionally expected of women and stimulated the continuing debate about female emancipation, as well as leading Corneille to a careful study of dramatic theory, which he then used to defend drama against its critics. He read his plays in the salons, relied upon the patronage of influential women, especially Anne of Austria, and attracted female audiences. It was his plays which provided the dominant model for the work of all the women playwrights discussed: Polyeucte inspired the first plays by women to be published in France, and Marthe Cosnard benefited from his personal support. And in many of his plays he extended the concept of the masculine hero to that of the heroic couple, creating a place for a woman at the hero's side. His plays present complex dilemmas with no clear solutions, characters caught between the irreconcilable demands of personal and political loyalties, and they encourage audiences to think about the situation of human beings in society, about their own values and their own beliefs.

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This questioning intensified in the eighteenth century, and the salon movement begun in the seventeenth century, and still organized by women, became increasingly politicized and subversive, providing a base for the *philosophes* who were prepared to question every aspect of contemporary society. One theme taken up in the Enlightenment was the association of religion with women's sexual repression, first proposed by Molière in *L'Ecole des femmes* and *Tartuffe*. Both these plays are frequently revived in France and abroad; both have recently been seen in London, and there have also been recent London stage productions of Diderot's *La Religieuse* and of Hindemith's opera *Sancta Susanna*, based on the play by August Stramm, highlighting the same conflict between Christianity and women's sexuality. As well as attacking hypocrisy and constraint, Molière's plays also challenged audiences to reconsider the position of women in society, consistently presenting arguments for their greater freedom, especially in the matter of choosing a husband, and celebrating the value of human pleasures and harmonious family relationships. For Jansenists, life on earth was to be endured; for Molière, it was to be enjoyed, and love and laughter were essential ingredients.

Although Racine's plays focus closely on female characters, the women he portrays are often women without the capacity to make their own decisions or the inclination to challenge masculine authority; at the mercy of their passions, manipulated by men or by the gods. Phèdre provides a vision of womankind to gratify the most bigoted misogynist—tainted by sin, punished by the gods, guilty and irredeemable. Since criticism of the theatre and of women by religious moralists focused on what they perceived as the need to keep women's sexuality under control, it seems paradoxical that the greatest period of French classical drama should culminate in a play showing a woman

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vainly trying to keep control of her own sexual feelings and destroying herself in the process, but written within the formal constraints which evolved out of the impulse to contain such passions.

Dramatists have continued to explore questions about women's roles—for example Ibsen, Shaw, Tennessee Williams, modern successors to the French classics—and have often aroused controversy in doing so (Hedda Gabler, Mrs Warren, Blanche Dubois). At the start of the twenty-first century there are probably as many women playwrights as men, though none has yet achieved the international status of any of these. And whereas the women writers of the seventeenth century were careful to observe the dramatic rules, modern authors, and feminist criticism, have challenged traditional 'masculine' models of story-telling and structure, so the concept of what makes 'a play' is constantly evolving.

Bossuet's diatribe against drama of 1694 was the culmination of religious attacks on the theatre during the century, and although he was supported by other writers (Lelevel, Pégurier, Le Brun, Coustel) and by the 'Décision faite en Sorbonne touchant la comédie' which confirmed strict diocesan rituals, his arguments seem to have had little influence on theatrical practice. Only a year later the Abbé Boyer could write in his Preface to Judith a defence of religious plays as a means for actors to 'confondre ceux qui s'obstinent sans cesse à décrier leur profession'. And Bossuet's categorical denunciation of the theatre in print did not prevent him from continuing to attend private performances—even of plays by Molière, whose work he had specifically condemned. Did he laugh at Tartuffe in private?

The Catholic Church eventually made reparation to the memory of Molière by honouring him with a Requiem Mass at Saint-Roch in 1922, on the 300th anniversary of
his birth. And yet during Lent of the same year Père Janvier preached a sermon in Notre-Dame on ‘la modestie chrétienne et l’amour des spectacles’, describing theatres in the following terms:

on y fait constamment, soit d’une façon indirecte, l’apologie de l’amour coupable, des passions sensuelles, sinon de la débauche, et de l’impiété, parce qu’on y décrit la tentation avec des attraits irrésistibles, le mal sous des couleurs séduisantes [...] Ajoutez encore à cela tout l’appareil théâtral, [...] l’ivresse produite par la profusion des lumières, par les notes vibrantes d’une musique affolée, par le bruit des applaudissements frénétiques et vous serez contraints d’avouer qu’en ces lieux de réjouissances on respire, la plupart du temps, un air empoisonné.6

We might be hearing Bossuet’s voice from the grave. Thirty years later the Archbishop of Paris could still refuse a Christian burial to a woman writer and stage performer who had defied convention both in her private life and in her writing, but Colette was the first woman in republican France to be accorded a state funeral.7

Within the Christian churches today, attitudes towards sexuality are still ambivalent and the issue of a woman’s role is still a contentious topic. In view of the continuing arguments about birth control, the ordination of women and the question of celibacy for the Catholic priesthood, even the inclusion of girls as well as boys in cathedral choirs, the tensions between traditional Christian doctrine and women’s sexuality seem likely to continue.

1. See Nicholas Hammond, Creative Tensions, Chapter 3.
2. Laurent Thirouin, L’Aveuglement salutaire, pp. 258-61.

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