



Theresa Varney Kennedy

Françoise Pascal's
Agathonphile martyr,
tragi-comédie

An Annotated Critical Edition

Françoise Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr*, *tragi-comédie*

Suppléments aux *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature*

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Theresa Varney Kennedy

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Contents

Introduction: Françoise Pascal, “fille lyonnaise”	9
Biography	16
Career	17
Performances	18
The <i>cercle précieux</i>	22
Paris	28
Reception of plays	29
The <i>patois lyonnais</i>	32
Part I: Analysis of <i>Agathonphile martyr</i>, tragi-comédie	35
Sources	35
The Roman hagiography	35
Romanesque influences	36
Theatrical influences	42
The 17 th century martyr play	46
The 17 th century tragicomedy	54
Action	58
Character types	61
Themes	66
Spectacularity	73
<i>Rhétorique amoureuse</i>	76
A tragic ending?	84
17 th century gallantry	85
The theme of tender friendship	86
Between tender friendship and gallantry	91
The “Carte de Tendre” in <i>Agathonphile martyr</i>	94
<i>Un galimatias</i> : gallant rhetoric & Christian rhetoric	102
The female martyr in 17 th century drama	105
La Serre’s Saint Catherine	113
Corneille’s Théodore	117
La Vallée’s Saint Susanne	119
Pascal’s Triphine	122

<i>Agathonphile martyr</i> as political propaganda	123
Marriage in 17 th century France	125
Marriage in 17 th century literature	128
Pascal's treatment of marriage	131
Conclusion	135
The Edition	137
Summary	138
Part II: <i>Agathonphile martyr, tragi-comédie</i>	141
Dedicatory	143
<i>Avis au lecteur</i>	146
Acte Premier	148
Acte Deuxième	163
Acte Troisième	176
Acte Quatrième	201
Acte Cinquième	216
References	232

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May 2008

Introduction: Francoise Pascal, “fille lyonnaise”

The theater is defined by Alain Viala as a selective prism which allows us to see each century's concept of reality and how the collective ideas, attitudes, and debates change and evolve from one period or from one society to the next.¹ Yet, the representation of 17th century life that appears through this prism is distorted if it is limited to a male-dominated point of view. Often college seminars in French theater are restricted to the study of such playwrights as Corneille, Molière, and Racine, the works and prefaces of the great theoreticians d'Aubignac and La Mesnardière, and the numerous debates between the *irréguliers* and the *réguliers* in regards to the rules for the theater during the first half of the 17th century. These are of course necessary for our understanding of how French theater established itself and evolved. However, until recent years, the few female authors from that period have been excluded from our literary canon, and their dramatic works forgotten. How does the female playwright's contributions to 17th century theater change what we see through Viala's alleged “selective prism”? Feminist thought is based on the “assumption that women have experienced life differently from men and that this difference is worth studying” (Jordan 1). Influenced by this idea, historians and researchers today are allowing the voices of women writers whose talents have been long overshadowed by those of their male contemporaries to be heard, some for the first time. Their writings reflect both their thoughts on the society in which they lived as well as the strategies they used to gain access to the world of literature.

As the first 17th century female playwright to have her plays performed publicly,² the voice of Françoise Pascal rises above those of her female counterparts. Pascal would pave the way for other successful female playwrights who emerged in the latter years of the 17th century like Madame de Villedieu whose tragedies were performed at the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* and Versailles, and Catherine Bernard who had two of her tragedies performed at the *Comédie*

¹ See the introduction in Alain Viala, *Le théâtre en France des origines à nos jours* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

² See Perry Gethner's introduction to Pascal's comic play in *The Lunatic Lover and other plays by French Women of the 17th and 18th centuries* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994) 3.

Française.³ The authorship and performance of her tragicomedies marks an extraordinary female act of self-affirmation for the 17th century, a period marked by a distaste for female authors in general. Chapelain, member of the French Academy, admits his hatred for "les femmes autrices" in a letter to Balzac" (1:505). According to Grenaille, author of *L'Honnête fille*, a female should never make writing her vocation. He writes that "la bien-séance ne permettait pas à une honnête fille de reduire en pratique les connaissances qu'elle pouvait avoir en matière de poésie" (3: 223).

Pascal struggled to receive recognition for her publications at a time when *la comédie* was the genre "par excellence" normally reserved for male writers.⁴ Since all writers were expected to adhere to models of Antiquity, and most women were not well enough educated to be familiar with the themes of Aristotle and with the plays of Antiquity, her authorship was questioned by her critics, especially since she published without the support of a male friend who had already established himself in the literary world as an *homme de lettres*. Most of the 17th century female playwrights who enjoyed some measure of success admitted that they received support from their male mentors: Marie-Catherine Desjardins from L'Abbé d'Aubignac, Catherine Bernard from Fontenelle; and in her preface to *Arrie et Petus*, Mlle Barbier tells us that Boursault inspired her to write, and that Pellegrin collaborated with her on her plays.⁵ Thus, in the case of Pascal, who attempted to publish without the guidance of a "paternal" literary mentor, we see the theater itself as a chauvinistic institution whose exigencies make it virtually impossible for her to be on an equal footing as her male counterparts.

Furthermore, Pascal faced the growing influence of the *Académie Française* and the rules for the theater that were reinforced by such writers as Boileau and Chapelain, key spokespersons for the *réguliers* who were winning the debate that had begun in the 16th century. Having come from a modest provincial background, Pascal expresses the difficulties she faced in having to educate herself in the rules for the theater through reading books, since she

³ Madame de Villedieu's tragicomedy *Manlius* was performed in 1662 at the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* and her tragedy *Nitétis* was also performed there a year later in 1663. *Le Favori*, *tragi-comédie*, her most successful play was performed at Versailles in 1665. *Laodamie, reine d'Epire* and *Brutus*, Catherine Bernard's tragedies were both performed at the *Comédie Française*; the first in 1689 and the latter in 1690. See Cecilia Beach, *French Women Playwrights before the Twentieth Century: a checklist* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994).

⁴ In the 17th century the term *comédie* alluded to all dramatic mediums; the *tragi-comédie*, the *tragedy*, and *comedy*.

⁵ On Mlle Barbier see her preface to *Arrie et Petus* in Gethner, *The Lunatic Lover* 214-16.

had no access to higher education. Most women did not attempt to write for the stage because of the strict rules of composition: "Women felt less free to express themselves in the dramatic medium, to which, especially in the case of the tragedy, a number of stringent rules were recognized to apply, than in other much more loosely defined genres like the novel" (Gibson 190). Despite these obstacles, Pascal was the most prolific female writer of plays for her time, producing three farces and three full-length tragicomedies.

Pascal's modest provincial background is yet another obstacle she faced as a writer. For the most part female writers represented the upper class, since they were the few who received the benefits of a proper education in the classics. It was unusual for female writers who were not of the elite class to participate in literary exercises. Even Du Boscq suggests in *le Nouveau Recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps* (1635) that it is perhaps only aristocratic women who should attempt to write:

Je ne veux pas dire pour cela, qu'elles soient incapables des Ars, qu'elles n'en puissent penetrer tous les secrets: mais elles ne doivent pas chercher une Sagesse contraire à celle de leur sexe, ny posseder des vertus qui ne sont point en usage. Puis que la Renommée ne depend pas de notre opinion, il la faut chercher en celle des autres. Peut-estre, qui si plusieurs Dames de qualité entreprenoient d'escrire, elles en feroient recevoir la coutume: mais sans cela, celles qui commencent, sont plus en danger d'estre moquées, que d'estre imitées. (185–186)

The "dames de qualité" who were poetesses only occasionally wrote, and most attempted only minor genres like madrigals, rondeaux, enigmas, or other *œuvres galantes*. Many of their works circulated in manuscript form in the literary Salons, and rarely were they published. Pascal, who published her own book of poetry, *Diverses poésies* (1657), precedes such authors as Marie-Catherine Desjardins, who would publish her *Recueil de poésies* in 1662 and Mlle Certain who would publish her *Nouvelles Poésies* in 1665.

Unlike Pascal, female 17th novelists who decided to publish often avoided unwanted criticism and protected their reputations by using a pseudonym. The novel was still considered an inferior genre which was felt to wield a particularly dangerous influence over female readers. Madeleine de Scudéry for example, chose to publish her novels under the name of her brother in order to maintain her reputation in aristocratic circles. And later, Madame de Lafayette would choose to publish her novel *La Princesse de Clèves* anonymously. Erica Harth points out that female authors who refused to sign their own works were "working their way around the code of gender and class.... They protected themselves from the dangers of writing and often forged new identities for themselves as writers, but at the price of exchanging authority

for secrecy" (26). In contrast to her aristocratic counterparts, it is perhaps Pascal's bourgeois origins which allow her the freedom to claim her work as her own.

While drama remained off-limits for most female writers, Pascal and a few other female playwrights gained access to the world of theater through the Christian martyr play genre in the mid-17th century. Christian drama was one genre in which women were welcome to participate since women's status in the religious domain had already been enhanced by the mystic movement. Mysticism, which began to attract more and more women followers in the 17th century, maintained that women are more privileged receivers of God's word since their weakness, powerlessness, and lack of education makes them more open to spirituality (Godineau 113). Furthermore, since the very same characteristics associated with Christ: humility, passivity, and modesty were encouraged in 17th century female behavior, women were considered ideal teachers of Christianity as well. Despite some misogynist attitudes, the Catholic Church was able to make use of passionate women eager to serve the Church in its reform. Numerous institutes were created and run by aristocratic women with the objective of teaching Christian doctrine to young girls.⁶ In addition to using the talents of women during this time of reformation, the Catholic Church profited from the theater, which supplied another means for moral instruction through its outpouring of plays based on Biblical themes and hagiographies. It is not surprising then that women, who had been given such an authoritative voice in the spiritual realm, would choose to assert themselves in the literary domain of theater through the religious martyr play. It is significant that the first female playwrights to publish plays in the 17th century chose not only religious topics, but legends depicting female martyrs.⁷ In 1650 there were two tragedies published by women; one entitled *Les Jumeaux martyrs*, by La Comtesse de Saint-Balmon, and the other entitled *Les Chastes martyrs*, by Marthe Cosnard. Just five years

⁶ See Ian Maclean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French literature 1610-1652* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 122. "It is not necessary to list here the many orders founded for or by women under such directors as St. Francis of Sales, Vincent de Paul, and Coton between 1590 and 1650. They form part of the religious Renaissance marked also by a resurgence of mysticism in the Church, in which sphere also women played a preponderant role."

⁷ See Beach. Madame Dorothée de Croy is the only 17th century female playwright who composed and published a play prior to 1650. Her tragicomedy, *Cimmatus et Camma*, published in 1637, is taken from a mythological source. It is not known as to whether or not this play was performed or not. Additionally, it is believed that Jacqueline Pascal, the sister of Blaise Pascal, who wrote poetry as well as a book of regulations for novices at Port-Royal, wrote a five act play which was performed privately in 1636, but never published.

later, in 1655, Pascal published a tragicomedy, *Agathonphile martyr*, based on Jean-Pierre Camus's novel *Agathonphile, ou les martyrs siciliens*, *Agathon, Philargiryppe, Triphyne, et leurs Associez* (Paris: Claude Chappelet, 1621), from which Cosnard's tragedy had also been inspired. And in 1663, a tragedy entitled, *L'illustre philosophe ou l'histoire de sainte Catherine d'Alexandrie* was written by an unknown nun who went by the name of La Chapelle.⁸

Pascal is of particular interest to us as modern readers since her experiences place her under the umbrella of both the history of Women's Studies and of the French language. As a provincial female playwright whose experiences and vision diverged from those of her male counterparts, Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr*, which met with much criticism, is a "transgressive" work, revealing an almost intentional effort to break with literary convention. First, in spite of the French Academy's attempts to suppress provincial dialects, Pascal defends the use of her "expression lyonnaise." Secondly, Pascal modifies the conventions of the martyr play and uses this revision to give a new role to the female martyr protagonist. Furthermore, this minor genre gives Pascal a vehicle for subtle criticism of the social order, and more specifically, the patriarchal system. Thus, Pascal's "female provincial writing" goes against the grain of the institution of theater which is attempting to regulate and unify literary production. Through the study of her work, I believe that we can gain a greater perspective regarding the female artist's struggles to comply with traditional theatrical models, which often advocate patriarchal ideals, particularly in terms of female characterization. A re-reading of Pascal's work will permit us to see how her vision of the society in which she lives diverges from that of her male counterparts.

Credit is due to those who have already made contributions to bring Pascal's creative works to light. Her plays have been commented and summarized by both Henry Lancaster in his four part work *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century* and by Fernand Baldensperger in the third volume of his work *Etudes d'histoire littéraire* which also contains an in-depth biography of the female playwright. Paul Scott includes a reading of Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr* in his dissertation *The Martyr-figure in French theatre 1596-1675*. More recent research has been conducted by Perry Gethner who edited, published, and commented Pascal's one act play *L'amoureux extravagant* in his first anthology of plays written by French women of the 17th and 18th centuries, and translated it for the English edition as *The Lu-*

⁸ For a complete summary and analysis of this play see Paul Scott, "Saint Catherine in Seventeenth-Century French Tragedy," *Female Saints and Sinners: Saintes et Mondaines* (France: 1450-1650), ed. J. Britnell et al., (Durham: Durham Modern Language Series, 2002) 39-58.

natic Lover.⁹ In his preface to the play, he underlines that Pascal is different from her female contemporaries since she views her work as more than just a "literary exercise" (5). For Pascal, theatricality and the "stage worthiness" of her plays is of utmost importance. He also points out that Pascal's main interest in the construction of her plot is the entertainment of her spectators. Thus in *L'amoureux extravagant*, she reduces the love intrigue in order to highlight the crazy antics of the obsessed lover and the two unruly servants. Furthermore, in his analysis of this comic play, he places the emphasis on how Pascal imitates Corneille's comedies through the courtly manners and speech of her characters and observes that even their names resemble those of his characters.

Although much of Gethner's research has focused on Pascal's one-act comic plays, he has also analyzed one of her full-length plays entitled *Endymion, tragi-comédie*, based on the French novel by Jean Ogier de Gombaud (published in 1624 and reprinted in 1626), the only one of her tragi-comedies that has been republished since the 17th century. This work appears in Gethner's second anthology of plays by French women of the 17th and 18th centuries which he situates within the genre of the "pièce à machine created in reaction to the grandioso Italian opera."¹⁰ In his introduction to the tragedy, Gethner underlines Pascal's tendency to follow the trendsetters in the world of theater. He again identifies Corneille as the innovator whose *Andromède* (performed in 1650) would inspire other playwrights from Molière to Pascal herself to make contributions to this new subgenre.

Going beyond Pascal's contributions to the theater, Deborah Steinberger's research focuses on her epistolary novel *Le Commerce du Parnasse*, published in 1669. Steinberger's critical edition of this work has shown how Pascal was an innovative writer, her work an original creation comprised of letters and poems written by not one voice, but many different voices functioning as a novel. The fact that Pascal herself appears as a central character in the novel, having inserted her own personal letters into it, distinguishes her work from other *recueil d'oeuvres mêlées*. Alluding to Janet Altman, who underlines the fact that the letters and memoirs of Mme de Lafayette, Mme de Sablé, Mme de Maintenon, and Mlle de Scudéry were first published posthumously by editors in the 19th century, Steinberger finds that Pascal's epistolary novel constitutes "une prise de position féministe avant la lettre; l'affirmation de son statut d'auteur, la publication de ses lettres sous son propre nom, étaient

⁹ See Perry Gethner, *Les Femmes dramaturges en France (1650–1750): Pièces choisies*, (Paris: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1993) and Gethner, *The Lunatic Lover*.

¹⁰ See Perry Gethner, *Femmes dramaturges en France, 1650–1750: Pièces choisies. Tome II* (Tübingen: Narr, 2002).

exceptionnelles pour son époque" (xvi). Furthermore, she notes that this novel enriches our understanding of preciousity and the gallant discourse found in the Salon. In the letters exchanged between Tersandre and Philis, who represents Pascal herself, Steinberger finds that her letters are characterized by a pure simple tone, while he exploits the *lieux communs* associated with gallantry. "Mlle Pascal souligne l'insincérité de son correspondant Tersandre, et elle s'en prend aux lieux communs du discours galant" (xi). For Steinberger, this novel is thus a reaction against contemporary gallantry. The final letter in the novel, a letter written to her sister in which she talks about her daily life in Paris marks a "retour à la réalité" as well as a refusal of gallantry and frivolous living. For Steinberger, the conclusion of the novel expresses the triumph of feminine virtue over unbridled passion, a theme that she notes will be treated in *La Princesse de Clèves* later on in 1678.

I have chosen to add to this corpus an annotated critical edition of Pascal's tragicomedy *Agathonphile martyr*, published in 1655. Inspired by the popularity of the novel in the second half of the 17th century, I feel that *Agathonphile martyr* marks an important contribution to the theater in terms of genre and female characterization. With *Agathonphile martyr*, Pascal offers a hybrid tragicomic martyr play which is highly influenced by the new *littérature galante*. In my analysis, I will primarily focus on how her play marks a problematic merging of two genres – the romanesque tragicomedy, whose objective is clearly to entertain, and the martyr play, a genre whose goals have traditionally been moral edification. Whereas Steinberger observes Pascal's condemnation of gallantry through the virtuous *Philis* in her later work *Le Commerce du Parnasse*, *Agathonphile martyr* is a celebration of the power of true love which can be perfected through a spiritual union. Pascal's play presents a world that appeals to the *mondains*, glorifying both spirituality and love, characterized by a mixture of tones and the juxtaposition of *rhétorique amoureuse* with Christian discourse. I believe that this unique work, written at the very end of the Counter Reformation merits our attention as a transitional piece that witnesses the importance that the *société lyonnaise* continued to place on religious drama as a moralizing tool, yet also reveals the influence of the growing *société mondaine* and their passion for entertainment and distraction. With her hybrid play, Pascal appeals to both of these agendas in her attempts to combine two contradictory themes – that of sainthood, or the pursuit of spirituality, and that of gallantry, or the pursuit of passionate love.

In terms of female characterization, while Gethner has shown how Pascal's later works demonstrate her willingness to follow theatrical trends set by Corneille, Pascal's female martyr Triphine is a rejection of his lifeless

female martyr Théodore "qui n'a ni jambes ni bras,"¹¹ (who has neither legs nor arms) having been made emotionally handicapped by her religious zeal. Triphine, on the other hand, does not feel compelled to choose between her love for Agathon and her love for God. In contrast to the traditional female martyr, Triphine is an independent thinker who speaks her heart, proclaiming the virtues of "constant" love. Therefore she is both a martyr for Christ as well as a martyr for love.

Furthermore, my interpretation of Pascal's female heroine opposes Paul Scott's claim that Pascal successfully steers her play "away from the question of resistance" (153). I believe that *Agathonphile martyr* is a politically charged play in that it leads a subtle campaign against the contractual marriage, or the *mariage de convenance*, very much in line with the point of view many of the *précieux* held concerning this institution. I will argue that Triphine is executed not only because of her conversion to Christianity, but also because of her refusal to respect the patriarchal code through the rejection of an arranged marriage and her decision to pursue the desires of her own heart. Thus in opposition to the traditional martyr play which primarily questions tyranny or the abuse of royal power, *Agathonphile martyr* seems to question the authority of the patriarchal system, and more specifically, a father's right to decide his daughter's destiny. It is both the public affirmation of her faith in God as well as her vow of constant love which gives her voice the authority to rise above that of her father's.

Biography

In order to understand better the obstacles that this female playwright faced in attempting to have her plays performed and published, her biographical information is an appropriate point of departure.¹² Pascal was born in Lyon

¹¹ In the *Examen* of the 1660 edition of *Théodore*, Corneille states "A le bien examiner s'il y a quelques caractères vigoureux et animés, comme ceux de Placide et de Marcelle, il y en a de trainants, qui ne peuvent avoir grand charme ni grand feu sur le théâtre. Celui de Théodore est entièrement froid: elle n'a aucun passion qui l'agite; et, là même où son zèle pour Dieu, qui occupe toute son âme, devrait éclater le plus, c'est à dire dans sa contestation avec Didyme pour le martyre, je lui ai donné si peu de chaleur, que cette scène bien que très courte, ne laisse pas d'ennuyer. Aussi, pour en parler sainement, une vierge et martyre sur un théâtre, n'est autre chose qu'un terme qui n'a ni jambes ni bras, et par conséquent point d'action."

¹² For bibliographic information on Françoise Pascal see Fernand Baldensperger, "Françoise Pascal, fille lyonnaise," *Études d'histoire littéraire*, vol. 3 (Paris: Droz, 1939) 1–31 and Deborah Steinberger, introduction, *Le Commerce du Parnasse*, by Françoise Pascal. (Exeter: U of Exeter Press, 2001) v–xx.

in 1632 near la Croix-Rousse to Séraphin Pascal and Marguerite Tollot, parents of modest means. She was baptized the 18th of February in her parish, Notre-Dame de la Platière. At the time of his daughter's birth, Séraphin Pascal served as a customs commissioner, but in 1644, he obtained a more privileged position as a guard for the Governor of Lyon, the Maréchal de Villeroy. In his biography, Baldensperger attributes Pascal's excellent education to her family's relationship with the Archbishop, Camille de Neufville, who was the brother of the Governor. Her excellent education may also be attributed to her family's connections with the Villeroyes,¹³ who employed Pascal as a "domestique," according to the "clef" of the *Dictionnaire des précieuses* written by Antoine de Somaize. Steinberger suggests that her high level of education may have even qualified her to fulfill the role of governess (v). Her hypothesis is supported by Furetière's definition of *domestique* in 17th century France, a term which is used to refer to multiple functions within a large household:

DOMESTIQUE, adj. m. & f. Qui est d'une maison, sous un même chef de famille. En ce sens il se prend pour femme, enfans, hostes, parens & valets.

Career

Pascal was a prolific writer of plays. *Agathonphile martyr, tragicomedy* (1655), published when she was 23, was followed by two other five-act plays; *Endymion, tragicomédie à machines* (1657) and *Sésotris* (1661), a tragicomedy based on the novel *Le Grand Cyrus* by Mlle de Scudéry.¹⁴ Pascal also wrote three one act "comic plays." *L'Amoureux Extravagant* and *L'Amoureuse vaine et ridicule* were both included in a short volume of secular poetry entitled

¹³ "Francoise Pascal dut sans doute à cette famille de recevoir une instruction exceptionnelle." *Dictionnaire des Lettres Françaises*, ed. Georges Grente (Paris: Fayard, 1954).

¹⁴ It is quite possible that Pascal published other tragicomedies. The Bibliothèque dramatique de Soleinne attributes *La Mort du Grand et Vritable Cyrus* (Chez Jean Montenat, 1655) to Francoise Pascal: "Ne faut-il pas attribuer cette tragi-comédie à Mlle. François Pascal?" (v. 1:1281). In addition, Deborah Steinberger's research at the Munciple Archives in Lyon (Document BB217, folio 439), revealed that in 1662, Francoise Pascal was awarded a cash prize for a tragicomedy, *La Constance Victorieuse*, that she had dedicated to the City Magistrates of Lyon. This play has not been recorded in any bibliographies or documents and according to Steinberger (Introduction ix) it is likely that the play was performed but unfortunately never published.

Diverses Poésies published in 1657. *Le Vieillard Amoureux* was published later in 1664.

There is little documentation about the actual performances of Pascal's plays, but at least one of them is known to have been well-received in Lyon according to Somaize, who refers to Pascal using her pseudonyme *précieux* "Palimène": "Palimène est une vieille précieuse. Elle fait fort bien les vers. L'on a représenté aux jeux du Cirque une pièce qu'elle a composée, et qui a esté trouvée fort belle" (273). Unless he is referring to one of her earlier plays, it is possible that the play to which Somaize alludes is Pascal's *Sésotris*, since she herself speaks of the universal applause that she received during the public presentation of the play in the preface to this work. Pascal's comic play *Le Vieillard Amoureux* also appears to have been quite successful since it was presented in Lyon in 1662 and in Paris at the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* in 1663.¹⁵

Besides the information on the performance of *Le Vieillard Amoureux* at the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* in Paris, there is very little known about where or by whom *Agathonphile martyr*, or any of her other plays were performed. As for the *jeux du cirque* in Lyon, where at least one of her plays was known to have been staged, researchers disagree as to which space is indicated by this expression. In order to shed some light on where *Agathonphile martyr* may have been staged, I would now like to briefly summarize what we know about Lyon's rich theatrical traditions.

Performances

Although it is unknown whether or not Pascal worked with Molière, her career must have greatly benefited from his presence in Lyon from 1652–1658.¹⁶ Baldensperger reminds us that *l'illustre Théâtre* was traveling through Lyon during the time that Pascal's plays were being performed and he suggests that it may have acted in one of them (4). Could Pascal be describing Molière's troupe in this sonnet "Fait à la comédie" found in *Diverses Poésies*? (1657)

Si je vois ces objets si brillants à mes yeux,
J'en admire l'éclat avec un doux silence,
Quand d'autres spectateurs avec violence
Par leurs bruits indiscrets troublent ces Demi-dieux,

Toutefois mes regards ne sont rien que pour eux,
Bien que mon sentiment accuse d'insolence

¹⁵ For dates see S. Wilma Deierkauf-Holsboer, *Le Théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne*, vol. 2 (Paris: Nizet, 1968–70) 109–10.

¹⁶ For more specific dates on Molière's travels and performances in Lyon, see Claude Brouchoud, *Les Origines du théâtre de Lyon* (Lyon: N, Scheuring, 1865).

Ces esprits importuns, qui n'ont pas connaissance
De ce qu'ils veulent voir en ces aimables lieux.

Mais enfin, si mes yeux contemplent ces merveilles,
Je sens d'autres plaisirs pendant que mes oreilles
Font suspendre mes sens à leurs divins propos.

Quand je les vois agir avec tant de grâce,
Il semble que je sois immobile à ma place,
Et si je ne les vois, je n'ai point de repos.

In this poem, Pascal reveals what it was like to attend the theater in Lyon in the 17th century. Unlike going to the theater today, the plays were usually performed in front of noisy boisterous crowds. It would have taken a talented playwright and actor such as Molière to cast a spell over them. Before the arrival of Molière's *Illustre Théâtre*, there were already numerous troupes of comedians called *troupes de campagne*, including those from Italy, that were performing regularly in Lyon. The theater had been very much appreciated in Lyon for a long time and seemed to be a tradition that was enjoyed by all social classes.¹⁷ Thus we can confirm that Pascal's modest social status did not keep her from attending theatrical performances. The *foires* brought in thousands of tourist spectators to Lyon four times a year. Many of them stayed in the *quartier du change*. During the theatrical season, comedians and *bateleurs* swarmed the streets of Lyon. However, even by the time of Molière's arrival in December of 1652, there were still no fixed public theaters in Lyon. The comedians performed in various *jeux de paumes* (tennis courts). Normally, shows began at 5 o'clock and lasted until 9 o'clock. The repertoire consisted of tragedy, farce, and ballet. These various genres were usually interpreted by the same actors and actresses.¹⁸

One of the best known *jeux de paume*, still standing in 1861 situated on rue de l'Angile in the *quartier* Saint Paul, was most likely where Molière's *Illustre Théâtre* performed much of its repertoire.¹⁹ Paul Saint-Olive, who saw the building in question in 1817, describes it as such: "La maison comportait deux corps de bâtiment, en équerre, séparés par une cour: le principal, en façade sur le quai de Bondy, où portait le numéro 17; le logis du fond, prenant jour sur la rue de l'Angile. C'est au deuxième étage de ce second bâtiment que se trouvait la salle du jeu de paume" (Bleton 8). If indeed Claude Basset's

¹⁷ Brouchoud, *Les Origines* 11. "Le goût des spectacles s'y était en effet depuis longtemps répandu dans toutes les classes de la société."

¹⁸ For a history on the theater in Lyon see Brouchoud and also Auguste Bleton, "Molière à Lyon," Public Lecture, *Livre d'Or du Deuxième Centenaire de l'Académie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts de Lyon* (Lyon, 1900).

¹⁹ For more information on the *jeux de paume* see Brouchoud 35–6 and Bleton 8.

tragedy *Irène* was performed in this *jeu de paume*, as the historian Choriér conjectures,²⁰ then one might suggest that Pascal's play in question was performed in the same place since the *Dictionnaire* designates the theater where both of their plays were performed as the *jeux du cirque*.

The etymology of the expression *jeux du cirque*, however, would seem to support Gethner's hypothesis that the play mentioned in the *Dictionnaire* was performed in the *Amphithéâtre des trois gaules* (*The Lunatic Lover* 8). This structure, still visible today in the hills of Croix-Rousse in Lyon, was built in 19 AD by the Romans for public spectacles. To support this hypothesis, one may turn to the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de L'Académie Française*, published in 1694, which defines the *jeux du cirque* as such:

Cirque. subst. m. Carrière, lieu où se faisoient les jeux publics, particulièrement les courses de chevaux & de chariots. Les Jeux du Cirque. remporter le prix aux Jeux du Cirque.

As mentioned earlier, one might logically conclude that the play mentioned in the *Dictionnaire* is *Sésotris* (1661), since the dates of publication are close.²¹ However, the fact that Pascal had already published five of her six plays, including *Agathonphile martyr*, by the time the *Grand Dictionnaire des précieuses* was written would allow us to make other conjectures. Would it not have been desirable for Pascal or Claude Basset, for that matter, to stage their martyr plays at the site where the first Christian community in Gaul suffered persecution and martyrdom for its faith? Although the idea is romantic, my findings, as well those of other researchers do not support this hypothesis. First of all, the *jeux du cirque* may not be limited to one specific space:

Les *jeux du Cirque* qui, dans le *Dictionnaire*, désignent le théâtre, concernent probablement aussi bien les locaux de hasard et les jeux de paume où les troupes de campagne italiennes et françaises – des Gelosi à l'illustre Théâtre – donnaient leurs représentations, que la salle de spectacle adjacente à l'hôtel des gouverneurs. Cette société distinguée ne pouvait en effet manquer d'avoir accès à ce théâtre, dont la tribune communiquait directement avec les appartements des Villeroy. Rien n'empêche d'admettre que non seulement l'*Irène* de Basset, mais telle pièce de Françoise Pascal ait eu la faveur d'être jouée ici. (Baldensperger 266)

Given Pascal's close relationship with the Villeroy family, Baldensperger proposes here that the play in question may have been performed in the *Hôtel des gouverneurs*, where the Archbishop Camille de Neufville resided. Often plays were performed in this theater in order to raise money for the poor and

²⁰ See Brouchoud 35.

²¹ According to Gethner, the play in question is *Sésotris*. See *The Lunatic Lover* 8.

sick hospitalized in the *Hôtel Dieu* in Lyon. Molière's troop played at least twice for these benefits during the 1655–1656 season.²² This theater, built by Nicolas de Villeroy, was apparently privately owned by the governor. Mlle de Montpensier describes the same theater in her *Mémoires*: “Nous étions dans une tribune où l'on entraît par chez M. le maréchal de Villeroy (éd. Chérueil, t. III, p. 328).... On dansa sur un grand théâtre fort bien éclairé” (317). Pascal's *tragicomédie à machines*, *Endymion* would have required an elaborate theater such as this with its more complicated décor which included a flying chariot.

Pascal's dedicatory epistle to the *Prévôt des marchands* and the *échevins* of Lyon included in the 1655 edition of *Agathonphile martyr* would support the hypothesis that her play was indeed performed in the theater adjacent to the apartments of the governor. One possible indication of her presence in this space is her usage of the demonstrative “ce” to refer to what she calls a “palais illustre” which denotates neither a *jeu de paume* nor an *amphithéâtre*:

Augustes Magistrats, merveilles des Mortels,
Dont les rares vertus meritent des Autels,
Ce n'est pas sans raison que ce Palais Illustre
Est nommé le sejour des miracles divins...

The word “sejour” or “residence” in the final line again references the “illustre palais” to which she refers in the beginning of her dedicatory:

Escoutez donc, MESSIEURS, ces Amants
Trop heureux,
Et souffrez qu'ils vous disent les desseins
Amoureux
Qui ont bruslé leurs cœurs d'une flamme
Divine.
Ils viennent à vos yeux sans sortir du tombeau,
Vous verrez Agathon, & sa chere Triphine
Se presenter à vous dans un sejour si beau.

Taken more figuratively, the language used here could appeal to the visual senses of her readers or spectators (“écouter,” “voir,” and “se présenter”) as simply a rhetorical technique meant to “set the mood.” Pascal presents her role as a dramaturge in a way that evokes Alcandre's role as magician and *metteur-en-scène* in Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*, who makes the subjects of the play appear before the spectators' very eyes.

Despite the evidence that we have examined here, we cannot be completely sure as to where or whether or not *Agathonphile martyr* was performed.

²² For more information on this subject, see Brouchoud 18–19.

However, if we were to make a conjecture, Pascal's *Agathonphile martyr* would have most likely been performed in the theater built in the *Hôtel des gouverneurs* since she had a known connection to the governor. Whilst Pascal's success was undoubtedly related to her involvement with this royal family, equally influential in her career is her association with the *précieux* both in as well as outside of Lyon, a topic to which I now turn.

The *cercle précieux*

Pascal, of modest origins, would have naturally gained access to the literary world via her association with the elite *précieuses* and *précieux*. These circles of men and women sought to distinguish themselves from that which was common or banal. Somaize defines *préciosité* as such: "Les lois des précieuses consistent en l'observance exacte des modes, en l'attache indispensable de la nouveauté, en la nécessité d'avoir un alcôviste particulier, ou du moins d'en recevoir plusieurs, en celle de tenir ruelle, ce qui peut passer pour la principale."²³ If they could not dress or behave like other people, they also distinguished themselves linguistically from others as well, avoiding the use of common words to describe ordinary things.²⁴

Préciosité is most often associated with the 17th century salons hosted by women. In the second half of the 17th century, the number of salons in Paris and in the various provinces multiplied. The most famous salon of the 17th century was the *Hôtel de Rambouillet* in Paris. However, not all of the salons were held in hotels. Some of the *précieuses* who hosted salons would receive their guests in a *ruelle* which was literally the space in between the wall and the bed of the hostess' bedchamber. Whether in Paris or in provincial cities, most of the salons had similar practices. All of the *précieux* had *noms romanesques*. For instance, Mme de Rambouillet went by the name "Arthénice," just as Pascal was called "Palimène." Their activities consisted of parlor games, masked balls, "devinettes," debates on the concept of love or linguistic controversies, or enigmas such as this one published in Pascal's *Diverses Poésies*, which may have been written to entertain the *cercle précieux* in Lyon:

²³ See the definition of "loix" in Antoine Bandeau de Somaize, *Le Dictionnaire des précieuses*, ed. Charles-Louis Livet, vol. 1 (1856; Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1972) 119.

²⁴ For example, we know that they created their own *rhétorique précieuse* referring to a mirror as a "conseiller de la beauté" and to furniture as "les commodités de la conversation."

Rigoureux ennemis, quel mal vous fait ma vie?
 Que ne me laissez-vous jouir de la clarté?
 En me tenant toujours dans la captivité,
 Faut-il s'étonner si je vous porte envie?

Agréable printemps, que je serais ravie,
 Si je pouvais paraître en toute sûreté,
 Pour aller tous les jours contempler ta beauté,
 Et la douceur des champs, sans être poursuivie?

Quand ces fiers meurtriers se soulent de plaisirs,
 La crainte de la mort vient borner mes désirs,
 Et m'oblige à languir dans l'horreur des ténèbres:

Mais est-il rien d'égal au malheur qui me suit?
 Sortant de ma prison je rencontre la nuit:
 Ainsi ces libertés me sont encore funèbres.

La Chauve-souris qui se plaint de la rigueur
 Des oiseaux.

In this poem the subject of the poem, "la chauve-souris," or "bat," is left out until the very end so that the *Salonnières* have ample time to guess what it could be. Its synonyms "rigoureux ennemis" and "fiers meurtriers" provide the reader or the listener with clues from which they can decipher the riddle.

Although the increase in the number of women who wrote in the 17th century is undoubtedly attributed to the development of the *vie mondaine*, as Timmermans attests, most *précieuses* did not attempt to write professionally: "Peut-être est-ce même la principale victoire de la préciosité que d'avoir favorisé à la fois l'accès à l'écriture d'un nombre grandissant de femmes et la reconnaissance de la légitimité pour elles d'écrire (en amateur, il est vrai) et de publier (en observant, surtout grâce à l'anonymat, toute la modestie exigée des femmes en général et des femmes de qualité en particulier)" (179).

While it would seem that many *précieuses* viewed writing as a pastime rather than a profession, Pascal was able to profit from her contacts within the *cercle précieux* in order to publish and have her works performed.

At the tender age of 13, Pascal had already began exchanging secular verses with one of the best-known court poets and *bels esprits* of the first half of the 17th century, Isaac de Benserade.²⁵ Often compared to his rival Voiture,

²⁵ Isaac de Benserade, *Poésies de Monsieur de Benserade publiées par Octave Uzanne* (Geneve: Slatkine reprints, 1967) 46–52. See "Vers de Mademoiselle Pascal, pour une Dame de ses amies, sous le nom d'Amarante, amoureuse de Thyrsis" and "Réponse aux vers précédents, par Monsieur de Benserade."

Benserade was known for his *pièces galantes*; stances, sonnets, chansons, madrigals, rondeaux and ballets. He was however, also drawn to the theater. His career was launched with the performance of his *Cléopâtre* in 1636, which made a great impression on the Cardinal de Richelieu who awarded him a pension of *huit cent livres*. After his death Benserade still managed to live off pensions paid to him by Anne d'Autriche and other women at Court. Later, he came under the protection of Mazarin who greatly appreciated his poetry. And of course, it wasn't long before the poet won the admiration of the young King Louis XIV, who asked him to write poems on his behalf for courtly women such as Mme de Hautefort, Mlle de La Vallière, and la Montespan. As Uzanne states in his preface *Poésies de Monsieur de Benserade*, Benserade was the "coqueluche des précieuses" of his time and suggests that he inspired the portrait of La Bruyère's Théobalde, "l'engouement des Philamintes et des Bélises" in the chapter *De la Société et de la Conversation* (xvi–xvii). As a well-established court poet, Benserade frequented the *Hôtel de Rambouillet* hosted by Catherine de Vivonne, who received other important figures and aristocrats in her *chambre bleue*, including The Duke of Enghien, The Duke of Rochefoucauld, the Duke of Montausier, Voiture, Georges de Scudéry and his sister Madeleine, Sarasin, Godeau, Corneille, and Madame de Sévigné.

Benserade, in his response to Pascal's *stances*, which she had written on behalf of a lady by the name of "Amarante" in love with "Thyrsis,"²⁶ expresses his admiration of her poetry and appears to be quite flattered:

Que vos vers sont ardens, que leur pompe est brillante,
Et qu'ils sont radoucis!
Il n'en faut point douter, vous êtes l'Amarante,
Et je suis le Thyrsis. (50)

By all appearances, "Amarante" had hired Pascal to write the poem on her behalf. Benserade however suggests that Pascal herself is this "Amarante" and that it is she who declares her love to him! Whether or not his hypothesis is true, he nevertheless is impressed by her ability to write poetry at such a young age:

Qu'une fille à treize ans d'amour soûpire et pleure,
C'est souvent un défaut;
Mais pour une qui fait des vers de si bonne heure,
C'est vivre comme il faut. (52)

While Pascal, or "Palimène" as she was so called, drew creative inspiration from such renowned poets as Benserade, she must have benefited both

²⁶ Thyrsis was a shepherd in Virgil's seventh Eclogue who lost a singing match against Corydon. Amarante, a kind of flowering herb, is most likely a pseudonym *précieux*.