Introduction

In 1729 the celebrated actress Adrienne Lecouvreur died in mysterious circumstances. Some of the events that supposedly took place before and during her final illness are reported by her friend, Mlle Aïssé, in a letter written to Mme Calandrini:

> Shortly thereafter, la Lecouvreur became so ill in the middle of a play that she could not finish... The poor creature went home, and four days after, one hour after midnight, she died.[1]

La Lecouvreur, a poor *creature*, is thus summed up by her "friend," who was not, incidentally, known as *la* Aïssé, although her own history was far from impeccable. An epistolary writer, Mlle Aïssé was meant to have been a Circassian princess, sold into slavery and bought by the French ambassador to Turkey, who brought her back to France to be raised by his sister-in-law. Like her friend Adrienne Lecouvreur, she never married, and she had at least one notorious love affair and at least one illegitimate child. Nonetheless, she retained the honorable title of "mademoiselle."

Why "la Lecouvreur"? Inside the theatre of the *ancien régime* the actress was almost always given the title "mademoiselle," but outside the private world of the stage, the actress was often referred to not with a title but with an article. Even today in France, the *la* is sometimes used, although now it indicates an actress of mythic stature. Among the praises Pierre Cardin lavished on Jeanne Moreau when she was inducted into the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 2001: "We do not hesitate to call her 'LA MOREAU.'"[2]

[1] Charlotte Elisabeth Aïssé, *Lettres de Mademoiselle Aïssé à Madame Calandrini* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1878), pp. 102–3.

[2] "Discours prononcé dans la séance publique tenue par l'Académie des Beaux-Arts... pour la réception de Mlle Jeanne Moreau... par M. Pierre Cardin," www.academie-des-beaux-arts.fr/membres/actuel/cinema/moreau/discours_reception_cardin.htm

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, "la" meant something quite different. It was not an honorable title but a dishonorable substitute. Historically, "monsieur," "madame," and "mademoiselle" were not modes of polite address but titles that indicated a person's place on the social ladder.[3] The *petit peuple* – servants, craftsmen, peasants – had no titles, and the issue of what titles could be assumed by more affluent members of the third estate was sensitive.

Actors and actresses, who came from many different social strata, were often perceived to have adopted titles to which they were not *entitled*. Men usually took a stage name that implied the particule, sometimes a feature of the landscape like Montfleury or Parc, sometimes a place name like Molière. To this they added the title "sieur de," thus assuming the particule and higher status. Actresses, most of whom were married to actors, took the title "demoiselle" or "damoiselle." In the Middle Ages a "demoiselle" was someone married to a "demoiseau," a gentleman, although one who had not been knighted.[4] This may offer a clue as to why actors and actresses adopted the titles they did: they were pretending to nobility, but at the lowest level.

Honoré de Balzac suggests another possible reason actors chose these titles, asserting that the title "sieur" was "accorded by Charles V to the bourgeois of Paris, permitting them to buy seigneuries and call their wives by the fine name of demoiselle."[5] If Balzac has it right, we might infer that the actors were not claiming nobility *per se*, but merely bourgeois wealth sufficient to buy an estate. On the other hand, that particule with its claim to ownership of property and the noble status that went with it suggests a more obvious motive.

In general, men were accorded their borrowed rank. "M. Molière" or "M. de Molière" or "sieur de Molière" were all used to refer to or address the actor–playwright; "le Molière" is unheard of. But mademoiselle Molière was often "la Molière," and the other actresses in the troupe were la Du Parc, la de Brie, la Beauval. There seems to have been a general unwillingness to allow them the use of "demoiselle."

Actors, actresses, and playwrights were all very conscious of titles and how they were employed. Molière, for instance, uses the title "madame" in a very particular way, calling attention to the bourgeois penchant for self-aggrandizement. Madame Jourdain, of course, is the

[3] In referring to a person, one used a title: "le sieur," "la demoiselle," and "la dame." When directly addressing the holder of such a title, one said "monsieur," "mademoiselle," or "madame."
[4] *Trésor de la langue française*, http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm [5] *Ibid.*

wife of a pretentious bourgeois, Madame Pernelle in *Tartuffe* is a pretentious bourgeoise herself, and Madame de Sotenville in *George Dandin* is a member of the aristocracy. Molière is playing on the social significance of titles. In *George Dandin*, for instance, the rich peasant complains of having married a "demoiselle." His in-laws, the Sotenvilles, impoverished gentry, cannot possibly give him the "monsieur," but address him as "son-in-law." When he responds with "mother-in-law," the lady snaps back that he must never use such familiarity with her, but must always address her as "madame." Dandin gets it wrong again, however, addressing his father-in-law as "Monsieur de Sotenville," which produces an instant rebuke: "Learn that it is not respectful to call people by their name, and to those who rank above you, you must say simply 'monsieur.'" They also chide him for referring to his wife as "ma femme."[6]

In the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Molière again puts all of these rules into action. The Jourdains address each other as "ma femme" and "mon mari," and only when Madame Jourdain interrupts her husband's tryst with the marquise Dorimène does she ironically confront him as "monsieur mon mari." The aristocrat Dorante, a count, gives his host and hostess the "monsieur" and "madame," but only in conjunction with their surname; he always addresses them as "Monsieur Jourdain" and "Madame Jourdain," as does Dorimène.

The adoption and careful use of titles is also a feature of Gougenot's *Comédie des comédiens*, probably performed in 1632, very early in the history of the Paris stage.[7] This metatheatrical play spends quite a lot of time on the subject of "condition" or social status. Mademoiselle Boniface and Mademoiselle Gaultier, new members of the troupe, although bourgeois in origin are always addressed as "mademoiselle" without surname and referred to as "ces demoiselles," signifying that in this fictional universe they partake of the "quality" or condition of actor. Their husbands are a merchant, Boniface, and a lawyer, Gaultier, also newly inducted into the company. Gaultier assumes that as a man of the robe he will have a greater claim to the roles of kings than his commercial rival, but Bellerose, the leader of the troupe, disabuses him. In the theatre, unlike the real world, talent and hard work triumph over birth and status; all are equally "messieurs" and "mesdemoiselles." Obviously, titles are of no small importance to the members of the troupe.

[6] Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), vol. II, pp. 469–70.
[7] N. Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens* (Paris: P. David, 1633).

This question of "quality" is addressed largely through the action of the two servants, Guillaume and Turlupin, whose masters want to bring them along into the troupe, but only as *gagistes* or *nécessaires*, paid by the day to play minor roles while they continue to serve. Guillaume and Turlupin have other ideas, however, and refuse to come unless they are included as *compagnons*, sharing members. At issue is not only the money but the quality and the title of "monsieur."

TURLUPIN Monsieur de Beauchasteau, since you seem to have the opinion that my comrade and I should join your troupe, if this would not dishonor the theatre, it seems to me that you would lose no personal honor by giving us the "monsieur."
GUILLAUME Honor that we will receive straight away in our new condition.

Bellerose then asks Gaultier and Boniface to approve the addition to the troupe of "Monsieur Turlupin and Monsieur Guillaume."

GUILLAUME That's the way to talk to men of wit.
TURLUPIN Yes, yes, that's why we're here.
GAULTIER Turlupin told me...
TURLUPIN Monsieur Turlupin.
GAULTIER ... of his intention and that of Guillaume.
GUILLAUME You have trouble pronouncing that word "monsieur"?
BONIFACE Monsieur Guillaume and Monsieur Turlupin, you will be satisfied.

Finally even the Capitaine, the troupe snob, agrees, after Guillaume warns him:

GUILLAUME You must say "monsieur" or we will call you simply "capitaine."

Intimidated by this dreadful threat, monsieur le Capitaine, having vented his earlier anger at these men of vile condition on a lion, two tigers, and three giants, agrees and shakes their hands.[8]

"Monsieur le Capitaine" is a clue to the origin of the infamous "la." As an officer and a gentleman, at least theoretically, the Capitaine enjoys a mode of address that joins a title to a state or profession. One might also say "monsieur le duc" or "monsieur le baron," or even "monsieur le président" to a high officer of the Parlement, a noble "of the robe." Some lower-echelon lawyers and guild masters might be addressed as "maître"; in the rest of the third estate, however, men were often known only by

[8] N. Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*, in *Le Théâtre français au XVIe et au XVIIe siècles*, ed. Édouard Fournier, 2nd edn. (Paris: La Place, 1871), p. 299.

surname and trade or profession, and a wife used the feminine form of her husband's trade. Thus, *le boucher* Blanc and *la bouchère* Blanc, *le boulanger* Du Pont and *la boulangère* Du Pont, *le comédien* Du Parc and *la comédienne* Du Parc. According to the grammarian César Du Marsais, for women the reference to trade or profession came to be understood, leading to the construction: article plus surname.[9] By this theory, *la comédienne* Du Parc would become *la [comédienne]* Du Parc, indicating a social status with no right to any title. In origin, the "la" was a mark of degradation only insofar as all non-nobles were degraded, but as the use of titles by the upper levels of the third estate became more widespread, refusing someone a title would be a way of demeaning him or her. The adoption by actors of the title "sieur" and by actresses of the title "mademoiselle," given the contempt for the profession displayed by the law and the church, made them easy targets for anyone who wanted to underscore their social undesirability.

Georges de Scudéry, who was proud of his own noble status, in his play also entitled *La Comédie des comédiens* at first christens his actresses "la Belle Espine" and "la Beau Soleil," but gives the latter a "mlle" in Act II, possibly because his gentleman character, M. De Blandimare, addresses her as "mademoiselle." Throughout the play, however, the actors address each other using formal titles, conforming to practice inside the theatre.[10] In Corneille's metatheatrical *L'Illusion comique*, titles are not an issue, since using them would give the game away. Molière's actors in *L'Impromptu de Versailles* are perfectly formal with each other, as are most of the actor-characters in most of the plays that feature them. An outsider, like the Baron in Poisson's *Le Poête basque*, might speak of la Beauchâteau, la Des Œillets, and la Valliot, but no actor-character would do so.[11]

Among those who wrote about actresses, Tallemant des Réaux, the gossip-monger, always uses the "la," which stresses the contempt he tends to display for women on the stage. Various aristocratic letter-writers and memoirists – Mme de Sevigné, the duchesse d'Orléans, the duc de St.-Simon – use it, aware of the social implications of "mademoiselle"; madame la duchesse and monsieur le duc were terrific snobs. The low point was reached when a pamphleteer accusing Armande Béjart of every sexual excess, including common prostitution, subtitled his work "L'Histoire de La Guérin"; the article here assumes a whole new set of

[9] César Du Marsais, "Article," *Encyclopédie*, ARTFL, http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu
[10] Georges de Scudéry, *La Comédie des comédiens* (Paris: A. Courbe, 1635).
[11] In Victor Fournel, *Les Contemporains de Molière* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1863), vol. I, pp. 437–9.

implications.[12] The late seventeenth century was also the time when the marquise de Brinvilliers, convicted of poisoning most of her family, was downgraded to la Brinvilliers, and la Voisin, the wife of a bankrupt jeweler, went to the stake for practicing magic and witchcraft on behalf of ladies of the highest ranks.

For the popular view of theatrical women, we need only consult the popular ballads. Jean-Nicolas de Tralage, who kept a notebook and scrapbook in the last years of the seventeenth century, was attracted to gossip and ballads about the theatre. Among them is "Sur les Filles de l'Opéra en 1696," a veritable cascade of "las": la Moreau, la Diart, la Deschars, la Renaud, la Carré, la Desplace, etc., etc.[13] Of course, the *filles de l'Opéra*, the dancers and *figurantes*, had dismal reputations, even worse than those of the women in the other state theatres.

The eighteenth century was less given to the "la," generally using "mademoiselle," even when accusing an actress of unbecoming behavior. Private correspondents like Mlle Aïssé may have still written about la Lecouvreur, but the theatre historians François and Claude Parfaict and Godard de Beauchamps, the gossips Bachaumont and Collé, those like Allainval and Dumas d'Aigueberre who wrote "appreciations," all use some variation of "mademoiselle." Even a police report of 1758, describing a drunken brawl between two stars of the Comédie-Française, uses "sieur" and "mlle."[14]

The reports of the morals police, who kept their eyes on certain actresses of the Comédie-Française, especially Mlles Clairon and Guéant, had their own form of reference that combined the "la" and the "demoiselle." Thus, they almost always refer to their prey as "la demoiselle Clairon" or "la demoiselle Guéant."[15] By the early eighteenth century, "demoiselle" had added to its earlier meanings. According to Furetière (1695), "'demoiselle' is also said ironically and offensively of women who lead a bad life."[16] One might suspect that this additional definition came from the adoption of the title by actresses. The word *fille* was similarly

[12] Cesare Garboli, ed., *La Famosa Attrice* (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 1997). Text in French.

[13] Jean-Nicolas du [*sic*] Tralage, *Notes et documents sur l'histoire des théâtres de Paris au XVIIe siècle*, extraits, mis en ordre et publiés d'après le manuscript original, ed. Paul LaCroix [le Bibliophile Jacob] (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1880), pp. 13–24.

[14] *L'Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et Curieux* No. 249 (September 25, 1878), 550.

[15] See throughout François Ravaisson-Mollien, ed., *Archives de La Bastille*, vol. XII (Paris: A. Durand and Pedone-Lauriel, 1881).

[16] On the other hand, it is fair to note that the majority of orders of reception, legal documents, and police reports collected by Émile Campardon pertaining to the actors and actresses of the Comédie-Française refer to them as "le sieur" and "la demoiselle." *Les Comédiens du roi de la troupe française pendant les deux derniers siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1879).

tainted by such usage as *fille d'Opéra*, meaning a dancer or *figurante* who used the stage of the Opéra to advertise her charms.[17]

As was so often the case, it was Voltaire who revolted, this time against the use of "la." In a letter of December 1735 to M. Thiériot he wrote:

> We are no longer of an age, you and I, where terms that are careless and without respect are agreeable to us. I never speak of M. Thiériot except as a man whom I esteem as much as I like. M. de Fontenelle is not a friend of Lamotte, but of M. de Lamotte. This mark of politeness distinguishes those who use it. The fops of the rue Saint-Denis said la Lecouvreur, and Cardinal Fleury said Mademoiselle Lecouvreur.[18]

Lemazurier in his 1810 *Galerie*, the first attempt to create a biographical dictionary of French actors, quotes Voltaire and absolutely rejects the usage of the "la," which he finds "a crude custom that has never agreed with French urbanity. We have always doubted that the people who say *la Dumesnil*, *la Clairon* have enough education to judge Mlle Clairon and Mlle Dumesnil; the authority of Voltaire confirms us in our opinion."[19]

Like Lemazurier, I have decided to avoid the "la," even though most contemporary French theatre historians use it, because I am aware of what it meant in the past. In modern usage, "la" seems to have been imported from the Italian, where it indicates divadom, a state even beyond stardom, which is wonderful. I shall, however, represent Voltaire, and shake my finger reprovingly. Under no circumstance will I ally myself with Tallemant des Réaux, or the chevalier de Mouhy, or all those anecdotalists and voyeurs who treated an actress as a thing to which a definite article can be applied: the door, the chair, the actress.

On the other hand. . .

Poor Lemazurier, stuck in the nineteenth century, was conscious of all those anecdotes and shady tales and all those prurient readers poised to welcome a book that reprised them. Believing, however, there was gold among the dross, that within all the accounts, memoirs, collections of letters and anecdotes, gossip columns, and other publications of the eighteenth century on the subject of actors and actresses he would find enough valid information to construct individual biographies of all the *sociétaires* of the Comédie-Française from its beginning to the end of the

[17] These women were also known as *les demoiselles de spectacle* and, if they found a sponsor, as *les demoiselles entretenues*.
[18] Voltaire, *Œuvres: Correspondance générale* (Paris: Pourrat Frères, 1839), vol. I, p. 501.
[19] P.-D. Lemazurier, *Galerie historique des acteurs du théâtre français* (Paris: Joseph Chaumerot, 1810), Préface, vol. I, p. xv.

eighteenth century, he decides the project is a worthy one. He assures his reader that "no writer who respects morality and respects himself will permit himself to collect all the offensive trash to be found in the collections; we would never forgive ourselves for having conceived this work in such a way that it would find a place here."[20] That said, and limiting himself to "those things a decent man can write about," he still confronts the inescapable paradox. While "there are and have always been, since the establishment of the theatre, many actors whose conduct merits nothing but praise, as almost everywhere, there are exceptions; and to speak generally, if morals have taken refuge somewhere, it is hard to think that they have chosen the wings of the stage for their asylum." So, although there will be no "disgusting images of license," there will be a few anecdotes, some morsels a little bit *gai*, a little uninhibited, since "the lives of the actors, taken in general, do not make a work suitable for the young," and the book "is destined only for those whose reason is formed."[21]

Lemazurier wants to rehabilitate the theatre and the women who were part of it, wants to avoid careless disrespect, but finally, grudgingly, he has to implicitly admit that "la," and so do I. Used originally to degrade women who were not "born," applied to artisan wives, actresses, criminals, and prostitutes, the "la" also designates the actress an outsider, someone who found no niche in the elaborate construction of social norms that characterized the upper echelons of the *ancien régime*. Not, finally, a "mademoiselle." Victim of the system? Not necessarily. Because actors and actresses, more often than not, have been and still are people who live outside the conventions of society, sometimes because they are excluded, sometimes because they so choose, because they are attracted to the advantages of the margins. The games played there are dicey, but the rewards are great.

Actresses can be gifted with inexplicable talents, they can be different, dangerous, sexually magnetic, sometimes "abnormally interesting," to borrow a phrase from Joseph Roach, who in studying the celebrity actress also coined the phrase "public intimacy" to account for her accessibility, which is illusory, and her appeal, which is part of her stock in trade.[22] Roach also warns us that in approaching celebrity and what he calls "it,"

[20] *Ibid.* pp. vi–vii. [21] *Ibid.* pp. viii–xi.
[22] Joseph Roach, "Public Intimacy: The Prior History of 'It,'" in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 15–16. See also his *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) for a fuller discussion of the constituents of celebrity.

that seductive power to command attention, we must be neither "wholly prurient" nor "unduly prim."[23]

I propose to follow that advice, focusing on the less sensational, testing the stereotypes, challenging the anecdotes, but always aware that some actresses happily displayed themselves and their sexuality on stage and off. They had allure. They had "it." "La Molière," "la Du Parc," "la Lecouvreur," "la Clairon" – all were denied the honorable title that they claimed and cherished, but were given another that also declares: "this is not *an* actress, any old actress, this is *The Molière*, *The Du Parc*, *The Lecouvreur*, *The Clairon*; this is someone extraordinary."

I share something else with my predecessor Lemazurier. Like him I have concentrated, especially in the later part of the book, on Paris and on the actresses who performed in the major theatres: the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the Théâtre du Marais, the Petit-Bourbon and the Palais-Royal, the Hôtel Guénégaud, the Comédie-Française. Although there is certainly information available about the actresses of the Comédie-Italienne, the Opéra, the Opéra Comique, the other fair theatres, and the provincial theatres, I decided to set my sights on the pinnacle, as it were, because the actresses who were most noticed and written about perched there, and because without this limitation the content of the book would have tended toward the broadly general and not have dwelt, as it does, on matters of specific interest to me. I have had no intention to be exhaustive. This is not an A to Z, soup to nuts, everything there is to be said about actresses in France from 1540 to 1750 book. Rather, I have followed my nose and allowed my curiosity to guide me. I begin with the whole question of anecdotes and how to use them in writing about something that is largely characterized by anecdotal evidence, and throughout the book I am attentive to the creation and maintenance of the stereotype of the actress. In Chapter 2 I explore some questions I have long had about the backgrounds of French antitheatricality in classical law and practice and in Roman Catholic thought, especially as applied to actresses. In Chapter 3, I revert to narrative history and summarize what can be known about the women who performed plays and the plays they performed in France before the establishment of the Paris theatres between 1629 and 1631. Chapter 4 includes, along with much of what can be known about the professional and personal lives of actresses in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, a discussion of a special group of plays, the early comedies of Corneille,

[23] Roach, "Public Intimacy."

as evidence of what actresses may have contributed to the burgeoning art of playwriting in the 1630s. In Chapter 5 I look carefully at several actresses who were stars or almost stars and speculate about how stars and celebrity influenced the now flourishing theatre. Chapter 6 is concerned with the art of acting in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries – and here the men get my attention as well as the women. Chapter 7 looks at the first half of the eighteenth century, pointing to changes and trends, though leaving much more work to be done, and finally at the ways in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century actresses have been used and abused in biographies, plays, and films.

In his preface to a collection of essays honoring Peter Thomsen, a pioneer in the field of actor studies, Martin Banham writes that the actor "exists precariously and survives through courage, obstinacy, wit, vanity, charisma, luck and sheer bloody-mindedness."[24] The early modern French actress survived like that while traveling from place to place, bearing and raising children, managing a household, and fending off admirers – or not. To the scorn heaped on her profession was added the additional burden of being a woman who violated most of the limitations women were meant to accept. On the other hand, after 1630, if she "made it," she could live *en bourgeois*, in considerable comfort, even luxury, in the capital, sharing equally in the rewards of her labor. In the eighteenth century, she could hob-nob with the powerful, dress like a princess, and revel in celebrity. Her life was certainly more exciting than most female lives; she went on the stage several nights a week, sometimes to applause and acclamation, sometimes to whistles and boos, but always with the exhilaration and the sense of exceptionalism that marks the relationship of performer and spectator. Insofar as she can be known, she deserves to be known. *Vive La Comédienne. Vivent Les Demoiselles.*

[24] Jane Milling and Martin Banham, eds., *Extraordinary Actors: Essays on Popular Performers. Studies in Honor of Peter Thomsen* (University of Exeter Press, 2004).