

# The Advent of Women Players and Playwrights in Early Modern France

PERRY GETHNER, *Oklahoma State University*

MELINDA J. GOUGH, *McMaster University*

Women's theatrical participation in early modern France has attracted increased scholarly attention in recent decades. Nonetheless, intersections between women's separate roles as performers, playwrights, and cultural arbiters have yet to be explored. Nor has much been written about the ways in which French women's theatrical activities intersected with or diverged from those of their female counterparts in neighboring countries. To begin filling these gaps and in the hope of prompting further work on such questions, this essay considers both the development of mixed-gender troupes in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century France and women's contributions to French cultural life as playwrights and as members of salon gatherings.

The larger movement toward greater theatrical visibility, agency, and mobility for women that this special section traces in early modern Europe did not develop at the same pace in France, we contend. It was during this period that professional troupes in the provinces and in Paris engaged actresses for the first time, and this was also the era when the first French women are known to have composed for the stage. When compared to other continental locales such as Spain and Italy, however, sixteenth-century France experienced a noticeable delay in the advent of mixed-gender professional troupes. To scholars of early modern drama used to thinking of England's "all-male stage" as an anomaly, this fact may seem surprising. In seeking to work through this puzzle, though, we have come to the conclusion that this deferral occurred not because the French exhibited more pronounced ideological resistance to theater, to women, or to foreigners than existed in other countries. Rather, the French wars of religion—and related wars of succession—occurred just as humanist drama was

beginning to develop. The constraints that such wars and their economic devastation placed on professional acting companies thus had a negative impact on transnational theatrical mobility, as well as on the financial viability of native French companies.

This finding provides a certain counterpoint to the emphasis on glamour, vibrancy, and mobility across divisions of gender, rank, language, and geography found in our co-contributors' essays on women and theater in Spain, Italy, and Bavaria. But by rendering more flexible working assumptions about period divisions (our discussion of women in "Renaissance Drama"—the title of this journal—has ended up ranging from mixed-gender troupes in the 1540s to women playwrights after 1650) and by expanding our focus to include court and salon settings alongside commercial theater, our essay indicates how France, too, particularly after its recovery from nearly thirty-five years of civil and religious wars, witnessed the development of new theatrical and dramatic spaces for women's contributions as cultural arbiters, playwrights, and performers. The participation of actresses in professional troupes, we show, had significant impacts on staging and performance practices as well as on dramatic elements such as genre, plot, theme, and character. Just as significant as what women accomplished in public playhouses, however, were the contributions made by amateur women playwrights and the promotion of women's cultural visibility at court and in salons, the latter being important social spaces where cultivated women interacted with male intellectuals and became directly involved in literary production and reception.

### I. GENDERED CASTING AND THE (DELAYED) IMPACT OF FOREIGN MIXED-GENDER TROUPES

One area where France and England have perhaps seemed more far apart than they actually were concerns the composition of theatrical troupes, especially in regard to the casting of female characters. Scholars of early modern English drama have traditionally seen as an anomaly that country's "all-male stage" tradition, in which boys played women's parts. Yet sixteenth-century France, unlike Spain and Italy, also experienced a noticeable delay in the advent of mixed-gender professional troupes playing in its capital (though the situation there changed much sooner than it did in London). This deferral occurred because of the political and social chaos that engulfed France during the second half of the sixteenth century. The numerous French wars of religion and related wars of succession seem to have hindered the formation of professional acting companies. Prolonged civil and political unrest did not affect just the activity of French troupes, however; it also restricted travel to France by troupes from other countries. In particular, the rarity of public appearances by Italian companies, which increasingly included women, meant that the French had less of an opportunity

to experience well-developed mixed-gender companies and to recognize the possibilities that their female stars afforded. The somewhat delayed appearance of professional women players that we identify in early modern France, therefore, occurred not primarily because of misogyny or religious objections to acting but because of the uniquely vivid and prolonged constraints that civil unrest placed on theater *per se*.

However, there were other factors besides the civil wars that delayed the advancement of professional companies in France and, more specifically, these companies' engagement of female performers—developments that, as far as we know, did not start until the final quarter of the sixteenth century. The new humanist approach to drama, inspired by Greek and Latin models and largely opposed to medieval genres, began around the middle of that century. But most of the authors of those plays were based in schools, and they designed their works to be performed, if at all, by casts of all-male students. Court productions of this new repertoire were rare, not just because of the constant warfare but also because of a lack of interest on the part of the kings. Due to the extreme scarcity of documentation, we do not fully understand how and when the professional actors and a sizable percentage of audience members came to favor the new types of plays. We have evidence of one professional French company as early as the 1570s that featured tragedies as well as farcical comedies, led by one Châteaueux, but we know nothing of its composition, for example.<sup>1</sup>

The historical record does confirm that actresses performed in provincial troupes long before they became a regular feature on the Paris stage.<sup>2</sup> Documentary evidence shows that amateur Frenchwomen had acted in the provinces from the late Middle Ages, while Marie Fairet (or Ferré), apparently the first professional French actress, performed as early as 1545 in a provincial troupe.<sup>3</sup> As Melinda Gough notes, however, it was not until the second decade of the seventeenth century that women appeared regularly at the city's only legal commercial playhouse, the Hôtel de Bourgogne. "This discrepancy between the provinces and the capital," she writes, "was in part a question of genre: while French traveling companies performed various kinds of plays, including the tragicomedies and

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1. Armand Baschet, *Les comédiens italiens à la cour de France sous Charles IX, Henri III, Henri IV et Louis XIII* (Paris, 1882; repr., Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1969), 46–47.

2. See Julia Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera* (2006; repr., New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 14; and Melinda J. Gough, "Courtly *Comédiantes*: Henrietta Maria and Amateur Women's Stage Plays in France and England," in *Women Players in England, 1500–1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (2005; repr., Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 193–215, esp. 200.

3. On amateur actresses performing outside of Paris, see Germain Bapst, *Essai sur l'histoire du théâtre* (Paris: Hachette, 1893), 56–59; and Léopold Lacour, *Les premières actrices françaises* (Paris: Librairie Française, 1921), 5–15.

pastorals thought more fitting for women actors, bawdy farce largely ruled on the Parisian commercial stage until the second decade of the seventeenth century, thus making this venue seem incompatible with female chastity."<sup>4</sup>

The first mixed-gender troupe to gain a foothold at the Hôtel de Bourgogne would be Valleran le Conte's company, which got its start around 1590 with performances in the provinces. Jean de Gaufreteau's chronicle of Bordeaux, mentioning the troupe's tour there in 1592, describes the "très grand applaudissement" with which audiences greeted the company's performances, especially those which featured an unnamed yet particularly beautiful, talented, and virtuous actress who eschewed farce in favor of tragic and tragicomic roles.<sup>5</sup> We know that Valleran eventually married Jeanne de Wancourt, who helped to run the company and was most likely a performing member of the troupe.<sup>6</sup> The company's extant acts of association also verify the presence of actresses among it at least as far back as 1607; one of them, Rachel Trépeau, had an extensive career in the course of which she moved on to other troupes. Valleran was also the first French manager to take on apprentices, and since these young people needed to know how to read, they had to have been recruited from middle-class families. On at least one occasion, in 1609, some of the apprentices were girls (three out of five), and the group included a brother-sister pair.<sup>7</sup> Valleran's troupe did hold a three-month lease at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris in 1599. For a long time, however, Par-

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4. Gough, "Courtly *Comédiantes*," 200. Although "Bapst says that women did not appear on a regular commercial stage in Paris until the second half of the seventeenth century" (177), Gough further notes, "we know that Marie Venier, dite Laporte, seems to have acted in Paris as early as 1606 or 1610, though not yet at the Hotel de Bourgogne." See also Lacour, *Les premières actrices*, 16–28; Eugène Rigal, *Le théâtre français avant la période classique* (Paris: Hachette, n.d.), 170–82; Rosamond Gilder, *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 83–85, 90–91; and Michael Shapiro, "The Introduction of Actresses in England: Delay or Defensiveness?" in *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, ed. Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 177–217, esp. 180. On Marie Venier, see also our discussion in a later paragraph of this essay.

5. Jean de Gaufreteau, *Chronique bordelaise*, 2 vols. (Bordeaux: Ch. Lefèbvre. 1877–78), 1:306–8. Virginia Scott also quotes the relevant passage at length, with English translation, in her *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France, 1540–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 78–79. Gaufreteau notes that Valleran's own acting skill was so great, particularly when playing the role of lover, that he was rumored during this sojourn in Bordeaux to have been truly smitten with this woman, even though she was married at the time to another actor and refused all advances by Valleran and by numerous male spectators who attempted to court her. After her departure from Bordeaux, Gaufreteau notes, this woman's actor-husband died, and she then retired from the stage and returned to Paris, where she lived honorably with her parents. If what Gaufreteau says is correct, then this mysterious actress could not have been Jeanne de Wancourt, who married Valleran after 1592. However, Gaufreteau himself admits that his account of the unnamed actress's life after leaving Bordeaux is based on pure hearsay.

6. Sophie-Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne* (Paris: Nizet, 1968–70), 1:62, 81.

7. *Ibid.*, 1:75–76.

isian audiences showed little enthusiasm for the new repertoire, mostly contributed by playwright-in-residence Alexandre Hardy. This troupe would have to wait until the 1620s, under the direction of one of Valleran's star pupils (Pierre le Messier, whose stage name was Bellerose), before it became the most important theatrical company in the capital. In the meantime, Valleran's company had to content itself primarily with touring in the provinces and outside of France, with confirmed stops in Frankfurt, Strasbourg, Leyden, and the Hague.

Another troupe from this period known to have used actresses is that of Laporte (Mathieu Lefebvre), whose wife, Marie Venier, appears to have continued her career even after her husband decided to leave the profession. Her sister, Colombe Venier, followed her onto the stage, and both of her husbands were actors. On several occasions, the first being in 1607, the troupes of Laporte and Valleran le Conte temporarily merged, so it is likely that they performed similar types of plays.<sup>8</sup> By the 1620s the presence of actresses was common in French troupes, and for the most part these women were the wives or sisters of male actors, although unlike in Spain, marriage to another member of the troupe was not a legal requirement for actresses in France.<sup>9</sup>

The formation of mixed-gender troupes in France would not have happened as quickly and as smoothly as it did, we posit, had mixed-gender troupes from Italy not managed to travel across the Alps to play before royal audiences. Italian playing companies may have visited France as early as the 1530s,<sup>10</sup> though their appearances would start to become regular only several decades later. The troupe that played before Henri II and Catherine de Médicis in Lyon in the late 1540s included actresses,<sup>11</sup> as did all the troupes performing in the 1570s and thereafter. The new French companies could not help being aware of the practices and popularity of their Italian counterparts, though the precise degree of influence is hard to assess.

Objections to the presence of Italian actresses in France were minimal. This acceptance may well have been due to the role of queen (and later queen mother) Catherine de Médicis, who of course was raised in Italy. The prestige of Italian actresses was further enhanced by the enthusiasm showed by Catherine's son Henri III, who had been entertained in Venice in July 1574 by the Gelosi with its then *prima donna* Vittoria Piissimi (as Pamela Allen Brown's essay for this fo-

8. *Ibid.*, 1:66–70, 79–80, 90–94.

9. On marriage as a legal requirement for Spanish *farsantas*, see María M. Carrión's "Legally Bound: Women and Performance in Early Modern Spain," in this issue.

10. Baschet, *Les comédiens italiens*, 2–9.

11. This was the Compagnia della Cazzuola, led by Domenico Barlacchi. On this troupe and the reception given to its female players in particular, see Pamela Allen Brown, "The Traveling Diva and Generic Innovation," in this issue; as well as Scott, *Women on the Stage*, 73.

rum notes). Three years later, Henri III invited this troupe to entertain him in France on the occasion of the 1577 Estates-General at Blois; the company then stayed on in France, undertaking public performances in Paris. The Gelosi impressed many with their “sumptuous costumes, set decorations, stage machines and their musical *intermedii*, as well as the elegant women who performed the female roles—something which had never been seen in France.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, this company’s continued commercial success in the French capital required Henri III’s personal intervention, for in late June 1577, the Parlement of Paris passed an injunction against their activities; the troupe lost its appeal; and only with Henri III’s express permission could they reopen at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in September 1577, in defiance of the Parlement. One objection raised against the Gelosi, Pierre de L’Estoile reports, was that their plays taught nothing but fornication and adultery and hence functioned as a “school of debauchery for the youth of both sexes in the city of Paris.” L’Estoile himself concurred with this judgment, especially regarding young women, for “in truth,” he writes, the players’ influence was “great, principally among the ladies and young women” who thereafter brazenly took to showing off their breasts.<sup>13</sup> This passage from L’Estoile’s diary demonstrates a certain degree of French resistance to Italian actresses. But it also indicates these women’s widespread appeal. Behind the outrage that L’Estoile records, in other words, we catch a glimpse of a larger trend whereby French women came to model themselves on visiting Italian women actors. Some may have imitated the more scandalous elements of the visiting women players’ comportment, as L’Estoile claims occurred, but others, including women who presided over and attended salon gatherings, seem to have consciously imitated the Italian women players’ much-admired learning and eloquence.<sup>14</sup>

Royal interest in patronizing visiting mixed-gender troupes continued with the arrival of Queen Marie de Médicis from Florence. In 1599, in preparation

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12. Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Théâtre de l’Hôtel de Bourgogne*, 1:26; John S. Powell, *Music and Theatre in France, 1600–1680* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 164.

13. Those who condemned the troupe, L’Estoile writes on June 26, 1577, “remonstrèrent que toutes ces comoedies n’enseignoient que paillardises et adultères, et ne servoient que d’escole de desbauche à la jeunesse de tout sexe de la ville de Paris. Et à la vérité, le desbord y estoit assez grand, sans tels précepteurs, principalement entre les dames et damoiselles, lesquelles sembloient avoir appris la manière des soldats de ce temps, qui font parade de monstrier leur poitrinals dorés et reluisans, quand ils vont faire leurs monstres; car, tout de mesme elles faisoient monstres de leurs seins et poitrines ouvertes, et autres parties pectorales qui ont un perpétuel mouvement, que ces bonnes dames faisoient aller par compas ou mesure, comme un orloge, ou pour mieux dire, comme les soufflets des mareschaux, lesquels allument le feu pour servir à leur forge.” Pierre de L’Estoile, *Mémoires-Journaux: 1574–1611*, 12 vols. (Paris: Tallandier, 1875–96), 1:192–93.

14. On this point, see also Julie D. Campbell, “‘Merry, nimble, stirring spirit[s]’: Academic, Salon and Commedia dell’arte Influence on the Innamorate in *Love’s Labours Lost*,” in Brown and Parolin, *Women Players*, 145–70, esp. 148–49.

for his marriage to her, Henri IV had sought out Tristano Martinelli's troupe, the Accesi, to perform in France for his new consort's pleasure.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after this, the royal couple worked together to bring the Gelosi—now headed by Francesco and Isabella Andreini—back to France. In 1608 Italian players were again performing in Paris. And in 1611 Marie de Médicis as queen regent took steps to bring to the court of France the Fedeli, headed by Isabella and Francesco's son Giovanni Battista Andreini, making a specific request for two women actors, "Flavia" and "Florinda."<sup>16</sup> Throughout the reign of Henri IV and the regency of Marie de Médicis, we find little objection to the women players in these troupes. Rather, when Isabella Andreini died in Lyon on her way back to Italy, her loss seems to have been mourned by many French courtiers, while in 1611 Marie encouraged her own children to form a mixed-gender "compagnie de comédiantes" for the purpose of mounting privately an adapted version of Robert Garnier's *Bradamante* (itself based on an Italian source text: Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*).<sup>17</sup>

Royal encouragement of women performers must have played a role in winning the approval of French audiences for mixed-gender troupes, both native and foreign. When Valleran's troupe was formed, around 1590, putting French actresses on the professional stage was probably seen as an innovation, yet there does not seem to have been any criticism of the practice at the time. Condemnations of actors on grounds of leading immoral private lives did not become widespread until the middle of the seventeenth century. These charges, mainly led by the clergy, were leveled at performers of both sexes.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the quick adoption of the principle of mixed-gender troupes in France in the first decades of the seventeenth century suggests that an increasing number of young people, and in many cases their families as well, considered acting a respectable profession.

## II. WOMEN PLAYERS AND NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN GENRE, THEME, PLOT, AND CHARACTER

The admission of women to acting companies had a major impact on the types of plays performed by those companies. Valleran Le Conte's troupe, the first French company known to have employed actors of both genders, was also

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15. Baschet, *Les comédiens italiens*, 109. See also Powell, *Music and Theatre in France*, 165; and Gough, "Courtly Comédiantes," 197.

16. Gough, "Courtly Comédiantes," 197–98.

17. *Ibid.*, 200.

18. Georges Mongrédien, *La vie quotidienne des comédiens au temps de Molière* (Paris: Hachette, 1966), 7–24; Laurent Thirouin, *L'aveuglement salutaire: Le réquisitoire contre le théâtre dans la France classique* (Paris: Champion, 1997); Jonas Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 191–220.

committed to the promotion of new and progressive repertory. Using women allowed for more convincing staging of the new dramatic genres for which love plots were central: tragedy (as it developed after 1600), tragicomedy, and pastoral. The fact that the troupe's playwright-in-residence, Alexandre Hardy, had at times acted with them and knew what would appeal to audiences also meant that he understood how to use actors of both sexes to maximum advantage. In fact, a sizable number of Hardy's surviving plays feature highly demanding roles for the female leads, which testifies to the troupe's faith in the talent of its actresses. It is thus not surprising that many of Hardy's tragedies had women as title characters, as in *Didon se sacrifiant* (1624), *Mariamne* (1625), *Lucrèce* (1628), and *Timoclée* (1628).<sup>19</sup>

Plays of the following generation, sometimes labeled the high point of French baroque drama, often featured other plot devices for which the use of female performers was seen as a necessity: cross dressing, most commonly involving women disguised as men; rivalry in love between two women; mythological subjects featuring one or more beautiful goddesses. In certain cases, especially that of Racine later in the century, the presence of an exceptionally gifted leading actress encouraged playwrights to center the play around a complex, fully rounded female protagonist. Indeed, Racine gave extensive coaching during the 1670s to the star actress of the Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe, la Champmeslé (née Marie Desmares); as a result, she would be cited as a model of diction and gesture for many decades. And he would write some of his most memorable female lead rôles for her, from *Bérénice* to *Phèdre*.<sup>20</sup>

Another conspicuous change driven by the availability of female performers was the development of new types of secondary roles for women. The *nourrice* (nurse functioning as a go-between or confidante), fairly common in tragedy and sometimes found in comedy as well, came to be replaced by a new stock character, the *confidente*, during the first half of the seventeenth century. The *nourrice* was typically played by men until the middle of the century, whereas the new *confidente* was played exclusively by women. The fact that *confidentes* were normally young women, of approximately the same age as their mistresses, made this part more desirable to actresses. Virginia Scott argues that by devel-

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19. We have cited publication dates rather than composition dates, which are uncertain. Due to Hardy's contract with the troupe, he was not allowed to publish his plays without their permission, a situation that ultimately led to his break with them in the 1620s. *Didon se sacrifiant* appeared in vol. 1 of the collected plays (1624); *Mariamne* appeared in vol. 2 (1625); *Timoclée* and *Lucrèce* appeared in vol. 5 (1628).

20. The claim that Racine coached his leading actress goes back to the playwright's son. See Louis Racine, *Mémoires contenant quelques particularités sur la vie et les ouvrages de Jean Racine*, in Jean Racine, *Théâtre, Poésie*, ed. Georges Forestier (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade], 1999), 1146–47.



oping a new kind of female role and giving it to female rather than male actors, the troupes expanded the range of performance options available to women actors and extended the length of these women's acting careers.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Scott's observation about the shift in casting applies more broadly. Even after the decline of the *nourrice*, male actors continued to play older women, especially middle-aged mothers and grandmothers—a practice that would persist until near the end of the seventeenth century. Actresses seemed reluctant to play the roles of older women who were viewed as essentially comic, a casting circumstance that accounts, in part, for the relatively small number of bourgeois mothers in comedies by Molière and his successors.<sup>22</sup> However, queens and aristocratic mothers not only retained their noble bearing but were also assumed to have maintained their good looks, and these parts still went to actresses.

Of course, there were other reasons for changes in types of characters and their gendered casting. With playwrights' increasing emphasis on exploring the inner lives of the main characters, it was deemed more suitable to have the confiding done to someone who could be viewed as a friend, but the male actors taking the parts of older women tended to play them for laughs,<sup>23</sup> which would interfere with the desired effect of intimate confiding. In addition, the fact that

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21. Virginia Scott, "Conniving Women and Superannuated Coquettes: *Travestis* and *Caactères* in the Early Modern French Theatre," *Early Theatre* 15, no. 1 (2012): 191–213.

22. On the reluctance of actresses to give up *première* roles that they had originated and "dwindle" into "mothers or maiden aunts," see *ibid.*, 195–96. Writing in the seventeenth century, Samuel Chappuzeau discusses the fact that actresses tended to specialize in a certain category of role, adding "et comme il n'y en a pas vne qui ne soit bien aise de passer toujours pour jeune, elles ne s'empresment pas beaucoup à représenter des Sisigambis [old shrews]. Il est de l'art du Poète de ne produire des meres que dans vn bel âge & de ne leur pas donner des fils qui puissent les conuaincre d'avoir plus de quarante ans" (*Le théâtre françois* [1674], 125). Gustave Reynier, in reference to the fact that *La devineresse* by Thomas Corneille and Donneau de Visé was the last hit comedy to feature a cross-cast role, states: "On sait que c'était autrefois un usage assez commun de faire jouer aux hommes certains rôles de femmes. . . . Après . . . 1685 [the year of retirement for the actor Hubert, who had played three major roles of older women in premiere productions: for Molière, those of Mme Jourdain and Philaminte, and for Thomas Corneille, the title role in *La devineresse*] on renonça à cette espèce de mascarade, et il fallut bien trouver des actrices qui consentissent à se vieillir." Reynier, *Thomas Corneille, sa vie et son théâtre* (Paris: Hachette, 1892), 380. Noting that Molière's characters Mme Pernelle, Mme Jourdain, and Philaminte were played by men, John Lough states that "by this date . . . this was done not because of any shortage of actresses, but for comic effect" (*Seventeenth-Century French Drama: The Background* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], 11–12). For a detailed discussion of Molière and Corneille's deliberate use of cross-gender casting in a small number of their comedies, see chap. 1 of Prest's *Theatre under Louis XIV*.

23. This is especially clear in the initial reception of Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*: audiences found the character of Mme Jourdain grotesque, most likely because the part was played by a man. See, e.g., the treatment of that play in Brécourt's semi-laudatory comedy from 1674, *L'ombre de Molière*.

troupes gradually expanded in size and included more women meant that playwrights could feature more female roles (though rarely more than four or five).

Another female role type that achieved prominence because troupes were employing actresses was the *soubrette*, a clever and witty servant, typically young and attractive, who would be increasingly featured in comedies. The main difference between *soubrettes* and *confidentes* is that the former are active characters, who frequently devise schemes to assist their mistresses, and who tend to be saucy, even insolent, whereas the latter are passive and well behaved, restricting themselves to listening and sometimes offering advice. *Confidentes* in tragedies do not get married at the end, although in several cases they do have suitors. In comedies, however, the *soubrette* in many cases marries a male servant. The development of mixed-gender troupes in France suggests that playwrights wrote *soubrette* roles with women performers in mind. The popularity of similarly witty female servant characters in the commedia dell'arte, such as Franceschina, may well have inspired this new development. Even if we cannot pinpoint direct Italian influence, we might profitably think about these roles in light of Louise Clubb's notion of the *theatergram*: a dramatic motif or unit that crosses linguistic, cultural, and geographic boundaries to appear in more than one national dramatic repertoire.<sup>24</sup>

### III. THE ADVENT OF WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

If the use of women performers on the French public stage had become the norm by around 1600, women dramatists would take much longer to emerge. While documentation is sparse, it seems that female playwrights were very rare in France until the 1650s. Prior to that point, the handful of known women authors of plays wrote for private theatricals, when they aimed to have their works performed at all. Only a single earlier example of a public performance is known: Catherine de Parthenay had a biblical tragedy publicly staged at La Rochelle in 1572, but for reasons that remain opaque she chose not to publish it.<sup>25</sup> Things began to change in the middle of the seventeenth century with Françoise Pascal, who had at least one of her plays staged in her native Lyon. It is possible that Molière's company, which was based for several years in Lyon, gave the premiere of her first play, though proof is lacking. Pascal was an innovator in that she aimed to support herself by her writing, published under her own name, and worked hard to get her plays publicly staged as well as printed. Her last play was

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24. Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

25. See J. S. Street, *French Sacred Drama from Bèze to Corneille* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 52.

probably intended for and staged at the Hôtel de Bourgogne theater in Paris.<sup>26</sup> Marie-Catherine Desjardins, who would later call herself Mme de Villedieu, succeeded in getting all three of her plays staged in Paris by professional companies, and she was also the first woman to have one of her plays performed at court by a professional company (*Le favori* in 1665).<sup>27</sup>

During the last third of the century several additional women had plays staged by Parisian companies, but the troupes were hard to deal with and tended to treat the female authors unfairly.<sup>28</sup> In a few cases—most notably Catherine Bernard's *Brutus* (which premiered in 1690 and was published the following year), Madeleine-Angélique de Gomez's *Habis* (which premiered and was published in 1714), and Françoise de Graffigny's *Cénie* (which premiered in 1750 and was published in 1751)—plays by women achieved considerable success in Paris's sole official French-language company, the Comédie-Française (founded in 1680),<sup>29</sup> remaining in the repertoire for multiple seasons. Nevertheless, long periods could elapse with no productions of works by women, and the number of women authors never reached what one might call a critical mass. The other major Parisian company, the Théâtre Italien, which by the 1720s was performing the bulk of its plays mostly or completely in French, also mounted the occasional play by a woman. However, during the course of the eighteenth century, most of the women composing plays destined them for private theatricals in the homes of aristocrats or wealthy bourgeois; these mostly amateur companies became very numerous and fashionable in that era.

Curiously, although quite a few professional actors also composed plays (Molière being the most celebrated example), it was highly unusual for French actresses to do so. Apart from Madeleine Béjart, a star member of Molière's troupe, who revised an earlier comedy based on *Don Quixote*,<sup>30</sup> and Mlle Longchamp, a

26. Fernand Baldensperger, "Françoise Pascal, 'fille lyonnaise,'" *Études d'histoire littéraire*, 3e sér. (1939): 1–31; Theresa Varney Kennedy, *Françoise Pascal's Agathonphile martyr, tragi-comédie* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2008), 9–32.

27. Micheline Cuénin, *Roman et société sous Louis XIV: Madame de Villedieu (Marie-Catherine Desjardins, 1640–1683)* (Paris: Champion, 1979); Perry Gethner, *Femmes dramaturges en France (1650–1750): Pièces choisies* (Paris: Biblio 17, 1993), 57–68.

28. One notable example involved Catherine Bernard. Despite the moderate success of her first play, *Laodamie reine d'Épire*, the Comédie-Française insisted, over her objections, on pairing her tragedy with an afterpiece only three weeks into the run, which substantially reduced her share of the profits. See Gethner, *Femmes dramaturges en France*, 189.

29. Readers will find modern editions of these volumes in the anthology *Théâtre de femmes de l'Ancien Régime*, ed. Aurore Evain, Perry Gethner, and Henriette Goldwyn (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014–), vols. 2, 3, and 4.

30. Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1929–42), 2:278. *D. Guichot ou les Enchantemens de Merlin* (1660) was a reworking, as a single play, of what was originally a two-part comedy by Guérin de Bouscal.

staff member of the Comédie-Française, who wrote a one-act comedy,<sup>31</sup> there are no examples in the seventeenth century. The eighteenth century is little better in this regard since, apart from Elena Riccoboni, comanager and leading actress of the Italian troupe, who composed a full-length comedy, *Le naufrage*, in the 1720s, no further examples appear, to our knowledge, until Julie Candeille during the period of the French Revolution. Given that actresses were literate and often well read, with some of them even hosting salons in retirement,<sup>32</sup> their apparent lack of interest in composition seems surprising; one can surmise that no one, whether inside the troupes or outside, gave them much encouragement.

In the early eighteenth century, intriguingly, it was a foreign-led and foreign-operated company, the Italians, that seemed more receptive to women-authored plays, though, like the Comédie-Française, they accepted plays by women only periodically. The fact that the Italian actresses tended to have a greater role in the management of their company may have contributed to the apparent difference in atmosphere. It is also possible that some women playwrights chose not to submit any of their works to the Comédie-Française, either because they perceived the troupe as hostile to women or because they were becoming less interested in the types of plays that the troupe preferred, namely, tragedy and full-length comedy.

Thus far we have discussed women playwrights whose texts were performed publicly by professional companies. However, we have evidence that a certain number of women wrote dramatic works specifically destined for court performance. For example, Catherine de Parthenay, whose biblical tragedy was mentioned earlier, authored three court ballets performed during the early 1590s.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the earliest known woman playwright in France wrote only for court performance: Queen Marguerite de Navarre, active in the 1530s and 1540s, composed a set of four biblical plays and seven short comedies, some of them secular and some on religious themes, to be acted by members of her entourage.<sup>34</sup>

Private performances were by no means limited to the court, however. Another venue for plays written by women was the salons. These were essentially

31. Lancaster, *A History*, 4:598. The play, produced in 1687 but never published, was entitled *Le Voleur ou Titapapouf*.

32. The most famous of these was hosted by Jeanne Quinault, between 1742 and 1745. See English Showalter, *Françoise de Graffigny: Her Life and Works* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004), 85–93.

33. Catherine de Parthenay, dame de Rohan, *Ballets allégoriques en vers, 1592–1593*, ed. Raymond Ritter (Toulouse: Impr. des Arts; Paris: Champion, 1927).

34. See Régine Reynolds-Cornell, “Comédies bibliques, comédies profanes de Marguerite de Navarre: Deux faces d’un Janus évangélique,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 26, no. 4 (2002): 11–31; Félix R. Atance, “Les comédies profanes de Marguerite de Navarre: Aspects de la satire religieuse en France au XVIe siècle,” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 56 (1876): 289–313.

private intellectual gatherings hosted by women of the aristocracy or upper bourgeoisie. While there were a few examples during the sixteenth century, woman-led salons achieved prominence during the two following centuries, involving cultivated women in the cultural life of their time while affording male authors the opportunity to read from their works in progress, receive feedback, and build up a following. Dramatic performance was not a standard activity at the salons, but one type of play did emerge from those gatherings. Among the literary entertainments that evolved in salons was the proverb comedy, a short play (either improvised or written out in advance) that illustrated a well-known proverb but deliberately failed to mention that proverb within the text; some members of the group acted out the play, after which the others were asked to guess which proverb was intended. The proverb comedy, which has been likened to charades, is known to have existed at least as early as the 1640s, although the heyday of its popularity would not come until the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

In a few cases a woman-led salon is known to have produced a work by a male playwright. According to abbé Arnauld, the single most influential salon during the first half of the seventeenth century, the *salon bleu* hosted by Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet, put on at least one mixed-gender production: *La Sophonisbe* (most likely the tragedy authored by Jean Mairet in 1634). The performers included Arnauld himself (in the role of Scipion), Rambouillet's daughter Julie (in the eponymous role of Sophonisbe), and Angélique Paulet, who sang and accompanied herself on the theorbo during musical interludes between the acts.<sup>36</sup> However, we know of no evidence that this salon or others from this earlier period ever staged theatricals with texts authored by women.

On the other hand, some of the women who frequented the salons during later periods were encouraged to write, and their works encompassed a variety of genres, including plays. In some cases, as with Catherine Durand in the late seventeenth century, or Mme de Staal-Delaunay and Mme de Montesson in the eighteenth, these plays were specifically intended for performance at private theatricals.<sup>37</sup> Some women writers who were salon participants managed to get

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35. See Clarence D. Brenner, *Le développement du proverbe dramatique en France et sa vogue au XVIIIe siècle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937). There are modern editions of the two earliest collections: Catherine Durand, *Comédies en proverbes*, in *Femmes dramaturges en France 1650–1750: Pièces choisies*, tome II, ed. Perry Gethner (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2002), 237–318; Françoise de Maintenon, *Proverbes dramatiques*, ed. Perry Gethner and Theresa Varney Kennedy (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014).

36. J. Maillard, *Histoire de Rambouillet de son château et des lieux remarquables de son forêt* (Paris: Librairie Alphonse Picard, 1891), 136.

37. For modern editions of some of these works, see Gethner, *Femmes dramaturges*, 2:321–69 (Staal-Delaunay, *La mode*); Evain, Gethner, and Goldwyn, *Théâtre de femmes*, vol. 4 (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015) (Staal-Delaunay, *L'engouement*; Montesson, *Mariane*).

their works staged by professional companies, with Françoise Pascal and Mme de Villedieu being the earliest examples. The increased prominence of women, both as audiences and as writers, eventually worked its way into the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, with the Ancients being much more hostile to both women authors and to the role of women readers and spectators in shaping literary taste, while the Moderns were far more favorable to the participation of women in cultural life.<sup>38</sup>

It would be hard to overstate the importance of the French salons. They functioned as arbiters of aesthetic taste and social mores, with female hosts who served primarily as interlocutors for male poets and playwrights. But increasingly, as time went on, the salons could also be spaces where women were encouraged to become writers and cultural producers. French women-led salons were known to have functioned as early as the late sixteenth century, with the *salon vert* of Claude Catherine de Clermont-Vivonne, maréchale de Retz. By the early seventeenth century, especially with the *salon bleu* of her great-niece, the marquise de Rambouillet, these gatherings had come to constitute important social and cultural spaces that facilitated mixed-gender conversation and intellectual exchange. The salons opened up a space for women interested in drama that went far beyond the opportunities then available for women playwrights in the commercial theater, even though these theater companies did feature women players.

That the salons came to have a significant impact on dramatic production is undeniable. Contact with male writers allowed women participants to learn more about French drama in general, to become more interested in attending and reading plays, and to voice their preferences about the changes they wanted to see incorporated into plays. The role of salon women is often credited for the following developments in French drama in the seventeenth century: banning of overly vulgar language and gestures, respectful treatment of women by male characters (at least the admirable males), and the increasing importance of love plots, with the frequent use of *galant* phraseology (for example, referring to amorous passion as flames, chains, or prisons).<sup>39</sup> In addition, the contact with male playwrights was beneficial to aspiring women playwrights. The earlier view that in order to be able to compose a literary work in a genre deemed eminent, such as tragedy, one needed a knowledge of Latin and a thorough grounding in classical

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38. See Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

39. Alain Viala, *La France galante* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008); *Challenges to Traditional Authority: Plays by French Women Authors, 1650–1700*, ed. and trans. Perry Gethner (Toronto: Iter Academic Press; Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015), 2–9.

authors gave way to a new perspective: since contemporary French drama was increasingly recognized as distinct from ancient drama and since its rules were becoming widely known, women without the type of formal education men received could feel that they had the tools to write plays good enough to present to the public. There are also a few known cases where, probably thanks to contacts formed in the salons, a male playwright agreed to mentor a novice woman playwright, and the woman went on to achieve genuine success. Thus, abbé d'Aubignac worked with Villedieu and Edme Boursault worked with Marie-Anne Barbier.<sup>40</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It is tempting to speculate about the growing importance of salon hostesses, women playwrights, and women actors in relation to women's public space more broadly. From our perspective, it would seem natural for the successes gained by French women as cultural producers and theatrical performers to translate into gains for women in French public and political life. However, this was not necessarily the case. Gender-inclusive public spaces in France during this period remained limited, with the salons and the court offering the most opportunities, and the fact that women's voices were more widely circulating in print and on the literal stage did not obviously grant them a greater voice legally or politically.

Even worse, women were deliberately marginalized from power in the wake of the Fronde (a civil war that lasted from 1648 to 1653). Yet women who were exiled from court during the second half of the seventeenth century not unexpectedly devoted more time to running or attending salons and to writing; in some cases, they objected to the mistreatment of women in real life and even devised imaginary worlds in which women were in control. The most famous example from the middle part of the century is the female-controlled land of the Amazons in Madeleine de Scudéry's novel *Le grand Cyrus* to which the eminent poet Sapho (modeled on Scudéry herself) retires. In the final decade of the century a number of women composed literary fairy tales that often featured imaginary realms run by queens or fairies.<sup>41</sup> The issue of political rights for women would not receive serious attention until the French Revolution. What we would call feminist thought during the early modern period instead focused on ob-

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40. Myriam Dufour-Maitre, *Les précieuses: Naissance des femmes de lettres en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2008), 356–69.

41. Mary Elizabeth Storer, *Un épisode littéraire de la fin du XVIIe siècle: La mode des contes de fées (1685–1700)* (Paris: Champion, 1928); Jacques Barchilon, *Le conte merveilleux français de 1690 à 1790* (Paris: Champion, 1975); Lewis C. Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality and Gender in France 1690–1715* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Raymonde Robert, *Le conte de fées littéraire en France de la fin du XVIIe siècle à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1982).

jections to the constraints placed upon women in regard to marriage (both in regard to choice of husband and to rights after marriage), and on the issue of whether girls need to be educated at all, and if so, what type of curriculum should be used. That being said, the number of women publishing, including women playwrights, grew steadily over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while mixed-gender troupes whose repertoire required gifted female leads remained the norm for public playhouses from then on; the use of actresses would be central to the entire subsequent history of French drama.