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Actresses Redefining Theater and Femininity in Eighteenth-Century France

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ACTRESSES REDEFINING THEATER AND FEMININITY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

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Published in 1798 and 1800, the memoires of Hypolite Clairon and Marie-Françoise Marchand Dumesnil relate the experiences and values of individuals who lived through massive social and cultural, and eventually political, changes. How and when these two women felt the need to adhere to society's standards in comparison to those instances when they were confident enough to assert themselves illuminates the ways in which developing a public persona could open up a space for women to stretch the boundaries of feminine self-fashioning. This space was not unlimited and may have depended on actresses making concessions to societal expectations. It was nearly impossible to assert both feminine morality and professional knowledge simultaneously. Clairon and Dumesnil both diverged from society's expectations of actresses, the former by being too often in the spotlight off-stage, the other not often enough. Their acting styles correspondingly diverged, yet their popularity as performers remained comparable. The following comparison of two women in almost identical circumstances who nevertheless maintained starkly different views and priorities will reveal the possible paths open to actresses, but also their limitations.

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Introduction

A ghost story, a rant about Shakespeare's Richard III, comments on makeup, a personal letter to an ex-lover, notes on various theatrical roles, a fight with a lover's wife— after having lived through one of the most massive revolutions in history, these are the memories and thoughts that seventy-six year-old Hypolite Clairon felt needed to be recorded for posterity in her memoires. She also included attacks on her professional rival, Marie-Françoise Marchand Dumesnil. The latter, then eighty-seven years old, responded by commissioning her own memoire. Published in 1798 and 1800, these two works relate the experiences and values of individuals who lived through massive social and cultural, and eventually political, changes.[1] Clairon and Dumesnil wrote these memoires with the aim of defending their reputations to society and posterity (and in Dumesnil's case, against Clairon), as well as to record their experiences and to articulate their views on the theater and acting methods.

Actresses were anything but representative of French women during the Enlightenment and Revolution. As performers they faced legal, social, and religious sanctions, and as women they were politically and legally dominated by men. However, the examination of the edges of a civilization reveals the boundaries of what that society will tolerate as well as illuminate its core values and concerns. How and when these two women felt the need to adhere to society's standards in comparison to those instances when they were confident enough to assert themselves illuminates the ways in which developing a public persona could open up a space for women to stretch the boundaries

[1] Clairon's Memoires were self-published in 1798, and then translated into English and printed in London in 1800. These are the editions I have worked from. Dumesnil's memoires were printed shortly thereafter under similar circumstances. Galerie de Bois reprinted Clairon's memoires in 1822. In 1823 the same series reproduced Dumesnil's memoires, and this is the edition I used. Slatkine Reprints in Geneva reproduced both of these editions in 1968.

of feminine self-fashioning. This greater degree of freedom also enabled these actresses to impact broader social and cultural changes. Nonetheless, this space was not unlimited and may have depended on actresses making concessions to societal expectations. These actresses' claims to respectability may have been based on adherence to feminine ideals or their authority as professionals; however, the status of women and the ideals of womanhood during their lives made the two nearly mutually exclusive. It was nearly impossible to assert both feminine morality and professional knowledge simultaneously. How did these women navigate their femininity and professional convictions?

Born to an unmarried village girl, Clairon's humble beginnings and strong personality led to an unusually high degree of criticism from the public during her life and after. From present-day Belgium, Clairon and her mother made their way to Paris. She debuted at the Comédie Italienne on the 8th of January 1736, but then left to work in smaller cities and gain more experience acting tragedy before she received approval to work for the Comédie Française on the 10th of September 1743.[2] She reportedly carried on many affairs throughout her lifetime. The most famous liaison, with the count of Valbelle, lasted nineteen years. Whatever her personal life, Clairon devoted herself to the study of her roles and consistently campaigned both for her own career and the well-being and autonomy of her troupe. She employed new acting techniques and promoted changes in theatrical production that still influence how we experience drama today. After retiring from the stage, she joined Voltaire at Ferney and then lived in Germany until she moved back to Paris during the Revolution.

[2] Edmund de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Cliaron: D'après ses correspondances et les rapports de police du temps* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1890), 1, 14, 54.

Mlle Dumesnil had similarly humble origins, but her parents were married. While she herself, like Clairon, remained unmarried, she lived with an actor, Grandval, for over thirty years and remained in Paris for the majority of her life. Although she remained very popular while on the stage, a much less eventful private life and reactionary attitudes toward theatrical innovation may have impacted how she was remembered. Unlike Clairon, whose name appeared in the *New York Times* several times seventy years after her death and is the subject of several biographies, Dumesnil has faded from memory except as a foil to Clairon.[3] Additionally, Clairon left behind portraits, letters, and a large archive of commentary and reporting on her performances, personal life, and causes while Dumesnil left a significantly reduced paper trail. A quiet life, a backward-looking mindset, and the fact that she had her memoires ghost-written by a man have led to significantly less research on her and her experiences. The ghostwriter, Antoine-Alexandre Barbier, wrote in a manner that reveals that he was writing on her behalf, under the name M. Dussault. Nonetheless, Dumesnil authorized the ghostwriter and sanctioned everything he wrote, and because of her influence on the eighteenth-century stage, her memoirs remain worthy of attention. More than a foil to Clairon, Dumesnil's life demonstrates the diversity of lifestyles available to actresses.

These two actresses experienced similar challenges, but reacted very differently. Of the two, Mlle Clairon remains the better known. She held more progressive views on acting methods, participated in theater reforms, and, perhaps most importantly, was followed by scandal nearly her entire life. Mlle Dumesnil lived a much more conventional life and had more traditional ideas about her job in the theater. Both women

[3] "Mlle Clairon," *New York Times*, November 2, 1873; "Hippolyte Clairon," *New York Times*, June 30, 1878, both of these articles may have been reprinted from a contemporary literary magazine published in London, *Temple Bar*; Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France*, 198.

were praised by famous philosophes, but Clairon had more personal contact with both Diderot and Voltaire. Nonetheless, it is difficult to know who was actually the more popular actress while they lived. Dumesnil joined the Comédie Française six years before Clairon, and remained on that stage a full decade after Clairon retired. The reasons for the disparity in continued popularity seem to have more to do with the bold actions Clairon took outside the theater than inside of it. Their stated reasons for the dispute, however, are entirely professional- over roles, costumes, and styles of acting.

This thesis will first examine the historiography of theater and women, particularly famous women, of the eighteenth century. Then I will examine the actresses' views and impact on the theater throughout their careers. The third section assesses how these women, who lacked the social standing of queens and official mistresses but also the semi-anonymity of female authors of the time, interpreted their own femininity. Clairon claims to have intended her memoires for publication ten years after her death, but as a result of the "accident" of their being published in German, she released her own edition in French.[4] Her stated intent—to provide guidance for those who seek theatrical fame—is deferentially framed. "It is the wish of many that I should write my sentiments relative to an art which I have long professed."[5] She mentions how different writing is from public speaking, but states that her "compliant disposition" requires her to fulfill the request of her friends.[6] However, her language is often assertive, despite occasional nods to humility. In addition to criticizing her female colleagues, quite frequently she expresses rather strong opinions about male actors and freely asserts her professional

[4] Hyppolite Clairon, *Mémoires d'Hyppolite Clairon et Réfelxions sur l'Art Dramatique,* Vol 1. (Paris: Buisson, 1798), i.
[5] Hyppolite Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon, The Celebrated French Actress; With Reflections Upon the Dramatic Art: Written by Herself,* vol 1 (London: O. G. and J. Robinson, 1800), 33.
[6] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon,* vol 1, 34.

views without much reference to other authorities. Convention resurfaces, however, when her relationships with men come into the narrative. What emerges is a sliding scale of rebellion: the closer her actions and views are to the stage, the less she concerns herself with conforming to society's expectations; actions and views taken outside the world of the theater, meanwhile, are framed in much more traditional ways. Dumesnil, conversely, remains consistently orthodox, and her memoire provides a consistent counter-point to Clairon's. Their rivalry began with Clairon's debut at the Comédie Française, they competed for leading roles from that point on.[7] Clairon and Dumesnil both diverged from society's expectations of actresses, the former by being too often in the spotlight off-stage, the other not often enough. Their acting styles correspondingly diverged, yet their popularity as performers remained comparable. The following comparison of two women in almost identical circumstances who nevertheless maintained starkly different views and priorities will reveal the possible paths open to actresses, but also their limitations.

[7] Jack Richtman, "Mademoiselle Clairon: actress-philosopher" in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. 154, bk. 6 of *Transactions of the Fourth International Congress on the Enlightenment* (Oxford: the Voltaire Foundation, 1976), 1813, 1816.

Chapter 1

Historiography- Setting the Stage

France in the second half of the eighteenth century underwent considerable social and cultural change. Theater in particular underwent a revolution in writing, acting, and production; all of these changes were based on theoretical developments surrounding the aesthetic and moral character of the theater. Actresses were key players in this debate. What theater meant and the function it performed in French society, while hotly and very publicly debated throughout the eighteenth century, only occasionally attracted the attention of scholars until the late 1980s and 1990s, with the rise of cultural history. Simultaneously, debates about women's nature and their place in society became increasingly urgent in tone. Historians have outlined and interrogated these developments, but have only rarely examined their intersections.

In 1926, Max Aghion wrote one of the first comprehensive surveys of the Paris theaters and their pasts, *Le Théâtre à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*; much of the work that followed emphasized the political aspects of the theater.[8] Marvin Carlson's vast array of work ties the repertoire of plays produced before and during the revolution to their socio-political setting as well as broader aesthetic theoretical movements.[9] Paul Friedland's *Political Actors: Representative Bodies & Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* traces how theater and its practice went from paralleling Absolutist political

[8] Ronald W. Vince, *Neoclassical Theatre: a Historiographical Handbook* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 97, 99.

[9] Please see: Marvin A. Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966); Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Carlson, *Voltaire and the Theatre of the Eighteenth Century* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998).

representations to coexisting almost inextricably with revolutionary politics.[10] Other works placed greater emphasis on the social aspects of the theater. *Le Théâtre et le Public à Paris de 1715 à 1750* (1972) provides an excellent statistical guide to the make up of eighteenth-century audiences, and the rhythms of the theatrical season as well as daily life.[11] In *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture 1680-1791,* (1999) Jeffrey S. Ravel changes the historical lens from individuals to the diverse crowds which impacted public opinion in order to examine how rather rowdy audiences reflected and commented on social and political tensions in the Old Regime. These same crowds acted as the judge of both the plays and how actors presented them.[12] These studies on the politicization of theater and its social context provide an important backdrop to the stories these memoires tell. However, the actual role these actresses played in the evolution that theater underwent throughout the eighteenth century has received little attention.

Due to their unorthodox lifestyle and restricted social status, no one would attribute a 'civilizing' influence to actresses, although theater's stated purpose was stabilizing "catharsis."[13] They nonetheless maintained a visible and powerful position in society similar to salonnières and queens. Yet their influence has only recently begun to receive adequate historical investigation. Virginia Scott's *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France* covers actresses from their first appearance on the French stage, focusing on the period from 1630 to 1720 throughout which actresses confronted numerous

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[10] Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3.
[11] Vince, *Neoclassical Theatre,* 99.
[12] Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).
[13] Aristotle, and S. H. Butcher, *Poetics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 35.

challenges to achieve the fame, wealth and autonomy offered by the stage. The theater of the seventeenth century was largely composed of acting families, many of the performers were married to other thespians, and men and women governed it under astonishingly equitable and republican terms. By the middle of the eighteenth century, actresses came from a greater variety of backgrounds and moved throughout the various levels of society more easily; many remained unmarried and may have enjoyed more wealth than before. However, the crown, through the four Gentlemen of the Chamber, wielded increasing power over the management of the theater, especially limiting actresses' voices.[14] Scott notes that although rumors had always followed actresses, slander remained difficult to verify. She also delineates a trend toward open libertinism throughout the eighteenth century.[15] This course of action aligned with the general stereotypes that surrounded the theater and actresses in particular. Scott is particularly sensitive to the additional barriers these stereotypes created, but focuses mostly on the actual experiences of women. Lenard R. Berlanstein scrutinizes the popular reputation of actresses in *The Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle.* He posits a connection between the perception of actresses and the political stability of the time. Throughout the eighteenth century, some actresses were mistresses of the wealthy and powerful, but as the century progressed, and the amount of celebrity these women enjoyed increased, so did anxieties about the moral deterioration and ultimate stability of society.[16] "French culture gave actresses greater prominence than elsewhere at the same

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[14] Virginia Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France: 1540-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 246.
[15] Ibid, 249.
[16] Lenard R. Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin De Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), 57-8.

time that it withheld respectability more resolutely."[17] Berlainstein's work reveals what expectations and prejudices theater workers like Mlles Clairon and Dumesnil faced; however, it leaves out actresses' reaction to their circumstances. Lauren Clay has begun to fill this historiographical gap by examining the theater's commercial nature on an empire-wide scale. Her recent book, *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* examines the "lived behaviors" of a widely diverse population, which contributed to the establishment of a distinctive cultural and commercial French theater.[18] She builds on Max Fuchs' framework in *La Vie Théâtrale en Province au XVIIIe Siècle* (1933), which agues that the French Revolution formed the capstone of commercialization, rather than the crucible of political tensions, in the French theater.[19] While gender is not Clay's main topic, she successfully incorporates any difference – or lack-there-of – between men and women's experiences in the eighteenth-century theater industry.

Until recently, the Enlightenment retained its reputation for increasing freedom and civil rights, and was heralded as "the century of women," during which they entered intellectual life and began their trek to social and political rights.[20] However, in the late 1980s historians called this narrative into question. In *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution*, Joan Landes controversially argues that, rather than the old patriarchy of the early modern era falling away to the force of individual rights, in the last half of the eighteenth century the old system was replaced by gendered spheres of

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[17] Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, 1.
[18] Lauren Clay, *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 6-7.
[19] Vince, *Neoclassical Theater, 97-8.*
[20] Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex: Woman's Nature in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

influence, which placed women in a no less repressed state.[21] Landes in turn has been critiqued for "confusing the Habermasian category of the bourgeois public sphere with the 'separate spheres' of the nineteenth century" and ignoring proto-feminist voices.[22] *In The Moral Sex: Women's Nature in the French Enlightenment,* Lieselotte Steinbrügge interrogates "the tension between, on the one hand, the Enlightenment aspiration to emancipate a (female) sex maintained in ignorance and, on the other, the 'objective necessities' of the bourgeois economic order, which required women to adopt the role of housewife and mother."[23] These critiques of the Enlightenment's role in the history of women has led to an increasingly nuanced and varied analysis of the intellectual and cultural developments and their impact on women, especially elite women.

Sarah Maza's book *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* critiques Landes' work as well. Maza emphasizes the importance of the private individual to the Habermasian public sphere, and echoes the common critique of Habermas' use of "bourgeois" as inapplicable to eighteenth-century France.[24] Maza also re-emphasizes the necessity of critically-thinking, private citizens to the creation of an oppositional public sphere, which undermined the Ancien Regime throughout the last half of the eighteenth century. Appeals to "public opinion," found within the judicial memoirs that form the basis of her own, work bolster Habermas'

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[21] Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 2.
[22] Leonard Berlanstein, "Women and Power in Eighteenth-Century France: Actresses at the Comédie Française" in *Visions and Revisions of Eighteenth-Century France* ed. Adams, Christine, Jack Richard Censer, and Lisa Jane Graham (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 158.
[23] Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*, 4.
[24] Sarah Maza, "Women, the Bourgeoisie, and the Public Sphere: Response to Daniel Gordon and David Bell," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Autumn, 1992), 937.

proposed historical developments.[25] She does reaffirm Landes' argument that anxiety surrounding women's public voices and actions grew as the Revolution approached.[26] While acknowledging competing appraisals of femininity, Maza points out Rousseau's exceptional impact on eighteenth-century readers.[27] Landes and Maza reaffirm the inescapability of Rousseau's misogynist views for any research into Enlightenment intellectual and cultural developments. In light of how his views were later cemented in the Napoleonic Code, this emphasis may require nuancing, but cannot be done away with.

One of Landes' main points of departure from Habermas' analysis lies in the importance of the salon.[28] The eighteenth century saw the heyday of literary salons; in this environment women, most famously Mme Necker and Mme Geoffrin, hosted and directed the conversation of the most important thinkers of the age. Dena Goodman, in *The Republic of Letters* (1994), succinctly explains the situation of women in these salons: "As governors, rather than judges, salonnières provided the ground for the philosophes' serious work by shaping and controlling the discourse to which the men of letters were dedicated and which constituted their project of the Enlightenment."[29] The center of intellectual production moved in the 1760s from the academic, royally sanctioned, academies to the salons, which then enforced *sociabilité* and *politesse*, until the late 1770s, when the men who attended the salons began to feel the civilizing

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[25] Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France*. Studies on the History of Society and Culture; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 10-15.
[26] Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs*, 315.
[27] Maza, "Women, the Bourgeoisie, and the Public Sphere," 945; *Private Lives and Public Affairs*, 171.
[28] Please see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press: 1991).
[29] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: a Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1994), 53.

influence of women was no longer necessary. Throughout this same time, the discussions that took place within the Salons moved from aesthetic to political matters.[30] Her work agrees implicitly with Habermas by emphasizing the importance of the Salons, despite their private nature, in the formation of the public sphere and the trajectory of its growth, and explicitly in her fourth chapter, "Into Writing: Epistolary Commerce in the Republic of Letters," in which she demonstrates how the salons extended their reach to international levels via correspondence. In addition to conveying news, serving as introductions and relating private concerns, *philosophes* co-opted the epistolary form to generate very public debates, for example, Rousseau's *Letter à D'Alembert.*[31]

In *The Other Enlightenment* (2001) Carla Hesse expands the scope to include less well-known women by focusing on women authors.[32] She refutes arguments that rest on a purely masculinist definition of the public sphere, which posit that French women must chose between their womanhood and their claims to political and social equality with men.[33] Instead, Hesse highlights the successful and ongoing struggles of modern women to prove their capability, and thus their equality, while maintaining their gender-specific

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[30] Goodman, *The Republic of letters*, 168.
[31] Ibid 143, 150, 152.
[32] For the history of women of this period more generally please see Diane E Boyd, and Marta Kvande, eds. *Everyday Revolutions: Eighteenth-Century Women Transforming Public and Private* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008); Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791,* (Durham: Duke University Press 2001); Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1998); Olwen H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 1989); Tessie P. Liu, *The Weaver's Knot: The Contradictions of Class Struggle and Family Solidarity in Western France, 1740-1914,* (Ithica: Cornell University Press 1994); Tracey Rizzo, *A Certain Emancipation Of Women: Gender, Citizenship, and the Causes Celebres of Eighteenth-Century France* (Susquehanna University Press, 2005); Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Samia I. Spencer, ed. *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (Indiana University Press, 1992); R. Mc Nair Wilson, *Women of the French Revolution* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1936).
[33] Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern.* Princeton University Press, 2003, xiv; she specifically cites Joan Wallah Scott's *Only Paradoxes to Offer.*

interests.[34] This struggle, according to Hesse, began with women writing. She elucidates how the limits placed on women shaped their writing, how different forms were more easily claimed by women and how representations within these forms emerged differently from other, more direct, literary styles. In particular, the novel became a vehicle for women's philosophical views. Hesse posits that women's public voices shifted during the Revolutionary period from literal voices in the form of salonnières and fishwives, to metaphorical voices expressed in the written word. This shift distinguishes women's path to modernity from men's; women, as an "other" according to Enlightenment philosophy, became modern via their public published voices.[35] At the same time, publishing and capitalist endeavors were open to French women on different terms than men – especially after the Napoleonic Civil Code – women needed their husband's permission to take the next step in modernization from self-determination to having a public voice though publishing their writing.[36] Mlles Clairon and Dumesnil occupy a particular place in this story, existing both as public presences and published authors. As mentioned above, however, their memories have not often been preserved in the historical record, except perhaps Clairon as a scandalous arch-type. Both her nineteenth- and twenty-first century biographers rely heavily on anecdotal evidence and focus on her personal relationships rather than her professional accomplishments.[37]

The world exposed by all of this research lays out the general path of change throughout the eighteenth century. What work remains undone, however, is an investigation showing how the people creating these changes experienced them.

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[34] Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment*, xiv-xv.
[35] Ibid, xii.
[36] Ibid, 77.
[37] Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France*, 275.

Memoires such as those written by the actresses Clairon and Dumesnil present historians with the opportunity to recapture their experiences and perhaps understand better how and why these developments happened as they did. I will show how the attempts of both actresses to conform to eighteenth-century expectations of women and the assertive actions and opinions that separated them from those standards demonstrate how these women negotiated the changing meaning of both the theater and femininity to conform to their own viewpoints. Many of the sources on actresses are anecdotal, including those that they provide themselves, popular reports, and official records. Virginia Scott argues that a historian must "judge the information it yields, dismiss what is clearly impossible or improbable."[38] However, such a method does not answer the questions I wish to ask of these memoires. There are several improbable stories in these memoires; why the actresses wanted them to be believed lies at the heart of my inquiry into their self-portrayal as women. An accurate recounting of their lives requires a critical view of the memoires and the anecdotes they contain. As the monarchy and court's grasp on political and cultural power weakened, space opened up for individuals like Mlle Clairon to voice their concerns and beliefs about the theater. As troupe members of the Comédie Française, these women shaped how the public experienced theater; this position of power simultaneously made actresses symbols of femininity, and targets for criticism.

[38] Ibid, 11.

Chapter 2

Theatrical Technique, Method, and Professionalization

Nightly performances at the Comédie-Française took place in a rectangular space, rather than curved as we see today, lined with three stories of private boxes. Where Orchestra seats occupy space in theaters today, in the eighteenth century (mostly male) patrons paid twenty *sous* (about a laborer's daily pay) for standing room in the parterre. Until 1759, high-ranking theater-goers could even be seated on the stage, although this practice interrupted both the *vraisemblance* and, occasionally, the performance.[39] The standing members of the audience and those in the boxes alike spent the performance socializing, circulating and talking with friends; the parterre audience often heckled the performance or commented on the spectators seated above them.[40] Shows lasted between three and four hours, lighted by oil lamps and tallow candles.[41] In addition to cues from the text, scenery and props aided conveyance of the play's meaning.[42] In adherence to tradition, performers used exaggerated gestures and inflection.[43] While theatrical practice increasingly gravitated towards realism throughout the eighteenth century, the experience of attending the theater bore little resemblance to what we witness today.

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[39] Ravel, *The Contested Parterre*, 8-9, 30, 53, 71. Also, Enlightenment architects had already begun designing stadium-style seating, please see Pannill Camp, "Theater Optics: Enlightenment Theater Architecture in France and the Architectonics of Husserl's Phenomenology" in *Theater Journal* 59, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 615-633.

[40] James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1, 9.

[41] Ravel, *The Contested Parterre*, 14; Johnson, *Listening in Paris,* 11.

[42] Renaud Bret-Vitoz, *L'Espace et la Scène: dramaturgie de la tragédie française, 1691-1759* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, SVEC 2008:11), 21; Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique de Tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 41-86; Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 22.

[43] Angelica Goodden, *Actio and Persuasion Dramatic Performance in Eighteenth Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 48-51.

Nonetheless, many of the changes that produced the theater we experience today have their roots in French Enlightenment theater. The debates and new practices that surfaced during this period ultimately led to the development of the "fourth wall" – the imaginary space that separates the actors and play from the spectators, – historically accurate or convincing sets and costumes, the high level of influence and visibility performers enjoy, and the rigorous training they often undergo today. Clairon's views on education, makeup and costuming, and professionalism contributed to these developments, while Dumesnil's views and practices worked to maintain old standards. Actors in France under the Gallican Church and monarchy struggled under severe legal and social sanctions. Authorities associated their profession with dishonesty and duplicity, citing immoral content and representation or embodiment of characters as dishonest or inappropriately mystical, and the putting forth of one's body for profit was used as the moral basis for legal and social censure.[44] These limitations restricted Clairon, Dumesnil, and all of their colleagues. To a respectable, upper-class woman, "to be compared with an actress was as insulting as being likened to a prostitute" and many eighteenth-century fictional works promoted this connection.[45] Across Europe, actors and actresses alike, regardless of their actual conduct, lived under suspicions of sexual depravity.[46] Without formally excommunicating them, the Church placed theater workers under a ban that prevented them from receiving communion and last rites, and from entering into marriage. Additionally the state prevented actors from holding office, witnessing in court, inheriting or bequeathing property, or serving in the military. While

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[44] Friedland, *Political Actors*, 5, 18-22.
[45] Morag Martin, "Casanova and Mlle Clairon: Painting the Face in a World of Natural Fashion," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 7, no. 1 (March 2003): 60-61.
[46] Please see Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

the Comédie Française was royally sanctioned, it did not hold the status of an 'Academy,' which would have ameliorated actors' civil situation.[47] At the same time, the potential impact of actresses on French society grew proportionally with the increase in the number of theaters, which was remarkable. "Between the 1680s and 1789 at least seventy metropolitan cities and eleven cities in France's colonies celebrated the inauguration of their first [theater]."[48] In Paris alone the number of seats grew from 4,000 in 1700, doubling by midcentury, to 13,000 in 1789. The audience's growth mainly consisted of the new middling class, and the larger audiences led to greater chances for theatrical celebrity.[49] Some of this recognition was based on beauty—perhaps most of it—but, especially considering many actresses continued performing for decades, acting ability and method also impacted a performer's popularity. At the same time, the definition of what audiences and critics considered good acting was evolving. The exchanges between Rousseau, D'Alembert and Diderot on this issue are the most widely studied in the existing literature, but the new theatrical practices developed unevenly and through a wide variety of voices. Clairon and Dumesnil, through their acting, public statements, letters, and memoires, were two of these voices. These actresses shaped the course of how performance and theater as a profession developed.

A strong current of thought remained loyal to the traditions established by Racine and Molière; neoclassic traditionalists held that tragedy should be written in verse, "show 'great events' and arouse 'strong passions,' but never in such a way as to corrupt its

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[47] John McManners, *Abbés and Actresses: the Church and the Theatrical Profession in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1-2, 9; Ravel, Jeffrey S. "Actress to Activist: Mlle Clairon in the Public Sphere of the 1760s." *Theatre Survey* 35, no. 01 (1994): 73–86, 74-5.
[48] Clay, *Stagestruck*, 2.
[49] Berlanstein, "Women and Power in Eighteenth-Century France," 160.

audience."[50] Moreover, once plays entered the Comédie Francais's repertoire they established traditions for each role and scene. Concurrently, and with increasing strength as time progressed, critics concerned themselves with the role of reason, *vraisemblance*, and the concerns of the common-man. Voltaire, who wrote some of the most important and popular plays in this time period, maintained many of these traditions, but less rigidly followed strict rules for rhyme and rhythm in his verse and allowed for more diverse action.[51] Diderot led the charge for change, aided by Jean François Marmontel. They both promoted verisimilitude in costumes, scenery, and plot. In *Paradox sur le Comédien*, written in the mid-1770s, Diderot insisted that an actor on-stage could only perform well consistently if they felt nothing, but instead gave only the outward appearance of the emotions they must portray. According to traditional theatrical method, an actor embodied their character and felt all of its emotions fully.[52] The development of the fourth wall and lifelike acting began in the middle of the eighteenth century.[53] Enlightenment theorists also debated how these new standards should be reached; the attack against artificiality targeted stilted acting on the stage. Should actors achieve a more realistic style via rules and study, or rely on their talents and inspiration? Should they embody their role, as traditionally believed, or practice putting on the appearance of their character's emotions, as promoted by Diderot and others?[54] The new acting method focused on technical mastery over deep emotions and natural talent.[55] The transition

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[50] Marvin A. Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 142.
[51] Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 145-6.
[52] Denis Diderot, "Paradoxe sur le Comédien" in *Diderot : Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 1006-7, this is also the passage where he commends Clairon's performance, but cites Dumesnil as inconsistent.
[53] Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 148, 153.
[54] Friedland, *Political Actors*, 22.
[55] Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 161.

between methods was never completed, and debate about the merits of both the "technical" or "exterior" and "internal" methods still continues today.[56]

Clairon consistently promoted the new "external" method throughout her career and memoire; Dumesnil maintained the "internal" method was the mark of genius. In both of their memoires, *la nature* indicates individual talent and deep emotion felt by the actor, while *l'art* refers to extensive study of roles and plays, and technical understanding.[57] Clairon placed more emphasis on *l'art*, while Dumesnil stressed *la nature*. Clairon's insisted that "an intimate acquaintance with stage-effect and the rules of the theater, an accurate ear, a good taste, a sound, discriminating, and attentive judgment, are not all that is required : it is necessary to be acquainted with mythology, history, geography, and language ; he must be acquainted with every description of poetry, and the writings of every dramatic author, ancient and modern."[58] Once such discerning persons have accepted a play, this education would ideally join knowledge of dancing, drawing, music, language and belles lettres. These subjects refine the physical aspects of acting- the use of the body and the voice to convey meaning.[59] Indeed, she started performing using the new method well before Diderot's *Paradox Sur Le Comédien* was published. She argued throughout her career that "Nature" must be guided and refined by education and technical training to accurately represent cultural and temporal differences.[60]

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[56] Robert Cohen, *Theatre: Brief Version* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 60-62.
[57] *L'art* and *la nature* received a good deal of attention in other areas of Enlightenment debate as well, especially in politics. Debates around women's nature will be discussed in the next section. In this context, the issue at stake is what it takes to be a great performer.
[58] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol. 1, 102-3.
[59] Ibid, 97-102.
[60] Ibid, 47-8, 113-4.

Dumesnil, however, rejected the idea that *l'art* or technical training could produce anything more than a hollow imitation; she denied the utility of the studies and *l'art* advocated by Clairon. Instead she insisted that natural talent made acting quite easy work. For an actor to perfectly represent a character, "son oreille et son coeur doivent être ses guides (his ear and his heart should be his guide)."[61] Dumesnil believed "ces grandes affections de l'âme" (great feelings of the soul) transcended cultural differences, and these universal emotions, portrayed when an actor "forgot themselves" were much more effective than an actor who understood minute cultural differences, but failed to convey the larger message.[62] Deep feelings and natural giftedness, according to Dumesnil, were the only route to great theatrical art.

Drawing from their own experience, Clairon and Dumesnil offered examples of how the balance between *la nature* and *l'art* depended on the character one had to represent. Nevertheless, each remained loyal to her respective ideals. Clairon presented a "Study of Pauline in Polieucte" as an example of a role that would be impossible without extensive study. This character maintains an equal love for two men, something for which, Clairon insisted, there existed "no model in nature."[63] Thus, the role required extensive study of the historical setting and the potential physical manifestations of complicated emotions. She first tried out these ideas on an audience in Bordeaux, with great acclaim, as recorded in her memoires and the *Encyclopédie*.[64] Clairon admitted that she relied more heavily on nature than study when playing some characters whom she felt

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[61] Ibid, 51, 55-7.
[62] *Mémoires de Mlle, en Réponse aux Mémoires D'Hyppolite Clairon; Revus, Corrigés, et Augmentés d'une Notice sur cetter Comédienne par M. Dussault.* (Paris: L. Tenré Libraire, 1823), 52-4, 59.
[63] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 175-6.
[64] Ibid, 126-8; "Déclamation," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2013 Edition), Robert Morrissey (ed), http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/, 4:684.

were similar to herself, yet this only led to charged of duplicitousness from Dumesnil, who insisted on the primacy of talent throughout, and claimed Clairon only had to study so much because she lacked natural ability.[65] This difference of opinion marked their careers and was well-known, from actual practice on stage and public statement. In 1787 they strongly reasserted their positions in a discussion with other performers and playwrights.[66]

Clairon's arguments for naturalness and *vraisemblance* took on a literal form in regard to costuming and the use of make up in theater. Traditionally, actresses supplied their own costumes and generally chose the most extravagant and fashionable dresses they could afford, regardless of whether she played a maid or a queen. They also used white paint and rouge, which was also used by fashionable women of the time.[67] Clairon demanded dress that fit both the character and the setting. She pointed out that classical actors would not have had access to items from as far afield as India and the Americas and that characters consumed with grief would not have spent too much time arranging their hair. Those cast in roles outside of a contemporary, French context must recognize the character's situation and do all they can to construct an accurate and believable experience for the audience.[68] In 1755, for a production of Voltaire's *Le Orphélin de la Chine*, involving one of several roles he wrote specifically for her, she became the first official French actress to appear in comparatively accurate costuming, rather than

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[65] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 193, 199-202; Dussault M. *Mémoires de Mlle Dumesnil*, 180, 185, 189, 190.
[66] Regnault-Warin, "Memoires Historiques et Critique sur F. J. Talma" in *Actors on Acting: The Theories, Techniques, and Practices of the Great Actors of All Times as Told in Their Own Words* edited by Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (New York: Crown Publishers, 1972), 177.
[67] Martin, "Casanova and Mlle Clairon," 59, 62.
[68] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 83-6.

hoopskirts and jewels.[69] Clairon even argued that tradition needed to be disregarded if it interfered with creating a believable scene.[70] Her memoires also attacked the use of white paint, which "spoils and discolors the complexion, weakens and dims eye-sight, absorbs the whole countenance, conceals the expressive motion of muscles, and produces a contradiction between what we see and what we hear."[71] Denunciations of makeup and paint abounded during the eighteenth century; often the use of make up was linked to loss of innocence, duplicitousness, and "aristocratic artifice."[72] Clairon complicated these arguments by acknowledging the necessity of using makeup to please audiences and men, and simultaneously insisting makeup should look natural and could be used to support the *vraisemblance* of a role.[73] Thus she modified expectations of both the stage and femininity to suit her own viewpoints.

Conterminously with the debates surrounding theatrical theory and performance, debates regarding the actor's place in society and theater's place in the liberal arts took place. Once more, Mlle Clairon played a key role in both movements, while Mlle Dumesnil maintained a more traditional course. Actors, philosophes, and theater critics had argued for decades about the place of theater in society and the liberal arts. Theater workers were neither protected as members of a guild nor accepted as privileged practitioners of a liberal art.[74] Did actors simply convey the written words of a playwright? Was it a technical skill or an art form on par with other royally protected mediums such as art and dance, which did not face the legal and social sanctions that

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[69] Carlson, *Voltaire and the Theater of the Eighteenth Century*, 98, 100, 102.
[70] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 1, 86-88.
[71] Ibid, 88.
[72] Martin, "Casanova and Mlle Clairon," 58-59.
[73] Ibid, 59, 61-2.
[74] Clay, *Stagestruck*, 134.

actor did? By drawing parallels between acting and dance, painting, and rhetoric, advocates of theater sought to demonstrate that acting was an art in itself and even that the playwright's message would be meaningless without the performers who conveyed it.[75] Throughout her memoires, Clairon drew similar parallels. She asserted that actresses and actors alike had all the dignity of other artists by emphasizing education (or l'art) as discussed above, by insisting on the right of actors to judge works, and by repeatedly calling attention to performer's financial struggles.

Clairon's fight for professional and civil recognition took more direct routes as well. Jeffery Ravel has outlined how "her political capital with powerful Old Regime figures, her unmatched virtuosity in interpreting the roles written by Voltaire and others, and the lingering taint of sexual notoriety attached to her person . . . combined to identify her career with" the civic rights of actors. Throughout the early 1760s she led a campaign to end the persecution of players and gain for the Comédie Française the status of an academy, thus allowing the actor's participation in civic life. Through pamphlets, strikes and personal communications, Clairon and her supporters, including Voltaire, made quite a bit of noise, but were ultimately materially unsuccessful.[76]

In 1765 Clairon became involved in an affair that ultimately resulted in her retirement from the stage. Partway through the first run of the wildly popular *Le Siège de Calais*, one of the troupe's members, Dubois, was sued by his doctor for unpaid bills for the treatment of venereal disease. The troupe, eager to avoid negative press, paid the debt and fired Dubois. However when the Gentlemen of the King's Cambers (the governing body of the Comédie Française) reinstated him, Clairon and the troupe's other leading

[75] Goodden, *Actio and Persuasion*, 1-2, 8-11.
[76] Ravel, "Actress to Activist," 78-81.

players failed to report to work. In response to public outcry, the defecting actors were arrested. Clairon was released after five days and placed under house arrest for four weeks, where she continued to campaign for Dubois' expulsion.[77] Despite generous financial incentives, Clairon refused to return to work after the controversy faded from public memory. After over a year of campaigning, Clairon finally "demanded her unconditional retirement from the troupe."[78] She placed blame on people outside of the theater trying to gain more power within it, belived that some of her fellow actors were against her, but ultimately stated that could not continue under the repressive rules that actors lived under.[79]

In her memoires, Clairon most clearly breaks through the boundaries of meek-womanhood in her statements regarding her profession. Her professional equality with men, success on the stage, and positive press surrounding her activism encouraged her to continue to take strong stands on the state of the French Stage. She gave directions on how to act and defended acting as a profession authoritatively and on equal footing to her male counterparts. Although the powers of the troupe eroded over the eighteenth century, "actresses had the same rights and responsibilities as the male performers" in the governance of the theater, for example in setting the program and assigning roles.[80] This established professional equality gave her more room in her professional life. In her memoires, she critiques a male actor, LeKain, extensively, claims professional equality

[77] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 80.
[78] Ravel, "Actress to Activist," 80-2.
[79] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 74-83.
[80] Berlanstein, "Women and Power in Eighteenth-Century France," 156.

with him as well as a superior understanding of his character, and then says exactly how he should perform his characters.[81]

Her actions as a leader in the movement for recognition of actors' civil rights, her theatrical innovation in both acting style, and costumes and make-up reference her own beliefs and experience as much as any outside authority. Clairon's writing was devoted to subjects that should be studied by actors: dancing and art to improve performance, music and language to improve voice and delivery, history and geography to better understand the plays, and in order to be able to judge works as fit or unfit for the stage.[82] With these pronouncements Clairon participated in a broader discussion about the professionalism of the stage and the social status of performers. Beyond offering a guide for future actors, Clairon delineated a specific agenda for how the theater should work. After following her recommended course of study, an actor "will then be able to judge whether an author has made the most of his subject."[83] Just as she assumes the right to pass judgment on authors, Clairon assesses the performance of her male colleagues with professional dispassion rather than feminine deference. By drawing parallels between acting and dance, painting, and rhetoric, advocates of theater sought to demonstrate that acting was an art in itself and even that the playwright's message would be meaningless without the performers who conveyed it.[84] Throughout her memoires Clairon draws similar parallels and asserts that actresses and actors alike had all the dignity of other artists, all on her own authority.

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[81] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 1, 172-5.
[82] Ibid, 102-3.
[83] Ibid, 102-3.
[84] Goodden, *Actio and Persuasion*, 1-2, 8-11.

Once more, Clairon's views attract criticism from Dumesnil; in addition to adhering to traditional acting methods, Dumesnil's memoire attacks Clairon's assumption that she, or perhaps any actor, has the right to judge playwrights and established performers. Traditions in costuming established under Corneille, as well as actors like LeKain who have been lauded by their audiences, were, to Dumesnil, unassailable.[85] Above all else, her memoire rails against Clairon's proposed establishment of a tribune of actors to judge plays to be performed. They argued that the players needed the authors in order to perform as much, if no more than, the authors needed the actors to distribute their work. She in turn calls for a mixed panel of playwrights and actors, who would ultimately decide on works. The memoire even attacks Clairon's calls for civic and religious recognition, citing examples of actors' immorality as the just cause, rather than result of these sanctions.[86] Throughout her response, Dumesnil relies on male authorities to argue points, only going beyond their stated opinions to personally attack her rival. The memoires adhere to separate spheres ideology while defending the public career of their subject.

Unlike other working women of this era, actresses were able to maintain equal footing with men as the French theater commercialized; they negotiated their own contracts and "confidently asserted their right to fair treatment" in workplace matters.[87] Yet they did not often comment publicly on broader theatrical concerns. Clairon insisted that all performers must have a thorough education in order to act well and to judge plays (and thus to fulfill the obligations of a troupe member). By incorporating and comparing other recognized arts to acting, Clairon claims its equality to them; at the same time her

[85] Dussault, *Mémoires de Mlle Dumesnil*, 73, 75.
[86] Ibid, 76-9, 83-5, 91-4, 96, 106-7.
[87] Clay, *Stagestruck,* 139, 151.

language subtly asserts her equality to others who engaged in this debate – gone are all the markers of submissiveness, yet the tone is formal and does not trespass over the boundaries set by eighteenth-century *politese*. The snide remarks in Dumesnil's memoir skate closer to line of poor manners, but her message remains staunchly conservative and rather than innovate, she adds her voice to those who contested change. By relying on male authorities and setting herself against the various changes taking place around her, Dumesnil placed herself increasingly outside the norm for the increasingly emboldened actresses of the time; at the same time this attitude reflected broader beliefs about a woman's place. Clairon, in addition to fighting for change within the theater, navigates her position as a woman in the public eye creatively, maintaining claims to virtue without relinquishing autonomy.

Chapter 3

Femininity, Virtue and Self-Representation

The *Querelle des Femmes*, or "Women Question," raged around these women's careers. This *querelle* posed, and attempted to answer, questions concerning women's social, biological, cultural, and intellectual roles.[88] The various ideals the participants in the *Querelle* proposed for femininity created space for women to innovate as well as resist changes in their status. However, this debate co-existed with philosophical, social, political and legal transformations that rarely took women into consideration. Thus, discussions of femininity in the eighteenth century must take into account diverse aspects of contemporary life. Christine de Pisan, arguably, sparked the *querrelle des femmes*, at the turn of the fifteenth century; it continued at varying levels of intensity, until the French Revolution.[89] In 1673, François Poulain de la Barre set off a firestorm with the publication of his *De l'Égalité des Deux Sexes*. Before this work, most of those who argued for an elevated status for women—and there were several—merely listed examples of women who were already considered exceptional (e.g., Joan of Arc), instead of offering an over-arching argument that could be applied to all women.[90] Invoking Descartes's separation of mind and body, Poulain argued that women had just as much common sense as did men. Moreover, he sought to historicize the tradition of subordinating women. He asserted that men created inequality when, while in the savage state, they desired and gained power, due to a thirst for supremacy, which was not felt by

[88] Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*, 5.
[89] Joan Kelly," Early Feminist Theory and the 'Querrelle des Femmes,' 1400-1789," 5-8.
[90] Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, 39.

women.[91] While this was an interesting new argument, few early feminists picked it up for their own use. Poulain had discounted women's physical differences from men, focusing instead on their equal endowment with reason.

Throughout much of the early modern period, medical discourses emphasized these physical differences, which were considered determinative of women's mental and moral attributes as well. By the mid-eighteenth century, biological beliefs had moved from describing women as mal-formed men, which belied a hierarchy of the sexes that melded into social hierarchy, to an understanding that stressed innate, scientific difference.[92] The *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772), the definitive summa of Western knowledge of the age, had several articles covering *Femme*. In it, the uterus was identified as the source for many of the ailments that befell women. According to the anatomical section of the article *Femme* by Desmahis, women could become crazed if they were not sexually satisfied, making it all the more important for them to be married.[93] According to Desmahis, their beauty offset women's physical infirmities, and a parity in difference thus existed between men and women.[94] Yet legally married women throughout most of France were completely absorbed under the identity of their husband. This state of dependency was intended to be offset by the husband's concern for his wife's well being. A woman's property could remain under her jurisdiction if stipulated in the marriage

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[91] Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 152.
[92] Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Women*, 21-3.
[93] Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*, 30-1.
[94] Desmahis, "Femme (*Morale.)*," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2013 Edition), Robert Morrissey (ed), http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/ For more on biology and women in the eighteenth century, see Tomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass. 1990); L. Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth Century and Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1989 Heidi Bostic, *The Fiction of Enlightenment: Women of Reason in the French Eighteenth Century (Newark, 2010).*

contract, a formality found mostly in the nobility and middle classes.[95] Most of the *Encyclopédie* articles concerning women suggest little to contest this state of affairs except "Femme" (*Droit nat*) by Jaucourt. This article argues for equality between individuals entering into a legal contract (marriage), but does not address other inequalities.[96]

In addition to a political system that rarely considered women legal entities and discourses that discredited their mental capacities, beliefs that seemed far removed from the *Querelle des Femmes* also eventually further affected their position in society. *Philosophes* from Rousseau to Beaumarchais believed in the initial equality of man, but also that their different natural abilities, or their lack thereof, would eventually lead to a stratified society; nonetheless, these stratifications would not be based on birth or rank, but natural talent and merit.[97] Though women could be credited with the ability to reason and with other talents, many contemporaries considered it necessary for them to use their biological ability to bear children so Enlightened society could survive. "Woman is accorded a secure place here, sited in a triple sense: anthropologically as the 'ruler' in the sphere of human reproduction; socially as a (bourgeois) housewife and mother; morally

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[95] Adrienne Rogers,"Women and the Law," in *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* ed. Samia I. Spencer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 35-7.

[96] Boucher d'Argis, "FEMME (*Anthropologie)*," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2013 Edition), Robert Morrissey (ed), 6:475. For more on women and the *Encyclopédie* see: Janie Vanpée, "*La Femme mode d'emploi*: how to read the article FEMME in the *Encyclopédie*" in Brewer, Daniel, and Julie Chandler Hayes, *Using the Encyclopédie: ways of knowing, ways of reading*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002; Sara Ellen Pricious Malueg, "Women and the *Encyclopédie*" in Samia Spencer, *French women and the age of Enlightenment* (Bloomington, Ind. 1984), p. 259-71; P. Charbonnel, "Repères pour une étude du statut de la femme dans quelque écrits théoriques des 'philosophes'," (1976), p. 93-110; Terry Simley Dock, *Women in the Encyclopédie: A Compendium. Potomac, MD: Studia Humanitatis,* 1983.

[97] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse)* 1.

as a chaste person living in seclusion whose destiny (to love) manifests itself solely in the family sphere."[98] The implementation of this ideal of housewife and mother – contained in the household but allowing society to continue biologically and ensuring its level of morality by nurturing her children – gave women a(nother) newly defined position in the public mind, however it was not one that many women could achieve in reality.

These were not ideals that women who led such public lives as actresses would have been able to meet, but they formed the prevailing conception of what a woman should be. The Enlightenment was "a dialectical encounter between a culture of feeling and a culture of reason."[99] Men and women were expected to be both rationally and emotionally engaged in their world. Women were often seen as incapable of the former, and the epitome of the latter. However these discussions were rarely so clearly defined. Diderot's thoughts on women and their place in society were hardly systematic; indeed they often seem contradictory. His sympathy toward several of the female leads in his novels and his assistance with the education of multiple young women in his life indicate a profound empathy with women's subjugated situation and a willingness to aid in its amelioration. "But if Diderot had a genuine interest in women, their well-being, their education, and creative powers, he was not one of those who . . . attempted to eliminate the distinctions traditionally maintained between the sexes. In fact, in many respects, Diderot shared the more traditional view of women of many of his contemporaries."[100] Within the same short document, *Sur Les Femmes* (1772), he praises women's loyalty, decries their lowly status, compares them to children, and discusses their uncontrollable

[98] Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*, 32.
[99] T. C. W Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe, 1648-1815* (New York: Viking, 2007), xxvii.
[100] Blandine L. McLaughlin, "Diderot and Women" in *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* ed. Samia I. Spencer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 296.

passions at length.[101] The portrait that emerges of women as impulsive, proud, and tenacious (whether motivated by selfishness or conviction) impressed Diderot. Elsewhere, he portrays women as illogical and weak-minded, "those rare women not characterized by those traits are seen as deviating from their essence when they embody those qualities that are considered the prerogative of superior men." But in other places manliness could be meant as a compliment.[102] He also wrote about what the world could look like if morality were structured differently. In several places he wrote about the disadvantages of marriage for men and women, citing the fleeting nature of emotional attachment.[103] Diderot's reforming spirit and recognition of actual injustices could not quite overcome his conviction of sexual difference. In his view, improved education may have advanced women's situation, but their biologically determined nature could not be overcome or ignored. His insistence on women's difference did not prevent him from being concerned and sympathetic with their civic and educational state.

Clairon drew on each of the themes that Diderot laid out in her memoires. She joined Diderot's cry against women's subjugation; used sentimental language to describe all sorts of emotions; most extraordinarily, she lived out and wrote about his hypotheses concerning marriage and non-traditional sexual relationships. She states she was moved to tears when she first saw Mlle Dangeville act and credits the education she received through watching her neighbor and then actual productions "enlightened her."[104] Emotion and education, or reason, combined to inspire her and opened up a new path for her

[101] Diderot, "Sur Les Femmes," in *Diderot : Oeuvres*. (Gallimard, 1946), 950-956.
[102] McLaughlin, "Diderot and Women," 297.
[103] Ibid, 301.
[104] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 1, 25.

future.[105] Dumesnil, mistrustful of the cultural rise in emotionality, posited that Clairon's insistence on studying undermined her claims to sensibility. Even her emotional claims of love for the Count and other personal interactions that she recorded appeared to Dumesnil as the product of art and artifice.[106] Both actresses acknowledged sexual difference, but Clairon added criticisms that echoed Diderot. "The difference of our physical powers, our educations, our prejudices, the manner we employ our time, all concur in convincing me that our pretentions are in vain, that men are not what they ought to be."[107] While condemning men's dishonesty and seduction tactics, she admits: "But let us pardon those who follow the impulse of voluntary inclinations; and let us frankly confess we should act in the same manner if we dared."[108] This remark blurs the lines between the sexes by acknowledging men and women as equally sexual.

Clairon also appealed to her audiences' emotions and sensibility in asking for understanding of youthful naiveté. When describing her life before she joined the Comédie Française, she referenced two young men in particular who had an impact on her reputation before she was aware enough to defend it. While acting in Rouen she developed a relationship with a man. Many believed they were lovers, but she maintained that they were not. A different young man admired her, and attempted to rape her. Her description of this event maintains her innocence, but she also included titillating description of her alluring appearance that would keep her audience engaged. This young man then went on to write scurrilous descriptions of her. She admits she should have fought these allegations more strongly, but had believed that since her innocence was

[105] Ibid, 29, 31, 33.
[106] Dussault, *Mémoires de Mlle Dumesnil*, 58.
[107] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 15.
[108] Ibid,16-17.

true, it would be believed. For the most part, people stood behind her, but this type of libel would follow her for the rest of her career.[109] She later used sentimental calls to encourage the sympathy due a young person to justifications for her love affairs as an adult. "My talents, my person, the facility of access to me, have lain such a variety of men at my feet, that it was impossible for a soul naturally tender, and incessantly impressed with scenes most likely to seduce the passions, to be wholly impregnable to the attacks of love. Love is a debt due to nature; I have satisfied it, but in a manner that leaves me no cause to blush; I defy any one to cite an instance wherein I have acted disgracefully . . . I defy any one to mention a wife, or a parent, whose happiness I have disturbed."[110] The naturalness of affection and the depths of emotion she felt excused her sexual impurities. In this instance, Clairon engages the sentimentality of the Enlightenment, and asserts her own candidness. Her motivations were pure, and her actions did not hurt anyone outside of the relationship.

The most remarkable way Clairon reworked acceptable standards for women's sexuality was by simply saying those standards applied to married women alone. "My precepts are only addressed to married women, or those who . . .expect to become such. Without this, my own words would condemn me, and my lesson would be lost." [111] In the same action, a sexual relationship outside of marriage, Clairon distinguished between "an error" in a single or young woman and "a crime" in a married one. [112] She warned her young married friend against trusting men's motivations for friendship, and against being

[109] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 1, 42-7, 50-1.
[110] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 85-6.
[111] Ibid, 259-60.
[112] Ibid, 259-60.

too flirty.[113] Yet she qualifies culpability in such circumstances on the basis of age and marital status. Thus, in the several places she references someone as her lover, she excused herself because neither she nor they were bound by marriage vows.[114] Wives at this time could be prosecuted for infidelity, and even jailed; it is likely that Clairon also wanted to avoid the social and religious stigma attached to violating marriage vows.[115]

Clairon's assessment of female purity does not allow for infidelity, yet she believed marriage came with responsibilities; if wives failed to uphold these standards, the presence of a mistress should not surprise them. She fashioned a conversation between her and Madame la M...- the wife of one of her presumed lovers. This dialog as Clairon writes it provides an illustration of how she presents her interactions with men more generally. She insists the use of rouge makes her look "younger and gayer" than the wife who believes herself wronged.[116] This is just the first of a long list of comparisons she makes in order to point out Madame la M...'s shortcomings. She neglects her husband, has a negative attitude, and is unsympathetic and reclusive. Clairon explains how this contrasted with her own willingness to place him before any other duties she may have and her compassionate attitude towards him. Additionally, Clairon favorably compares herself to his previous mistress, who absorbed his time and money, while, she herself makes him go home for dinner and pays her own way. She insists that any betrayed wife should at least be grateful for a competitor that requires her husband to fulfill his duties at home, especially if she has failed to fulfill her own.[117] All that remains to be said is that she is the mistress; while that fact is heavily implied throughout, she

[113] Ibid, 19-20, 250-1, 253.
[114] Ibid, 278, 281.
[115] Rogers, "Women and the Law," 37-8.
[116] Ibid, 181.
[117] Ibid, 176-6.

never actually states it. This leaves her room, at the end of this conversation, to unblushingly state, "Assure yourself that I am not the mistress of the M.... ; I have only the sentiments of a mother and friend towards him ; and he only cherishes and respects me under those titles." Clairon compares the relationship to other sexual relationships that "the M. . ." had maintained and simultaneously that their relationship was not at all sexual. This tension between justifying the place she holds in the life of another woman's husband, and her unwillingness to completely abandon decorum draws a concrete line that Clairon was unwilling to cross in her memoires.

Despite several offers, Clairon never married. Additionally, she never had any children who would not have had a set place in French society, and could have created legal problems for the well-known actress.[118] As a further claim to righteousness, she denies having taken money from friends or lovers, and denies being the Count de Valbelle's mistress because she did not want to be perceived as a social climber. She, like Diderot, believed passions were fleeting and did not want to lose the love of the count and have to remain with him.[119] Jealousy also deterred her; when faced with a possessive suitor, she declared "I might have been content to have been restrained by a flowery wreath, but I could not brook being confined by a chain."[120]

This attitude separates Clarion from many eighteenth century women. Especially as the century drew to a close, society began to expect that women were naturally nurturing, while men's nature pushed them out into the world. This emphasis on women and men's differing natures derives from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the most

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[118] Ibid, 86; Rogers, "Women and the Law," 42. In theory unwed mothers who failed to claim their pregnancy or to have their child baptized before it died could be branded, exiled, or put to death.
[119] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 1, 221-4.
[120] Ibid, 3.

influential thinkers of the eighteenth century. In his Bildungsroman, *Emile,* he asserted, "The man must be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive; the one must have both the power and the will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance. When this principle is admitted, it follows that woman is specially made for man's delight."[121] He argued earlier in the same work that the differences between the sexes stem from their biological differences, that they cannot be considered equal, and that therefore perfection is equally attainable for both, but only insofar as each sex acts in accordance with its ideal. Additionally in his *Letter to D'Alembert,* he criticizes the impact French women were having on the culture, as men flocked to their salons. He also targets actresses, saying they are defying their "natural modesty" as women in addition to making their living off of lies.

This assessment of the theater formed the focal point of one of the most celebrated public arguments of the eighteenth century. Rousseau's philosophical theories were extremely influential, as detailed elsewhere, and they had a lasting impact on the eighteenth-century public's understanding of women. However, his anti-theatrical diatribes had little effect on theater attendance. Diderot's response, as well as his general views on the theater, had a much more far-reaching impact. Rousseau's voice joined two others, Luigi Riccoboni and Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, in condemning women's presence on the stage, however he took the criticism even further and wanted to abolish stage-theater in its entirety. To present sexual love on the stage, they suggested, could only corrupt the audience, going against the very principles of drama. Additionally, they reasserted the stereotype of actress-as-prostitute, and charged that actresses were violating their nature as women by displaying themselves publicly and violating their

[121] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education* (NuVision Publications. 2007), 336.

feminine nature.[122] Clairon and Dumesnil by necessity ignored some of these charges, but they also adapted and subscribed to other Rousseauian ideals.

Dumesnil's memoires repeatedly voice her approval of Rousseau; she admired his "Confessions," which were written in the spirit of self-discovery, and claims that this was the opposite of what Clairon did.[123] After repeatedly referring to Clairon as a "*femme galante,*" Dumesnil's memoires launch an attack on her claims to have not had any children. Her lack of offspring was "certainly not for lack of trying" and failing to produce children is not something women should be proud of, as they thus fail to fulfill their natural and most esteemed role. She asserted that Clairon made excuses for her behavior, that women were not all like her.[124] Her own conservative lifestyle reflects her support for Rousseauian ideals. She lived quietly in a district far from where most members of the troupe made their home with the same man for most of her life. She even brought her unadventurous lifestyle into work and "wore house dresses to rehearsal and sat knitting in the wings."[125] While ignoring one of Rousseau's most severe and well-publicized proscriptions for a healthy society -- banning the theater -- Dumesnil went out of her way to live almost every other ideal he proposed: modest, nurturing women in the home.

One of the few things Dumesnil and Clairon agreed on was the negative effect the boulevard theaters had on theater as an art and Parisian society. Throughout the Old Regime, these theaters had been restricted and marginal to elite French cultural life,

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[122] Virginia Scott, "The Actress and Utopian Theater Reform in Eighteenth-Century France," *Theater Research* 27, no. 1 (2002): pg 18-20; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Lettre A M. D'Alembert" in *Du Contract Social ou Principes de Droit Politique* (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1962), 213-5; Restif de la Bretonne, *La Mimographe, ou Idées d'une Honnête-Femme pour la Réformation du Théâtre National* (Amsterdam: Chez Changuion, 1770), 68.
[123] Dussault, *Mémoires de Mlle Dumesnil,* 181, 217, 288.
[124] Ibid, 269-73, 283.
[125] Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France*, 257-9.

however once the Revolution stripped the royal theaters of their privileges, a broader repertoire and legal recognition allowed the influence of these boulevard theaters to grow.[126] The lower standards for art paled in comparison to the moral degradation that these theaters fostered. Clairon posits the immorality that girls entering these theaters were drawn into prematurely aged them.[127] Dumesnil's memoires took these criticisms further, arguing that these boulevard actresses only wanted fame and flattery, meanwhile they lost their most important trait, their purity and honor.[128] She called for women to follow the guidance of the Catholic Church and Rousseauian ideals, and left little room for any slips in virtue and abandoned any opportunity to spread blame between the two sexes.

Clairon's standards were much less rigid than Dumesnil's. Her mother had, like Rousseau, considered theater "only the road to eternal damnation." However, Clairon explained, by nature her mother was good, compassionate etc, but her nature had not been elevated by education; once she saw the beauty of the theater she changed her mind, and allowed her daughter obtain the education necessary for a stage career.[129] Clairon rejected the idea that theater was inherently immoral and nuanced ideals of femininity and marriage. She wrote to her young married friend, "It must be confessed that it is no less our duty than it ought to be our inclination to adopt our husbands' wishes."[130] Here, she promotes submissive womanhood, the proposition that a wife exists as a support to her husband. "The desire of pleasing . . . is, in my opinion, the germ of every female

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[126] Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 218.
[127] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 168.
[128] Dussault, *Mémoires de Mlle Dumesnil*, 167.
[129] Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, vol 2, 32, 36-8.
[130] Ibid, 204.

virtue; and I regard those who are deficient in this duty as false or weak women." She charged that her friend's top priority should be her family and duties as a wife and mother; she encourages her to keep studying and cultivate her mind, but at the same time reminds her reader "the woman who enters into disputes goes beyond her sphere."[131] While promoting traditional roles and separate spheres, Clairon emphasized the opportunity for equality in a relationship when each spouse ruled a sphere. She believed this would cause the spouses to rely on each other and thus create a partnership rather than a hierarchical relationship.

As other studies, specifically of English actresses, have shown, in order to maintain their hold on public virtue, some actresses redefined it to match (or at least minimize conflicts with) their unorthodox lifestyles and profession. Beyond the theater, female novelists argued that "a breach in chastity" did not eternally exclude a woman from virtuousness, especially when a stronger entity was pursuing these women.[132] Clairon similarly adjusts feminine ideals to suit her by drawing distinctions between married and single women, and by incorporating Enlightenment views on nature and its power. Dumesnil made fewer alterations to the Roussouian feminine ideal, and thus operated in seemingly contradictory ways, ensconced in the home except when she mounted the stage to perform intense and personal emotions publicly. While still a voting member of the troupe, Dumesnil rarely took a leadership role and submitted to the authority of leading male actors, the Gentlemen of the Chamber, and the state. Her lifestyle did nothing to diminish her popularity on stage, but seems to have caused her reputation as an artist to die with her. Conversely, Clairon continued her innovation here

[131] Ibid, 285.
[132] Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 117-8.

in acting methods and in her work for the troupe. She led the charge for realism and exterior acting which set acting standards for decades after she left the stage, and did so with very little guidance from men.

The way these actresses rejected, embraced, or redefined threads of the theatrical and philosophical debates that fulminated throughout their careers and after provides another example of an individual's adaptability and creativity when attempting to understand themselves and their world. Whether by drawing a clear line between the status and priorities of single and married women, or by deflecting public comment by leading a very subdued private life, actresses had to navigate desires and expectations that stood in outright conflict with each other. As with the women writers that Carla Hesse studied in *The Other Enlightenment*, actresses "were at once private beings who were subordinated within the web of civil society, and at the same time public figures, capable of transcending those constraints in order to participate in a universal life of the mind."[133] These two actresses took very different paths when negotiating this duality; Clairon presented herself primarily as an actress, and took all the room that status gave her, while Dumesnil concerned herself with meeting feminine standards, and forced being an actress to fit into her idea of womanhood. Nonetheless, Clairon and Dumesnil's adaptations of broader ideas demonstrate how seemingly concrete standards became quite fluid in practice, especially amongst massive social, cultural, and political change.

[133] Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment,* 77.

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