

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.

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"

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.

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 *Mercurie galant*. Bernard and L’Héritier 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 François, 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. Polichinel, 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

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 Saintonge'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 Saintonge, 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. Saintonge, *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 Saintonge'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, "Saintonge (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 siècles*, 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.

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 *Didon*, 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 Ladvoat 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 Ladvoat, *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 Saintonge'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

Selected Poems

Introduction

Saintonge's volumes of poetry contain hundreds of pages in an array of genres popular in her day, from short riddles, pastoral lyrics, and drinking songs to longer verse epistles. Many of them were meant to be sung, and some even indicate current opera tunes to which the words have been fitted. I include four poems here, intended not as a representative sample but rather as poems which offer some insight into her self-representation as a writer, her meeting with the king during the height of her success, and her use of the Dido example in a context apart from her opera. Besides the three verse epistles, addressed to three frequent recipients of her poetry, I have included one very brief poem that shows her working in a different verse form. The poems all convey the friendly, witty tone that pervades her lyrics.

2.35–37 Epître A M.L.G.

En lui renvoyant l'Ouvrage d'une Dame qui se plaint de ne pouvoir plus faire de Vers depuis que l'Amour l'a quittée.

Certes, je plains le piteux sort
 De ta dolente Iris, beau Sire,
 L'Amour la quitte, elle est sans reconfort,
 Et de son triste chef maintenant rien ne tire;
 Quant à moi, sans aucun effort,
 A maints travaux divers ma Muse peut suffire.
 Comme Iris, au tendre Enfançon
 Onc n'ouvris de mon coeur la porte,
 La fierté me prêtoit main-forte;
 Si j'ai parlé d'Amour, ce n'étoit qu'en Chanson.
 Non que jadis le jargon d'amourette
 De gentils Preux n'aye écouté par fois:
 Mais du petit Archer pas n'ai suivi les loix,
 Ainsi que faisoit la pauvrete.
 C'étoit son Apollon, il la faisoit rimer
 Au gaillard Printems de son âge.
 Et de meshui rien ne peut l'animer,
 Jeunesse, Amans, tout a troussé bagage.
 Que lui sert-il de se douloir,
 De montrer si peu de courage?
 A son esprit c'est faire voir
 Plus de rides qu'à son visage.

 Sçavoir se passer de beauté,
 Tenir propos pleins d'allegresse,
 C'est conserver l'air de jeunesse
 En dépit de l'antiquité,
 Et braver la triste vieillesse.
 Moi, qui de Cupidon n'ai suivi le flambeau,
 Ains celui du Dieu du Parnasse,
 Point ne me trouves sombre, un feu toujours nouveau
 M'anime d'une noble audace.
 Je sais dans mon Automne ainsi qu'en mon Printems,

2.35–37 Letter to M. L. G.

In sending him the work of a woman who laments not being able any longer to write poetry since Love has abandoned her.

Surely, gentle Sir, I do lament

Your sorrowing Iris's piteous plight:

Love has left her, she is comfortless,

And now can think of nothing more to write;

As for me, without the slightest effort

At varied works my Muse suffices quite.

To Cupid, tender babe, I never did

Like Iris open up my heart's front door,

For Pride lent me a hand and made me strong;

If I have sung of love, It was nothing ever but a song.

Indeed to hear from valiant gentlemen

Their amorous jargon, I did sometimes pause,

But was never subject to the little archer's laws,

As was your friend, poor thing;

Love as her Apollo made her sing

In the merry springtime of her age.

Now she has nothing left to draw upon:

Youth and Lovers have packed their bags and gone.

What good is it to mourn,

With such little strength and grace?

It makes her show more wrinkles

In her spirit than her face.

To know how to get on without one's beauty,

To maintain a merry conversation,

That's a youthful spirit's conservation

In spite of growing old,

And to face bravely age's depredation.

I who never followed Cupid's torch,

But rather served the god of Mount Parnassus,

Do not feel somber; fire always new

Inspires me to bold and noble passes.

For I know how to hear my Muses sing

De ma Muse entendre les chants.
 Il ne me chaut qu'Amour loin de moi se retire,
 Il ne m'a fait ne mal ne bien;
 Ma Muse quelquefois parle de son martyr,
 Et des douceurs de son lien;
 Mais mon coeur n'en dit jamais rien.
 Or sus, pardonne-moi, beau Sire,
 De t'envoyer si fol écrit:
 Puisse-t-il un moment ébaudir ton esprit,
 C'est tout l'effet que j'en désire.

1.269 Madrigal A Madame la Marquise de C-

Pour vous remettre en goût, on vous dit chaque jour,
 Qu'il faut aimer & boire:
 C'est trop de l'un des deux, si vous voulez m'encroire,
 Prenez le vin, laissez l'amour.

2.47-49 Epitre A Madame L. M. D. C.

 Gentille Dame, à qui chacun veut plaire,
 De grace, aprenez-moi comment vont vos plaisirs;
 Car la Déesse messagere
 Fait par trop languir mes désirs.
 On croiroit la voyant s'obstiner à se taire,
 Que son ennemi le Mystère
 A sçu, pour la premiere fois,
 Sur tout ce qui vous touche arrêter ses cent voix.
 Sus donc, hâtez-vous de m'apprendre
 Si dans votre charmant Palais
 Votre labeur s'avance au gré de vos souhaits,
 Ou si ce Dieu malin qui cherche à vous surprendre,
 N'a point fait arriver chez vous
 Quelque étranger aux traits piquants & doux,
 D'un gracieux et beau langage,

In my Autumn just as well as in my spring.
I do not care that Love has fled my hall;
 He did me neither good nor ill.
My Muse speaks sometimes of love's torment still
 And of the sweetness also of his call,
 But my heart says none of this at all.
 So pardon me, dear Sir, who do no worse
 Than send to you this foolish bit of verse.
May it amuse your spirit for a minute;
 That's all the aim that I desire in it.

1.269 Madrigal to Madame la Marquise de C-

To regain your old good mood, people daily tell you so:
 That you must love and drink.
That's one too many, if you want to know what I think;
 Take the wine, let love go.

2.47–49 Letter to Madame L. M. D. C.

Dear Lady, whom all wish to please,
Tell me how you do yourself amuse,
 For the goddess who brings messages
 Makes me wait too long to hear your news.
One would think from her obstinate silence
 That Secrecy, her foe, has managed to
 —For the first time—stop her hundred voices
Regarding anything concerning you.
 Come then, quickly let me know
 If in your lovely Palace
The work advances in the way you wish,
Or if the naughty God who likes surprising
 Has placed upon your dish
A stranger who is sweet and appetizing,
 Of fair and generous speech,

Dido

Translator's Introduction

Mme. de Sainctonge's *Dido* was the first French opera libretto written by a woman, or at least the first female-authored libretto of an opera that was actually performed and documented. Although Dido's tragedy, as told by Vergil in Book IV of the *Aeneid*, was a prolific source of plays and operas, Sainctonge's 1693 *Didon* was the first French opera on that subject. Parfaict's *Dictionnaire* lists several earlier French spoken tragedies about Dido, but Sainctonge's is the first listed as a "tragédie lyrique." Giovanni Francesco Busenello had written a libretto *Didone* for the Venetian opera in 1641; and Henry Purcell's English *Dido and Aeneas* had been performed in England in 1689. There is no evidence that Sainctonge, residing in Paris, would have known either work.⁶¹ Although she is likely to have been familiar with at least one of the earlier French dramatic versions, in adapting the text for opera, she made a number of innovations, which add to the novelty and liveliness of an otherwise well-known story. Thus although an anonymous contemporary verse mocked the theme as hackneyed.

Après luy [Fontenelle], la Sainctonge enfante un autre
Enée. Chacun en rit, sa muse est surannée.

[After him (Fontenelle) Sainctonge gives birth to another
Aeneas.

Everyone laughs about it, her muse is very old],⁶²

61. She might have been able to read an Italian libretto, since her mother knew Italian well enough to publish a translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*; but, as we shall see, her primary model was Montfleury rather than Busenello. Busenello in Act III, scene 8, has Sichaeus's ghost appear to the fainted Dido and sing an aria of condemnation; might Sainctonge have taken the idea for her own parallel scene from Busenello's? If so, she toned down the ghost's language from vehement attack to a milder reproach.

62. *Chansonnier Maurepas* (1693), BnF Français 12622 (MF 33798), 523–24; also cited by Mélése, *Repertoire*, 196. Fontenelle had written *Énée et Lavinie* [Aeneas and Lavinia], which was not a success (first performed 1690).

Dido, Tragedy

Performed by the Royal Academy of Music in 1693.
The words by Mme Xaintonge, and the music by M. Desmarets.
Opera XXX.

Cast of the Prologue

Mars
Fame
Followers of Mars
Followers of Fame
Venus
Followers of Venus [nymphs]

PROLOGUE: THE PALACE OF MARS

Scene 1: Mars, Fame, and their followers

Mars: Make known the new exploits
 Of that earth-conquering hand;
 The more his enemies bring war,
 The more his triumphs grand.
 His clemency alone
 Can his just wrath disband.
 A thousand different peoples
 He has defeated quite.
 If his wishes matched his power,
 The Universe entire
 Would bow before his might.

Chorus: His famous deeds we sing on high.
 Trumpets and drums to our voices reply!

Fame: Of all the famous conquerors
 In eras past I spread the name.

Griselda

Translator's Introduction

Saintonge's *Griselda*, unlike the *Circe* and *Dido*, was written explicitly as a drama rather than a libretto for opera. Fortunée Briquet in her *Dictionnaire Historique, littéraire et bibliographique des Françaises*¹²⁵ and the modern *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française*¹²⁶ suggest that both the "tragedy" *Griselde* and her comedy *l'Intrigue des Concerts* were performed in Dijon in 1714, in the same year and city that they were published in her *Poésies diverses*. However, Charles de Mouhy, writing earlier than either of those two his *Extrait de l'histoire des dames lettrées, qui ont travaillé pour le Théâtre depuis son origine jusqu'en 1780*, declares that neither play was performed "although they should have been."¹²⁷ It is unclear whether this means that they were worthy of performance or whether performances had been planned but were for some reason canceled. The death of the Queen of Spain, wife of Louis XIV's grandson, in 1714 interrupted entertainments in France as well as in Spain and could have stopped a projected performance of these plays; or if they were intended for performance a year or more before their publication,¹²⁸ the death of the Duke of Burgundy in 1712 might have interrupted such plans. Whether or not the plays were performed, they were available to readers.

Dijon was quite active theatrically. The governor of Dijon was the Prince de Condé, a great lover of theater, whose theatrical company was performing in Dijon during the 1690s.¹²⁹ Moreover, Paris-

125. (Paris 1804); *Grand Dictionnaire des femmes de l'Ancienne France*, SIEFAR, <http://www.siefar.org/DictionnaireFB/FBSaintonge.html>

126. Ed. Roman d'Amat et al. (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1985) vol 16, p.91.

127. (Paris 1780) v.3,p.272; <http://www.siefar.org/DictionnairesAutres/CMSaintonge.html>: "elle est plus connue dans le genre de l'Opéra que dans celui du Théâtre François, quoiqu'elle ait publié *l'Intrigue des Concerts* et *La Princesse de Saluces*, qui n'ont point été représentées, quoiqu'elles dussent l'être."

128. Usually plays were not published until they had completed their run in the theater, unless the author did not expect them to be performed at all.

129. Georges Mongrédien, *Daily Life in the French Theatre at the Time of Molière*, trans. Claire Eliane Engel (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1969), 164, 175–76.

Griselda, wife of the Prince of Saluzzo
Isabelle, daughter of Griselda and the Prince, believed to be the
daughter of the Duchess of Florence, the Prince's sister
The Prince of Saluzzo
Hidaspe, former caretaker of the Prince
Phenice, Griselda's confidante
Federic, kinsman of the Prince and wooer of Isabelle
An officer sent by the Duchess of Florence

The Scene is in Saluzzo in the Prince's palace.

ACT I

Scene 1: Griselda, Isabelle

Griselda: I confess it is true that I love solitude;
It hides my anguish and my troubled mood
The grandeurs of Court hold no pleasure for me:
Its nobles and daylight I equally flee.
I speak frankly, Madam, without inhibition:
You'll be less surprised at my current condition
When you know the excess of my pain and disgrace.

Isabelle: How it grieves me to see you with tears on your face!
My Lady, I wish it were within my means
To calm your misery's violent extremes;
My fondness for you grows at every new turn,
As you can well judge by my care and concern.

Griselda: You flatter my grief; your friendship is dear;
But Princess, my fortune's less friendly, I fear.
I once captured the heart of your uncle the Prince;
He has shown only rigor and scorn to me since.
My troubles' narration, both faithful and sure,
Will make you aware of the pains I endure.
When I saw this Hero the very first day,
He was in the woods hunting and had lost his way.