

‘IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER’?: THE ACTRESS AS BEAUTY IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

I WILL BEGIN THIS ARTICLE with three quotations. The first is from an anonymous Spanish Jesuit priest writing in 1589:

The low women who ordinarily act are beautiful, lewd, and have bartered their virtue, and with gestures and movements of the whole body, and with voices bland and suave, with beautiful costumes, like sirens they charm and transform men into beasts and lure them the more easily to destruction as they themselves are the more wicked and lost to every sense of virtue.¹

The second is from La Mesnardière’s *Poétique* of 1640:

... l’Actrice qui pousse de tristes parolles est sçavante en son mestier; si elle sçait faire force sur les endroits pitoyables, agrandir son infortune par l’éléuation de sa voix, dépeindre ses langueurs par l’inflexion de ses tons entrecoupez de soupirs, & accommoder son geste, ses larmes & ses regards à ces sentiments lugubres, pour peu qu’elle ait de beauté, qui est le charme vniuersel qui donne la grace aux choses, il n’y aura guére de cœurs qui ne soient viuement touchez [...].²

And the third is from De Pure’s *Idée des spectacles* of 1668. The first part of this quotation is well known, the second may be less so:

Il seroit àussi à souhaiter que toutes les Comediennes fussent & jeunes & belles, & s’il se pouvoit, toûjours filles, ou du moins jamais grosses. Car outre que la fecondité de leur ventre couste à la beauté de leur visage ou de leur taille: c’est un mal qui dure plus depuis qu’il a commencé qu’il ne tarde à revenir depuis qu’il a finy. Cependant la beauté & leur jeunesse sont les deux forces d’agrément qui ne tarissent point; & par où les choses les plus inutiles, & les moins spirituelles ne laissent pas d’être agreables. Sans elles l’habileté, le merite, la hardiesse, la memoire & toutes ces parties ensemble, qui sont les principales & les essentielles de la profession, sont comme des forces desarmées, & des talens decreditez. La persuasion de l’esprit est aisée après la satisfaction des sens.³

We see, then, that for both La Mesnardière and De Pure, it is not enough for an actress to be talented, she must also be beautiful, although La Mesnardière pays rather more attention to the other aspects that go to make up a performance, particularly voice and gesture (probably summed up by De Pure’s terms ‘habileté’ and ‘merite’). Similarly, our fearful Spanish Jesuit picks up on these same component elements (beauty enhanced by costume, voice, gesture and movement), while going further than the other two in emphasising the dangerous impact their conjunction has on the members of the audience, or the male ones at least.

So, how do seventeenth-century French actresses measure up according to these criteria? And was there anything they could do to compensate if they were found to be lacking in the all-important beauty department? Of course, an actress’s appearance inevitably changed over

time, and another factor I will consider is the effect of the ageing process on career and critical reception.

The seventeenth-century actress most famed for her beauty was undoubtedly Mlle Baron. The Parfaict brothers recount how, when she was due to appear at Court, the Queen warned her ladies in waiting who all took flight, not wanting to face unwelcome competition.⁴ And Loret, in his obituary of her, praises her physical perfection in a way that is uncharacteristic of him:

Et la mort n'a point respecté
Cette singulière Beauté.
Faisant périr en sa personne,
Une grace toute mignonne,
Un air charmant, un teint de lis,
Mille & mille agrémens jolis
Qui des yeux étoient les délices,
Bref, une des rares Actrices
Qui pour notre félicité
Sur la Scène ait jamais monté.⁵

Another actress whose beauty is generally uncontested was Mlle Du Parc: 'cette belle Actrice, / Avec son port d'Impératrice' (Loret, III, 431).

Other actresses might more properly be described as 'attractive' or 'jolies' rather than beautiful.⁶ Women who fit into this category include Mlle Le Noir ('une aussy jolie petite personne qu'on pust trouver'),⁷ Mlle De Brie ('grande, bien faite, & extrêmement jolie'; Parfaict, XII, 205), 'la belle' Mlle Desurlis,⁸ Mlle Dupin ('belle & bien faite'; Parfaict, XII, 477), Mlle Raisin ('très jolie et très aimable' according to Mme de Maintenon, and with 'beaucoup d'agrémens' according to the Princesse Palatine),⁹ and perhaps also Mlle Durieu ('grande, bienfaite, & assez jolie'; Parfaict, XIV, 541).

Still others had the advantage of youth, so prized by De Pure as well as, it would seem, by Robinet. Leaving aside such child stars as Louise Beauval and Mlle Turpin,¹⁰ his favourite was undoubtedly Angélique Du Croisy, and her cross-dressed performance as Zéphire in *Psyché* left a particularly strong impression:

Mais la *Psyché*, mardy, je vis
(Dont mes yeux furent ravis
Et, comme je croy mon cœur même,
Ah! qu'elle merite qu'on l'aime!)
Une tres jeunette Beauté,
Qui peut mettre en Captivité
Le cœur le plus libre du monde,
Même, je pense, sans seconde.
Dessous l'habit de Cavalir

Elle essayait de pâlir
 Le trésor de ses divins Charmes
 Dignes, certes, des plus beaux Carmes.
 Mais, quoy que pour me duper mieux,
 Un personnage officieux
 Me présentant cette mignonne,
 Qui, comme un bel astre, rayonne.
 La traitast de jeune seigneur
 Mes yeux, en un mot, et mon cœur.
 Que ses rares appas charmerent
 Son Sexe me [declarent];
 Et j'ay repondu en deux mots
 Qui n'étoient pas trop, pour pylots:
 Ce jeune Seigneur, ce me semble
 Où l'on void ramassez, ensemble.
 Les plus doux attraits de l'amour,
 Quoy que me dise son atour
 Est une Jeune Demoiselle.
 La plus charmante et la plus belle
 Que l'on puisse voir de deux yeux,
 Chez les mortels, et chez les Dieux.
 Or, ladite beauté naissante,
 Si brillante et si ravissante,
 Est un chef d'œuvre de Mignard.
 Qui, soit qu'il travaille avec l'art,
 Ou bien, avecque la nature,
 Est nonpareil en la peinture.
 Elle merite un poeme entier
 Pour bien dignement la louer
 Dessus l'une et l'autre maniere
 Et ce que l'on convient à Moliere. (*Robinet et Laurent*, pp. 115-16)

Robinet was not alone in appreciating Angélique Du Croisy's charms, and an anonymous epigram in *La Fameuse Comédienne* describes her as follows:

Elle a la taille fort mignonne.
 Beaucoup d'esprit et bien de l'agrément.
 La bouche belle et beaucoup d'enjouement:
 Mais son papa de trop près la talonne.¹¹

Such a comment suggests there may be some justification for d'Aubignac's exhortation in *La Pratique du théâtre* that 'pour y conserver la bien-séance, ne pourront les filles monter sur le Theatre, si elles n'ont leur pere ou leur mere dans la Compagnie'.¹²

Other actresses were more nondescript, a category best personified by Mlle Bellonde, who is described by Grandval as being 'ni grande, ni petite, ni belle, ni laide' (*Parfaict*, XIII, 304). We might also include Mlle

De Villiers, of whom Tallemant says that ‘elle n’était pas trop belle’ (II, 368), even though Robinet writes in his obituary of her that:

Une Demoiselle a fait choir,
Que jadis il faisoit beau voir,
Pour sa grace & sa bonne mine [...]. (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 50)

Finally, we come to actresses of whom it was said quite definitely that they were not beautiful or even that they were ugly, where we find some surprising names. Thus, alongside Mlle Beaubour (‘intelligente, mais nullement belle’),¹³ Mlle La Grange (‘très-laide & un peu coquette’; Parfaict, XIII, 299), and Mlle Dauvilliers (‘manque de beauté’; *Fameuse Comédienne*, p. 68), we find some of the greatest actresses of the age, including Mlle Beauval (‘assez grande, bien faite, & point du tout jolie’; Parfaict, XIV, 531), Mlle Des Œillets, Mlle Molière and Mlle Champmeslé, of whom more later.

Of the actresses in this category, Mlle Dauvilliers was certainly the most unfortunate. She was not beautiful to begin with, according to the following epigram from *La Fameuse Comédienne*:

On lui croit de la chasteté;
Non que son humeur soit tigresse,
Mais quand on manque de beauté,
C’est la caution de la sagesse. (p. 68)

Then, in 1680, she was horribly disfigured by cancer of the face, forcing her to retire and take up backstage work (Parfaict, XII, 205).¹⁴ Other actresses may have been attractive in their early years, but were subsequently criticised for being past their prime — another topic I will return to later.

So, what exactly constituted a beautiful woman in seventeenth-century terms. For example, should she be tall or small? In fact, this does not seem to have been of much importance, for, as we have seen, Milles De Brie and Le Noir were both considered attractive, even though the former was tall and the latter was small. On the whole, though, the preference would seem to have been for tall women, perhaps because they appeared to best advantage on the stage. Thus, Mlle Durieu is described as being ‘grande, bienfaite, & assez jolie’ (Parfaict, XIV, 541), and Mlle Raisin as ‘belle, grande & bienfaite’ (Parfaict, XIV, 538). Mlle Des Œillets, on the other hand, is described as ‘petite, & peu jolie’ (Parfaict, XI, 52).

Of particular interest in this context are two descriptions of Mlle D’Ennebaut that conflict to such an extent that they might have been written about different people. In the ‘Avertissement’ to the works of Montfleury father and son, published in 1739, it is said that she was

'belle, petite, avoit de l'embonpoint, & chantoit avec grace' (Parfait, XII, 473). Whereas, in a series of letters written to the *Mercure* describing a number of seventeenth-century actors and usually credited to Mlle Paul Poisson, the former Angélique Du Croisy, she is said to have been 'une grande personne, fort puissante et de bonne mine', although the author does concur as to her singing ability.¹⁵ Given, though, that Mlle Poisson and Mlle D'Ennebaut were together in the Comédie-Française company from 1680 to 1684, when the latter retired,¹⁶ it is likely that the former actress is the more reliable source.

So much for height, what about that perennial problem: weight. We have just seen that for Mlle D'Ennebaut, having a certain amount of 'embonpoint' was considered to be no disadvantage to beauty. In fact, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* of 1694 defines *embonpoint* in very positive terms as 'Bon estat, ou bonne habitude de corps. Il ne se dit que des personnes un peu pleines & grasses'.¹⁷ Supporting this view is criticism levelled at women who were thought to be too thin. For example, Mlle Des Œillets is described as having been 'laide, point jeune et fort maigre' (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 82), and there is even a suggestion that Mlle De Brie might have been a little on the skinny side. Thus, Grimarest recounts how a friend of Molière's criticised his attachment to her on the grounds 'qu'elle n'est point belle, que c'est un vrai squelette; et qu'elle n'a pas le sens commun'.¹⁸

On the other hand, you could have too much of a good thing, as we see from Tallemant's comment on Mlle Bellerose: 'La Bellerose est la meilleure comédienne de Paris; mais elle est si grosse que c'est une tour' (II, 778). And Du Tralage wrote of Mlle Duclos in the following terms:

Mlle *du Clos* ou *Château-Neuf* est une grosse fille qui se porte bien, aimant la joye; on dit qu'elle sçait accorder Vénus et Bacchus; elle est assez bien faite, la peau fort blanche, elle chante un peu, mais sa voix n'est pas forte; si elle continue à engraisser, on ne la pourra souffrir dans quelques années [...].¹⁹

One complication here is that the word *taille* is used both to describe a person's height as well as, more generally, their figure. Indeed, these different usages are incorporated in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*'s definition of the term.

Taille, signifie aussi, La stature du corps. Belle taille. grande taille. mediocre, moyenne, riche taille. petite taille. il est d'une taille avantageuse. il est de la riche taille. il est de ma taille. avoir la taille vilaine. avoir la taille gastée. un habit qui fait bien la taille, qui gaste la taille. elle est grosse & courte, elle n'a point de taille.

Comments that seem to relate to height include the description of Mlle Champmeslé as having 'une taille avantageuse, bien prise & fort noble' (Parfait, XIV, 523), and, more negatively, of Mlle Molière as having 'la

taille médiocre, mais un air engageant' (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 58). Conversely, the following comments would seem to relate more to figure: on Mlle Du Parc that 'Son visage et sa riche taille / Charmèrent, dit-on, tout Versailles' (Loret, IV, 197); on Angélique Du Croisy that she had 'la taille fort mignonne' (*Fameuse Comédienne*, p. 68); and on Mlle Dupin that she had '[la] taille Poupine' (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 141).²⁰

Breaking things down further, what do our commentators have to tell us about the relative attractiveness of different body parts? For skin, of course, whiteness was *de rigueur*, and we have already seen how Mlle Baron was praised for her 'teint de lys' (Loret, III, 547), and Mlle Duclos for her 'peau fort blanche' (Du Tralage, p. 4). On the other hand, it was said of Mlle Champmeslé that, although 'le tout ensemble des traits de son visage plaisoit également à tout le monde', 'sa peau n'étoit pas blanche' (Parfaict, XIV, 523). One can only suppose that she remedied this defect on stage at least, for Pougin, writing in the nineteenth century, describes how actors were obliged:

... sous peine de paraître livides et horribles en paraissant sous les feux combinés de la rampe et du lustre, de s'enduire le visage de blanc et de rouge placée d'une certaine façon, afin de donner à leur teint l'aspect de la nature et de lui rendre la vivacité que lui ferait perdre l'éclat des lumières qui converges de tous les côtés sur eux.²¹

What better excuse to camouflage a less than perfect complexion. One of the few references to seventeenth-century stage makeup occurs in a fragment of Rotrou's *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, discovered by Jacques Scherer in 1950. Here, the actress, Marcelle, is criticised by one of her male comrades for wearing too much make-up in a way he deems unsuitable for her character. She, however, chooses to ignore him, causing Genest to comment that actresses always like to have their own way in matters of makeup and costume.²² And in Regnard's *Chinois*, Colombine accuses French actresses of wearing too much makeup, but the Parterre judges that both French and Italians are just as bad in that respect.²³

Critics also found fault with Mlle Champmeslé's eyes, which were 'extrêmement petits, & ronds' (Parfaict, XIV, 523); a defect she shared with Mlle Molière, who had 'un air engageant, quoiqu'avec de très petits yeux' (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 58). On the other hand, it is said of Mlle Raisin that 'ses yeux étoient charmans' (Parfaict, XIV, 538), and the impact of Mlle Valliot's eyes was described in the following terms: '[s]es yeux disputent fort et ferme avec Jupiter de la puissance du foudre'.²⁴

If eyes were supposed to be big, mouths were supposed to be small. Unfortunately, Mlle Molière had 'une bouche fort grande et fort plate' (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 58). The same criticism is levelled at Mlle Raisin, although in her case there were redeeming features: 'On dit

qu'elle avoit la bouche un peu grande, mais ce défaut étoit réparé par la blancheur de ses dents, qui étoient parfaites de tout part' (Parfaict, XIV, 538). Angélique Du Croisy, on the other hand, is said simply to have had 'la bouche belle' (*Fameuse comédienne*, p. 68).

On the question of Mlle Molière's features, it is interesting to see how closely the description in the *Lettres au Mercure* matches the supposed portrait given of her in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. Here, when Covielle points out that Lucile's eyes are little, the love-sick Cléonte agrees but adds that they are 'pleins de feux, les plus brillants, les plus perçants du monde'. Of her wide mouth, he asserts that 'on y voit des grâces qu'on ne voit point aux autres bouches; et cette bouche, en la voyant, inspire des désirs, est la plus attrayante, la plus amoureuse du monde'. Finally, when Covielle criticises her for being short, Cléonte agrees but adds that her figure is 'aisée et bien prise'.²⁵

With one notable exception, comparatively little is said about actresses' hair. Manon Dancourt is praised for her 'cheveux superbes' (Lyonnet, I, 423), and Mlle Bellerose is said to have 'des cheveux d'un blond ardent'.²⁶ Brunettes include Mlle Champmeslé: 'la mignarde Brune' (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 76), and Mlle Beauchamps: 'la Belle Brune' (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 61). Madeleine Béjart, of course, was a redhead, although perhaps not quite the Titian-haired beauty in whom Virginia Scott would have us believe.²⁷ Thus, in *Élomire hypocondre*, Élomire/Molière describes the creation of his company as follows:

Pour des femmes, j'eusse eu les plus belles du monde;
Mais le même refus de la brune et la blonde,
Me jeta sur la rousse, où malgré le gousset,
Grâce au poudre d'alun, je me vis satisfait.²⁸

The 'brune' here was Mlle Du Parc and the 'blonde' was Mlle De Brie; 'la rousse' was, of course, Mlle Béjart. 'Le gousset' refers to body odour, and 'poudre d'alun' could either serve as a deodorant or else as a contraceptive, giving a somewhat unsavoury *double entendre* to the use of the verb *satisfaire*.²⁹

The great exception where hair is concerned is Mlle Molière, whose 'coiffure' is mentioned by a significant number of commentators. Indeed, it appears that one of the ways in which she compensated for her comparative lack of beauty was by paying attention to her hair and costume, and it is said of her that 'personne n'a mieux sçu se mettre à l'air de son visage par l'arrangement de sa coëffure, & plus noblement par l'ajustement de son habit' (Parfaict, XI, 323). The effect was much appreciated by Robinet when she played Cléophile in *Alexandre*:

O justes Dieux, qu'elle a d'appas!

Et qui pourroit ne l'aimer pas?
 Sans rien toucher de sa coiffure
 Et de sa belle Chevelure [...].³⁰

Poor Président Lescot, who was tricked into having an affair with a prostitute disguised as Mlle Molière, found the actress's hair particularly appealing when he went to see her play *Circé*: 'Elle y avoit un certain habit de Magicienne, et une quantité de cheveux épars qui lui donnoit un grand agrément' (*La Fameuse Comédienne*, p. 52). This, of course, would almost certainly have been a wig.³¹

Despite the fact that one of the best-known descriptions of a seventeenth-century actress is that of Mlle Du Parc dancing in a skirt split to show of her thighs and her stocking tops (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 63), not much attention is paid by commentators to legs. Of course, most of the time they would have been covered, and Mlle Du Parc appears to have been the exception rather than the rule. Thus, Robinet writes of *Psyché* that Mlle De Brie:

Y fait la *Déesse Vénus*,
 Mais montrant ses jambes moins nus,
 Que ladite Beauté celeste,
 Comme étant beaucoup plus modeste [...]. (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 83)

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the dress, of the period, breasts attract significantly more attention. In fact, according to Colombine in Regnard's *Chinois*, having a good pair of breasts was an essential requirement for an actress: 'c'est l'essentiel pour une comedienne. La gorge est une partie à quoi les spectateurs s'attachent le plus, principalement messieurs du balcon, qui se mettent-là espèrs, afin d'être plus à portée' (II, 237). Actresses who fulfilled this criterion were Mlle Dupin, 'Dont le corsage est si poupin' (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 128),³² and Mlle Auzillon, who, according to Robinet, had 'fort, la Gorge, selon / Qu'une Gorge belle, me semble' (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 33). Others could remedy any deficiencies in this department by judicious use of costume, as is suggested in Regnard's *Coquette*. Here, Colombine criticises her new outfit because it makes her chest look small. Arlequin suggests her dressmaker provide 'une paire de linge', to which the latter replies that Colombine can have 'de si gros qu'elle voudra', and promises to return with 'votre manteau avec de la gorge'.³³

In fact, costume could be employed more generally as a means of compensation by actresses who were not conventionally beautiful. Thus, it is said of Mlle Des Œillets that, despite having an ugly face: 'elle se mettoit si bien, et avoit un si grand air de noblesse et d'autorité, qu'elle plaisoit toujours infiniment' (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 82). Likewise, Mlle Molière added nobility to her appearance 'par l'ajustement de son habit'

(Parfaict, XI, 323), and Grimarest comments on ‘les soins extraordinaires qu’elle prenoit à sa parure’ (p. 59). The *Lettres au Mercure* give us further information as to her fashion sense: ‘elle se mît très-extraordinairement, et d’une manière presque toujours opposée à la mode du temps’ (p. 58). Indeed, rather than following fashion, Mlle Molière set it, as is noted in the *Mercure galant* of December 1673: ‘Tous les manteaux de femmes que l’on fait à présent ne sont plus plissés; ils sont tout unis sur le corps de manière que la taille paroisse plus belle; ils ont été inventés par Mlle Molière’.³⁴ Again, Robinet was impressed, writing of her costumes as Cléophile in *Alexandre* that they were:

Semez de perles, de rubis
Et de toute la Pierrerie
Dont l’Inde brillante et fleurie,
Rien n’est si beau ni si mignon [...]. (*Continueurs*, I, 538)

Indeed, not content with mere decoration, Mlle Molière integrated attention to details of hair and costume into her acting style, as we see from the following, somewhat defensive, appreciation:

... si Mademoiselle Moliere retouche quelquefois à ses cheveux, si elle raccommode ses nœuds ou ses pierreries, ses petites façons cachent une satire judicieuse & naturelle. Elle entre par-là dans le ridicule des femmes qu’elle veut jouer [...].³⁵

An actress could also make up for her physical defects in more indefinable ways. For example, it is said of Mlle Des Œillets that she was ‘une très excellente, et même gracieuse comédienne, quoique laide, point jeune et fort maigre, mais, malgré cela, fort pleine d’agrément’ (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 82). This is confirmed by Raymond Poisson, who wrote of her death as follows:

Cette perte est grande, la Des Œillets étoit une merveille du Théâtre, quoiqu’elle ne fut ni belle ni jeune, elle en étoit un des principaux ornemens.

Et justement on dira d’elle,
Qu’elle n’étoit pas belle au jour,
Comme elle étoit à la chandelle
Mais sans avoir donné d’amour,
Ni sans être jeune ni belle.
Elle charmoit toute la Cour.³⁶

The word *grâce* and its derivatives are also used to explain the charm of other less than beautiful actresses. For example, Mlle Molière is described as doing everything ‘avec grâce’ (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 58), and Mlle Guyot, whose appearance is passed over in silence, is said to have possessed ‘tant de grace [...] / Que, par tout, elle a fait grand bruit’ (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 142). Similarly, after listing her physical defects, the Parfaict brothers note of Mlle Champmeslé that these were ‘pour ainsi

dire, effacés pars les graces naturelles répandues sur toute sa personne, & le son gracieux & touchant de sa voix' (XIV, 523). It is also encouraging to find intelligence being given as a compensatory attribute for Mlle Beaubour ('intelligente, mais nullement belle'; Lyonnet, I, 109), and as an adjunct to the beauty of Mlle Beauchâteau ('[elle] joignoit à de la beauté, beaucoup d'esprit'; Parfaict, IX, 413).

Mlle Champmeslé is, in fact, an interesting case, for the assumption of her being ugly is largely based on a comment by Mme de Sévigné (who was not entirely impartial given that her son was having an affair with the actress) that 'ma belle-fille [...] est laide de près'.³⁷ And although the Parfaict brothers mention her bad skin and small eyes, they add that 'le tout ensemble des traits de son visage plaisoit également à tout le monde' (XIV, 523). Robinet is also appreciative of the actress's charms, describing her on two occasions as being 'pouponne'. For example, on 28 September 1669, he wrote that:

On se sent la sang tout meslé
Voyant la belle Champmeslé,
Aimable en toute sa personne,
Et si bien faite et si pouponne.³⁸

But, as we have just seen the Parfaict brothers observe, Mlle Champmeslé's strength lay above all in her voice: that other tool of the actor's trade, so much appreciated by La Mesnardière and our anonymous Spanish Jesuit. Even Mme de Sévigné was forced to admit of her son's mistress that 'quand elle dit des vers elle est adorable' (I, 417). A fuller appreciation of her vocal skills is given in the *Entretiens galans*:

Le récit des comédiens est une espèce de chant, et vous m'avouerez bien que la Champmeslé ne nous plairoit pas tant, si elle avoit une voix moins agréable. Mais elle la sçait conduire avec beaucoup d'art, et elle y donne à propos des inflexions si naturelles, qu'il semble qu'elle ait véritablement dans le cœur une passion, qui n'est que dans sa bouche [...].³⁹

Other actresses praised for their voices are Mlle Dangeville, who 'avait pour elle le charme de l'organe' (Lyonnet, I, 425), and Mimi Dancourt, who had 'un organe pur, vibrant et mordant au besoin' (Lyonnet, I, 423-24). Not all so were so fortunate. For example, Mlle Bellonde had 'un accent provincial approchant du gascon' (Du Tralage, p. 3), and it said of Mlle Dupin that 'elle grasseyoit, & parloit du nez' (Parfaict, XII, 531). These, though, were all otherwise attractive women. Poor Mlle Beauval, on the other hand, had neither face nor voice to recommend her, leading to dissatisfaction in the highest places:

[Le] Monarque parut toujours mécontent de la figure & de la vois de cette Comédienne. [...] Mademoiselle Beauval étoit assez grande, bien faite, & point du

tout jolie. Sa vois étoit un peu aigre, & sur la fin de sa carrière Théâtrale, elle devint enrouée. (Parfaict, XIV, 531)

How, then, did she become one of the greatest actors of the age? Perhaps looks and voice were not as important for comedy as they were for tragedy, or for soubrettes as opposed to heroines or *ingénues*.

What of more temporary inconveniences? Economic necessity meant that actresses could not avoid performing while pregnant.⁴⁰ However, despite De Pure's repugnance, this does not appear to have posed a problem for other contemporary commentators in the sense that they go all but unremarked. Thus, the only reference I have found is when Robinet writes of *Laodice* that 'Dennebaut, malgré sa grossesse, / Y fait des mieux une Princesse'.⁴¹ As for the Italians, as Colombine remarks in *Les Chinois*: 'tout le monde sait que Marinette & Colombine ont des enfants tous les neuf mois' (II, 257); a fact that was occasionally turned to comic advantage by the troupe's playwrights.⁴²

Menstruation was apparently also thought to have a detrimental effect on a woman's appearance. Thus, the *Recueil Conrart* (XVIII, 33) contains a somewhat distasteful verse addressed to Mlle Beaupré, entitled 'À la Beaupré, comédienne, qui avait mauvaise couleur parce qu'elle avait ses fleurs':

Beaupré, dont la couleur modère mes ardeurs,
Que votre sort vous rend bien différent des autres!
Ils ne sont jamais beaux que quand ils ont leurs fleurs,
Vous ne l'êtes jamais quand vous avez les vôtres.⁴³

If youth and beauty were so prized, what became of actresses when they grew older? Of course, some actresses aged better than others; for example, Lyonnet notes of Mlle Dangeville that she was still beautiful enough to play Venus at fifty (I, 425). However, the real star where ageing well is concerned was Mlle De Brie, of whom the Parfaict brothers note that 'la nature lui accorda le don de paroître toujours avec un air de jeunesse', before relating the following anecdote, which they credit to Du Tralage:

Quelques années avant sa retraite du Théâtre, ses Camarades l'engagerent à céder son rôle d'Agnès à Mademoiselle Du Croisy, & cette dernière d'étant présentée pour le jouer, tout le Parterre demanda si hautement Mademoiselle De Brie, qu'on fut forcé de l'aller chercher chez elle, & on l'obligea de jouer dans son habit de Ville. (XII, 472)⁴⁴

She apparently continued to play the role until her retirement at the age of fifty-five (not sixty-five as the Parfaict brother would have it), and *La Fameuse Comédienne* confirms that she remained physically attractive into her later years:

Il faut qu'elle ait été charmante,
 Puisqu'aujourd'hui, malgré ses ans,
 À peine, des charmes naissants
 Égalent sa beauté mourante. (p. 67)

However, few actresses were as lucky, and commentators could be hard on faded beauties. For example, Mlle Valliot was once '[une] personne aussy bien faite qu'on en pust voir', and had attracted crowds to the theatre; but by the end of her career, according to the ever spiteful Tallemant, she was a 'vieille décripité' and 'ne valoit plus rien' (I, 515-16; II, 774). Similarly, by 1649, Mlle Beaupré was 'vieille et laide' (Tallemant, II, 776), and listed among Mlle Des Œillets's defects is the fact that she was 'point jeune' (*Lettres au Mercure*, p. 82). Another sufferer in this respect was Madeleine Béjart. Undoubtedly attractive at the outset of her career, by 1663, her age (forty-six) was being used as a means of mocking Molière. In the court performance of *Les Fâcheux*, she had appeared as a nymph in an open shell, and Donneau De Visé's *Vengeance des marquis* includes the following exchange:

PHILIPIN Il me semble que je suis aux *Fâcheux*, et que je vois sortir d'une
 coquille une belle et jeune nymphe.
 ALCISTE Il me souvient de cette nymphe, on croyoit tromper nos yeux en nous
 la faisant voir, et nous faire trouver beaucoup de jeunesse dans un
 vieux poisson.⁴⁵

And an earlier comment in the same play would seem to be a dig, not only at Madeleine, but also at the other actresses in the troupe.

À propos du *Prince jaloux*, que dites-vous de celle qui en joue la première amante? Le Peintre dit qu'il faut de gros hommes pour faire les rois dans les autres troupes; mais dans la sienne, il ne faut que des vieilles femmes, pour jouer les premiers rôles puisqu'une jeune personne bien faite n'aurait pas bonne grâce.⁴⁶

This was another area where make-up could be of some help, as is shown by the following account of an eighteenth-century dancer:

On raconte que Mlle Guimard, la célèbre danseuse de l'Opéra, dut à cet art le moyen d'être toujours jeune et de paraître, pendant tout le cours de sa carrière, exactement ce qu'elle était au temps de ses débuts; elle avait, datant de cette époque, un portrait qui la représentait dans tout l'éclat et la fraîcheur de sa jeunesse. Ce portrait, placé dans sa loge, lui servait de modèle lorsqu'elle se disposait à paraître en scène; elle s'était accoutumée à le copier grâce à l'aide de tous les procédés en usage pour ce genre de toilette, et son expérience était devenue telle que, ayant beau vieillir, elle trouvait moyen de faire reflleurir sur son visage les grâces de son printemps. On assure qu'elle resta jeune ainsi, pour le public, jusqu'au jour de sa retraite. Mais il est probable que l'opération devait exiger un temps considérable. (Pougin, p. 495)

Finally, did the actresses' charms have the kind of effect on men that contemporary critics so feared? For the attitude expressed by our anonymous Spanish Jesuit was to appear in France with still more vigour in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. For example, in 1671, Voisin wrote of the actress that: 'La nudité de son sein, son visage couvert de peinture et de mouches, ses œillades lascives, ses paroles amoureuses, ses ornemens affetez, et tout cet attirail de lubricité, sont des filets où les plus résolues se trouvent pris'.⁴⁷ Similarly, the anonymous author of the *Description de la vie et mœurs, de l'exercice et l'état des filles de l'Opéra* described in the 1690s how such women were:

... considérables par la grâce et la beauté de leurs personnes, par la magnificence de leurs habits et de tous leurs atours, par la tendresse de leurs voix charmantes, et par l'expression naïve et plaisante, avec laquelle tous leurs gestes, toutes leurs postures et toutes leurs démarches contribuent à se faire admirer des spectateurs.

Here too, though, the fascination was mingled with horror, and he worked himself up into a frenzy as he warned against 'ces filles de Babylone', 'ces sirènes dont parle Isaïe, qui habitent les temples de la volupté, ces basilics qui empoisonnent et tuent les âmes par les oreilles'.⁴⁸

A previously overlooked source in this respect is Robinet's letters, which frequently present imagined collective male responses to the actresses in question. These range from weak puns like that on Mlle Beaulieu's name ('Et que maints en lorgnant ce Beau Lieu, / Posteront volontiers leur cœur en si beau Lieu!'; *Continueurs*, II, 283-84) to more elaborate fantasies. He sometimes pretends that all the men in the audience are ready to fall in love with the woman they have been watching, whether it be Mlle D'Ennebaut in Boyer's *Atalante*:

Qu'en dût-on, mille fois, mourir,
On seroit tout prest de courir,
Dans l'aimable Lice, avec elle
Ma croyance, du moins, est telle. (*Robinet et Laurent*, pp. 75-76)

or Mlle Dupin in Boursault's *Germanicus*:

La Dupin, à taille Poupine,
Y fait le rôle d'Agripine,
D'une si charmante façon,
Qu'elle prend à son ameçon,
Les cœurs de tous ceux qui la voyent. (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 141)⁴⁹

This supposed collective response is frequently represented by the use of 'vous' and is always gendered as male, despite the fact that Robinet's letters are addressed to Madame and there were no doubt

significant numbers of women among his reading public. For example, he writes of Mlle D'Ennebaut in Thomas Corneille's *Antiochus* as follows:

Elle vous réduit à l'extase
 Par ses appas & ses discours,
 Et sçait dans de feintes Amours
 En inspirer de véritables
 Par ses charmes les plus aimables. (*Continueurs*, I, 924)⁵⁰

Sometimes Robinet imagines the actresses playing their stage roles in real life, as with Mlle de Molière, who played a confidante in Pierre Corneille's *Attila*: 'Et maint (le cas est évident) / Voudroit en être CONFIDANT' (*Continueurs*, II, 724). Elsewhere, he imagines the audience longing to imitate the male characters and inhabit the world of the play. However, in the following quotation, this is as much a reflection of the skill of the male actors as it is of the charms of Mlle De Brie as Donneau De Visé's *Délie*. This is also, incidentally, a good example of the *vous* phenomenon:

Un Licidas, un Céliante,
 Avec leur manière touchante,
 Vous font envie à tous momens
 De devenir, comm'eux, Amans,
 Et la beauté de leur Délie,
 Qui sous son Empire les lie,
 Vous fait partager leurs soupirs
 Et faire avec eux des dézirs. (*Continueurs*, II, 1075)

Mlle Molière displayed her 'appas séducteurs' as Orphise in the same play, causing Robinet to conclude of himself and the other spectators as follows:

Et pour vous dire ingénument
 Dessus ce point mon sentiment,
 On embrasseroit des Bergères
 Très volontiers sur les Fougères. (*Continueurs*, II, 1075-76)

To conclude, therefore, we see that, in the seventeenth century, some actresses succeeded, temporarily at least, thanks to their youth, and that others succeeded thanks to their beauty, but that a lack of beauty did not necessarily debar an actress from theatrical success, despite what De Pure, and, to a lesser extent, La Mesnardière, would have us believe. Particularly since there was much an actress could do to enhance her appearance by judicious choices in hair, costume and make-up. The ability to move one's spectators, a good voice, a gift for comedy or that indefinable quality, 'charm', could also compensate for less than regular features, a tendency to put on or lose weight, or even, in a very few cases,

the onset of wrinkles. That Robinet, at least, was aware of all the diverse elements at the actress's disposal is clear from the following account of Mlle Desurlis as Venus:

Et la Déesse qui fait tout,
 Dans la Piece, de bout, en bout,
 Est par la belle *Desurlie* .
 (De charmes, comme Elle, remplie)
 Portraite si fidèlement.
 En Appas, Discours, Ornement,
 Que, sans que l'erreur fust extrême.
 Je la prendrois pour Elle-même. (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 66)

Unlike the anonymous Jesuit with whom we began, or the critic of opera girls who expressed his horror in almost identical terms, or Voisin who echoed the Jesuit's fear of the actress's charms, Robinet, at least, was able to perceive the actress and her attributes in a positive light: as an adornment of the stage, rather than as a siren luring the hapless male spectator to his perdition.

University of Durham

¹ In Rosamond Gilder, *Enter the Actress: the First Women in the Theatre* (London, Bombay, Sidney: George G. Harrap, 1931), p. 60.

² Hippolyte Jules Pilet de La Mesnardière, *La Poétique* (Paris: Antoine de Sommerville, 1640; repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1972), pp. 86-87.

³ Michel de Pure, *Idée des spectacles* (Paris: P. Brunet, 1668), pp. 170-71.

⁴ Claude et François Parfaict, *Histoire du theatre françois depuis son origine jusqu'à present*, 13 vols (Amsterdam and Paris: P. G. Le Mercier & Saillant, 1735-49; repr. in 3 vols. Geneva: Slatkine, 1967), IX, 155. The Parfaict brothers can have had no direct knowledge of the people and events they describe, nor do they always give their sources, although these can sometimes be determined. Their assertions must, therefore, be treated with a degree of caution.

⁵ Jean Loret, *La Muze historique*, ed. by J. Ravenol. Éd. V. de la Pelouze and Ch.-L. Livet, 4 vols (Paris: Daffis, 1857-91), I, 547.

⁶ This distinction is an interesting one, and is analysed by Michael Moriarty in his chapter on Méré in *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), where he distinguishes between *beauté* and *agrément*. He sums up Méré's argument as follows: 'In other words "on loue les plus belles femmes, mais on aime les plus jolies" [...]; the context shows that to be "jolie" is an effect of *agrément* rather than *beauté*' (p. 102). The message to women is that men are more likely to stay with them if they are agreeable rather than just beautiful. This would hardly seem to be relevant in the context of this discussion, since we are concerned with women as objects of admiration rather than as potential life partners. However, a different tone does appear to be employed by the commentators in respect of women described as 'jolie' rather than beautiful, the comment about Mlle Baron's 'Mille & mille agréments jolis' notwithstanding.

- ⁷ Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux, *Historiettes*, ed. by Antoine Adam, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), II, 774.
- ⁸ *Le Théâtre et l'opéra vus par les gazetiers Robinet et Laurent (1670-1678)*, ed. by William Brooks (Paris-Seattle-Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1993), p. 66.
- ⁹ Pierre Mélèse, *Répertoire analytique des documents contemporains d'information et de critique concernant le théâtre à Paris sous Louis XIV, 1659-1715* (Paris: Droz, 1934), p. 93.
- ¹⁰ See Jan Clarke, 'De Louison à Fanchon: des enfants acteurs et leurs costumes chez Molière et à l'Hôtel Guénégaud', *Le Nouveau Moliériste*, IV-V (1998-99), 171-90.
- ¹¹ *Les Intrigues de Molière et celles de sa femme, ou la Fameuse Comédienne, histoire de La Guérin*, ed. by Charles-Louis Livet (Paris: Isidore Liseux, 1877), p. 68.
- ¹² François Hédélin d'Aubignac, *La Pratique du théâtre* (1715), ed. by H. J. Neuschäfer (Geneva: Slatkine, 1971), p. 354.
- ¹³ Henry Lyonnet, *Dictionnaire des comédiens français*, 2 vols (Paris and Geneva: Librairie de l'art du théâtre, 1902-08; repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1969), I, 109. Clearly, the same reservations apply for Lyonnet as for the Parfaict brothers.
- ¹⁴ Nor did Mlle Dauvilliers's troubles end there, for her husband apparently went mad and died in Charenton ten years later (Parfaict, XIV, 300).
- ¹⁵ *Lettres au Mercure sur Molière, sa vie, ses œuvres et les comédiens de son temps*, ed. by Georges Monval (Geneva: Slatkine, 1969), p. 41. Also in Lyonnet, *Dictionnaire*, I, 503. These letters are used extensively by Lyonnet, although without being cited as a source.
- ¹⁶ Georges Mongrédien and Jean Robert, *Les Comédiens français du XVII^e siècle: dictionnaire biographique* (Paris: CNRS, 1981), p. 96.
- ¹⁷ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 2 vols (Paris: Coignard, 1694).
- ¹⁸ Grimarest, *La Vie de M. de Molière* (1705), ed. by Georges Mongrédien (Paris: Michel Brient, 1955), p. 109.
- ¹⁹ Du Tralage, *Notes et documents sur l'histoire des théâtres de Paris au XVII^e siècle* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1969), p. 4.
- ²⁰ According to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, *poupin* actually means 'Propre d'une propreté affecté'. Robinet is probably using it here not only for the sake of the rhyme, but also because of its similarity to *poupon*: literally 'Jeune enfant qui a le visage plein et potelé', but seemingly used as a general term of approval of more youthful charms. I am grateful to Dr Bill Brooks for alerting me as to this point.
- ²¹ Arthur Pougin, *Dictionnaire historique et pittoresque du théâtre et des arts qui s'y rattachent*, (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1885), p. 355.
- ²² Rotrou, *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, ed. by François Bonfils and Emmanuelle Héning (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), pp. 148-49.
- ²³ In Evariste Gherardi, *Le Théâtre italien*, 6 vols (Paris: Briasson, 1741; repr. in 3 vols, Geneva: Slatkine, 1969), IV, 259-60.
- ²⁴ *Le Testament de Gaultier-Garguille*, in Léopold Lacour, *Les Premières Actrices françaises* (Paris: Librairie française, 1921), p. 115.
- ²⁵ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), II, 749.
- ²⁶ Paul Tallemant, in Lacour, *Les Premières Actrices françaises*, p. 125.
- ²⁷ Virginia Scott, *Molière: a Theatrical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 32.
- ²⁸ Le Boulanger de Chalussay, *Élomire hypocondre* (Paris: C. de Sercy, 1670); in Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Couton, II, 1269.

²⁹ Ibid., II, 1557, n. 2.

³⁰ In James de Rothschild, *Les Continueurs de Loret*, 2 vols (Paris: D Morgand & Ch. Fatout, 1881-82), I, 538.

³¹ Wigs were probably worn by actresses far more than has generally been supposed. For example, wigs were provided for both the female singer and the young actress playing Louison in *Le Malade imaginaire* in 1674 (Jan Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume Two: the Accounts Season by Season* (Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), pp. 224, 232).

³² See n. 20 above.

³³ In Gherardi, *Théâtre italien*, III, 194-95.

³⁴ In Pierre Mélése, *Le Théâtre et le public à Paris sous Louis XIV, 1659-1715* (Paris: Droz, 1934), p. 173.

³⁵ *Entretiens galans*, II, 95-96; in Mélése, *Le Théâtre et le public*, pp. 194-95.

³⁶ 'Lettre de Raymond Poisson, à M. de Mériille, premier Valet de Chambre de Monsieur', in Parfaict, XI, 52-54.

³⁷ Madame de Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. by Roger Duchêne, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1972-78), I, 417. Madame de Sévigné was, nonetheless, full of praise for Mlle Champmeslé's acting ability (see n. 50 below).

³⁸ In Mélése, *Répertoire analytique*, p. 81. He uses the same term on 8 March 1670 (*Robinet et Laurent*, p. 33). On the meaning of *pouponne*, see n. 20.

³⁹ In Mélése, *Théâtre et public*, p. 194.

⁴⁰ See Jan Clarke, 'Molière's Actresses: Birth, Death and Other Inconveniences', *Women and Theatre Occasional Papers*, 3 (1996), pp. 1-15.

⁴¹ In Mélése, *Répertoire analytique*, p. 83.

⁴² See Jan Clarke, 'The Wit and Wisdom of Colombine', in *Les Femmes au Grand Siècle, Le Baroque: musique et littérature, Musique et liturgie*, ed. by David Wetsel, Frédéric Canovas, Christine Probes and Buford Norman (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2003), pp. 208-09.

⁴³ In Lacour, *Les Premières Actrices françaises*, p. 144.

⁴⁴ This anecdote is not, however, to be found in Du Tralage's *Notes et documents*.

⁴⁵ In Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Couton, I, 1106.

⁴⁶ Ibid., I, 1104

⁴⁷ *La Défense du traité de Monseigneur le prince de Conti touchant la comédie et les spectacles, ou la Réfutation d'un livre intitulé: Dissertation sur la condamnation des rheatres* (Paris, 1671), in Henry Phillips, *The Theatre and its Critics in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 188). On the actress as temptress generally, see Phillips, *The Theatre and its Critics*, pp. 187-88, where he concludes ironically that 'An actress, then, sins against the natural state of her sex: she is not only responsible for the thoughts of lust she provokes in her audience but is guilty of mass adultery!' (p. 188).

⁴⁸ Louis Ladvoat, *Lettres sur l'Opéra à l'abbé Dubos suivies de Description de la vie et mœurs, de l'exercice et l'état des filles de l'Opéra*, ed. by Jérôme de La Gorce (Cahors: Cicero, 1993), p. 77. According to La Gorce, the author of the *Description* may well have been the abbé de Vassetz (p. 15).

⁴⁹ On *poupine*, see n. 20.

⁵⁰ We should not, however, forget that actresses could arouse extreme emotional reactions in women, too, as is suggested by Mme de Sévigné's account of Mlle Champmeslé's appearance in Thomas Corneille's *Ariane* (I, 469).