

## Adapting to the Theater: Representations of the “Philosophe” by French Women Writers

by Elizabeth Blood

The most infamous play about the *philosophe* to hit the stage of the Comédie Française in the eighteenth century was Charles Palissot's reputation-bashing *Les philosophes* (1760). The criticisms presented in Palissot's play incited dozens of writers, *encyclopédistes* as well as *anti-philosophes*, to take to the stage with their own opinions of this popular character. Responses to Palissot's play in 1760 included: Cailleau's *Les philosophes manqués*, Chamberlain's *Le philosophe malgré lui*, the anonymous *Le sage ou le philosophe du jour*, Poinsinet's *Le petit philosophe* and Poinsinet de Sivry's marionette comedy *Les philosophes de bois*. Of course, the trend of critical “*philosophe* plays” continued well beyond 1760 and into the Revolutionary period, generating, among a score of lesser-known others, Michel-Jean Sedaine's *Le philosophe sans le savoir* (1765). While Palissot's renowned play did not have the last word in the representation of the character of the *philosophe* on the French stage, it was not the first of its kind either. Palissot's play was but one in a long line of theatrical attempts at portraying the *philosophe*. The staging of the *philosophe* stretches back to the earliest decades of the century with Macourt's *Crispin philosophe* in 1716, a host of anonymous *Arlequin philosophe* plays and Philippe-Néricault Destouches' extremely popular *Le philosophe marié, ou le mari honteux de l'être* in 1727. All in all, between 1716 and 1789, over sixty plays specifically citing the *philosophe* in the title were performed and/or published in France.

The struggle to define a social role for the *philosophe* was not the only object of these theatrical productions, for as he was gaining authority as a public figure, so was the author. Authors who publicized their own representation of the *philosophe* were at the same time seeking to represent themselves as important figures in the public sphere. An

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author's status could be greatly empowered by the success of a critical adaptation, winning public acclaim and monetary return, but power was also required in order to achieve that success. To write a critical response to an earlier representation of a character or a subject was only the first step. The play then had to be approved by censors, approved by a theater director and by a carping troupe of actors, approved by the literary magazine critics and by the general public. This was not an easy feat for any writer, least of all for women. Of the sixty-plus plays written about the *philosophe*, only four are known to have been written by women. None of those four were ever staged in Paris.

To write and publicize a play with the *philosophe* as the central figure in the title was, necessarily, to comment on earlier plays in that vein, to criticize other authors and to engage oneself and one's work in a public exchange of ideas. The case of the "*philosophe* plays" was perhaps one of the most torrid of all eighteenth-century theatrical debates. Charles Collé, who had begun to write a play entitled *La veuve philosophe* prior to 1760, was appalled at the vehemence of the *philosophe* debate which he called a "guerre littéraire" (*Journal et mémoires* 252). He published his play four years later as, simply, *La veuve* in order to avoid being entangled in the controversy. It stands to reason that authors who published plays with the *philosophe* as the central figure in the title, especially after 1760, wanted their work to be a part of that public controversy.

Theater, in the eighteenth century, was an important public forum, a literary sphere of critical discourse. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas points to the coffeehouses and *salons* of the period as important "centers of criticism" (32) which led to the establishment of a new type of *bourgeois* reasoning public that was detached from the court. While he does not rank it as one of the most important authentic public spaces of eighteenth-century France, Habermas does point to the theater as a locus of bourgeois public gathering.<sup>2</sup> To use

Paula Backscheider's words, the theater was a type of "arena for the working out of satisfying communal fictions" (xv). Theatrical adaptations of common eighteenth-century characters, or "fictions," such as the story of the *philosophe*, illustrate the way in which the stage functioned as a space of public critical discourse. By adapting the character of the *philosophe* to a new theatrical setting, and by responding either explicitly or implicitly to earlier representations, an eighteenth-century author was able to participate in an ongoing public intellectual exchange about the role of the *philosophe* in society.

The fact that women were finding entry into public literary exchanges such as the debate over the character of the *philosophe* by appropriating the strategy of literary adaptation demonstrates the determination of women authors to stake out their own territory on the battleground of representation. A study of the four plays, Marie-Geneviève-Charlotte Thiroux d'Arconville's *Le bijoutier philosophe* (1767), Mlle. A. C. Kinschott's *Le philosophe soit-disant* (1767), Geneviève Savalette Marquise de Gléon's *L'ascendant de la vertu ou la paysanne philosophe* (1787) and Olympe de Gouges' *Le philosophe corrigé, ou le cocu supposé* (1788), will show how women authors of "philosophe plays" wrote themselves into the continuing literary debate of their century to define new social roles for philosophers and authors, roles that were to include women. By naming the *philosophe* as the central figure in the title of their works, these four women playwrights implicated their plays as responses to, or re-visions of, earlier works about this character. An analysis of the women's plays, particularly their portrayal of the main characters and their use of theatrical space, will reveal the ways in which the women dramatists contested, confirmed or criticized earlier representations of the *philosophe* and his place in society. A study of how each play was presented to the public will show how these women were able to subvert the obstacles which inhibited women from publicizing their plays in the

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eighteenth century and the ways they were able to succeed in representing themselves to society as authors.

Ira Owen Wade's book about eighteenth-century "*philosophe* plays" is a study of fifty-one plays that he chose because they were the only ones he deemed closely linked to "the growth of the Encyclopedic party" (2). Of these fifty-one plays, Kinschott's play was the only one written by a woman, and he does not discuss it in depth. Wade identified five types of *philosophes* portrayed in the works: the ancient Greek philosopher, the *philosophe amoureux*, the *philosophe champêtre* (old, retired and still *amoureux*), the practical (*sans-le-savoir* type) *philosophe*, and real eighteenth-century *philosophes* whose lives were idealized on stage. Wade also delineated four types of plays: those that lightheartedly attack some of the beliefs of the *philosophes* which he finds in the period 1720-1750, those that attack the personal character of certain scapegoat *philosophes* from 1750-1760, those that attack specific doctrines of the *encyclopédistes* from 1758-1774, and those that attack the *sous-philosophes*, the charlatan-like fake *philosophes*, from 1759-1789.

While Wade's study is valuable in revealing the scope, extent and import of the "*philosophe* plays" in France, his method of categorizing and generalizing tends to oversimplify a wonderfully complex phenomenon. While the types of characters and plots he isolates may have been types or topics which were focal points within the larger debate, his work undermines the individuality of the voices of the many playwrights involved in this diverse literary, cultural and social conversation. What is important about these plays is not what they can tell us about the growth of the Encyclopedic party, for they are subjective fictions, but what they can reveal to us about the many different opinions people had about this new social type, and the divergent ways in which these people were able to make their opinions available to the public as playwrights. In short, it is in celebrating the differences, rather than categorizing the

similarities, that we will arrive at a better understanding of both the appearance of a new social type, called the *philosophe*, and the nature of dramatic authorship in the eighteenth century.

In order to envision the stances of our four women authors of “*philosophe* plays,” the dynamics of their interaction with other authors, and the complexity of the larger debate about the *philosophe*, it is necessary to place them within a context. The “*philosophe* plays” which have more or less been incorporated into the canon — the works of Destouches, Palissot and Sedaine — convey three different and widely acclaimed conceptualizations of the *philosophe*’s character and place in society. In each play, the use of space is crucial to the definition of the *philosophe*. “Far from being accidental or arbitrary,” notes Hanna Scolnicov in her essay in *The Theatrical Space*, “the articulation of theatrical space is, at its best, an expression of the playwright’s philosophical stance” (15). Scolnicov cautions, however, that one must examine both the fictional space presented on the stage and the fictional “space without” (15), that is, the space evoked by the dialogue of the characters that is not physically presented on stage. The juxtaposition of these spatial conceptions leads to a clearer understanding of the issues the playwrights were trying to explore.

Destouches’ misanthropic *philosophe* is coaxed out of his private study and into the world of human relationships when he must publicly admit to being a happily married man. The play takes place in the *philosophe*’s private study, but the outside world creeps into the room in the form of letters, visitors and the spaces of Parisian social activity evoked in the dialogue. Destouches’ stance was that the true *philosophe* was a man whose public doctrines coincided with his private actions.<sup>3</sup> Palissot’s *philosophe*, Valere, is also a hypocrite, but one who manipulates the public and the publishing world and is ridiculed rather than reformed. Predominantly greedy and egotistical, Palissot’s

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*philosophe* tries to flatter Cydalise into turning over her daughter and her daughter's hefty dowry to him. His scam is revealed, but only within the boundaries of the woman's home. Palissot was able to plant a seed of doubt in the minds of the spectators regarding the actual *philosophes* of their day by portraying a man who appears admirable to the general public, but privately and secretly is actually corrupt. Sedaine, in reaction to his predecessors, defended a new role for the *philosophe* by offering a representation of a kind of unsung social hero. Sedaine's Vanderk is a model of compassion, modesty and reason. He lives in an unnamed city, works as a humble merchant, and his positive actions have an effect upon his family, his community and even the far-away spaces of the international community of commerce. Although their works raise many of the same issues as those written by their male counterparts, the plays of Arconville, Kinschott, Gléon and Gouges offer alternative representations of the *philosophe* and his place in society.

In Arconville's *Le bijoutier philosophe*, published in 1767, the *philosophe* is portrayed as a merchant of curiosities. The play is more or less a straightforward translation of an English play, *The Toy Shop* by Robert Dodsley, and was published as such, anonymously, in a collection entitled *Nouveau théâtre anglois, ou choix des meilleures pièces de théâtre représentées à Londres depuis quelques années*.<sup>4</sup> In this one-act play, two gentlewomen are persuaded by a gentleman friend to visit the shop and meet the curious shopkeeper, who is the main attraction. The shopkeeper, dubbed a *philosophe* in Arconville's play, distributes as much unsolicited advice to his customers as he does curiosities. As the three onlookers observe the shopkeeper, a string of customers come in, and each is sold a bauble which reveals the existence of frivolity, laziness, pride, hypocrisy or some other such vice in their character. An old man wishing to buy a present for a young woman gets a mirror and a lesson about vainglory, and so on. Some leave angry, some leave confused, some leave thankful for

having learned an important lesson. In the end, the gentlewomen buy the wares suggested to them and depart fully satisfied with the spectacle they have witnessed.

Arconville's changes to Dodsley's original text are few, but important. The change of title from *The Toy Shop* to *Le bijoutier philosophe* is probably the most significant.<sup>5</sup> It allowed Arconville to change the import of the entire play and incorporate her work into the public debate about the *philosophe*. In Dodsley's play, the shopkeeper is portrayed as a preacher rather than a *philosopher*. In the epilogue, which was not translated by Arconville, the speaker states, "Well, Heav'n be prais'd this dull grave sermon's done./(For faith our Author might have call'd it one)" (47). This idea is reinforced in Dodsley's play when Gentlewoman #2 says to the shopkeeper: "Why, Sir, me thinks you are a new kind of Satirical Parson, your Shop is your scripture and every piece of Goods a different Text from which you expose the Vices and Follies of Mankind in a very fine allegorical Sermon" (17). Arconville's version diminishes the religious aspect of the play so clearly suggested by Dodsley, not only by the transformation of the title but also by subtle liberties taken in the translation. In the scene where the Gentlewoman compares the shopkeeper to a "Parson," Arconville manipulates the translation as follows: "Il me semble que vous soyez un Ministre d'une *nouvelle Eglise*. Votre boutique vous sert de *Temple* et chacune de vos marchandises est *un texte* avec lequel vous *déclamez* contre les folies du genre humain, dans un fort beau sermon rempli d'allégories" (9, *my emphasis*). Instead of being a "Satirical Parson," Arconville's *philosophe* is the minister of a "new church". Instead of the shop being a "scripture" and the "goods" being passages read from that scripture, the *philosophe's* shop is a "Temple" and his commodities are his own philosophical texts. Instead of exposing vice, the *philosophe* "declaims" against it. With just a few slight changes to Dodsley's text, Arconville creates a whole new meaning. This new church, this pagan temple from which

themselves into literary circles and literary debates. Backscheider discusses the importance of Katherine Philips' English translation of one of Corneille's plays to her own career. She demonstrates the ways in which Philips used her translation to create an authorial public persona for herself, stating that it was "an important moment in the history of women's writing" (76). The case of Arconville's liberal translation of Dodsley exemplifies this phenomenon. Arconville adopted a rather conventional technique of circulating theatrical texts, a collection of translated plays, and adapted it to create a work—and a public statement—of her own, without causing a scandal or breaching the unwritten codes of women's literary conduct.

Kinschott's dramatic version of Marmontel's *Le philosophe soi-disant* offers another example of a woman writing herself into the debate about the *philosophe* by adopting a conventional technique of textual circulation, but this time making the leap from anonymous translator to signed author. Kinschott's *Le philosophe soit-disant* (with a slight spelling change) was published in Maestricht in 1767, the same year that Arconville's *Le bijoutier philosophe* was published in London. Kinschott's play is essentially a type of translation as well, not from one language to another, but from one genre to another. She transformed Marmontel's short story into a three-act play. This was not a surprising feat according to Wade, who considered Marmontel's story to be easily adaptable to the theater because it was composed primarily of dialogue.<sup>7</sup> Wade did not discuss Kinschott's play in detail, dismissing it because he thought that it too closely followed Marmontel's original and because Grimm had called it a "mauvaise pièce" (86). Wade described the *philosophe soi-disant* as a type of pseudo-*philosophe*, a charlatan, a scapegoat that the "real" *philosophes* could ridicule and use as a "shield" to "turn the shafts" of public opinion back in their favor after the blow of Palissot's play (95). Kinschott's play, however, depicts the humiliation of only one particular hypocrite, who fancies himself a

*philosophe*, by several wise women who wish to teach him a lesson.

Marmontel's story takes place at the country home of Clarice where she is "avec une de ces Sociétés qu'on appelle frivoles et qui ne demandent qu'à s'amuser" (290). The *philosophe* Ariste arrives for a visit and Clarice, her *fiancé* Cléon, and several female friends decide to have a little fun. The *philosophe* is quick to condemn the vices of society and praise simple living and solitary reflection, but the women and Cléon methodically force Ariste to reveal his true self by encouraging him to drink and eat extravagantly, to sleep in a luxurious room, to indulge in a new fancy outfit and to get a stylish *coiffure*. In short, they flatter his *amour-propre*. Ariste is too readily swayed from his life of austere philosophy, and when alone, admits that he enjoys the society of these women. Clarice easily seduces the *philosophe* with her beauty, to the point that he decides to betray Cléon and marry her himself, until the Présidente, who is neither young nor beautiful nor charming, seduces him with her money. In the end, Ariste tells Clarice that he must sacrifice her for Cléon's happiness, but in fact he has simply opted to marry the Présidente for her money. At the end of the story, the Présidente ties a ribbon around Ariste's neck, like a leash, and leads him out to show the others that she was able to make the so-called *philosophe* grovel at her feet, all for the sake of her money. The furious *philosophe* leaves, swearing that he will publish a book condemning the corruption of his era.

The countryside is the space presented in Marmontel's story. It is associated, on the one hand, with nature and the gardens that surround the chateau. Clarice remarks, "la campagne est un séjour délicieux; car enfin elle nous rapproche de la condition des animaux, et comme eux nous semblons n'y avoir pour loi que le doux instinct de la nature" (302-3). On the other hand, given the interior of the *château* itself, the country is also the space of a lifestyle of luxury. The "spaces without" evoked in the text are the

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extremes of corrupt city life and the solitude of the desert. The scheme of humiliating Ariste is presented as a sort of mean joke undertaken solely to amuse a “frivolous” society of women. When the *philosophe* first arrives, Clarice says to her impatient friends, “cela est bon pour la campagne, il y a moyen de s’en divertir” (204), and when Cléon explains his idea to trick the *philosophe*, “tout le monde y applaudit” (301). While the *philosophe* is portrayed as a hypocrite who enjoys the luxuries of the country while scorning the evils of the city and only pretending to revere the isolation of the desert, the women in the play are portrayed as cunning tricksters. Clarice, responding to Ariste’s statement that pretty women are not cut out to be *philosophers*, asserts “rien ne se ressemble moins, je crois, qu’une jolie femme et un philosophe” (291). Marmontel’s readers may be apt to take this statement at face value, concluding that the women of Clarice’s society who are true to themselves, who enjoy the luxuries of the good life and are amused by a good joke, have nothing in common with a pretentious *philosophe* trying to appear to be something that he is not. Kinschott’s *philosophe* is very similar to Marmontel’s, but her changes to the text make her portrayal of the story of the *philosophe soi-disant* more temperate and render the actions of the female characters more righteous.

Kinschott transcribes almost word for word the entire story written by Marmontel, putting the dialogue into theatrical form, lengthening some of the speeches here and there, and dividing the action into three acts. She cuts out only a few of the women characters (Madame de Ponval and Doris, who do not really contribute to the development of the plot) from Marmontel’s cast, reducing the female contingency to Clarice, her friend Lucinde and the Présidente. She adds two characters to the play, Finette and La Fleur (servants to Clarice and Cléon) whose conversations frame the action of the play. She also invents an important scene between Clarice and Lucinde in which they discuss their real reasons for humiliating the

*philosophe*. Her additions to Marmontel's story serve to portray the female characters in a more amiable light.

At the beginning of Act I, Kinschott uses the servants to introduce the character of the *philosophe*. La Fleur states that he had worked for Ariste's uncle five years ago and at that time his character was "leste et gai" and that now he had become "un être bizarre qui fait profession de ne ressembler à rien" (13). This passage establishes, in case there was any doubt, the point that Ariste was not a well-intentioned *philosophe* but truly a fake worthy of being ridiculed by the women. At the start of Act II, La Fleur relates to Finette the events at the dinner table. The pretensions of the *philosophe* were visible even to him, proving that even uneducated servants could see through his charade. The character of Finette is also important to the portrayal of women as strong, intelligent people of good sense. She refuses La Fleur's overtures, telling him that he'll have to save up some money and act with more propriety if he wants her to marry him, and further advises him, "de me laisser pleine liberté et de te fier à ma sagesse" (9).

Scene eleven of Act II, in which Clarice and Lucinde discuss men and defend their own actions towards the *philosophe*, significantly alters the character of the women portrayed in the story. They hope that their scheme will change the *philosophe*, not just humiliate him: "nous le rendrons plus humain: et quand il le sera, sa société sera fort agréable" (54). Like Destouches' *philosophe* who had to learn to balance his philosophy with his love for his wife, Clarice and Lucinde hope to make Ariste "tout à la fois aimable et raisonnable" (55). To accomplish this, Clarice states that they need only "allier la raison avec un grain de folie" (56). At the end of Kinschott's play, the women, including Finette, are each given a voice to respond to Ariste's humiliation, though they noticeably do not speak out in Marmontel's version. Clarice's statement summarizes well their sentiment: "heureux les gens qui restent dans leur caractère" (82).

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Kinschott also adds new spatial dimensions to the story. Her play takes place at Clarice's country home, but instead of simply having a garden on the grounds, Kinschott's Clarice nurtures a "petit bosquet à l'angloise" (15). This new space exists in contrast to the "spaces without" described by Finette and La Fleur in the opening dialogue: the domestic bliss of a nearby village of farmers where a "fermière" just gave birth to a baby girl, and the dangerous wild of a "bois voisin" where women should not venture alone (8). The English garden seems to represent a type of compromise between the uncontrolled wild of the woods and the controlled domesticity of the farmers' village. It is an in-between space of moderation that contains the pleasures of wild freedom within reasonable boundaries. This spatial dynamic reveals the essence of Kinschott's revision of Marmontel's story.

Kinschott's adaptation allowed her, like Arconville, to bring her own representation of the *philosophe* to the literary debating arena. While her *philosophe* remains similar to Marmontel's, Kinschott's additions to the text created a new philosophical stance. Adding the image of the *bosquet à l'anglaise* allowed Kinschott to portray a less frivolous female society than Marmontel's. In her version, the women's purpose in scheming against Ariste was not just amusement, but a concerted effort at reforming him and making him understand that wise people, male or female, are those who remain true to themselves. The female characters unite reason and folly, like an English garden, and the false *philosopher* is not just a farcical dupe, but a social type to be reformed. When Kinschott's Clarice declares, "rien ne se ressemble moins, je crois, qu'une jolie femme et un *philosophe*" (20), it is with a clear note of irony. Kinschott's adaptation allows the reader to understand that if there are any real *philosophers* in the story of the *philosophe soi-disant*, they are the women who try to reform the hypocritical Ariste.

Like Arconville's translation, Kinschott's play was never produced on stage, and like Arconville's play again, Kinschott's was not published in Paris. Kinschott's comedy, however, does take a bolder stance by criticizing the so-called *philosophes* of her day as well as Marmontel's portrayal of women in his story. Although these two women playwrights found ways into the literary debate about the place of the *philosophe* in society, they did so with some caution, not publishing in Paris, not claiming to have invented their plots on their own, and not seeking to have their plays produced on stage. Twenty years later, two more women would write plays portraying the *philosophes* and they would not be as modest. In those twenty years, however, much had changed politically and socially in France. Paris was on the threshold of the Revolution and the city's theaters were on the verge of becoming truly public, free from royal control.

Gléon's five-act drama *L'Ascendant de la vertu ou la paysanne philosophe* was published in 1787 in a collection of her works entitled *Recueil de comédies nouvelles*. The setting of Gléon's play is similar to Kinschott's. The action takes place on the grounds of a country estate, in a *bosquet* that separates the main character's house from the *château* of the landowners. Gléon's plot and characters are original, and she takes a bold step in making her *philosophe* a woman. The play begins as Monique, the peasant woman *philosophe* who had been raised and educated by the recently deceased mistress of the *château*, decides to allow her god-daughter Pauline, raised in turn by her, to marry her son Alexis. The plot thickens when Pauline's not-too-bright father decides that he wants her to marry a local farmer's son instead. This farmer ridicules Pauline's father for his lack of control over his own daughter and tries to convince him to take her back into his own home and force her to marry his own son. Alexis soon arrives, but in the company of the Comte, the *seigneur* of the land, who is also in love with Pauline. The Comte plots with the farmer to make Pauline marry the

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farmer's son so that he alone will have access to the young woman.

The play centers on the conflict between the Comte and Monique. The Comte tries to intimidate first Monique, then Pauline's father, and finally he hires a lawyer to try to coerce Monique into relinquishing control of Pauline, but to no avail. Rumors fly that Monique is planning to send Pauline off to a convent during the night, so the Comte and the farmer plan to kidnap the girl. As a cloaked woman exits the house, the two men seize her, but are later surprised to discover that it is not Pauline, but Monique. They threaten to break down the door to her house if Monique doesn't give them the key. She refuses. Someone spots a priest leaving through the back door, and Monique finally surrenders the key, stating that Pauline and Alexis are now married. The Comte is suddenly overcome with respect for virtue and turns the care of his land, and the peasants living on it, back over to Monique who, he admits, is a better person than he.

The space of the play is more or less limited to the space represented on stage: the *bosquet* which lies between Monique's house, Pauline's father's house and the Comte's *château*. The only "space without" evoked is the nearby convent, which is the realm of total female control. The grove is an intermediary space, a battlefield separating the sphere of female authority (Monique's house) and the sphere of male authority (the father's house and the Comte's *château*). There is a clear division between the two camps and a dichotomy that is developed throughout the play aligning the women characters with all that is good, constant, virtuous, reasonable, nurturing and protective, while associating the male characters with the opposite characteristics. Men are generally portrayed as bad, inconstant, corrupt, passionate/unreasonable, violent and exploitative. Monique is constantly criticizing not only the male characters she confronts, but men in general, defining their negative traits in comparison to "nous autres" (29), women—a phrase used repeatedly throughout the play.

This division between men and women is spatially represented on stage. The Comte and the father want to move Pauline into their homes in order to have authority over her, but their attempts at removing her from Monique's realm of authority, her home, are unsuccessful. When the Comte first comes to Monique's house to try to convince her to give up Pauline, he wants to enter the house to talk. Monique refuses, stating that she will only speak to him from her doorway: "Je veux pouvoir m'en aller si je ne suis pas contente de ce que vous me direz" (70). Later, when the Comte tries to persuade Pauline's father to remove the girl from Monique's house, the father admits that he is afraid to do so: "quand je m'tourne par là (montrant la maison), m'est avis que j'voudrais ben que la porte ne s'ouvrit pas" (101). The house resembles a fortress that at once protects the women from the assaults of the men, but also limits the authority of Monique to one closed area. While planning the kidnapping of Pauline, and in an attempt to control Monique, the Comte orders the farmer to lock Monique inside her house: "Dès que vous entendrez ouvrir la porte de sa maison, rapprochez-vous tout doucement, saisissez Pauline, repoussez Monique chez elle, fermez sa porte et prenez la clé" (118). In the end, the Comte's acknowledgment of Monique's superior character—superior because based on reason and virtue rather than on passion and desire—is to enlarge her sphere of authority. He asks her to watch over his land and his tenants: "Je vous remets le soin de ma terre. Soyez la maîtresse ici; je vous demande pour prix de la victoire que vous avez remporté sur moi de ne jamais abandonner des habitants à qui vous avez donné l'exemple de toutes les vertus" (143).

Gléon's representation of the *philosophe* can be compared to Sedaine's. Like Sedaine's Vanderk, Monique is caring and emotional, protective of her "children" and a good example for her society. She is a working person, modest and honest, not seeking fame or fortune, wanting to live in a thriving society. Unlike Palissot's and Destouches'

*philosophes*, Monique's beliefs correspond perfectly to her private behavior. Gléon's great innovation is of course in making the *philosophe* a woman, and a virtuous one who battles male authority and wins. *La paysanne philosophe* can also be likened to Kinschott's *Le philosophe soit-disant* in which the female characters attempt to teach right from wrong in a social space controlled by them. Gléon's female character, however, does not try to blend reason and folly like Kinschott's characters, but rather embodies reason itself.

Gléon herself was not as forceful as her female characters in charging onto the battlefield of the literary public sphere. One might say that she worked her way into it from the safety of her own *château*. According to the preface to her collection of plays, a preface written by "ses amis" (i), the Marquise de Gléon wrote solely "pour employer des heures de retraite et de loisir" (i) and never intended her works to be published or staged in public. Although, at the same time, her friends state that Gléon did not disapprove of their endeavor to publish her works. The preface offers several reasons for Gléon's lack of ambition: first, the staging of a play required a tremendous personal investment considering all of the "cabales intérieures et extérieures" (ii) that would have to be overcome; second, the judgments of the public and the critics are "souvent très arbitraire[s]" (ii); and third, the whole process would be even more stressful for Gléon considering the "difficultés, celles de l'état, le sexe et le caractère de notre Auteur" (ii). The difficulties of producing a play on stage were compounded by the fact that Gléon was not only a woman, but an aristocrat of upstanding reputation. Women were discouraged from pursuing careers in the theater by the rules of social propriety and by the prejudices of the men who controlled the official theaters. According to English Showalter, "the theater demanded a degree of self-promotion and managerial activity that women could not easily provide" (111)—or perhaps that they did not want to appear to provide.

Gléon's protested lack of self-promotion is, in fact, highly questionable. Did she really intend to keep her theatrical works private, or were her friends simply protecting her reputation by claiming that it was only at their request that she published her work? Did she really fear the scandals, the arbitrary public judgment, the damage to her reputation and the limits of her sex? Or could it be that the publication of these disclaimers was, in fact, just one of the ways in which Gléon subverted the system that inhibited women from participating in the theatrical world. The authors of the preface note that, despite her supposed lack of self-promotion, Gléon was successful in publicizing her works. They declare that the Parisian theater-going public would have approved of *La paysanne philosophe*, because Gléon had already succeeded in staging the play at a theater in Marseilles where it was "universellement applaudie" (v). Furthermore, they state that publication itself was a very important means of access to the public, one that should not be undervalued. Gléon's friends claimed that plays written for publication were often written by talented authors, and that they were writers who dared to take risks in their works, unlike the playwright hacks who "croient toujours entendre, tandis qu'ils composent, le murmure d'un Parterre qui condamne sans examen" (iii). In addition, a close reading of the text allows the reader to grasp "mille nuances délicates qui se perdent dans l'immensité de la salle" (iv).

Although Gléon did not build a career in the theater, for financially she presumably had no need, she did succeed nonetheless in working her way into the theatrical world and the debate about the *philosophe*. Gléon was able to adapt to the set of circumstances which deterred women from publicizing their theatrical works. Through the publication of her own original "*philosophe* play" and the staging of that play in Marseilles, she offered a representation of the *philosophe* which was at once forceful, confrontational and firmly feminist. Gléon succeeded in creating a space for herself and her work in the public forum, without risking her

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reputation and without confronting the Parisian theatrical world head-on. Perhaps we can hear an echo of Gléon's own feelings in the words of her *philosophe* who, explaining to her son that men are consumed by *amour-propre*, says: "Nous ne sommes pas comme cela nous autres: nous avons plutôt prouvé qui nous sommes....Mais tout ça, le monde a toujours été de même, nous ne le changerons pas" (29).

The year following the publication of Gléon's plays, another woman playwright, one who was not afraid of risking her personal reputation, who thrived on scandal and believed that she could change the world, would bring the *philosophe* back to the drawing board. In 1788, Olympe de Gouges published her play *Le philosophe corrigé ou le cocu supposé*. Unlike her predecessor, Gouges forced her way into the arena of the theatrical world and demanded recognition as an author and a playwright. She gained notoriety challenging the male writers, theater directors and actors who controlled the industry and stood in the way of her path to publicity. Gouges' "*philosophe* play" was published, preceded by her lengthy "Préface sans caractère," in the midst of her battle against the Comédie Française whose leaders were refusing to stage her controversial work *L'esclavage des noirs*. Gouges' "*philosophe* play," despite its provocative title, is not a shocking work as far as her ideas about the *philosophe* are concerned.<sup>8</sup> Rather than creating a black-and-white definition of what a *philosophe* should be and opposing women and men, or good and bad, in a dichotomy as Gléon did, Gouges reveals the many levels of possible realities and possible understandings of the situation of the *philosophe*, ultimately endorsing the dissolution of the social title "*philosophe*" rather than any one representation of the character.

As the play opens in the park of the country estate of the Marquis de Clainville, the elderly valet Monsieur Pinçon reveals the secret plot that the Marquise, the Comtesse and Madame Pinçon have contrived in order to test the

philosophical principles of the Marquis (the *philosophe*). They hope to correct his misguided beliefs and “pousser à bout sa Philosophie” (25). With the Marquis away pondering philosophy in “solitude” for a year, the Marquise has given birth to their first child (of whom the Marquis knows nothing). After the birth, in an attempt to revive the love he once had for her, the Marquise disguised herself as another woman, went to a ball, found her husband and proceeded to make him fall in love with her again, without revealing her true identity.

The Marquis arrives at his *château* having heard false rumors of his wife’s infidelity and doubting her constancy, while he thinks himself to be on the verge of having an affair with the masked woman. He is soon informed about the birth of a baby in the making of which he believes he played no part. He is furious and is ridiculed by his friend, the Baron, for not exercising more control over his wife. The Marquis retorts that his philosophy is to give women their freedom and not be tyrannical in domestic matters. Likewise, his uncle, the Commandeur, criticizes the Marquis’ handling of his domestic affairs, fearing for his public reputation. The Comtesse also confronts the *philosophe*, calling his philosophical indifference sheer self-involvement. To cap it all off, a delivery of letters arrives from Paris for the Baron, one of which contains a song which is being circulated mocking the supposedly cuckolded *philosophe*.

The women—with the exception of the brash Madame Pinçon who thinks she would have had a great career as a military hero if she had been offered the same education as men—are ready to give up the charade when the Marquis finally shows his true emotions for his wife in a rage. The Commandeur, however, learns of the women’s “comédie” (24) and wants to join the fun. He plots to have Madame Pinçon dress-up as a *petit-maître* and pretend to be the Marquise’s lover. The Marquis confronts the disguised Madame Pinçon and challenges her in a duel. Finally, all is revealed. The *philosophe* is cured of his apathy, swearing to

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give up his corrupt philosophies and be the most passionate, respectful husband from that day forward: “je reconnais, dès ce moment, le véritable bonheur. Etre uni avec mon épouse, l’adorer, en être tendrement aimé...” (173).

In Gouges’ play, the *philosophe* is humanized by the female characters and reintegrated into the domestic sphere, his own home. Here, there is an actual shift in the use of the space on stage from the exterior park in the first act to a room inside the *château* in the subsequent acts. The space of the estate itself, however, is interpreted in several different ways. The Marquis sees his country home as the woman’s domain, a place of either total tyranny or total freedom. He believes that if he stayed in the home, he would be a tyrant; if he leaves, the woman is entirely free. There is no in-between. He had chosen to leave the Marquise there on her own, in freedom, so as not to “tyranniser son cœur et son penchant” (29). The Marquise, however, had felt the estate to be a place of forced solitude, where she was “renfermée” (28). The “spaces without” evoked in the dialogue of the play are possible alternative spaces for the main characters and potential alternative modes of living. The cloister is invoked as a prison, a state of captivity in which to silence and contain the Marquise. The Marquis’ other residence is a place where he can escape from social ties “dans la solitude et dans les livres” (29). Paris is described as a state of corrupt civilization, where only the appearance of virtue and authority is required to salvage a marriage. The Baron also alludes to “l’Isle d’Otaiti” (38), a lawless state of nature, where men and women follow their passions and all types of immoral behavior are permitted.

In the end, the country estate becomes a space of compromise between all these different possibilities. The Marquise and her friends show the *philosophe* that depriving women of the pleasures of a companionate marriage is as unjust as claiming absolute power over them. Total freedom deprives them of their rights to domestic felicity just as much as total tyranny. As the *philosophe* is

corrected, made more passionate, and the Marquise gives up her extravagant charade, returning to her sensible self, the spatial problem is remedied. The couple creates a middle ground between tyranny and total freedom, dispassion and passion without bounds, solitude and public life, captivity and escapism. As in Kinschott's *Le philosophe soit-disant*, the country estate symbolizes a space of moderation where "reason" and "folly" are conjoined.

The range of spatial possibilities and lifestyles referred to by the characters is further complicated by the different levels of reality presented in the play. The women's charade is spoken of as a play itself in which each character has an assigned role. There is also reference to the masked ball at which the Marquise had pretended to be another woman seducing her own husband. This play within a play within a play is complicated by the Baron who is not aware of the women's scheme and begins scheming on his own, playing his own roles to try to manipulate the women, always unsuccessfully. In each scene, there are different realities that coexist. Similarly, Gouges' representation of the *philosophe* does not rely on one definition but many definitions, each character describing him from his or her own point of view. When asked if he is a *philosophe*, the Marquis aptly replies: "Ce mot est commun et difficile à définir. La Philosophie n'est point égale chez tous les hommes: on l'applique à tout propos" (54).

The Marquis does attempt to define the *philosophe*, stating that it is someone who is "juste et généreux dans ses procédés" (54). He defends himself against accusations of emotional atrophy by saying that he is a man of passion and feeling, but above all a man of reason: "je sais dompter mes passions" (54). The Marquise defines the *philosophe* as dispassionate and unfeeling. The Comtesse describes him not just as indifferent but also as not virtuous because of his egotism and self-involvement. She considers the *philosophe* "un homme fort ordinaire" (56). The Baron, on the contrary, believes him to be "un homme extraordinaire" (56), but

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attributes to him many of the same characteristics that the Comtesse has mentioned: “Indifférent, distrait, enfin un Philosophe” (56). The Commandeur is the most outspoken against the *philosophe*, claiming that he is essentially an enemy of social order and a dangerous sort of revolutionary thinker. The Commandeur states that the Marquis’ philosophical beliefs not only degrade his own character in the public eye, but threaten the very fiber of social order by challenging the laws and conventions that men have created to maintain an organized and peaceful state: “cette grande liberté que vous admirez comme un don du Ciel, ferait la destruction totale du genre humain” (105). Blaise and Babet, the lower servants, offer an alternative interpretation by expressing apathy towards the question of the *philosophe*. According to them, the whole controversy is just another example of the absurdity of the lives of the wealthy: “ils nous paraissent si ridicules, si fatigués, quoiqu’ils ne fassent rien” (149).

The conflict over the definition of a *philosophe* is resolved not by the predominance of one representation over the others, but by a refusal of the term. The Marquis is not converted into a “mari philosophe” (70) but renounces philosophy to become simply a husband. When the Commandeur declares, “Enfin nous l’avons corrigé,” the Marquis replies: “Dites plutôt que vous m’avez guéri. Puissent tous les maris me prendre pour modèle” (172-3). While Gouges’ representation of the *philosophe* who is humanized and reincorporated into the domestic sphere is certainly original, it clearly evokes the image of the married *philosophe à la Destouches*. Destouches’ Ariste is transported from his life of solitude to a happy married life, like the Marquis. In Gouges’ play, however, the *philosophe* is not embarrassed by his love for his wife, as is Ariste, but is averse to that love. The Marquis was consciously working towards suppressing his love for his wife, rather than just the public visibility of it. Moreover, Gouges’ *philosophe* is moved from a life outside of the home into the interior of the

home, while Destouches' *philosophe* is brought out from a private room within the home and into the public space of the home. Rather than advocating like Destouches, that the *philosophe*'s public doctrines match his private actions, Gouges suggests that the *philosophe* should give up his doctrines and concentrate on his private life.

Gouges' play echoes many of the issues presented by other authors of "*philosophe* plays" as well. The Comtesse's idea that the *philosophe* is egotistical and self-interested and the Commandeur's outright condemnation of the liberal *philosophes* as destructive forces in society can both be aligned with Palissot's portrayals. In addition, Gouges' country estate setting is similar to Kinschott's. The country is an ideal in-between space in which to present the *philosophe*. It is away from city life, yet not in a place of solitude, and depicts a sphere of social activity controlled by women. In Kinschott's play, the women scheme against the *philosophe* to reveal his hypocrisy. Gouges' *philosophe*, however, is not shown to be false, but instead is made to see the falsity of his philosophical beliefs. Gouges' play more or less declares the social death of the *philosophe* and the birth of a new important social type, the man of feeling.

In Gouges' play, the reader can also find some similarities to Gléon's characters. The feminism of Madame Pinçon and the Comtesse points to a differentiation of men and women in Gouges' work that is akin to the dichotomy presented in Gléon's drama. According to the Comtesse, who defines women against men and talks of "nous autres femmes" (71) as Gléon's Monique did, women embody the successful mixture of reason with passion, audacity with fidelity and virtue. However, Gouges' play allows for many representations of women, as it does for articulations of space and opinions about the character of the *philosophe*. Gouges offers a variety of different types of female characters (the loving Marquise, the brash Madame Pinçon, the sweet-but-clueless Babet) and a variety of ways in which they are perceived by the male characters (as objects of lust

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by the Baron, as reflections of their husbands according to the Commandeur, and simply as mates by the Marquis).

Although Gouges was an outspoken, public supporter of women's rights herself, her multiple representations of women render her text less audacious than Gléon's in confronting male authority. However, Gouges' resolution of her battle of the sexes in the *Philosophe corrigé* can be interpreted as more realistic than the one presented by Gléon. Gouges offers her readers a lesson in relativity, through the various viewpoints of the different characters, and a happy ending which is a compromise, whereas Gléon's incendiary ending portrays the triumph of women's superiority over men's moral degradation. Perhaps this is an example of the phenomenon discussed in the preface to Gléon's work, namely that plays written for publication can be riskier than plays written for the public stage because the author does not worry about how the public audience will receive them. Gouges states in her preface that she did intend for this play to be staged, but published it beforehand in order to test the waters, to "pressentir le goût" (8), and see if her readers would be favorable to its presentation on stage, thus granting her the support of public opinion when she submitted the play to the Comédie Française. Her play was not accepted there, and according to Benoîte Groult, "il semble que les Comédiens de l'illustre Maison aient décidé de refuser systématiquement les pièces de la trop arrogante Olympe" (27).

While her play presents the incorporation of a man into the women's sphere of activity, in her early career as a playwright Gouges was trying to insert herself into a sphere of masculine activity, the public forum of the stage. Gouges' preface to the *Philosophe corrigé* is moreover a declaration of her right to be a playwright and have her works presented on the stage of the Comédie Française alongside the works of male writers. Her argument for equal treatment in the theatrical world is that, "en littérature une femme ne tient pas à son sexe" (4). Gouges rejected the stereotypes of the

woman writer and adopted the “masculine” characteristics of the author. She recognized that women were supposed to be, as Showalter put it, “modest and self-effacing” (108), but refused to accept this role. She stated clearly: “J’ai de l’ambition comme tous les hommes” (8). Gouges confirmed her masculine role by challenging her arch-enemy Beaumarchais to a duel of words: “je dois convaincre le public de ce que je suis et de ce que je puis faire. Il faut pour cela défier un homme de lettres” (6). She explained her reasons for choosing Beaumarchais, who had criticized her work and publicly accused her of hiring a man to write her plays for her. The rivalry was serious, and Gouges believed that she had become a threat to Beaumarchais: “je devenais pour lui un homme redoutable” (11).

Gouges aligned herself with male characteristics and traditions in order to distinguish herself as an author. She discussed the unjust treatment of women in the theater and criticized the Comédie Française for not allowing women’s plays on stage, arguing that women’s plays had been successful in other Parisian theaters. In her letter to the Comédie Française, transcribed in her preface, she claims: “On excuse volontiers les chutes fréquentes qu’y font les hommes; mais on ne veut pas qu’une femme s’expose à y réussir” (8). She also criticized the male playwrights, such as Beaumarchais, who encouraged women writers only insofar as they were able to keep them silenced and under their control. Gouges’ preface essentially constructed a public persona for herself as an Author, endowing herself with the “masculine” qualities necessary to succeed in the theatrical world: ambition, pride and talent.

Gouges also adopted what Mark Rose calls the “discourse of original genius” (6) which had become the primary defining characteristic of quality literary production by the end of the eighteenth century. She criticized the works of male authors as being generally inferior to her own, claiming that most men just imitate other writers and do not create anything new.<sup>9</sup> Gouges claimed originality based on

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the fact that she received no formal education and therefore did not have the opportunity to imitate the works of other (male) writers: “je prétends à l’originalité; oui, sans doute; et l’on ne peut me la disputer, puisque c’est à mon ignorance que je la dois” (5). At the end of her preface, Gouges predicted her future celebrity in the theatrical world: “Quand je parviendrai à une célébrité que je ne puis espérer, on me verra toujours cette même simplicité que j’ai eue avant d’être Auteur” (20). Gouges was successful in forcing her way into the theatrical world by adapting her authorial public persona to the gendered conceptions of dramatic authorship, and by adopting the tradition of literary adaptation as a means of entrance into the debates of the public forum. While other women writers, like Gléon, carefully worked their way into the public forum from the fringes of the theatrical world, Gouges attacked it right at its center, the Comédie Française. Gouges made many enemies in the literary circles of Paris (as well as in politics), but her high-profile and confrontational style created a place for her work — and a name for herself — in the theatrical world.

No matter how limited their options, the fact remains that women writers were writing about the same important topics as their male counterparts, and in similar ways. By appropriating the tradition of literary adaptation in the theater, by writing a play entitled “le *philosophe*” that responded to earlier representations of the character, Arconville, Kinschott, Gléon and Gouges were able to insert their works into the literary debate over the *philosophe*’s place in society. They did not copy or imitate men’s writings, but rather copied and imitated their actions and their authorial techniques. Women wrote theatrical adaptations just as men did, adding their own innovations and their own philosophical ideas, participating in a cultural and intellectual, textual conversation between playwrights of all different backgrounds and beliefs, with different agendas and ideologies, resulting in a dramatic debate that spanned an entire century and was never to be resolved.

What difference did one individual writer's voice make? The last chapter of Diderot's *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*, in which his *philosophe* Ariste deduces that the only way to learn about the Truth is to form a model of the ideal philosopher, may offer a response:

Mais de ce modèle idéal qui est propre à mon état de philosophe, puisqu'on veut m'appeler ainsi, quel usage ferai-je quand je l'aurai? Le même que les peintres et les sculpteurs ont fait de celui qu'il avaient. Je le modifierai selon les circonstances....C'est l'étude des passions, des mœurs, des caractères, des usages, qui apprendra au peintre de l'homme à altérer son modèle, et à le réduire de l'état d'homme à celui d'homme bon ou méchant, tranquille ou colère. C'est ainsi que *d'un seul simulacre, il émanera une variété infinie de représentations différentes qui couvriront la scène et la toile*....Après cet entretien avec lui-même, Ariste conçut qu'il avait encore beaucoup à apprendre. (1281-2, *my emphasis*)

To better understand the role of the *philosophe* in eighteenth-century France it is necessary to study the great variety of different representations of his character, his story, his place in society; to read not only the few plays about the *philosophes* that have made their way into the canon, but the many different plays that imagine his story from as many different points of view as possible. To study only the representations of the *philosophe* written by canonized authors such Destouches, Palissot and Sedaine, is to know only a small part of his story. According to Ann Messenger, "Reading only the giants...we are in danger of over-praising their originality, of failing to recognize their innumerable links with and dependencies on the whole stream of literature

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of which they are a part” (222). A reading of the four plays about the *philosophe* written by women exposes the rich complexity of the debate over the rise of this character in the eighteenth century and hints at the nature of the polyphony of voices that contributed to it.

Very few women writers were able to succeed as playwrights in the eighteenth century, but there were nonetheless many women writers working with the dramatic genres considered the most respected by the critics of the day. These women were able to include their voices and their works in the “stream of literature” that depicted the social climate of their era. By adapting to the conventions of the theater, through the publication and circulation of their alternative representations of the “*philosophe*,” along with positive representations of female characters, Arconville, Kinschott, Gléon and Gouges were able to write themselves into the debates of an otherwise inaccessible critical sphere and create a space for women philosophers and women authors in the literary circles of pre-Revolution France.

## Notes

1. Since the English word “philosopher” does not adequately translate all of the connotations of the French term “philosophe,” I will use the latter in this essay.

2. Habermas recognizes the changes in theatrical writing and the organization of theatrical space going on in the eighteenth century which led to an authentic public theater. In the course of this discussion of the psychological realism and subjectivity of the novel that were crucial to the development of an authentic literary sphere, Habermas comments that theatrical writing was following the same trends: “contemporary drama too became fiction no differently than the novel” (50). However, he cautions that “the theater obtained a public in the strict sense of the word only when the theaters attached to court and palace....became ‘public’” (38).

3. Destouches’ play was extremely successful in France and was translated and adapted into many foreign languages in the eighteenth century, often by women writers such as Elizabeth Inchbald in England and Maria Vittoria Serbelloni in Italy, who may have been attracted by the strong female roles.

4. All of the translations in this collection have been attributed to Arconville in the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale by Paul Lacroix.

5. Another woman writer and translator of foreign plays, Elisabetta Caminer Turra, also translated this play into Italian as part of a collection, but translated the title directly, calling her version *La bottega del chincagliere*. It is interesting to note that another of Dodsley’s works, *The Economy of Human Life*, was published by one eighteenth-century French translator as *Le philosophe indien*, while the other 12

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French translations and the 5 Italian translations listed in the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale translate the title directly (i.e., *L'œconomie de la vie humaine*).

6. Backscheider states that the men who encouraged Philips' translation of *Pompey* may have seen themselves "going little beyond the long tradition of courtly encouragement of wives' and sisters' translations" (76).

7. See Wade's study of plays based on Marmontel's story (83). Wade identifies eleven plays with the title *Le philosophe soi-disant* published in the eighteenth century, nine of which he says can be traced directly to Marmontel's story.

8. While Gouges' shifting of the *philosophe's* role in society from solitary thinker to devoted husband is neither shocking nor an entirely new idea (cf. Destouches' *Philosophe marié*), her work does contain explicit references to philosophical doctrines and political agendas. If read as a political piece, it might prove to be more controversial.

9. Gouges claims originality despite the fact that many of her plays were adaptations of earlier theatrical works. I have shown the ways in which Gouges' *Le philosophe corrigé* is a recycling of earlier representations of the *philosophe* on the French stage. Some of her other plays, while surely original on many levels, were equally inspired by preexisting theatrical characters. Her *Mariage inattendu de Chérubin* is a reworking of Beaumarchais' *Le mariage de Figaro*; her *Molière chez Ninon* follows in a long line of plays about Molière's life that stem from Carlo Goldoni's *Il Moliere*. This process of adaptation was quite common in the eighteenth century, and does not at all discredit Gouges' claims to originality in her writing style and the inventiveness of her plots.

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