Women's Letters in Classical French Comedy

by
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Although in the course of the seventeenth century a number of French women received great acclaim for their literary productions, the prejudice that writing was and ought to remain an exclusively male preserve remained widespread. The reactionary Arnolphe in *L'Ecole des femmes* was far from alone in denouncing the nuns who ran convent schools for teaching their charges to write, but a significant percentage of men seems to have encouraged and appreciated the efforts of the opposite sex. One of the ways to gauge this gradual shift in attitude is to explore the letters composed by female characters in comedy, one of the genres that aimed increasingly at giving a realistic portrayal of contemporary society.[1] It would be instructive to compare such letters in plays written by men with those in plays written by women, but unfortunately there are only a handful of comedies by women in the seventeenth century, and only one of those plays refers to epistolary activity by ladies.

In fact, letters, whether composed by males or females, tend to occur rather infrequently in comedy, in large part because playwrights try whenever possible to bring characters face to face. (Out of a corpus of 90 plays examined, only 26 feature letters; of these 16 have letters written by males and 14 have letters written by females.) Because communication between characters is so vital, especially in drama, letters are a second-best option, to be used only when characters are kept apart. Nearly all letters written by women are addressed to a man, and, in the majority of cases, to the man with whom the writer is in love. The differences between those letters involve the woman's degree of independence, her self-confidence and her social rank. Each letter reveals much about the personality and the values of the writer, and collectively

these documents serve to deepen characterization as well as to advance the action.

Perhaps the most familiar category of female letter writer is the young woman who is imprisoned in her home, either by a tyrannical guardian who aims to force her to marry him or by unfeeling parents determined to marry her off to a man whom she cannot abide. Because the dreaded wedding is imminent, the girl must take prompt action, which frequently means making contact with the young man whom she loves, even if she barely knows him and even though society frowns upon such forward behavior from the female sex. In most of the comedies featuring such episodes the playwright tends to emphasize not the actual content or style of the letters, but rather the ingenious method of delivering them. In Molière's *L'Ecole des maris* (1661), for example, the heroine has no messenger at her disposal and devises the unusual stratagem of getting her despotic guardian to deliver the missive for her. Pretending to feel violently offended by the advances of Valère, who, she claims, has just succeeded in delivering a letter to her, she asks Sganarelle to return it to the sender unopened and to inform the young man of her indignation and contempt. Of course, since Valère never wrote to her, the letter which Sganarelle is transmitting to him is Isabelle's own, in which she informs him of her desperate circumstances and her affection for him, requesting only an assurance that his intentions are honorable. It is significant also that Molière makes Isabelle apologize three times for her unconventional behavior, first to heaven ("O Ciel! sois-moi propice et seconde en ce jour/ Le stratagème adroit d'une innocente amour." II.1. 361-62), then in an aside to the audience, in which she declares that, given her circumstances, "tout esprit bien fait" will excuse her (vv. 366-68), and finally in the letter itself: "Cette lettre vous surprendra sans doute, et l'on peut trouver bien hardi pour moi et le dessein de vous l'écrire et la manière de vous la faire tenir; mais je me vois dans un état à ne plus garder de mesures." While admitting that she had to choose between Valère and despair, she also insists: "Ne croyez pas pourtant que vous soyez redevable de tout à ma mauvaise destinée: ce n'est

pas la contrainte où je me treuve qui a fait naître les sentiments que j'ai pour vous; mais c'est elle qui en précipite le témoignage" (II.5).

The majority of comedies featuring letters by imprisoned women appear prior to 1665. To be sure, the convention of tyrannical guardians who lock up young women persists well after that date, but it is increasingly viewed as hackneyed and non-realistic, and the young women tend to be more aware that they have rights which are being violated and to feel resentful about it. Thus, in Jean-François Regnard's *Les Folies amoureuses* (1704) Agathe offers no apologies for her behavior in taking the initiative with her suitor Eraste or for the astonishing manner in which she manages to deliver her message. (She pretends to go insane, and while claiming to be a musician, she insists that all the men outside her house sing the songs she hands to each of them; needless to say, the paper she gives to her guardian is a musical score, while the paper she hands to Eraste is her letter.) Thus, she begins simply by stating, "Vous serez surpris du parti que je prends," and refers pointedly to "l'esclavage où je me trouve." She is firmly convinced of the legitimacy of her actions: "j'ai cru qu'il m'était permis de tout entreprendre. Vous, de votre côté, essayez tout pour me délivrer de la tyrannie d'un homme que je hais autant que je vous aime" (II. 10).

If the comic value of these letters from imprisoned women lies primarily in the stratagems used for their delivery, the content is a very serious business indeed. That is because letters are among the few instruments at the woman's disposal for letting the lover know of her feelings toward him and for giving him vital information to help him plan her release. Such letters are also tantamount to a declaration of independence, since the prisoner openly rejects the authority of the tyrant and insists on choosing the person who will deliver her.

Such declarations may vary from the charmingly guileless to the dazzlingly clever. The most striking example of the former occurs in Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes* (1662). Compelled by her tyrannical guardian

Arnolphe to denounce her suitor Horace from her window and then to throw a large stone at him, Agnès also manages, unbeknownst to Arnolphe, to include a letter revealing her true feelings and intentions. This letter, in which the naive and ill-educated girl first displays a mind of her own, is all the more surprising to the audience in that until this point we have seen her only in the presence of her guardian and thus know about her only those thoughts that she is able to state in his very forbidding presence.

Agnès' letter (III.4), a model of simplicity and directness, makes three significant points. First of all, Agnès asserts for the first time a sense of self-worth: she is an individual with feelings and needs of her own. The opening words ("Je veux vous écrire") proclaim her need for self-expression, and the realization that her views differ from those of others, especially Arnolphe, adds to her resolve to speak out (for example, "Peut-être qu'il y a du mal à dire cela; mais enfin je ne puis m'empêcher de le dire, et je voudrais que cela se pût faire sans qu'il y en eût"). Secondly, Angés begins to realize that she has been kept in a state of ignorance and stupidity, which puts her at a clear disadvantage in dealing with any man and causes her personal embarrassment. Owing to her ignorance of linguistic and social conventions, she is afraid both of looking foolish and of expressing herself badly (for example, "j'ai peur de mettre quelque chose qui ne soit pas bien, et d'en dire plus que je ne devrais").

Agnès' final point is especially telling because we rarely encounter it in the writings of comic heroines. The girl tells Horace that he has a moral obligation to treat her honorably and not to take advantage of her situation: "je suis si touchée de vos paroles que je ne saurais croire qu'elles soient menteuses. Dites-moi franchement ce qui en est; car enfin, comme je suis sans malice, vous auriez le plus grand tort du monde, si vous me trompiez; et je pense que j'en mourrais de déplaisir." Her instinctive understanding that fairness ought to prevail in relations between the sexes has led her to deeper moral insight than any of the male characters in the play. It is also

instructive to note that Horace is touched by the girl's letter and is delighted to see her intelligence awaken, going so far as to call the attempts to stifle Agnès' mind a "crime punissable" (v. 952). Arnolphe, on the other hand, not only fails to accept the validity of the girl's criticisms, but denounces her in his next soliloquy as an ingrate, a libertine and cunning hypocrite whose innocence has been one continuous sham (III.5).

If the letter in *L'Ecole des femmes* is the spontaneous expression of a simple and artless girl, the masterpiece of ingenuity must be the corresponding epistle in Quinault's *La Comédie sans comédie* (1657, perf. 1655). Isabelle, the heroine of "Le Docteur de verre" (the second of four plays-within-a-play in this remarkable hybrid work), needs to inform her lover Tersandre, whom she has not seen for several days, that her father has resolved to marry her off at once to a wealthy old doctor and that prompt action is needed to save her. But since we are in Spain, where girls are kept under lock and key, Isabelle cannot be sure that her servant Marine will succeed in getting the letter out of the house. Because of the likelihood of interception, she resorts to the expedient of a totally unpunctuated letter that can be read in two contradictory ways: one designed to mollify the father and one to convey the true message to the lover. Thus, when Isabelle's sharp-eyed father discovers and confiscates the letter, he naturally reads it as follows:

> Le peu de soin que tu prends de m'écrire ne m'empêche pas d'être encore sensible à l'amour. Des vertus l'obéissance est celle qui sur toutes me plaît la moins. Heureuse entre les filles est celle qui n'a point de parents qui aiment le bien. On me presse d'épouser un vieux Docteur en vain. J'ai promis de n'y consentir jamais. Sans plus songer, à ma promesse il faut que je satisfasse (etc.).[2]

But Marine, as previously agreed, insists that her master has utterly misconstrued the letter, which, she claims, is intended for Isabelle's sister in a convent. She then proceeds to read it in the following manner:

> Le peu de soin que tu prends de m'écrire ne m'empêche pas d'être encore sensible à l'amour des vertus. L'obéissance est celle qui sur toutes me plaît. La moins heureuse entre les filles est celle qui n'a point de parents qui aiment le bien. On me presse d'épouser un vieux Docteur. En vain j'ai promis de n'y consentir jamais. Sans plus songer à ma promesse, il faut que je satisfasse mon père. (III.2)

Isabelle is more forceful than Agnès in her objection to arbitrary parental authority. She is also more clearly aware of how the society has abused terminology, making self-denial and blind obedience the highest of virtues and love of wealth (on the part of one's parents) the key to happiness.

Perhaps because of the brevity of the intercalated comedy, Quinault does not make Isabelle's letter indispensable to the plot. The father, although claiming to be satisfied with Marine's interpretation of that document, announces that he will give it to another servant to deliver to the convent, and before the girls can devise a strategem to recover the letter, Tersandre enters in disguise, thus making written communication with him unnecessary. Yet, even if the letter episode is deemed structurally superfluous, it turns the often bland and stereotypical role of the heroine into a vibrant personality--clever, determined, articulate, and dissatisfied with the values of her society.

The second category involves semi-emancipated women who, although officially in the care of a parent or guardian, can come and go as they please and receive male visitors in their home. Their letters are straightforward declarations of affection, but not cries for help. They do not feel dependent on the men they love, and they want a relationship based on reciprocal trust and understanding. Such letters are less effective dramatically, since the women have ample opportunity to express their feelings in the beloved's presence; thus, writing is little more than a means to deal with the excessive nature of their love,

which seems to obsess them at all hours. As Dorinde in Françoise Pascal's one-act comedy *L'Amoureux extravagant* (1657) explains, her mistress Cloris spends all her time writing love letters to her beloved Tyrsis, although she may speak to him whenever she wishes. This in turn makes endless work for herself: "Enfin depuis le jour, / Que cette fille a su ce que c'était qu'Amour, / Il faut incessamment que je sois en campagne / Avecque ses poulets" (scene 3). Perhaps because of the brevity of the play, Cloris' latest letter is never read aloud.

An analogous situation exists in Molière's *Le Dépit amoureux* (1663, perf. 1656), where Lucile, having already exchanged numerous gifts and letters with her suitor Eraste, sends him a letter urging him to speak to her father without delay about arranging their marriage and making no secret of her feelings:

> Vous m'avez dit que votre amour
> Etait capable de tout faire:
> Il se couronnera lui-même dans ce jour,
> S'il peut avoir l'aveu d'un père.
> Faites parler les droits qu'on a dessus mon coeur;
> Je vous en donne la licence;
> Et si c'est en votre faveur,
> Je vous réponds de mon obéissance. (I.2. 135-42).

In the scene of the lovers' quarrel, which gives the play its name, Eraste and Lucile return all the presents that each had received from the other and rip up all the other's letters, while commenting acidly about the beloved's falseness. One letter by each of the parties is read aloud, after which they destroy the whole pile. Lucile's letter, probably her first to him, acknowledges her awareness of his love and gives him clear encouragement, without making a direct declaration of her own affection:

> Vous m'aimez d'une amour extrême,
> Eraste, et de mon coeur voulez être éclairci:
> Si je n'aime Eraste de même,
> Au moins aimé-je fort qu'Eraste m'aime ainsi.
> (IV.3. 1345-48)

Considerably less timid is the letter (not read aloud) by Lucrèce in Corneille's *Le Menteur* (1644). At the request of her friend and next-door neighbor Clarice, she arranges a secret tryst outside her window that night for the purpose of learning more about the man to whom Clarice has just been betrothed. But Dorante, who has taken an immediate fancy to Clarice after a chance meeting with the two girls in the Tuileries, takes five acts to discover which one is which, and the ruse, in which both ladies appear on Lucrèce's balcony and only Clarice speaks, serves only to prolong the confusion and plunge Dorante even deeper into deception.

Even more aggressive and, by standards of the period, morally reprehensible, are the forged letters attributed to Mélite by her rejected suitor Eraste in Corneille's very first play, *Mélite* (1633, perf. 1629-30), which originally bore the subtitle *Les Fausses Lettres*. Hoping to destroy the budding romance between Mélite and his erstwhile best friend, Tircis, Eraste composes love letters in which she offers herself to Philandre, a man whom the girl barely knows and who is in any case already engaged to Tircis' sister. The first of the forged letters is utterly out of character for Mélite, but it shows that Eraste understands male vanity, even if he knows far too little about feminine psychology. It begins: "Malgré le devoir et la bienséance du sexe, celle-ci m'échappe en faveur de vos mérites: pour vous apprendre que c'est Mélite qui vous écrit, et qui vous aime" (II.7), adding prudently that they must limit their communication to letters for the time being, because she remains under the control of a mother who prefers another suitor. This bit of shameless flattery has its desired effect on Philandre and sets in motion a series of plot twists, not all of which go according to Eraste's original plan. Indeed, the fact that none of the male characters questions the authenticity of the letters suggests that Eraste's style corresponds to their imagined model of how a woman would write. Eraste adopts an even more outrageous tone in the second supposed letter, making Mélite claim to possess no intrinsic value; her worth is derived solely from the esteem bestowed upon her by a man--precisely the

manner in which Eraste himself prefers to view the female sex:

> Je commence à m'estimer quelque chose puisque je vous plais, et mon miroir m'offense tous les jours ne me représentant pas assez belle comme je m'imagine qu'il faut être pour mériter votre affection. Aussi la pauvre Mélite ne la croit posséder que par faveur, ou comme une récompense extraordinaire d'un excès d'amour, dont elle tâche de suppléer au défaut des grâces que le Ciel lui a refusées. (III.2)

The third category features liberated women who offer their persons or their assistance to men. In some cases they go beyond the dictates of the *bienséances* and their conduct may draw censure from the other characters, although in others their boldness provokes nothing but admiration. Most of these ladies are widows, with total control over their fortunes, and they possess sufficient experience and self-assurance not to be afraid of men. Of all the love letters written by women in seventeenth-century comedies, the most altruistic and the one that most fully shatters the stereotypes is that of Mélisse in Corneille's *La Suite du Menteur* (1645). This time the man is in prison, and the lady is trying to obtain his release. In addition, neither one has ever seen the other, yet the communication directly leads to their falling in love. In fact, although Mélisse has composed the letter on orders from her brother, whose life Dorante has just saved, she considers herself morally obligated to honor the feelings she has expressed.

The letter episode ties in perfectly with the *romanesque* nature of the plot. Dorante is returning to France after a sojourn in Italy when he discovers two men dueling and rushes over to them. He tries to save the life of the wounded man, but the injury is fatal. Meanwhile, the other duellist has taken Dorante's horse and escaped. When three police officers arrive and find Dorante bending over the body of the dead man, they arrest him for murder. Since they are careful to confiscate all his money

and valuables, Dorante risks remaining in prison indefinitely. Cléandre, the surviving duellist, desperately wants to help Dorante but cannot do so openly without serious danger to himself. He therefore turns to his sister, who sends Dorante a purse together with a letter giving the following explanation for her generosity: "Au bruit du monde qui vous conduisait prisonnier, j'ai mis les yeux à la fenêtre, et vous ai trouvé de si bonne mine, que mon coeur est allé dans la même prison que vous, et n'en veut point sortir, tant que vous y serez. Je ferai mon possible pour vous en tirer au plus tôt" (I.2).

Mélisse, delighted to learn from her messenger Lyse that Dorante is so touched by this action that he declares that he loves the lady, though he does not yet know her name and has never set eyes on her. As in Corneille's tragedies, love is not simply a blind passion; it must be grounded, in heroic souls at least, on the loved one's virtue and *générosité*. Thus, Dorante sees falling in love as something he is required to do:

> Un si rare bienfait en un besoin pressant
> S'empare puissamment d'un coeur reconnaissant.
> Et comme de soi-même il marque un grand mérite,
> Dessous cette couleur il parle, il sollicite,
> Peint l'objet aussi beau, qu'on le voit généreux,
> Et si l'on n'est ingrat, il faut être amoureux.
> (I.3. 257-62)

Dorante is handsome and a perfect gentleman and from Dorante's letter (which is not read aloud) of his feelings of love and devotion, similarly believes that an official act of commitment must be honored:

> Il est de mon honneur de ne m'en pas dédire.
> La lettre est de ma main, elle parle d'amour, . . .
> Un tel gage m'oblige à lui tenir parole,
> Ce qu'on met par écrit passe une amour frivole,
> Puisqu'il a du mérite, on ne m'en peut blâmer,
> Et je lui dois mon coeur, s'il daigne l'estimer.
> (II.1. 420-26)

This is also one of the rare instances in which both partners feel a deep and reciprocal obligation to the other, quite unlike the more common scenario (Agnès or Isabelle) where the imprisoned heroine is totally dependent on the hero to rescue her. Indeed, the play ends quite atypically with a *combat de générosité* involving no fewer than four characters.

The offer of assistance by Olimpe in Thomas Corneille's *L'Inconnu* (1675) is not quite as altruistic as that of Mélisse, but still well-intentioned. Although engaged to the Chevalier, she has developed an attachment for the Marquis, the most serious of the numerous suitors of her best friend, the Comtesse. For some time a mysterious suitor has been showering the Comtesse with presents and entertainments that are both lavish and in impeccable taste, and it seems that the dazzled recipient is likely to accept the unknown suitor, once he makes himself known. Olimpe, hoping that a marriage between the Comtesse and the Inconnu would make the Marquis transfer his affection to her, sends a message to the stranger, urging him to reveal his identity without delay, and noting that she has already told the Comtesse a white lie in order to promote the Inconnu's interests. She says nothing of her ulterior motives, although the reason she gives for her intervention is indeed sincere: "Vos manieres pour nostre aimable Comtesse sont si engageantes, que je n'ay pû me defendre d'entrer dans vos interests" (V.1). Since Olimpe does not realize that the mysterious suitor and the Marquis are one and the same, her assistance does not receive the reward she had hoped for, though she does earn the gratitude of the other characters and finds a perfectly satisfactory husband in the Chevalier.

Molière's *Dom Garcie de Navarre* (1661) features the unusual situation of a woman warning her beloved to reform, or else (II.6). Elvire, a princess with the power to choose between two princely suitors, has openly expressed her preference for Dom Garcie, who had earlier rescued her from "tyrants." However, she is so repulsed by his uncontrollable jealousy that she finally sends him a very pointed letter clarifying her feelings toward him. This

unambiguous and frank missive unintentionally provokes a violent quarrel when Dom Garcie comes into possession of only half of it, and jumps to the erroneous conclusion that it is addressed to a rival and contains a betrayal of himself. But, as he will find out several scenes later, his confidante Dom Lope, who handed it to Dom Garcie, actually found the letter lying on a table in the apartment of Elvire's confidant and took it without authorization, whereupon another of Elvire's ladies attempted to retrieve the document; in the process it was torn in two. Although a crestfallen Dom Garcie vows to surmount his jealousy after reading the letter in its entirety, it will take three more acts before he is able to exert adequate self-control and before Elvire agrees to accept him for a husband.

Far more brazen and more imprudent is the letter written by Lucile in Florent Dancourt's *Le Chevalier à la mode* (1687). Led astray by the example of her foolish aunt, Mme Patin, who shamelessly flaunts her wealth and hopes to find an aristocrat for her second husband, this innocent young girl is swept off her feet by a handsome young man whom she meets during her strolls in the Tuileries. Since he passes himself off as a Marquis and she claims to be a rich heiress, both of them think at once of marriage, even though she has as yet withheld her name. Upon learning that Mme Patin has resolved upon marriage with her own aristocratic suitor, the Chevalier de Villefontaine, Lucile makes a direct epistolary advance to her admirer: "Vous avez témoigné tant d'envie de me connaître, que je me suis résolue à satisfaire votre curiosité. Je vous attends dans les Tuileries, où j'ai mille choses à vous dire" (II.10). Lucile is in reality not independent at all; in fact, she is still a minor living with her father. But she hopes that an elopement with a nobleman will force her family to ratify the match and confer on her the independence she desires. The supposed Marquis arranges an elopement in the hopes of securing both the girl and her money, but she is saved at the last minute when her suitor is unmasked as a notorious adventurer, who is also, under another alias, the Chevalier de Villefontaine betrothed to her aunt. Heartbroken and publicly humiliated, Lucile has no choice but to wed the

respectable young man chosen by her father. Violation of modesty and prudence cannot be allowed to triumph in conventionally moral comedy.

At the outer limits of *bienséance* are the satirical missives of Célimène in Molière's *Le Misanthrope* (1666). Although she claims to be writing in order to reassure her suitors of her affection, her real purpose seems to be her joy in composing malicious portraits of them. By sending to each highly unflattering descriptions of his rivals, she puts herself in the comfortable position of denouncing them for being jealous of such hopelessly unworthy competitors. Of course, she can get away with such behavior only so long as the men do not pass around the letters among themselves. When in the last act those epistles are read publicly, thus exposing her true feelings, it causes a sensation and breaks up her salon. However foolish the *petits marquis* may be, even they cannot fail to realize that her letters express, not her passion for the recipients (since in fact she loves none of them), but rather her extreme contempt for them. For example, "Votre Clitandre dont vous me parlez, et qui fait tant le doucereux, est le dernier des hommes pour qui j'aurais de l'amitié. Il est extravagant de se persuader qu'on l'aime; et vous l'êtes de croire qu'on ne vous aime pas. Changez, pour être raisonnable, vos sentiments contre les siens" (V.4). Although no one in the play makes any attempt to justify Célimène's behavior, one might speculate that the letters hint at female resentment of the role imposed on court ladies: look pretty, smile at everyone, try to keep on good terms with all males. Certainly, Célimène feels little esteem for her admirers, or for men in general, though her letters convey more amusement and pride in her wit than moral or social indignation.

The letter that most clearly violates social and moral norms is that of Flavie in Jean de Mairet's *Les Galanteries du duc d'Ossonne* (1636, perf. c. 1632). In an unusually risqué situation for the period, a beautiful young widow and her sister-in-law not only take lovers into their bedrooms (shown onstage), but proceed to exchange lovers when they discover the men's fickleness. Flavie, who

would have remained faithful to the duke, had he not betrayed her first, writes to Emilie's lover, Camille, who has inexplicably transferred his affection to Flavie, whom he barely knows. Furious at the men's outrageous behavior, Flavie decides, not to banish both of them from her presence, but to take a different sort of revenge by inviting her new swain to spend the night with her: "Si vous m'aimez autant que vous voulez que je le croie, rendez-vous cette nuit sous ma fenêtre, . . . ne vous étonnez pas de ma résolution, j'ai des raisons qui me font précipiter le terme de notre entrevue" (V.6). Though the last sentence is ambiguous, at the very least, Camille is too eager to satisfy his amorous desires to suspect a trap. In any event, Camille's appearance at the rendezvous leads to a series of farcical adventures, for Emilie has given a similar assignation to her new lover, the duke, for the same hour, and in the darkness Flavie mistakes the duke for Camille, while Emilie, overhearing voices in her sister-in-law's room, comes out of her own room with a torch to discover Camille in the hallway, still waiting for Flavie. When all is revealed, the four young people appear to accept the formation of a ménage à quatre! Although the behavior of all four characters consistently violates the *bienséances*, Flavie's letter does not lack justification. It was Camille who wrote to her first, announcing his love, and she has ample reason to be suspicious of his intentions, since she is aware of Camille's affair with her sister-in-law, which in turn provoked her brother to hire assassins to slay the youth--an attack from which Camille nearly died. Although she believes, from observing Camille's eyes, that he does indeed love her, she wonders whether his real motive is vengeance, and she does not fear to use the same tactics that the men have used against her: letters, ruses, and aggressive pursuit.

The role of women's letters becomes more fully clear when those documents are compared to letters composed by men in comedies of the same period. The latter group is far more heterogeneous, consisting in large part of information letters (for example, one father writing to another), letters of introduction or recommendation, even business letters. Love letters are infrequent, in part

because male characters, enjoying greater mobility than their female counterparts, have more opportunities to express their feelings in person. Such letters are rarely read aloud, since the playwright wants to suggest that the style and sentiments do not depart from standard conventions; the most amusing exception is in *Le Dépit amoureux* (IV.3), where Lucile reads Eraste's first declaration of love to her and then proceeds to rip it up. Even when the letter contains information about plans to effect the girl's escape from her tyrannical father's clutches, as in Racine's *Les Plaideurs* (II.3), the contents seem too obvious to require its being read out loud. Men's letters reflect the wider range of occupations and interests available to their sex; they also reveal far less of the writer's personality, at times nothing at all. Women's letters are introduced when the writer has resolved to assert her autonomy and to take greater control over her own destiny. In addition, the letter written by a woman to a man is a kind of personal commitment, revealing the writer's intimate secrets, giving the recipient a special claim over her, and, most importantly, asserting the writer's dignity as an individual who sees herself as not a whit inferior to men. Thus, these documents are both more intimate and more individualized, and they tend to inspire admiration for the lady's intelligence and spirit, which is not the audience's usual response to letters written by men.

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Notes

[1]Although I have found no previous studies that focus on letters in French comedy, there is no shortage of fine work on the letter in general during the seventeenth century. Notable studies include: Bernard Bray, *L'Art de la lettre amoureuse, des manuels aux romans (1550-1700)* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1967); Fritz Nies, "Un genre féminin?" in *Revue de l'histoire littéraire de la*

France 78 (1978): 994-1003; Gabrielle Verdier, "Gender and Rhetoric in Some Seventeeth-Century Love Leters" in *Esprit créateur* 23 (2) (1983): 45-57. Pamela Stewart's excellent article on letters in the comedies of the eighteenth-century Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni uses a very different approach from mine, concentrating on the stage business (often comical) associated with writing, reading, interpreting, delivering, and mixing up letters: "Le lettere e la scena. Il costume e l'attività epistolare nelle commedie di Goldoni," in *Quaderni veneti* 5 (1987): 81-119.

[2]I have used my own (unpublished) acting edition, with modernized spelling and punctuation, which makes the differences between the letters easier to read. The student production of "Le Docteur de verre" which I directed in 1987 was probably its first performance in the New World.