

FRANÇOISE PASCAL, MARIE-CATHERINE  
DESJARDINS, ANTOINETTE DESHOULIÈRES,  
AND CATHERINE DURAND

Challenges to Traditional Authority:  
Plays by French Women Authors,  
1650–1700



*Edited and translated by*  
PERRY GETHNER

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Tel: 416/978-7074 Email: iter@utoronto.ca

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Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Tel: 480/965-5900 Email: mrts@acmrs.org

Fax: 480/965-1681 Web: acmrs.org

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## Introduction

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### *The Other Voice*

It will no doubt come as a surprise to many that women writers existed in France long before our own day, that they cultivated nearly all the known genres, that in some cases they were highly regarded, that in certain respects they were innovators, and that many of their works can still be read with pleasure today. Until quite recently, only a handful of literary scholars knew that French women authors in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries were active in such fields as drama, narrative and philosophical poetry, and all branches of fiction and non-fiction. While critics have recognized that some women composed best-selling novels, only one of them, Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, has traditionally been considered worth reading. Indeed, scholars increasingly are coming to realize that many literary historians of the last two centuries made what seems like a concerted effort to devalue women writers and ignore their works.<sup>1</sup>

For numerous reasons the works of French women playwrights deserve to be rediscovered. Drama was considered the most prestigious branch of literature during the early modern period, and the fact that some women cultivated dramatic art indicates that they viewed themselves as fully integrated into the cultural life of France. The range of their accomplishments is particularly impressive: women wrote in every dramatic form popular in that era, and in some cases they helped to initiate new genres or subgenres. Most of all, many of these authors brought a distinctively female perspective to the subjects they treated. For example, they stood up for the rights and dignity of women, condemned male tyranny and corruption, denounced social injustices, and imagined new possibilities for social and political organization.

Only in the last few decades has a serious attempt been made to reedit works by these unjustly neglected writers. Even less effort has been given to making these works available in English. The current volume, which constitutes a supplement to my earlier English-language anthology,<sup>2</sup> should help to remedy this situation and allow scholars to place French women playwrights in dialogue with

1. See Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Faith E. Beasley, *Salons, History, and the Creation of 17th-Century France: Mastering Memory* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006).

2. Perry Gethner, trans., *The Lunatic Lover and Other Plays by French Women of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994) comprises six works by Françoise Pascal and Mme de Villedieu (both represented in the current volume by other plays), Anne de La Roche-Guilhen, Catherine Bernard, Marie-Anne Barbier, and Françoise de Graffigny.

their male counterparts in France, their female counterparts in other European countries, and the general culture that they helped to enrich.

The reception accorded to the French-language editions I have published of works by women playwrights attests to considerable enthusiasm for this corpus. Plays by women have been successfully used in the classroom for a variety of purposes: intellectual history (representing what women in the early modern period thought about their society and culture), literary history (how the contributions of women dramatists interface with, or contrast with, those of their male colleagues, especially in cases where a male author and a female author treat the same or similar themes), or women's studies (how the plays interface with the writings of women in other genres and/or in other countries).<sup>3</sup> Some of these plays, especially the short comedies, can easily be staged in student productions. But, most of all, the best of these plays, including the works included in the current collection, are thought provoking and enjoyable to read.

### *Historical Context*

The contributions of French women to drama have long been neglected, even though the overwhelming majority of their works were published and a large number were performed, sometimes with considerable success. There are a few isolated cases of women who wrote plays in the sixteenth century, but they never constituted a tradition and their work received little attention.<sup>4</sup> This is hardly surprising, given that the sixteenth century in France was a chaotic time, dominated by religious strife and both foreign and civil wars—developments that interfered with the evolution of professional theatrical companies and with the creation of a distinctive tradition. At the same time, the humanist movement promoted a new interest in the drama of classical antiquity while disparaging the forms of medieval drama that audiences continued to enjoy. All four of the known female playwrights of that century dabbled in drama only intermittently, preferring to cultivate poetry or prose, and none of them seems to have had any ties with professional performers. Two were aristocrats (Queen Marguerite de Navarre, better known as a religious poet and author of one of the finest novella collections of the

3. On the possibilities for classroom use, see Perry Gethner, "Women and the Theatrical Tradition," in *Teaching Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century French Women Writers*, ed. Faith E. Beasley (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2011), 84–91.

4. For a more in-depth historical account, see the general introductions to the individual volumes of the anthology *Théâtre de femmes de l'Ancien Régime*, ed. Aurore Evain, Perry Gethner, and Henriette Goldwyn, 3 vols. to date of 5 projected (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2006–11); and English Showalter, Jr., "Writing off the Stage: Women Authors and Eighteenth-Century Theater," *Yale French Studies* 75 (1988): 95–111. See also the website accompanying the anthology above: Aurore Evain, *Théâtre de femmes de l'Ancien Régime*. <http://www.theatredefemmes-ancien-regime.org>.

Renaissance, and Catherine de Parthenay, a duchess and religious poet), while the others were active in private literary gatherings (Louise Labé in Lyon, who specialized in love poems, and Catherine Des Roches in Poitiers, a poet of feminist leanings who hosted a salon with her mother). Their purpose in composing plays was to provide entertainment for their friends or members of their entourage, in addition to allowing for self-expression. Apart from one of Parthenay's biblical tragedies, staged by the Protestant community at La Rochelle around 1574 (presumably as an act of solidarity or defiance in the wake of a notorious massacre of Huguenots), none of their plays was intended for public performance. Nonetheless, all these authors except Parthenay had their dramatic works published, and it is possible that some were posthumously staged.

These texts hardly seem feminist today, but in some cases the choice of themes and the treatment of the female characters are suggestive. For example, Marguerite satirizes what she considers improper religious attitudes and practices, often using young women as models of genuine devotion, and she presents the Virgin Mary as a model of intellectual distinction as well as maternal tenderness. Labé uses the allegorical figures of Cupid and Folly to rehabilitate the irrational aspect of amorous passion, which she allows women, as well as men, to express openly. Parthenay's lost tragedy, judging from the title, exalted the biblical heroine Judith, who slew the enemy of her people and ended the siege of her city. Some of Des Roches's philosophical dialogues, which seem to have been conceived as playlets, feature discussions about the desirability of educating girls and cultivating their talents.

Only at the midpoint of the seventeenth century do we find women playwrights in significant numbers and who managed to win both popular and critical recognition. Curiously, only a single play by a woman is known to have been written during the first half of the century, and that work, *Cinnatus et Camma* by Dorothee de Croy (surviving in a manuscript dated 1637), a curious hybrid of medieval and Renaissance traditions, was never published or performed. But around 1650 women playwrights came to prominence; all of them published their works, and many of their plays were publicly staged. There are many reasons why the change happened at precisely that time. Perhaps the most crucial is that the drama acquired a new respectability during the second quarter of the century, owing to the strong support of the prime minister, Cardinal Richelieu. The government increasingly gave encouragement to gifted young playwrights, sponsored some of the professional companies that came to be based in Paris, and made the goal of perfecting the drama one of the tasks of the newly formed French Academy, whose original purpose was to standardize and regularize the French language. As plays became more refined in both style and subject matter, and as both aristocrats and well-educated members of the middle class came to look upon the playhouse as a privileged form of serious entertainment, more people attended

performances, read plays in print, and discussed them at social gatherings. Meanwhile, new and improved playhouses were constructed, and starting in the 1640s new types of stage machines were introduced, allowing for elaborate special effects. The appearance of an unusually gifted group of playwrights, eager to please noble patrons and sophisticated audiences while displaying their worthiness of official recognition as authors (at a time when the modern notion of author was coming into its own) likewise contributed to the new enthusiasm for drama as the most valued branch of French literary activity.<sup>5</sup>

The high level of excellence achieved by French playwrights, which would continue throughout the second half of the century, led to the widespread belief that the French had developed a national dramatic tradition equaling that of the Greeks and Romans. One no longer needed a solid background in the literature and languages of classical antiquity to feel capable of attempting a tragedy or comedy; it sufficed to be acquainted with the dramatic masterpieces and theoretical treatises written in French. Indeed, many of the works authored by women were intended to be read in dialogue with recognized masterpieces by male playwrights. Since the critical debates were widely publicized and since it was claimed that many of the basic dramaturgical principles were derived from eternal and universal reason, aspiring playwrights could start off having a basic familiarity with their craft.<sup>6</sup> Following consecrated models was an especially useful strategy for women playwrights, because it allowed them to know in advance what sorts of things the public would accept or reject. However, it also meant that subversive elements had to be carefully camouflaged so as not to offend the audience. (How this was done will be discussed in the introductions to the individual plays.)

Another factor contributing to the rise of French drama was the prominence of the salons. Informal literary gatherings had met in the private homes of aristocrats or wealthy bourgeois since the sixteenth century, but during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these became more numerous and prestigious, attracted a greater percentage of the leading intellectual figures, and more openly encouraged the participation of women in all aspects of literary activity. Women could participate in the increasingly public debates over dramatic theory and over the worth of individual plays. They could provide active support for authors they liked or join in attacks against authors whom they opposed, as happened when Antoinette Deshoulières composed a satirical poem as part of a cabal against Racine's *Phèdre*. In some cases, friends from the salon actively encouraged

5. See Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1985).

6. The standard treatments of what is commonly referred to as French classical theory are René Bray, *La Formation de la doctrine classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1927; repr. 1968); and Jacques Scherer, *La Dramaturgie classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1950). Among the recent studies in English, arguably the most thoughtful is John D. Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder: The Theory of Tragedy in Classical France* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999).

the efforts of an aspiring woman writer; this sometimes took the form of finding a male mentor willing to pass on some of his own experience.<sup>7</sup> Villedieu was mentored by the abbé François Hédelin d'Aubignac, unsuccessful as a playwright but highly influential as a writer of dramatic theory, while, in the final years of the century, Marie-Anne Barbier would be mentored by the respected playwright Edme Boursault, himself a protégé of the great Pierre Corneille. During a period when women were not allowed into the universities, and indeed when debates raged over whether girls should receive any form of education, the salons functioned as the equivalent of educational institutions, exposing women of serious intellectual interests to significant books and authors and encouraging them to voice their own opinions on everything.

As many contemporaries noted (some of them approvingly, but by no means all), cultivated women played an important role in shaping French literary taste, both in terms of subject matter and style. At least partially in deference to an increasingly refined and supportive female audience, the language in tragedy and in the more serious types of comedy was largely purged of vulgarity and colloquialism, while erotic or misogynistic remarks and gestures came to be frowned upon. Women helped to impose a preference for a simple and clear style that was also harmonious and moving, free of pedantry and esoteric classical allusions. Male characters in drama and fiction were expected to behave with unfailing politeness to women, and virtuous male protagonists had to speak of love in respectful and flowery language, as well as adhering to a code of conduct based on the values of chivalric novels. Indeed, the central role of love in French tragedies, which by the middle of the seventeenth century had become a nearly obligatory component, was often attributed by contemporaries to the demands of the female element of the public.<sup>8</sup> Love was, however, far from a useless ornament in the plots, since the hero's selfless devotion to his lady entails an obligation to perform valiant deeds in order to prove himself worthy, while in numerous plays the hero's internal conflict is caused by a clash between the demands of his heart and those imposed by other forces, such as family, nation, or religion.

7. There has been a major renewal of interest in the salons in recent decades. In addition to the volumes by Joan DeJean and Faith Beasley cited above, see Carolyn C. Lougee, *Le Paradis des femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Myriam Dufour-Maitre, *Les Précieuses: Naissance des femmes de lettres en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2008); Delphine Denis, *Le Parnasse galant: Institution d'une catégorie littéraire au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2001); Anne Duggan, *Salonnières, Furies, and Fairies: The Politics of Gender and Cultural Change in Absolutist France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005). The best overall study of how women in France became integrated into its intellectual life is Linda Timmermans, *L'Accès des femmes à la culture sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Champion, 2005).

8. See, for example, Carine Barbaferi, *Atrée et Céladon: La galanterie dans le théâtre tragique de la France classique (1634–1702)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

Of course, it would be a huge exaggeration to suggest, as did some literary theorists of the era, that the female portion of the literary public devised and imposed new rules on an unwilling male literary establishment. The “feminine influence” was in fact part of a shift in taste that emanated primarily from the salons and incorporated ideas and values that were likewise shared by a sizable percentage of male intellectuals. That shift, linked to a broader social phenomenon that is now generally known as *galanterie*, impacted all the arts, as well as real life.<sup>9</sup> As a code of conduct, it came to be embraced primarily by the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie as a means of displaying personal refinement and of belonging to an elite. This aspect of the code covered such external markers of status as extreme attention to dress, comportment, and rituals of polite interaction. Sociability, especially at the salons, required a variety of skills: speaking clearly, correctly, and persuasively; possessing a broad general knowledge without sounding pompous or erudite; being an attentive listener; displaying wit and a general good sense of humor; having good taste in evaluating artistic productions; showing respect to people of merit, regardless of rank; and, most relevant here, showing deference to the ladies present. Plays and novels written by or for habitués of the salons tended to reflect these qualities in the language and conduct of the characters.

As an ethical category, *galanterie* was linked to the code of *honnêteté*—a term that meant at the time something closer to “good breeding” or “refinement of conduct,” as well as adherence to moral standards. Curiously, *galanterie* was not exclusively linked to ethical standards; indeed, in later generations, it would increasingly denote sexual license. It is also true that *honnêteté* could become self-serving and function as a marker for aristocratic snobbery. But as used in literary works during the second half of the seventeenth century, both terms typically functioned as ideals designed to inspire admiration and emulation. As a moral standard, *honnêteté* was founded on secular principles, rather than religious, and it manifested itself essentially through a refined instinct or sensitivity for the well-being of others, combined with a sense of personal honor that required one to conform to the standards set by society for one’s rank and position, even if that necessitated sacrificing one’s life or happiness for the welfare of others. Once again, this code of conduct would come to be expected for the virtuous protagonists in literary works.

However, whereas *honnêteté* was primarily an ethical and social ideal, *galanterie* also had a crucial aesthetic component. For salon society, the most important goal of literary works was to provide pleasure, and this pleasure was to derive from such characteristics as diversity, wit, elegance and refinement of language, and a strong emphasis on decorum. One of the consequences was the encouragement of generic hybridity, in other words, works with heterogeneous

9. The best overall treatment of *galanterie* in its various cultural and historical manifestations is Alain Viala, *La France galante* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

components (letters or narratives that mixed prose with verse; novels containing intercalated poems or stories; plays punctuated by episodes of music and dance; reworking of material derived from popular tradition, such as fairy tales and ghost stories, etc.). In the present volume, this hybridity is apparent in Pascal's use of the machine play form, with its use of music and special effects; in Villedieu's lighthearted dedicatory epistle that alternates between verse and prose and unconventionally places the concluding material at the beginning; and in Durand's inclusion of her short plays as an appendix to a novel (itself a generic hybrid with much intercalated material).

By the end of the seventeenth century, although intellectuals differed vehemently about whether modern developments in the arts and sciences constituted progress, there was general agreement that the French had already achieved a high level of success in the arts and letters, and especially in drama. The masterpieces from that century, rapidly canonized and widely read and revived, were seen as a cherished patrimony that helped to serve Louis XIV's avowed goal of making France the cultural capital of Europe. During the course of the eighteenth century, increasing numbers of female intellectuals came to believe that they had an obligation not merely to appreciate that patrimony as readers and spectators, but also to contribute to it as authors. It is no accident that over the course of what became known as the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, one of the sharpest disagreements concerned the role that women were deemed fit to play in the country's cultural life, both as writers and as influential members of the public. The Ancients were strongly opposed to female participation and could on occasion produce openly misogynistic texts, whereas the Moderns valued educated and cultivated women and felt that their increasing role as arbiters of taste was beneficial. It should be noted, however, that even the male champions of the Modern cause would not qualify as feminists by today's standards and held on to many of the conventional beliefs about women's role in society.<sup>10</sup>

Although women would write for the stage in greater numbers and with greater success during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they also faced formidable obstacles, not all of which applied to their male counterparts. The professional companies could be difficult to deal with, and in many cases women playwrights needed to use male intermediaries (noble patrons, family members, friends). Molière, in his capacity as director of a troupe, seems to have been an exception in that he was supportive of Villedieu and even advanced her money well before staging the premiere of her play *Le Favori* [The Favorite Minister]. But the Comédie-Française, formed in 1680 as the official national company

10. For an insightful overview of the quarrel's significance, see Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). The principal polemical texts may be found in *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, ed. Anne-Marie Lecoq (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

with a virtual monopoly in the capital, tended to treat young playwrights with little respect. For example, Catherine Bernard fought with the actors when they wanted to shorten the portion of the initial run of one of her tragedies when it was given alone (that is, without a comic afterpiece). Mme Ulrich got her comedy accepted but, apparently because it had been revised by a member of the troupe (who was an acclaimed dramatist in his own right), she was denied the usual privilege of free admission to performances. Due to the standard view that public notoriety undermined a woman's reputation for modesty, there was often pressure on women playwrights to have their works staged or published anonymously. This pressure was especially severe for women of the aristocracy, since nobles were not supposed to engage in lucrative activities.

If getting plays staged was a challenge, so was getting them published. Obtaining a privilege (official permission to publish a book) was complicated, and women writers often turned to male intermediaries, such as relatives, influential friends, or booksellers, to handle the process. Privileges, however, were deemed essential only for works printed in Paris; women who published elsewhere did not bother with them. After around 1670 it became somewhat more common, though still not the norm, for women authors to obtain privileges directly. Another troublesome question was whether to allow their names to appear on the title page or the privilege (all or part of which was typically printed with the volume). Many women, especially those of noble rank, preferred to designate themselves by the title Madame or Mademoiselle, followed by their initial(s). Although some preferred complete anonymity, others wanted to make it clear to the public that they were female. In a number of cases, a woman writer who began her career publishing anonymously would eventually allow her full name to be used. And, of course, there were problems shared with male writers, such as exploitation by publishers, pirated editions, false attributions, deliberate tampering with the text, and faulty presentation (especially if the author was not around to oversee the printing).<sup>11</sup>

Another constraint was the view, frequently expressed well into the twentieth century, that women, due to the inherent limitations of their gender, are incapable of cultivating the loftiest of literary forms. It was at least recognized that women could write with distinction in forms such as familiar letters, short verse, and fiction, where their greater emotional sensitivity and their instinctive cultivation of a simple and "natural" style, unhampered by the standard formal education accorded to men, served them well. Of course, that same lack of education

11. See *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Myriam Dufour-Maitre, "Éditer, imprimer, publier: Quelques stratégies féminines au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *L'écrivain éditeur, volume 1: Du Moyen Âge à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. François Bessire (Geneva: Droz, 2001), 257–76; Edwige Keller-Rahbé, "Pratiques et usages du privilège d'auteur chez Mme de Villedieu et quelques autres femmes de lettres du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Œuvres et critiques* 35, no. 1 (2010): 69–94.

was held against women who wanted to write in other areas. This prejudice led to the constant charge that women playwrights whose efforts were successful must have used male collaborators or, even worse, that the women had merely lent their names to male authors who preferred to remain hidden. The women playwrights expressed their outrage in a variety of ways. The most common was to compose prefaces to the published texts of their plays in which they objected to these charges as an attack on their reputation, competence, and integrity. In the final decade of the seventeenth century and the early decades of the next, a number of women playwrights organized the publication of their collected works, which was a particularly visible method of asserting authorial control and dignity.<sup>12</sup>

In this period, as has been noted, women playwrights cultivated every dramatic form available. Although the current anthology includes examples of only three (tragedy, short comedy, and tragicomedy), women likewise composed works in other genres such as pastoral, farce, and tearful comedy. It is also remarkable that as a native French operatic tradition developed during the final decades of the seventeenth century, women got involved with it very quickly: during the 1690s both a female composer, Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre, and a female librettist, Louise-Geneviève de Sainctonge, had works staged at the Opéra.<sup>13</sup> However, it was in the two most prestigious dramatic genres, the ones going back to classical antiquity, that the women authors most directly competed against their male counterparts, and it is in those areas (tragedy and comedy) that their originality can perhaps be most clearly demonstrated. (The hybrid genre of machine plays will be discussed in the introduction to Pascal's *Endymion*.)

### Tragedy

Between roughly 1630 and 1680 French authors created a distinctive new type of tragedy. It would gain acceptance from critics and audiences alike thanks to the appearance of a series of masterpieces, many of them written by Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine. These tragedies maintained their popularity long after the death of their authors, and some of them have remained staples of the repertory to the present day. The hallmarks of the new tragedy included the following: a central

12. See Perry Gethner, "French Women Writers and Heroic Genres," in *Women Writing Back/Writing Women Back: Transnational Perspectives from the Late Middle Ages to the Dawn of the Modern Era*, ed. Anke Gilleir, Alicia C. Montoya, and Suzan van Dijk (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 235–53; Gethner, "Stratégies de publication et notions de carrière chez les femmes dramaturges sous le règne du Roi Soleil," in *Le Parnasse du théâtre: Les recueils d'œuvres complètes de théâtre au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Georges Forestier, Edric Caldicott, and Claude Bourqui (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2007), 309–23.

13. Sainctonge's tragic opera libretti appear in an earlier volume of the Other Voice series: *Dramatizing Dido, Circe, and Griselda*, trans. Janet Levarie Smarr (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010).

role for love plots (absent in the tragedies of the ancient Greeks) that also generate internal conflicts in which love competes with other forms of obligation; emphasis on the protagonists' inner lives; little or no violent action shown on stage; a heroic world where protagonists are expected to embody such values as courage, selflessness, loyalty, lucidity, piety, and good manners; choice of historical subject matter but with emphasis on the elements of the story that are timeless, and thus featuring only a minimum of what would later be termed local color. Plays were expected to follow a long list of dramaturgical rules (see below), and to be morally edifying (avoiding anything that could give offense to the political and religious authorities). Apart from a few experiments with tragedies in prose, which were poorly received, tragedies were written in verse, which meant alexandrine (12-syllable) lines in rhyming couplets, and with strict adherence to the rules of versification codified during the Renaissance and seventeenth century. Plays were held to both dramatic and literary standards, able to satisfy both spectators in the theater and readers of the published text.

During the second quarter of the seventeenth century, French intellectuals became consumed with debates over the rules governing drama. It was believed that greatness in literature was largely dependent on rational criteria that were timeless and universal and could be codified. Among the rules that would be formally adopted by the French Academy, the most famous were the three unities of time, place, and action, plus verisimilitude and *bienséances* (decorum). In their strictest sense, which gained acceptance by around the midpoint of the century, the unities required that the time of the represented action last no more than twenty-four hours, that the play use a single set (no scene changes), and that the plot be perfectly unified (no subplots, no extraneous scenes or characters). Plausibility came to depend on conventional understanding of what constituted normal and proper behavior, though exceptions could be carved out for exceptional occurrences derived from history or mythology. Decorum banished nearly all violent and unseemly actions from the spectator's view, though they could happen off stage and be recounted by a messenger. While it was primarily an aesthetic category (tying representation to what was appropriate for a given person, place, or circumstance), it was sometimes converted into a moral category, prohibiting anything that the public might deem too shocking or offensive. One clear example of this is Villedieu's alteration of history for the denouement of *Nitétis*: instead of allowing Cambyses to contract an incestuous marriage with his sister, she has the evil king commit suicide before it can take place.

Much of the theoretical debate concerned the role of emotions in drama, and particularly in tragedy. The requirement, derived from Aristotle, to produce the feelings of pity and fear in the spectator came to be linked to the principle that the playwright should promote identification with the protagonists, concern for whose welfare could keep the audience anxious throughout the play. Once pity and

fear are not necessarily restricted to the play's conclusion, it becomes acceptable to have happy endings in which the virtuous characters emerge victorious, while only the villains are killed off. This is the principle at work in plays like *Nitétis*; no one at the time would have questioned the label of tragedy that the author gave it. At the same time, Pierre Corneille pioneered a type of heroic tragedy in which the protagonist's exceptional greatness of soul—an absolute devotion to principle accompanied by little or no human weakness—would inspire primarily admiration in the viewer. Although in such plays admiration remains the dominant emotion, it does not preclude a substantial role for pathos. The title characters of *Endymion* and *Nitétis* were designed to provoke a similar response of pathos mixed with admiration, although the authors were far from following Corneille's model in all respects. In a handful of cases, playwrights presented heroic figures who exercise their greatness in evil ways, thus showing that strength of will is not always tied to virtue, but they usually took pains to balance the evil protagonist with an example of conventional goodness, as is the case in *Genseric*. Finally, the authors of French tragedy gradually moved away from the ancient Greek emphasis on the role of Fate as an external force crushing the protagonists and over which they have little or no power. Characters tend to be fully conscious of their thoughts and emotions and spend much of their time in carefully reasoned deliberation, whether or not their actions turn out to be reasonable. In order to inspire admiration, they needed to be presented as active agents rather than passive victims.<sup>14</sup>

It would take a long time for women to try their hand at tragedy. Deemed the most prestigious branch of drama, it deserved, in the view of many people, to be cultivated only by men. In addition, some theorists felt that in order to write a proper tragedy, authors had to be well versed in the history and literature of classical antiquity (held to be the greatest heroic age) and capable of understanding the heroic mentality. The breakthrough for women occurred in large part because of Cardinal Richelieu's active support for the composition of tragedies based on religious themes, especially the glorious deaths of Christian martyrs. Because the type of heroism in such plays centered on passive endurance and profound religious devotion, while not necessarily involving such staples of heroic tragedy as battles or statecraft, hagiographic subjects appealed strongly to women writers, and four of them published martyr plays, including the only French nun known to have composed a dramatic work. It is not clear whether any of those plays were performed, but they must have attracted some attention, because two were republished, and one of them garnered a laudatory poem from Pierre Corneille, the writer of the most esteemed of all French religious tragedies, *Polyeucte*.

14. For a discussion of the role of emotions in the dramatic theory and practice of the time, see Georges Forestier, *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l'œuvre* (Geneva: Droz, 2004); Forestier, *La Tragédie française: Passions tragiques et règles classiques* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010).

Although the total number of tragedies produced by French women during the second half of the seventeenth century is small (nine, counting two plays labeled as tragicomedies but which are closer to tragedy), the corpus is by no means negligible. Five were staged professionally in Paris, two of them were revived, and another had an unusually successful initial run. Although none of these plays appeared separately in more than one edition, those of Villedieu and Deshoulières would be included in posthumous collections of their complete works (and they were among the first French women to gain this type of authorial recognition). Marie-Anne Barbier, a prolific playwright from the first quarter of the eighteenth century, was apparently the first to boast of belonging to a respected tradition of women writers in various genres that included Catherine Bernard, whose acclaim as a writer of tragedies helped to inspire her.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most innovative features of these tragedies is the way female characters are portrayed. The heroic woman, or *femme forte*, who had been something of a staple in French literature during the first half of the seventeenth century, faded from prominence in the decades following. This was due to a number of factors: displeasure with the prominent role of powerful aristocratic women during the mid-century civil war, known as the Fronde; dissatisfaction with the performance of the two queen mothers who had served as regents for much of the first half of the century (Maria de' Medici and Anne of Austria); and the authoritarian persona adopted by Louis XIV, who constantly compared himself to the sun and took care to emphasize his manly attributes. Henceforth, male playwrights tended to portray reigning queens in a mainly negative light: not fully competent, impetuous, violent, blinded by passions such as love or jealousy, prone to let personal feelings override concern for justice and political expediency. Some of the older queens in these plays hold on to their power only by murdering their children or grandchildren. Women playwrights, on the other hand, took a more favorable view of female rulers, portraying them as intelligent, energetic, capable of resolute action, and unwilling to be bossed around by arrogant and tyrannical men. The title character in Bernard's *Laodamie* (1737; performed 1689) stands out as a positive role model, displaying political astuteness and courage, and she manages to control her amorous feelings in order to do what is right for her country.<sup>16</sup> Her sole limitation, which leads to her downfall, is that she is not a warrior and finds herself forced to depend on a male hero. The empress in Deshoulières's *Genserik* (1680), though a captive detained in a foreign land, retains her indomitable spirit and helps to plan an escape attempt, which ultimately fails.

15. This statement occurs in the preface to her tragedy *Arrie et Pétus* (1702). There is a translation of that work and of Bernard's *Laodamie* in *The Lunatic Lover*, trans. Gethner.

16. Unless otherwise specified, dates of plays given in parentheses refer to the first published edition. If that date is considerably later than the date of first performance, that fact is noted.

The shift in popular taste led playwrights to abandon the portrayal of capable female rulers and also women warriors. The rare attempts by male dramatists to showcase female fighters, such as Thomas Corneille's *Bradamante* (1696), were poorly received, and the same fate awaited those female dramatists of the following century who went further and dared present warriors who were at the same time reigning queens: Barbier's *Tomyris* (1707), Madeleine-Angélique de Gomez's *Marsidie* (1724), Anne-Marie Du Boccage's *Les Amazones* [The Amazons] (1749). On the other hand, female protagonists were allowed to exercise considerable political influence behind the scenes, by giving advice or admonition to male leaders, or by encouraging the activities of men who love them. Villedieu's *Manlius* (1662) and *Nitétis* (1663) and Bernard's *Brutus* (1691) provide good examples of this attenuated version of the strong-willed woman. In the first decade of the next century, Barbier would present a heroine who organizes a conspiracy that nearly succeeds, manipulating male politicians and generals while cleverly concealing her central role in the business (*Arrie et Pétus* [Arria and Paetus]), and another heroine who sets the political agenda for her politician sons and insists that they maintain their commitment to her populist ideology (*Cornélie mère des Gracques* [Cornelia Mother of the Gracchi], 1703).

Arguably the most overtly feminist component of tragedies by women is the debunking of standard models of male heroism. What has been termed the "demolition of the hero" during the second half of the seventeenth century relates to various political, social, and religious factors, but it is also possible to locate a gender-related component.<sup>17</sup> The key sociopolitical factor was the deliberate reduction in the power of the traditional nobility at the expense of an increasingly absolutist monarchy, whose bureaucracy consisted largely of people recruited from the bourgeoisie. The ethos of the long-established aristocracy (known as the "sword nobility") was a code based on personal and family honor, eagerness to pursue glory, need to present an ostentatiously grand appearance, overweening pride and courage, and resistance to other forms of authority. But that code came to be perceived as a survival of feudalism out of step with modern notions of a well-run nation state. The religious factor was the realization that the noble ethos was in many respects incompatible with Christian values. Discomfort with the exaltation of the heroic ideal was especially strong among those affiliated with a religious movement known as Jansenism, which held an extremely pessimistic view of human nature influenced by St. Augustine. Jansenists emphasized the fallen state of humans who are in constant need of divine grace, favored a turning

17. The phrase "demolition of the hero" was coined by Paul Bénichou in his influential study *Morales du grand siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), and it has been explored in a large number of studies, especially monographs devoted to Corneille or Racine. See, for example, Serge Doubrovsky, *Corneille et la dialectique du héros* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963); André Stegmann, *L'Héroïsme cornélien, genèse et signification*, 2 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1968).

away from worldly activities so as to focus on service to God, and questioned the view that humans could accomplish great things purely by their own efforts. Moralists writers, many of them influenced by Jansenist ideas, wrote scathingly of the vanity of most human pursuits, debunked supposedly virtuous or glorious actions (often performed for inglorious reasons), and argued that most people most of the time are incapable of true self-knowledge, thus being unaware of their basic wretchedness.

In the hands of women writers, these anti-heroic views could take on a particularly anti-male cast. French tragedy, especially that of Pierre Corneille, had relied heavily on ancient Rome to provide a model of ultimate heroic stature. But women playwrights treating Roman history tended to adopt the opposite perspective: even if the heroic ideal was at times fully realized and remains worthy of our admiration, on far too many occasions supposedly great Roman leaders failed to live up to their principles. As a result, the women authors often chose male characters who are seriously flawed or even totally contemptible or villainous. Guilty of bad judgment, prejudice, hypocrisy, even cowardice, those leaders discredit Rome and, by extension, the model of French heroic tragedy. The first example of this phenomenon is the negative portrayal of the distinguished general Torquatus in Villedieu's *Manlius*. Significantly, the playwright alters history to provide a happy ending: Torquatus, after having disgraced himself by various acts of misconduct, experiences a spiritual conversion in the final scene, pardons his son, renounces his unworthy passion for a captive princess, agrees to a politically necessary marriage for himself, and reaffirms his commitment to proper Roman values. The title character in Bernard's *Brutus*, far from being the supreme model of Roman patriotic fervor and self-sacrifice, is shown as a conflicted, irresolute leader who believes that the senate is forcing him to issue an unjust death sentence on his elder son and who finally sinks into disillusionment and despair. Women playwrights were not alone in selecting odious leaders from antiquity as their protagonists, but they provide some of the most memorable examples, including such non-Roman tyrants as Cambyzes (in *Nitetis*) and the title character in *Genseric*. However, not all the women playwrights followed Villedieu's lead in providing happy endings where the tyrant reforms or is killed. In most other cases the virtuous characters die, albeit nobly, leaving the villainous leaders in power and only slightly (and presumably only temporarily) punished by the loss of a loved one.

Another key innovation by women playwrights was the emphasis on genuine friendship between women. Male writers, following a misogynistic tradition going back to antiquity, automatically assumed that women are incapable of having reasonable and moderate relationships, unable to resist violent passions such as love, hatred, and jealousy. Male playwrights like Corneille and Racine, in tragedies with more than one female protagonist, tend to make them rivals in love

who hate and sometimes try to destroy one another. Even in plays in which the women are not rivals and ought to form an alliance, they generally fail to do so and treat one another with sarcasm and scorn. Women writers, on the other hand, sometimes show female characters who care deeply about one another, are willing to make sacrifices to ensure the other's welfare, and always give what they believe to be good advice. Even when they discover that they are rivals in love, their bond with each other remains firm. However, more often than not female friendships highlight the pathos in the situation of women who are powerless victims; only rarely does the friendship involve women of heroic stature who join forces in a common cause.<sup>18</sup>

### Comedy

Because the number of comic plays composed by French women in this period is likewise very small, it is hard to generalize about their contribution to that dramatic genre. Although it can hardly measure up to the remarkable achievements of English women playwrights during the Restoration period, whose work tends to be far more daring and at times overtly profeminist, the corpus does contain undeniable elements of satire, making occasional comments on the unjust treatment of women and featuring proper and improper role models.

The French women authors' most significant contribution came in the domain of the one-act play. While the farce, a late medieval form of comedy, had fallen into disfavor with critics because of its frequent reliance on vulgar language, crude physical humor, demeaning treatment of women, and morally questionable endings, audiences still enjoyed it, and the genre would persist in a somewhat sanitized version. Several women would compose works in that genre, including the only professional actress of the century known to have written an original play, Mlle Longchamp (*Le Voleur* [The Thief], lost, performed 1687). However, around the middle of the seventeenth century, a new brand of one-act comedy developed in which all the objectionable features of farce were eliminated. These works are miniature comedies of manners, typically featuring characters drawn from the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie. Since during the third quarter of the century the practice of using afterpieces (short comedies performed following a full-length play) became the norm for Parisian theatrical companies, an increasing number of playwrights cultivated them. Short comedies were particularly appealing to novice playwrights, because they are far less complicated to write than

18. For a fuller discussion, see Perry Gethner, "Female Friendships in Plays by Women Writers," *Cahiers du dix-septième* 12, no. 2 (2009): 31–41; Gethner, "Reinterpreting the Griselda Legend: Sainctonge versus Perrault," *Women in French Studies* (special issue, 2008): 48–57. As these studies show, the phenomenon of friendship between women is not limited to tragedy; examples are also found in comedy and tearful comedy or melodrama.

full-length plays: they utilize a small number of characters who are little more than stereotypes, have a minimal plot, focus on short humorous scenes, and rely on caricature and implausibility.

The first female practitioner of this form, Françoise Pascal, centered her short plays on the foibles of delusional members of salon society who fail to grasp the difference between real life and the world of novels and mythology. Her *L'Amoureux extravagant* [The Lunatic Lover] (1657) makes fun of a well-meaning but untalented and silly male poet, whose failures in the areas of poetic composition and love are exploited by a more intelligent group of friends and their servants.<sup>19</sup> In *L'Amoureuse vaine et ridicule* [The Vain and Ridiculous Lady in Love] (1657), Clorinde, a woman in her thirties, imagines that she is an irresistibly beautiful teenager and that every man who sees her is secretly in love with her. Although her folly is publicly exposed through a practical joke played on her by two teenaged girls who live nearby, in collusion with their fiancés, Clorinde remains firmly locked in her dream world at the end of the play, never realizing how she has been ridiculed. One-act plays of this type, since they require a small cast and a minimal stage set, could be performed by amateurs as well as by professionals. They are entertaining, without being offensive to either sex or to members of any social class or profession. Even when Pascal returned to the more traditional farce in her last comedy, *Le Vieillard amoureux* [The Old Man in Love] (1664), which was intended for a Parisian troupe that still employed specialists in farce, she added several personal touches: husbands who mistreat their wives are sharply castigated, and there is a brief moment of pathos when the old man realizes that he must forgive the young lovers and everyone bursts into tears.

As the century came to a close, a new generation of male playwrights cultivated a more cynical brand of comedy that highlighted the rise of a new class of financiers, with a concomitant emphasis placed on greed and social climbing, to the detriment of the traditional social hierarchy and conventional moral standards. These authors also took a far less rosy view of marriage, with more attention paid to the sometimes sordid negotiations that lead up to it and to the lack of harmony between spouses, who often hope to see their union terminated. The women playwrights of that generation tended to share that cynicism and could be as daring as the men in denouncing social ills. Mme Ulrich's *La Folle enchère* [The Crazy Auction] (1691) turns the metaphor of the marriage market into literal reality. Two rich and vain women, both middle-aged, compete in financial pledges to secure the hand of a handsome young man whose greedy father proposes to sell him to the highest bidder. Following what the characters themselves term an auction, the loser takes her revenge by abducting the coveted groom. Ulrich adds an extra layer of subversion by showing that young women, subject to tight parental control, are the principal victims of such transactions: the handsome young man is really a

19. This play is included in *The Lunatic Lover*, trans. Gethner.

young woman in disguise, while the tyrannical father and one of the middle-aged rivals are really disguised valets. However scandalous, the plot reflects the mores of the era, while nodding in the direction of conventional comic resolution, since the elaborate deception is perpetrated in order to unite two young people from good families who genuinely love each other. Saintonge's *L'Intrigue des concerts* [The Intrigue at the Concert] (1714, but probably composed around 1695) shows the difficulties faced by a young woman who is trying to earn an honest living as a professional singer, and it also exposes an unscrupulous banker, appropriately named La Richardière, who in addition to his financial dishonesty maintains a scandalous private life, constantly seducing and impregnating his female servants. Again, the cynicism is not total, for the banker's stepson, likewise a financier, is an honorable young man who sincerely loves the heroine. Although the young lovers are finally united, the song that concludes the play reminds the audience that nowadays success in love depends primarily on wealth.

The same disenchanting view of society would become even more prominent in comedies intended for private theatricals rather than the public playhouse. One of the most popular types of such short comedy is the dramatic proverb, which started as a parlor game akin to charades. It is a short play illustrating a well-known proverb but without mentioning that proverb in the text; the audience has to guess. The first authors to refine the proverb play from an improvised sketch into a literary form, to be written down and published, were two women, Henriette-Julie de Murat and Catherine Durand. Freed from the constraints of the public playhouse, where censorship was becoming increasingly rigid, they dared to present a variety of subversive and risqué situations, which allowed for some protofeminist comments. We see young aristocratic men who are hopelessly inept socially or even mentally deficient, debauched youths who treat their girlfriends with not the slightest bit of respect or decency, callous husbands who flaunt their mistresses in front of their wives, and shallow fops who try to court several different women at the same time, not realizing that the women are capable of using the same tactics against them. Some of the women are equally willing to violate the codes of morality and propriety. A wronged wife takes a lover and fearlessly confronts her husband; two teenaged girls sneak out to an all-night party to experience the pleasures accorded to adult women; a girl abandoned by her parents on a dreary country estate for no apparent reason becomes so angry at her confinement that she resolves to take a handsome peasant youth as her lover. In some cases the emancipated women manage to prevail.

Finally, mention should be made of a form of comedy that died out when it was overtaken by opera: comedy-ballet (spoken comedy with totally sung prologue, epilogue, and interludes). These works, very expensive to produce, were usually royal commissions, as was the case with the lone example written by a woman—King Charles II of England, an avid Francophile, called upon a French

Huguenot expatriate living in London, Anne de La Roche-Guilhen, to compose a hybrid play to celebrate his birthday in 1677. *Rare-en-tout* [All-Wondrous], La Roche-Guilhen's sole work for the stage, contains much political, literary, and musical satire, as well as some protofeminist elements: the title character, a lady's man who falls in and out of love with astonishing rapidity, is humiliated, though not daunted by his misadventures; praise is accorded to accomplished female singers, whether amateur or professional; and the shepherds and nymphs in the allegorical interludes do not hesitate to criticize satyrs and fickle lovers for their lack of refinement and honesty.<sup>20</sup>

### *Tragicomedy*

The intermediate genre of tragicomedy enjoyed exceptional popularity in France between roughly 1620 and 1660.<sup>21</sup> In its most common form, the plot is fictional, often derived from well-known novels, and centers around the adventures of young lovers. The obstacles tend to arise from external forces, such as hostile parents, unscrupulous rivals, natural disasters, wars, or political intrigues. Since new obstacles may arise unexpectedly during the course of the play, the action is episodic and not always properly unified. The characters are mostly undeveloped, often simply divided into heroes and villains, and poetic justice is normally observed at the conclusion (the good characters are rewarded and the bad ones appropriately punished). The reliance on surprises, suspense, and constantly renewed challenges reinforces a feeling of life as dangerously unstable and filled with uncertainties. But surprises may be favorable as well as unfavorable, and in all but a handful of cases there is a happy ending. Despite the impression given by the name, probably fewer than half the tragicomedies contain comic characters or episodes, or feature characters taken from differing social ranks.

There are a number of reasons why tragicomedy fell out of favor during the second half of the seventeenth century. Perhaps the most important was the acceptance of the three unities. Tragicomic plots seemed even more unbelievable when a large number of actions had to be squeezed into a single day and a single place. In addition, critics and audiences came to recognize the principle that tragedies were allowed to have happy endings (there are examples of this among the ancient Greeks), making some critics question whether a separate genre of tragicomedy was needed. Starting with the second quarter of the century, tragedies increasingly featured love plots, though these had to be carefully intertwined with more serious concerns, such as politics or religion; once again, tragedy appropriated an

20. This play is included in *The Lunatic Lover*, trans. Gethner.

21. The best general studies of French tragicomedy from this period are H el ene Baby, *La Tragi-com edie de Corneille   Quinault* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2001); and Roger Guichemerre, *La Tragi-com edie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981).

element that had been crucial to the success of the intermediate genre. Finally, French critics adopted a new principle, the unity of tone, which banned the use of overly serious elements in a comedy or of comic elements in a tragedy; this innovation likewise undermined the legitimacy of tragicomedy.

Since the genre was in decline when women playwrights started to become a significant presence, it is not surprising that women composed few works in that form, and none at all after 1665. However, Françoise Pascal managed to produce some genuinely innovative tragicomedies. Her *Agathonphile* (1655) combines a stock tragicomic love plot with a Christian martyr scenario, while *Endymion* (1657) combines an atypical love plot (a romance between a human and a goddess) with a surprising variant of the play-within-a-play device (much of the action turns out in retrospect to have occurred within a magically induced dream). *Endymion* is also a rare example of a tragicomedy that is also a machine play (see the introduction to that play). All three of her tragicomedies also have feminist touches: the heroines are far more active and energetic than their male counterparts, and in *Endymion* we encounter a version of polytheism in which Diana is worshiped as the most powerful deity. The two plays that Villedieu labeled as tragicomedies also contain feminist touches, but there is nothing formally innovative about them. *Manlius* is really a tragedy with a happy ending, while *Le Favori* is really a comedy featuring characters of very high rank.

### *Note on the Translations*

I have tried to make these translations as readable and as stageworthy as possible. I have followed the common practice of rendering alexandrine lines in rhyming couplets as iambic pentameter in blank verse. For verse plays, I have kept exactly the same number of lines as in the original. My English verse is not perfectly regular, though I hardly take more liberties than English blank-verse plays of the Restoration period. I have avoided archaic or stilted grammar and vocabulary, while trying to make the tragedies sound slightly more elevated in tone than ordinary colloquial speech. Elaborate poetic devices that would confuse the modern English reader have been simplified (for example, the personification of abstractions and of body parts, or the ubiquitous use of terms like “fire” or “irons” to designate amorous passion).

The inconsistency in the rendering of proper names is intentional. For names derived from classical history or mythology, I have used the standard English form. For invented characters for whose names I could find no English equivalent, I have retained the French form. For obviously parodic names (Pedanta and Formont [strong mountain] in Durand’s eighth proverb comedy), I again keep the French forms, since their meaning should be easily grasped. In verse plays, for the

sake of prosody, I normally drop the possessive “s” for names that end in “s” (e.g., Venus’ rather than Venus’s, Atlas’ rather than Atlas’s).

In accordance with the conventions of English-language drama, I have eliminated the divisions of acts into scenes, because the term *scene* in traditional French usage referred not to a change of decor (banned during the period when these plays were written) but rather to the entrances or exits of characters. In all such cases I have indicated those entrances and exits with stage directions. In a number of cases, I have added stage directions to clarify the action for the reader; these are indicated in brackets, whereas the stage directions in the original texts are indicated in parentheses.

Translations of sources cited in the notes to the plays are my own unless otherwise indicated.