

From tragic hero to creole businesswoman: Voltaire's *Sémiramis* and her parodies in 18th-century France and Saint-Domingue

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Date of deposit	28 03 2022
Document version	Author's accepted manuscript
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Citation for published version	Prest, JT 2022, From tragic hero to creole businesswoman: Voltaire's <i>Sémiramis</i> and her parodies in 18th-century France and Saint-Domingue. in M Geoga & J Steele (eds), <i>Allure of the Ancient: Receptions of the Ancient Near East, ca 1600-1800</i> . Intersections, vol. 80, Brill, pp. 259-283.
Link to published version	https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004426245_011

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From Tragic Hero to Creole Businesswoman:
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in 18th-century France and Saint-Domingue

Introduction

Semiramis—or Sammuamat—is a legendary figure. Commonly recognized as the founder of Babylon and as the remarkably successful ruler of the vast Assyrian Empire when she acted as queen regent for several years, Semiramis remains a source of mystery and ongoing fascination and has been ascribed shifting identities across a variety of literary, historical and artistic genres and different time periods. In her excellent survey of portrayals of Semiramis from Herodotus (with whom the figure first entered the written historical record) to the late 20th century CE, Julia Asher-Greve identifies a number of different core trends.¹ A common thread that runs through the majority of them is Semiramis's status as an exceptional woman—a quality that can of course be used to serve or, more commonly, to undermine the feminist cause. As a female ruler, Semiramis was, by definition, exceptional and her position widely considered “unnatural”—a usurpation of the male prerogative, admissible only if it was understood precisely to be exceptional and if the ruler displayed what were understood to be “masculine” qualities. In this context, Semiramis could be admired as an exceptional woman whose commendable qualities as leader and warrior remained fundamentally within the male preserve. While a degree of exceptionality is a given in (serious) accounts of Semiramis as ruler, these vary considerably in their evaluation of Semiramis's personal morality, her motives and, of course, her sexuality. Surprisingly, perhaps, her Oriental origins are seldom explored. At the heart of the debate sits the question of Semiramis's relationship with her husband, Ninus, and their son, Ninyas (or Ninias). Sometimes Semiramis the exemplary ruler existed alongside Semiramis the lustful adulterer, who was also, in some accounts, guilty of incest. This malleability, which is further promoted by the absence of a clear account of the life and character of

¹ ASHER-GREVE J., “From ‘Semiramis of Babylon’ to ‘Semiramis of Hammersmith’”, in Holloway S.W. (ed.), *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 10 (Sheffield: 2007) 322–373.

Semiramis's supposed historical model, no doubt accounts in no small part for the enduring interest that the figure holds.

My point of departure is the trend identified by Asher-Greve, which she describes as the 'discovery of the potential of Semiramis as tragic heroine' in the "Baroque age"—a period that, uncoincidentally, featured a number of prominent female European regents and rulers.² Asher-Greve identifies Muzio Manfredi's *La Semiramis: tragedia* (1593) as the probable first example, and other important versions were penned by noted dramatists including Caldéron (1600–1681). Interest in dramatic tragic versions of the story continued throughout the early modern period, well into the eighteenth century.³ Arguably the period's most famous tragic dramatization of Semiramis's life and rule—and the one that concerns us here—is that by Voltaire (1694–1778), which was inspired in part by a desire to outdo a work on the same subject by his rival, Crébillon (1674–1762). Voltaire's *Sémiramis* was first performed at the Comédie-Française in the playwright's presence in 1748 and published the following year with the *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* serving as its lengthy preface.⁴

In what follows, I shall begin by evaluating Voltaire's Semiramis as a tragic figure in the context of eighteenth-century French drama. Certainly, accounts of Semiramis as a successful political leader with a complicated personal life, as outlined above, lend themselves to the tragic genre, as does her exceptionality coupled with her elements of personal weakness. As will be seen, Voltaire's heroine displays elements of grandeur that we associate with seventeenth-century French tragedy (as exemplified by the works of Corneille and Racine) alongside characteristics designed to appeal to contemporary interest in sentiment and suffering (in the *Dissertation sur la tragédie*

² Asher-Greve, "From 'Semiramis of Babylon' to 'Semiramis of Hammersmith'" 340.

³ Scholars across (and even within) different academic disciplines define the early modern period differently. Most scholars in French Studies use the term loosely to cover the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries up to the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. Others prefer to treat the eighteenth century separately from its predecessors, calling it the Age of Enlightenment. Here the term is used in its broadest sense.

⁴ Voltaire continued revising the text even after it was published. For details of the work's evolution and early publishing history, see Robert Niklaus's Introduction to the play in VOLTAIRE, "*Sémiramis, tragédie*, critical edition by R. Niklaus" in *Les Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 30A (Oxford: 2003) 37–254 (79–89). All references to the *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* and to the text of Voltaire's *Sémiramis* are to this edition.

ancienne et moderne, Voltaire indicates that one of his goals in writing *Sémiramis* was to develop his portrayal of pathos or *le pathétique*).⁵ As Robert Niklaus has argued, with *Sémiramis*, Voltaire produced a tragic work that displayed a distinct affinity with opera and even anticipated melodrama.⁶ The discussion will then be expanded to include eighteenth-century French theatrical parodies of *Sémiramis*, which introduce an entirely different aspect to her portrayal in the form of a comic figure—an area that is not addressed by Asher-Greve. I shall then turn to performances of *Sémiramis* in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (in present-day Haiti) as the basis for a discussion about an extraordinary Creole parody of *Sémiramis* that was performed in Saint-Domingue at least twice between 1772 and 1780, but which has remained unstudied until now.⁷

Voltaire's *Sémiramis*

When examining Voltaire's portrayal of Semiramis, I refer to the Voltaire Foundation's 2003 version of the play in a critical edition by Niklaus, which takes as its starting point the first authorized edition of the work and, as its most reliable version, the last edition published in Voltaire's lifetime and (at least partly) under his supervision.⁸

Semiramis as ruler

Semiramis's extraordinary achievements as a conquering ruler over the fifteen years prior to the beginning of the play are not in doubt in Voltaire's version.⁹ We find references to her power and authority over the prostrate kings of the Orient (I.1.11), and it is noted that even sycophantic flatterers do not compare the greatest and best-

⁵ *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* 156.

⁶ NIKLAUS R., "The Significance of Voltaire's *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* and its relevance to *Sémiramis*" in Barber G. – Courtney C.P. (eds.), *Enlightenment Essays in Memory of Robert Shackleton* (Oxford: 1988) 231–248 (239). Niklaus also insists on the influence, unacknowledged by Voltaire, of Metastasio's *Semiramide riconosciuta*, which had been set to music by Gluck and performed in Vienna in 1748 (235). As Asher-Greve notes, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the primary dramatic vehicle for representations of Semiramis was opera ("From 'Semiramis of Babylon' to 'Semiramis of Hammersmith'" 346).

⁷ Throughout, the term "Creole" will be used in the primary sense in which it was used in late eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, to mean local.

⁸ Note that in this edition new line numbers are provided for each act.

⁹ Voltaire would later call Catherine the Great of Russia "la *Sémiramis du nord*" (Semiramis of the north)—a designation that is above all a comment on her status of a female ruler, but which also seems to suggest some admiration for her success in this role.

loved kings on earth to Semiramis (I.1.55). Even the scheming prince Assur (a character added by Voltaire) acknowledges the queen's extraordinary achievements, which he attributes primarily to her 'âme inflexible et profonde' [deep and inflexible soul] (II.4.235), but also to her feminine beauty which, he says, made people love the laws that she imposed on them with force (II.4.248). There is no indication that Semiramis's beauty is of an exotic variety—indeed, her othering is focused, of course, on her sex and also, interestingly, on her religion: not content with the words of the ghost or high priest, she also consults a special priest summoned from Memphis in Lower Egypt (see I.5, I.6, II.1 and II.4). According to Assur's account, it is Semiramis's mastery of supposedly masculine qualities (he has seen her 'gouverner en monarque, et combattre en héros' [govern as monarch and fight as a hero] [II.4.242]) coupled with her feminine charms, notably her beauty (II.4.247), that together seem to give her the edge over successful male rulers. Semiramis modestly acknowledges that she will probably be considered by posterity as the equal of great kings (II.7.305). Ninias's lover, the perceptive Azéma (another character added by Voltaire) briefly acknowledges the possibility that Semiramis's military leaders might now be tired of serving a woman (II.3.194) but insists that the point is moot since Semiramis is still the reigning queen. The problem is, as Assur's follower, Cédar, and Semiramis both acknowledge, albeit from different perspectives, compounded by the fact that she does not have an obvious (male) successor lined up (until his identity is revealed in the course of the play, Ninias—who is known as "Arzace"—is presumed dead). Enter the marriage plot (II.7.345) and with it the prospect of a male co-ruler and the possibility of a male heir. Although Semiramis acknowledges that she is now beyond her physical prime (II.7.346), she seems to hope that she may yet be able to produce another child (III.6.259–62).

The play opens with news of Semiramis's customary self-confidence being undermined by the ghostly voice of her murdered husband, Ninus, calling for vengeance from his mausoleum. The audience learns that, as a result of this, the hands of the formerly matchless Semiramis are leaving the reins of the empire slack (I.1.58). She is troubled, fearful and even tearful, a shadow of her former self, as prince Assur puts it in II.3.147. As a result, the empire is facing a potential crisis. The high priest Oroès notes that the stakes of the crisis, as befits a tragedy, are high: Oroès's god's reputation and the future of Asia, as well as Arzace's life (I.3.186).

Semiramis as murderer

Semiramis's motive for killing her husband is never fully explained in the play, although the minister, Otane, recalls a burdensome marriage (I.5.272) and the possibility of Ninus repudiating Semiramis—something that, he claims, would have led to the fall of Babylon (I.5.274). The justification, then, is ultimately more political than personal. Certainly Voltaire goes to considerable lengths to dilute—though not absolve—Semiramis's guilt by giving her a thoroughly evil accomplice in the form of prince Assur.¹⁰ The minister, Otane, tells Semiramis that her accomplice was indeed more guilty than she (I.5.288), but Semiramis, who is of nobler stock, rightly observes that the more sacred the ties, the more guilty the crimes (I.5.292). The wise high priest, Oroès, clearly sees Semiramis as guilty of killing her husband, even if it was Assur who actually administered the fatal poison (IV.2.108–110). Semiramis acknowledges her guilt and expresses remorse but reveals that she thought the gods had already punished her by depriving her of her son immediately after the murder. The question for her now is whether or not she will be punished further and what the arrival of the great warrior Arzace (who, as we have seen, will later be revealed to be her son, Ninias) means, given that the voice from the mausoleum has—in customarily ambiguous fashion—told her that her suffering will be near its end when Arzace appears in Babylon.

Semiramis's incestuous (cum maternal) love

Voltaire's portrayal of the emotional bond between Semiramis and Arzace/Ninias is very deliberate. Arzace (who is also ignorant of his own identity) admits to his lover, Azéma, that he was struck by Semiramis's humanity (II.1.50) at their first meeting, that he was moved by her welcome and that his appreciation of her is second only to his appreciation for Azéma (II.1.57–58). Semiramis, for her part, tells Otane of how she felt upon meeting Arzace: 'A son premier aspect tout mon cœur étonné, / Par un pouvoir secret se sentit entraîné' [The moment I saw him my heart was moved / And caught up by a secret power] (III.1.19–20). The informed reader or spectator would understand the secret nature of these emotions to stem from her maternal instinct; in order to attenuate Semiramis's guilt in this regard, Voltaire quickly spells out the link between

¹⁰ Semiramis refers to Assur as her accomplice in I.5.321 and 328, and he refers to himself in that way in II.4.286.

Semiramis's motherhood and her feelings for Arzace: Semiramis explains to Otane that she was once a mother and now anticipates that Arzace will take the place of her husband and her son (III.1.58–59).¹¹ This of course paves the way for Semiramis to recognize Arzace as her son, Ninias, later in the play. Semiramis's instinct is sharpened in IV.4 when she acknowledges to Arzace that she is both attracted to him by an unknown power and repelled by him. When, later in the scene, she learns the truth, she is suitably horrified and asks to be punished by death for her incestuous feelings but above all for her murderous past. Mother and son both hope that a less bloody outcome may yet be possible, and Arzace cannot of course knowingly execute his mother (he is no Orestes and she no Clytemnestra). Her inescapable punishment at his hand must be a mistake on Arzace-Ninias's part, which takes place in the darkness of the mausoleum. Semiramis dies while seeking to save her son from the evil Assur; her son avenges his father's death by fatally wounding someone he believes to be Assur, but who turns out to be his mother.

While Voltaire was much criticized for this rather unconvincing plot device, it does serve his broader purpose of establishing the dignity of both mother and son and of administering divine justice in a way that satisfies and moves (rather than horrifies) his audience. Semiramis's brave decision to enter the mausoleum is borne of a wish to protect her son and thus confirms her status as good mother, while her guilt and acceptance of her punishment redeems her (at least to a degree) from the status of bad wife. Oroès confirms that 'le ciel est satisfait; la vengeance est comblée' [the gods are satisfied and the vengeance complete] (V.8.220), and when Semiramis learns that it is Ninias who has wounded her, she acknowledges that she has received from him the death that was her due (V.8.251). She blesses Ninias and Azéma and instructs them to reign happily (V.8.266). Semiramis dies with her reputation largely intact, and the play ends with the prospect of a benevolent Ninias on the throne overseen by the all-seeing gods, who will continue to administer their justice.

French parodies

¹¹ See also III.6.291.

Sémiramis was subject to more bitter attacks than any of Voltaire's other plays, the majority of them in the form of published letters and tracts following the play's premiere.¹² The fiercest and most sustained criticisms relate to the play's alleged lack of *vraisemblance* (or verisimilitude—one of the guiding principles of French neoclassical tragedy), particularly in relation to Ninias's failure to recognize his mother's voice inside Ninus's mausoleum and the prominence of Ninus's ghost, who not only appears onstage but even speaks in III.6.¹³ The problematic nature of the ghost's appearance was compounded by the presence of on-stage spectators at the Comédie-Française during the first few years of the tragedy's performance history in the capital. A well-known anecdote holds that, on the opening night, the stage was so full that the actor playing the ghost was unable to make his onstage entrance, and when the attendant guarding Ninias's mausoleum cried out 'Messieurs, place à l'Ombre' [Gentlemen, make way for the ghost] the tragic spell was broken, and the audience responded with laughter. Voltaire went to considerable lengths to address this issue, which also severely reduced the spectacular potential of the work, first by bringing in two officers to restrict the number of on-stage spectators and later by paying to have all the onstage seats removed.¹⁴ All spectators were finally banned from the Comédie-Française's stage in 1759. The figure of Semiramis herself was widely appreciated, thanks in no small part to the talents of the much-admired tragic actor, Marie-Anne-Françoise Dumesnil (1713–1803), who performed the title role.¹⁵ When Henri Lekain (1729–78) took over the role of Ninias at the Comédie-Française in August 1756, this gave new impetus to the work and inspired the striking image of the two gloriously costumed actors interacting at a moment of high tension in IV.4 that is reproduced in Figure 1 [Insert Fig. 1 near here]. We know that Lekain also played the role at the theatre in Bordeaux on 4 August 1772.¹⁶

¹² See Voltaire, "*Sémiramis, tragédie*, critical edition by Robert Niklaus" 48n17 for further details.

¹³ Voltaire defended the centrality of his ghost to the plot and noted the success in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (a play that he described as vulgar and barbarous) of the ghost of Hamlet's father, which fulfils a similar function. See his *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* 160–161.

¹⁴ Voltaire, "*Sémiramis, tragédie*, critical edition by Robert Niklaus" 43 and 47.

¹⁵ Later in the century, the role was performed by Mlle Saint-Val and Mme Vestris.

¹⁶ Lecouvreur manuscript. See Lagrave H. – Mazouer C. – Regaldo M. (eds.), *La Vie théâtrale à Bordeaux, des origines à nos jours: Des origines à 1799* (Paris: 1985) 248.

A particularly entertaining source of criticism was found in the form of theatrical parodies, which abounded on the eighteenth-century French stage. The theatrical parody is a rather elusive genre, but a key element of any parody that is to be identified as a parody *of a particular play* is that it retains and reworks recognizable elements from the source work. Often this involves a reworking that brings a play and its characters closer to the target audience in time, space and, crucially, social status. In the case of tragedy, this necessarily involves the debasement of characters of a high social status (society's rulers)—something that lends the genre a subversive element that calls into question the more elevated status of its theatrical models (especially tragedy) and perhaps also of the types of characters these portray. Nearly half of Voltaire's plays were parodied, including *Sémiramis*.¹⁷ Voltaire's attitude towards these parodies reflects the intricate way in which theatrical parodies combined criticism and compliment. Voltaire noted, for instance, that his rival Crébillon's *Sémiramis* tragedy was so poor that it had not even been honoured with a parody ('honorée d'une parodie'). But in Autumn 1748, Voltaire went to very considerable lengths to prevent the performance at court of a parody of *Sémiramis* by Bidault de Montigny called *Sémiramis tragédie en cinq actes*, which he described in a letter to the queen consort as 'une satire odieuse qu'on veut faire contre moi' [an odious satire that they want to make of me]. Voltaire eventually succeeded, and Niklaus concludes that Montigny's parody was probably never performed at court or on the Paris stage. It did, however, reach audiences via its publication first in 1749 as *Sémiramis tragédie en cinq actes* and then in 1750 as *La Petite Sémiramis*. Another parody called *Zoramis ou le spectacle manqué* was written for the fairground theatre, although it was banned from both performance and publication.¹⁸ Valleria Belt Grannis also identifies Nicolas Ragot de Grandval's *Persiflès*, published in two editions (one dated 1748, the other with no date) as a parody of *Sémiramis* that sought to recreate a sense of confusion among the audience that echoed that created by the source play.¹⁹ However, Isabelle Degauque rightly observes

¹⁷ 25 out of a total of 56, according to GRANNIS V.B., *Dramatic Parody in Eighteenth Century France* (New York: 1931) 245. Degauque examines parodies of fifteen of Voltaire's tragedies in Degauque, I., *Les Tragédies de Voltaire au miroir de leurs parodies dramatiques: d'Œdipe (1718) à Tancred (1760)* (Paris: 2007).

¹⁸ This account of parodies of Voltaire's *Sémiramis* is based on Voltaire, "*Sémiramis, tragédie*, critical edition by Robert Niklaus" 50, 50n21 and 51. See also Grannis, *Dramatic Parody in Eighteenth Century France* 329–31 and Degauque, *Les Tragédies de Voltaire* 76n127.

¹⁹ Grannis, *Dramatic Parody in Eighteenth Century France* 329.

that, despite the presence in the work of a character called Semiramis (alongside other big names such as Zoroaster and Helen of Troy), the parody bears no obvious direct relation to Voltaire's tragedy.²⁰

By contrast, Montigny's parody, written, like its model, in rhyming Alexandrine couplets, combines the common parodic technique of spatio-temporal relocation (it is set on the stage of the Comédie-Française theatre) with the technique of personification, which is used to criticize explicitly the weaknesses of the source play. Semiramis is the only character in the cast to be granted a proper name (she remains Semiramis), but even she is more a personification of Voltaire's play than a rewriting of its eponymous heroine. For instance, the moment when Semiramis admits that she has not respected the requirements of verisimilitude is above all a comment about the whole play, rather than on such details as her failure to recognize her son. Given the importance of verisimilitude to French neoclassical tragedy, this is harsh criticism indeed. The other characters in Montigny's parody are personifications of different elements of tragedy, several of which are also associated with specific characters from the original play. Le Dénouement (present from the start of the play alongside L'Exposition) is the high priest, Oroès, while l'Intérêt [the interest] (a late arrival onstage) represents Ninias, and the tragic emotion of pity (la Pitié) is Azéma. L'Intrigue [the plot] is conspicuous by its absence from the play. La Cabale (a term used to describe any group that took sides during contemporary theatrical disputes and rivalries) is associated with Assur, while the disapproving ghost of Ninus becomes the ghost of Pierre Corneille, who represents the high standard of French classical tragedy of which Voltaire has fallen short.²¹

Montigny's Semiramis, who is followed by a personification of Remorse wherever she goes, has none of the tragic dignity or even the tragic flaws of her model; rather, aware of her own mediocrity, she 'dissimule ses défauts, avec la complicité de la Cabale, de crainte d'être éreintée par la critique' [hides her faults, with the help of the cabal, for fear of being panned by the critics].²² Montigny's personified Semiramis is guilty not of

²⁰ Degauque, *Les Tragédies de Voltaire* 37n61.

²¹ It would appear that the unpublished and unperformed parody, *Zoramis*, also featured Corneille's ghost rebuking Voltaire. See Degauque, *Les Tragédies de Voltaire* 76n127.

²² Degauque, *Les Tragédies de Voltaire* 75.

murder or of unwittingly incestuous marriage plans, but simply of being a badly executed play—one that must be prevented from making the unforgivable mistake of being published. Similarly, her namesake’s original cathartic redemption by means of her acceptance of her death at her son’s unwitting hand as a suitable punishment is comically deflated by an alternative ending, in which we learn that Semiramis has collided with *la vraisemblance* in the mausoleum and fallen over. Where tragic Semiramis dies, it is expected that parodic Semiramis will recover from her injuries if she has a good lie down. The primary target of Montigny’s play is not the (female) character of Semiramis, but Voltaire’s (more gender neutral) play and, more broadly, his personal shortcomings as a tragic (male) playwright. The parody does also contribute a different Semiramis figure to the body of early-modern dramatic writing: one who is thoroughly mediocre, rather ordinary and a bit clumsy. The fact that Montigny’s Semiramis figure is based on Voltaire’s flawed tragic hero makes her all the more incongruous and thereby all the more comical: where Voltaire’s character was supposed to draw tears from his audience, Montigny’s was supposed to draw laughter from his. We see, then, that the core issues of femininity, sexuality and leadership that have dominated discussions of the figure of Semiramis are here secondary to the need to make her rather ordinary in the interests of provoking critical laughter and swaying public opinion about a talented but flawed tragic playwright.²³

We now turn to another context in which Voltaire’s *Sémiramis* reached theatre audiences during his lifetime and prompted a different kind of theatrical parody that is as fascinating as it is rare and elusive. Although performances of *Sémiramis* in Voltaire’s lifetime are acknowledged to have taken place in Brussels, Potsdam, Bayreuth, Vienna, Hamburg, Hanover, Copenhagen and somewhere in Italy,²⁴ no acknowledgement has been made until now of the work’s performance in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue.²⁵

²³ An interesting parody that is more distantly related to Voltaire’s *Sémiramis* is Goudar’s pantomime parody of Angiolini’s *ballet d’action* version of *Sémiramis*, which was based on Voltaire’s text. See NYE E., *Mime, Music and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: The Ballet d’Action* (Cambridge: 2011) 147–149.

²⁴ Voltaire, “*Sémiramis, tragédie*, critical edition by Robert Niklaus” 69–70.

²⁵ Beaucé briefly mentions the performance of French operatic parodies in Saint-Domingue: BEAUCÉ P., *Parodies d’opéra au siècle des Lumières: évolution d’un genre comique* (Rennes: 2013)

Theatre in Saint-Domingue

The French slave colony of Saint-Domingue enjoyed a vibrant—if also erratic—tradition of public theatre between its tentative beginnings in the 1760s, its heyday in the 1780s and the slave revolts of 1791 that led to what is now known as the Haitian Revolution.²⁶ Hundreds of theatrical works were performed in towns across the colony, most of them in the two main port towns of Port-au-Prince (in the south-west of the colony) and Cap-Français, now called Cap-Haïtien, in the north. Audiences were predominantly white, but a small number of free people of colour were admitted to the playhouses, where they sat in separate seats. It is generally understood that enslaved people were excluded from the public theatre in Saint-Domingue, but it is likely that some domestic slaves accompanied their masters to the playhouse and that some may even have witnessed the performances there. Enslaved people and former slaves sometimes performed in the theatre orchestra. The stage was overwhelmingly white, featuring a mixture of French and white Creole performers, although we do know the names of two solo female performers of mixed racial ancestry. There is also evidence to suggest that more people of colour performed on the Saint-Dominguan public stage.²⁷

No theatrical registers or account books remain for the colonial-era theatre tradition in Saint-Domingue. Our principal source of information regarding performances is a series of announcements that appeared in the local press, advertising upcoming performances. While these have, therefore, to be treated with some caution (some of the performances may not have taken place or may have featured last-minute, unpublished changes, while many subscription performances appear not to have been advertised in this way), they nonetheless provide us with a compelling sense of the vibrant theatre tradition that existed in the colony.²⁸ The majority of works performed

92. However, she wrongly suggests that audiences in Saint-Domingue would not have been familiar with the original works being parodied (95).

²⁶ For more on the Haitian Revolution, see, among others, DUBOIS L. *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: 2004).

²⁷ LAUJON, A.P.M. de., *Souvenirs de trente années de voyages à Saint-Domingue* (Paris: 1834), 2 vols., vol. I 166–167. See also *Supplément aux Affiches américaines* (8 March 1788) 749.

²⁸ See my trilingual (English/French/Creole) database of announced performances as documented in the local press between 1764 and 1791 at the following website: <https://www.theatreinsaintdomingue.org>.

in Saint-Domingue were imports from France, and frequent references were made in the local newspapers announcing upcoming performances to similarities between a production in Saint-Domingue and previous productions in France. Despite this apparent privileging of the metropolitan model, French works were adapted to local conditions and some new works were composed and created locally.²⁹ A noteworthy genre that appears to have been unique to Saint-Domingue is the Creole parody, to which we shall return below. The most popular theatrical genre by a significant margin was, however, *opéra-comique*, followed by spoken comedy. Tragedy was significantly less popular and, according to the contemporary eye-witness, Moreau de Saint-Méry, performances of tragedies in the town of Le Cap often took on comic aspects, much to the delight of the local, Creole audience (Moreau de Saint-Méry excepted).³⁰ Voltaire's tragic theatre was relatively well represented in Saint-Domingue, and we have evidence of performances of no fewer than ten of his tragedies in the colony, including *Sémiramis*. Although, as Christopher Miller and others have pointed out, Voltaire did not engage directly with the details of French colonial expansion in his tragedies, he did consider other, comparable forms in a number of works, notably in *Alzire ou les Américains*, which is set in Peru but which displays some evidence of sympathy for enslaved people and which could be read as an allegory of the Atlantic slave trade.³¹ While the enslaved characters of *Sémiramis* are more discreet, it is likely that they will have taken on a new significance in the context of a slave colony. Here, however, our primary interest is with the character of Semiramis herself.

²⁹ Some of these are considered in PREST J., "The Familiar Other: Blackface Performance in Creole Works from 1780s Saint-Domingue", in Leichman J. – Bénac K. (eds.), *Colonialism and Slavery in Performance: Theatre and the Eighteenth-Century French Caribbean* (Oxford-Liverpool: 2021), 41-63.

³⁰ MOREAU DE SAINT-MÉRY M.L.E., *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue*, ed. Taillemite E. – Dorigny M., 3 vols. (Saint-Denis: 2004) vol. 1 360.

³¹ MILLER C.L., *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham-London, 2008) 71–82. Miller provides a fascinating account of a performance of *Alzire* on the West African slave island of Gorée (not, in fact, by sailors on their slave ship, but by soldiers stationed at the garrison) and speculates about how *Alzire* might have been received when it was later performed in Saint-Domingue. See also CAMIER B. – DUBOIS L., "Voltaire et Zaire, ou le théâtre des Lumières dans l'aire atlantique française", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 54.4 (2007) 39–69 for an interesting discussion of how Voltaire's tragedy, *Zaire*, which also features an enslaved character, was reworked for anti-slavery purposes in Saint-Domingue in the revolutionary era.

***Sémiramis* in Saint-Domingue**

In July 1766, readers of the local newspaper in Saint-Domingue learned of the Parisian revival of Voltaire's *Sémiramis* and of Mlle Dumesnil's particular success in the title role.³² However, we have no record of the work being performed in the colony until September 1771. Renewed interest in the work may well have been prompted by news of the extraordinarily spectacular command performance that had taken place at Versailles in July 1770 for the marriage of the dauphin to Marie-Antoinette (featuring 97 actors, including supernumeraries and a dazzling array of sumptuous costumes).³³ The performance was reported in the local newspaper, the *Affiches américaines*, in a short piece that focuses entirely on the extraordinary performance in the title role by Dumesnil.³⁴ The work may well have been chosen by (or perhaps for) the actor Mlle Leroy, who, we learn, was making her Saint-Dominguan début in the title role in the theatre of Cap-Français.³⁵ The upcoming performance of Voltaire's tragedy is described as being 'ornée de tout son spectacle' [decorated with all its spectacle], which is a fairly common claim in such announcements but a particularly grand one in this instance given how spectacular the work was. As indicated above, the clearing of the stage at the Comédie-Française had increased the opportunities for elaborate scenery and scenic effects in *Sémiramis* as well as the use of far greater numbers of performers in the roles of guards, magi, slaves and followers.³⁶ There is no evidence of there ever having been spectators on the Saint-Dominguan stage. Unfortunately, no details are given about stage sets, costumes or supernumerary actors with regard to this first performance, but the next announcement that we have relating to a performance in Le Cap in 1772 spells out the same ambition more clearly. *Sémiramis* will be performed 'à l'instar de Paris, c'est-à-dire, avec tout le costume des habits, des décorations, & toute la pompe du

³² *Affiches américaines* (9 July 1766) 246.

³³ See PITOU S., "Voltaire's *Sémiramis* at Versailles in 1770", *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 84.2 (1974) 148–155. According to Pitou (and the report in the *Affiches américaines*), Dumesnil performed the title role ("Voltaire's *Sémiramis* at Versailles in 1770" 150). Oddly, Niklaus claims that it was performed by Mlle Saint-Val l'aînée (Voltaire, "*Sémiramis, tragédie*, critical edition by Robert Niklaus" 68).

³⁴ *Affiches américaines* (28 November 1770) 456–457.

³⁵ *Supplément aux Affiches américaines* (31 August 1771) 374.

³⁶ Niklaus has also argued that it allowed for the use of more *jeux muets* [silent play] and privileged a more realistic form of acting that was enforced by the choice of new actors as the century wore on (Voltaire, "*Sémiramis, tragédie*, critical edition by Robert Niklaus" 67, 71 and 103). Voltaire also wrote about the importance of having large stages to accommodate spectacular performances ("*Sémiramis, tragédie*, critical edition by Robert Niklaus" 158).

spectacle dont elle est susceptible' [like in Paris, that is to say with all the costumes, decorations and spectacular pomp to which it lends itself].³⁷ While this claim seems more aspirational than accurate, it seems likely that additional effort was made in relation to these elements of the production. On this occasion the only named actor is Fromentin, who will perform the role of Ninias.³⁸ The actor playing Ninias in the next documented performance of *Sémiramis* is named as the visiting actor Bonioli in a performance of the work 'ornée de tout son spectacle' organized by (and for the benefit of) the actor Baron and on a double bill with Favart-Duni's *opéra-comique*, *La Fille mal gardée*.³⁹ No mention is made of who will perform the title role. This privileging of the male lead features in another announcement later that same year for a performance, on a double bill with Sedaine-Philidor's *opéra-comique*, *Le Jardinier et son seigneur*, featuring the celebrated actor Dainville as Ninias.⁴⁰ Although there is no mention of stage sets or other spectacular elements, this performance was organized by someone called Gayot, who was a set designer, which suggests that its scenery would have constituted an important feature of the production.

The next documented performance of *Sémiramis* in Cap-Français is especially interesting for our purposes as it introduces a new parody into the discussion. Two announcements in 1780 inform readers of an upcoming performance of *Sémiramis* (with a new set) alongside *Harpiminis, ou la Passagère du Port-Margot*, which is described as a one-act verse parody of *Sémiramis* by 'le Sieur Cl...'.⁴¹ *Harpiminis* will be discussed in more detail below, but it is important to underline here the fact that the original appeared on a double bill with its parody, allowing spectators the rare opportunity to pick up on the dialogue between the two works. A second announcement for the same performance is almost identical but provides additional information about the new set, which is by Gayot and which features the gardens and a view of Semiramis's palace.⁴²

³⁷ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (23 May 1772) 25.

³⁸ Fouchard describes Fromentin as a tragic actor from Paris. FOUCHARD J., *Artistes et répertoire des scènes de Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince: 1955 & 1988) 42.

³⁹ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (1 April 1775) 153.

⁴⁰ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (18 November 1775) 549.

⁴¹ "Parodie en un Acte & en vers de SEMIRAMIS, par le Sieur Cl...". *Affiches américaines* (6 June 1780) 175 and (13 June 1780) 185.

⁴² *Affiches américaines* (13 June 1780) 185–186.

The final documented performance of *Sémiramis* in Le Cap was on a double bill with Chamfort's comedy, *La jeune indienne* and organized by the actor Mme Labarre. It featured Dainville as Ninias for a second time and Mme Tesseire in the title role. The announcement is the most detailed by a significant margin; it highlights the work's spectacular nature and engages with the most controversial element of the work (Ninus's ghost), while praising its moral usefulness:

Mde *Labarre* a cru servir le goût du Public en lui présentant cette Tragédie, qui fait une époque remarquable dans l'histoire du Théâtre François. M. de *Voltaire*, génie vaste & fait pour créer, entreprit hardiment d'introduire sur la Scene l'ombre de Ninus, sortant de son tombeau, pour prévenir un inceste & pour venger sa mort; Sémiramis entrant dans ce mausolée & en sortant expirante, percée de la main de son fils.

Il n'est point de Tragédie qui ait un aussi brillant spectacle; tous les tableaux terribles & vraiment tragiques s'y rencontrent. On ne peut qu'y profiter: à côté de cette belle maxime,

..... *Il est donc des forfaits*

Que le courroux des Dieux ne pardonne jamais!

Ne voit-on pas cette excellent instruction,

..... *Apprenez tous, du moins,*

*Que les crimes secrets ont les Dieux pour témoins.*⁴³

Mde Labarre believed she was meeting public taste by presenting them with this tragedy, which marks a significant moment in the history of French theatre. M. de Voltaire, a great genius and born to create, boldly undertook to introduce onstage the ghost of Ninus coming out of his tomb in order to prevent incest and to avenge his death; [with] Semiramis entering the mausoleum and leaving it expiring, pierced by the hand of her son.

⁴³ *Affiches américaines* (12 March 1783) 124.

There is no tragedy that is so brilliant in its spectacle; all kinds of terrible and truly tragic scenes are found in it. We can only benefit from it, from this beautiful maxim,

..... *So there are offenses*
That the wrath of the gods never forgive!
 Do we not receive this excellent instruction,
 *All learn, at least,*
That secret crimes have the gods for witnesses.

A reading of this announcement alongside Voltaire's *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* reveals that Mme Labarre is in fact drawing heavily on Voltaire's own account of the work. The two quotations from the play are the same two that Voltaire includes towards the end of his *Dissertation* in order to underscore the moral utility of his work (he described tragedy as a school of virtue):⁴⁴ the first is spoken by Semiramis as she sits dying in the final scene; the second is taken from the final speech of the play featuring the wise words of the high priest, Oroès. These quotations rhetorically situate Semiramis as a source of moral improvement—a flawed female character capable of reform and redemption, even if this comes at the cost of her own life. Less obvious is the fact that the portion of the announcement that I have underlined is taken verbatim from a slightly earlier portion of the *Dissertation*.⁴⁵ Such citations lend a useful air of (metropolitan) authority to the speaker or writer—something that may have been especially useful to a woman electing to put on such a serious, tragic work for an audience that generally preferred lighter works.

In addition to these six documented performances of the work in Le Cap between 1771 and 1783, we know of single performances of the work in the towns of Saint-Marc (in the west) and Port-au-Prince in 1783 and 1784 respectively. The performance in Saint-Marc again featured Dainville as Ninias, but, surprisingly, we are not told who was to perform the title role. Readers are told that the work would be decorated with all its

⁴⁴ Voltaire, *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* 164.

⁴⁵ Voltaire, *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* 159. The phrase “tableaux terribles & vraiment tragiques” is also inspired by the *Dissertation*, where Voltaire writes about his drama being “vraiment terrible et tragique” [really frightening and tragic] (159).

spectacle ('ornée de tout son Spectacle') and that nothing would be spared in terms of the different costumes and decorations that it requires ('il ne sera rien épargné pour les différens costumes & decorations qu'elle exige').⁴⁶ Interestingly, the performance in Port-au-Prince three months later also featured Dainville as Ninias and is also described as being 'ornée de tout son Spectacle'.⁴⁷ Clearly Dainville made a speciality of the role, with the result that in Saint-Domingue the role of Ninias seems to have been privileged over that of Semiramis. Likewise, we have no record of the most celebrated female actor on the island, Mme Marsan, having ever played the female lead.⁴⁸

Harpiminis

We know of two announcements in the local press relating to performances of *Harpiminis* some eight years apart (and it is possible that additional, undocumented performances of the work also took place). The work's premiere is mentioned in March 1772, when it featured on a double bill in the northern port town of Le Cap with the comedy *Timon le misanthrope* by Louis-François Delisle de la Drevetière. In this announcement, the work is described as '*Harpiminis, Magasinier de l'Embarcadere du Port-Margot, Parodie de Sémiramis, en Vers & en un Acte*' [parody of *Sémiramis* in verse and in one act].⁴⁹ In the second announcement, briefly mentioned above, we read of an upcoming performance a one-act verse parody of *Sémiramis* by 'le Sieur Cl...' called *Harpiminis, ou la Passagère du Port-Margot*.⁵⁰ It is significant that in both instances *Harpiminis* is explicitly acknowledged as a parody of Voltaire's *Sémiramis*—clearly this was a detail that was thought to be of importance and of interest to the theatre audience in Saint-Domingue. Indeed, the local or Creole parody was a genre unique (as far as we know) to Saint-Domingue and one that was associated above all with the actor-director Clément, who referred to himself in elliptical form on more than one occasion in the Saint-Dominguan press, no doubt in order to create a sense of mystery and/or complicity with those in the know. He must surely be the 'Sieur Cl...' of the second *Harpiminis* announcement. Clément was probably French-born, but he lived in Saint-

⁴⁶ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (11 October 1783) 578.

⁴⁷ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (17 January 1784) 32.

⁴⁸ See PREST J., "Parisian Palimpsests and Creole Creations: Mme Marsan and Dlle Minette perform *Nina* on the Caribbean Stage", *Early Modern French Studies* 41.2 (2019), 170–188.

⁴⁹ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (28 March 1772) 154.

⁵⁰ *Affiches américaines* (6 June 1780) 175 and (13 June 1780) 185.

Domingue, mostly in Le Cap, for around 40 years,⁵¹ and, judging by how he wrote about himself in the press, considered himself to be a local playwright. Indeed, he is thought to have been the only successful playwright ever to have been based in colonial-era Saint-Domingue.⁵² Clément was the author of at least three Creole parodies of French works and of several Creole comedies. In addition to *Harpiminis*, Clément's other parodies include *Jeannot et Thérèse*, a reworking of Marie-Justine Favart and Hardy's *Les amours de Bastien et Bastienne* (1753) (itself a patois parody of Rousseau's intermède, *Le Devin du village*) and *Julien et Suset*, a two-act parody of Dezède's *opéra-comique, Blaise et Babet* (1783). Regrettably, none of these works appears to have been published, and *Jeannot et Thérèse* is the only extant text of a Creole parody that we have.⁵³ In the absence of the text of *Harpiminis*, we are obliged to look hard at the clues that do remain.

It is clear from both newspaper announcements that *Harpiminis* relocates *Sémiramis* in time, space and social context, as is common in a theatrical parody. Where the source work is set in ancient Babylon (albeit a Gallicized ancient Babylon), the parody is based in contemporary Saint-Domingue; where the eponymous hero of the source work is a reigning queen with a distinguished reputation as leader (and a murky past), the hero (or anti-hero) of the parody is a businesswoman involved in port trade. Both newspaper references agree on the main title of the work, *Harpiminis*, which is obviously a comic rendering of Semiramis. The new name suggests that the protagonist is now a mini harpy—a mythological creature but above all contemporary shorthand for an unpleasant and unfeminine woman known for her avarice (sometimes itself a misogynist shorthand for financial success). Where Semiramis was considered

⁵¹ In Port-au-Prince between 1762 and 1767, but otherwise in Le Cap.

⁵² For more on the career and identity of Clément, see CAMIER B. – HAZAËL-MASSIEUX M.-C., “*Jeannot et Thérèse: un opéra-comique en créole à Saint-Domingue au milieu du XVIIIème siècle*”, *Revue de la Société haïtienne d'histoire, de géographie et de géologie* 215 (2003) 135–166 [140–141].

⁵³ The work appears to have existed in several versions, including the author's 1758 original, a bowdlerized version (date unknown) and a new version by the author from 1783. Two manuscripts of the text have so far been discovered: one in the Public Record Office at Kew, the other (incomplete) held at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Camier's edition of the texts and music of all known versions is forthcoming. Here all quotations are from the 1783 version as reproduced in CAMIER B. – HAZAËL-MASSIEUX M.-C., “*Jeannot et Thérèse: un opéra-comique en créole au milieu du XVIIIe siècle*”, *Revue de la société haïtienne d'histoire et de géographie* 215 (2003) 135–66.

unfeminine owing primarily to her extraordinary leadership qualities, Harpiminis may be cast as unfeminine because she is brash and greedy (or perhaps just financially successful). Where Voltaire was at pains to downplay Semiramis's sexual guilt (she is, as we have seen, as horrified by her incestuous feelings as the audience is and acts immediately to mitigate those feelings), it is possible that Harpiminis may have shared the parodic fate of many of Voltaire's tragic heroines and been granted a degree of sexual freedom only to become an object of misogynistic fascination and opprobrium.⁵⁴

Both references also agree on Harpiminis's work base being the northern parish of Port-Margot (several miles west of Cap-Français) and, more precisely, on the waterfront. Port-Margot was the location of the first settlement of the colony by the French, who arrived there in 1640, and it is possible that this fact was referenced in the parody, perhaps as a comment on different types of colonial expansion (France's and Assyria's). According to the contemporary eye-witness and author of a would-be encyclopaedic account of colonial Saint-Domingue, Moreau de Saint-Méry, the parish's main products were sugar, indigo, liquor and, especially, coffee.⁵⁵ The original subtitle describes Harpiminis as a 'Magasinier de l'Embarcadere du Port-Margot', i.e. as a warehouse operator based on the wharf—a job that, while not absolutely exclusively male, was far more commonly undertaken by men than by women even in a colony that witnessed many more businesswomen and female managers than in the metropole. The feminine version of the masculine noun (*magasinier*/*magasinier*) emphasizes Harpiminis's non-conformity with the standard expectations of her biological sex. Moreau de Saint-Méry describes the wharf at Port-Margot as inadequate and in need of repair.⁵⁶ He notes that in 1780 (i.e. a few years after the premiere of *Harpiminis*), the wharf featured fourteen 'maisons ou magasins' (the terms are often used interchangeably to describe dwellings, warehouses or shops, depending on their context) as well as a battery with six cannon to protect it from invasion.⁵⁷ Our fictional Harpiminis would thus appear to be operating a wharf warehouse used for the storage of goods transported by boat to and from Port-Margot. Port-Margot's main transport link was with the much bigger, more

⁵⁴ See Degauque, *Les Tragédies de Voltaire*, 49 and 63–64 for more on this tendency.

⁵⁵ Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description II*, 646.

⁵⁶ Moreau de Saint-Méry *Description II*, 649–650.

⁵⁷ Moreau de Saint-Méry *Description II*, 650,

urban and more urbane port town of Cap-Français, and it seems likely that many members of the theatre audience in Le Cap, where both documented performances of *Harpiminis* took place, will have felt a certain sense of superiority over people from Port-Margot—something that would have intensified the parodic experience.

An incident also documented in the local press a few months before the premiere of *Harpiminis* may provide further clues about the choice of *Harpiminis* as a name and about her character and occupation. In November 1771, readers of the *Supplément aux Affiches américaines* (then published in Le Cap) will have found a curious—and obliquely written—announcement:

Le sieur *Faurès* a l'honneur de prévenir MM. les Habitans que c'est à faux que l'on a répandu le bruit, dans leur Quartier, qu'il abandonnoit le Passage du Port-Margot; & par consequent qu'il continuera d'apporter les provisions, *gratis*, à ceux qui lui donneront leur café à charier, & ne prendra que 30 sols par sac. Son Magasin est, au Cap, sur le bord de la mer; & le sieur *Harispe* tient celui de l'Embarcadere, au Port-Margot.⁵⁸

Mr Faurès has the honour of informing the planters that the rumour, spread in their neighbourhood, whereby he is giving up the Port-Margot crossing is false; he will therefore continue to carry provisions for free for those who give him their coffee to transport, and will only ask for 30 sols per bag. His warehouse is in Le Cap on the sea front; Mr Harispe is in charge of the one on the wharf in Port-Margot.

The announcement raises the possibility that *Harpiminis* may have been inspired by the real figure of Mr Harispe, who ran a warehouse on the Port-Margot wharf in the months before the play was first produced. Harispe's relationship with Faurès is unclear, but two possibilities suggest themselves: first, that Harispe is Faurès's business associate or second, that Harispe is his rival and possibly the source of the unwelcome rumour. On 27 June 1770, Faurès (who was already running a transport service from Jacquezy, several miles east of Le Cap) had announced in the *Supplément aux Affiches américaines*,

⁵⁸ *Supplément aux Affiches américaines* (16 November 1771) 506 and (23 November 1771) 518.

that he was taking over a warehouse in Port-Margot (formerly managed, or at least owned, by one Mme Gazin—a fleeting example of a woman running such an enterprise) and that he would run a transport service ('le Passage') from there using a schooner built in Le Cap with a capacity of 36 barrels of sugar—a standard unit of measurement.⁵⁹ Since the announcement from 1771 indicates that Faurès is now working from Le Cap, it is possible that in the meantime Harispe had taken over his base in Port-Margot. It is equally possible that Harispe was running his own rival transport service and might even have been the source of the rumours that appear to have been losing Faurès some trade. Such rumours were not uncommon and in 1783, Corneille the elder and Letourville, who were now transporting people and goods to and from Port-Margot, complained of similar rumours having been spread by 'des gens aussi inconsidérés que malintentionnés' (as inconsiderate as they are malicious) whereby their partnership was to be dissolved and the business abandoned.⁶⁰ That Harpiminis was involved in such mischievous behaviour would chime particularly nicely with the spirit of parody, but both options outlined above evoke confusion and mistaken identity—a central theme in Voltaire's original play—and suggest the comic potential that can arise from such situations. Harpiminis is a somewhat masculine businesswoman who may have used dubious means to steal business from her rival.

The link between 'magasins' and 'le passage' in both of Faurès's announcements may also help resolve the apparent discrepancy between the two subtitles given for *Harpiminis*. With regard to the second subtitle, 'Passagère du Port-Margot', Moreau de Saint-Méry notes that 'le Port-Margot a deux passagers qui font les transports au Cap' (Port-Margot has two services for transport to Le Cap).⁶¹ Here 'passager' could refer to a boat that was used to transport goods and people or to the person running such a boat service.⁶² It is clear from all such announcements that *passagers* ran their businesses

⁵⁹ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (27 June 1770) 287.

⁶⁰ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (8 January 1783) 13 and 23.

⁶¹ Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* II 651

⁶² In a newspaper announcement from 1782, for instance, Sieur Corneille described himself as the "passager du Port-Margot" (*Affiches américaines* [2 October 1782] 375), and he was referred to in this way in a separate announcement in *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (16 October 1782) 397. For a description of the "passager" as a boat, see Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* I 217.

from *magasins*, and so it is possible that the two subtitles are describing aspects of the same job; it is also clear that enterprising individuals might have more than one occupation—a warehouse owner or manager might easily also run a transport service, particularly if both could be done from the same location (a warehouse on the wharf). This was the case, for instance, for Sieur Cirvel, who in 1770 joined forces with the existing *passager* in Accul, having bought three warehouses on the wharf, two for storing sugar, the third for coffee and other provisions.⁶³ It seems likely, then, that Harpiminis ran a warehouse *and* a transport service with overlapping clientele—people who needed goods transported would sometimes also need to have those goods stored. As was the case with *magasinier*, the feminine form of *passager* used in the sub-title of our parody serves to remind us that Harpiminis’s job is usually the preserve of men. Indeed, Dominique Rogers and Stewart King note that women were excluded from participating in transatlantic commerce and that ‘those who built and maintained boats used within the colony (e.g. *acons*, *passagers*, *goélettes*) were exclusively male fraternities’.⁶⁴

Harpiminis appears, then, to have offered the would-be sophisticated theatre audience in Le Cap with a comic portrayal of life in Port-Margot and specifically with the story of a slightly unconventional and uncontrollable businesswoman who, one imagines, is put back in her place in the course of the play. We know that *Harpiminis* was written in verse (possibly in Alexandrines), but we know nothing else about the text. Clément’s *Jeannot et Thérèse*, despite its French title, is written entirely in an early form of Haitian Creole, while we know that *Julien et Suset* also features extensive amounts of Creole.⁶⁵ Works featuring substantial portions of Creole are normally advertised to that effect, but even the francophone work *Les Veuves créoles* (an early example of a work written in the Caribbean) features one line of Gallicized Creole when one of the widows

⁶³ *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (10 March 1770) 118.

⁶⁴ ROGERS D. – KING S., “Housekeepers, Merchants, Rentières: Free Women of Color in the Port Cities of Colonial Saint-Domingue, 1750–1790” in Catterall D. – Campbell J. (eds.), *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500–1800* (Leiden: 2012) 357–397 (359). Although this statement is a little sweeping, all the examples of *passagers* that I have found in the local press are indeed male.

⁶⁵ Interestingly, we know that someone called Mme Faurès was brought in to perform the role of Suset in 1788 owing to her mastery of the Creole language. If Mme Faurès is related to Sieur Faurès, this would strengthen the idea that in *Harpiminis* Clément was supporting the cause of an acquaintance (Faurès) by mocking his rival (Harispe).

addresses one of her domestics at a moment of tension. Given the prevalence of Creole among dock workers in Saint-Domingue, who would often use the language to communicate with enslaved people working for them, it is likely that Harpiminis speaks in Creole at some point in the work. From the point of view of a would-be superior audience, the use of Creole (which, paradoxically, they needed to understand in order to enjoy the work to the full) would have increased their sense of superiority over the people portrayed. It also offers an interesting, localized variant on the common practice in parody of having formerly elevated characters from tragedies speak in a familiar register.

Both *Jeannot et Thérèse* and *Julien et Suset* feature black characters who were at least sometimes performed in blackface—a fact that raises the question of Harpiminis’s racial ancestry—something that is of significance in the context of colonial Saint-Domingue. As I have discussed elsewhere, by the time of the second documented performance of *Harpiminis*, it was increasingly common for newspaper announcements to advertise blackface performance as a feature that would interest audiences.⁶⁶ The absence of any such indication, combined with her (mostly) “masculine”, (mostly) “white” profession, suggests that Harpiminis was portrayed as European—by default if not explicitly so. But the possibility that she was presented as a successful free woman of colour should not be ruled out. As Garrigus has pointed out, in an urban context at least, ‘free women of colour had considerably more economic independence than white women’.⁶⁷ Dominique Rogers has demonstrated that in Le Cap (and also in Port-au-Prince), it was not uncommon for free women of colour, despite their low literacy rate, to own enslaved people and property and to manage their own affairs and represent themselves before the law.⁶⁸ The majority of jobs performed by free women of colour were in the domestic sphere where they acted as midwives, cooks, seamstresses, hairdressers and so on.⁶⁹ White widows and some widows of colour quite often ran

⁶⁶ PREST J., “The Familiar Other: Blackface Performance in Creole Works from 1780s Saint-Domingue”, in Leichman J. – Bénac K. (eds.), *Colonialism and Slavery in Performance: Theatre and the Eighteenth-Century French Caribbean* (Oxford-Liverpool: 2021), 41-63.

⁶⁷ GARRIGUS J.D., *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in Saint-Domingue* (New York: 2006) 176.

⁶⁸ ROGERS D., “Réussir dans un Monde d’Hommes: les Stratégies des Femmes de Couleur du Cap-Français”, *Journal of Haitian Studies* 9:1 (Spring 2003), 40–51 (47).

⁶⁹ Rogers, “Réussir dans un Monde d’Hommes” 43.

their deceased husbands' estates (often, but not always, as an interim measure), as seems to have been the case with the aforementioned Mme Gazin.⁷⁰

Conclusion

We began with the emergence of Semiramis as a tragic hero in the early modern period. Of all the European Semiramis tragedies, Voltaire's is surely the most famous and the most influential.⁷¹ Voltaire's queen broadly fits the French tragic model—itsself inspired by Aristotle—of a distinguished but flawed protagonist caught in a dilemma of high stakes. As we have seen, the great Semiramis feels remorse for her guilty past, is suitably horrified to learn that she was on the verge of committing incest with her son (for whom her feelings were always somewhat maternal) and ultimately accepts her fate as a suitable punishment, thereby retaining—or perhaps regaining—her dignity. Voltaire's Semiramis also displays an element of vulnerability and emotionality that would have appealed to an eighteenth-century audience. Alongside tragic Semiramis, we have seen that another, overlooked version of the character existed: comic, clumsy, mediocre Semiramis in a parody by Montigny and no doubt an acutely undignified Semiramis in *Zoramis*. These alternative portrayals of the queen of Babylon did not reach as wide a contemporary audience as intended, owing to Voltaire's extensive efforts to prevent their performance; however, the publication of Montigny's parody has allowed his Semiramis to endure particularly resoundingly. Such parodies were rooted in both the French tradition of theatrical parody as a source of audience pleasure and in a contemporary debate about the strengths, and especially weaknesses, of Voltaire as a tragic playwright.

When Voltaire's *Sémiramis* reached a different audience in the French slave colony of Saint-Domingue, its significance was inevitably different. Thousands of miles away from the lively debates of contemporary Paris (and several years after the main polemic over the work itself in any case), *Sémiramis* represented to a Saint-Dominguan audience a rare example of a tragedy that, owing largely to its spectacular dimension as well as to

⁷⁰ See Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* III 1493.

⁷¹ It should be acknowledged that Metastasio's version was the source for more operatic adaptations than Voltaire's. See Niklaus, "The Significance of Voltaire's *Dissertation*" 239–240n11.

the reputation of its author, was likely to please an audience that otherwise preferred lighter works. On the one hand, *Sémiramis* was reclaimed as a particularly spectacular French work exported to the colony; on the other, its discussion of male-female roles and relations resonated in new ways in a context where women were relatively scarce and where (paradoxically) female entrepreneurship thrived in comparison with the metropole. The suggestion that the same work will have resonated differently in Saint-Domingue is also supported by the parody that emerged locally. While Parisian audiences never had the opportunity to see the parodies written for their enjoyment, still less to compare in close succession the source play (or hypotext) and its parody, audiences in Saint-Domingue were presented with a bespoke Creole parody of the work which on at least one occasion was performed with its source play. Thus another comical Semiramis emerged in the 1770s in the form of a Creole businesswoman working on the structurally unsound wharf in Port-Margot, created for the enjoyment of the theatre audience in the northern port town of Cap-Français. As was the case with Voltaire's *Semiramis*, it seems that, even in Saint-Domingue, Harpiminis's ethnic origins were of less interest than her gender. Like *Semiramis*, it appears that Harpiminis excelled in a "masculine" profession and was punished for her ruthlessness in pursuing that profession. *Harpiminis* is of considerable interest as a work that comments on one of the most important tragedies of the eighteenth century and on one of the most important figures from the ancient Middle East; it is also of considerable interest as the only known example of a Creole parody of a tragic work—and one that has, until now, remained unstudied. What I have been able to glean about *Harpiminis* in the absence of the text of the play offers new insight into a vibrant, Creole theatre tradition that responded to, but was also distinct from, its French models. Ultimately, *Harpiminis* offers a unique and distinctly Creole response to the queen of Babylon that depends for its full force on the ongoing existence of that figure in all its complexity at the same time that it expands that complexity.

9908 words including footnotes

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[Figure 1]

Fig. 1. *Les Métamorphoses de Melpomène et de Thalie ou Caractères dramatiques des comédies françaises et italienne* (Paris: 17**) Plate 15. Features costume designs for Lekain as Ninias and Dumesnil as Semiramis in Voltaire's *Sémiramis* IV.4.

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