

Dramatizing Dido, Circe, and Griselda

LOUISE-GENEVIÈVE
GILLOT DE SAINCTONGE



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Gillot de Saintonge (1650–1718)

The Other Voice

I came upon Mme de Saintonge while looking for dramatizations of Boccaccio's famous Griselda story (Decameron X, 10). Hers was so extraordinary that I became curious about who this woman was. I discovered that she was also the first woman to write opera libretti that were performed by the Paris opera company, known as the Royal Academy of Music. Besides that, she wrote the texts for music-and-dance entertainments for the courts of Paris, Lorraine, and Barcelona. From the first work of hers that we know was performed, in 1687, to the publication of her last play, the Griselda play, in 1714, her career spanned nearly three decades. Not only did she continue to write theatrical works for a longer time than other women of her era, she also started writing them at a mature age. The more famous Catherine Bernard began and ended her writing for the theater in her twenties; so too Catherine Desjardin. Marie-Anne Barbier was 32 when her first play was staged and continued writing into her forties. Mme de Saintonge was 37 when her first piece was performed at court, in her forties when her Paris operas were performed, and in her sixties when her *Diane and Endymion*, written for the Duke and Duchess of Lorraine, played in Nancy and Lunéville and her *Griselda* appeared in print.

Very little has been written about her other than brief notices in some of the dictionaries of theater or of illustrious persons during the *ancien régime*.¹ Without trying to claim undue greatness for her, I have found her writings and her career of sufficient interest to merit further attention, especially with regard to the work of women for performance in the early modern era. Moreover, anyone pursuing

1. The one modern study I am aware of is François Moureau, "Madame de Saintonge, bergère moderne ou 'la mise en nouveau langage' de la *Diane* de Montemayor (1699)," in *Nouveaux destins des vieux récits: de la Renaissance aux Lumières*, Cahiers V. L. Saulnier 9 (Paris: Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure, 1992), 19–31. She is mentioned a few times in passing by Linda Timmermans, *L'Accès des Femmes à la Culture (1598–1715). Un débat d'idées de Saint François de Sales à la Marquise de Lambert*. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1993.

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versions of the Griselda story and curious about how a woman might treat this tale will find Sainctonge's play surprising and rewarding.

Readers may be struck by her independence of spirit. For example, she advises a widowed friend to avoid remarrying not on the grounds of piety, virtue, or reputation, but rather for the sake of enjoying one's liberty. She presents herself not as a writer of naturally tender self-expression nor merely an amateur writing for her own amusement and that of her friends, but explicitly as a detached and professional craftsman. All three of her major works for the stage—the two operas and the five-act drama—focus on women, whose names furnish the titles: *Dido*, *Circe*, and *Griselda*. These three women offer a strong and constant passion that contrasts sharply with the weak, vacillating, deceitful or self-deluded characters of their men. Males who normally appear as wise and virtuous heroes—Aeneas, Ulysses, and Gualtieri—find their heroic status deeply undermined in her works. The plays are pervaded by a suspiciousness or cynicism about male attitudes and behaviors that makes even the villainous *Circe* ultimately win our sympathy. Finally, the *Griselda* drama offers also a positive community of mutually supportive women such as we seldom see in men's writing.²

The Context for Women's Theatrical Writing

"The seventeenth century produced eleven women dramatists," writes Henry Carrington Lancaster; "None of them ... wrote more than a modest number of plays, but they at least made it possible for women to have their productions accepted for performance at the *Comédie Française*."³ We might say the same about Mme de Sainctonge's work with regard to the Paris Opéra, where she was the first woman to have

2. An exception that springs to mind is the medieval French *Quinze joies de mariage*, in which collusion among women is represented in negative terms, i.e. from the viewpoint of the bamboozled male.

3. Henry Carrington Lancaster, *Sunset: A History of Parisian Drama in the Last Years of Louis XIV 1701–1715* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1945), 69. In this study, focused on the years 1701–1715, Chapter V, 69–81, treats "Tragedies by Women: Mlle Barbier and Mme Gomez." For his list of the eleven dramatists, see his *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1929–43), Part V (1942), 86–87.

her libretti performed. In her case, however, she seems to have remained unique for quite some time. Writing for the opera was apparently a harder field to break into than the theater of spoken drama.

The latter half of the seventeenth century was an especially good moment for women in theater, as it was for French theater in general. In the decade from 1655–64, Françoise Pascal in Lyons wrote half a dozen plays: three tragi-comedies and three farces; one of the tragi-comedies made use of the recently introduced possibilities for machine-based spectacle.⁴ 1662 and 1665 saw the first female-authored dramas produced in Paris by professional actors: Catherine Desjardin's *Manlius* and *Le Favori*. The success of this second play, performed by Molière's company, caused it to become the first woman's play given a command performance at the French court. In 1677, Anne de la Roche-Guilhen, a Huguenot who supported herself primarily by writing prose romances, composed a "comédie-ballet" for the birthday of the English King Charles II, who had been raised in France during the Puritan reign in England. *Rare en Tout*, a light play containing a number of songs in both French and English, is this woman's only dramatic attempt.⁵

After the 1670s, when Molière was dead and Corneille and Racine had at least temporarily stopped writing plays, theater companies were looking for new writers. In 1680 Mme Deshoulière's tragedy *Genséric* was a hit at the Hotel de Bourgogne; 1689 and 1690 saw the success of Catherine Bernard's two tragedies, *Laodamie* and *Brutus*. Donneau de Visé, reviewing *Brutus* for the *Mercure galant* in December 1690, remarked, "Women today are capable of everything."⁶

4. Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature*, Part V (1942), 86.

5. The text of Desjardin's *Le Favori* and Roche-Guilhen's *Rare en Tout* are available in *Les Femmes dramaturges en France (1650–1750): Pièces choisies*, ed. Perry Gethner (Paris-Tübingen: PFSCB Biblio 17, 1993); translated as *The Lunatic Lover: Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century French Plays by Women Writers*, ed. P. Gethner (New York: Heinemann, 1994).

6. "Les dames sont aujourd'hui capables de tout." Cited from *Mercure galant*, December 1690, 287–89, by Nina Ekstein, "Appropriation and Gender: The Case of Catherine Bernard and Bernard de Fontenelle," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30:1 (1996), 61. On the other hand, Marie-Anne Barbier, in the preface to her *Arrie et Pétus*, performed in 1702 and published in 1745, complains that men still consider women incapable of producing good work and therefore refuse to give women the credit they deserve. She cites contemporary examples to refute this lingering prejudice, including the theatrical writings of "Mme des Houlières"

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So too with the death of both Lully and Quinault by 1688, the Royal Academy of Music was open to new talents. In 1694, the year of Mme de Saintonge's *Circe*, another woman, the musician and composer Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre, whose skill at playing the keyboard as a child of five had brought her to the attention of the court, composed the first French opera for which a woman had written the music; her *Céphale et Procris* was performed at the Académie Royale de Musique on March 15, between Mme de Saintonge's two operas.⁷ Both Jacquet de La Guerre and Gillot de Saintonge had composed or written a pastoral entertainment for the king performed in 1687, early in their careers, and another pastoral for the Elector of Bavaria in 1712–1713.⁸ Moving in similar circles, and even living at times in the same neighborhood,⁹ with careers that spanned the same decades, they were undoubtedly aware of each other although there is no evidence of their interaction.

In the opening decade of the eighteenth century, Marie-Anne Barbier wrote four tragedies and a comedy; two of her plays were praised by the *Gazette de Rotterdam* as being on a par with those of Corneille and Racine.¹⁰ Her *Cornélie*, like Saintonge's earlier works, was dedicated to “Madame,” the Princess Palatine and Duchess of Orléans. Parfaict also attributes to Barbier three later ballets: *Les Fêtes de l'été* [Summer festivities] (1716), *Le Jugement de Pâris* [The Judgment of Paris] (1718), and *Les Plaisirs de la campagne* [Rural

and Catherine Bernard; the tragedies of this latter are “trop recentes pour être effacées de la mémoire des envieux de notre gloire” [too recent to be effaced from the memory of those envious of our glory]. This text is available in the anthologies, both in French and translated into English, by Perry Gethner, *Les Femmes dramaturges en France (1650–1750)* and *The Lunatic Lover*. See 184–85 of the French volume for a fuller citation of Donneau de Visé's remarks.

7. An excerpt from this opera, her only opera, can be heard on the recording *French operatic airs from Lully to Rameau*, L'Oiseau Lyre, LP, Mono, OL 50117. Other music, cantatas and instrumental suites, are available on more recent recordings. Her father, brother, and husband were all musicians.

8. Catherine Cessac, *Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre. Une Femme Compositeur sous le Règne de Louis XIV* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1995), 35, 154.

9. Cessac, 39, 106–08.

10. Lancaster, *Sunset*, 72.

pleasures] (1719).¹¹ Madeleine-Angélique Poisson Mme de Gomez wrote several tragedies, the first of which, *Habis* (1714), “was acted more frequently than any other tragedy of the period except for two by Crébillon and two by La Grange-Chancel.”¹²

Mme de Saintonge therefore did not need to feel that she was doing something bizarre or transgressive in offering and publishing her own contributions to court and city performances. Nonetheless, the variety and length of her career of theatrical writing—and its performance—exceeds that of previous French women and uniquely extends into the writing of libretti performed by the Paris opera.¹³ In Noinville’s list of fifty-six librettists from the beginning of French opera into the mid-eighteenth century, she is the only female named.¹⁴

While the seventeenth century saw a notable increase in publishing generally, and in writing and publishing by women as well, Seifert notes that the competition among writers for attention created “a backlash against women writers” during the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the very period when Mme de Saintonge’s writing career began. And yet, “In the face of these concerted efforts to deprofessionalize and delegitimize them, women were publishing in numbers previously unknown.”¹⁵ As an increasing number of women entered the field of literary production in the last decades of the century, often writing for money, and sometimes even winning literary

11. Claude Parfaict, *Dictionnaire des théâtres de Paris, contenant toutes les pièces qui ont été représentées jusqu'à présent sur les différens théâtres françois, & sur celui de l'Académie royale de musique*;... 7 vols. (Paris: Lambert, 1756, 7 vols.); Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1967, 2 vols.), 1.378.

12. Lancaster, *Sunset*, 80.

13. Other women named above, like Mme de Saintonge, published volumes of prose narrative and poetry as well as drama.

14. *Histoire*, Part 1:177–78. See also Perry Gethner, “Saintonge,” 485.

15. Lewis C. Seifert, “*Les Fées Modernes: Women, Fairy Tales, and the Literary Field of Late Seventeenth-Century France*” in *Going Public. Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 132–33. Joan DeJean’s bibliography of women writing in France between 1640 and 1715 includes well over two hundred women, though not all of them saw fit to have their work printed: *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 201–19.

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prizes,¹⁶ the attacks against them became more strident. Writing too professionally, rather than merely for personal amusement, was seen as an unnatural overturning of clearly demarcated gender boundaries. "If we do not make order," Chappuzeau protested anxiously in his *Académie des femmes*, "soon along with a book they will pick up the sword."¹⁷ Boileau's famous tenth satire, or "Satire on Women" (1694), berated women not only for the degeneration of literary taste but for the corruption of the entire social order. In his *Portraits* of 1699 Pierre-Jacques Brillon satirically represented the woman writer as a quarrelsome wife wanting to dominate her husband and ridiculed her for thinking her poetry to be good.¹⁸ Women not content to stick to the more feminine genres of lyric poetry and letters but daring to compete with men in the larger and more serious genre of tragedy—including the "tragédie lyrique," as opera was called—would have been all the more threatening to the male sense of turf. The conflicted issue of women's place in "public" and in the production of culture was difficult to ignore.¹⁹

Nonetheless, the surprising thing about Mme de Saintonge is precisely her sense of normality: her assumption that there is nothing problematic about her writing as a woman for the theater, that composers and choreographers will gladly work with her, that her pieces will be performed, and that the audience will be pleased. Obviously she had setbacks as well as successes and periods when her work was less in demand; however, her general tone of self-presentation is one of self-confidence. She feels no apparent need to defend or apologize for her writing nor to write merely for a theater

16. Catherine Bernard, Mlle L'Héritier, Mme Durand, Mme de Murat, all won prizes for eloquence or poetry in the last decades of the century, prizes which were celebrated in the *Mercur galant*. Bernard and L'Heritier each won three times.

17. Samuel Chappuzeau, *L'Académie des femmes*, (1661), III,3, cited in Linda Timmermans, *L'Accès des Femmes à la Culture (1598–1715). Un débat d'idées de Saint François de Sales à la Marquise de Lambert*. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1993, 346–47: "Si nous n'y donnons ordre, apres cette équipée,/ Bien-tost avec un livre elle prendra à l'espée."

18. *Portraits sérieux, galands et critiques* (1696), cited in Timmermans, 227 and 346.

19. Timmermans gives a detailed account of these conflicts in her *L'Accès des Femmes à la Culture (1598–1715)*, esp. 177–236 and 319–355. See also Ottavia Niccoli, "Lotte per le brache. La donna indisciplinata nelle stampe popolari d'Ancien Régime," *Memoria*, Oct. 1981, 49–63; and the essays in *Going Public*, ed. Goldsmith and Goodman.

of the mind.²⁰ Rather, without being herself a part of the court, she had the satisfaction of knowing that over the course of many years choruses of singers, troupes of dancers, and stage machinery were realizing her work at the courts of France and Spain and in the opera house of Paris.

The Personal Context of Her Work

Family

Louise-Genevieve Gillot, Mme de Saintonge (or Saintonge, or Xaintonge), was born and died in Paris (1650–March 24, 1718) to parents who prepared her way into a career of writing and publishing, and possibly provided connections to the theater. I have chosen to spell her name the way it appeared most often on her publications. She tended to publish as “Mme de Saintonge” but to sign her dedications “Gillot de Saintonge” or “G. de Saintonge.”²¹ Her mother, Louise-Geneviève de Gomès de Vasconcellos, was apparently born into a noble Portuguese family which, at the misfortunes of the Portuguese King Dom Antoine, had sought safety in France. In *Histoire secrète de Dom Antoine, roi de Portugal, tirée des Mémoires de don Gomès Vasconcellos de Figueredo*,²² Mme de Saintonge claims that her maternal grandfather participated in the troubles of Dom Antoine, and that her history of this king is based on a manuscript found among her grandfather's papers. She recounts how Dom Antoine, overwhelmed by the forces of Philip II, was forced to flee to France, and how her grandfather and

20. Margaret Cavendish, living on the continent with her husband during Cromwell's regime, wrote and published two volumes of plays explicitly intended at best for reading aloud at home rather than for a performance on stage. Sophie Tomlinson emphasizes this quality of imagined performance in an article which takes its title from Cavendish's own phrase: “‘My Brain the Stage’: Margaret Cavendish and the Fantasy of Female Performance,” in *Women, Texts and Histories 1575–1760*, ed. Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss (New York: Routledge, 1992), 134–63. In contrast, the printed volumes of Mme de Saintonge proudly make explicit that many of her pieces were indeed performed.

21. So too Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre tended to sign her work “Jacquet de La Guerre,” using the same combination of maiden and married names (Cessac, 21).

22. Dated erroneously 1686 instead of 1696 by the *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française* ed. Roman d'Amat et al. 20 vols. (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1933–2004) 16 (1985), 91.

his brothers joined him in Paris, hoping in vain to return some day to Portugal. Of her grandfather's three children, all born and raised in Paris, only one girl survived, our writer's mother, to whom her father was deeply attached. He saw her married before his death. Between 1678 and 1697, the mother wrote and published, sometimes under her maiden name and sometimes under her married name "dame Gillot de Beaucour," half a dozen novels and, most famously, an abridged translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, *L'Arioste moderne* (Paris: Jean Guignard, 1685; reprinted 1720).²³ Obviously she was fluent in Portuguese, French, and Italian; she made sure that her daughter received a good literary education.

The father of Mme de Saintonge was Pierre Gillot, Sieur de Beaucour, a property which gave his wife her *nom de plume*.²⁴ We know little about him, although Charles de Mouhy (3:272) comments that he was "well respected" ["*fort estimé*,"],²⁵ whatever that might indicate. Several branches of the Gillot family could claim nobility; one of these came from Burgundy. In this line Jean Gillot, in the sixteenth century, had published a book on law. One of his sons, Jacques Gillot (d.1619) had become an intensely scholarly canon of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, and a deacon to the members of Parliament; he published

23. On the mother, see Louis-Gabriel Michaud, *Biographie Universelle Ancienne et Moderne*, nouv. ed. (Paris: Madame C. Desplaces, 1857), 17.154–55 [but the date of death given by Michaud is her daughter's]; Fortunée Briquet, *Dictionnaire historique, littéraire et bibliographique des Françaises...*; Louis Prudhomme, *Biographie universelle et historique des femmes célèbres mortes ou vivantes* (Paris: Lebigre, 1830); *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française*, 16 (1985), 90–91.

24. Noinville's *Histoire de l'Opéra*, 1.201, erroneously lists Pierre Gillot's name as sieur de Beaumont. Parfaict's *Dictionnaire des théâtres de Paris* refers to him as Sieur de Dancourt or M. Dancourt, apparently confusing him with the theatrical family Dancourt (Paris: Rozet, 1767), vol. 5, "Saintonge," accessed online July 2007 at www.cesar.org.uk/cesar2/books/parfaict_1767/display.php?volume=5&index=12; however, all other sources list him, under his wife's biography, as M. Gillot de Beaucour, which accords with the name used by his wife.

25. Charles de Mouhy, "Extrait de l'histoire des dames lettrées, qui ont travaillé pour le Théâtre depuis son origine jusqu'en 1780," in *Abrégé de l'histoire du Théâtre Français, Depuis son origine jusqu'au premier Juillet de l'année 1780* [Extract of the history of women of letters who have worked for the Theater since its origin until 1780] (Paris: Jorry et Mérigot, 1780), 3.272.

several books and corresponded with the humanist Joseph Scaliger.²⁶ These might be the family of Pierre Gillot. Perhaps he or a son of his²⁷ was the P. Gillot who published two odes, a sonnet, and a rather witty dialogue with the nymph of the Seine which comes close to the style of Mme de Saintonge's poetry.²⁸ If so, she came from a thoroughly literary family with a tradition of education and publication.

Was her father related to Claude Gillot (1673–1722), famous for his pictures of and scenery for the theater and opera? Claude was drawing, printing, and painting images of actors and dancers in Paris during the same decades that Mme de Saintonge was writing and publishing her operas, dramas, and ballets, i.e., the 1690s and early 1700s. However, he was not a native Parisian, and his involvement in designing for the Opera postdates Saintonge's operatic successes by nearly twenty years.²⁹

Was her father related in some way to the Gillot who is named in Soleinne's *Bibliothèque dramatique* as the author of several Italian-influenced farces for the Fair of Saint Germain in 1695?³⁰ Saintonge

26. Archives Biographiques Françaises, microfiche 455, 32–34, esp. the long annotated essay by A. E. Picot from his *Les Français italianisants au XVIIe siècle* (1906).

27. Or perhaps it was her nephew. A Pierre Gillot, Sieur de la Fortiniere and Valet de Chambre of His Royal Highness Monsieigneur the Duke of Orleans, Regent of France, printed in 1723 an angry account of his fruitless efforts to obtain justice for his brother's murder. Given Mme de Saintonge's connection to the mother of this Regent, her relative could have obtained a position in the same family.

28. *La Seine, poème au sujet du feu d'artifice représenté devant le Louvre pour l'heureuse naissance de Mgr le Duc de Bretagne* (Paris: D. Jollet, 1704) [The Seine, poem on the topic of the fireworks presented before the Louvre for the happy birth of my lord the Duke of Bretagne].

29. See Bernard Populus, *Claude Gillot (1671–1722): Catalogue de l'oeuvre gravé* (Paris: Rousseau, 1930); and François F. Moureau, "Claude Gillot et l'univers du théâtre," in *Claude Gillot (1673–1722): Comedies, sabbats et autres sujets bizarres*, ed. François Moureau (Paris: Somogy Editions d'art and Langres: Musee de Langres, 1999), 77–93.

30. The *Catalogue de la Bibliothèque dramatique de M. de Soleinne*, ed. P. L. Jacob (Paris, 1844), 5.3, #3399: "Théâtre inédit de la Foire" includes: "L'Enlèvement de Proserpine par Pluton, roi des enfers," "Polichinelle Colinmaillard," "Polichinelle grand Turque," and "Le Marchand ridicule," all by Gillot and all dated 1695. The "List of Plays" at the end of Lancaster's *History* includes these four unpublished works by Gillot (956–57); 934–36 discuss this manuscript and credit Paul Lacroix with the attribution. Polichinelle, obviously derived from the Italian Pulcinella, is the main character in some of these farces; the "ridiculous merchant" and father was probably based on Pantalone. The manuscript of these plays is

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refers to spending time at the home of a cousin in Saint Germain.³¹ Was this cousin the author? Or a family link to the painter, who lived not far from Saint Germain? There seem to have been several Gillots associated with theater during the lifetime of Pierre Gillot's daughter.³² This might help to explain Mme de Sainctonge's involvement in writing for the theater: opera libretti as well as dramas, "idilles" and ballets.

The daughter, confusingly named after her mother Louise-Geneviève, married Monsieur de Sainctonge, a lawyer in the parliament in Paris.³³ Du Tillet describes him as a learned man who

in the BnF 9312 (MF 30870). François Moureau ("Claude Gillot," 92, n3) notes that the well-known artist and the unknown "entrepreneur de spectacles" at the fair are two different Gillots.

31. Sainctonge, *Poésies diverses*, 1.61.

32. It seems impossible that she herself might have authored these farces. Her writing was aimed at the royal court and aristocracy. Moreover, the loose construction, primitive text, and crude nature of the farces is not at all like the careful construction and concern for proper good taste of Mme de Sainctonge's other theatrical writing. As the National Archives indicate, there were a number of different Gillot families in Paris at the time, ranging from aristocracy associated with the court and government to modest tailors and coal vendors.

33. The fullest information on her comes from Evrard Titon du Tillet, *Le Parnasse François* (Paris: Jean-Baptiste Coignard Fils, 1732), who seems to have known her personally. She is included in the same sources that mention her mother: Fortunée Briquet, *Dictionnaire historique, littéraire et bibliographique des Françaises et étrangères naturalisées en France* (Paris 1804); Louis Prudhomme, *Biographie universelle et historique des femmes célèbres mortes ou vivantes* (Paris: Lebigre, 1830), 4 vols. Vol. 2, 464–65; and d'Amat, *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, 16 (1985), 91. Beyond those, brief notices about her are included also in Pierre-François Godard de Beauchamps, *Recherches sur les théâtres de France* (Paris: Prault père, 1735); Leris, *Dictionnaire portatif historique et littéraire des théâtres*; Noinville *Histoire du Théâtre*, Part I, 201–2, and more recently Perry Gethner, "Sainctonge (or Saintonge), Louise-Geneviève Gillot, dame de (1650–1718)," in *The Feminist Encyclopedia of French Literature*, ed. Eva Martin Santori (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 485. Dandrey, in the *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises. Le XVIIe siècle*, ed. Patrick Dandrey, et al, rev. ed. (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 145–46, erroneously attributes the *Arioste moderne* to her instead of to her mother. See also *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Grove's Dictionaries of Music Inc., 1989); and *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Grove's Dictionaries of Music Inc., 1992). Prudhomme's account contains several errors; Ferdinand Hofer, *Nouvelle Biographie Générale depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à 1850–1860* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1852–66), who cites Prudhomme as a source, is also unreliable.

encouraged his wife's taste for "Belles-Lettres."³⁴ Like the Gillot family, the Sainctonges had a claim to nobility, a link to Burgundy, and a long connection with law and the parliament. Several Sainctonges had been members of the Parliament in Dijon from the time of Louis XII, and some continued to serve that Parliament during our writer's lifetime.³⁵ These Dijon connections became more patently important to Mme de Sainctonge towards the end of her life, as we shall see.

Both the Gillot family and the Sainctonge family had produced, over several generations, a number of notaries, lawyers, and counselors to the parliament or king.³⁶ With its appreciation for the importance of education and writing skills, this is indeed the type of profession that had tended to support writing by women in their families since the late sixteenth century.³⁷ Although both families included branches that had a claim to title of nobility, Mme de Sainctonge offers no indication of her status. Nonetheless, it may be relevant to the tone of informal banter with which she addresses several marquises.

34. Titon du Tillet, *Le Parnasse François*, 563: "Mlle Gillot eut une excellente éducation, & fut élevée dans l'étude des belles Lettres, y étant portée par son goût naturel & par l'exemple de M. de Sainctonge, Avocat au Parlement de Paris, homme de merite & d'érudition, avec qui elle fut mariée." [Mademoiselle Gillot had an excellent education and was raised in the study of Belles-Lettres, being drawn to it by her natural inclination and by the example of M. de Sainctonge, a lawyer for the Parliament of Paris, a man of merit and erudition, to whom she was married."] Noinville 1:201.

35. L'Abbé Jules Thomas, *Un mot pour les Xaintonge* (Dijon: Imprimerie Darantiere, 1912), 5. François Moureau, "Mme de Sainctonge," 25, n32, cites from Philibert Papillon's *Bibliothèque des auteurs de Bourgogne* (Dijon: Desventes, 1745), 2.359, the existence of a Pierre de Xaintonge active in the Burgundian parliament between 1615 and 1641. The manuscript collection of the BNF (Pièces orig. 2608, MF 20527) contains a certification of nobility for a Françoise de Xaintonge, son of Jean de Xaintonge, signed in Paris in 1600 but referring also to Dijon.

36. BNF manuscripts, Pièces orig. 2607, includes a Jacques Sainctonge, notary in 1599, a Girhosme de Sainctonge and a Jean de Sainctonge, both counselors to the king in the seventeenth century. A Sainctonge, perhaps our writer's husband, signed a printed legal document in 1682 (*Factum pour messire François Galliot Gallard*). BNF manuscripts, Dossiers Bleus 314 mentions several Gillots as counselors to parliament or lawyers.

37. For example, both the Des Roches, mother and daughter, and Moderata Fonte came from such families.

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Mme de Saintonge was buried in the church of St. Louis-en-l'Île, on the Isle St. Louis.³⁸ During the mid-seventeenth century this very small island in the Seine, next to the Ile-de-Cité in the heart of Paris, was newly developed into a few blocks of fashionable residences inhabited by a mix of nobility, lawyers, and bankers; presumably her family lived in one of those new residences. So too did Titon du Tillet, her earliest biographer, and Philippe Quinault, the chief opera librettist of the 1670s and 1680s, who is buried in the same church.

Apparently she had several children. As a result of the success of her opera *Dido*, the librettist was invited to dine at court, an event which she describes in a verse epistle. Since the epistle refers to “mes Filles” as having been invited with her, she had at least two daughters, whose ages were probably at that time close to twenty.³⁹ She mentions in the same poem that her brother-in-law also accompanied her. However, as she does not mention her husband being included on this occasion, she may have been widowed by then (1693), which would explain the presence of her brother-in-law as the male protector of her family. On the other hand, she also does not mention her son being included, although Louis Ladvocat in a letter two years later (1695) refers to her having a son.⁴⁰ Marriage and children may explain why she was mature—a woman in her forties—when her literary career began in earnest; and if her husband was dead, she may have begun writing because she needed money, like other women writing for the theater in France.⁴¹

38. Unfortunately the old cemetery has been destroyed, and there is no marker in the church.

39. *Poésies diverses* 1.64. Mme de Saintonge was then 43.

40. Louis Ladvocat, *Lettres sur l'Opéra à l'abbé Dubos, suivies de la critique de Didon par l'abbé Dubos*, ed. and introd. Jérôme de La Gorce (Cahors: Cicero Editeurs, 1993), 57, letter of October 26, 1695.

41. Both Marie-Catherine Desjardins de Villedieu, whose plays were performed during the 1660s, and Catherine Bernard, whose dramas of 1689 and 1691 are nearly contemporary with Saintongé's, were writing at least in part because of financial need. Claude Dulong, *La vie quotidienne des Femmes au Grand Siècle* ([Paris]: Hachette, 1984), 11–12, observes that “nothing prevented a woman of quality, if she had leisure and some education, from writing and publishing. But, again, it was at the risk of her reputation...The women writers, quite numerous, of the second half of the century...were almost all adventurers...whom sudden poverty compelled to earn their bread as best they could.” [“rien n'empêchait une femme de qualité, si elle avait des loisirs et de l'instruction, d'écrire et de publier. Mais, là encore, c'était

Career

The first work of hers which we can date is a pastoral “Idyll sung in the [royal] apartments for the King’s return to health” [“Idille chantée aux apartemens sur le Retour de la Santé du Roi”].⁴² When King Louis recovered from a serious illness in 1686–87, a number of poets and musicians offered their expressions of joy. This is the first of Mme de Saintonge’s texts to be performed at court. The composer is not named, but Michel Antoine suggests that this was already a collaboration with the Henry Desmarest with whom Mme de Saintonge would have a long professional relationship.⁴³ This may have been the beginning of their work together, but how they became connected remains uncertain. The work must have pleased the king, for she later reminded him of it. Obviously pursuing her connections with the court, she wrote in the following year an “Idyll for Monseigneur [the Dauphin]

au risque de sa réputation. ... Les auteresses, assez nombreuses, de la deuxième moitié du siècle, ... étaient presque toutes des aventurières... que leur soudaine pauvreté contraignait à gagner leur pain comme elles pouvaient.”] As a bourgeoisie, Mme de Saintonge had less to worry about with regard to losing social status, although she was still subject to the usual social anxieties about women turning unbecomingly professional.

42. *Poésies diverses*, 1.95–106.

43. The best work on Desmarest is the biography by Michel Antoine, *Henry Desmarest (1661–1741) biographie critique* (Paris: Éditions A. et J. Picard & Cie, 1965), which also contains the most extensive list of the composer’s works. Contemporary spellings of the composer’s name included: Desmarests, Desmarestz, Desmarets, Desmaretz, Desmarais, des Marests, Démarets, des Marais. For Antoine’s speculations that Desmarest set Mme de Saintonge’s text for the king’s recovery, see p. 39.

The king’s recovery from a dangerous surgery in 1686–87 evoked many expressions of thanksgiving. Charpentier, a lifetime friend of Desmarest, similarly composed an “Idyll on the convalescence of the King” [“Idille sur la convalescence du Roi”]; and Charpentier’s “Idyl” similarly made use of a text by a woman, in this case a poem on the king’s health by Mme Deshoulières which had already appeared in the *Mercure galant*. Patricia Ranum, *Portraits around Marc-Antoine Charpentier* (Baltimore: Dux Femina Facti, 2004), 420, 569–70, observes that it is “highly unlikely” that Charpentier would have approached the poet “on his own initiative” as he was working in the service of the princess Mlle Marie de Guise, who requested this composition on behalf of Mme Isabelle de Guise for a party the latter was planning to celebrate her cousin the king’s recovery. This raises the question of who might have approached Mme de Saintonge for a text on this occasion, a question which I cannot answer.

on the Capture of Philisbourg⁴⁴ (1688), but as she does not indicate that this one was performed, it probably was not.

Her first major success was the libretto for the opera *Didon* [*Dido*], composed by Desmarest and performed by the Royal Academy of Music, opening in September 1693.⁴⁵ She followed this success swiftly with the *Circé* [*Circe*], first performed in October 1694, again with music by Desmarest. Temporarily thwarted in his hopes for a better post at court, Desmarest was in his early thirties when he composed Sainctonge's two operas. The composer, who had been a musician for the court since boyhood, when he had sung in the royal chapel choir, and who had been composing for the court so far mostly religious music, was launching his opera career at the same time as the librettist.⁴⁶ The death in 1687 of Jean-Baptiste Lully, who had held

44. "Idille pour Monseigneur [le Dauphin] sur la Prise de Philisbourg," *Poésies diverses*, 1.137–45. The capture of Phillipsburg was part of a long French campaign against the Habsburg Emperor. As the Dauphin's first involvement in military action, it was celebrated by writers and composers far beyond any real contribution of the prince to this event. For a description of some of the celebrations, see Robert Isherwood, *Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 264.

45. Antoine, *Henry Desmarest*, 45, gives the date September 13. Le duc Louis-César de la Baume-le-Blanc Lavallière, *Ballets, Opéra, et autres ouvrages lyriques, par ordre chronologique depuis leur origine; avec une table alphabétique des ouvrages et des auteurs* (Paris: Cl. J. Baptiste Bauche, 1760; Repr. London: H. Baron, 1967), 113, says that it opened June 5; Parfaict, *Dictionnaire* (1767), 2.307, gives September 11, which is also the date printed on the edition by Ballard: *Recueil general des opéra representez par l'Academie royale de musique, depuis son établissement*, (Paris: Ballard, 1703), 121–73.

46. These two operas are his first two works recorded in Lavallière, *Ballets, Opéra, et autres ouvrages lyriques*, 30; and Donald Jay Grout. *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947, repr 1964), 144, names the *Dido* as the beginning of his career. However, David Mason Greene, *Greene's Biographical Encyclopedia of Composers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 186–87, notes that he had tried his hand at opera once before, with an unsuccessful and now lost *Endymion* in 1682. Antoine's thorough scholarship (*Henry Desmarest*, 36–37), indicates that the *Endymion* was given only private performances in the royal apartments at Versailles and never appeared on the opera stage. In this private manner, the *Endymion* was performed twice in a row in February-March 1686, according to the *Journal du Marquis de Dangeau* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, Fils et Cie, 1854), I, 298, 300, 307; on at least the first occasion the performance was spread across several days, two acts at a time. See also W. S. Brooks and P. J. Yarrow, *The Dramatic Criticism of Elizabeth Charlotte, Duchesse d'Orleans, With an Annotated Chronology of Performances of the Popular and Court*

a tight monopoly on opera, had at last opened the field for other composers to try their hands.

Both the *Dido* and *Circe* were published in the year of their performance by the Parisian publisher Ballard, and a year later in the *Recueil général des opéra représentés par l'Académie royale de musique*, volumes 4 (1694) and 5 (1695).⁴⁷ The *Dido* was successful enough to have another performance in 1696 in Lyon, a 1701 performance in Strasbourg, and a Paris revival in 1704.⁴⁸ It even won Mme de Sainctonge an invitation to the palace to present a copy to the king, an event she described as the high point of her life.⁴⁹

Parfaict's *Dictionnaire* lists the singers and dancers for both the 1693 and 1704 performances of *Dido*.⁵⁰ Guillaume-Louis Pecour was the choreographer for the Royal Academy of Music, after a long career as a dancer admired at court as well as in town; he would have been the choreographer for Sainctonge's operas.⁵¹ Jean Berain was the costume and set designer for all the Academy's operas from 1680 until his death in 1711.⁵²

Theatres in France (1671–1722), Reconstructed from her Letters (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 118–19.

Antoine, *Henry Desmarest*, indicates (and suggests where the evidence is less clear) that Desmarest and Sainctonge continued collaborating at different times throughout their careers, especially after 1700. During Sainctonge's lifetime, Desmarest was hired as the only French composer at the Spanish court of the new king of Spain Philip V, grandson of Louis XIV, in 1701. In 1707 Desmarest moved to assume the position of music director at the court of the Duke de Lorraine, Leopold I. In both places, he composed texts by Sainctonge. For the most complete list of his works, see Antoine, *Henry Desmarest*, appendix II.

47. They were reprinted in the 1703 volumes of the *Recueil général des opéra représentés par l'Académie royale de musique, depuis son établissement* (Paris: Christophe Ballard, 1703), vols. 4 and 5. The *Dido* was published also in Amsterdam: by Vuolfgang, 1699, and by A. Schelte, 1700; A. Schelte also printed the *Circé* in Amsterdam, 1695.

48. Antoine, *Henry Desmarest*, 191, item 24; Parfaict, *Dictionnaire*, 2.306–7; Lavallière, *Ballets, Opéra, et autres ouvrages lyriques*, 113.

49. See the verse epistle published in her *Poésies diverses*, 1.61–65. In re the presentation copy, see the introduction to *Dido*.

50. http://cesar.org.uk/cesar2/books/parfaict_1767/display.php?volume=2&index=307. Also Parfaict's *Dictionnaire* (1767), 2.307.

51. La Gorce, *L'Opéra à Paris au temps de Louis XIV*, 115–16.

52. Jérôme de la Gorce, *Berain Dessinateur du Roi Soleil* (Paris: Herscher, 1986). Many of Berain's designs can be seen in the chapter on opera, 66–103; p. 75 shows the final set for

The librettist was not well known at the opening of her *Dido*, but the success of this opera provoked curiosity about her. Thus the Marquis de Dangeau in his journal on September 15, 1693, wrote:

Monseigneur [the Dauphin] went to dine in Paris at the home of Monsieur [the king's brother] with my lady the Princess of Conty; afterwards he gambled, and then heard the opera *Dido*; the music is by the little Marais, and it is a woman who wrote the words.

Her gender deserved note as she was the first female librettist to have her work performed by the Paris opera. A year later, on November 11, 1694, the Marquis had learned more about her:

Monseigneur went to Paris to the opera *Circe*, a new opera for which the little Desmarets has made the music and for which the wife of a lawyer, named Mme de Saintonge, has made the text.⁵³

The *Gazette d'Amsterdam* (or *Nouvelles extraordinaires de divers endroits*) of November 18, 1694, printed a letter from Paris dated November 12, which similarly observes:

The Dauphin came here yesterday to see a new opera called *Circe*, which was shown for the first time; the words are by Mademoiselle Saintonge, wife of a lawyer in this city, and the music is by Monsieur Desmarets.

We can see that the attendance by the crown prince attracted attention and made the opera newsworthy. According to a letter by Louis Ladvoat written on December 9, 1694, Monseigneur had within a month gone to see and hear *Circe* no less than five times. It was quite common for people to hear an opera repeatedly, and the Dauphin was an enthusiast for opera. Nonetheless, five times in one month suggests

the *Circe*.

53. Marquis de Dangeau, *Journal du Marquis de Dangeau*, 19 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, Fils et Cie, 1854), 4.359, and 5.105.

that the Dauphin liked this piece. The Prince de Condé had a copy of the *Circé* bound with his coat of arms on the binding.⁵⁴ Even though *Circe* was less a hit than *Dido*, Ladvocat comments that despite the formation of “some cliques” against it, the opera was drawing large audiences and doing well financially.⁵⁵ *Circe* had its last performance on January 2, 1695.⁵⁶

Mme de Saintonge, trying to continue her collaboration with Desmarest while varying the genre, wrote the text for a ballet “The Charms of the Seasons” (“Les Charmes des saisons,” 1695). The genre of opera-ballet was in its initial development. When the librettist Houdar de la Motte and his composer André Campra presented their *L'Europe galante* in 1697, which gave the genre its first important success, they could still announce their creation as “completely new” [“tout neuf”]. Following the model of *L'Europe galante*, the genre—a ballet in which words, spoken or sung, were a major feature—flourished grandly in the first decades of the eighteenth century. Saintonge in 1695 was thus among the very earliest contributors to this new genre. Instead of the unified plot of opera, the opera-ballet had separate characters and situations in each act, loosely connected by a general theme.⁵⁷ To her dismay, however, her theme on the seasons was preempted by l'Abbé Pic and quickly set by Collasse, a court composer who had previously beaten Desmarest in a competition for a coveted post at Versailles.⁵⁸ Their version was chosen for performance instead of hers and Desmarest's.

As the ballet was intended for performance by the opera company, it makes use of the possibilities of machinery and scene

54. BnF Rés. Yf. 1337.

55. Ladvocat, *Lettres sur l'Opéra à l'abbé Dubos*, 28, 30.

56. *Ibid.*, 34.

57. On this genre and the various attempts to define it, see James Anthony, *French Baroque Music from Beaujoyeux to Rameau*. rev. ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978, 132–40; and Paul-Marie Masson, “Le Ballet héroïque,” *La Revue musicale* 1928, 132–54.

58. See Antoine, *Henry Desmarest*, 31–34, for the competition for musical posts at Versailles in 1683, in which Collasse was hired but Desmarest not; 52, for the preemption of the ballet theme. Philippe Hourcade, *Mascarades & ballets au Grand Siècle (1643–1715)* (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères/ Centre national de la danse, 2002), 69–70, compares her ballet with Pic's, and wonders, given the emphasis on dance, whether Pecour, the choreographer for the Opéra, did not have a hand in the design of Pic's ballet.

change, one of the main attractions of that theater. The “*Charmes des Saisons*” includes popular types of spectacular effect: Ceres arrives in a chariot drawn by dragons, Bacchus in a ship rigged with vines. Each season has its own set: a garden, barns filled with grain, a vineyard, and a hall. The ballet is framed by appearances of Apollo, at first with the Muses and at the end with the Hours, announcing their celebration of a king who triumphs in every season. Each of the four seasons has its appropriate lovers and deities as well as its dancing troupes and choruses. In spring Zephyre and Flore are involved in a debate for and against inconstancy, amid nymphs and breezes. In summer Ceres and Pan are celebrated by shepherds and shepherdesses while Lisandre pleads with the indifferent Iris. In fall the grape harvesters celebrate Bacchus while satyrs dance, and Iris at last yields to Lisandre. Winter, introduced by two older lovers, brings in Saturn and Momus, with the liberties and pleasures of a Carnival masquerade.

Publishing the text one year later as the first item in her *Poésies galantes* (1696), Mme de Saintonge could not resist attaching a Note to the reader:

More than eight months ago a person whom I greatly esteem, and who has full power at the Opéra, came to beg me insisently to write a Ballet of the Seasons. I satisfied his haste, finished it in less than fifteen days, and gave it to him, and all means were undertaken to have it appear on stage. But the interest of some cabales was raised against me, who made the matter turn out another way. I mention this here only to make plain that my Ballet was finished before that of Mr. P—. I have too much delicacy on the matter of proper behavior to have wished to treat a subject that someone else had already worked on; I would not even have had it printed if some Persons worthy of consideration had not wished it.⁵⁹

59. Avis au lecteur: Il ya plus de huit mois qu'une personne que j'estime beaucoup, et qui a un entier pouvoir à l'Opéra, vint me prier avec instance de faire un Ballet des Saisons. Je satisfis à son empressement, il fut achevé en moins de quinze jours, je le donnay, & toutes les mesures furent prises pour le faire paroître sur la Scène. Mais l'interest éleva contre moy

This note of protest gives us some insight into how Mme de Saintonge's writing was put together with music and dance, for it indicates that someone powerful in the opera had come to her for text. Certainly personal connections were always important to fostering the opportunities for talent to display itself. Who might this person be? A possible candidate could be Louis Ladvocat, who frequently attended opera rehearsals, readings of new libretti, and auditions of singers, offering his advice to Jean Nicolas Francine, director of the Royal Academy of Music. Ladvocat's surviving letters from 1694–97 refer several times to Mme de Saintonge, with regard to her work both on the *Circe* and on the *Charmes des Saisons*; but he does not indicate having asked her to write, nor does he seem particularly inclined in her favor concerning the rivalry over the ballet. In a letter of May 5, 1695, he remarks: "Mme de Saintonge has finished her ballet of the *Seasons*. Duché has nearly finished his *Momus*. ...I was told yesterday that another version of the *Seasons* than that of Mme de Saintonge is nearly ready, and that one will be able to choose which of the two is most pleasing."⁶⁰ Another possible candidate is Francine himself, who was eager to continue the success of Saintonge's two operas but succumbed to pressure from aristocratic patrons of her competitor. A third possibility is the Duke de Vendome, who had sponsored the production of Lully's last works when that composer had fallen into disgrace with the king. As Desmarest was personally connected with the Duke de Vendome, whom Cowart presents as a

des cabales qui firent tourner la chose sur un autre pied. Je ne marque cecy que pour faire voir que mon Ballet est fait avant celui de Mr. P—. J'ay trop de delicatesse sur le chapitre de l'honnéteté, pour avoir voulu traiter un sujet qu'un autre auroit travaillé, je ne l'aurois pas même fait imprimer, si des Personnes de consideration ne l'avoient souhaité." *Poesies galantes*, 2.

Lavallière, *Ballets, Opéra, et autres ouvrages lyriques*, 127, lists Saintonge's ballet "Les Charmes des Saisons, Ballet en vingt entrées" as having been performed in 1701 for the coronation of Louis XIV's grandson as King Philip V of Spain; but he admits that he has simply listed all her court entertainments under that same date, which is the only one explicitly given in her 1714 volumes.

The text for her ballet was published again, but without the note to the reader, in her *Poésies diverses*, a second edition of her poetry and performance texts, augmented and expanded into two volumes, printed in Dijon by Antoine de Fay in 1714.

60. Ladvocat, *Lettres sur l'Opéra à l'abbé Dubos*, May 5, 1695, 50–51.

leader of a libertine counterculture to the increasingly austere court of Versailles, the duke might have approached the composer and thus his librettist as well.⁶¹ In that case, Francine, Lully's son-in-law and heir to the directorship of the opera, may have decided to select the version by Collasse, who had completed Lully's final, unfinished opera and who included some of Lully's airs in this ballet.⁶² Whoever was the instigator of the "cliques" that had tried to harm the success of the *Circe* may have intervened more successfully this time, nipping the work in the bud before it could present its "charms" to an audience. In any case, Mme de Saintonge clearly felt cheated and, perhaps somewhat discouraged, turned her efforts to new venues.

Although Desmarest continued to compose operas and also ballets, he had already begun working simultaneously with another librettist.⁶³ Meanwhile, Mme de Saintonge was publishing a flurry of other types of work and had found another composer. The December 1696 issue of the *Mercure galant* printed a notice and the whole text of her "Eclogue sung twice at Fontainebleau at the King's supper, where it was received with great applause. The verses are by Mme de Xaintonge, whose excellent talent everyone knows. The melodies were made by Monsieur Marchand, of the King's Music."⁶⁴ This important notice identifies for us another composer who could, better than Desmarests, connect her to performances at court.

61. Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV & the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 162–74, suggests that Lully's *Carnaval* of 1675, in reviving the title of a previous court ballet, became a model for a later series of ballets in the 1690s and early 1700s which similarly reused the titles of court ballets from the 1660s while completely rewriting the music and text. Pic and Collasse's *Les saisons* of 1695 is the first of this series: a *Ballet des saisons* had been performed at court in 1661. The person who suggested the theme to Mme de Saintonge might thus have had this program of revival in mind.

62. Collasse, *Les saisons*, Lavoix's introduction, 5, 8–9.

63. His next two works set texts by Duché de Vancy: *Théagène et Cariclée* and *Les amours de Momus*, both ready in 1694—he had been working on them along with his first two operas. These later two were not nearly so successful as the ones he had written with Mme de Saintonge, and contemporary critics attacked the new librettist's work. But Duché de Vancy was a valet de chambre of the king and a secretary of the Duke of Noailles, and Desmarest may have seen him as providing connections useful to his career (Antoine, Henry Desmarest, 48–49, 56).

64. *Mercure galant*, December 1696, 84–95.