

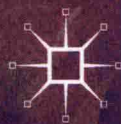
WOMEN DRAMATISTS, HUMOR, AND THE FRENCH STAGE



1802–1855



JOYCE JOHNSTON

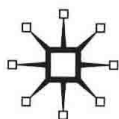


Women Dramatists, Humor, and the French Stage

1802–1855

Joyce Johnston

palgrave
macmillan



WOMEN DRAMATISTS, HUMOR, AND THE FRENCH STAGE

Copyright © Joyce Johnston, 2014.

All rights reserved.

First published in 2014 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN: 978-1-137-45671-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Johnston, Joyce, 1971–

Women dramatists, humor, and the French stage : 1802–1855 /
by Joyce Johnston.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-137-45671-7 (hardback)

1. French drama (Comedy)—19th century—History and criticism.
2. French literature—Women authors—History and criticism.
3. Women in the theater—France—History—19th century.
4. Theater—France—History—19th century.
5. Humor in literature. I. Title.

PQ568.J64 2014

842'.7099287—dc23

2014025004

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: December 2014

For Ryan, Mae, and Zach

Acknowledgments ∞

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to the faculty and staff of the Department of Languages, Cultures, and Communication at Stephen F. Austin State University. I would like to thank Ann Doyle-Anderson, for encouraging my scholarly pursuits when I was an assistant professor under her wing. I must especially thank my current department chair, Jeana Paul-Ureña, for her constant support and encouragement. I also thank Perry Moon, Juan Carlos Ureña, Dana Cooper, and Catherine Schmitz for their most thoughtful feedback on this project. Thanks to Gloria Hetrick for her constant support and assistance in matters both great and small.

I have been extremely fortunate to have outstanding mentors who supported me and advised me throughout my research. Cecilia Beach, Perry Gethner, and Rosemary Lloyd have offered me their wisdom, expertise, patience, and friendship, and I am eternally grateful.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Stephen F. Austin State University for awarding me Faculty Development Leave in the fall of 2013 and for a mini-grant that allowed me to travel to Paris to collect data in summer 2011. This project would not have been possible without the help of librarians from Stephen F. Austin State University Library, la Bibliothèque nationale de France, la Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, and la Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques.

I want to thank my parents, Ken and Lois Carlton, for putting in extra grandparenting hours so that I could complete this study. Thanks to Ryan for his love, support, sense of humor, and for being a great husband, teacher, and father throughout this project. Special thanks to Mae and Zach for their patience, hugs, and for reminding me that taking time out from work to play every now and again is a very good thing.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Contents ∞

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1. Revisiting Women, Humor, and the French Stage	1
2. Sophie de Bawr: Successful Resistance, Resisting Success	25
3. The Shifting Stages of Sophie Gay's Theater Career	63
4. Virginie Ancelot's Comedy for Women	99
5. Delphine Gay de Girardin: The Muse Takes Center Stage	137
6. Conclusion	189
<i>Notes</i>	199
<i>Works Cited</i>	211
<i>Index</i>	223

1. Revisiting Women, Humor, and the French Stage ∞

Until recent decades works by nineteenth-century French women writers existed within a critical abyss. With the exceptions of George Sand and Germaine de Staël, the vast majority of works by women from this period had been cast outside of the literary canon. Fortunately, recent decades have witnessed great strides in filling this void through the publication of modern critical editions of works, such as Sophie Cottin's *Claire d'Albe*, Claire Duras's *Ourika*, and Delphine de Girardin's *Chroniques parisiennes*, and poetry by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and Marie Kryszewska, to name only a few. Collectively, this rediscovery focuses on the novel and, to a certain extent, on poetry. While efforts to resurrect these exceptional texts were long overdue, women's contributions to the French theater during the first half of the nineteenth century remain virtually untouched by contemporary literary criticism. If the earliest years of the nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented production of novels among women writers,¹ women wrote for the theater with much less frequency and success.

Perhaps better than any other single writer of her day, Sophie de Bawr (1773–1860) understood the problematic situation encountered by women who wished to write for the Parisian stage. On one hand, the theater offered dramatic authors the opportunity for financial gain in a timely manner. This was a crucial factor for women writers like Bawr who, during the unstable post-Revolutionary climate, found themselves obligated to write for their own financial survival or for that of an entire family. On the other hand, the public nature of the theater rendered it a questionable venue for any upstanding *citoyenne*. The ideal republican woman avoided the public eye to stay at home and care for husband and children, as a foray into public life threatened morality and risked corruption. Considering

this context, Bawr, author of the immensely successful play *La Suite d'un bal masqué* (1813), after a career of theatrical hits declared:

Je me crois donc, plus que personne, en droit de conseiller aux femmes de ne point écrire pour le théâtre; c'est là surtout, que pour veiller soi-même à ses intérêts, on a besoin de tenue, de courage et de persévérance; qu'il faut savoir supporter, sans en tourmenter sa vie, la multitude d'entraves, les mille petites contrariétés qui se renouvellent sans cesse, en un mot qu'il faut être homme. (Bawr *Mes Souvenirs* 255)

[I believe myself, therefore, more than anyone, within my rights to advise women not to write for the theater; it is there above all that to look after one's own interests, one needs proper behavior, courage and perseverance; one must know how to put up with, without tormenting one's life, the multitude of hindrances, the thousands of little aggravations that occur over and over without end, in a word one must be a man.]²

Bawr's assertion attests to the fact that theater remained all but off-limits to women. Nonetheless, Bawr along with Sophie Gay (1776–1852), Virginie Ancelot (1792–1875), and Delphine Gay de Girardin (1804–1855) staged successful plays at Paris's top venues (Théâtre Français and Odéon) or at other respected theaters (Ambigu-Comique, Vaudeville, Gymnase) prior to the lifting of censorship laws in 1864. Between 1802 and 1855, all four of these dramatists were heavily involved in the literary scene of their day and hosted their own salons, venues essential for any male author wishing to see his works published and accepted among the public. While their theatrical works do not always demonstrate a direct engagement with the politics of the day, these writers were aware of and influenced by the tumultuous events that characterized their time. All four of these playwrights rescripted the republican family, much to the advantage of women. Although these writers did not challenge masculine authority outright, their plots and characters undermined the foundations of male dominance. Throughout their theatrical works a use of humor effectively underscored social inequities regarding the treatment of women. Indeed Bawr, Gay, Ancelot, and Girardin very often owed the success of their plays to their wit and humor, which both pleased audiences and allowed the writers to display their own unconventional views on womanhood without being overt.

Although the strategy of using humor to both to sell tickets and criticize the inferior status of women effectively allowed these women to bring their works to the Paris stage, their nuanced attacks have cost them dearly in terms of literary and historical recognition. Women playwrights of early nineteenth-century France are all but forgotten by today's scholars. Alison

Finch in *Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France* refers to "[t]he invisible women of French theatre" in the title of her chapter on women dramatists. The apt phrase underscores the fact that while women did indeed write for the theater, their works have almost wholly disappeared from critical view.

Prior to examining the four exceptional authors in question and their unjustly forgotten contributions to French art, culture, and history, it is essential to understand the French theater industry at the time. During the first half of the nineteenth century, French women playwrights encountered obstacles beyond those experienced by women novelists. If the theater industry's constant fluctuation regarding the conflicting aesthetics of Classicism versus Romanticism and popular theater versus "high" theater offered challenges to men who sought to stage their works, women encountered additional obstacles. Despite the Revolution's proclamations of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, Napoléon's Civil Code of 1804 reaffirmed women's secondary status under French law.³ As we have noted, the theater offered writers the opportunity to turn a healthy profit, yet association with the theater remained a scandalous undertaking for women. Actresses suffered the most, garnering unsavory reputations, but the industry as a whole was seen as an inappropriate milieu for women of decent society, and this judgment extended to playwrights. In some ways, during the first half of the nineteenth century, women who sought a career in the theater industry encountered even greater obstacles than their predecessors. In the eighteenth century, Raucourt, Montansier, and other women successfully managed theaters. However, in December 1824, by royal decree, women were specifically forbidden to own theaters in France. As F. W. J. Hemmings argues, official explanations of the act as an effort to preserve propriety and the myth of the "weaker sex" and threats to public morality, fail to offer any satisfying reasoning as to why women who were able to turn a profit a century prior were now banned from doing so (*Theatre and State* 162). Given this unwelcoming climate, it is not surprising that women, in general, did not often brave writing for the theater.

If women's contribution to the theater in the nineteenth century remains untouched by literary criticism, French women's use of humor suffers a similar condemnation to oblivion. That century saw the publication of several important texts regarding the nature of humor and laughter from sociological, literary, and psychological frameworks, yet women's works remain absent in any of these considerations. Charles Baudelaire's *De l'essence de rire* (1855), Henri Bergson's *Le Rire* (1900), and Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) all factor into

this study; however, their concepts based on humor as utilized by men often fail to offer a satisfying description of the essence of laughter evoked in the plays of Bawr, Gay, Ancelot, and Girardin. In fact, there exists very little published material on French women writers' tradition of humor. Alison Finch refers to this critical gap in nineteenth-century French literary analysis as "the most singular omission to date in most critics' reassessment" (5). Thus, the intersection of humor and theater—intellectual products incongruous with the image of a proper lady—represents a crucial subject for us to probe. The humor displayed in plays by the four authors in this study appears to be harmless, crowd-pleasing fun on the surface, but in-depth examination of this comedy reveals disquiet regarding a French social system that subjugated women.

In undertaking a discussion of women, theater, and humor, the last quality warrants our foremost attention as it presents a critical conundrum. In a period remembered for Romanticism and Realism, discussions of humor often take a backseat to loftier veins of analysis. Nonetheless critics have examined humor within the works of the century's greatest male writers such as Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert. George Pistorius, in examining moments of humor in Stendhal's novel *Lamiel*, concedes that comic characters rarely appeared in novels from the first half of the nineteenth century (219). Hollis A. Woods, in his doctoral dissertation, explored aspects of humor in the works of Balzac. However, Woods also underscores that Balzac constantly fuses his humor to a more serious overarching style and purpose, noting that "Balzac's style on the whole is a serious one" (329). Particularly with novels of the period, comic moments may arise within a serious text, but the purpose of the majority of novels at the time remained solemn.⁴

When daring to write comedies, Bawr, Gay, Ancelot, and Girardin abandoned the serious for the frivolous, but nonetheless expressed pleas for equality and used their wit to demonstrate that they were on par with their male counterparts. Indeed George Meredith in his 1877 discussion of comedy implies that it is imperative that women develop their sense of humor to be truly men's equal:

[W]here women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty—in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted them by a fair civilization—there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel or the poem, pure comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions. (32)

Meredith's assessment suggests that at the end of the nineteenth century, women had failed to achieve equal footing in terms of ability to display humor. Although Meredith recognizes that women can be humorous, he insinuates that women had failed to establish their own public tradition of humor. Indeed, as we have stated, critical material on French women's humor is sparse. However, as Regina Barreca correctly notes, "It is the inability of the critical tradition to deal with comedy by women rather than the inability of women to produce comedy that accounts for the absence of critical material on the subject" (*Last Laughs* 20).

While a growing number of scholars such as Barreca, Judith Lowder Newton, Emily Toth, Nancy Walker, and Judy Little have illuminated the intricacies of women's humor in the works of British and American authors,⁵ little has been written regarding French women and their use of comedy, wit, and humor. French women writers such as Delphine de Girardin and Sophie Gay garnered professional success with their witty, nontheatrical writings at a time when the trait of humorist hardly aligned with the notion of a *femme comme il faut*. Perhaps the expression of humor represented a threat, a wielding of power to which women were not entitled. As Annie Rivara accurately assessed, "le rire n'est... guère decent chez une femme" [laughter is hardly decent in a woman] and argues that women who laugh within eighteenth-century French novels are either seen as frivolous or as sexually independent and therefore dangerous (1297). In addition to the danger associated with women's humorous expression, it has been argued that popular humor is not always feminine humor. Warren Johnson has observed that women of nineteenth-century France, particularly late in the century, seemed alienated from comedy of the body and scatological humor, which typified cabarets such as the Chat Noir (52–53). Johnson also references "the striking absence of a female brand of comedy during (the nineteenth century), even of the more refined sort practiced across the Channel by Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Oliphant" (47). He observes that women writers such as George Sand tended to produce novels that took a more serious approach to women's suffering within a corrupt social order and he does not address women's theatrical works. Moreover, the scope of Johnson's study does not encompass popular theater during the first half of the century, a period when audiences sought comedic entertainment and where we can indeed discern a tradition of feminine humor and of women dramatists finding their comedic voice within. The authors considered in this study faced obstacles as they sought to demonstrate that women were capable of producing very funny plays.

However, few comedies by women writers prior to the twentieth century remain in print—a fact that supports Nancy Walker's assertion that the tradition of women's humor "has been largely omitted from the official canon...been allowed to go out of print, to disappear from all but the dusty reaches of library shelves" (*A Very Serious Thing* 120).

Misogynist attitudes of literary historians writing not long after our writers' deaths contributed to their works' disappearance. Writing in 1929, Jean Larnac offered his rationale for a lack of French comedies by women:

si on peut citer un certain nombre d'auteurs féminins qui aient construit des tragédies, des drames ou des pièces à thèse, on n'en peut découvrir aucun qui se soit vraiment essayé dans la comédie. Imagine-t-on un Molière, un Labiche même, sous l'apparence d'une femme? L'idée semble absurde. Une femme sait rire de ses semblables (encore son rire se greffe-t-il sur un sentiment de jalousie, d'envie ou de colère, au lieu de se fonder sur l'illogisme des événements); elle ne sait pas faire rire. (63)

[If one can cite a certain number of female authors who constructed tragedies, dramas or problem plays, one cannot find a single one who truly tried her hand at comedy. Can one imagine a Molière, even a Labiche in the guise of a woman? The idea seems absurd. A woman knows how to laugh at her kind (still her laughter is linked to a feeling of jealousy, envy or rage, instead of being based on the illogical nature of events); she does not know how to make one laugh.]

Larnac further argues that writing comedy is against women's nature, pointing to a dearth of women writers of theatrical comedy throughout literary history. Although many of Larnac's observations on women's inability to write comedy are based solely on misogynist stereotype, comedies by French women have indeed been largely ignored by current literary scholarship. Regina Barreca in a discussion of Henri Bergson pinpoints the issue at hand. Bergson insists that laughter is that of a group, that laughing along with the group indicates one's inclusion into the set. Yet Barreca poses the questions, "What happens, however, when a group is excluded from the mainstream? Will this group ignore the mainstream's values and develop values of its own?" (*They Used to Call Me Snow White* 112). It is precisely this dynamic I propose to explore in this study.

Significantly, when we examine nineteenth-century France, a time dominated by revolutions, empires, monarchies, republics, and wars, events largely defined by men's actions, women tend to fade into the shadows. Naturally, the humor of women, which often dealt with tribulations familiar to them such as marriage, finances, and reputation, holds little interest in such an exploration limited to grandiose historical events. In

addition, an expression of humor often indicates ridicule or an attempt to express anger in a socially acceptable manner. A society based on men controlling women, a society that insists that women's most important role was that of "good mother," would be reluctant to acknowledge such expressions among women who were meant to be docile. Barreca explains the gendered bias against women's humorous expression:

when a man demonstrates his anger through humor, he is showing self-control, because he could be acting destructively instead of just speaking destructively. When a woman demonstrates her anger through humor, however, she is seen as losing self-control, because she isn't meant to have any angry feelings in the first place. (*They Used to Call Me Snow White* 94)

At stake is power itself. If women bring to light the fact that something is laughable—something linked to masculinity and the established rule of the day—humor takes on a subversive tone, as Barreca illuminates:

It is risky to admit to one's self that a situation might be funny or absurd, because to do that means taking into account the idea of change. When you see the humor in a situation it implies that you can also then imagine how the situation could be altered. (*They Used to Call Me Snow White* 19–20)

Comedy in the form of theatrical productions offered the women dramatists in this study the opportunity to stage their works as long as they conformed to the reigning tastes of their day. The choice of so-called frivolous comedy supplied fertile ground for these women to sow the seeds of discontent and to question patriarchal injustices that permeated a post-Revolutionary society. This was no easy task for our women playwrights as French theater during the First Empire, Restoration, July Monarchy, and early years of the Second Empire was subject to censorship laws that were not lifted until 1864. As Alison Finch points out in discussing women playwrights, although F. W. J. Hemmings's meticulous studies of French theater "allow us to make informed guesses about conditions for women dramatists," he does not consider women's contributions and the specific challenges they faced (62).⁶ Finch also notes that Charles Wicks's thorough catalog of plays throughout the century, *The Parisian Stage*, lists only 200 female playwrights, and that of the 32,000 odd plays Wicks catalogs, approximately 700 were penned by women and over a quarter of those were done in collaboration with male authors (63). She further notes that the majority of plays by women were one-act works, often fillers, or curtain-raisers (64). *Le Monde dramatique* (1837) devotes five pages to women

associated with the theater, two paragraphs of which discuss three isolated women playwrights: Sophie de Bawr, Virginie Ancelot, and Sophie Gay (*Le Monde dramatique* 197). Michel Corvin's *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du théâtre* makes no mention of women playwrights, and the same is true of *Le théâtre français du XIXe siècle: histoire, textes choisis, mises en scène*.⁷ There is literally no telling how many women writers (or, for that matter, male writers) collaborated on plays attributed to men during the time. Furthermore, the curse of invisibility can be attributed not only to the fact that the writers in this study were all women, but also to the fact that they wrote for genres that themselves had been cast to the margins of literary canon. If critics consider French theater of the nineteenth century, the tendency was to focus on Romantic Drama rather than popular forms of theater such as vaudevilles or short comedies, genres women were more easily able to exploit.

The ever-changing conditions within the theater industry presented our authors with both new opportunities and added restrictions. January 19, 1791 saw the proclamation of the freedom of the theaters, which led to the abolition of theater privilege making it theoretically possible for anyone following proper procedure to open a theater. The proclamation eliminated restrictions on the types of plays theaters could stage, made works by authors dead for more than five years public domain, and gave living authors exclusive rights to their work. In essence, the theater became a true commercial enterprise, and women writers as well as men capitalized upon these changes to line their pockets. Lower classes now had access to theatrical spectacle, dramatically changing the audience writers sought to please. In 1806 and 1807 Napoléon reduced the number of theaters to eight (the Opéra, Opéra Comique, Théâtre Français, Théâtre Italien, Vaudeville, Variétés, Gaîté, and Ambigu-Comique), yet the theater industry continued to thrive. Nonetheless, the licensing system in place until 1864 certainly pointed to a certain amount of state control of the industry and was, naturally, open to abuse. Censorship in one form or another remained in place in France until 1864 and the censors—usually civil servants rather than educated men with any interest in artistic production—generally exercised greater scrutiny over plays that invited audiences to demonstrate political partisanship. And what was permitted upon stage was ever linked to the political. For example, an assassination attempt on King Louis Philippe by Fieschi in 1835 resulted in increasingly repressive censorship laws instituted in September of that same year. Ancelot and Girardin both submitted plays for production following this event, yet we shall note in later chapters that their plays, more than those of Bawr and Gay, offer less formulaic

structures and more complex uses of humor to broach the subject of women's rights during this era of increased scrutiny. Notably, all of the writers in this study staged their works prior to Napoléon III's 1864 "liberation of the theaters," whereby the emperor abolished the licensing system and censorship restrictions were greatly eased.

The theatrical works of Bawr, Gay, Ancelot, and Girardin all generally reflect the bourgeois society and situations of middle-class women of their own time. However, they were much indebted to women playwrights of the previous century. If the Enlightenment in some ways prompted a reconsideration of women's status, it did little in the way of improving their lot when it came to pursuing the noblest of literary genres. The theater was considered the ultimate proof of literary merit, which led to praise and lucre. As Barbara Mittman points out, for this reason women were not encouraged in their playwriting pursuits (164). Before the Revolution women often limited the cultivation of theatrical arts to private venues such as *théâtres de société*. Mistress and later wife to the Duc d'Orléans, Madame de Montesson composed sentimental plays for the Trianon theater, yet her works failed to attract literary attention. Marie-Antoinette similarly produced mediocre plays at Versailles, doing little to refute the notion that writing for the theater debased women. Madame de Genlis, conforming to the model of a proper society woman, penned plays for children and salon plays for adults, both of which focused on offering morally uplifting lessons, but were never performed at mainstream theaters (Mittman 166). Like these predecessors, Bawr, Gay, Ancelot, and Girardin all benefitted greatly from their involvement with salon culture. The atmosphere within those gatherings created opportunities for one to read works, receive encouragement, and, particularly in the case of Sophie Gay, stage works within a lavish salon theater while avoiding public scrutiny.

Although conditions associated with public theaters were not always hospitable, some women did succeed in having their works staged during the eighteenth century. Marie-Anne Barbier, Madeleine-Angélique de Gomez, and Anne-Marie Du Boccage all staged tragedies in Paris. Certainly they were indebted to Corneille and Racine's stylistic influence—Gomez in particular—but it is significant that these women triumphed in what was considered the highest literary pursuit.⁸ However, in contrast to these women's success in staging tragedies, with the exception of Girardin's *Cléopâtre* (1847), I find no record of any other women staging a full five-act tragedy during the first half of the nineteenth century. When Girardin's shorter, three-act *Judith* failed at the Théâtre Français in 1843, the event was interpreted as evidence that

women were incapable of writing tragedy. In addressing Girardin's *Judith*, Jules Janin notes:

Les femmes de ce temps-ci ont beau faire, même celles qui ont le plus le droit de tout oser, il est, dans les arts de l'imagination et de la pensée, des tentatives qui leur sont défendues. Malgré tant d'efforts du génie féminin, les œuvres viriles sont restées des œuvres viriles... Or de toutes les œuvres que les femmes intelligentes doivent laisser à l'esprit de l'homme, la tragédie est sans contredit, l'œuvre suprême. Elle demande plus de terreur que de pitié, plus de passion que d'amour, plus de colère que de pardon, plus de vengeance et d'indignation que n'en peut contenir le cœur d'une femme. (337)

[Women of these times can try as they may, even those who have the most right to dare anything, there are, within the arts of imagination and thought, attempts that are off-limits to them. Despite all the efforts by feminine talent, masculine works have remained masculine works... Yet of all works that intelligent women should leave to the minds of men, tragedy is indisputably, the utmost work. It requires more terror than pity, more passion than love, more anger than pardon, more vengeance and indignation than a woman's heart can hold.]

That Girardin, an established novelist, poet, and journalist, could fail to demonstrate talent as a tragic playwright with this, her first staged work, served as sufficient proof that women lacked the ability to create tragic theater. This mentality carried over from prior centuries during which women who pursued heroic genres endured similar criticism based on stereotyping.⁹ While it is true that heroic genres such as theatrical tragedies fell out of favor with audiences over the course of the eighteenth century, thus accounting for some absence of tragedies written by women in the following century, it is nonetheless significant that tragedies by women became an even greater rarity among women writers.

Women's theater of the eighteenth century, like that of the nineteenth, often showcased situations facing women. Françoise de Graffigny (1695–1758), a pioneer of the *drame*—a sensitive, moralizing genre, middle-ground between comedy and tragedy—produced plays that vindicated unjustly vilified feminine types. Two of her *comédies larmoyantes* were staged: *Cénie* (1750) and *La Fille d'Aristide* (1758). These plays, as Perry Gethner underscores, call attention to social problems and the status of women (“Les Petites nouvelles de Graffigny” 44). Much like the writers in this study, the majority of eighteenth-century French women playwrights displayed intelligent, active women as protagonists. Olympe de Gouges's *Molière chez Ninon* (1788)¹⁰ presents a positive view of the salon