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Giving Madame Denis Her Due: The Mistaken Attribution of *La Coquette punie*

Carol Kleiner Willen

MME DENIS, née Marie Louise Mignot,¹ is a familiar figure in the annals of French society during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Her presence is felt throughout Voltaire's voluminous correspondence, for she was his niece, mistress, and, upon occasion, "chère muse." In addition, she served as hostess and majordomo in every residence occupied by the philosopher from 1750 until his death in 1778.² Voltaire's friendship and counsel were sought by the most celebrated persons of the day; an almost constant flow of visitors flocked to his door. In this cosmopolitan and cultivated milieu, Mme Denis reigned supreme, exercising a degree of power and influence unwarranted by her native abilities, for even those who felt the greatest antipathy towards her treated her deferentially in the hope of gaining an audience with her uncle.

Until recent years the interest aroused by Mme Denis has been almost exclusively historical and biographical. According to the pervading view, she was a garrulous, self-important, and volatile woman who cut a ludicrous figure in a setting peopled by men and women whose talents and personal worth were far superior to hers. Generally biographers of Voltaire have noted, in passing, that she was an aspiring playwright;³ but since they often fail to take the woman seriously, they conclude,

¹ (1712-1790).

² During Voltaire's sojourn in Prussia at the court of Frederick II (July 1750-March 1753), his niece continued to occupy his house on the rue Traversière in Paris. Only one other separation deserves mention: following a domestic upheaval at Ferney in 1768, Mme Denis spent approximately one and a half years in the French capital (March 1768-October 1769).

³ Mme Denis is the author of *La Coquette punie*, a five-act comedy in verse; *L'Étranger persécuté*, a five-act comedy in prose; *Paméla*, a three-act prose comedy; and three acts of a tragedy, *Alceste*, which she had begun to transpose from prose into verse.

by a quirk of syllogistic logic, that her literary endeavors are to be dismissed as works of little or no consequence.⁴ This characterization of Mme Denis, which in many ways blatantly contradicts the role she played in the life of Voltaire, is unfortunately founded upon incomplete evidence — the biased, if not malicious, testimony of a handful of her contemporaries.⁵ One can assume that neither they, nor the biographers and literary historians responsible for the subsequent popularization of this view, ever had the opportunity or the inclination to read her plays.

Within the past decade there have appeared two articles, based upon actual texts, in which Mme Denis and her literary interests undergo a more objective appraisal. Jérôme Vercrucysse, in his essay "Madame Denis et Ximènes ou la nièce aristarque," demonstrates that, as a critic of the theatre, she possessed both perspicacity and sound judgment.⁶ In "Madame Denis's unpublished *Pamela*: a link between Richardson, Goldoni and Voltaire," Colin Duckworth examines a play whose construction clearly indicates that its author was a person of a certain cultural refinement. Mme Denis' stage adaptation of Richardson's novel, which "is largely a translation and adaptation of Goldoni's *Pamela nubile*,"⁷ offers convincing proof of her familiarity with con-

⁴ In his biography, *Voltaire ou la royauté de l'esprit* (Paris: Flammarion, 1966), Jean Oricux presents what is perhaps the least flattering portrait of Mme Denis to be found anywhere. Delighting in the use of avian imagery, he refers to her both as a turkey-hen ("la dinde de la rue Traversière") and as a goose. Her literary aspirations — in other words, her desire to take up the quill — permit him to play upon ornithological terms. For example, he writes: "The actors [of the Comédie Française] refused to play the nonsense which fell from her quill pen [literally, the feather of a goose]." ("Les Comédiens se refusèrent à jouer les inepties tombées de sa plume d'oie" — p. 415.) See also pp. 362, 464, 517, 662.

⁵ Perhaps the most frequently cited portraits of Mme Denis are those left by Mme d'Épinay, in a letter to the Baron de Grimm, c. 25 November 1757, and Grimm's own remarks in the *Correspondance littéraire* of 15 April 1768. See letter D7480 in the definitive edition of Voltaire's correspondence, *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire; Banbury, Oxfordshire: Voltaire Foundation; Oxford: Taylor Institution; 1968-1977), CII — *Correspondence*, XVIII, 267. See also [Frédéric Melchior] Grimm and [Denis] Diderot, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, VIII (Paris: Garnier, 1879), 54.

⁶ [Jérôme] Vercrucysse, "Madame Denis et Ximènes ou la nièce aristarque," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Theodore Besterman, LXVII (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1969), 73-90.

⁷ Colin Duckworth, "Madame Denis's unpublished *Pamela*: a link between

temporary literature, and also helps to explain the genesis of Voltaire's *Écossaise*.

The Houghton Library of Harvard University owns not only the copy of *Paméla* which Duckworth used in his study,⁸ but also a manuscript version of Mme Denis' initial work, *La Coquette punie*, a five-act comedy in alexandrine verse.⁹ The latter text, upon which my doctoral dissertation is based, was thought to be an "inédit," existing only in manuscript form.¹⁰ In the course of my research I discovered not only that the play has in fact been published, but also that for the past two hundred years it has been attributed, under the title *La Veuve coquette*, to Joseph-François-Édouard Corsembleu de Desmahis, a contemporary of Mme Denis and another of Voltaire's protégés.¹¹ My

Richardson, Goldoni and Voltaire," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, LXXVI (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1970), 41.

⁸ Houghton MS Fr 232.1.

⁹ Houghton MS Fr 232. I am indebted to Mr. W. H. Bond, Librarian of the Houghton Library, for permission to use this document. Houghton acquired the manuscript of *La Coquette punie* on 23 December 1964 from an English antiquarian bookseller, H. D. Lyon, who in turn had purchased it from Jacques Lambert of the Librairie de l'Abbaye in Paris. The work is described in this fashion in the 1957 Librairie de l'Abbaye catalogue entitled *Voltaire. Autographes, documents, manuscrits*: "154 *La Coquette punie*. Comedy in five act[s] and in verse. 114 p[p]. Copy in a good hand, with numerous autograph corrections by Mme Denis. A few passages are written on pieces of paper glued to the text." ("154 *La Coquette punie*. Comédie en cinq acte[s] et en vers. 114 p[p]. Copie d'une bonne écriture, avec de nombreuses corrections autographes de Mme Denis. Quelques passages sont écrits sur des morceaux de papier collés dans le texte.")

An examination of Voltaire's correspondence shows that this comedy underwent several changes of title during its genesis. On one occasion, 19 July 1748 (D3724), Voltaire uses the expression "Dame à la mode" in alluding to his niece's play. On 26 September 1748 (D3767), 4 October 1748 (D3774), 22 November 1748 (D3811), and 18 January 1749 (D3851), he speaks of the "femme à la mode." On 14, 16, and 23 August 1749 (D3978, D3987, and D3993), he refers to "la petite maîtresse." The ultimate title of the play, "*la coquette punie*," does not actually appear in the philosopher's correspondence until 3 May 1752, in a letter from Voltaire to d'Argental (D4885). For the letters cited, see Voltaire, *Correspondence* (note 5 above), X, 283, 322, 327, 363, 399; XI, 124, 132, 139; and XIII, 48.

¹⁰ The other extant copy of this play, corresponding to the following description in Lambert's catalogue, could not be located: "155 *La Coquette punie*. 130 pp. Another copy, more polished, and clear, without erasures or corrections. The text, compared to that of the preceding copy, offers numerous variants." ("155 *La Coquette punie*. 130 pp. Autre copie, plus soignée, et au net sans ratures ni corrections. Le texte, comparé à celui de la copie précédente, offre de nombreuses variantes.")

¹¹ Joseph-François-Édouard Corsembleu de Desmahis (1722-1761).

attempt to formulate a hypothesis which would explain the mistaken attribution led me to explore the relationship between Voltaire and his disciples, and the social climate in which *La Coquette punie* was written.

Literary and sociological circumstances intertwine in mid-eighteenth-century France. A contagion which can only be termed "théâtromanie" — the vogue of writing, directing, and presenting plays, not to mention, of course, assiduously attending dramatic performances — helps to account for the profusion, as well as for the mediocrity, of the comedies written both by aristocrats and by the bourgeois who attempted to emulate them, all of whom were "amateurs" in the primary sense of the word. Directly related to this literary phenomenon is a particular feature of life in Parisian salons which has great bearing upon the present study: the custom of sharing one's work with friends, by reading plays aloud or by circulating them in manuscript form. The comments and criticisms arising from the ensuing discussions might then be used by the author in preparing a revised text. Nothing could be further removed from the notion of literary exclusivity, of jealously concealing one's work until a polished script was ready for production. Playwrights sought and received assistance, not only from experienced mentors, but also from well-meaning friends of dilettante status. These circumstances illuminate the attribution of an early version of Mme Denis' comedy to Desmahis.

My discovery of the second text was the providential consequence of a search for structural or thematic similarities between *La Coquette punie* and other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century comedies which Mme Denis might have read, seen, or heard discussed in the highly literate atmosphere of which she was a part. What struck me initially about *La Veuve coquette*, the first work in the second volume of the *Œuvres de M. Desmahis, Première édition complète, Publiée d'après ses Manuscrits, avec son Éloge historique, Par M. de Tresséol*,¹² was the list entitled "Acteurs":¹³ the dramatis personae bore the same names as the

¹² *Les Œuvres de M. Desmahis, Première édition complète, Publiée d'après ses Manuscrits, avec son Éloge historique, Par M. de Tresséol* (Paris: Humblot, 1778). This edition, containing two volumes bound as one in the original leather cover, is owned by the Freiburger Library of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, to whose head librarian, Mrs. Ann Drain, I would like to express my appreciation. (See Fig. 1).

¹³ "Volume II, containing the plays" ("Tome second, contenant les pièces de théâtre"), p. 2.

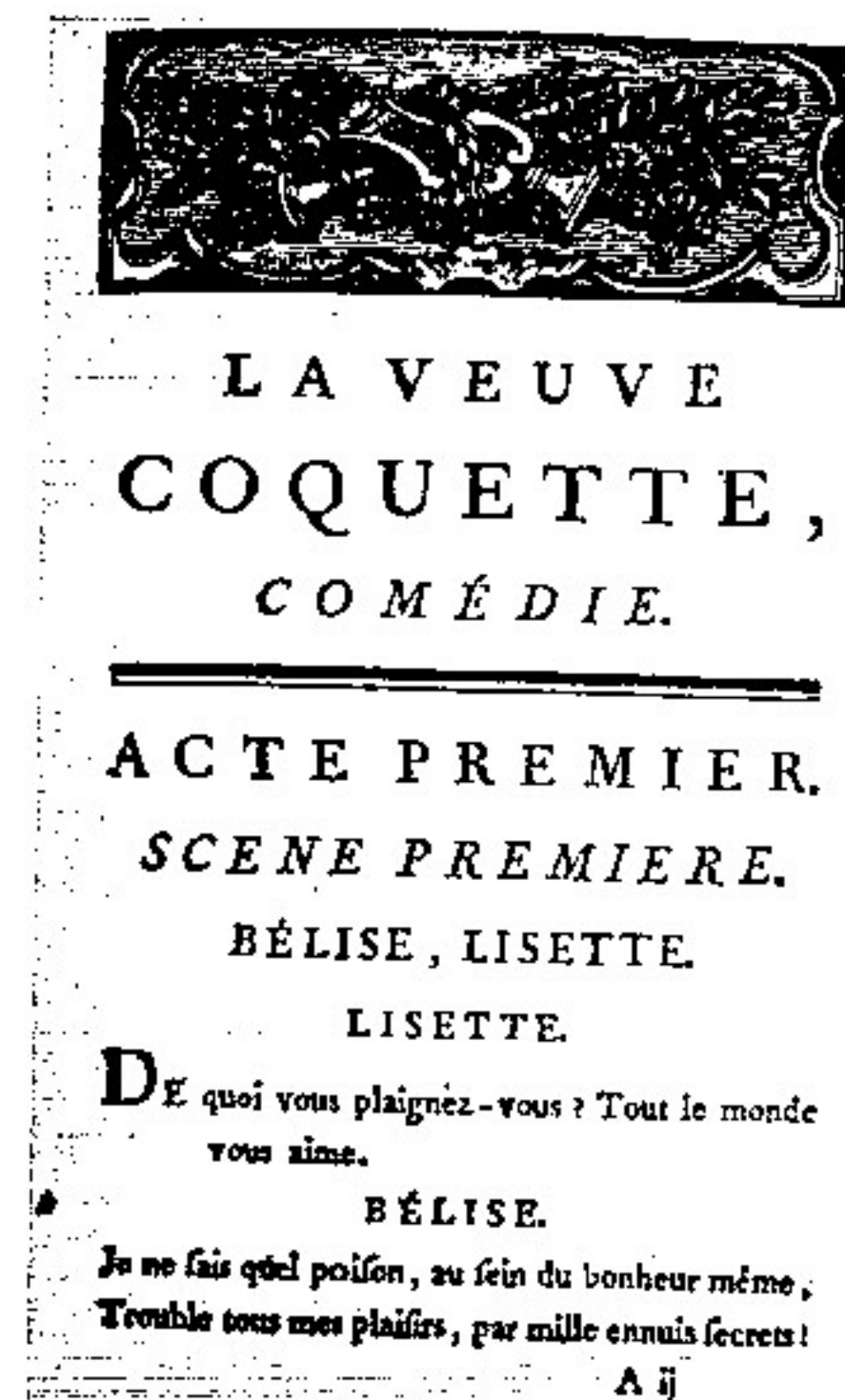
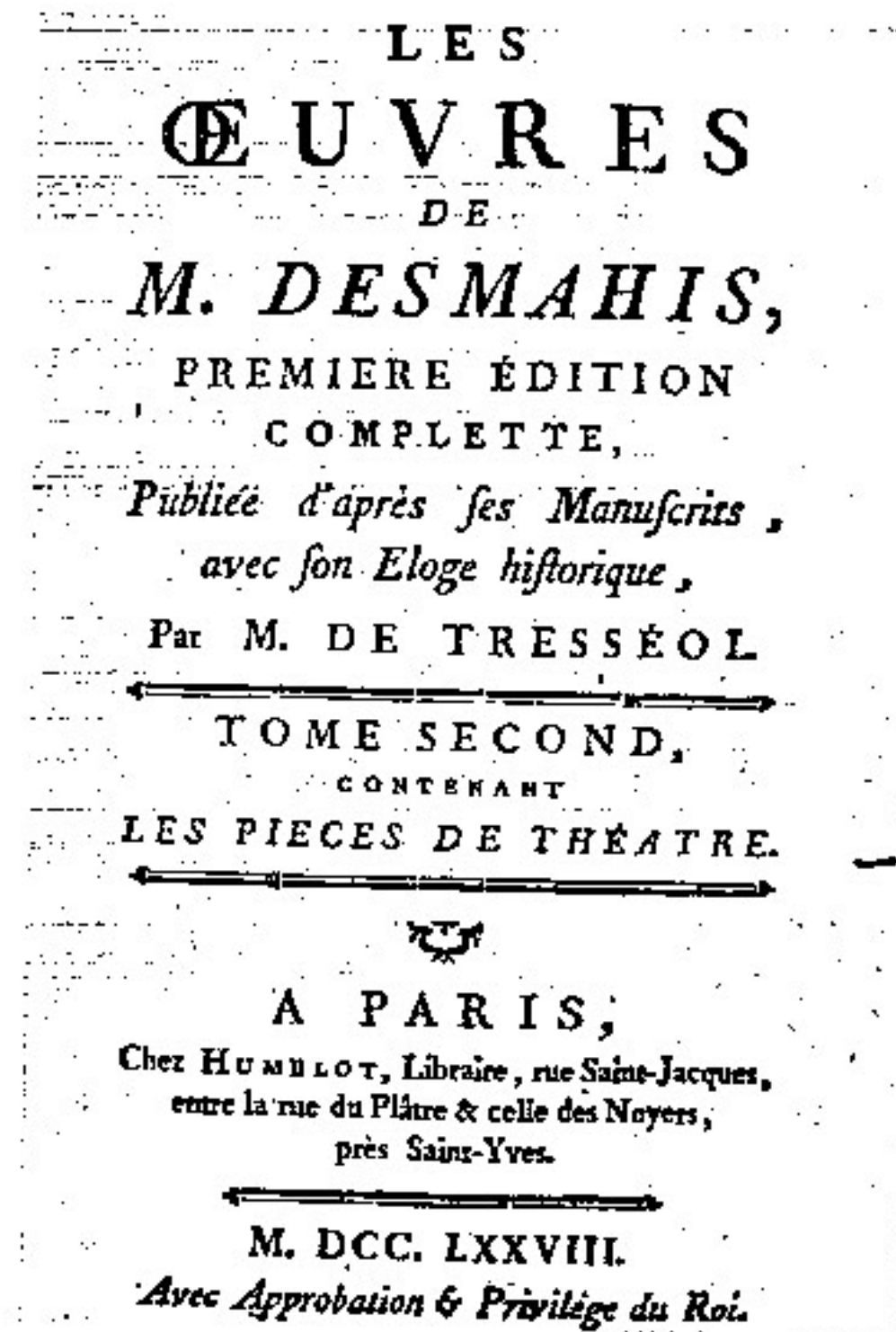


FIG. 1. (LEFT) TITLE PAGE OF DESMAHIS' ŒUVRES (1778), VOL. II
(RIGHT) FIRST PAGE OF LA VEUVE COQUETTE IN THIS VOLUME

Freiberger Library,
Case Western Reserve University

characters in *La Coquette punie*. This coincidence, while it naturally aroused my curiosity, proved nothing in itself, for the use of stock figures bearing conventional names was common practice in the French comic tradition. One would expect G ron te to be a "barbon," a curmudgeon upon whom the fortunes of young lovers depended; "Lisette" and "Frontin" were necessarily the names of servants, and so on. Since the first portion of the exposition happens to be quite different from that of *La Coquette punie*, it was not until I had read a dozen or so lines that I realized I knew by heart much of the text I was examining.¹⁴

My initial reaction was to doubt that *La Coquette punie* had in fact been written by Mme Denis. The prefatory material, however, was extremely helpful in proving my suspicions ill-founded. In fact, the most telling comments in this regard are offered by the editor himself, Pierre Ignace Roubaud de Tress ol, in the " loge historique" which precedes the first volume. This edition, published in Paris in 1778, is posthumous; Tress ol explains that he had undertaken the task of assembling the collected works of Desmahis because the public, "eager to garner the literary heritage of celebrated Authors, had been demanding for a long time the collection of Monsieur Desmahis' complete Works. The Person charged with this trust desired, with the same ardor, to satisfy its eagerness, & to fulfill this last obligation to friendship."¹⁵

As editor, Tress ol took great liberties with the material at his disposal. Several of the plays, he explains, were found in an amorphous state, consisting of nothing more than seemingly incoherent thoughts, hastily penned, which, though meaningful to their author, seemed to possess neither rhyme nor reason.

It was necessary . . . to correct, to improve, to fill the gaps, to treat another's property as one's own. It was necessary to guess the Author's intent, to form with him a community of intellect & talent; & in this company to yield to him

¹⁴ Shortly before his death in May 1778, Voltaire received from Roubaud de Tress ol a copy of this edition of Desmahis' works. Although his letter of thanks (January 1778; *D20990: Correspondence* [note 5 above], XLV, 168) is both cordial and complimentary, it is doubtful whether he paid much attention to the contents of the two volumes. In any case, it is clear that Voltaire did not realize that *La Veuve coquette* was simply a version of his niece's play.

¹⁵ ". . . avide de recueillir l'h ritage litt raire des Auteurs c l bres, demandoit depuis long-tems le recueil des Œuvres entieres de M. Desmahis. La Personne, charg e de ce d p t, desiroit, avec la m me ardeur, de satisfaire   son empressement, & de rendre ce dernier devoir   l'amiti " (I, xxi).

all the honor of the successful issue. The Public . . . will exercise indulgence towards an Editor who . . . did not at all hesitate to work for the fame of the Author, by drawing to himself alone all the criticism.¹⁶

In the case of *La Veuve coquette*, the editor admits that he inserted lines according to his own discretion.¹⁷ Unfortunately these additions are not identified.

Tresséol himself recommends that the reader be circumspect in examining this collection of poetry and plays. In the "Éloge historique" he does not hesitate to mention that "the manuscripts of Monsieur Desmahis offered what amounted to only a confused heap of loose sheets."¹⁸ Nevertheless, the state of disorder in which the documents were found, the tentative and incomplete character of a number of works, were the least of the obstacles confronting Tresséol as editor:

Another difficulty presented itself, from which it was not easy to escape. Monsieur Desmahis, who read a great deal, used to copy, sometimes without indicating the sources, pieces which he was very glad to have at hand, & which he left mingled with his own productions, relying with good reason upon himself to take care not to appropriate the work of another, & to render to each his due. An Editor would need a felicitous memory and great patience in order to perform this separation of goods, so to speak, & save his Author from the reproach of plagiarism.¹⁹

Could *La Veuve coquette* not then be the work of another, copied by Desmahis for personal use?

It seems that, in his eagerness to pay homage to his friend, Roubaud de Tresséol literally appropriated whatever he found among the papers

¹⁶ "Il falloit . . . corriger, réformer, remplir des lacunes, disposer du bien d'autrui, comme du sien propre. Il falloit deviner l'Auteur, faire avec lui société d'esprit & de talens; & dans cette société lui céder tout l'honneur du succès. Le Public . . . usera d'indulgence envers un Editeur, qui . . . n'a point balancé à travailler pour la gloire de l'Auteur, en attirant sur lui seul toute la critique" (I, xxii-xxiii).

¹⁷ "I supplied several lines which the first [play] was lacking." ("J'ai suppléé plusieurs vers qui manquoient à la première [pièce]" — I, xxv.)

¹⁸ "Les manuscrits de M. Desmahis n'offroient presque qu'un amas confus de feuilles volantes" (I, xxii).

¹⁹ "Il se présentait un autre embarras, dont il n'étoit pas facile de sortir. M. Desmahis, qui lisoit beaucoup, copioit, sans indiquer quelquefois les sources, des morceaux qu'il étoit bien aise d'avoir sous sa main, & qu'il laissoit confondus avec ses propres productions, se reposant avec raison sur lui-même du soin de ne pas s'approprier l'ouvrage d'autrui, & de rendre à chacun ce qui lui appartenait. Un Editeur avoit besoin d'une heureuse mémoire, & d'une grande patience pour faire cette séparation de biens, si je puis ainsi parler, & sauver son Auteur du reproche de plagiat" (I, xxiii-xxiv).

of the deceased. During Desmahis' lifetime, there had been considerable confusion as to the authenticity of the literary works attributed to him. Tresséol's well-intentioned zeal succeeded only in further complicating the issue.

There exists sufficient textual evidence not only to link the two versions of the play, but also to establish irrefutably the anteriority of *La Veuve coquette*. Perhaps the most cogent proof is provided by the treatment of four passages which appear in the printed version; on the manuscript of *La Coquette punie* they have been vigorously crossed out. The deleted words, however, correspond exactly to the text of *La Veuve coquette*.²⁰ After carefully retracing the genesis of *La Coquette punie*, and after reconstructing the events of the period 1747–1752 which captured the attention of the Parisian theatre public, I have hypothesized that the version of the play presented by Tresséol was probably written prior to the middle of 1749,²¹ while the manuscript at Houghton (see Figs. 2–3), bearing the date 1752, may very well have been written during the latter half of 1752.²²

One finds no other contemporary allusion to Desmahis' having created a play bearing this title, or even one which remotely resembles "Veuve coquette," or "Coquette punie." However, Tresséol's edition, perhaps because of its generous two-volume format, has somehow come

²⁰ These variants are indicated in the critical edition of *La Coquette punie* which accompanies my dissertation. They correspond to the following lines in my transcription of the manuscript: 601–602; 679, 681; 1319, 1321; and 1397–1398.

²¹ The most compelling evidence is internal. *La Coquette punie* contains a passage (I, iii) on the subject of women's rights in the literary domain which is not found in *La Veuve coquette*. These lines seem to be Mme Denis' response to the presentation of two plays which had caused a stir in the theatre public: *Les Amazones*, by Mme Du Boccage, which had its première 24 July 1749 and was played eleven times that year, and Mme de Graffigny's *Cénie*, first presented 25 June 1750, which ran for twenty-five performances. The first version of Mme Denis' comedy was practically completed before these plays appeared. See D3830 (24 December 1748) and D3968 (27 July 1749) — Voltaire, *Correspondence* (note 5 above), X, 381, and XI, 114–115.

²² The Houghton manuscript of *La Coquette punie* bears the date 1752. We know, however, according to a letter written by Mme Denis to Pierre Robert Le Cornier de Cideville on 17 July 1752 (D4948: Voltaire, *Correspondence* [note 5 above], XIII, 108), that she continued to work on the text during the summer of that year, even after sending a revised version of the play to Voltaire in Potsdam. Moreover, the actors of the Comédie Française often demanded changes as well. (Mme Denis had submitted her manuscript for their consideration in August 1752, and had withdrawn it towards the end of November.) It is thus possible that the play underwent extensive revision during the latter part of 1752.

4. Mais qu'une femme s'occupe ou bien ne s'occupe, pas

Houghton Library

to be regarded as the definitive collection of Desmahis' prose, poetry, and plays.²³ Consequently, in such reliable works of reference as Brenner's *Bibliographical List of Plays in the French Language 1700-1789*, *La Veuve coquette* is credited to Desmahis.²⁴

Convinced that this comedy was in fact the work of Mme Denis, I began to explore the possibility of personal ties between the real author of the play and the individual to whom it had been posthumously attributed. I found the human dimensions of this story to be far more interesting than any textual considerations.

While it is difficult to establish the precise circumstances in which Desmahis first met Voltaire, we know that the philosopher's ties with the Corsembleu family of Sully antedate 1722, the year of the young poet's birth.²⁵ Upon his arrival in Paris in 1740, Desmahis sought a mentor and Maecenas, and Voltaire, who took great interest in the careers of aspiring writers, adopted the eighteen-year-old as a protégé, introducing him to the habitués of the most prominent salons of the day. His earliest literary endeavors, works of occasional verse, were very well received.

In his late twenties Desmahis turned to writing for the comic theatre.

²³ Desmahis' first attempt at theatrical writing was *L'Impertinent*, and his last, *L'Honnête Homme*, a five-act comedy of which only fragments exist, since the author fell ill during its genesis. In several biographical sources, mention is made of a one-act comedy, *L'Inconséquent*. Tresséol comments, on this subject: "It has been printed that Monsieur Desmahis had almost completed a comedy entitled *L'Inconséquent*: we found only a few halves of scenes from it, of which we were not able to make any use." ("On a imprimé que M. Desmahis avoit presque achevé une comédie intitulée *L'Inconséquent*: nous n'en avons trouvé que quelques moitiés de scenes, dont nous n'avons pu faire aucun usage" — I, xl-xli.) While Tresséol thus dismisses *L'Inconséquent*, he is the only editor to include among the works of Desmahis *Le Triomphe du sentiment*, "in one act & in verse, . . . a clever play which has not yet been printed" ("en un acte & en vers, . . . une piece ingénieuse qui n'a point encore été imprimée" — I, xxxviii), and *La Veuve coquette*.

²⁴ In his *Bibliographical List of Plays in the French Language 1700-1789* (Berkeley, California: 1947), Clarence D. Brenner appears to rely solely upon the Tresséol edition, listing only *L'Honnête Homme* (5487); *L'Impertinent* (5488); *Le Triomphe du sentiment* (5489); and *La Veuve coquette* (5490).

²⁵ Voltaire made three trips to Sully-sur-Loire. In 1716 he was "exiled" there as punishment for having written a satirical epigram, the target of which happened to be the Duchesse de Berry, daughter of the Regent, Philippe d'Orléans. Voltaire revisited Sully — of his own volition — in 1719, and again towards the end of 1722. Desmahis, who was born on 3 February 1722, was therefore less than a year old at the time of Voltaire's last stay in that region.

L'Impertinent, a one-act comedy in verse, was first presented on 30 August 1750. On the third of September, in a letter to her friend Cideville, Mme Denis commented: "Today they're performing a little play of Desmaï's. I intend to go."²⁶

Did Mme Denis know the author of *L'Impertinent* at that time? All indications are positive. Both belonged to the most literate and literary segment of Parisian society. Under Voltaire's patronage Desmahis "was welcomed with eagerness, & encouraged by protectors & lovers of Letters,"²⁷ and had acquired a reputation as poet and "bel esprit." Mme Denis had taken up residence in Paris in the spring of 1744 after losing her husband, Nicholas Charles Denis, commissary of the regiment stationed at Lille. By 1750 she was a well-known hostess and devotee of the arts. In the successful salon which she had established in 1747, she attracted many of her uncle's protégés, in addition to her own coterie. Jean François Marmontel, who thoroughly enjoyed himself in the ambiance she created, reports in his *Mémoires*:

The lady and her guests were scarcely more reasonable nor less joyous than I, and when Voltaire could escape from the bonds of his marquise du Châtelet and his society suppers, he was only too happy to come and roar with laughter with us.²⁸

Mme Denis' concupiscence is as well documented as her cordiality. A maternal though sensual woman whose behavior was at times nothing short of licentious, she savored the company of talented men, particularly those who were young and charming, and who shared her interest in literature and the theatre. Holding a salon legitimately afforded her the opportunity to create a masculine entourage; Desmahis, a successful poet ten years her junior, possessed all the requisite membership qualifications. In any case, they were unquestionably part of the same general milieu; and, of course, both "métromanes" enjoyed the protection of Voltaire, with whom Mme Denis had shared a common residence since 1750. Clearly, the two had met before 1755. In August

²⁶ "On joue aujourd'hui une petite pièce de Desmaï. Je Compte y aller" (3 September 1750; D4211: Voltaire, *Correspondence* [note 5 above], XI, 345).

²⁷ "... fut accueilli avec empressement, & encouragé par les protecteurs & les amateurs des Lettres" (Tresséol, I, xxxi).

²⁸ "La dame et ses convives n'étoient guère plus sages ni moins joyeux que moi; et, quand Voltaire pouvoit s'échapper des liens de sa marquise du Châtelet et de ses soupers du grand monde, il étoit trop heureux de venir rire aux éclats avec nous." *Mémoires de Marmontel*, ed. Maurice Tourneux (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1891), I, 188.

or September of that year, Voltaire wrote to the young man, "Madame Denis' remembrance of you is as fond as mine."²⁹

As stated above, the version of her play found among the manuscripts of Desmahis dates from around 1749; *L'Impertinent*, the play for which he is best known, was first presented the following year. The practice among playwrights of sharing their unfinished or newly completed works with friends before unveiling them publicly lends support to the hypothesis that Desmahis, who was engaged in writing a comedy at the same time as Mme Denis, had borrowed from her a copy of the text on which she was then working.³⁰ It is highly plausible that she knew Desmahis in the late 1740s and early 1750s, and willingly assented to his reading the play.

The similarities between *La Coquette punie* and *L'Impertinent* suggest communication between their authors. In fact, it can be argued that Desmahis not only borrowed Mme Denis' play, but also borrowed from it. The re-routed letter which provides the critical situation ("nœud") in the intrigue of *La Coquette punie* furnishes all there is in the way of dramatic action in *L'Impertinent* — which was originally entitled *Le Billet perdu*, "the lost note."

The thematic similarity between the two plays is even more important than their structural resemblance. Both fall under the rubric "le théâtre des méchants," created by Laurent Versini in his study of *Les Liaisons dangereuses, Laclos et la tradition*.³¹ Perhaps the best-known play of this type is *Le Méchant*, by Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset, first performed in 1747.³² Such works are reflections of "la méchanceté à la mode," a fashionable manifestation of worldliness conjoined with wickedness, gratuitous yet premeditated cruelty which the moralist Charles Pinot Duclos actually views as a social phenomenon among

²⁹ "Mad^e Denis est aussi sensible que moi à votre souvenir" (D6454: Voltaire, *Correspondence* [note 5 above], XVI, 265). This is the first solid evidence of the fact that Mme Denis and Desmahis knew one another.

³⁰ See note 21 above.

³¹ *Laclos et la tradition: Essai sur les sources et la technique des Liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968).

³² In this category one might also include *Le Chevalier à la mode* (1687) of Florent Carton de Dancourt; *Le Flatteur* (1696) of Jean-Baptiste Rousseau; *L'Ingrat* (1712), *Le Médisant* (1715), and *Le Glorieux* (1732) of Philippe Néricault Des-touches; *Le Petit-Mâitre corrigé* (1734) of Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux; *Le Fat puni* (1738) of Pont de Veyle; *Les Dehors trompeurs, ou L'Homme du jour* (1740) of Louis de Boissy; *L'Impertinent* (1750) of Desmahis; and *La Coquette corrigée* (1756) of Jean Sauvé de La Noue.

members of the upper crust. Beneath a veneer of charm and poise lurked scandal and subterfuge. A careful turn of phrase, a whispered innuendo, a scintillating albeit stinging barb — these were the means by which the “méchant” succeeded both in dazzling and in manipulating his peers. “Wickedness,” observes Duclos, “has ceased to be odious, without even losing its name . . . Today wickedness is reduced to an art, it takes the place of merit in those who have none other, and often gains them consideration.”³³

Central to each of the plays which Versini assigns to this category is an audacious character who strives relentlessly for social dominance, performing evil deeds with a delectation that is at once unholy and unwholesome. Eager to distinguish himself at any cost, the “méchant” does not shrink from the wanton destruction of reputations — or lives. Both Damis, the impertinent protagonist of Desmahis’ work, and Bélise, the chief character in Mme Denis’ comedy, bear a strong resemblance to the exemplar of the species, Gresset’s Cléon, and thereby exhibit the key psychological traits which distinguish the role of “méchant.” One can account quite simply for the popularity of such comedies: contemporary playwrights had discovered that the behavior of these scoundrels provided titillating theatrical fare. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose vehement opposition to most forms of dramatic representation is yet another aspect of his singularity,³⁴ lamented that Cléon had failed to shock the audience because he gave the impression of being merely “an ordinary man; he was, they said, like everybody else.”³⁵

The portrayal of wickedness is curbed by the common form to which these plays adhere. They constitute a category under the more general heading “comedy of character.”³⁶ According to the traditional schema of character plays, the principal figure manifests, and is ultimately punished for, some type of anti-social eccentricity. Once his true character

³³ “La méchanceté a cessé d’être odieuse, sans même perdre son nom . . . Aujourd’hui la méchanceté est réduite en art, elle tient lieu de mérite à ceux qui n’en ont point d’autre, et souvent leur donne de la considération.” Duclos, *Considérations sur les mœurs* (1751), in the *Œuvres de Duclos* (Paris: A. Belin, 1821), I, 96.

³⁴ See Rousseau’s *Lettre à M. d’Alembert sur son article “Genève.”*

³⁵ “un homme ordinaire; il étoit disoit-on, comme tout le monde.” Rousseau, “Préface à *Narcisse ou l’Amant de lui-même*,” *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, II (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961), 964, note.

³⁶ Classical comedies were generally categorized in two groups: those based upon “character” and those based upon “intrigue.” In many instances this distinction is a precarious one.

is unmasked, his actions are criticized; yet good fellowship prevails, and generally he is offered the opportunity for rehabilitation. In the "théâtre des méchants," however, the chief character is more dangerous than ridiculous. Once his machinations have been revealed, they are condemned, as before, but in this case, castigation and ostracism are far less likely to imply reform. On the contrary, the "méchant" sees his embarrassing situation as a temporary setback, his failure to gain control as a mere slip-up.³⁷ He therefore scrambles to his feet, brushes himself off, and sets out to find another group of gulls.

Eighteenth-century critics such as Collé, Grimm, and d'Argenson were quick to point out the similarity between *L'Impertinent* and Gresset's *Méchant*,³⁸ and subsequent judgments of Desmahis' play conform to the observations made by the author's contemporaries.³⁹ Still more striking, however, are the resemblances between *La Coquette punie* and *Le Méchant*. In my view, Mme Denis' comedy, while by no means a flawless play, can nevertheless be considered a superior illustration of the "théâtre des méchants." Like the brazen Cléon, Bélise is supremely egotistical and utterly callous. Endowed with a real flair for the dramatic, she is constantly preoccupied by the necessity of staying in the limelight. The charm which she can exude at will enables her to

³⁷ Jacques Truchet, in his remarks on Gresset's *Méchant*, takes issue with the line "He is punished enough when shame overcomes him." ("Il est assez puni quand l'opprobre l'accable" [V, x].) Truchet observes: "Opprobrium does not overwhelm him at all. His failure is only an abortive attempt. He will start again." ("L'opprobre ne l'accable pas du tout. Son échec n'est qu'un coup manqué. Il recommencera.") Truchet, ed., *Théâtre du XVIII^e siècle*, I (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1972), 1474.

³⁸ See Charles Collé, *Journal et Mémoires sur les hommes de lettres, les ouvrages dramatiques et les événements les plus mémorables du règne de Louis XV (1748-1772)*, ed. Honoré Bonhomme (Paris, Firmin Didot, 1868), I, 219; Grimm and Diderot, *Correspondance littéraire*, I (1877), 473; and René Louis de Voyer de Paulmy, marquis d'Argenson, *Notices sur les Œuvres de théâtre*, ed. H. Lagrave, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, XLII (Les Délices, Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1966), 424.

³⁹ The comments made upon this filiation by Léon Fontaine and Frédéric Deloffre are representative of later critical reaction. Fontaine, in *Le Théâtre et la philosophie au XVIII^e siècle* (1879; rpt. Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1967), describes Cléon as the progenitor of a "lignée nombreuse," a prolific and infamous line of cynical schemers, and refers to *L'Impertinent* as "son premier-né," his first-born (p. 178). In the introduction to his critical edition of Marivaux' *Petit-Maître corrigé* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1955), Deloffre writes: "Close to the *Méchant*, the character of the 'Indiscret' [*sic* *L'Impertinent*], created shortly thereafter by Desmahis, goes further in certain respects." ("Proche du *Méchant*, le caractère de l' 'Indiscret', créé peu après par Desmahis, va plus loin à certains égards" — p. 36.)

conceal the fundamental perversity of her nature, and to gain the confidence of her potential victims.

Every classical French comedy is both an exercise in imitation and an attempt at innovation. In *La Coquette punie*, Mme Denis has not only created a work which possesses multiple affinities with the other comedies of cruelty mentioned here, but has also made a notable contribution to the *genre* by her departure from the traditional portrayal of the principal character: for the first time in the evolution of the "théâtre des méchants," center stage is occupied by a female, "la méchante." If, as Jacques Truchet suggests, one views Gresset's Cléon as a forbear of Valmont, the marquis in Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*,⁴⁰ then surely Bélise can be considered a precursor of his female counterpart, the formidable Mme de Merteuil.⁴¹

Desmahis was captivated by "la méchanceté à la mode," and particularly by the social behavior of worldly women, "mondaines." One has only to glance at the "Pensées détachées sur les femmes" which appear in the Tresséol edition of his works to appreciate the nature of this fascination. The most valuable evidence of his interest in what might be termed feminine psychology lies in his best-known prose piece, the article "Femme (moral)" which he contributed to the sixth volume of *L'Encyclopédie* (1756). In this essay Desmahis traces the progressive moral corruption of a fictitious female in the descent from ingénue to coquette to courtesan.⁴²

What little biographical data we possess on Desmahis thus substantiates the hypothesis that he knew Mme Denis, and that he at some point borrowed from her the text of her comedy. As protégés of Voltaire, they must have had numerous mutual acquaintances; as ardent theatre enthusiasts, they probably attended performances of many of the same works. Furthermore, at approximately the same time both were engaged in the business of writing plays: all of her theatrical pieces were created between the years 1747 and 1759, and those of Desmahis, during

⁴⁰ Truchet (note 37 above), I, 1474.

⁴¹ Laclos possessed a vast knowledge of the theatre and, according to Laurent Versini, knew *Le Méchant* by heart (*Laclos et la tradition* [note 31 above], p. 86). He would not, however, have been familiar with *La Coquette punie*.

⁴² Desmahis' other entry in the sixth volume of the *Encyclopédie* is the article "Fat" ("Fop"). Considerably shorter than the essay "Femme," it can nevertheless be regarded as a sort of companion piece. Written in the style of the *Caractères* of La Bruyère, this brief sketch offers additional proof of the author's interest in the milieu of the "mondains" and "mondaines."

the period 1749-1761. The date on which *L'Impertinent* was first performed, 30 August 1750, represents roughly the half-way mark in the genesis of what was to become *La Coquette punie*. Finally, the subject of "la méchanceté à la mode" held a strong appeal for both Marie Louise Denis and Joseph-François-Édouard Corsembleu de Desmahis, especially as it related to the moral degeneration of women.

To be sure, the discovery that a version of Mme Denis' *Coquette punie* has for two centuries been incorrectly attributed to another playwright will create no tremors in the scholarly world. What is important, it seems to me, is the explanation for this occurrence. The altruistic zeal with which Roubaud de Tresséol undertook the project of "collecting" Desmahis' works accounts quite simply for the editorial error; the real issue is the very presence of Mme Denis' comedy among the manuscripts left by one of her contemporaries. The social phenomenon of "théâtromanie" illuminates the proliferation of amateur theatres in eighteenth-century France, as well as the "epidemic" of authorship, resulting in a profusion of playwrights and plays. The custom of exhibiting and even circulating inchoate or incomplete texts helps to explain how the manuscript of a work by one author might have found its way to the writing-table of another.

The real key to the conundrum, however, is the name "Voltaire," for it was towards this eminent figure that both Mme Denis and Desmahis gravitated. When the young widow left the garrison of Lille in 1744, her decision was based in part upon the attractiveness of the French capital, locus of the most intense artistic, intellectual, and social activity on the Continent; the principal factor, it appears, was the knowledge that her uncle and lover awaited her there. Upon leaving Sully-sur-Loire, Desmahis, too, sought Voltaire in Paris: surely this eminent friend of the Corsembleu family would take under his broad wing a fledgling poet. Bonds of friendship in one case, and a more than avuncular affection in the other, guaranteed them a warm reception. Membership in the Voltairian milieu practically assured their eventual meeting; what made this encounter inevitable was the similarity of their literary activities and interests — a passion for the theatre, a desire to write plays, and a particular fascination for "la méchanceté à la mode." All circumstances considered, the presence of Mme Denis' play among the *Œuvres de M. Desmahis* is unexpected but not inexplicable.⁴³

⁴³ I should like to acknowledge the assistance of my brother, Stuart J. Kleiner, who proof-read this article for me and offered suggestions for its improvement.

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