

Marcie Ray

COQUETTES,

WIVES, AND

WIDOWS

Gender Politics in French Baroque Opera and Theater

Coquettes, Wives, and Widows



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Gender Politics in French Baroque
Opera and Theater

Marcie Ray



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For Ben

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All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

The narrator of André Campra's cantata entitled *Les Femmes* (*Women*, 1708) characterizes his tragic love life as a shipwreck. To churning rhythms in the accompaniment, he laments that love's winds and storms have long agitated him. Fleeing from his past mistakes, he seeks tranquil shores far from affairs of the heart. As he sobs through slow melismatic passages, he denigrates love, wailing that its chains weigh upon an unhappy heart. Moreover, the troubling power of women threatens him. The narrator claims that women have usurped authority in courtship, becoming formidable queens who tyrannize men. In turn, men have debased themselves, transforming into their beloveds' besotted slaves. In quick, incisively articulated phrases, he condemns the courtship games that women play and disparages the stereotypical roles they portray from the coquette to the prude. He argues that the flirt betrays men, while the chaste woman makes men desperate. Jealous women inspire men to chafe at what they should adore. The beautiful woman is capricious, the intelligent woman is bold, and the indolent woman is boring. To escape the pain that inevitably follows love, he prays for indifference to all women. He concludes his tirade against love and the "deadly sex," bidding them both a final farewell.

This short musical work, comprised of four recitatives and three airs, points in miniature to many of the issues that this book addresses in its investigation of full-length musical and theatrical works. *Coquettes, Wives, and Widows* examines how composers and librettists grappled with issues first raised in Parisian salons and female-authored literature, in which women imagined new, more flexible roles for themselves in courtship and wedlock. It analyzes comic spectacles to show that plots about love and marriage from 1701 to 1745 portray a complicated web of ideological positions, especially with regard to women. It argues that these plots furnished an important vehicle for negotiating emerging legal, social, and cultural formulations of love and marriage, as well as women's place in the cultural imagination and social hierarchy, which had become contested terrain in the previous century.

In the mid-seventeenth century, women began to lead salons, in which primarily aristocratic men and women reimaged noble comportment and manners; critiqued contemporary literature and poetry; and debated moral philosophy. These female-led gatherings emboldened some women to engage in other intellectual pursuits, including writing fiction.¹ Such literature often focused on courtship, charting new, expanded roles for women. To appeal to the wide readership of these first novels, some male authors also focused on love.² The relationship, however, between female-authored fiction and subsequent male-authored theatrical works is complex. Composer Jean-Baptiste Lully and librettist Philippe Quinault's operatic collaborations emerged as the salon's female-centered ideas became unfashionable and as Louis XIV reached his majority, at which point he brooked no challenges to his authority—an authority often represented in political metaphors with the king representing the male head of household. The theater became an important space to stage his royal power.³ Quinault, for instance, granted male characters the ultimate control in his libretti, even though he matured as a writer in female-led salons.⁴ Contemporary playwrights such as Molière, furthermore, hastened the decline of salon women's influence with his satires on women who desired cultural and intellectual influence in plays such as *Les Précieuses ridicules* (*The Affected Ladies*, 1659) and *Les Femmes savantes* (*The Learned Women*, 1672).

By the turn of the eighteenth century, writers of all kinds acknowledged that women were important readers and spectators. Early eighteenth-century composers in particular appealed to women as an influential constituency through continued promulgation of love plots. Yet at the same time, authors of all kinds also continued the late-seventeenth-century tendency to satirize women's attempts to attain cultural authority. In *Coquettes, Wives, and Widows*, I argue that early to mid-eighteenth-century French comedies and musical spectacles about love rewrite the progressive themes that emerged from the salon fifty years before. Composers, librettists, and dramatists performed their own critical readings of courtship and marriage to return to the values of the male-dominated culture. While only chapter 4 treats themes developed specifically in the Parisian salons, all of the chapters show that stage works responded to salon women's arguments against marriage by concluding that wedlock is actually in a woman's best interest. These spectacles all confirm the worst ideas about women to insist that they needed the institution of marriage to protect themselves from their own immorality and foolishness. Such works shame, banish, and discipline “unruly” female characters who dared to pursue marriages based on affection or even avoid

marriage altogether.⁵ Librettists paraded around the rule breakers to confirm that society still required strict rules about class demarcations, femininity, and sexuality. Librettists and dramatists could caricature, misrepresent, and exhaust empathy for disobedient female characters to make villains of all women. Through these maneuvers, they could distract and mislead readers and audiences from women's contemporary critical perspectives on their longstanding subordination. Without an understanding of women's position at this time, the works investigated here seem merely to promulgate longstanding stereotypes of women as fickle, irrational, greedy, and manipulative. In the context of women's roles in seventeenth-century salons and literature, however, it becomes clear that these libretti repudiate women's gains in cultural authority that began in Parisian salons.

Musicologists working on women's characterization in opera have long deliberated whether female operatic characters symbolize women's subjugation or empowerment. Catherine Clément's classic feminist analysis inaugurated these studies, investigating why so many women must die in the most beloved operas. For her, opera held no liberation for women: "they suffer, they cry, they die."⁶ Some musicologists continued Clément's line of thinking, showing the ways in which music, in addition to the libretto, fueled a heroine's demise.⁷ Others, however, responded to Clément by finding spaces in opera where women might have achieved some measure of power. Some looked to places in the music where operatic heroines seemed liberated, even for brief moments, from the standard operatic or cultural conventions—areas where their voices or themes exemplified empowerment through music.⁸ Other scholars would indicate how this power on stage could translate to agency off stage for the women who performed the roles.⁹ The diva's cultural power, however, spurred critics to try to rein it in.¹⁰ Yet other scholars would show how the visual aspects of the operatic spectacle could contribute to (or undermine) the audience's impression of a character's agency.¹¹

Fewer projects focus on feminist analyses of comic characters, although Mozart's comic heroines are an important exception. Wye Allanbrook observes the way that Mozart grants agency to Zerlina even as she teases her lover to beat her for her indiscretions.¹² Mary Hunter believes that while Mozart may grant his lower-class female characters rhetorical competence, he also trivializes or diminishes their earthier sexuality to contain its threat.¹³ Kristi Brown-Montesano's work is perhaps most similar to *Coquettes, Wives, and Widows*. She encourages her reader to see stereotypes such as the coquette and spinster as both representations of old fears about femininity and the anxieties of a particular time and place.¹⁴

Like the studies above, twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminism inform this study. Yet, the methodology is also grounded in an early modern context, focusing on several central issues of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French women-centered thought and literary experiments, particularly in its consideration of women's roles in courtship and marriage. Early modern French women began to desire greater authority in courtship and marital negotiations, especially as their rights in marriage and the family diminished under the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century law. Although progressive ideas about women existed in earlier times, seventeenth-century women began voicing these concerns in greater numbers and with greater visibility, particularly as they embarked upon literary endeavors that reached national and even international audiences.¹⁵ These ideas shape how I employ a feminist lens.

While *feminism* per se is ahistorical to this era, several scholars nevertheless use this term to understand pro-woman early modern thought. Joan Kelly's work argues that early modern women's defense of their sex may be called "early feminism."¹⁶ Kelly identifies the fifteenth century as the moment during which women began writing feminist theory instead of men writing on women's behalf, launching what is known as the *querelle des femmes* (quarrel about women).¹⁷ Kelly points to the quarrel as "the vehicle through which most early feminist thinking evolved."¹⁸ Literary scholar Joan DeJean argues that mid-seventeenth-century salon women extended the debate. She claims that seventeenth-century female writers invented literary genres to treat their new realities, and, importantly for this study, she shows that marriage was one of the terrains upon which women enacted their feminist critiques.¹⁹ She claims these endeavors amounted to political protest: "Affairs of the heart are portrayed as indissociable from affairs of the state."²⁰

While feminist analyses are abundant in early modern literary studies, feminist musicological research on seventeenth-century French opera is still relatively new. Patricia Howard was one of the first musicologists to tackle women's representation in French Baroque opera. She has shown that although librettist Philippe Quinault began his literary career under feminist patronage, his libretti for composer Jean-Baptiste Lully are replete with destructive images of women.²¹ Marilyn K. Browne later revised some of the premises in Howard's work, arguing that the representations Howard found regressive were instead very conventional portraits of aristocratic love.²²

Feminist scholarship on French Baroque music is not limited to portrayals of women. Georgia Cowart has shown that music critics deployed gendered rhetoric to characterize opera's vices and virtues. Catherine Gordon-Seifert,

furthermore, reveals how mid-seventeenth-century serious songs offer insight into contemporary conceptions of love, relationships, and women's position in society.²³

In addition to contributing to emerging feminist research in French Baroque music, *Coquettes, Wives, and Widows* will take a broader approach to the study of genre than much musicological work on this period.²⁴ Most musicological endeavors in the French Baroque focus on the output of composers Jean-Baptiste Lully, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and, increasingly, André Campra, all of whom wrote for the Opéra.²⁵ This book does indeed consider the works of all three to some extent, but it also contributes to an understanding of musical spectacles by other composers and librettists in the early eighteenth century, particularly those operas performed at the two stages known together as the *théâtres de la foire* (fairground theaters), later renamed the Opéra-Comique. Around the dawn of the new millennium studies of these popular entertainments have begun to flourish.²⁶ Few offer hermeneutic interpretations. The field has generally privileged the study of *tragédies en musique* (operas, or tragedies in music) over comedy for a number of possible reasons. Quinault's libretti and Lully's scores were printed in close proximity to productions, are easily available, and were somewhat more stable texts than the improvised *commedia dell'arte*-derived genres at the Comédie-Italienne and the *théâtres de la foire*. The *tragédie en musique* was also more prestigious since it was protected by a patent, or *privilege*, signed by Louis XIV. On the contrary, the *théâtres de la foire* operated without such a privilege. The *tragédie en musique* might also have held more interest to musicologists because Lully's operas coincided with the height of Louis XIV's majority, contributed to some complex negotiations of absolutism, and maintained a contentious relationship to spoken tragedy in the golden age of French Classicism, thereby playing a role in the debate known as the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns. Finally, Lully and Rameau's *tragédies en musique* featured newly composed music. In contrast, librettists and music arrangers for *opéras-comiques* (comic operas), as the genre performed at the *théâtres de la foire* became known, initially adapted preexisting popular tunes, fitting them with new verses. For my purposes, however, the comic mode can be especially illuminating in its treatment of women; unlike in tragedy where a strong-willed woman must either become subservient to men or die (with a few exceptions, such as in Lully's *Armide* and Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée*), comedy offers multiple potential destinies for women.²⁷

This book also seeks to fill a gap in our understanding of the decades between 1701 and 1745. In general, scholars have been more interested in

the eras that bookend this period. Indeed, James R. Anthony has characterized the Opéra in this period as a “graveyard” for operatic entertainment since few new works after Lully’s death until those of Rameau survived more than one season.²⁸ Musicologists have devoted considerable attention to musical spectacles intended for performance during the height of Louis XIV’s reign.²⁹ These studies largely concern the ways in which musical spectacles contributed to or resisted absolutist politics or treat formal matters regarding the development of the *tragédie en musique*. Musicologists have also studied staged musical works from the 1750s and beyond because this era marks a turn toward sentimental family dramas and Enlightenment philosophy.³⁰

The period from 1701 to 1745 charts different dramatic territory. The musical spectacles of the early eighteenth century turn away from aristocratic entertainments that aggrandized Louis XIV. Fifty-eight years into his reign (and forty out from under his mother’s Regency), the king was no longer as invested in the theatrical life of his court perhaps as a result of old age, illness, and increasing religious devotion. The Sun King’s young nobility began to create a “shadow court” in Paris, and operatic production moved from court to Paris, where artists began to appeal specifically to those whom they expected to rule following the king’s death.³¹ To attract an audience that was seeking to distance itself from the Crown, composers and librettists turned away from traditional heroic themes that served as vehicles for royal propaganda toward a *galant* aesthetic that invited utopian visions of equality and freedom. In particular, Cowart shows how early eighteenth-century Parisian spectacles parodied ballets from early in Louis XIV’s reign to subvert their discourse of absolutism.³² To serve new spectators, dramatists created new genres from the *opéra-ballet* to *opéras-comiques*. Apart from Cowart’s studies, scholars have devoted less attention to staged musical works in the early eighteenth century, and rarely is the focus specifically on love even though the works turn increasingly upon themes of love.³³

Love plots belonged to all theaters in this era, exploding onto the stage in all venues and genres, much to the consternation of conservative critics from Jansenist sympathizers to academicians.³⁴ This era witnessed a critical debate about the morality of the theater, and critics from Blaise Pascal to Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that theatrical portraits of love could inspire the degeneration of the entire nation.³⁵ Thus, the critical climate frames this book.

It also charts the changing ideas about love and marriage occurring off-stage. Innovations in family law over the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries shaped not only early modern female advocacy but also the structure, characters, and content of musical and theatrical works.³⁶ The

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the movement away from strategic marriages that created advantageous political and economic alliances between noble families (and sometimes between noble and nonnoble families). By the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, parents began to consider romantic attachment, rather than just money and prestige, in their children's marital negotiations. This freedom of choice and affection marks the turn to what is called the "modern" marriage, in which this union was newly imagined to provide fulfillment and personal happiness.³⁷

As society began to grapple with emergent family laws, authors of literature and drama also started to negotiate the changing landscape. Mitchell Greenberg argues that the modern family was born on the late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century stage, and that the family becomes a privileged site for representing individual subjugation, which was an important corollary to the emerging absolutist state.³⁸ As he puts it, "In the instances of both tragedy and comedy, the Classical theater may be seen as a particularly over-invested site of Absolutist desire, where an imperious 'sadistic' drive towards 'integrity' comes up against the inchoate, anarchic drive of individual passion, and where, 'masochistically,' this passion is brought to conform to, or be eliminated from, the Law."³⁹ Like contemporary laws that consolidated male authority, dramatists subjugated female characters and repressed elements coded as feminine in these family romances. Greenberg asserts that the feminine Other begins to represent a modern subject, one that is not defined by his or her subjection to a higher authority.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, other authors of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature proposed a counterdiscourse to these changes by imagining alternative social realities.⁴¹ DeJean examines women's literary experimentations with the love plot from roughly 1640 to 1715, and elucidates a number of ways in which female writers subverted literary and social norms to grant women greater authority in their fictional worlds.⁴² Even if authors and dramatists were not interested in promulgating progressive sexual politics, dramas that feature aristocratic marriage or the promise of marriage began to seem more ironic than happy since the nobility often arranged their children's marriages with little regard for their children's feelings. Of *L'École des femmes* (*The School for Wives*, 1662), Marcel Gutwirth writes, "Are we to suppose that they will be happy-ever-after just because they're young, pleasant to look at, and for the moment in love?"⁴³ He argues that even when Molière's comedies end in marriage or engagement, they hardly seem optimistic.

Over the course of the early eighteenth century, changes in literature and drama reflect a new embrace of wealthy, nonnoble values. For Valentini

Papadopoulou Brady and other scholars, aristocratic love in the works of Pierre de Marivaux features the language and behavior of the court and salon, whereas nonaristocratic love combines both sentiment and practical elements such as financial security and class suitability.⁴⁴ As a result, the happy ending began to lose some of its cynicism, and marriages once again could embody wish fulfillment for women, though not without trading one kind of confinement (filial duty) for another (spousal authority).

Literary studies devote significant attention to this changing landscape. Scholarship about marriage in literature, however, tends to wrestle with the assumption that eighteenth-century novels mostly generate momentum unironically through their drive toward marriage. To make this picture more complex, Kelly Hager has shown that the failed marriage plot was actually just as prominent by the early nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Christine Roulston, furthermore, invites us to consider novels that narrate events after the traditional courtship plot—those that deal with life after the wedding. She shows that marriage and narrative are not incommensurate.⁴⁶ Finally, Laura E. Thomason shows that Lawrence Stone's companionate, or "modern," marriage was by no means predominant by the eighteenth century, and its idealized nature complicated women's relationship with respect to it. She argues that British women wrote letters, autobiography, and fiction to voice their discontent with their own circumstances and imagine new marital possibilities.⁴⁷

Other books, following D. A. Miller's *Novel and the Police*, argue that the novel served a disciplinary function.⁴⁸ Lisa Surridge, for example, investigates the ways in which Victorian fiction shaped public opinion on domestic violence.⁴⁹ Some of these novels question husbands' authority over their wives and even, by the end of the century, the viability of marriage as an institution. Others continue to uphold marriage as an ideal even as they depict domestic battery, which nevertheless exposes its flaws. Nancy Armstrong's claims are even broader. She argues that novels centering on courtship and marriage constructed feminine subjectivity, which came to represent moral norms. Authors then deployed sexuality in novels to evaluate competing ideologies with respect to this idealized domestic woman.⁵⁰ The characters of *Coquettes, Wives, and Widows*, by contrast, served as stark warnings of the dangers independent women could unleash upon society.

To chart the dynamic landscape of love and marriage in eighteenth-century French comic repertory, this book investigates works from all of the public stages in early eighteenth-century Paris—the Opéra, the Comédie-Italienne, the Opéra-Comique, and the Comédie-Française. By comparing repertoire from different venues over several decades, this study illustrates

two significant features regarding the portrayal of women and love. First, it observes that the genres in Paris's four public theaters had contrasting political stances with regard to women and love; therefore, each proposed to solve the "problem" of progressive women in different ways. Louis XIV created three of these theaters; the Comédie-Française purveyed plays in the French language; the Comédie-Italienne offered plays first in Italian, and later in French; and finally, the Académie Royale de Musique, or the Opéra, offered French sung drama. These three theaters possessed royal patents, which granted them special rights to artistic properties such as spoken French and music. The fourth venue studied here—the *théâtres de la foire*—were small theaters in Parisian fairgrounds; they had no royal patents, and were often taken to court by those that did for using speech and music. Overall, the *commedia dell'arte*-inspired repertoires at the *théâtres de la foire* and the Comédie-Italienne tended to explore women's roles more sympathetically than those at the Opéra and the Comédie-Française.

Coquettes, Wives, and Widows argues that outcomes for women in spectacles are related to the expected ideological commitments for each theater, rather than the perspectives of a particular social milieu. Theatrical audiences in the various Parisian theaters were heterogeneous in terms of the spectators' social status.⁵¹ Thus, it would be difficult to attribute views on women to specific kinds of spectators. Rather, the differences and similarities between the productions at each of the theaters shows that ideological commitments inhered to certain venues, as a result of the tensions between various parts of its audience. Theaters under the careful surveillance of absolutist machinery—including the Opéra, the Comédie-Française, and, to a lesser degree, the Comédie-Italienne—would be expected to affirm the authority of the father (as a symbol of both traditional and royal authority), whereas audiences could expect to find depictions of a *monde renversé* (world turned upside down) at the *théâtres de la foire*, whose artistic productions received no royal subventions. Since contemporaries believed that the fairground theaters catered largely to the masses (even though the nobility could be found in attendance), audiences expected base humor and biting social commentary. As such, women play a larger role in the intrigue, tricking fathers or other authority figures into agreeing to marital unions of the woman's choice, similar to Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's famous intermezzo *La serva padrona* (*The Maid as Mistress*, 1733).⁵² Unlike spectacles at the other theaters, female characters in *opéras-comiques* are often celebrated for pursuing love or personal happiness. Yet, as the epilogue of this book shows, the way these outcomes have translated to real women's lives is limited.

To explore the rich intersections of musical spectacles and class and sexual politics from representation to reception, the following chapters investigate four different types of women. The chapters in this book are organized according to each character type's desired proximity to men, from the coquette and the widow, who want to manipulate men, to separated women and the Indifferent Woman, who want to avoid them. Like Campora's cantata *Les Femmes*, the chapters thus run from one extreme to another: the coquette to the prude. The first and the last chapters are each devoted to a larger work, whereas chapters 2 and 3 focus on *opéras-comiques*, which are often only one act. As a result, these middle chapters treat multiple works.

Chapter 1 centers on Jean-Philippe Rameau's *ballet bouffon* (comic ballet) entitled *Platée, ou Junon jalouse* (*Platée, or Jealous Juno*, 1745), arguing that its socially ambitious coquette responds to anxieties about the blurred boundaries between aristocrats and wealthy nonnobles. When Platée dreams that Jupiter, the king of the gods, wishes to marry her, she embodied the fear that some wealthy families capitalized upon marriage to insinuate themselves into higher echelons of society. This chapter shows through a number of negative examples of the coquette in other contemporary comedies that women's sexual power in fictional and real-life courtship inspired a host of interrelated fears about the power women might acquire through love, and it shows the various methods dramatists sought to ameliorate these apprehensions.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine dramatic portrayals of widows and women seeking marital separations to explore the various contemporary perspectives on independent women. Moralists and social critics blamed such women for the breakdown of contemporary society in part because, since the Renaissance, jurists claimed that the state was modeled after conventional families. Literature and theatrical works of the seventeenth century reveal increasing anxiety about the perceived likelihood that widows and separated women would undermine political stability as the trend toward independence bubbled up from individual families to reach the monarchy itself. Widows and women seeking a marital separation appeared frequently in stage works in the late-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and dramatists and librettists regularly punished them for threatening the social order. The treatment of such character types, however, depended in part on the venue and genre. These chapters show that the *forains* crafted more sympathetic depictions of these marginal figures, whereas the dramatists for the royally authorized Comédie-Française and Comédie-Italienne drew on socially conservative approaches, in which widows or separated women must be punished, expelled, or male authority reasserted by the show's end to uphold the established hierarchy.

Chapter 4 examines André Campra's and Antoine Danchet's *Aréthuse, ou la vengeance de l'Amour* (*Arethusa, or Cupid's Vengeance*, 1701), an adaptation of a tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, to demonstrate the important but subtle differences between seventeenth-century female-authored literature and eighteenth-century musical spectacles. This chapter shows that the heroine Aréthuse is legible as a contemporary, rather than only a classical figure because she reproduces a literary character that I call the Indifferent Woman—a woman who avoided what she deemed “the slavery of marriage.” Like these feminist literary characters, Arethusa rebuffs her suitor's advances, but Campra and Danchet's heroine is not truly self-reliant. She trades her duty to the chaste goddess Diana for her submission, finally, to her future spouse. *Aréthuse* and its later mid-century adaptation reveal how literary women's characters could be deployed in later drama in ways that diffused their original critical stance, which attests to the unease this perspective continued to inspire well into the eighteenth century.

Ultimately, this book observes the ways that dramatists negotiated the threatening power of progressive, woman-centered thought largely by punishing independent female characters, which were modeled upon the characters first created within mid-seventeenth-century salons and fiction. The works analyzed here transform women's critique of marriage into an assault on men and society more broadly, raising questions about unmarried women and their relationship to male authority: without marriage, how can men be heads of households and, by extension, heads of an obedient state? Such shows can portray marriage either as an antidote to woman's chaos (such as the mid-eighteenth-century spectacles centering on the aristocratic coquette from chapter 1) or that chaotic women are antithetical to the stability symbolized by marriage (such as all the women who must be banished or ridiculed). Male characters are thereby positioned as voices of reason (such as Jupiter in chapter 1) or as victims of their destructive tendencies (such as Alpheus in chapter 4). Transforming the unmarried woman into a comic figure undermined the seriousness with which contemporaries might have considered her and the world of possibilities she offered.

The resistance to women's critical perspectives on marriage would have lasting consequences. They carved out niches where they could, but ultimately, they could not match the larger social and cultural forces at work against them. Women came up with strategies to resist that status quo only to find that the game would change again. Instead of achieving real freedoms after their rethinking love, women in the mid-eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century felt compelled to conform to the idealized