

Subverting the Script:
Female Playwrights and the Fluidity of Gender and Class in 18th-Century France

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how gender and marriage are depicted in 18th-century pre-revolutionary French theaters written by women. While conventional tropes of arranged marriage and forbidden love permeate the period's theater, this study highlights a focus on gender inversion and female autonomy within the selected corpus. By analyzing the works of Barbier, Graffigny, and Benoist, the research demonstrates how Enlightenment values were interpreted through a gendered lens, resulting in fluid portrayals of behavior, emotion, and kinship systems. Furthermore, by expanding the scope beyond public stages to include private theatrical spheres, this thesis reveals how female dramatists utilized the public nature of theater to challenge social norms. Ultimately, these works facilitate a critical dialogue on the evolution of gendered identity and the subversive potential of early modern female authorship.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This thesis examines plays written by women in France during the 1700s, just before the French Revolution. During that period, plays often covered common themes like arranged marriages or “forbidden” love. However, this study focuses on a different aspect of these stories: how female writers used their characters to challenge strict rules imposed on women. The study also looks beyond the famous public theaters to include plays performed in private homes and social circles. It shows that these women weren’t just writing entertainment; they were using the stage as a public platform to challenge how society treated them. Ultimately, these 300-year-old plays spark a conversation that remains relevant today about how we define gender and independence.

DEDICATION

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my committee for their invaluable guidance and insightful feedback throughout this project. I am particularly grateful to my chair, Dr. Shryock, for his unwavering support, patience, and for providing the academic freedom that allowed me to grow and explore this topic fully.

To Elizabeth & Brenna

I will keep climbing this mountain so you can stand taller and see farther. Remember, you are never alone.

*"I have been a thousand different women."
-Emory Hall*

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1- <i>Arrie et Pétus</i> and the Rise of the Female Heroine	1
CHAPTER 2- The Social Institution of Gender in Graffigny's <i>Cénie</i>	15
CHAPTER 3- Gender Fluidity in Graffigny's <i>Phaza</i>	25
CHAPTER 4- Gender & Social Classes in <i>La Superchérie réciproque</i>	35
CONCLUSION- A Gendered Legacy.....	43
WORKS CITED.....	47

Introduction

French society in the 18th-century maintained strict stability through rigid patriarchal hierarchies that confined individuals to predetermined roles. Gender and class intersected to keep women under control. Elite women could be seen to hold a unique place in society at that time, wielding influence through salons and courts, while lower-class women were mostly restricted to domestic duties in the private sphere, as social order relied on their remaining in the home under male control. Legal and social structures of the Old Regime, which viewed women as intellectually weak and subordinate, facilitated their transfer from father to husband, turning marriage into a transactional tool for wealth and lineage rather than affection. Women were treated as perpetual dependents, making them prey to men and socially isolated. Ultimately, while men passed their family name to their offspring, it was the women, a subordinate class, whose value resided solely in their ability to produce the next generation.

Theaters

The 18th century made France and Paris the hub of cultural trends and new ideas. In September 1715, after Louis XIV's death, his great-grandson, Louis XV, took the throne at just five years old. This transition, with his great-uncle, Philippe II, Duke of Orleans, serving as regent, ushered in a period of political uncertainty that opened the door to significant social transformation. As the rigid structures of the past loosened, Enlightenment values emphasized

the importance of the individual and empowered the Third Estate; many saw these transformations as a chance to rise and be heard.

The theater had long been a controversial space for the monarchy, strictly monitored and censored to prevent the spread of views and ideas deemed threatening or progressive. People were not supposed to deviate from the King's mores or challenge social and gender norms. Giving people a platform, literally a stage, where they could be something other than what they were, dangerously empowered them. The theaters in France provided an outlet for intellect and emotion. The censorship the theater faced from the Crown highlighted the perceived threat that public performances posed to social order and the monarchy's control over its subjects. At that time, people's knowledge was limited and could be easily manipulated if they lacked access to education, printed information, or broader geographical connections. By regulating what was published or performed, the King could keep people ignorant and suppress their imaginations. The government's control of culture through censorship of dramatic discourse maintained the social order's hierarchy and contributed to the stability of the absolute monarchy.

The Comédie-Française, the first officially state-run theater, was established in 1680 when Louis XIV ordered the merger of Molière's and La Thuillierie's rival theater troupes in Paris. They had operated henceforth as a single company that performed plays by Corneille, Molière, and Racine, among others. The Comédie-Française was a state theater charged with "upholding the dignity of the monarchy and the inviolability of the Catholic Church" (Hemmings 44). Around 1760, commercial theaters began to appear, and many became privatized. In exchange for strict censorship and control, the King granted the Comédie-Française a pension and royal protection, elevating their prestige. This backing gave the troupe a significant advantage over others such as the Comédie-Italienne.

The turn of the 18th century marked a breakthrough for women in the theater, as female playwrights began to have their work performed at the Comédie-Française. Perry Gethner notes that Catherine Bernard was the first woman to have a play performed at the theater in 1687 (*The Lunatic Lover* XIII). However, success was not consistent throughout the century. In fact, between 1717 and 1749, no new plays by women were produced (Showalter 96). Gethner, in *Thèmes philosophiques et féministes dans le théâtre de Madame de Graffigny et de ses contemporaines*, argues that one reason for the scarcity of female-authored performances was that public theaters like the prestigious Comédie-Française favored tragedies, which were considered the most highly regarded genre. According to Gethner, tragedy did not attract many women. In this thesis, we will examine one tragedy, a drama, and two comedies, highlighting that systemic social barriers were more likely the reason for their infrequency. Given the gender inequalities inherent in 18th-century French society, the few women who successfully published or staged their works were truly remarkable.

Theatrical Education

In 18th-century France, the theater served as a cultural crossroads. It offered an escape from daily life and a place to be seen. For upper-class spectators, the act of going to the theater was often more significant than what was performed on stage. The theater was divided into sections that reflected social divisions, accommodating these groups while separating them. The balconies were reserved for the wealthy, while the pit, or *parterre*, was a common space where men could watch a performance at a lower cost. The pit, being close to the stage with standing room only, was a space for audience participation. Seats weren't installed in the *parterre* until

1782, and this change was not welcomed by everyone. Ravel writes, "[members of the parterre] thought [it] capable of self-government, and they warned against the despotic consequences that would occur if the parterre were seated. The standing parterre was a sort of theatrical utopia, where virtuous men overcame the inequalities of birth to act in an enlightened manner" (Ravel). The theater was a microcosm of society, and one's social class influenced the experience. However, regardless of where people sat in the theater, all audience members watched the same performance. The theater helped bridge class divides and allowed written work to be shared through oral performance, thus reaching a broader cross-section of society than other forms of writing.

Enlightenment thinkers viewed theater as a tool to promote moral development. While theater provided an escape, a distraction, and a source of enjoyment, it also served as a platform for expression, allowing writers to create worlds unlike their own. In *De la réformation du théâtre* (1743), the author and actor Luigi Riccoboni claimed that one of the most significant benefits of theater was its ability to convey practical truths to the spectator's soul through entertainment (Riccoboni 96). As Hemmings observes, theaters were vital to Parisians; they craved the entertainment and escape they offered. Regarding commercial theaters and the monarchy's censorship, J.F. Reichardt, an 18th-century writer and critic, stated, "[the crown] says that many of the small theaters will be suppressed. I am curious to see whether they will really dare to attempt such a measure; for whoever lays a finger on the Parisians and their theaters affects them spiritually, just as a rise in the price of bread affects them physically. Cheap bread and play a lot!" (Hemmings 115). This access to arts and entertainment was sacred and remains a fundamental part of French culture today.

Public and Private Stages

Comparing public and private productions from this period allows for a nuanced analysis of themes and characters as reflections of feminist attitudes. Performing on public stages generated revenue and could bring notoriety and prestige. However, writing for public stages also entailed limitations and personal risk. Writers aiming to express progressive views had to carefully balance tradition and innovation. Creative liberties that challenged social and gender norms were not openly accepted and often led to theatrical failures and damage to a writer's reputation. In addition to the typical barriers to success faced by male writers, women also had to navigate gender roles in society, which often required obedience and agreeableness. To be taken seriously, women had to choose their words carefully in both their works and public life. For many women, the potential risk outweighed the reward. Mme Roland, who avoided this dilemma by collaborating with her husband, summarized it as follows: "Jamais je n'eus la plus légère tentation de devenir auteur un jour; je vis de très bonne heure qu'une femme qui gagnait ce titre perdait beaucoup plus qu'elle n'avait acquis" (quoted in Showalter 24). Women playwrights faced a difficult choice. If they pursued a public career, they knew that society would inevitably find ways to discredit and demean them.

Private stages, however, were spaces where censorship and public criticism could not easily extend their reach. Home theaters and salons grew increasingly popular. Many women took advantage of the 18th-century fascination with amateur theater, or *théâtre de société*, in which individuals built and set up theaters in their homes (Gethner 291). These private stages

offered writers opportunities to test new works. They also provided unlimited entertainment and tended to be more daring and provocative. Françoise de Graffigny describes one such theater in a letter dated December 16th 1738:

"Le théâtre est fort joli, mais la salle est petite. Un théâtre et une salle de marionnettes, oh, c'est drôle! Mais qu'y a-t-il d'étonnant? Voltaire est aussi aimable enfant que sage philosophe. Le fond de la salle n'est qu'une loge peinte garnie, comme un sofa, et le bord sur lequel on l'appuie est garni aussi. Les décorations sont en colonnades, avec des pots d'orangers entre les colonnes." (I, 228)

These small, fully functional theaters in homes and estates, like the one at Cirey, home to Voltaire and his lover Emilie du Chatelet, served as safe testing grounds for playwrights and offered a more intimate experience for spectators. For some women, these private stages would be the only places where their plays would be performed.

Another difference between public and private theaters was whether admission was charged (Hemmings 226). Private theatrical companies attracted audiences by invitation. Women in this sector wrote for pleasure and had the freedom to be both creative and critical in their work. In Paris, the number of private theaters before the Revolution was estimated to be over 100 (Hemmings 229). Intellectual and enlightened thinkers were more open to women expressing themselves, whereas traditionalists saw little value in women's opinions. During this period, no shared literary space existed; instead, it was divided along gender lines. The space occupied by female writers was never on the same level as that of men; instead, it was separate and othered. Works created for these private venues are difficult to find today, as many have been lost, possibly never preserved, or published in large quantities.

Salons

Gender, rank, and social norms—any one of which could mean instant rejection—created a rather inhospitable environment for female writers. However, the 18th century, during the Enlightenment, saw the golden age of salons, spaces where women could find intellectual outlets. "In continental Europe, the salon was widely regarded as a powerful force, 'a vast engine of power, an organ of public opinion' or, in Montesquieu's words, 'a kind of republic...a new state within a state. This novel institution was largely the creation of aristocratic women'" (Landes 21). Salons played a significant role in motivating and creating opportunities for women. They exposed them to new knowledge and fostered critical thinking. Many salon hostesses, *salonnières*, had some level of formal education and came from privileged households. The contribution of salons to the social liberation of intellectual thought for women is highlighted in an article from the Library of Congress:

They were the daughters of French ministers or the wives of aristocrats and had grown up with the privilege of an expansive education. Although they did not enjoy legal rights, in many cases, they were regarded as intellectual equals of the men in their lives. Historians still debate the true role of the salon in history, but there is no doubt that it provided a platform for its hosts to exert influence beyond the domestic realm. ("Women and the Revolution")

Behind closed doors, these impromptu theaters provided an escape from the suffocating restrictions of Parisian society, sparking imagination and creativity.

Françoise de Graffigny was a well-known hostess who held her salon on rue d'Enfer in Paris, near the Luxembourg Gardens. Unlike many of her fellow *salonnières*, she did not come

from wealth and faced several financial setbacks. However, her persistence ultimately led to her success. She expanded her social circle through the connections and friendships she built.

Graffigny's salon focused on writing and aimed to be more inclusive than those reserved for the elite. It did not have set meeting times or dress codes. Her goal was to encourage conversation, and she believed that a diverse group of attendees helped achieve that.

The Women Behind the Works

Many recognize the names Marivaux or Beaumarchais, whose works are frequently staged today, but where are the women? Many might say they never existed because they are not mentioned in history books or their busts are not displayed, but they were there. They wrote, published, performed, and were well known in their time. Their presence was not isolated but part of a continuous stream of women who created and contributed to a legacy. Anne-Marie Barbier's advocacy for women's equality, recognition, and abilities in her preface to *Arrie et Pétus* (1702) could be mistaken for an article from today. The core of the female struggle has not changed. History has long been written by men about men, with women making only occasional appearances. Their significant achievements were often downplayed or credited to male influence and assistance. If women were too good, men would look for possible solutions. A woman could never simply be good. Thankfully, Perry Gethner's translations and critical editions have highlighted French women writers from this period and expanded our understanding of 18th-century French drama.

Male writers often sought help or advice from colleagues without criticism. However, women with male mentors faced harsh backlash, and their work was frequently attributed to

men, undermining their credibility, and inviting accusations of plagiarism (Gethner XII). Women who depended on writing for their primary income had to cater to the public and remain vigilant against censors to protect their livelihoods. Playwrights working for public theaters generally adhered to tradition and avoided excessive innovation to prevent shocking audiences. This thesis, therefore, not only uncovers a new history of female theater but also offers a broader perspective on theater as a whole. Many characters in these plays reflect the writers' own desires for greater freedom and social justice. Female characters in theater have long been created from a male perspective. Female characters written by women often challenge gender stereotypes and social restrictions. To better understand the context in which these characters were created, the following is a brief biographical overview of the authors covered in this thesis.

Françoise de Graffigny, author of *Cénie* and *Phaza*, began her writing career after her marriage and had no surviving children. Born in Nancy, she had a father in the military and a mother who was the niece of the famous engraver Jean Callot (Kulesa). She received a modest education and married at 17. Graffigny's marriage was a difficult period in her life, as her husband was emotionally and physically abusive. Graffigny eventually sought legal action and obtained a separation agreement. Her husband died in 1725, two years after the court order. After her unhappy marriage, her benefactor was Élisabeth Sophie de Lorraine, Duchess of Richelieu. Following the Duchess's death in 1740, Graffigny focused on writing as a source of income. Her extensive daily correspondence with her friend François-Antoine Devaux offers insight into her life and reveals parallels between Graffigny's experiences and the characters in her plays.

Marie-Anne Barbier was born in Orléans in 1664 to a family of working-class craftsmen and bourgeoisie d'offices (Montoya). Little is known about her education or early life. Her family left Orléans and presumably moved to Paris. Barbier appeared on the French salon scene

at the beginning of the 18th century. She frequented the salon of Marie-Anne Mancini, the Duchess of Bouillon, niece of Cardinal Mazarin, chief minister of Louis XIV. Barbier dedicated her first play, a tragedy titled *Arrie et Pétus*, to Madame la Duchesse de Bouillon, a patron of female writers and a woman of influence. Barbier was the author of four tragedies and a comedy. She admired Corneille, and her plays strictly adhered to the norms of classical theater. It is unclear whether Barbier was married or where her income came from beyond the theater. Assuming she supported herself through her writing, having her pieces performed on public stages would have been essential to generating revenue, which would also have meant she faced more pressure to write within the codes of *la bienséance*, a rule requiring plays to respect moral codes and good taste. This ensured that performances were appropriate and did not shock audiences. *La vraisemblance*, which is closely linked, demanded believability. Defying social norms could drastically impact her career longevity. The salon scene proved vital for forming connections with playwrights, such as Boursault, and fellow female writers. These connections helped Barbier get her work showcased on the biggest stage in Paris.

Françoise-Albine Benoist was a French novelist and playwright, born in Lyon in 1724. She married painter Jean-Marie Benoist in 1754. None of her theatrical works were performed publicly, and little is known about her life. She contributed to *Journal des Dames*, a magazine aimed at a female audience. The magazine initially focused on fashion but in the 1760s adopted a feminist approach, addressing women's issues. "The publication of *Le Cabinet des modes* and *Le Journal des dames et des modes* coincided with the growing public debate on French women's right to a compulsory and improved education... these journals engage in that debate, both tangentially in their role as cultural and sartorial educator and directly in their discussions of the ideal components of a new female-focused pedagogy in France" (McIlanney 239). Benoist used

the journal to explore themes of virtue, morality, and gender, all of which appear in her play *La Superchérie réciproque* (1768). She also often attended less prominent salons in Paris and actively participated in debates about Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas on gender roles.

From a patriarchal standpoint, depicting women as strong or intelligent would have been threatening. Such portrayals could undermine male dominance and present women as equal and capable, views previously discussed as antithetical to the dominant ideologies of the epoch. Although the theater presented ideas somewhat removed from social realities, these ideas still posed a danger. The three female playwrights studied here used theater to challenge stereotypes and promote societal change by publicly presenting new possibilities. Plays presented alternate realities and could encourage tolerance through exposure, for instance, by showcasing women in positions of authority or power. Leading female characters in these plays do not submit to patriarchal figures; they act independently and rely on their own judgment. While they do not always avoid hardship or consequences for their choices, they act voluntarily. Female protagonists demonstrate complex thought processes and control emotional responses, traits often associated with male characters in Classical drama. In each play, we see evidence of Enlightenment values filtered through a gendered lens. Gender becomes more fluid through reversals in gendered behaviors, emotions, and, sometimes, physical traits. We also observe examples of a transformed gendered kinship system.

Chapter 1

Public Theaters

Arrie et Pétus and the Rise of the Female Heroine

Anne-Marie Barbier's *Arrie et Pétus* is the first of two publicly staged plays discussed in this thesis. First performed on June 3, 1702, it is also the oldest. This work is significant to the historical development of the female heroine. In the preface, Barbier speaks directly to her female audience. The foreword's strong feminist views set the tone for a fresh, bold interpretation of Pliny the Younger's classic story. Although Barbier faced gender-based limitations in her professional writing, her play still pushes boundaries by developing complex female characters and featuring a woman in the lead role. Edmé Boursault, a French playwright and friend of Corneille, served as a mentor to Barbier early in her theater career; he died in 1701. Boursault encouraged Barbier to write for the stage and suggested the topic of *Arrie et Pétus*. Intrigued by the story and captivated by the strong female heroine, Arrie, Barbier accepted the challenge.

From the outset, Barbier was determined to showcase her talents as a female writer within a continuum of women authors, not in isolation. In her preface, she pays tribute to those who came before her and challenges critics who claim women cannot be writers and intellectuals. She writes, "Cependant, sans chercher des exemples dans l'antiquité, notre siècle a fourni assez de dames savantes pour détruire cette prévention, et je pourrais en citer une infinité

pour autoriser ce que j'avance" (Barbier). Barbier goes on to name several women and praises them for their achievements in prose and verse. Her preface also confronts those who dismiss her work because of its female authorship. Barbier highlights the successes of Catherine Bernard, a 17th-century French poet and playwright, to counter claims that her success was impossible and must have been largely written by a man: "les tragédies de Mademoiselle Bernard sont trop récentes pour être effacées de la mémoire des envieux de notre gloire" (Barbier). Bernard died in 1712 and would undoubtedly have read Barbier's work. Presenting evidence of other female accomplishments emphasizes a lineage that strengthens her resolve and courage, as well as that of her female audience.

Arrie et Pétus contribute to an emerging focus on female agency during this time period. In the language of the preface, males become the Other. Barbier writes, "En vérité, je ne me serais jamais imaginé que ce qui a plu dans mon ouvrage eût dû me nuire, ni qu'on refusât aux personnes de notre sexe le mérite de produire de bonnes choses" (*Théâtre de femmes de l'Ancien régime*, tome III, 365). She criticizes the prejudice that women are incapable of producing quality work. Barbier does not shy away from her success to appease men; she openly embraces the part of her work that depicts women as equals, representing a woman confident in her talent and unapologetically female. *Arrie et Pétus* was performed 23 times at the Comédie-Française (De Laporte 84). Marie-Anne Barbier held the record for the most plays staged by a woman until George Sand produced her sixth stage work in 1888 (Showalter 97).

Arrie et Pétus was the first of four tragedies written by Barbier, further challenging Gethner's claim that the absence of works written by women was due to their disinterest in the genre. The script, written in classical Alexandrine verse, follows the three unities of tragedy: the plot must unfold in a single setting over 24 hours, with a single main storyline connecting all the

side plots. The play features complex female characters who act decisively and independently, even in the face of a crisis. According to the preserved letters of Pliny the Younger, Arria, a Roman woman, visits her husband in prison after Emperor Claudius has condemned him to death for his involvement in a rebellion. Paetus is reluctant to take his own life, so during a visit, Arrie plunges a dagger into her own heart and then gives her dagger to her husband, famously saying, "Paetus, it does not hurt." Paetus then follows her example and kills himself (Firth para. 5). Marie-Anne Barbier's version of the piece alters some details to emphasize the women. An unidentified reviewer of Barbier's tragedy praises it in those terms:

On y trouve du goût, du génie et de beaux vers, des scènes bien liées, des situations touchantes, des sujets bien choisis. Les hommes lui ont reproché qu'elle avait trop cherché à célébrer les femmes, et qu'en voulant faire les héroïnes de ses pièces grandes et généreuses [...]. (Montoya 2005 para. 12)

Like her male counterparts, Marie-Anne Barbier sought opinions and guidance from other playwrights of her era. However, because she was associated with male mentors such as Boursault and the abbé Simon-Joseph Pellegrin, himself a poet and playwright, she faced negative criticism and attacks on her claims of authorship. Another review of *Arrie et Pétus* reads:

Ce seroit tromper grossièrement le public que de lui laisser croire que cette tragédie est entièrement de Mademoiselle Barbier, ainsi qu'on pourroit le présumer sur le titre des Œuvres de cette demoiselle : il y aurait aussi quelque injustice à soutenir qu'elle n'a fait que prêter son nom à M. l'abbé Pellegrin. Ce qui est certain, c'est que ce dernier en est l'auteur de la meilleure partie. Ce fait est connu, et nous a été attesté par M. l'abbé Pellegrin lui-même. [...] Cette tragédie eut assez de succès pour que

Mademoiselle Barbier put se flatter d'avoir réussi. Il y a cependant bien de l'apparence qu'elle ne le dut qu'à l'indulgence du public pour un coup d'essai, et pour la personne qui s'en disait l'auteur : car la pièce est un peu faible par la conduite, les sentiments, et la versification. (F. et C. Parfaict, *Histoire du théâtre français depuis son origine jusqu'à présent*, Paris, P.G. Le Mercier et Saillant, t.14, 258-264)

Reviews either said it was too good to have been written by a woman or accepted her authorship while criticizing the piece. Enlightenment values fostered female empowerment, but established social conventions did not. Women were only allowed to be so talented and were discouraged from publicly attempting to surpass men. The reviewer's criticism of the powerful female characters highlights the double standard women faced. Barbier also pushed the boundaries of what was tolerated at the time in how she depicted women in her play. Marie-Anne Barbier celebrates female strength and presents the audience with Arrie, the ideal heroine.

Barbier was sensitive to social conventions and gender imbalances. This awareness contributed to her success as a professional playwright. In the preface, she alluded to gender-based double standards when justifying the elevated level of intelligence she bestowed upon Claudius. History describes him as timid and someone who suffered from unusual movements and tics (Momigliano). Barbier writes : "Quelque temps après, on m'objecta que Claudius n'était point caractérisé, et que je le faisais parler avec trop d'esprit pour un homme que l'histoire représentait comme un imbécile... Outre que si j'avais fait parler Claudius en stupide, tout ce qu'il aurait dit de mauvais serait retombé sur moi" (*Théâtre de femmes de l'Ancien régime*, tome III, 364). Barbier, in other words, improved the male character so that the

differences in competence and valor between the male and female protagonists were less shocking to the male audience. Making Claudius more intelligent would mask some of the women's powerful traits, giving the illusion of counterpoise. Even with increased attention to improving the male characters, some reviews of the piece suggest that Barbier still went too far in exalting women. In a book published in 1769 on the history of French female writers M. de la Porte expresses his unease with the representation of gender in *Arrie et Pétus*:

Ce théâtre, Madame, n'a rien de remarquable, rien qui le distingue particulièrement. On sait qu'en général, l'auteur s'y proposait la gloire de son sexe, en choisissant des sujets qui en étaient comme le triomphe ; mais rien de plus commun que la manière de les traiter. Il est cependant vrai de dire que la conduite de ces tragédies est assez régulière, et l'enchaînement des scènes assez bien lié ; parce qu'il ne faut pour cela que cette espèce de bon sens, dont Mademoiselle Barbier n'était pas dépourvue. Il y règne même une sorte de sublime manqué, d'où résultent mille défauts d'exécution. À force de vouloir rendre ses héroïnes grandes et généreuses, les héros même les plus connus deviennent tremblants et timides. Elle ne montre partout que de grandes femmes et de petits hommes, des géantes et des pygmées. (La Porte 84-93)

La Porte lightly acknowledges Barbier's skill in executing the play's structure and versification but also suggests that it is not an impressive feat. Downplaying the difficulty of the task also diminishes the achievement. Criticizing her work for inadequate portrayals of the male sex highlights the misogynistic norms of 18th-century French society. Portraying men as sentimental is clearly shocking and crosses a line. Gender roles and behaviors in the 18th-century were expected to be followed across all facets of society. Conformity was key to maintaining

patriarchy, misogyny, and the social order. By reversing traditional gender roles for her characters, Barbier's work made conservative audiences feel uncomfortable and threatened.

While her version remains faithful to the tragic love theme, Barbier introduces notable differences. A point of disagreement between Barbier and Boursault during the writing process involved the couple's marital status. In Pliny, Arrie and Pétus are married and have a child, but Barbier thought it would be more engaging on stage if they were lovers : "J'eus beau lui dire que l'amour conjugal languirait sur scène, et ne serait pas du goût de bien des gens, il ne revint point de son sentiment ; et moi-même, après y avoir pensé, je sentis bien qu'il avait raison, et que l'histoire serait trop défigurée" (Barbier, 364). Ultimately, Barbier compromised by portraying them as lovers for the first three acts and as husband and wife for the last two. In a footnote in *The Lunatic Lover* (214), Perry Gethner, pioneering scholar of 17th-and 18th-century French literature questions Barbier's motives: "Given that her dying father ordered her to marry Pétus, and that their love is mutual, it is hard to see why Arrie should have waited until this moment to agree to the marriage" (Gethner 341). The passion increases with Arrie being single. Since marriages of the period rarely resulted from deep love, depicting a married couple on stage wouldn't evoke the same emotional response as a secret one. Moreover, Arrie's independence in remaining unmarried for most of the play—only agreeing to marry Pétus when ready—challenges social norms. Marriage happens solely at Arrie's chosen moment. This focus on personal choice was becoming increasingly significant in theater at the time, and performances centered on marriage carried deeper meaning than simple love stories. Vickerman-Ribémont, an academic author and editor known for her work in comparative literature notes:

La nouvelle conception du mariage se heurte aux traditions familiales, aux stratégies économiques et sociales, consolidées par des dispositions juridiques. Et

puisque ce changement de l'approche du lien conjugal a un effet sur la relation entre l'individu à la recherche du bonheur... et traduit en même temps un état et des défis de la société. (14)

The idea of a woman dictating her marriage sharply contrasts with what actual women in the audience would have experienced or those holding the book in hand. Her father is dead, and she is unmarried, yet she is still capable of speaking and acting on her own behalf. This absence of patriarchal influence was a new idea in 18th-century theater, allowing the elevation of strong women. This self-sufficiency is shown when Arrie says,

Allons, cherchons Pétus, qu'il nous prête sa main ;

Et qu'il venge en consul tout l'Empire romain.

J'ai su lui cacher, je le ferais encore. (13)

Waiting until the last minute to involve Pétus in her plan underscores that Arrie is the decision-maker in the relationship and Pétus a supporting character. We see the same unilateral planning later in Graffigny's *Cénie*, when Dorimond and Méricourt arrange Cénie's marriage without her. In this case, Arrie is deciding Pétus' future without him present. However, Arrie is doing so with the intent of protecting him, not because she disregards his opinion. This reversal in decision-making places the males in passive roles. Claudius and Pétus are at the mercy of Agrippine and Arrie's choices, while we will see Cénie at the mercy of patriarchs.

From Ancient Rome to 18th-century France, marriages helped men build economic wealth and social status. In her chapter "The Traffic in Women," Gayle Rubin discusses kinship and the exchange of women as commodities to form male alliances or to gain status for families.

Men were the agents behind these transactions; through arranged marriages, women were exchanged, bought, and sold for men's benefit. Ruben elaborates on this further:

Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical ties, status, lineage, names, ancestors, rights, and people—men, women, and children—in concrete systems of social relationships. (Rubin 88)

Women are considered the transferable sex; men are attached to family names and property. In this sense, the marriages in *Arrie et Pétus* shifted the benefactors within the kinship system. Both Agrippine and Arrie take control of their marriages, and in Agrippine's case, she uses the transaction for her own benefit rather than for the male or her father. Agrippine desires a marriage with Claudius so strongly that she is willing to manipulate and kill for it. She craves status and power for herself and her children, adopting a male role. Before his death, Arrie's father expressed his wish that she marry Pétus. It did not happen immediately after his death; instead, Arrie, who loves Pétus, suggested that they marry before being arrested for treason. Arrie dictates her own exchange to benefit her morality and interests.

The 18th-century commodification of women diminished their freedoms. The roles assigned to women restricted their power. From a 21st-century perspective, we can appreciate that the biological determinism that prescribes women as inferior is being challenged. As Rubin notes: "To an anthropologist, a kinship system is not a list of biological relatives. It is a system of categories and statuses that often contradict actual genetic relationships" (82). This was true in Barbier's 18th-century society and in Roman times as well. Marriage alliances that linked ruling families were often based on social rank rather than biology. Granting Agrippine and Arrie control over their wealth and the women benefiting from marriage transactions enacts a form of resistance to the French kinship system. On Barbier's stage, women both influence and profit

from marriage. Arrie refused to marry the emperor and disregarded the social advancement and power it could bring. She based her marriage on love and honor rather than on money.

Just as males assume the role of the "other" in the preface, male characters occupy a secondary position throughout the play. Gender roles are subverted: male characters adopt stereotypically female personas, driven by love, acting impulsively and emotionally, and appearing less intellectually capable than the female characters. The women in *Arrie et Pétus* take on male roles as decision-makers and authority figures, remaining level-headed and courageous during hardships. As La Porte notes in his review, this merging of female bodies with male qualities was not well received. Barbier challenges gender norms and presents a subversion of traditional gendered binary relationships. Arrie declares, "J'aime mieux la mort que le suprême rang, s'il faut pour y monter trahir mon propre sang" (22). Arrie does not seek social status but instead chooses a life of integrity and loyalty, standing against social conventions. Here, blood does not refer to purity, as was common at the time, but to defending a bloodline or a family member. Arrie is speaking of defending [*son*] *propre sang*, her father, who was accused of treason. A woman defending a man who is socially condemned is noteworthy, as women were rarely protected. Later, in other plays examined, we see people, mainly women, commit social errors that tarnish bloodlines, result in being sent away, and go undefended.

Barbier's Agrippine and Arrie dominate the stage in different ways. Arrie seeks to avenge her father's death and fights for justice and loyalty. Agrippine, who symbolizes grandeur and complexity, desires power and recognition. These women are noticeably more developed characters than their male counterparts. Both women are depicted as more powerful than the emperor, who holds the highest station in Rome. Claudius represents a patriarchal society that presents a powerful exterior while hiding its faults and insecurities. The two women share in

Claudius a common enemy and are alike in their ambition and determination to get their way. Agrippine seeks power and status, which she hopes to attain as Empress of Rome. Agrippine is willing to kill for this position and even manipulates Arrie's relationship with Pétus to eliminate her rival. She is a proud woman determined to place her family on the throne. While her motives align with traditional marriage strategies, she aims to benefit from the transaction and desires power to achieve her personal ambitions. The women's bodies and marriageability are bargaining chips they control. Arrie can choose to marry Claudius and rise to the highest station, or she can choose to marry Pétus, whom she loves, and face death. This ability to choose was generally not available to women in French society at the time, as we will see in later plays.

Throughout the play, Arrie expresses a variety of emotions. Both female characters present themselves differently in their demeanor and desires. While one plays the villain and the other the hero, there are several parallels between them. In *Arrie et Pétus*, both women seek to restore familial honor and status. Seeing two women in similar situations and observing their different behaviors allows for the simultaneous portrayal of two strong women. Agrippine aims to become Empress, fulfilling a family destiny—her father would have been emperor if he had not been killed. Arrie is seeking justice for her father's unjust death at Claudius's hands. For Arrie, her honor and that of her family are her top priorities, while her own love and well-being come second. Conversely, Agrippine acts out of greed, seeking to advance her interests and gain power, as she says: "La nature pour lors nous parle vainement. La fière ambition parle bien autrement" (367). Neither woman shows fear of the male characters. Agrippine uses her cunning to control the emperor: "Claudius à mes pieds, Messaline au tombeau...Au trône des Césars, je ne suis pas encore : et le sort qui m'appelle à ce rang plein d'appas" (366). She takes charge of her destiny and leverages her position to form alliances in her favor. Agrippine also conceals her

true feelings depending on whether she speaks in private or in front of Claudius: "Je vois l'empereur; cachons nos sentiments" (3). Such psychological detail adds depth to her character. She defies stereotypes of timidity, weakness, submission, and ignorance. While some female readers or theatergoers could disagree with Agrippine's domineering, manipulative traits or motives, they can still admire her strength. Arrie, the virtuous heroine, remains unafraid of death and eschews any fear or control the emperor might hold over her. Through Arrie, Barbier advocates for female agency and morality above all else, even if it means leaving society altogether through death.

Unlike the females, both Claudius and Pétus are indecisive. Claudius's hesitation and reluctance to have Arrie killed reveal a weaker side, a trait rarely associated with the emperor's station. Duty, honor, and loyalty are embodied by the female characters. Pétus never takes control of his relationship with Arrie; this is evident because they are not yet married, and he is ignorant of her plans. In an effort to save himself and Arrie, he allows himself to be manipulated by Agrippine, involving an enemy in his plans to escape. Arrie's choice is to stay and face death. Additionally, if Arrie hadn't forced him to consider suicide, he likely would have faced a harsh execution at Claudius's hands. "Bannis donc, cher époux, la frayeur de ton âme, et ne refuse pas l'exemple d'une femme" (428). She knows she is stronger and that Pétus would waver if she did not act. Only when Pétus's life is threatened does Arrie seem to hesitate, but her fear is never for herself. Claudius protects himself by eliminating others : "Pour assurer mes jours, sa mort fut nécessaire" (376). At the same time, Arrie protects others by eliminating herself—a much braver act. She sacrifices the highest power in Rome for her family and her integrity, and she does not wish to trade freedom for power.

Arrie and Agrippine both take control away from Claudius. When learning of Arrie's refusal and marriage to Pétus, Claudius states, "Quoi! Malgré mon pouvoir, vous disposez? (64). Claudius is shocked and blindsided that he never gets what he wants, considering the political station he holds. Claudius expresses his fear of Agrippine when he says : "De tous mes ennemis je ne crains qu'elle-même" (370). The emperor fears her more than anyone else, and his power diminishes under her influence and strength. " [...] Claudius : je m'attends à sa fureur/ Sitôt qu'elle apprendra qu'une nouvelle ardeur, / Lui fait perdre à la fois et l'Empire et mon cœur." (370). While talking with Claudius for the last time Arrie states, "Agrippine.... [sic] à ce nom tyran, je meurs contente " (70). Arrie is aware of Agrippine's power and knows she will continue to dominate Claudius even after she dies.

Society in the 18th-century operated according to rank and station. As previously argued, marriage was seen as an exchange of women for status and money. Claudius offers Arrie a choice, saying, "Du maître, ou de l'amant, c'est à vous de choisir." indicating he can be her lover or her master. This depiction of Claudius reveals his true nature and symbolizes how quickly things can change in marriage. In the beginning, he professed his love and was willing to lay the empire at her feet, yet when she displeases him, he becomes her master. Ultimately, Arrie chooses freedom through death. Claudius' emotions reveal panic, as if he's at the mercy of both women. He also appears to beg for Arrie's hand in marriage:

Mais enfin à vos pieds je mets la terre et l'onde.

L'époux que je vous offre est le maître du monde:

Et, quelque grand qu'il soit, vous voyez toutefois

Que ce maître du monde est soumis à vos lois. (373)

Claudius states that Arrie is the master of his world, his *maîtresse*, and Agrippine is the person he most fears. Making a woman control not only ordinary men but also the most powerful—the emperor—is a bold move for the playwright. Neither female character allows herself to be victimized.

Agrippine's personality aligns with Barbier's style in the preface, with her calculated mannerisms and language reflecting her unapologetic confidence. She aspires to power. Arrie refuses to let a man control her life and remains stoic in the face of danger. In their final moments, Arrie tells Pétus :

Vous me voyez, Pétus, pour la dernière fois.

Mais puisqu'il faut mourir, mourez à votre choix:

Et de votre destin soyez le seul arbitre.

Disputez au tyran un si superbe titre

Instead of crumbling in despair or seeking comfort from Pétus, she stays resolute and inspires courage. Arrie becomes a role model and a complex, three-dimensional female character. Her character is further advanced through her private reactions and fears, as well as her public performance and final decision. She is not without fear; her doubts, sorrow, and sadness are clear. In II.1, Arrie laments all she has lost : "Père, Rome, tendresse, honneur, haine, vengeance, / Qui pour me déchirer êtes d'intelligence" (378). Her feelings of doubt, sorrow, and sadness are openly shown. "Silence, mon amour, laisse agir ma fureur. / Ma coupable pitié me fait frémir d'horreur" (380). Barbier vividly portrays Arrie's inner torment and self-doubt, making her final acts even more powerful because she is brave despite her trepidations. This blending of vulnerability and strength is echoed later in Graffigny's *Cénie*. Such bravery, emotional depth, and vulnerability are rare among heroes, who are seldom emotional and brave at the same time.

Arrie thus embodies a redefinition of gender roles and stands as a prime example of a tragic heroine.

Barbier's personal rendition of a classical play proved successful, enabling her to build a career through her writing. Although she challenged social norms by featuring women as heroes, her choice to write a tragedy—the most highly regarded theatrical genre—reinforced her reputation as a serious author and demonstrated her ability to conform to dramatic conventions. She thoughtfully showed alternative gendered and social possibilities for women. She presented them in a way that was direct yet adhered to the dramatic conventions of tragedy and to *la bienséance*. Barbier's capacity to establish a notable presence in the theater scene while also honoring the *gloire de son sexe* is a significant achievement that has been overlooked for too long. Her sensitivity to an audience embedded in deeply ingrained gender roles contributed to her success in the public sphere. We will later see how works differ when aimed at public versus private stages and how other boundaries—regarding gender performance, social norms, and family structures—were challenged in 18th-century France.

Chapter 2

The Social Institution of Gender in Graffigny's *Cénie*

Cénie is the first of two plays written by Françoise de Graffigny to be examined in this thesis. The comedy is written in prose, unlike the classical Alexandrine seen in *Arrie et Pétus*. *Cénie* was performed twenty-five times at the Comédie-Française in 1750 and thirty-nine times between 1754 and 1762 (Evian 330). Graffigny's extensive correspondence mentions the play several times from the early planning stages to its reception at the Comédie-Française. The author never attended the first showing; too nervous, she waited for news at home.

Minette à la fenêtre pour voir arriver mon laquais que j'ai ceinturé d'une épée et que j'ai envoyé au parterre afin de venir à la fin du second acte me dire des nouvelles... Voilà mon laquais revenu. Il est resté jusqu'après le trois. Il dit quels applaudissements laissaient à peine le temps de jour, qu'ils ont été à chaque mot, à chaque moment, que dans le parterre on disait : « Ah, que c'est beau ! De qui est-ce ? – C'est de Mme de G... - Ah, cela ne m'étonne pas » (L.210).

Voltaire praised the play for its pure-hearted characters and for showing how moral and societal barriers can be overcome. The play became one of the most popular of the century. *Cénie* tells the story of an only daughter's fall from grace after discovering her true lineage. The play features a young, virtuous heroine, Cénie, and the turbulent, heartbreaking lives of her biological mother, Orphise, and her adoptive mother, Mélisse. Written for the public stage, it depicts a domestic setting, unlike the fantasy setting later seen in Graffigny's privately performed *Phaza*. Published in 1750, it was the second-to-last full-length play performed at the Comédie-Française, penned by a woman before the Revolution (Showalter 96). The work critiques the

rigid "social institution of gender" in 18th-century France (Lorber, "Introduction"). In Lorber's *Paradoxes of Gender* (1994), she advances the theory that "gender is a social institution." This was a novel way of theorizing about sociocultural influences on gender formation and the social inequalities that contributed to the subordination of women. Graffigny's *Cénie* offers a realistic portrayal of society while depicting a young woman who deviates from prescribed norms, promoting a life of individual agency for women. In *Cénie*, three women endure emotional distress caused by an institutionalized gender system. The women demonstrate heroic resilience in different ways. The older women are represented as accepting traditional gender in a controlled and stoic manner, while Cénie defies social standards and advocates for female autonomy over gender conformity. Throughout the play, Cénie's actions and choices challenge the gender system.

French jurisprudence preserved male hierarchical supremacy within the home. This not only dictated both sexes' social roles, behaviors, and gender performances, but also perpetuated a vicious cycle of male privilege and a life of female limitation and inequalities. Children raised in conforming households grew up seeing this hierarchy as the "natural" standard. They could then adopt these behaviors themselves, perpetuating the unequal system, which continued into the next generation. Women were treated as means to an end and used to satisfy needs, whether financial, sexual, reproductive, or tied to social stratification. Judith Lorber discussed how society constructs gender behaviors and practices. These norms and expectations become institutionalized through social interactions and legal polices (Lorber). Although traditional gender norms have existed since antiquity, we see in Graffigny's plays that resistance to them is possible, thereby bringing about change. The first step is education: "The most powerful means of sustaining the moral hegemony of the dominant gender ideology is that the process is made

invisible; any possible alternatives are virtually unthinkable" (Lorber 26). True progress requires revealing the process of gendered socialization and transforming what is currently deemed unthinkable into an achievable reality.

In 18th-century France, women lacked societal support and opportunities for independence. This absence of self-sufficiency is evident in Orphise's decline in social standing after her husband, Dorsainville, disappears. Being an abandoned pregnant wife, or committing faults, as society perceives them, overshadows her bloodline.

Dorsainville. - Eh, comment n'aurait-elle pas succombé à l'horrible état où je l'ai lassée ?

Prête à donner le jour au premier fruit de notre tendresse, je m'arrache de ses bras, je la laisse sans biens, sans secours : dans cette extrémité que pouvait-elle devenir ?

Clerval. - Il y a des asiles pour les femmes de son rang que le malheur poursuit. (341)

Clerval, who is Dorsainville's friend, Cénie's love, and Dorimond's nephew, suggests that even women of her social standing have *places* to which they can be sent when they no longer conform to society's standards. When Cénie's background and her desire to withdraw from society are revealed, Clerval offers to arrange her stay in a convent or another form of refuge. Contrary to the loyalty seen in *Arrie and Pétus*, the men in *Cénie* do not share the same allegiance to family members. Women who became social outliers were frequently isolated or institutionalized. Through Clerval's effortless acceptance of Cénie's situation, Graffigny illustrates how common exile was for women across all social classes. While critics might view Cénie's voluntary retreat as a "fall from grace," Graffigny frames it as an act of personal agency – one for which Cénie is eventually rewarded. The narrative concludes by reuniting the couples, effectively liberating them from social persecution.

We see evidence of generational inheritance of institutionalized gender norms in Orphise when Cénie discusses her views on marriage and her reluctance to be with Méricourt. Having had no say in her own life, Orphise tells Cénie, "Il est des occasions malheureuses, où le choix ne nous est pas permis. Dans la situation où vous êtes, il ne vous reste que l'obéissance" (345). Cénie is told to accept her circumstances and that she has no choice. Orphise sees Cénie's situation must be accepted; it cannot be debated or changed.

Several of Graffigny's heroines consistently resist social pressures. *Cénie* notably emphasizes the frivolity of such rules and enforced gender roles and shows women at the mercy of society and men, leading them to feel significant emotional distress. It depicts the separation of mother and daughter, the division of lovers due to social nonconformity, and the loss of a wife's integrity and legacy in her husband's eyes. It also highlights the limited options available to women at that time and how their economic survival depended on men. Graffigny critiques legal and social injustice, questioning laws and customs that limit women's agency, especially regarding inheritance, property, and marital rights. The women in *Cénie* lack individual wealth. Because of her father's fortune, Cénie and her future dowry are commodities that men desire. Marrying her is necessary to access Dorimond's money. We see Méricourt's complete disregard for Cénie as an individual, as his desire is not for her but for the wealth he expects to come into by marrying her. When he learns of Cénie's feelings for his younger brother Clerval, he is determined to intervene. Although he is much older than Cénie, he doesn't see the age difference as a problem but as an advantage, believing her youth will make her more willing to obey.

Méricourt. - Fort bien. Mon oncle va me proposer à Cénie.

Lisette. - Cela est bon : mais si elle vous refuse ?

Méricourt. - Elle n'oserait. À son âge, on ne sait qu'obéir. (338)

After Cénie refuses his offer, he uses the letter her mother left on her deathbed, which reveals her true lineage. Méricourt does this to control Cénie, threatening her with ruin and social alienation. However, Cénie does not react as expected; she shows bravery in accepting uncertainty, poverty, and isolation, rather than a loveless marriage: "Que gagnerais-je à tromper tout le monde? Pourrais-je me tromper moi-même?" Unlike Cénie, Méricourt is willing to keep her secret for his own benefit, emphasizing the importance of outward appearance over true virtue and integrity. Méricourt's character can represent a view of French society at the time, highlighting a lack of morals, corruption, and a system that prided itself on bloodlines and alliances, covering up transgressions to maintain appearances.

Cénie's resolve becomes even more admirable because her character is not free of fear about the future. In private, Cénie breaks down, saying, "Mon indépendance m'épouvante : je ne tiens plus à rien" (359). Although she is distressed, she does not change her mind. Women like Arrie and Cénie show not an absence of fear but bravery in the face of it, further affirming their courage. While Clerval is willing to marry her regardless, she declines, unwilling to jeopardize his social standing or reputation. Cénie is aware of the social condemnation he would face, and her love for Clerval forces her to distance herself from him. Méricourt is sly and scheming. The contrast between these two characters portrays women as heroic and complex, while men appear manipulative and driven by greed. Cénie embodies the challenge of a woman seeking independence within an unequal system.

Graffigny mostly depicts the limited opportunities afforded to women. Each of their stories could stand alone as the main plot in a separate performance. The lives of the three women, all of whom experience suffering induced by social pressures, combined into a single theatrical event, offer a concentrated depiction of the female condition that strengthens

Graffigny's message. Graffigny skillfully pleases the audience while avoiding gender discord or outright criticism of men. Having lived through a loveless and violent marriage herself, Graffigny consistently critiques marriage in both *Phaza* and *Cénie*. However, her stance in *Cénie* is not entirely opposed to that institution; *Cénie* proposes marriage reform and unions based on love and choice:

Je me suis fait une idée différente du mariage. Un mari qui n'est point aimé ne me paraît qu'un maître redoutable. Les vertus, les devoirs, la complaisance, rien n'est de notre choix; tout devient tyrannique, on fléchit sous le joug, on n'a que le mérite d'un esclave obéissant. (342-343)

Both *Phaza* and *Cénie* view marriage as a surrender of oneself and a form of enslavement to men. Graffigny's characters, therefore, value friendship between a man and a woman more than marriage; it is a relationship chosen, and it requires effort from both parties to survive. It is not given; it must be worked for and earned.

Jurisconsulte Antoine-Gaspard Boucher d'Argis defines marriage as follows in his *Dictionnaire de droit et de pratique* (1749) :

Mariage, [...] considéré en général, est un contrat civil & politique, par lequel un homme est uni & joint à une femme, avec intention de rester toujours unis ensemble. Le principal objet de cette société est la procréation des enfants. (quoted in Vickermann-Ribémont 33)

The pressure placed on women to have children is ultimately what caused *Cénie*'s situation, in which she was stolen from her biological mother to remedy a childless marriage. Both of *Cénie*'s mothers made life-altering decisions to maintain kinship statuses. In an effort to produce an heir and abide by her conjugal duties as a wife and woman in society, Dorimond's wife takes *Cénie* from her biological mother and pretends she is her own.

Méricourt. - Elle est pour Dorimond, mais qu'importe ? Écoutez. (*Il lit*)
 « Je vous ai trompé, Monsieur, et mes remords ne peuvent s'ensevelir avec moi. La disproportion de nos âges m'a fait craindre de retomber dans l'indigence dont vous m'aviez tirée. Pour assurer ma fortune, j'ai supposé un enfant. Votre dernier voyage me facilita les moyens de faire passer Cénie pour ma fille. La mort me force à révéler mon secret. (355)

Mélisse's confession indicates that she would not have inherited her husband's possessions without an heir. It is possible that a marriage contract between an older, wealthy man and a much younger *femme indigente* stipulated that the spouse would not inherit his fortune unless she produced a son or daughter (Gethner). To avoid poverty and shame, Mélisse passes Cénie off as her own. Additionally, Cénie's biological mother does not escape social and gender condemnation. She is disgraced after losing her husband and daughter, reduced to the condition of a governess despite her aristocratic bloodline. Without a husband or child, she is punished and stigmatized for deviating from gendered social expectations. Female characters rarely experience positive outcomes; they suffer in every scenario, with one exception. With great fortune, Cénie and her biological mother, Orphise, are saved from exile through the reinstatement of their social standing and financial stability with the return of a husband and father.

The lives of Graffigny's female protagonists highlight the oppression and commodification of women while also representing their desire for and worthiness of something more. Méricourt, Clerval, and her father make decisions without her input or knowledge. Cénie is at the mercy of the men, further demonstrating the male, kinship nexus of marriage. Rubin states, "A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a Playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relationships. Torn from these relationships, she is

no more the helpmate of a man than gold itself is money" (Rubin 34). Rubin conceptualized that kinship systems described the commodification of women and society's gendered system, where males were the givers and females are the gifts ("je t'aurais proposé ma fille," 337), which converts and places a biological female into a socially defined gender with its prescribed roles and responsibilities. Kinship statuses reflect and reinforce the prestige and power differences between genders. We see men using possessive, transactional language when speaking about women. Dorimond wishes to 'reward' Méricourt with a wife, his friend's daughter Clarice, for Méricourt's overseeing of his business and attentiveness to his wife, Mélisse, in her final hours. Dormond tells Méricourt : "Je veux récompenser ton zèle, & je voudrais le récompenser à ton goût" (12). The women are made out to be prizes for men's good behavior. When alone in Act I, Scene 4, Méricourt speaks of Cénie and seeks vengeance if Dorimond goes back on his offer of his daughter: "Ah! Cénie ! tremblez pour votre sort, si vous aimez assez Clerval pour braver mon ambition. Je ne perdrai pas impunément quinze ans de contrainte; j'ai de quoi me venger de vos mépris" (19). The dialogue centers on what a marriage with Cénie will offer him; it does not consider her well-being or emotional attachment. This language use can echo Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital, which explains how language use reflects and perpetuates social inequalities (Bourdieu 1991). When there is a gender imbalance woven into language and legal systems, it is hard to envision change. A generational imbalance is exemplified by the older women in the play, who embody the Ancien Régime's gender roles for women. Orphise is resigned to her gendered fate and tries to convince Cénie that her dreams of something different will only bring her trouble: "Le bonheur n'est pas toujours où l'on croit le voir: et la vertu a son point de vue assuré. Suivez-la, obéissez à votre père, vous trouverez en vous-même la récompense du sacrifice" (344). Orphise condones the silencing and suffering of women; she encourages Cénie

to be passive and to forgo personal emotions through self-sacrifice. Orphise is a product of a society that oppresses women, and she, like the women before her, has always accepted this fate as her prescribed social condition. Cénie represents a new age of women and Enlightenment ideals, encouraging her peers to emerge from the shadows and consider a life of greater freedoms and opportunities.

Graffigny, an independent and celebrated public figure, challenged gender roles and set an example for women by raising awareness of gender as an institution, as Lorber conceptualized it. For both, gender "affects[s] individual lives and social interactions in major ways," and its "changing effects" may be researched, or here rendered visible (1). Certainly, Graffigny demonstrates a shift in gender norms, allowing women to engage intellectually with men and to have greater control over their lives. Although some viewers might expect Cénie to exhibit sentimental weakness and to forsake her moral convictions for money and comfort, she does not.¹ Remarkably, Graffigny left behind 15 volumes of correspondence containing over 2,500 of her letters, which have since been published and enable us to access her inner thoughts and feelings firsthand, including her intent. In its time, *Cénie* may have been overlooked as a feminist piece, but perhaps Graffigny's greatest cleverness was to reveal gendered marital roles in a socially unoffending way. Graffigny's powerful yet clandestine message achieved great success and was an outstanding accomplishment in the way she unobjectionably advanced feminine equality for the viewing public of her time to witness and celebrate!

In *Phaza*, Graffigny equally explores gender and social constraints, critiquing marriage as a purely transactional institution. In this play, which was intended for a private audience, her

¹ Gendered codes on French stages in the 18th-century were defined by a mixture of rigid social and patriarchal norms. Theater in this period often reinforced the period's binary view of gender, showcasing women as either virtuous, domestic, or frivolous, while men were cast as active, rational, and authoritative.

thoughts are expressed in an even more open and curious manner. This aligns with Judith Butler's assertion that gender is neither a "radical choice" nor a strictly imposed "script", but rather a performance enacted within "a culturally restricted corporeal space" (Butler 8). Cénie defied her socially prescribed gender script. She made choices that completely altered her destiny and those of others. She chose to relinquish her social status to preserve her self-worth. By portraying women who refuse to suffer for the sake of tradition, Graffigny further illustrates Butler's point that "Gender reality is real only to the extent that it is performed" (278). In the following analysis of *Phaza*, we will see more examples of characters that reject the social conventions of the time.

Chapter 3

Private Theaters

Gender Fluidity in Graffigny's *Phaza*

Enlightenment ideas of the 18th-century fostered greater intellectual experimentation and a taste for freedom among the French. These ideals were evident across all art forms, particularly in theater, which incited social and political change. Citizens felt empowered and began questioning the authority of the Church and the State. The theater, which attracted intellectuals and progressives of the time, became not only a public spectacle but also a private one. Home theaters gained popularity, extending the salon atmosphere. People sought unfiltered content for entertainment and intellectual stimulation, free from the pomp and pretense of the Comédie-Française and similar institutions. "Au cours du XVIII^e siècle, caractérisé par la théâtromanie, beaucoup d'aristocrates et de riches bourgeois organisaient des spectacles dans leurs maisons, et, dans bien des cas, ils faisaient même construire une salle de théâtre bien équipée" (Gethner 291). As we saw in our introduction, women used these stages to explore newfound freedom of expression and artistic creativity.

Françoise de Graffigny is arguably among the most well-known female playwrights and novelists of 18th-century France. Facing ruin and poverty multiple times throughout her life, she supported herself through her writing, though it was not a lucrative profession compared with the security a marriage could have provided. Having suffered both physical and emotional abuse from her first husband and the heartbreaking loss of both her children in infancy, she may have found entering another marriage far less appealing than the prospect of poverty. In her correspondence, Graffigny also expressed a desire to become a man—not literally, but because

she wished to live without the restrictions women faced in 18th-century France. "Crois-moi, mon cher Panpan, je ne suis pas la seule femme qui pense bien. Quand vous seray [sic] rendu dans un plus grand monde, ... vous me trouverez un peu au-dessus du commun de nostre sexe, mais bien loing [sic] du galant homme qui e[st] le but où j'aspire" (quoted in Bostic 1). Her intelligence and aspirations far exceeded what society permitted for women. Graffigny's own life, shaped by limited female liberties, may have inspired her literary characters, whose gender fluidity unlocked new possibilities based on merit and intellect, as reflected in *Phaza*.

Graffigny's 1753 play *Phaza*, written in 1747 and first performed on Comte de Clermont's private stage at Berny in 1753, is a comedy written in prose. It explores the idea of gender as a social construct through gender fluidity, ultimately demonstrating that gender is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. In creating *Phaza*, a character who blurs the lines of gender and social norms, Graffigny brings to light a part of society that was previously less visible.

Set in a fairy-tale world, the play does not follow realistic 18th-century depictions or gender norms; instead, it creates a space for greater critique regarding the limits of essentialism and gender exploration than seen in *Cénie*. *Phaza*, a girl raised as a boy by a fairy queen, exhibits multiple examples of gender-nonconforming behavior and gender inequality (Gethner 286). The fairy-tale setting allows for a playful reversal of sexual roles and statuses that feels more accessible to the general public. The audience enters a distant land where traditional social rules do not apply, creating a clear separation from their own reality and from Graffigny's fictional universe. Watching her play, viewers may become familiar with and more comfortable with ideas that challenge conventional gender roles and sexual identities. *Phaza* presents viewers with gender options and encourages them to question socially accepted norms.

Graffigny highlights modern notions of sex and gender through her portrayal of Phaza. Born a girl but removed from French European society, she adopts typical masculine behaviors and norms without knowing they were either masculine or feminine. What she shows, (un)wittingly in terms of language from the field of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, is a cisgender character who performs gender in a masculine way—what she envisioned, for the "genre humain," in Clémentine's words, was intentional. If social constructivism was considered a revolutionary theory in the 1970s, one can only imagine its reception at the time of *Phaza's* performance.

The openness and honesty of the female characters are striking. In scene two, when Azor is talking to his mother, Clémentine, trying to understand why the fairy Singulière would isolate girls from society and raise them, telling them they are boys, Clémentine responds,

Il n'y a point d'enchantement. Son erreur n'est qu'un effet de la bisarrerie de Singuliere, & de l'éducation qu'elle donne à ses élèves ... La réforme du genre humain. Elle prétend que la supériorité que les hommes ont usurpée sur les femmes seront [sic], bientôt détruite si dès l'enfance, au lieu d'inspirer aux jeunes filles la timidité, la douceur & la modestie on leur donnoit de la valeur, de l'ambition, de l'indépendance, & sur tout qu'on les rendit bien inconstantes, bien perfides en amour; les choses devenant égales, la société en tireroit de grands avantages. (Graffigny 52)

Graffigny clearly states the purpose of her play: removing girls from society can change who they become, suggesting a social constructionist approach to gender rather than an essentialist one. In "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex", Freud claimed that "anatomy is destiny." Two centuries earlier, Phaza offered a different perspective for womenkind. It is society and

education that determine what it means to be a woman or a girl, not one's physical body. Phaza and the other girls in Singulières' experiment are shaped by the social and cultural environment in which they are raised. Born girls, they "perform gender"--as Simone de Beauvoir characterizes it--in a more fluid manner. They did not change sex (being female), but rather how they were raised as males changed them emotionally and socially. They are not raised to be weak or inferior, and as a result, they do not become so.

Phaza's identity is reinforced through social performance and repetition. Educated and dressed as a male since birth, she naturally embodies masculine traits and behaviors. In Judith Lorber's 1994 *Paradoxes of Gender*, in the section titled "gender bending," she emphasizes that gender is actively created through daily choices and that people can easily be misidentified if it weren't for superficial markers:

Without a deliberate use of gendered clothing, hairstyles, jewelry, and cosmetics, women and men would look far more alike...the ease with which many transvestite women pass as men and transvestite men as women is corroborated by the common gender misidentification in Westernized societies of people in jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers. (Lorber 18)

In this sense, Clementine's niece Zamie remains completely unaware that Phaza is a girl until the end of the play: "Ah! Si j'avais su qu'elle ne fut qu'une femme, comme je lui aurais rendu ses injures" (Graffigny 107). Phaza's performance highlights gender as a fluid social construct rather than a rigid biological binary. It challenges prescribed roles by emphasizing that identity is performed through expression rather than being inherently dictated by one's anatomy.

On the first page of the list of characters, Graffigny notes "Phaza doit avoir un habillement pittoresque." This costume direction suggests that Phaza has an exotic, distinctive

wardrobe, potentially helping differentiate her from others and reinforcing the fairy-tale world being created. Phaza's "girl-boy" character challenges traditional gender norms through clothing. Her wardrobe makes her stand out as different from others, allowing the character to act independently of 18th-century gender-specific societal expectations. For Phaza, clothing also becomes a way to adopt and shed different genders throughout the play. Her outward gender identity is determined by what she wears, a point that becomes even more evident during the masquerade ball at the end of the play, where she finally wears clothing that is socially appropriate for her sex (dressed as a female), only to be forced to change it to masquerade as something else (dressed as a male).

In Act I, Scene I, before being told that Phaza believes herself to be a boy, Azor says, "J'adore une jeune Amazone..." (Graffigny 50). His mother, Clémentine, is shocked by this declaration. From Azor's comparison of her to an Amazon woman, he sees her as female yet also as a rugged, strong huntress. He recognizes her mixed-gender qualities and still falls for her. He is attracted to her in her "natural" state, out hunting in the forest. Azor does not find these stereotypically masculine qualities and attire repulsive, even though they were at odds with 18th-century French sartorial norms. There are other parallels to the legendary Amazones among 18th-century women writers; Louise Dupin, for example, praises them: "[cette] nation que les femmes gouvernaient à l'exclusion des hommes a su faire de grandes conquêtes" (Dupin 191). Singulière's realm and her tribe of *garçonfilles* share traits similar to those of the legendary Amazon women, as Dupin articulated. Phaza's love of hunting and the notable exclusion of males in their territory mimic the group of warriors. Through Azor's declaration of love and desire, Graffigny also shows that wild beauty and strength can be attractive and desirable traits in a partner and friend.

Historical 18th-century French norms demanded a gender performance aligned with one's anatomy, used to justify the legal and social subordination of women. Graffigny distances the body from social limitations by presenting Phaza as a "blank slate." Raised as a male without knowledge of her biological sex, she is not transgender by modern definitions but rather "agendered" by her lack of socialization. Graffigny omits physical descriptions, allowing Phaza to become a mosaic of traits. "Gender divisions and the gendered organization of social worlds are iron cages that allow for little resistance or rebellion" (Lorber 2). Graffigny creates a world where gender norms are fluid, thereby calling biological determinism into question. We see Phaza, who is undoubtedly aware of her body's appearance yet seemingly unaware of what a male body is supposed to look like. She considers herself male yet is biologically female. This diminishes the only view that had significance in the 18th century: that one's genitalia determined gender norms. Everything is upended, and Graffigny challenges the norms of her time as well as those of today, effectively dismantling the "iron cage" of social organization, as further shown in the 20th-century works of Lorber.

There are also other gender fluid characters within wider society in *Phaza*. There is no mention of Clémentine's husband or any father figures, suggesting that even outside Singulière's realm, circumstances differ from those of 18th-century French society.

Clémentine embodies traditional patriarchal roles by manipulating family members to advance her social standing and treating her son, Azor, as a commodity to be married off. By exploiting Azor's emotions, she creates a scenario designed to challenge Phaza's prophecy, which states that Phaza will die before the age of fifteen if she discovers her true self, unless, without ever knowing love, she falls at the feet of her conqueror. Clémentine states: "Son ignorance peut nous servir. Je sais gré d'avoir amené Zamie...Je vais par précaution faire avertir

les sujets de Phaza de se préparer à la recevoir, & si je vois que les choses s'arrangent selon mes désirs [...]" (60). Although Singulière has asked Clémentine to oversee her realm, Clémentine uses the opportunity to sabotage the experiential environment Singulière has built. She poaches Singulière's prized student, Phaza, intending to exploit her future inheritance by exposing her biological sex. This exploitation aligns with Louis Dupin's Article 30 in "Réflexions sur la puissance des maris" in *Des Femmes*, where she notes: "Non seulement la fortune pécuniaire des femmes est à la disposition des maris, mais les droits et honneurs attachés aux héritages qu'elles possèdent leur deviennent propres" (Dupin 306). Clémentine further adopts male roles by orchestrating marriages to secure social status. However, unlike how kinship functioned, her male role does not afford to be part of a social network of men. In Act I, when her son Azor seeks help to marry Phaza, Clémentine says, "Vous voilà chez Singulière, vous êtes son amie, vous obtiendrez pour moi la main de la belle Phaza. Je suis comble de mes vœux, vous riez..." (Graffigny 51). Clémentine reveals she has already arranged a union between Phaza and her niece, Zamie. This proposal is a calculated deception, knowing Phaza is a girl. This move, intended to manipulate and frustrate Azor, demonstrates her use of a marriage contract as a tool for psychological and social control.

The play ultimately presents one woman's ideals against another's. Clémentine represents a more conformist approach to social structures, focusing on arranging marriages for personal gain and upholding the gender binary. In contrast, Singulière, the high fairy, exemplifies a more avant-garde attitude, reflected in her gender-fluid realm and the social experiment she conducts. Singulière is not physically present at any point in the play; her methods are critiqued without an opportunity for rebuttal. In "Staging Gender in Graffigny's Phaza," Bostic describes Clémentine as a good and generous character, stating: "She has left the more benevolent fairy Clémentine in

charge during her absence" (Bostic 2010). However, Clémentine cleverly manipulates Azor and undermines Singulière's intentions while supervising her realm. She shows no admiration or kindness toward Singulière's experiment, stating of the high fairy that she: "prend au berceau les filles qu'elle les trompe sur leur sexe et les tient dans cette solitude qui l'assûre du secret" (Graffigny 53). Her description of Singulière's methods is stern and unsupportive. When Azor is shocked by the idea, she does not defend Singulière but instead criticizes further: "Vous avez vu les effets ridicules de cette éducation dans les élèves que Singulière lâche de temps en temps dans le monde sous le nom de petits-maîtres" (Graffigny 53). Clémentine's disapproval of these "petits-maîtres" suggests a critique of outspoken, unconventional women, reinforcing traditional gender structures in 18th-century French society and, in turn, Graffigny's opposition to them.

Although we observe similar issues regarding social constructs in *Cénie*, they are presented with greater subtlety and delicacy than in this play. Graffigny opposes traditional marriage, viewing it as an unequal contract that strips women of their moral and legal independence. As Goodman notes: "The crusade for companionate marriage, or marriage based on the love and free choice of the partners, was one of the Enlightenment's central campaigns against tradition and patriarchal authority" (Goodman). Graffigny's *Phaza* questions the institution of marriage and what it signifies. *Phaza* also questions the loss of liberty that comes with becoming a wife, as she warns Zamie: "En prenant un époux, vous renoncez à vos droits sur votre liberté, sur votre personne & même sur votre cœur" (72). At the end of the play, when *Phaza* kneels before Azor and ultimately breaks the spell, revealing her true identity, the scene allows for a dual reading. While her kneeling could be interpreted as a submissive betrayal of her principles, she is also begging for "l'amitié la plus pure" (104). In declaring "Je serai l'ami de

mon Roi" (103), Phaza prioritizes a mutual partnership based on an egalitarian bond over playing the role of lover or Queen to a King. This allows for a very different reading than the first.

Vickermann-Ribémont points out:

Si l'une des caractéristiques les plus importantes de la comédie est le dénouement heureux qui signifie, par la réconciliation définitive, un retour à l'équilibre, voire à l'ordre, les dénouements doivent eux aussi être interrogés par rapport à l'impact juridique et à la fonction de commentaire qu'ils peuvent assumer au sujet de l'état juridique et social du mariage. (304)

Graffigny's ending satisfies societal expectations while highlighting the performative nature of gender. The final lines are ambiguous and do not present one ultimate position; they place the reader in an undetermined position because the final statement returns to her original argument that gender is a constructed role. In the final scene, as Phaza prepares to attend the ball, she is dressed as a woman, a disguise, because at this point in the play, she still believes she is a boy. After the curse is broken and she discovers her true biological identity, Phaza is forced to change her clothing. Clémentine's last words, "Charmante Phaza, il faut chercher un autre déguisement" (107), signify that Phaza must now operate within the constraints of femininity. This instant correction aligns with Lorber's idea that "Like bravery, masculinity and femininity can be put on and taken off with changes of costume and role" (Lorber). Phaza is forced to embody the "Other" because she must occupy a female position in society that conforms with her biological sex but transgresses her socially constructed male upbringing.

In the conclusion to *Thèmes philosophiques et féministes dans le théâtre*, Perry Gethner expresses disappointment with Graffigny's lack of daring. He states, "Dans Phaza la jeune femme élevée pour régner renonce au pouvoir dès qu'elle découvre son sexe véritable et offre le pouvoir

à son époux. Pour une vision politique plus radicale, il faudra attendre la génération d'Olympe de Gouges" (Gethner 303). Olympe de Gouges may have been more explicit in her intentions, but she also wrote decades after these women and paid with her life for her outspoken opinions. Female playwrights of pre-revolutionary France should not be overlooked for their perceived subtlety. They played a vital role in a female literary legacy that inspired figures like De Gouges. Graffigny challenges and stages gender ideology. She presents these ideas in a way that does not affront, assault, or disturb the patriarchal divide. Read within the context of her time, her tact only enhances her intelligence and the finesse needed for personal preservation while also questioning the very foundation of 18th-century French society. Her proposed constructionist ideas on gender were groundbreaking in the field of gender studies two and a half centuries later.

Chapter 4

Gender & Social Classes in *La Superchérie réciproque*

Social classes in 18th-century France were defined by the *Ancien régime* three-estates system, in which birth dictated rights, privileges, and tax burdens. The country's legal framework was fragmented, combining local customs, royal decrees, and canonical laws. Privilege, rights, and status were not determined on merit. This environment created deep social divisions that, in combination with new Enlightenment ideas, culminated in the French Revolution at the end of the century.

La Superchérie réciproque (1768) is a privately produced play written by Françoise-Albine Benoist. This one-act comedy in prose satirizes social mobility through marriage and the invention of elevated social classes. Benoist takes liberties with women's portrayal while wrapping her progressive message in moralism, preserving the *bienséance* necessary for the time. Rosalie, adopted at a young age after the death of her biological parents, who were farmers, was placed in the care of the Comte d'Orbac and his wife. Rosalie, a product of her environment, aspires to rise in society's ranks even as she remains aware of her humble beginnings. Diapason, a 'music teacher' interested in her wealth, invents a false title, Marquis de Fléville, to make himself worthy of her hand in marriage. The plot becomes even more complicated when Rosalie, committed to climbing the social ladder, leads him to believe she is the Count's biological niece. Diapason, in need of money, sees in Rosalie a means of escaping his precarious situation, and Rosalie sees the same in Diapason. In this play, social class issues are intertwined with reversed gender roles, reflecting the rigid social hierarchies of 18th-century France.

This play differs from *Phaza*, the other privately performed play, because it does not present feminist sentiments as explicitly. We know from her other work that Benoist shared those feelings and advocated for greater freedoms for women, but this play presents her opinions more delicately. *La Superchérie réciproque* focuses more on critiquing social classes and unveiling the arbitrariness on which they are based, while weaving in inverted gender roles.

"Superchérie," meaning "trickery" or "deception," describes the characters' behavior that challenges social boundaries. There are several instances in which class and gender intersect, and opportunities vary depending on how people fit into categories, with status ultimately determining an individual's life path. At the beginning of the play, the Count offers Rosalie to Monsieur Paperar. The two men negotiate the terms and solidify the arrangement. At first, Paperar does not consider himself worthy of Rosalie, as she has played her class role extremely convincingly, and to onlookers she appears to be the Count's biological niece. Respecting his late wife's wishes, the Count only reveals Rosalie's true parentage to the prosecutor (her future spouse being the sole person to know), requesting his utmost discretion.

Le Comte : Je veux vous marier...Une dot de douze mille livres, une jolie fille, voyez si cela vous convient.

Monsieur Paperar. – Ah ! Monseigneur, dès que vous me faites la grâce de vous en mêler...Une dot de douze mille livres, une jolie fille...Je ferai tout ce qu'il vous plaira.

Le Comte. – C'est Rosalie à qui je veux vous marier.

Monsieur Paperar. - Monsieur le Comte se moque peut-être de son petit serviteur...Épouser une fille de qualité. (À part.) Hum ! il y a quelque chose là-dessous. (455)

The prosecutor sees the advantageous position he has been placed in and subtly convinces the Count to increase the dowry by one thousand francs, alluding to potential gossip. This moral corruption is also evident in *Cénie*, where Méricourt is willing to conceal Cénie's parentage for his own financial gain.

There are several more parallels to Graffigny's *Cénie*. We observe the same pattern of a woman of status mothering a young orphan; we also witness how her mannerisms, education, and financial resources are the only factors that determine whether society recognizes someone as part of the upper class. Blood may be concealed, perhaps symbolizing the insignificance of self-worth and morality, two aspects that seemed to hold little importance at this time. The Counts' wife made him promise on her deathbed that he would reveal Rosalie's parentage only to her future spouse and no one else. Cénie's adoptive mother also kept her true parentage secret until her death.

In the three plays previously analyzed, women intervene in the marital arrangements being made on their behalf. Likewise, Cénie advocated a progressive view of marriage and the consideration of a woman's choice. When the Count approaches Rosaline to tell her he has arranged a marriage for her, she inquires about the suitor's status: "quelqu'un dont la naissance et la fortune soient convenables" (460). This leads to an argument between the two, as the Count does not feel that Rosaline is in a position to have these concerns, since she is a simple farmer's daughter. He states: "Je sais qu'elle est vaine: c'est l'aveugle tendresse de ma femme qui a nourri sa vanité en lui faisant donner une éducation au-dessus de sa naissance. Si elle eût été plutôt en ma disposition, je l'aurais fait élever comme une fille de son état devait l'être" (456). As we see above, the Count blames Rosaline's elevated opinions and expectations on his wife, who raised her as her own and did not limit what she was exposed to or had access to, as is typically the case

with a class designated at birth. Rosaline refuses the arrangements the Count has made for her, arguing that she deserves better and was raised to be worthy of such. She does not believe she should be settling because of her birth status, and she counters, "Je pensais au contraire que la bonne opinion de soi était ce qu'il y avait de plus avantageux: elle élève l'âme, elle rend capable des plus belles actions, et fait parvenir aux plus grandes fortunes. Moi-même, j'en fais preuve" (460). The Count responds : "Que ce préjugé est condamnable ! Devez-vous ignorer que la modestie est la première vertu de votre sexe ?" (460). Modesty was strongly associated with women and was considered to represent moderation in the appreciation of one's qualities, as well as balance and discretion. The Count reminds Rosaline that she is not playing her gender or class role correctly and needs to get back in line. He encourages her to rethink her position and "vanity, " one of the stereotypical vices often ascribed to women in 18th-century France. The virtue of modesty was imposed on women to control and remind them to 'stay in their place.'

Of the four plays analyzed, this is the first in which we see a female protagonist performing her class- and gender-typical role of the time. However, her willingness to enter an engagement and pursue alliances for profit rather than for feelings is a stereotypically male trait. Gender stratification examines how societies distribute power and resources along gender lines. Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized that humans are inherently good but corrupted by society, advocating for natural goodness, direct democracy, and a return to simpler, more natural ways of life, often seen as idealistic or romantic (Humphris). We see this corruption in Rosaline, who has been affected by the spoils of an elevated rank and socially inherited vanity, whereby presenting male mannerisms in a negative light.

When Dubois is introducing the 'Marquis' for the first time, his selling points are materialistic, assuming that a woman of Rosaline's status would only consider such qualities.

Dubois says: "Ses parents ont du crédit à la Cour: il a deux cousines qui sont des miracles de beauté, elles sollicitent pour nous" (454). The Marquis's wealth and social status are entirely superficial and prove the lack of just reasons in justifying social rank. It's all about money and appearances, which coincidentally are being faked. Rosalie, aware of her real parents, is drawn to the 'music teacher' only after being told he is a marquis: "Il faut qu'il ait passé ses jours à la Cour, il m'y mènera sans doute...Cet espoir m'enchanté...et j'espère que j'y paraîtrai avec quelque avantage" (458). She does not mention his demeanor or an emotional connection, but only the opportunity and access to luxury his station will grant her. Where men were the decision-makers, negotiators, and profiteers in marriage arrangements, we see a woman acting in a man's role by seeking an arrangement that benefits her personally. She desires access to the court. She also wishes to gain access to property and financial accounts that will ensure a lavish life. Status was displayed through lavish homes and luxurious clothing. Performing class was about adhering to the social and civil codes of dress and behavior. Enlightenment ideas promoted talent over birth, questioning the inherited privilege that kept the Third Estate in its place. This play can be read intersectionally as a call to equity—at the intersection of gender and class reversals. Rosaline, a woman from the Third Estate, adopts the behaviors and views of an aristocratic male regarding marriage. This plot line simultaneously challenges the class system's idea of fairness and gendered parity by having Rosaline wish to arrange her own transactional marriage.

While it appears that Rosaline is content to be treated as a commodity in a business deal, Benoist subtly highlights a reversal of gender roles through Rosaline's adoption of a male persona. Consequently, the criticism directed at her reveals a double standard: Rosaline is seen as vain and greedy by others for wanting something from her marriage, whereas men who desire the

same from marriage and negotiate for it are normalized, even expected. This shows how women are viewed compared to men when they exhibit the same behaviors in a given situation. Like the men, she herself is looking to profit from the transaction. The only concerns she raises are material and social. In a conversation with her servant, Rosaline expresses her feelings further:

Rosalie. – La conquête du marquis me dédommage assez...Convien qu'elle est des plus brillantes: je fais la plus grande fortune en l'épousant. Il réunit tout, naissance, richesses.

Lisette. – Et sentiment, car vous ne pouvez douter de son amour.

Rosalie. – En douter ? Comment, Lisette, feindre l'état de maître à chanter pour me voir! Il m'aime à l'adoration!

Lisette. – Il est vrai que ce travestissement tient du merveilleux, et il n'en faudrait pas avantage pour tourner la tête à une femme vaine. Mais vous, à ce qu'on peut voir, vous prenez la chose assez dignement. Cependant, avouez que vous l'aimez.

Rosalie. – Moi, je suis flattée de son amour, mais ce sentiment n'est pas ce qui m'affecte davantage : de plus grands objets m'occupent. (458-459)

Having grown up in this environment, she speaks down to her servant, Lisette: "Parlez, je vous l'ordonne." In reality, Rosaline is from an even lower social rank than Lisette, showing that these behaviors are learned, not genetically passed down. This idea of nature versus nurture is evident in *Phaza*, who, when raised in a new environment, became something completely different, blurring prescribed gender and social norms. Lisette. – "Oh! D'une fierté insoutenable, et d'une vanité outrée: elle se croit la plus belle personne, et sans doute la plus noble, car elle méprise ceux qui ne sont pas de sa condition et dédaignerait l'hommage de tout homme qui ne serait pas marquis ou baron" (466). Rosaline performs a higher social rank than her station and, in doing

so, fools everyone into believing that she is the Count's biological niece. The only thing that changes their entire perception of her is her parents. Performing class or gender means adhering to a social script prescribed by society at a specific historical time and place. When characters transgress their scripts, they become free of labels and categories.

Rosaline has several cunning lines that showcase her cleverness. When asked why she was taking music lessons (that the Count was paying for), she replies, "J'ai cru devoir cultiver un talent agréable qui souvent tient lieu d'esprit dans la société, délivre des insipidus propos, préserve de la médisance, et force même les conteurs à garder le silence. D'ailleurs j'ai de la voix..." (461). Of the four plays, this one is the wittiest. Its sarcastic tone fits perfectly with private productions. Rosaline is, in every way but birth, an aristocrat. She is arguably much more intelligent for seeing through society's façade. Following McIlvanney's lead, this shows Benoist's attention to how anyone with the proper education and opportunity can become someone entirely different. Restricting access to this keeps the social classes in line, as McIlvanney explains:

Pro-female agendas on the subject of improving access to education found philosophical reinforcement in Enlightenment discourse during this period, in which education, while still sexually differentiated, was presented as a fundamental human right for all French people regardless of class or gender. Enlightenment thinking had raised awareness of the correlation between knowledge and power, and women were more acutely aware of that correlation than most. (57)

The thought of what differentiates one human being from another, when stripped of money or a high-priced dowry, forced people to consider the importance of the individual and their universal

rights and opportunities, rather than reserving privileges for certain classes and denying them to others.

In the final scene, when all characters are present, the complete unraveling of all their secrets comes to pass. Rosalie returns to a stereotypical role as a submissive female indebted to a male. She is resigned to her fate and states: "Monsieur le comte est l'arbitre de mon sort." The count replies, "Vous aurez lieu de vous applaudir de votre docilité" (476). The final line comes from 'Le Marquis': "Je m'étais flatté d'une brillante fortune, mais je ne regrette point un bien qui m'eût coûté des remords. Le plaisir d'être riche ne vaut pas le bonheur d'être en paix avec soi-même." In what could be read as a cautionary tale, Mme Benoist has a man deliver the final line and ultimately be seen as the voice of reason.

In the end, standard morality is preserved, and class and gender norms are reestablished; however, Benoist's presentation and denunciation of gender roles and class divisions portray them as precarious and superficial within society. Rosalie's open rebellion against both grants today's reader an 18th-century perspective into the ideals that would fuel the Revolution in the decades to come. As was seen with royal censorship, whose purpose was to restrict certain content in an effort to maintain control over a population and a country, unrestricted knowledge gives Rosaline power and opportunity. The Count's reference to holding back her education shows that the primary separation between classes lies in education, and in knowing that there is more to life than what they are currently experiencing. Rosaline is the recipient of an aristocratic upbringing and acts accordingly. Now that she has acquired education, it is hard for her to revert to the class and gender norms of the Third Estate. Neither fits who she is. The Enlightenment encouraged individuals to learn and explore, thereby empowering them, as Benoist strove to echo on the stage.

Conclusion

A Gendered Legacy

The Enlightenment era has often framed 18th-century thought with a focus on class divisions. This thesis also explores these ideals in the context of gender. By looking at these plays through a gendered lens, it is possible to link them to a larger narrative of struggle for identity, equality, and personal expression outside of patriarchal hierarchies.

Women were heavily involved in the theater scene of the 18th century. This period can be seen as a rare golden age for certain playwrights, as society permitted their work to exist and even thrive in both reputable public theaters and in more intimate settings, such as private performances in salon culture. The extreme class hierarchies of the *Ancien Régime* may have contributed to the greater freedoms upper-class women enjoyed during this time. A regression in women's rights and theatrical production can later be seen in post-revolutionary France. Professor Joan Landes argues that the French Revolution, while promoting ideals of liberty, created a more rigidly gendered, male-dominated public sphere, pushing women out of influential roles such as in the salons and back into the domestic sphere. Women had to balance their public professional ambitions with their expected private, feminine social roles.

The four plays examined offer brief moments that cohere within their contexts, though they at times push the limits of the necessary *bienséance*; each, public and private, ends in a socially acceptable way, which is often seen as a retreat to reality off stage. Barbier, Graffigny, and Benoist can be seen as trailblazers of their time; they take up the ranks of their predecessors and serve as an inheritance for the generations to come. This paper serves as an example of the

difference these women made and continue to make in the lives of female authors and scholars today.

Although Gethner claimed that the plays lacked explicit feminist sentiment, one cannot overlook the context in which they were created. These authors sought to fit into literary circles; they wanted to be accepted by their peers and taken seriously. The three women's ability to navigate societal expectations and theatrical regulations while experimenting with gender norms is a feat in itself. If they had been blatantly feminist, they would likely have faced rejection and isolation, resulting in the loss of their works entirely. Small wins that may seem trivial by today's standards were giant leaps in their time. They made women in their audiences feel seen, and if the messages were sometimes too subtle for some to notice, they do not evade women who have inherited and live out gender inequality today.

Both the public and private productions examined in this study engaged in rational discussion of gendered social norms. We see females demonstrating reasoning in marriage, a complex and high-risk process. The commodification of women and their confinement to gender-specific roles are presented as social constructs rather than natural. *La Superchérie réciproque* stands out as an example of how exploitation intensifies when analyzed intersectionally through the lens of gender and class inequities.

Although these are only four theatrical works over a long century, one can wonder about the evolution of women's theater and its increasingly direct and daring nature. In the 20th century, theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler argued against the idea that gendered behavior is innate. Butler explained that, in the theater, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, separating acting from what is real. This distinction can maintain these two categories despite this temporary challenge to our current assumptions about gender

arrangements; the various conventions that declare 'this is only a play' allow strict lines to be drawn between the performance and everyday life (Butler 278). The restrictions placed on theaters demonstrated the power they wielded. If audiences saw possibilities acted out on stage, those ideas could influence the women who watched the performances. At their best, the theaters fed freedom and showed women what was possible. In cases where women were oppressed, seeing a woman's position acted out on stage served as a mirror, reflecting their reality and allowing them to see different possibilities unfold. These works call for self-reflection and call on us all to reassess the construct of gender identity that continues to challenge society today.

It is possible to associate the uncertain political climate, which eroded older regimes, with Enlightenment thought and the permission granted to certain women to secure a place in literary and political spheres. Although female authors risked intense criticism, the select few who persisted are to be seen as heroines in their own right. When you put a (theatrical) work of art into the world, you will be judged. Voltaire stated, "There is a certain dignity attached to the state of womanhood that must not be debased...A woman is indeed degraded when she becomes a playwright and does not succeed" (quoted in Mittman 9). And yet the three playwrights analyzed here persevered, took risks, and chose to do it anyway. In 18th-century France, their plays were iconoclastic; they showed women breaking free from stereotypes and from the predominantly male-constructed female figures seen on French stages. It may also suggest that there was a bit more flexibility regarding gender alternatives than is often assumed, given the codification of gender norms in the 19th century. While these plays go outside the norms, their existence suggests that there was a space outside the norm for them to be accepted by some and understood. Barbier, Graffigny, and Benoist artfully found a space for women to exist that

balanced their sentimental and intellectual sides, allowing them to act with agency and bravery on France's largest stage.

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