

**Narrative Innovation, Gender Fluidity, and Authority:
Mme de Villedieu's *Anaxandre***

Kathleen Loysen

The question of women's *prises de parole* within the narrative space, or those moments when they assume for themselves the privilege of speaking and writing authoritatively, is a prominent one in criticism devoted to seventeenth-century French literature.¹ This issue can be fruitfully examined via one example drawn from the corpus of *nouvelles galantes* composed by Marie-Catherine Desjardins, also known as Mme de Villedieu. In her "Anaxandre," published in 1667, Villedieu expertly blends multiple levels of narrative voices, while she also interpolates passages of other literary genres within the narrative frame, such as letters and poetry. As a woman highly invested in the public perception of her growing body of work and her authorial status,² Villedieu plays

¹ The bibliography on women writers in seventeenth-century France is too extensive to completely survey here. A few studies of note: Faith Beasley discusses the role of the *salon* milieu in shaping the definition of both the novel and the *nouvelle* and their relationship to history writing in *Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France*. Joan DeJean's *Tender Geographies* and Domna Stanton's *Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France* trace a similar itinerary, focusing on the notion of the woman as author in this same period. In *Exclusive Conversations*, Elizabeth Goldsmith studies the art of conversation as it developed in the salons and as it was represented in literature; she turns to women's forays into formal publication in *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*. Myriam Maître also discusses women and the book trade in her article, "Éditer, imprimer, publier: Quelques stratégies féminines au XVII^e siècle." Nathalie Grande studies the three arguably most famous women writers of seventeenth-century France, Madeleine de Scudéry, Mme de Lafayette, and Mme de Villedieu in *Stratégies de romancières*. Katherine Jensen analyzes the link between letter writing and epistolary fiction in *Writing Love: Letters, Women, and the Novel in France*. Colette Winn and Donna Kuizenga's edited volume on *Women Writers in Pre-Revolutionary France* likewise contains several excellent chapters covering a wide variety of women authors in *ancien régime* France, from Marguerite de Navarre to Olympe de Gouges (and including sections devoted to Mme de Villedieu). Studies on the development of women's narrative voice more generally include Susan Lanser's *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* and Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to 1870*.

² Several critics have investigated Villedieu's publishing history and her investment in cultivating her own public image. See, in particular, Nathalie Grande and Edwige Keller-Rahbé's special issue, *Madame de Villedieu ou les audaces du roman*. Several of the contributors to Keller-Rahbé's *Madame de Villedieu romancière* do likewise, including Grande ("Discours paratextuel et stratégie d'écriture"). Also useful in regards to Villedieu's construction of her literary and social personae is Roxanne Decker

with the notions of author, narrator, and audience (whether that audience be represented as a reading or a listening one). By demonstrating the interchangeability of narrative voices and even of the *gender* the reader ascribes to any particular narrator or speaker, she shows that authorial and/or narratorial identity is both fluid and fungible—what I will call here *gender-fluid narrative ventriloquism*.³ Whether in manuscript or print form, Villedieu contends that readers cannot know for certain who the author of any individual text is, and she plays with this ambiguity to evoke questions around the very meaning of authorial identity, authorial intent, and the locatability of truth and fiction in the literary space. I posit that in this *nouvelle* we can see a “véritable mise-en-scène de la fonction-auteur,” as expressed by Nathalie Grande (128), and my purpose here will be to explicate Villedieu’s staging of that author function and the fluid role played by gender in that process. In this text, that is, we can see the dual dynamics of the author Villedieu’s process of self-authorization,⁴ as well as her representation of her female characters/narrators undergoing this same process, in a complex *mise-en-scène* of her own real-life circumstances.

Lalande’s “The Authorial Mask as Metaliterary Device,” included in Winn and Kuizenga’s *Women Writers*. In addition, Decker Lalande’s extremely valuable collection of articles, *Labor of Love: Critical Reflections on the Writings of Marie-Catherine Desjardins*, contains chapters devoted to Villedieu’s authorial and narratorial identity: Beasley’s “Apprentices and Collaborators: Villedieu’s Worldly Readers”; Nancy Klein’s “Inscribing the Feminine in Seventeenth-Century Narratives”; Goldsmith’s “Secret Writing, Public Reading”; and Decker Lalande’s own chapter, “Sex, Lies, and Authorship in Villedieu’s *Les Désordres de l’amour*.” Charlotte Simonin also discusses Villedieu’s awareness of herself as author in “Des seuils féminins? Le Péritexte chez Mme de Villedieu.” Valerie Worth-Stylianou analyzes how Villedieu was received as a woman author early in her career in “‘C’est, pourtant, l’œuvre d’une Fille’: Mlle Desjardins à l’hôtel de Bourgogne.”

³ Margaret Wise looks at Villedieu’s narrators’ gender fluidity in *Les Mémoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière* in “Villedieu’s Transvestite Text,” while Donna Kuizenga labels this same impulse “writing in drag,” which she locates not only in Villedieu’s *Portefeuille* but also in Guilleragues’s *Lettres portugaises*, Edme Boursault’s *Treize lettres amoureuses d’une dame à un cavalier*, and Eliza Haywood’s *Letters from a Lady of Quality to a Chevalier* (see “Writing in Drag: Strategic Rewriting in the Early Epistolary Novel”). See also Decker Lalande in her introduction to *A Labor of Love*, and her chapter within it, “Sex, Lies, and Authorship in Villedieu’s *Les Désordres de l’amour*”; and Démoris, “Ecriture féminine en je.” The concept of discursive ventriloquism is theorized in Cooren and Sandler, as well as in Goldblatt.

⁴ Beasley names this process Villedieu’s “valorization of her authority to publish” (“Apprentices” 182), while Decker Lalande speaks of her “fictional explorations of authorial empowerment” (“Authorial Mask” 381). Beaulieu and Desrosiers-Bonin use the phrasing “l’auto-représentation de l’auteure et/ou la prise de parole féminine” (6) and “stratégies de légitimation” (8).

Villedieu is indeed a purveyor of what Alison Stedman calls “generically heterogeneous,” and therefore rococo, literature (43–45).⁵ Born in 1640, she was active in the Parisian literary world starting in the late 1650s until her death in 1683, first in the collaborative site of the salon and subsequently publishing independently under her own name and making a living in this way, a rarity in seventeenth-century France.⁶ She was a prolific author of poetry and plays, even succeeding in having one of her plays produced by Molière’s troupe,⁷ before turning to short stories and novels later in her career; she is often credited with inventing the genre of the *nouvelle galante*.⁸ Included within this designation are her *nouvelles* “Lisandre” (1663), “Anaxandre” (1667), “Cléonice” (1669), “Les Annales galantes” (1670), and “Les désordres de l’amour” (1675). I have chosen here to focus on “Anaxandre,” a work which has received scant critical attention.⁹ Notwithstanding this neglect, with its meta-reflexivity, genre hybridity, and gender fluidity, “Anaxandre” is an exemplary site of narrative play for Villedieu, and these factors converge around the question of authorship, authorial identity, and gender.

The Ribou version of the text includes three paratextual items, which appear before we reach the text proper on page 15 of the work.¹⁰ These are a title page, a “Lettre aux Dames de la cour de Bruxelles,” and

⁵ Leggett also discusses baroque themes in Villedieu, rather than structure, which is Stedman’s focus.

⁶ Villedieu distinguishes herself in this way from two other prominent women writers of her period, Madeleine de Scudéry, who often published under the name of her brother George, and Mme de Lafayette, whose works were published anonymously (Knox 11).

⁷ “Le Favory” was performed at a festival in Versailles in 1665, with direction by Molière and a score by Lully (Klein, “Feminine Space,” 126); Jeffrey Peters has determined it was the “first performance before the French king of a play written by a woman” (261).

⁸ See Beasley (“Apprentices” 186); Grande and Keller-Rahbé’s introduction to *Madame de Villedieu ou Les Audaces du roman*, entitled “Villedieu, ou les avatars d’un nom d’écrivain(e)”; and Nancy Klein, “The Female Protagonist” (2).

⁹ Micheline Cuénin’s seminal *Roman et société sous Louis XIV : Madame de Villedieu* devotes some space to “Anaxandre” (248–51), mainly positioning it as an autobiographical piece, a picture I hope to complicate here. The only other extended treatments I have found of the *nouvelle* are in dissertations by Lori Knox and Helen Prud’homme.

¹⁰ Madame de Villedieu, *Anaxandre* (Jean Ribou, 1667). All page references will be given parenthetically. This edition is available in electronic format via Gallica, the website of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (gallica.bnf.fr). Ribou was known as Molière’s publisher (see Bradby and Calder, as well as Call); he also published Somaize’s *Grand dictionnaire des préieuses* (1660), as well as other gallant fiction (see Stedman).

a piece that functions as a preface or frame narrative. The first, the title page, includes the work's title, *Anaxandre*, followed by a generic designation: *Nouvelle*. We then have the woman author's name prominently displayed: Mademoiselle Des-Jardins. Later in her career, with his family's consent, she appropriated the name of her deceased lover, Charles de Boësset, sieur de Villedieu, in order to publish under the name Mme de Villedieu, which is how she is most commonly known today.¹¹ The page displays an emblem, and indicates that the book was published in Paris by Jean Ribou in 1667, with a *Privilège du roy* (the privilege itself is included at the close of the volume, with another reference to Mlle Des-Jardins as author).¹²

After the title page appears the dedicatory epistle, "Lettre aux Dames de la cour de Bruxelles," written from a "je" perspective. But as the letter is unsigned, it is unclear at its outset just who the "je" represents, and whether we are to read it as a male or female voice, as the author Villedieu herself, or as another fictional narratorial persona. Addressed to "Mesdames," the letter continues on in a first-person perspective and addresses an explicitly female-only audience throughout. Due to the presence of several markers of orality, this audience can be imagined as both a female reading public and also as a potentially physically present gathering, as if in a salon. The author of the letter speaks of his or her own "Génie" (ii), displaying an audacious pride in themselves as well as the penchant for self-promotion so characteristic of Villedieu. But then, the letter-writer's identity starts to become a bit more precise, since they refer to their own prior "Ouvrages" in the plural, indicating that this current set of interlocutors has been exposed to and appreciated other works in this author's repertoire. It is to respond to this audience's "curiosité obligeante" (ii) that the author offers this new tale, explaining that it is *not* a continuation of a prior work concerning the character Alcidamie. This is a reference to Villedieu's own prior work, *Alcidamie*, published in 1661. In a curious *mise en abyme* and mental conjuring of the physical storytelling circumstances, Villedieu explains in the letter that she cannot relay the continuation of those *Avantures* (ii),

¹¹ In their introduction to *Madame de Villedieu ou Les Audaces du roman*, entitled, "Villedieu, ou les avatars d'un nom d'écrivain(e)," Grande and Keller-Rahbé trace the evolution of Villedieu's many names: "son inscription fluctuante du nom d'auteur" (5). They also document how Marie-Catherine Desjardins, engaged but never married to Boësset, was granted the right to use his surname by his family (7). Boësset died the same year of his split with Desjardins (1667).

¹² See Keller-Rahbé ("Pratiques") about Villedieu's relationship to the *privilège d'auteur*.

since the queen in question, Alcidamie, is too timid to appear in person before such an audience. Alcidamie and the letter-writer therefore decided that a different story would be told, but not via this letter-writer's own voice. Rather, the main character of the tale, named the *Étranger Anaxandre*, will step in as the storyteller, standing before this group in the flesh to try to win them over on behalf of the letter-writer by telling appealing stories—"qui va vous solliciter en ma faveur" (iii).

We will not be told the birthplace of Anaxandre, nor will the letter-writer describe him, explaining that this information would be superfluous to Anaxandre accomplishing his *Commission*, which is to tell this group of ladies an entertaining story. Within that story to come, the letter-writer declares that he will offer his own portrait of himself, and that he will adapt his portrait in order to suit the tastes of his audience. Villedieu's emphasis here is on the malleability of the material to be recounted, of the storyteller's presentation style, and even of his self-presentation; she thereby demonstrates her acute awareness of the link between author and audience, and indeed the former's dependency on the latter. In order to please his audience, Anaxandre "sera de la taille & de la figure dont il faudra estre pour vous plaire" (iv), signifying that he will be whatever the audience wants him to be. Moreover, the primacy of the audience's tastes in the shaping of the narrative foreshadows the interchangeability of narrative voices that we will encounter throughout the text. Anaxandre knows he is a great soldier, but he also posits that ladies would prefer to hear about love conquests rather than military ones. Villedieu highlights here the notion that the tastes of the audience are determinative in what gets told and how, and that there are male and female domains for storytelling in terms of subject matter and presentation style.¹³ We also learn from the letter-writer that Anaxandre will tell his story aloud: the audience will "entendre raconter" (v) his story. Further solidifying the supposition that the letter-writer here is plausibly a figure of Villedieu herself, is the fact that she refers to herself at the end of the letter in the feminine, while advising her audience on just how to receive Anaxandre and his storytelling session:

Tel qu'il est recevez-le [Anaxandre] de grace, Mesdames,
avec cette mesme bonté qui vous a fait recevoir si
obligeamment les respects de *celle* qui vous l'envoie; &
permettez luy d'entretenir Vos Excellences avec autant de

¹³ Beasley's *Revising Memory* elaborates on such distinctions drawn by Villedieu, who clearly wishes to distinguish her "particular" stories from official historical narratives.

liberté que vous m'en avez accordé, pour vous assurer de mes tres-humbles soumissions. (v, emphasis added).

What has been staged here is that the letter-writer is referring to her own past successes in her dealings with this particular audience, and offering up a new (male) storytelling voice, Anaxandre, to tell this story of her own creation, *Anaxandre*.

The third and final paratextual item is the enframing story: it is the story *about* Anaxandre that will include within it the story he will *tell* before the present audience referenced in the letter, that of Clidamis and Iris. The title of the work and its genre are repeated: *Anaxandre. Nouvelle*. And it is within the story *about* Anaxandre that we will receive the text itself, the story *of* Iris and Clidamis (starting p. 15), the protagonists of the love story Anaxandre is here to recount. This story-before-the-story, the frame narrative, is written in the first-person voice of Anaxandre, who is both the primary narrator of the story of Anaxandre and a character within the story he tells (I will call these two figures narrator-Anaxandre and character-Anaxandre, who exist in two distinct temporal spaces). He is addressing the same female-only, seemingly present audience as the writer of the letter “Aux Dames.” He continues to underscore that his primary purpose is to entertain, by his amiable nature and his attempts to build a relationship with his readers/listeners. He creates the image of a live communicative link between speaker and listener, again apparently ceding control over what gets told and how: “De quelles Aventures vous plaist-il que je vous entretienne, mes Illustres Dames? En voulez-vous d’enjouées? en voulez-vous de serieuses? Parlez, de grace, j’ay dequoy satisfaire à vos ordres sur toutes sortes de matieres” (1). It is clear that this fictional male narrator has a great deal of confidence in himself and his ability to please his audience, speaking as he does with such authority and pride in his talents as a storyteller. This moment of adopting the voice of the confident male other is an example of Villedieu’s gender-fluid ventriloquism, perhaps as a technique for advancing and performing her own authority. And yet, paradoxically, these male *prises de parole* and *prises d’autorité* all appear at the same time under the very prominently featured name of MADEMOISELLE DES-JARDINS on the work’s title page. While Villedieu is certainly not attempting to conceal her actual gender in her claims to authorship and authority, she *is* spotlighting, through slippage and play, the perplexing role gender plays in the

creation of an authoritative narratorial voice, especially in seventeenth-century France.

This narrator-Anaxandre claims to be speaking from his own personal experience, which in early modern French literature tends to be a typically female basis for storytelling authority. Men speak from a place of institutionally sanctioned authority, and women from their lived experience.¹⁴ Narrator-Anaxandre uses the verb *conter* to refer to the story he will tell, which will be based on what he has himself seen and heard, and says he will be able to do this *without* stepping outside of himself: “je puis la faire [une Histoire amoureuse] à Vos Excellences sans sortir de ma propre Personne” (2). The compelling paradox here is that the work’s author, Villedieu, *has* chosen, or felt compelled, to step outside of herself and create this alternate male persona, in order to speak authoritatively and within the bounds of propriety about matters of the heart.¹⁵ On the contrary, narrator-Anaxandre is free according to *bienséances* to admit that he is an expert in love. He continues to insert parenthetical asides directed to his audience, reminding the external reader of the ladies’ presence: “charmantes Dames” (2). He compares himself to the heroes of medieval romance, “les anciens Amadis,” (3) who travelled the world and fought to earn the love of their “Maistresses,” by bragging of his many “Avantures” and “exploits memorables” (3–4). But he distinguishes himself from those other romanesque characters, from other travelers and knights errant, by specifying that he does not carry precious stones with him, but *words*:

¹⁴ One prominent example of this distinction is the *Heptaméron*, in which the devisante Parlamente declares that the stories the circle will tell will be true and based on events seen by the storytellers themselves, or related to them by reliable witnesses. They do this to differentiate themselves from the (male) *gens de lettres*, whose text-based knowledge and rhetorical style is said to interfere with the truthfulness of their stories. Parlamente says in the Prologue that they will exclude from their storytelling project “ceux qui avoient étudié et estoient gens de lettres,” because “monseigneur le Daulphin ne vouloit que leur art y fut meslé, et aussy de paour que la beaulté de la rethorique fait tort en quelque partye à la verité de l’histoire” (9). For further discussion, see Mathieu-Castellani, *La Conversation conteuse*, 8–21; Duval 244–45; and Pérouse 92–93.

¹⁵ See, especially, Goldsmith, who explains that for women in general, “the notion of becoming a published author carried an additional stigma, suggestive of scandalous self-exposure or even prostitution” (“Secret Writing” 112). The social proscription against women writing is also discussed in Stanton (*Dynamics*) and in Klein (“Inscribing the Feminine”). DeJean calls Villedieu in particular the “original notorious woman” (*Tender Geographies* 130), and Verdier recalls that Mmes de Lafayette and Villedieu were labelled “brazen adventuresses” (412, n. 2).

“je ne me chargeois point de Pierreries, comme les Aventuriers ordinaires des Romains; je ne portois que des Madrigaux, des Billets doux, & des Chansonnettes” (4). What distinguishes him from being entirely like “les anciens Amadis” is that he carries only poetry, the currency of love. He continues to draw out this image of poetry as currency—to “win”/buy women and also to financially support his far-flung travels, which lasted, he tells his present female audience, until he found himself on the allegorical *Isle des Vertus* (5). This island was full of both virtues and virtuous people—men, women, and children (“tout regorge de Vertu dans ce beau lieu” (7)); and he refers to the women of the island as *les Belles Insulaires*; they will later constitute yet another female listening audience, whom he will try to convince of the validity of his theories regarding gallantry and virtue. Into this land of virtue appeared another virtuous man—the perfect *homme galant*, according to narrator-Anaxandre: “un modèle parfait de tout ce que la probité, la franchise, & la générosité, peuvent former de plus excellent” (7–8). There ensues a discussion of whether there is a difference between various categories of virtues: “Vertus galantes” and “Vertus solides” (8). On the *Isle des Vertus*, for example, Coquetterie is banished, and narrator-Anaxandre recounts how the beautiful women of the island (the *Belles Insulaires*) were cruel to him and refused his advances, he who openly pronounces himself a “véritable Galant déclaré” (8).

It is noteworthy that there are two layers of telling and two audiences here: narrator-Anaxandre is telling the present female audience (the *Dames de Bruxelles*) the story of how character-Anaxandre tried in his speech to convince the women of the island (the *Belles Insulaires*) that it is possible to be both *galant* and *honnête*, and that gallantry does not necessarily nullify the possibility of virtue. Upon this, the unnamed perfect *homme galant* to whom he earlier referred approved this opinion, becoming “le premier à recevoir mon opinion” (9), upon which the two of them became fast companions, and began to travel and write poetry together, disseminating their poetry across the island (“semant des Vers tendres” (9)). They would sometimes share their verses orally, but the poems would in turn also be posted and/or printed, by an unknown or unnamed agent, giving some indication of real-world materiality. In the first example of the multi-generic nature of the text, narrator-Anaxandre inserts into his own narrative two examples of the type of poems he and the *homme galant* would write together, which promote love and gallantry, with vocabulary such as “plaisir,” “souple,” “tendresse,” etc. He recalls that there was some general public resistance

to the “liberté” of these verses—“il y avoit des Critiques qui murmuroient” (10), referring to the oral activity of the collectivity, performing their shocked reader response.¹⁶ But this orality is intermingled with the concrete physicality of the poems, since he speaks of continuing to find them lying about on tables and posted on walls around town. These poems and those written by others, circulated both orally and in written/printed form, are then in turn re-cited, re-integrated into a new narrative and textual/printed space, within this represented storytelling scene and the book which contains it.

In one specific instance, Anaxandre, still within his frame narrative, recounts how he found upon the table of one of the *Belles Insulaires* a four-page anonymous “Elegie en forme de Songe” (11–14) which he also then reproduces here, adding both to the fiction of authenticity as well as to the representation of the creation-transmission-reception circuit of which the book as a whole is an intricate *mise en abyme*. This found poem’s unnamed female “je” speaks of her love for a certain Clidamis; as in the “Lettre aux Dames,” the identity of the poetic voice will make itself evident as the poem and the remainder of the book unfold. After he finds it, narrator-Anaxandre tells of the poem being circulated among and read aloud by members of the public on the Island. Loving it so much, they wanted to learn of the original adventure that had inspired it: “Cette Elegie parut si tendre à toutes les Personnes qui la leurent, qu’elle leur inspira un desir tres grand de sçavoir l’avanture qui l’avoit fait naistre” (14). Narrator-Anaxandre, thereafter, will tell the story of how the Elégie we have just read came into existence. Again, we see examples of lived experience inspiring poetic and narrative accounts; we will later see instances of that poetry in turn inspiring love relationships, harkening back to Anaxandre referring to poetry as his “currency” of love.

To recapitulate the work’s multifaceted structure thus far: narrator-Anaxandre is in the process of telling his present audience (the *Dames de Bruxelles*) about what he told his past audience (the *Belles Insulaires*), which is the adventure of Iris and Clidamis, which in turn gave rise to the poem that he found in the past moment (the *Elegie*), which incited the telling of this very story, and which he has recreated

¹⁶ This recalls contemporary indignation regarding the supposed licentiousness of Villedieu’s own poem, “Jouissance,” recited publicly in the salons. See Grande and Keller-Rahbé’s Introduction; DeJean, *Tender Geographies*, 127–32; Jensen 179; Klosowska 213–14; and Worth-Stylianou 105.

here for future reading audiences (“ne voulant pas perdre cette occasion d’entretenir mes belles Insensibles de tendresse & de galanterie, je leur fis le recit qu’elles me demandoient en ces termes” (15)). There is therefore a doubled scene of oral storytelling performed at the request of others as Anaxandre passes into story mode, with two distinct sets of female interlocutors: the *Illustres Dames* to whom he is currently speaking, and the *Belles Insulaires* whom he represents himself as addressing in the past. Moreover, we also have a male narratorial voice created by a female author; this male narrator, within his story of two characters, Iris and Clidamis, in his own turn ventriloquizes the voice of Iris, by conveying her first-person poems and letters within the body of his story—proliferating the instances of gender-fluid ventriloquism. Crucially, the multiplicity of gender-switching narrative voices are all contained within and made subservient to the over-arching, decidedly female voice of the work’s signed author from the title page and the *privilège*, “Mademoiselle Des-Jardins.”

Subsequently, narrator-Anaxandre passes directly into his intercalated narrative: there is a section break, and we read a new story title subsumed within the primary story title (*Anaxandre*): “Histoire d’Iris et de Clidamis.” The multiple levels of narration signify that what follows is a fully formed story within another fully formed story, with the same represented teller, narrator-Anaxandre, who will maintain through the course of this telling the same oral presentation style as he has throughout the frame narrative. Furthermore, he has a dual, and perhaps a triple, audience: the women-listeners of the Island, the women-listeners of the frame, and finally the women-listeners/readers who exist outside the frame of the book.¹⁷ Narrator-Anaxandre then continues in the mode of third-person narration, telling *about* the couple at the heart of the story, Iris and Clidamis.¹⁸ *Notez bien*: This is the same Iris who is

¹⁷ For instance, in the opening lines of the enclosed story of Clidamis and Iris, the “vous” to whom Anaxandre is speaking seems clearly to be the same women-listeners of the frame story: “Il n’est pas necessaire de vous dire qu’Iris avoit des charmes, & que Clidamis estoit digne de la charmer: il est aisé de juger par l’Elegie que je viens de vous redire” (15).

¹⁸ “Iris” and “Clidamis” were the names used by Mme de Villedieu to refer to herself and her lover in her own poetry. Klein explains, “In the gallant poetry of the times, Iris designates Marie-Catherine DesJardins, while Clidamis refers to Sieur de Villedieu. One finds his name Clidamis used as early as 1662, in a poem published in Mme de Villedieu’s *Recueil*, entitled ‘A Clidamis, Eglogue’” (*Female Protagonist* 157). Cuénin affirms, “Notre poétesse faisait si peu mystère de ses sentiments qu’elle composa pour

the author of the *Elégie* we just read, which narrator-Anaxandre had inserted into his enframing story. The couple are said to be perfect for one another, born in the same city, belonging to the same rank, each “digne” (16) of the other. We read/hear the story of how their love grew, traversing alternating periods of doubt and faith in one another, until after a year of hesitation their secret love had become so “violent” (17) that it had to emerge from the private realm into the public. Narrator-Anaxandre reports, “Voicy comme la chose arriva” (18), leading into yet another story within a story, introduced by this depersonalized narratorial reporting clause.

We learn that the truth emerged with “un éclat” (18), when the king ordered Clidamis to the border in order to put down a revolt. Iris was so distraught upon his departure that she retreated to a *Maison de Religieuses*, to remove herself from the worldly tumult and seek her *repos*—such a place, we read, is where “les Personnes de qualité vont quelquefois chercher des azyles contre l’accablement du grand monde” (18–19).¹⁹ However, just as she became acclimated to her separation from the *monde*, Iris got drawn back in to the social sphere: she is obligated by *bienséances* to emerge for the wedding of a relative (19). The god of Love (*Amour*) sees this an opportunity to bring the lovers back together, so he creates a coincidence that brings Clidamis back to Court on the very day of this marriage, and, as if by “hazard” (20), they attend the same masquerade ball, which is part of the wedding festivities. Everyone at the ball is masked; but, unlike in medieval romance, where the couple is unable to recognize each other in such situations without some sort of concrete sign—even unmasked—here, the couple are so in love that they recognize each other instantly, *in spite of* the masks. The strength of their emotion is such that despite the improbability of their co-presence in this time and place, which had not been anticipated by either of them, they can sense one another’s being: “à peine avoient-ils mis le pied dans la Salle, qu’Iris & Clidamis sentirent une émotion qu’ils n’avoient jamais ressentie [...] la force de la sympathie les découvrit l’un à l’autre, malgré leur opinion & malgré leur déguisement” (21–22). Clidamis is drawn toward Iris by a “mouvement secret” (22), and narrator-Anaxandre tells us Clidamis then spoke to her, whispering

‘Clidamis’ des poésies qui circulaient partout, et elle prit en juillet 1668 le nom de celui qu’elle considérait comme un époux” (62).

¹⁹ Similar thematics will be seen a decade later in Mme de Lafayette’s *Princesse de Clèves*. For a discussion of retreat in Lafayette, see DeJean, *Tender Geographies*; and Racevskis, among many others.

directly into her ear, and narrator-Anaxandre relates their conversation in direct discourse via a reporting clause. There is therefore a new “je/vous” pair (Clidamis/Iris): “Ha! Masque, luy dit-il, vous estes Iris sans doute, & il n’y a qu’Iris sur la Terre qui puisse me causer le trouble extrême que je sens” (22). Their exchange continues, both in narrated form and in direct discourse; we also learn of Iris’s emotions when, for instance, flipping the “je/vous” dyad, Iris exclaims: “Helas! luy dit-elle, il y a une heure que mon cœur m’annonce quelque chose de nouveau, sans que je comprenne ce qu’il veut me dire; mais je voy bien qu’il m’avertissoit que Clidamis estoit dans cette Salle” (23). It is interesting that thereafter Iris and Clidamis continually refer to each other in the third person while directly speaking to one another: “O dieux! s’écria-t’il, est-il bien possible que ce Coeur illustre vous ait dit quelque chose en ma faveur; & qu’Iris, l’adorable Iris, ait senty pour moy ce que j’ay senty pour elle?” (23–24).

We then return to narrator-Anaxandre’s discourse, speaking to his dual audience (it is deliberately ambiguous whether it is meant to be understood as the frame women or the island women, or both): “Je vous laisse à juger, Mesdames, de l’étonnement de toute l’assemblée à cette exclamation” (24). Furthermore, this instance of the word *assemblée* refers specifically to Clidamis and Iris’s *own* present internal audience, those accompanying them at the masquerade ball, directly overhearing their conversations and observing their interactions. Once again, emphasis is placed on the apparent *truth value* of the story being recounted, given the importance afforded to the story’s verifiable chain of transmission among ear- and eye-witnesses.²⁰ Even narrator-Anaxandre feels compelled to relate that he is only authorized to tell this true story because he heard it from the mouths of the two lovers themselves: “j’ai sceu de la bouche mesme de ces deux Amans” (24), explicitly valorizing oral transmission. But then, he describes scenic details and conversational tidbits to such a painstaking degree that we are left with the impression that perhaps he was also physically there, despite explicitly stating that he only knows of this *aventure* because of what was recounted to him by its protagonists. Nevertheless, the reader is privy to such minute details as: “Tout le monde tourna la teste du costé d’où cette voix estoit partie” (24), and narrator-Anaxandre continues to interpolate narratorial judgments on the characters involved: “la tendre Iris” (24). He also repeatedly spotlights the entire collective of witnesses,

²⁰ On the notion of “ear witnessing,” see Botelho’s volume, *Renaissance Earwitnesses*. On eye witnessing in a legal context, see Frisch.

the “assemblée,” who told others of what they saw and heard. This series of origin stories are what allowed for this episode to be eventually preserved in written/printed form: “elle avoit une grande assemblée pour témoin de ses actions” (24–25). Iris is so enchanted by Clidamis’s speech that she cannot look away; she becomes in turn *his* captive, internal audience: “elle demouroit attaché à son discours, comme une Personne enchantée, sans avoir la force ny de sortir de sa place, ny d’interrompre une longue suite de paroles passionnées dont Clidamis accompagna les premieres” (25).

Iris continues to express concern about having shown weakness in public; she is feeling the pressure of the spectacle of courtly life. She feels shame that she let her emotions be perceived by others, who then become the witnesses who are able to report her story to the wider world. By allowing the internal to become external, instead of dissimulating her passions, she demonstrates here that she has not yet mastered the art of *paraître* (26), or the spectacle. She is far too transparently *être*, unable to control her physical responses to external stimuli.²¹ Overcome, afraid of dishonoring herself in public, she tries to flee from the ball, but Clidamis follows her. She later recalls to narrator-Anaxandre that she was so captivated by Clidamis that it was “impossible de resister à ses charmes” (27). Subsequently, the re-citing and re-telling continue within the reported conversation of Iris and Anaxandre: we read a report of the conversation of Clidamis and Iris: “tendant la main à Clidamis avec une douceur toute charmante: Allez, Clidamis, luy dit-elle, & ne craignez rien de mon ressentiment” (28). Again seeking *repos*, protection from the worldly challenges besetting her, she returns home to go straight to bed; however, she spends most of the night dreaming of Clidamis and their interactions earlier that evening. It is reported that she repeatedly turns the story over to herself in her mind: “repassant sa memoire sur la maniere dont cette aventure s’estoit passée” (29). Again, *aventure* is the stuff of stories and literature; Clidamis and Iris’s “real-life” love story, the original event, inspired the poem we earlier read, along with this enclosing story, and its respective enclosing story, which are the vehicles by which this *aventure* is being transmitted to the external readers. Narrator-Anaxandre must, for the sake of demonstrating his own veracity as a storyteller, his own *auctoritas*, establish the entire complex chain of transmission: “J’ay sceu toutes ces particularitez de sa bouche mesme” (29). This whole story was told to him by the figure of Iris herself.

²¹ Nora Peterson’s recent book, *Involuntary Confessions of the Flesh*, also discusses the representation of characters’ physical inability to mask their emotions.

Further, more tangible “proof” of her story comes in the form of another poem: she rose from bed and composed a piece of poetry, in yet another representation of lived experience giving rise to literature.

This very poem is also intercalated within the body of the *histoire*; chronologically, it is Iris’s very first literary *prise de parole*. We remember that she was also the author of the first poem the reader encounters in the book, the *Elégie en forme de songe*. And yet, in story-time, that poem was written *after* this one, making this her first moment of putting pen to paper. It is a poem written in the voice of Iris addressing her own heart, admitting that she is now “soueëmise” (30) to Clidamis. But it is noteworthy as her first *prise de parole*, and this is remarked upon even within the diegesis of the book. Narrator-Anaxandre, addressing his female companions, points out that they must be surprised that Love had generated a Poet so quickly: “Peut-estre vous semblera-t’il surprenant, Mesdames, que l’Amour ait fait un Poëte en si peu de temps *d’une Personne de l’âge et du sexe d’Iris*” (30–31, emphasis added). Instead of boldly exclaiming, like Mme Galien in 1737, “Je suis Auteur,”²² we hear “elle est Poëte,” out of the mouth of narrator-Anaxandre. And yet, behind both Iris and Anaxandre, there prevails the figure of the actual author, Mme de Villedieu, as ventriloquizing mediator, the voice behind each of these myriad narrative and poetic personae, praising her own surprising (since young and feminine) literary prowess.²³ Iris was transformed at this moment *into* a poet, by the force of love. She is aware that her age and gender make the fact of her writing poetry extraordinary, but such “metamorphoses” are due entirely to passion (31), since, narrator-Anaxandre explains, it is impossible to love without writing poetry: “on ne sçauroit aimer sans faire des Vers” (31). Despite how surprising it is for such a person, female and young, to inhabit the role of poet, narrator-Anaxandre reassures his audience that her background, natural intelligence, and education all sufficiently prepared her to be a writer: “Il ne faut donc pas s’étonner, si nostre jeune Amante qui avoit un tres-bel Esprit naturel, une grande lecture, & beaucoup d’usage du beau Monde, commença d’abord sa passion par des Vers” (31). She had received an outstanding private

²² See Loysen for a discussion of the eighteenth-century writer Mme de Galien’s surprised exclamation upon realizing her own status as an author: “Je suis Auteur!”

²³ Valérie Worth-Stylianou discusses public reaction to Villedieu’s literary interventions in “‘C’est, pourtant, l’œuvre d’une Fille’”; she indeed encountered such wonder at her age and gender despite following in the footsteps of Madeleine de Scudéry, who would go on to win the *prix d’éloquence* from the Académie française in 1671.

education: “elle estoit enseignée par un Maistre excellent en cet Art” (32). Thereafter, within the storyline, Iris becomes a public phenomenon and everyone is flabbergasted by her talent: “elle y a fait des progrès qui ont étonné toute la Terre” (32). This is of course a self-referential story of Villedieu herself, coming to assume authorship as well as authority, and engaging in considerable self-promotion, represented literarily within the pages (poems, stories, conversations, letters) that constitute this *nouvelle*.

Meanwhile, in another location, Clidamis is likewise spending a night of agitation, joy, and fear. As a true *galant*, he gets dressed up the next day to return to see Iris. She reassures him of her love inasmuch as it is possible for a woman to do and still maintain her public image and reputation for virtue. They agree they are equals and fully suited to one another, and so they plan to marry. Further incitement for wedding promptly is the fact that rumors are starting to circulate about their *aventure*: “leur aventure avoit fait un éclat si grand, qu’ils comprirent qu’elle ne pouvoit estre justifiée que par un prompt Mariage” (33–34). Thus, they begin to prepare their marriage, and thereafter the people in the town (referred to as “on”) start to look at them as if they were married already: “on les regardoit déjà dans la Ville comme des Gens mariez” (34), which makes the general public the audience to the enactment of Clidamis and Iris’s love story.

However, in a reminder of the absolutist political climate, Clidamis is once again forced to choose between love and duty, *amour* and *devoir*: a new war breaks out on the border, and the king forces Clidamis to participate. He must therefore abandon Iris. His preference would be to conclude their marriage before leaving, but her parents, who of course hold the ultimate familial authority, desire a proper wedding ceremony (“Iris avoit à répondre de ses actions à des Parens façonniers qui vouloient des Noces dans l’ordre et dans les ceremonies” (35)). The couple therefore agree to defer their marriage until after the military campaign and Clidamis’s return. Their goodbye and separation are so emotional that they inspire yet more poetry: “l’absence de Clidamis fut une source inépuisable de Vers pour la charmante & spirituelle Iris” (35). The reader learns that it is during this time that Iris composed the Elegie we read at the beginning of the book (the one which inspired all the storytelling which followed): “Ce fut en ce temps-là qu’elle fit l’Elegie qui a donné matiere au recit de cette Histoire” (35–36). The circularity of Villedieu’s metanarrative is astonishing: the poem inspired by Iris’s real-

life story (*aventure*) gave rise to this very recounting of that same story, in which the *Elegie* itself is reproduced, and in which she sings her own praises as a poet and as a storyteller.²⁴

Clidamis is also composing poetry during this time, but narrator-Anaxandre relates that his poems are not as good as Iris's; here, Villedieu permits herself yet another a moment of self-promotion and self-referentiality, if we are to take Iris as a figure of the author herself. Iris and Clidamis begin a long-distance communication during their separation: "un commerce tres-spirituel" (36), consisting of letter writing and poetry exchange.²⁵ It is during this military campaign that the narrator-Anaxandre says he first made Clidamis's acquaintance. In this moment, the narrator figure becomes a character within the action of the story being recounted: this figure is character-Anaxandre. The two became close friends: "Je connus Clidamis à cette Campagne, & je devins le plus cher de ses Amis: je servois dans cette mesme Armée" (36). Here again, we see narrator-Anaxandre establishing the chain of transmission and his own credibility, reassuring his audience and readers that he personally knew Clidamis and therefore, his whole story takes on the authority of a personally verifiable true tale. At first, Anaxandre's role as a character is only peripheral, in that he serves as audience to the main love story between Clidamis and Iris; but later, he will become implicated in the plot itself as a participant, not just as an observer of and commentator on (and subsequent storyteller of) others' *aventures*.

Due to character-Anaxandre's relative political freedom (he is not a subject of the same king as Clidamis—he chose to fight for him voluntarily), he is allowed to leave the military campaign early and return to Court, while "le pauvre Clidamis" (37) is obligated to stay. At this point in the underlying plotline, character-Anaxandre has not yet met

²⁴ Among the many authors who have examined the question of an author/narrator reflecting upon her own writing, Jean-Paul Sermain fruitfully looks at such mechanisms in early modern narrative in *Métafictions*. He says that such works "[jou]ent de la mise en rapport de deux discours distincts de la fiction, celui vécu par les personnages et celui mis en œuvre par le roman, cette dualité se manifestant souvent dans la double face d'un même énoncé qui est vécu par le héros comme le moment décisif ou ultime de ses aventures, la médiation même de sa vie, et qui en même temps constitue le texte par lequel est instauré et transmis l'univers romanesque au lecteur" (14). He specifically examines how Villedieu accomplishes this in her *nouvelle* "Cléonice" (1669), but does not treat "Anaxandre."

²⁵ On the importance of letter writing in seventeenth-century culture, see Bray and Strosetski; and Goldsmith (*Exclusive Conversations*).

Iris; he has only heard stories circulating about her. He has no specific plans to see her; his friend Clidamis, prone to jealousy, would prefer that they not meet. But once again due to “le hazard” (38), character-Anaxandre becomes friends with a friend of Iris’s, who shows him copies of poems that Iris had written, evoking the widespread salon practice of circulating poetry in manuscript form. Narrator-Anaxandre describes these poems as “les plus beaux que j’eusse veu [*sic*] de ma vie” (38). This constitutes another instance of self-promotion on the part of frame narrator/author Villedieu, since she (or the character/narrator she created) is of course talking about her own poems. The narrative then turns in on itself once again, when narrator-Anaxandre comments on his own narrative style. He explains that since he has chosen to be brief, he will not insert too many examples of Iris’s poems into his own tale: “Bien que la briefveté où je me suis assujetty, semble me defendre de mesler beaucoup de Vers dans ce Recit; ceux dont je parle sont si admirables, que je ne puis m’empescher de vous les redire” (38). There are many noteworthy elements here: a reference to the blending of poetry and prose in a single work, along with references to orality (*ceux dont je parle, redire*) and to his external listening/reading audience (*vous*). He then uses the deictic “voicy” to introduce the inserted poems, poems shown to him in physical form by Iris’s friend.

The first poem, “A Clidamis,” is named as having been written by Iris; it is represented as transmitted here as an interpolation within the story of a male narrator; this narrator originally received the poem from a female friend (who received it from Iris-author); this male narrator then declares the verses to be the best he has ever seen. But this male narrator is the creation of a female author who is in actuality the author of this enclosed poem (praising thereby her own literary talent and bolstering her own authority). Within these many layers of gender-fluid ventriloquism, Iris addresses Clidamis in a “je/tu” relationship, but she also speaks of the poem as having been directly dictated to her by Amour. All of this begs the question: who is to be presumed the ultimate author of this poem? Villedieu? Iris? Amour? Narrator-Anaxandre as the one who published it, in the sense of publicizing it more widely (via storytelling or via the ultimate creation of the book in our hand), or his and Iris’s mutual friend, who circulated it in manuscript form? Moreover, we do not know whether any of this textual transmission was undertaken with the knowledge or permission of Iris-author.²⁶

²⁶ This is yet another allusion to an episode in Villedieu’s own life, which taught her the hard lesson of the uncontrollability of text: when her lover, the sieur de Villedieu, sold

This first poem is followed directly by a second poem, with no narratorial voice re-emerging between them. It is entitled “La Solitaire,” and is another poem written by Iris referring to herself both in the first person (“je”) and in the third (“la solitaire”). It contains a great deal of physical description of her lover, Clidamis, as well as references to poetry and letters as material indicators of the love that one experiences: “On voit de mille Amans des offrandes sans nombre, / Des Lettres, des Portraits, des Bagues, des cheveux” (41). The poem’s theme is one of inconstancy and mutability, and there are several moments where the plot complications that are yet to come are foreshadowed: lovers always risk betrayal, and love is never sure to last. There are references to the constancy of inconstancy, such as with the following oxymoron: “De cette inconstance ordinaire” (41). The poetic voice describes her fears of infidelity, ingratitude, jealousy, and absence. At this point in the diegesis, it is reasonable for Iris to be experiencing such fears because of her physical distance from her beloved. However, character-Anaxandre, who will himself become ensnared by Iris’s charms, will go on to play *on* and play *up* these fears to his own advantage, as we shall see. The poem also includes represented speech and reporting clauses: “Sainte Divinité de mon Coeur amoureux, / (Dit-elle d’un ton pitoyable)” (43); represented voices: “Elle croit discerner les accens de sa voix” (43); represented outbursts: “Elle s’écrie, arrête, Amarillis, écoute” (44). There are many references to love’s opposite as constituting *repos*, *retraite*, *tranquille sommeil* (45). Iris starts to desire the *repos*, the *liberté*, the indifference and peace of not loving and not being subject to passions: “Sçachant combien l’Amour enfante de douleurs / Combien la liberté fait naistre de douceurs, / Son Coeur forma quasi des sentiments d’envie / Pour cette indifferente & si paisible vie” (46), perhaps wishing she were still in her convent retreat from earlier in the story. There are repeated references that one should always be wary of ruses and trickery, and lessons on how to distinguish between *Amour profane* and *Amour divin* (46). She then expresses a glimmer of regret about her very regret: “Elle se reprocha dans ce tendre moment / D’avoir pû souhaiter d’oublier son Amant” (47), demonstrating just how troubled her sense of *repos* is. She states that lessons must be personally experienced in order to be learned; it is not possible to learn from the reports (stories) of others: “Telles sont de ce Dieu les secretes chimeres, / Qu’on ne les apprend

her private love letters to the publisher Barbin without her knowledge and against her will. This is discussed by Decker Lalande in her chapter, “Sex, Lies and Authorship” (in *Labor of Love*) and in “The Authorial Mask.” See also Chupeau; Démoris; Jensen; and Kuizenga (“Seizing the Pen”).

point sur le rapport d'autrui" (47), an instance of Villedieu simultaneously bolstering her own authority by foregrounding the criticality of lived experience and undermining it by downplaying the exemplary power of story.

Moreover, the speaker seems to change over the course of the poem, sometimes seeming to be Iris and at other times someone other than her. At the end, it seems to return to the "je" of Iris, addressing Clidamis, instead of the other internal poem character names who stood in for them (Amarillis and Tirsis, respectively). I would also draw attention to the moment in the poem where the female character in the poem sees her reflection in the water and thinks she is gazing not upon herself but upon her male lover: again, we see the interchangeability of the male and female characters, identities, and speaking voices. In the last stanza of the poem, Iris makes the explicit connection between herself and Amarillis: "Si je n'estois, Iris, ton Amante fidelle, / Je voudrois estre Amarillis, / Montre à l'Amant de cette Belle / Ce fidelle crayon de son mortel ennuy; / Et ce que je te mande d'elle, / Tasche à me l'apprendre de luy" (48).

After this nine-page retrospective and prospective poem, the frame narrator-Anaxandre returns to the scene to give his critical opinion of this poem (again, an instance of self-commentary on the part of Villedieu): "Ces Vers me donnerent une envie furieuse de voir la Personne qui les avait faits" (48). This is another instance of poetry *inciting* loving feelings. He is starting to fall in love with Iris based solely on her verse and her reputation. He tries to convince their mutual friend to bring him to Iris's house. Once again, "le Destin" comes to his aid (48), and he succeeds in meeting her without needing to be introduced by a third party. Since this is the point in the storyline when character-Anaxandre meets Iris for the first time, everything we have already heard/read up to this point was logically told to narrator-Anaxandre *by* the main couple subsequent to this meeting.

The circumstances of their meeting are festivities around the birth of a royal heir. Narrator-Anaxandre describes the townswomen's reaction to this event in othering terms, describing how "they" celebrated in "their" way—"les Dames de la Ville voulant solemnifier cette Feste à leur maniere" (49). The women decide to have a sleigh race ("Course de Traîneaux" 49), which takes place in the gardens next to the royal palace. The courtly pastime is described in great detail, with the women riding in

their decorated sleighs, accompanied by well-dressed knights; Iris, however, refuses to have a knight accompany her. Narrator-Anaxandre starts to speak at length about these other women present for the sleigh race, but then seems to catch himself and remembers that his prescribed narratorial task is *only* to talk to his external audience about Iris. As in the beginning of his storytelling session, we see him self-limiting his storyline and underscoring the narrative selection process, stating that he will only relate the information that is pertinent to his audience and to his primary purpose: “comme c’est Iris seule que je me suis chargé de vous entretenir, je ne vous parleray que de ce qui la regarde” (49–50). There is a lengthy description of Iris’s clothing and horse, and in the process, he compares her to the goddess Diane:

Jamais tout ce qu’on nous a dépeint de la majesté de Diane, n’a approché de la grace avec laquelle Iris conduisoit son petit Char. Elle estoit vestuë d’un habit de drap noir fait a la maniere de celuy où on nous represente les Nymphes. (51–52)

The “on” here refers to classical writers who had described the original Diane to “nous,” the contemporary community of readers. This Modern Diane far surpasses the Ancient Diane, foreshadowing perhaps the burgeoning *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*,²⁷ in this comparison of the relative value not just of the two Dianes, but of the corresponding descriptions of them. And yet, the original Diane is still the standard by which beauty is measured; and ancient descriptions are still the standard by which all descriptions are to be evaluated. This allusion to ancient stories, which we have all received as part of our common heritage and which are then adapted by future generations, evokes the ever-regenerating chain of stories and storytellers that *this* story’s multiple tellers are joining.

Upon seeing Iris at the sleigh race, narrator-Anaxandre tells us that character-Anaxandre started to fall in love: “toute sa Personne, qui est adroite & bien formée, avoit des graces si singulieres dans cet equipage, que je ne pûs la remarquer sans trouble & sans admiration” (53). This is the first time he is seeing Iris, so he does not yet realize her identity, or that she is the very woman that his friend Clidamis loves. He needs to find out what her name is: “Je m’informay d’abord du nom de

²⁷ Formative in my understanding of this *querelle* are DeJean (*Ancients Against Moderns*) and Fumaroli.

cette belle Fille” (53). Then he realizes with surprise that this is the same woman about whom he has heard stories being told—Modern stories are circulating about her, just like Ancient stories circulated about the original Diane. But one stark difference is that this Diane is not merely an object of description, an object of the male literary gaze, but also an author and creator in her own right.²⁸ Stories have indeed been told *about* her, but Anaxandre has also read her literary creations; stories and poems have also been told *by* her—the object has become the subject. Character-Anaxandre is now even more in love with her than he had been when all he knew of her was her reputation and her poetry: “ayant appris que c’estoit la mesme que j’avois tant de passion de connoistre, & dont les Vers m’avoient semblé si beaux, je redoublay encore mon attention pour elle” (53). Iris is the spectacle that all present are watching—not only character-Anaxandre, but also the whole adoring crowd: “elle commençoit à se faire autant d’adorateurs, comme il y avoit de spectateurs à cette Feste” (53–54).

Suddenly, when her horse startles, character-Anaxandre is there to save her, since, we recall, she is the only lady unaccompanied by a Knight. Her horse “l’auroit brisé [le traîneau] sans doute entre les Arbres, si je n’eusse esté assez heureux pour l’arrester. Je luy gagnay le mors avec beaucoup de vitesse; & presentant une de mes mains à Iris, pendant que je retenois son Cheval de l’autre” (54). This is the very moment at which character-Anaxandre passes from *observer* to *participant* in the action; he goes from hearing about Iris and reading her poetry, to seeing her, to now touching her and speaking directly to her, in direct discourse that narrator-Anaxandre relates to us in the storytelling moment: “Voila ce que c’est, Madame, (luy dis-je) de ne vouloir pas souffrir de Cavalier apres de vous” (54–55), referring to the risks she is incurring as a woman alone.

After this dialogue, the narratorial voice returns: “Iris estoit si troublée de son aventure” (55). Iris is too upset to even say anything in response to Anaxandre, and gets whisked away by her friends: “elle fut entraînée à son Carosse par un nombre de ses Amies qui ne luy donnerent pas le temps de me dire une seule parole” (55). Subsequently,

²⁸ Villedieu here seems to be responding to Scudéry’s call in *Les Femmes illustres* for women to take up their pens as writing subjects, arguing that “women could best insure their places in history by writing, rather than by being written about” (Greenberg, “The World of Prose and Female Self-Inscription,” 39).

Iris becomes the audience to stories told about Anaxandre, prolonging the circular movement of the storytelling circuit:

il se trouva bientost des Gens qui luy apprirent mon nom
& ma naissance; car bien que je fusse étranger, je n'estois
pourtant pas tout à fait inconnu, j'avois servy le Roy de ce
Royaume avec assez de bonheur, j'estois d'une Maison
assez éclatante, & j'avois fait beaucoup d'Amis dans cette
Campagne. (56)

We then learn via indirect discourse that “Iris pria donc un de ses Parens de venir me faire ses complimens” (56). When this planned meeting takes place, character-Anaxandre is charmed by her conversational skills, her verbal acumen showing itself once again: “je la trouvay si charmante dans la conversation, & toutes ses actions avoient un agrément secret si propre à engager les coeurs, que je luy donnay le mien tout entier dès cette premiere visite” (56–57). He admits right away to his audience that he is falling even more deeply in love with Iris, despite now knowing about her relationship with Clidamis and the fact that Clidamis is his friend with whom he had “lié un commerce assez étroit” (57). He knows all the stories of Clidamis and his relationship with Iris: “pour n'ignorer aucune des particularitez de son aventure” (57).

In spite of this knowledge, he finds himself carried away by his passions: “je m'abandonnay à ma passion naissante avec autant d'emportement, que si je n'avois rien sceu de l'estat present de l'ame de nostre Iris” (57). He repeatedly refers to Iris with this second-person plural possessive—“nostre Iris” (57), “nostre Maistresse” (58), “nostre Amante” (61), as if Iris belonged both to Clidamis and to him; or, in fact, as if she belonged to all of us. Like Diane, she has become part of our cultural heritage—the new Diane, the new Nymphé, the new woman writer for the Moderns. He immediately starts to consider Clidamis his Rival, rather than his Friend: “ne regardant plus Clidamis comme mon Amy, dès l'instant que je me consideray comme son Rival” (57–58). He starts to devise ways to steal Iris away from Clidamis, and the extent of his duplicitous purpose is seen in a panoply of words like: *dessein*, *fausses confidences*, *ruse*, *artifices*, *feindre*, *apparence*, *faux avis*, *inconstance pretendü*, *perfidies* (58–60).

To accomplish this appropriation of his friend's lover, he begins a sham letter-writing exchange with Clidamis, in which he hopes to blur

the lines between lies and truth, appearance and reality. At the same time, he also lies to Iris about an infidelity on Clidamis's part: "je sceus feindre une infidélité de Clidamis, avec une apparence si ingénue, que la credule Iris s'y laisse decevoir" (59). This faked infidelity leads Iris to believe that due to their separation, Clidamis has fallen in love with a woman closer to where he is stationed. So, we see character-Anaxandre pretending to be telling a true story to Iris based on trumped-up letters between him and Clidamis. In addition, he even composes phony letters about the infidelity, claiming to be Clidamis himself addressing Iris: "Je me faisais écrire de faux avis de cette inconstance prétenduë [de la part de Clidamis], que je faisais passer par les mains d'Iris" (59). He also pretends to Iris that he will deliver letters from her to Clidamis, that in fact he never does: "quand elle voulut témoigner son ressentiment à Clidamis par ses Lettres, je mis si bon ordre à ne luy en laisser recevoir aucune, qu'il fut trois mois entiers sans avoir de nouvelles de sa Maistresse" (59–60). Therefore, even though the letters have been written, no communication is enacted between the letter writers and their intended recipients; the circuit is broken. Clidamis does not receive the letters written to him by Iris, and character-Anaxandre continues to also hide actual letters written by Clidamis to Iris. But the inoperative nature of their message transfer is unknown to the purported participants in the letter exchange, who believe themselves to be engaged in actual written communication with one another. Furthermore, any letters actually received by Iris were counterfeit: "quelque Lettre contrefaite" (60). This is a *mise-en-scène* of the very fluidity and fungibility of authorial identity: narrators can switch and swap identities, and even genders, at will. Readers can never know who is writing which piece of text. Who is the author figure behind this voice? Is there any way to ascertain? Is there any such thing as a fixed author or a fixed authorial identity?

Turning then to his doubled audience of women listeners, narrator-Anaxandre tries to justify and rationalize the actions of character-Anaxandre, by turning Vice into Virtue in the name of love. Just as we see happening with narrators and authors in this text, vice and virtue, truth and lies, are interchangeable and indistinguishable, constantly being represented as changing places. This teller can easily slip into the identity of that teller, and then a whole new basis for judging credibility will need to be forged. This speaks to the opacity and complexity of communication when it is disconnected from its social, oral context of origin. Narrator-Anaxandre claims that Vice becomes Virtue when the action is undertaken in the name of love: "toutes les

perfidies qui n'ont pour but que de se faire aimer de ce qu'on aime, passent pour des vertus en Amour, plutost que pour des vices" (60). Even though it is a crime to "tromper sa Maistresse," it becomes permissible to do it in order to "détruire son Rival" (61). He refers again to his female reader-hearer audience's interpretation of him: "tout perfide que je vous parois dans ce recit" (61). He is telling the story of himself, and attempting at the same time to control his audience's reader response and interpretive reactions.

Upon seeing Iris's distraught reaction to this supposed infidelity, he momentarily thinks of renouncing his "artifices" (61). Instead, however, he tries to find yet another way to turn the situation to his advantage. He attempts to convince Iris to repay infidelity with infidelity—a self-serving suggestion if ever there was one. But she refuses, maintaining that she will not become that which she abhors: "Non, non, Anaxandre, me disoit-elle un jour, je ne veux point imiter l'exemple d'un Homme que je condamne" (62). She does not want to cause any pain to Clidamis, even if she believes, based on Anaxandre's lies, that he has betrayed her. She claims to be voicing the feminine point of view when she says:

car, Anaxandre, ne vous y trompez pas, la plus grande partie des Femmes s'abusent, quand ells s'imaginent reparer l'affront qu'un inconstant leur fait, en devenant inconstantes à leur tour: au contraire, la foiblesse qui nous [les femmes] porte à aimer, ne peut estre excusée que par la fermeté de l'amour. (63)

We return to the idea expressed earlier in the Elegie, that love is a weakness. Women must counteract this weakness with steadfastness and constancy, even in the face of abandonment and infidelity. Character-Anaxandre bursts out: "Quoy, repris-je tout hors de moy-mesme, vous trouvez qu'il est plus beau pour une Femme, qu'on abandonne d'aimer un Homme qui ne l'aime plus, qu'il ne le seroit de rendre mépris pour mépris, & d'oublier celuy qui l'oublie?" (64). She insists that it would be most preferable to be able to free herself entirely of any feelings at all for this man; but, since that is not possible, she should remain constant. She should not be fickle because the man is fickle, or justify his perfidy with her own: "ce que je nie fortement, c'est qu'il soit louable de changer quand un Homme change, & d'autoriser sa legereté en suivant son exemple" (65). She is advancing the idea of authority and exemplarity:

she strives to be an example of constancy, even in the face of inconstancy. Consequently, character-Anaxandre advises her to *pretend* to change, to *pretend to be inconstant*. This additional blurring of the lines between lies and the truth, between being and seeming, would be a “trahison innocente” (65), since her ruse’s ultimate purpose would be to win back Clidamis. But Iris’s theory of love does not allow this; she offers a treatise on honorable love, and in so doing she is self-authorizing to stand her ground and choose her own path rather than yield to character-Anaxandre’s machinations.

We then return to narrator-Anaxandre addressing his female listening/reading audience: “Vous jugez bien, Mesdames, que ce raisonnement n’etoit pas selon mon sens, & que je faisais tous mes efforts pour le combattre; mais mon eloquence estoit inutile” (66). His words are futile, his eloquence has no effect on his conversational partner; Iris remains “ferme dans son opinion” (66). And now he must live with the knowledge that he has betrayed his friend and caused hurt to Iris, the one he loves “plus que ma vie” (67); moreover, all of his efforts failed and he only succeeded in pushing Iris further into the arms of Clidamis.

He is in the middle of berating himself for all of this, when yet another *aventure* takes place, one that will separate him from Iris forevermore. Despite acting as if this were something that happened *to* him, “par hazard,” this is a path he chooses; he will have to live with the consequences he wrought. But he speaks to his audience as if to exculpate himself: “il arriva une aventure qui fut le comble de toutes mes disgraces” (67). The story is as follows: He was at Iris’s house on an occasion when she was not there. Since the other women consider him to be the man who saved Iris’s life at the sleigh race, they have no problem leaving him alone in her room to wait for her. He is in her “ruelle” (68), looking at her paintings, her books, and her writing case (*écritoire*), which she had left open on a table next to her bed. Naturally, his curiosity drives him to look inside, whereupon he finds a letter which he unfolds and reads. The contents of this letter are then inserted into the narrative flow: “Lettre d’Iris à son infidelle Clidamis” (69). The letter begins with a poem, within which the internal audience is the Muse. Iris’s intended external audience is Clidamis, but in actuality, the external audience is character-Anaxandre and, subsequently, each of his future listening audiences and, ultimately, the external readers. Once again, we see a representation of the uncontrollability of literary

circulation, highlighting the impossibility of ever ascertaining with precision the author or the reader of any particular text—from whose hands it emanated and into whose hands it will travel.

After its poetic opening, the letter moves to prose, in which Iris addresses Clidamis directly: “Vous voyez ce que c’est, Clidamis” (70); she then moves back again to poetry, now referring to her Muse in the third person instead of speaking directly to her. She relates what the Muse wants to say to Clidamis, as if declaring herself the spokeswoman for the Muse. We then return to narrator-Anaxandre, who describes his reaction upon reading the letter within the story moment: “Je pensay mourir de douleur à la lecture de cette Lettre” (72). He describes his own reader response, the effect this letter had on him. But what will be the effect on his respective audience? Narrator-Anaxandre continues talking to his external audience: “je vous avouë” (72). He decides on his own that Clidamis must not receive this letter, and so he resolves to steal it. In its place in the *écritoire* he leaves his own letter to Iris, declaring his love for her. But in this case, there is no re-citation of the contents of the letter. He states only, “je pris une plume, & me laissant emporter à la violence de mon transport, je declaray à Iris par une Lettre les sentimens que j’avois pour elle depuis si longtemps, & la rage où j’estois de n’avoir pû reüssir à chasser Clidamis de son ame” (73). He folds this letter to Iris just like the one Iris had written to Clidamis; he takes Iris’s letter and leaves his behind in the same place, in yet another scene of substitution and interchangeability. He retires to the country for a few days to give Iris the time to read the letter and react, wondering about her reader response, the effect his writing will have on its intended audience. But here too, this letter will not reach its intended audience. The communication circuit is disrupted once again. This letter, the one written by character-Anaxandre to Iris, gets sent to Clidamis in place of Iris’s original letter, which character-Anaxandre has stolen. Again, narrator-Anaxandre attributes this to fate: “Mais, charmantes Dames, admirez de grace la bizarrerie de ma destinée” (74). This letter, the one written by Anaxandre to Iris, gets delivered directly into the hands of Clidamis, who then, finally, learns the truth about his devious friend. Narrator-Anaxandre describes his friend reading the letter, disrupting the fiction he has created of how he could have possibly known Clidamis’s reaction, since it cannot be the case that this was recounted to him as well: “Représentez-vous la surprise de cet Amant à la lecture de cette Lettre” (76). This letter reveals to Clidamis all the subterfuge that has

taken place, along with his friend's betrayal and the fact that the man he trusted to be his Amy is in actuality his Rival.

Clidamis leaves immediately to go straight to Iris, and arrives at her house (of course, coincidentally!) at the same moment as character-Anaxandre. This is the first time that character-Anaxandre will be in the presence of both Clidamis and Iris at the same time. He was there to ascertain the effect of his communication on its intended audience, wondering how Iris would react to the letter he had written her: "je venois sçavoir l'effet qu'elle [la lettre] auroit produit" (77). He describes to his dual audience his reaction upon seeing his Rival: "je vous laisse à penser ce que je devins à la veuë de ce Rival detesté" (77). Clidamis, fired up by rage, jealousy, and passion, reveals to character-Anaxandre the fact that he was the actual recipient of this missive, rather than its intended addressee, Iris. The truth is thereby revealed simultaneously to all those present: Clidamis begins to spew invective at character-Anaxandre in front of Iris, who had heretofore known nothing of any of these shenanigans. This leaves both character- and narrator-Anaxandre unable to express himself, both within the story-moment and within the recounting of the story: "il me jetta dans une confusion que je ne puis vous exprimer" (78). Iris asks Clidamis for an explanation of this whole "Enigme" (78), and we then see Clidamis become the storyteller: he recounts the story of the fate of the letter, so that character-Anaxandre is now the story recipient: "je sceus l'avanture de ma Lettre" (78). Moreover, Iris learns of Clidamis's innocence via this storytelling scene, which in turn leads to their reconciliation. Character-Anaxandre leaves in despair, attributing the entire episode to fate: "regardant l'union de ces deux Amans, comme un ouvrage des Astres, que rien n'estoit capable de détruire, j'abandonnay cette Ville fatale, où mon repos avoit esté trouble d'une maniere si extraordinaire" (79). Distraught, he leaves the city of Clidamis and Iris, and destiny eventually brings him to the *Isle des Vertus*—where he would meet the *Belles Insulaires* and become the storyteller we met at the work's debut.

And then, with no break and no transition, on page 80 of the text, we suddenly return to the voice of the initial frame narrator, who now speaks of Anaxandre in the third person: "Anaxandre estoit dans cet endroit de sa narration, lors qu'il receut un ordre de moy de se rendre aupres de vous, ô illustres Dames de la Cour de Bruxelles" (80). Throughout the course of the text, we have zoomed in across multiple levels of narration, playing with the notions of author, narrator, and

audience all along the way, and the camera has now zoomed all the way back out. This sort of gender-fluid ventriloquism is typical of Villedieu's fiction, and calls to mind the words of Roger Chartier, who explained in the following way the paradox of the variegated narratorial voice which nonetheless supports the unity of the author-function of any text: "cet éclatement manifeste avec la plus extreme virtuosité la figure de l'auteur en sa fonction primordiale: garantir l'unicité et la cohérence du discours" (62–63). In the case of Mme de Villedieu, her claims to authorship are all the more fully supported and performed on the page by the multiplicity of voices—narrative, poetic, epistolary, and conversational—which flow back and forth across the gender binary; play with the notions of identity and anonymity, authentic and feigned authorship; and finally converge to create a literary image of Villedieu *qua* author.

As I hope to have shown, Mme de Villedieu's little-studied "Anaxandre" provides an important opportunity to examine the workings of female authorship in early modern France. Villedieu's complicated gender-fluid ventriloquizing serves as a metafictional reflection on just how challenging it was for a woman of her time to craft an *authentic* and *authoritative* writerly reputation. By repeatedly spotlighting the lack of control one possesses over the transmission and reception of own's own textual productions, and emphasizing moments of textual susceptibility to false claims of authorship, she paradoxically strengthens her own position as an author. The literary virtuosity she displays, along with the high degree of generic and gender hybridity, the multiplicity of discursive loci, and her focus on authors' interactions with their plural (internal and external) audiences, all serve to bolster her pretensions to authorship. In this end, after all, this dizzying picture and multivocal assembly is all contained under the overarching name of a singular, female author: Mademoiselle Des-Jardins, proclaiming her own literary aptitude and thereby demonstrating her own claims to authority.

Montclair State University

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