

LA DEVINERESSE AND THE AFFAIRE DES POISONS

THE *AFFAIRE DES POISONS* was one of the greatest scandals ever to hit France. It revealed that members of all classes of society had at best consulted fortune tellers, hunted for buried treasure or practised alchemy, and at worst been involved with abortions, poison, black masses and pacts with the devil. Most commentators begin their accounts with the arrest, trial and execution of the marquise de Brinvilliers in 1676. However, these events were self-contained and only really served to set the tone for what was to come as the true extent of the web of poisoners and their clients was revealed. According to Anne Somerset in her recent book, the Affair proper began with the arrest of La Delagrangé in February 1677.¹ I, though, would put its start somewhat later, with the arrest of La Bosse and La Vigoureux in January 1679. However, the event of most significance was undoubtedly the arrest of the best-known of all the *devineresses*, La Voisin, on 12 March, and that of her accomplice, Lesage, twelve days later. In April, the *Chambre Ardente* was constituted to examine the Affair, and continued to sit until July 1682, when it was formally dissolved. It was, though, temporarily suspended for seven months from 30 September 1680 to 19 May 1681, when it seemed as if its probing was getting too close to Mme de Montespan and thereby the King. The Affair, then, roughly divides into two parts: March 1679 to September 1680 and May 1681 to July 1682.²

During the first of these periods, the theatre company operating at the Hôtel Guénégaud in Paris produced a play by Thomas Corneille and Jean Donneau de Visé entitled *La Devineresse*. It was premiered on 11 November 1679, and ran until 10 March 1680.³ The play has an episodic structure, presenting a series of encounters between the *devineresse*,

¹ Anne Somerset, *The Affair of the Poisons: Murder, Infanticide and Satanism at the Court of Louis XIV* (London: Phoenix, 2004). Other works consulted in connection with the events of the Affair were: Frantz Funck-Brentano, *Le Drame des poisons* (Paris: Hachette, 1899; repr. Paris: Tallandier, 1977); Georges Mongrédien, *Madame de Montespan et l’Affaire des poisons* (Paris: Hachette, 1953); Frances Mossiker, *The Affair of the Poisons: Louis XIV, Madame de Montespan, and One of History’s Great Unsolved Mysteries* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970); Jean-Christian Petitfils, *L’Affaire des poisons* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1977). The main source of documentary evidence was François Ravaisson, *Archives de la Bastille: documents inédits* (Paris: Durone & Pedone-Lauriel, 1872), hereafter referred to by the abbreviation Rav.

² By order of the King, the Lieutenant-Général de police, La Reynie, continued to investigate, even while the *Chambre Ardente* was suspended.

³ See Jan Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume Two: the Accounts Season by Season* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), pp. 144-52.

Mme Jobin, and her clients. These are hung around a loose plot of a love triangle: a marquis wants to marry a comtesse, but is loved by the inconveniently married Mme Noblet, who is paying Mme Jobin to separate them. The *devineresse*, therefore, tells the comtesse that if she marries the marquis he will be jealous, make her unhappy and end up by killing someone. The comtesse agrees, however, to marry him if he can prove to her that Mme Jobin is a fake, which he sets out to do. All this gives rise to series of conjuring tricks by which Mme Jobin seeks to deceive the dupes who come to consult her and to impress the marquis with her supposed powers.

The question of the relationship of the play to actual events is a vexed one. Funck-Brentano maintains that it was a propaganda exercise instigated by the Lieutenant of Police, La Reynie (pp. 253-54). Others, notably Philip Yarrow and Anne Somerset, find this suggestion ridiculous. The former includes an appendix to that effect in his edition of the play, where he writes: 'La pièce ne renferme aucune allusion précise au procès de La Voisin; et il est difficile de croire que le seul La Reynie pût en fournir la matière'.⁴ The latter concurs: 'it is inconceivable that that merciless scourge of fortune-tellers and conjurers could have had a hand in this light comedy, in which the eponymous divineress is depicted as an engaging rogue rather than a genuine menace' (p. 251).

De Visé himself recounted the circumstances of the play's composition in his obituary article on Thomas Corneille published in *Le Mercure galant* in January 1710:

Les Comédiens m'ayant pressé, avec de fortes instances, de mettre après la mort de Madame Voisin, tout ce qui s'étoit passé chez elle pendant sa vie [...]: je fis un grand nombre de Scenes qui auroient pu fournir la matiere pour trois ou quatre Pièces; mais qui ne pouvoient former un sujet, parce qu'il étoit trop uniforme, [...] je lui donnai mes Scenes [à Thomas Corneille], & il en choisit un nombre, avec lesquelles il composa un sujet, dont le nœud parut des plus agréables [...] (pp. 281-82)

According to De Visé, then, the first inspiration came not from La Reynie but from the actors themselves. This is not surprising. Following the success at the Guénégaud of Corneille and De Visé's spectacular musical productions *Circé* and *L'Inconnu* in 1675, the troupe had been in the doldrums. The pair's *Triomphe des dames* of 1676 did not enjoy the same degree of acclaim, probably because limitations on the use of stage music imposed to favour Lully's Opera were fully applied for the first time.⁵ Since spectacle without music seemed well nigh impossible, the

⁴ Thomas Corneille and Jean Donneau De Visé, *La Devineresse*, ed. by P. J. Yarrow (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1971), p. 150.

⁵ See Jan Clarke, 'Music at the Guénégaud Theatre, 1673-1680', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 12 (1990), 89-110 (pp. 105-7)

company decided to devote more of its effort to the production of tragedy, entering into a series of pitched battles with the Hôtel de Bourgogne by giving productions to rival the latter's *Phèdre*, *Iphigénie* and *Le Comte d'Essex*.⁶ It finally scored a major success by luring the Hôtel de Bourgogne's leading actress, Mlle de Champmeslé, to join it in time for the 1679-80 season.⁷ Indeed, even Thomas Corneille himself appears to have thought that spectacle at the Guénégaud was doomed. Not only did he provide the Hôtel de Bourgogne with its *Comte d'Essex*, he also went over to the enemy with a vengeance by collaborating with Lully first on *Psyché* (1678) and then on *Bellerophon* (1679).

Yet spectacle was still popular with the theatregoing public, as a highly successful series of productions by the Italian troupe with which the Guénégaud company shared its theatre had recently proved. Notable among these was *La Magie naturelle* of December 1678, which may even have acted as a source of inspiration for *La Devineresse*,⁸ and whose effects include an elevating bed that turns into a hell's mouth, a pie filled with flying snakes on a disappearing table, and Arlequin rotating on the sails of a windmill before appearing on a dragon to defeat a giant.⁹ This was clearly worlds away from the gods and *gloires* of the traditional machine play, but was successful enough to cause the Guénégaud company to think that it should not yet abandon spectacle altogether. Moreover, it clearly wanted to profit from such spectacle alone, instigating ungenerous legal action to prevent the Italians from profiting by the use of further machines in the theatre that they shared.¹⁰ In these circumstances, it seems to me highly likely that the Guénégaud company should have sought to reintroduce spectacle into its programmes, and who better to contact than its old team of Thomas Corneille and Jean Donneau De Visé.¹¹

⁶ Guy Boquet, 'Naissance d'une troupe: genèse d'un répertoire', *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 32 (1980), 105-26.

⁷ Jan Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume One: Founding, Design and Production* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p. 233.

⁸ This view is expressed by Virginia Scott in *The Commedia dell'arte in Paris, 1644-1697* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 212.

⁹ Delia Gambelli (ed.), *Lo Scenario di Domenico Biancolelli*, 2 vols (Rome: Bulzoni, 1993), II, 774-75, 781, 781-83; Giuliana Colajanni, *Les Scénarios franco-italiens du Ms. 9329 de la B. N.* (Rome: Edizioni di storia et letteratura, 1970), pp. 288-89.

¹⁰ See Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume Two*, pp. 355-59.

¹¹ In fact, De Visé might have had good reasons for not wishing to treat the subject, since his brother's second wife had been poisoned in 1677, for which crime a certain Anne de Carada was beheaded four years later (Rav., VI, 467-69, 485).

Much has been made of the fact that De Visé was a journalist and that both he and Corneille had, throughout their careers, had an eye for the main chance. The subject of *La Devineresse* is clearly a *sujet d'actualité*, but, as we have seen, De Visé later claimed it was the actors who pitched the idea to the playwrights rather than the other way round. The subject was, though, highly appropriate to their treatment, lending itself admirably to the type of conjuring trick spectacle popular in Italian comedy and the fairgrounds, and which was also employed by the *devineresses* themselves. Nor was this type of spectacle as dependent on music as the traditional, more grandiose machine play had been.

The actors took Corneille and De Visé out to dinner on 2 May 1679,¹² and it was probably at this meeting that the original pitch was made. A somewhat disingenuous pre-production piece appeared in *Le Mercure galant* in August, after an account of a visit to a fake fortune-teller:

La Troupe du Roi, appelée du Guénégaud, annonce une comédie nouvelle sous le titre de la Devineresse, ou les faux enchantements. Je ne sais pas bien encore ce que c'est; mais de la manière qu'on m'en a parlé, les spectacles de cette pièce approchent fort des choses que je viens de conter. Si cela est, il vaudra bien les machines ordinaires. (pp. 51-52)

A further piece appeared in October:

La même troupe doit faire paraître ensuite la nouvelle pièce qu'elle promet depuis quelque temps intitulée *La Devineresse*. On l'attend avec d'autant plus d'impatience, que ce titre excite la curiosité de tout le monde, et que le Théâtre Français imite parfaitement la nature. (pp. 352-53)

and the play was finally performed in November. It seems to me logical, therefore, that the idea was mooted in May, the bulk of the play (possibly De Visé's contribution) was written between May and August, and the finishing touches were put to it between August and October, at which point it went into rehearsal.

Anne Somerset believes it is inconceivable that La Reynie was involved; I, on the other hand, believe it is inconceivable that the play should have gone ahead without official approval, and think it highly likely that La Reynie played a part at some point. He was in close and regular contact with the actors, who visited and petitioned him in relation to their various legal disputes, and he also attended the theatre, being reimbursed, for example, for the cost of his box to see Pradon's *Phèdre et Hippolyte* in 1677.¹³ Did he discuss the Affair with Corneille and De

¹² Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie-Française, Registre des comédiens du roi. VII (1679-80), p. 10.

¹³ Registre des comédiens du Roi, IV (1676-77), p. 112.

Visé or even show them documents? Given the play's detail relevant to specific cases as well as a number of textual echoes of witness statements, I believe he probably did.

La Devineresse could only be of topical interest if the general public was aware of what was going on, which it was from the very beginning. For example, when La Bosse was asked on 5 January 1679 how she knew La Delagrangue was in the Conciergerie, she replied 'Tout Paris le sait' (Rav., V, 169). Nor was knowledge limited to that milieu; and Bussy's correspondents, for example, kept him fully informed. Thus, Mlle de Scudéry wrote to him on 26 March: 'La Bastille et le bois de Vincennes sont tout pleins d'empoisonneurs et d'empoisonneuses. Le roi a créé une chambre de justice pour en connoître'. On 30 March, the marquis de Trichateau told him that 'on ne parle que de cela'; on 16 April, le père Rapin called it 'une guerre cruelle aux empoisonneurs'; and three days later Trichateau informed Bussy of a number of recent arrests. Finally, on 28 April, Mlle de Scudéry reported that 'on ne parle que de gens pris pour poison', consoling herself with the thought that 'grâce à Dieu, je n'ai jamais acheté de fard ni fait dire ma bonne aventure'.¹⁴ Indeed, the incarceration of the poisoners' clients could hardly have gone unnoticed, and this first flurry of activity included the arrests between 1 February and 11 April of Mme Poulaillon (1 February), Mme Philbert (1 March), Mme Leféron (9 April), and Mme Dreux (11 April). These were the names that were on everyone's lips as Corneille and De Visé were composing their play, and it is to these cases and the relevant interrogations conducted in the period up to October 1679 that the play appears to refer.

The 'Au Lecteur' to *La Devineresse* reads very much like the disclaimer to be found at the end of a modern film:

Tant de Gens de toutes conditions ont esté chercher les Devinereses. qu'on ne doit point s'étonner si on a trouvé lieu de faire quelques applications. Il est pourtant vray (& on se croit obliger de le protester) qu'on n'a eu aucune veuë particulière en faisant la Piece; mais comme dans cette sorte d'Ouvrage, on doit travailler particulièrement à corriger les defauts des Hommes, & que la veritable Comédie n'est autre chose qu'un Portrait de ces defauts mis dans un grand jour, on n'en tireroit aucun profit, s'il estoit déguisé de telle sorte qu'il fust impossible que personne s'y reconnust. Ainsi au lieu de deux ou trois applications qui ont esté faites d'abord, on est fort persuadé que mille & mille Gens se sont trouvez dans les divers caracteres dont la Comédie de la

¹⁴ *Correspondance de Roger de Rabutin comte de Bussy avec sa famille et ses amis (1666-1695)*, ed. by Ludovic Lalanne, 6 vols (Paris: Charpentier, 1858-59), IV, 335, 339, 347, 348, 353. Bussy, too, was later to find himself more closely linked to the case than he would have wished, when his daughter, Mme de Coligny, contracted an unfortunate second marriage with the self-styled marquis de la Rivière, the former lover of one of the accused, Mme Poulaillon.

Devineresse est composée, & c'est parce qu'ils s'y se sont trouvez, qu'elle a pû leur estre utile. (p. 6)¹⁵

Such formal protestations notwithstanding, I would contend rather that very precise applications are to be made, and to the cases of Mmes Poulaillon, Philbert, Leféron and Dreux in particular.

These four women have much in common, particularly in that all were accused of having killed or tried to kill their husbands. To particularise them a little: Mme Poulaillon loved the *soi-disant* marquis de la Rivière and robbed her husband to support him. Mme Philbert fell in love with her second husband, the King's flautist Philbert, while still married to her first, and supposedly took steps to prevent her lover from being married to her daughter. The widowed Mme Leféron apparently poisoned her first husband before being charmed by La Voisin into marrying a fortune hunter. Finally, Mme Dreux loved the marquis de Richelieu and sought to eliminate her rivals. Their ends were more or less sticky depending on the sympathy and degree of influence they were able to exert. Mme Dreux was admonished and fined, Mme Poulaillon and Mme Leféron were each sentenced to banishment, although the former at her own request was later incarcerated in a 'house of correction', but poor Mme Philbert, having been denied the opportunity to bid farewell to her husband and children, had her hand cut off and was hanged.

These cases clearly have many similarities with the love triangle that is at the centre of *La Devineresse*. For example, Mme Noblet reminds Mme Jobin of her assurance that her husband will die soon, to which the *devineresse* replies: 'je vous répons du Veuvage dans quelques mois' (II, 1). This is reminiscent of La Voisin's account of how Mme Leféron showed her hand to La Lérroux and asked if she would soon be a widow. The *devineresse* replied that her husband would die in September, sent a little vial of liquid to help things along, and M. Leféron did, indeed, pass away at the appointed time (Rav., V, 470). Mme Dreux, like Mme Noblet, wanted to remove her rivals, although in her case it was by the more direct means of a poisoned bunch of flowers (Rav., V, 269, 318). She also frequently said she that wanted to be a widow and asked La Voisin when it would be (Rav., V, 304). And Mme Noblet's final words: 'N'épargne rien, je te prie, ma chere Mme Jobin' (II, 1), call to mind Mme Dreux's instruction in similar circumstances: 'Dépêchez-vous, Mme Voisin' (Rav., V, 470).

Another character in *La Devineresse* who wants to know when her husband will die is Mme de la Jublinière. Mme Jobin tells her that an urn

¹⁵ The *privilege* for *La Devineresse* is dated 1 February 1680 and it was 'achevé d'imprimer pour la première fois' on 14 February 1680 (Yarrow edition, p. 146).

will fall in her room during the night; if it breaks, her husband will predecease her, if not she will go first (II, 4). In fact, the urn is caused to fall by the lady's companion, who is in the pay of the *devineresse*, and who later recounts her mistress's terror and mystification with much glee (IV, 7). We see, then that Mme Jobin is dependent on her agents: not only those who serve her at home (Mathurine, Dame Françoise and Du Clos), but also those who work for her clients. She even notes that she has spies 'chez le Marquis' (II, 1). Real *devineresses* operated in the same way. Thus, La Bosse reported that La Vigoureux had wanted to give Mme Poulailion the same servant she had given to Mme Philbert, while La Voisin tried to have La Vertemart placed with Mme de Montespan, notwithstanding the fact that she was already in contact with the lady's servants Cato and Mlle Des Oeillets (Rav., V, 349, 478, 490).

As for the main plot of *La Devineresse* concerning the marquis and the comtesse, the scene in which Mme Jobin tells the latter that her suitor will be a jealous husband (I, 6) bears remarkable similarities to a visit Mme Brunet, the future Mme Philbert, and her lover made to La Voisin. The *devineresse* told Philbert 'qu'il était extrêmement bizarre et d'un tempérament chaud et prompt', and warned his mistress as follows: 'Ma pauvre enfant, si Dieu permet que votre mari meure et que vous prétendiez épouser cet homme-là [...], vous serez beaucoup plus malheureuse que vous n'êtes pas avec votre mari' (Rav., V, 260). Philbert later recalled the encounter and said La Voisin had been drunk. In any event, his contact with her did nothing to harm his reputation – quite the contrary, for La Voisin later claimed that she knew details about his and Mme Philbert's private life that modesty prevented her from revealing (Rav., V, 314). Gossip subsequently ran wild and when Philbert, who had been imprisoned, was released he found women fighting over him.

In Act III, scene 4 of *La Devineresse*, the marquis and the comtesse come to see Mme Jobin, with the latter wearing a mask and putting on a Languedoc accent. The marquis says that he and the unknown lady have eloped and asks Mme Jobin to reconcile them with her father. Mme Jobin requests that the lady unmask, saying: 'je m'arreste plus aux traits du visage qu'aux lignes des mains'. Similarly, La Vigoureux told Mme Poulailion that it was easier to read faces than hands (Rav., V, 160). The real-life event with which this scene has most in common, though, is a visit to La Voisin made by M. Broglio and a masked provincial lady, who later turned out to be the marquise de Canilhac. They asked the *devineresse* to tell the lady's fortune, to which she replied 'qu'elle ne se connaissait point aux physionomies de velours' (Rav., V, 403-05). The couple requested a potion to stop the lady's husband drinking, and, when that failed, asked for something stronger. This was clearly more effective, for the husband died and the couple married and left Paris.

In order to effect a reconciliation with the Languedoc lady's father, Mme Jobin says she will put a charm on a letter, causing the marquis to explode: 'Du Papier charmé! Y-a-t-il rien de plus ridicule?' (III, 5). Just how ironic this comment was in the circumstances we will see in a moment. In fact, belief in charmed paper was widespread, and La Voisin herself said of a planned trip to Saint-Germain: '[Lesage] lui dit de donner un placet, et qu'il y ferait quelque chose pour faire réussir son affaire, et en ces mots: J'accommoderai votre placet et le ferai passer' (Rav., V, 485). The fact that the intended recipient was the King must have shaken her interrogators to the core.¹⁶

Wronged husbands are represented in *La Devineresse* by M. de Troufignac, a provincial who complains that his wife has stolen his money and run away to Paris disguised as a man (V, 2). I have found no reference to cross-dressing in any of the accounts of interrogations I have read. It would seem, then, that this constituted an attempt to introduce a different type of spectacle on to the Guénégaud stage: the spectacle of the lower part of Mlle Dupin's legs, which would have been revealed by her male garb.¹⁷ Mme de Troufignac herself appears in the next scene and asks Mme Jobin to draw up her horoscope (V, 3). She gives her date of birth as 15 November, the significance of which I have been unable to determine,¹⁸ and her initials as C. S. This is almost certainly an allusion to Mme Dreux, whose full name was Catherine-Françoise Saintot. And Mme Dreux did, indeed, send a note to La Voisin asking her to draw up her horoscope (Rav., V, 342). This scene also gives rise to a certain amount of lesbian innuendo, as Mme Jobin warns the cross-dressed Mme de Troufignac with regard to her courtships. Nor is this the only incidence in the play, as Mme de la Jublinière's companion dwells perhaps overlong on the fact that they had to sleep together in order to effect the *devineresse*'s plan with regard to the vase (IV, 7).

Other allusions to the Affair that are not directly related to these cases include the fictional M. Gilet's fear of being wounded, which is cured by Mme Jobin equipping him with an 'enchanted' sword (I, 11-12). Reports of interrogations reveal that the marquis de Feuquières consulted La Vigoureux and Lesage drew up a horoscope for the duc de Luxembourg to similar ends (Rav., V, 164, 294). The peasant girl who wants Mme

¹⁶ La Voisin's attempt to poison the King (ostensibly on behalf of Mme de Montespan) by means of a poisoned *placet* was the subject of many of the later interrogations and deliberations. For her part, La Voisin's daughter maintained that 'Elle ne croit que l'on puisse rien faire à du papier comme cela' (Rav., VI, 237).

¹⁷ Mlle Dupin apparently specialised in such roles, since she also appeared cross-dressed in Thomas Corneille's *Triomphe des dames* and Montfleury's *Dame médecin*.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Professor William Brooks for the suggestion that the play might have been scheduled for a 15 November premiere.

Jobin to give her breasts (II, 5) is generally supposed to represent the duchesse de Foix, who wrote a letter complaining that no matter how much she rubbed hers, presumably with some unguent, she could not make them stick out any more. But, this was not known until after 1680, and the scene bears a closer relationship to La Voisin's account of how she sent Mme Philbert to visit La Bosse, 'pour lui donner les moyens de gagner quelque teston' (Rav., V, 323), although the marquis de La Rivière apparently told Mme de Coligny that La Voisin could increase the size of a lady's bosom or make her mouth smaller.¹⁹

The fictional Mme Des Roches, on the other hand, wants to reduce the signs of ageing, causing Mme Jobin to suggest what must be the first known chemical peel:

Mais enfin si vous voulez avoir une peau d'Enfant, unie, délicate, fine, il faut vous résoudre à [...] demeurer quinze jours dans votre Chambre sans vous montrer. [...] Je vous donneray d'une Pommade qui fera tomber insensiblement la premiere Peau de votre visage, sans que vous sentiez le moindre mal. (III, 9)

And of course, many of those arrested, including La Voisin and Lesage, claimed that the phials of liquid they supplied were really only lotions for the skin (Rav., V, 316). Echoing de La Rivière's comment, Mme Des Roches also asks for her mouth to be made slightly smaller, causing Mme Jobin to reply that her cream will serve to enhance all those features considered essential for a seventeenth-century beauty: '[elle] appetisse la bouche, rend l'œil plus fendu, & donne une juste proportion au nez'. This may suggest that the part of Mme des Roches was played by Mlle Molière, whose mouth was considered rather too large and whose eyes rather too small for true perfection.²⁰

This assumption is confirmed by the fact that Mme Des Roches also wants to improve her singing voice and performs to allow the *devineresse* to judge the composition of her potion (III, 9), since Mlle Molière was frequently one of those company members who sang. Shortly after the opening of *Circé*, on 21 March 1675, a decree had been issued which forbade theatre troupes from employing external vocalists and permitting only two company members to sing.²¹ Thereafter the Guénégaud troupe and its playwrights had to find strategies by which to integrate vocal music into its performances in such a way that a less than perfect rendition was understandable and, consequently, acceptable. This

¹⁹ Mossiker, *The Affair of the Poisons*, p. 177.

²⁰ Jan Clarke, 'In the Eye of the Beholder?: the Actress as Beauty in Seventeenth-Century France', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 25 (2003), 111-27 (pp. 116-17).

²¹ Nicolas Delamare, *Traité de la police*, 4 vols (Paris: Brunet, 1722-38), I, 475.

is clearly one such means. It is, perhaps, somewhat pointed, therefore, that the song Mme Des Roches sings is from Corneille and Lully's recent triumph *Bellérophon*.

Even scenes that are clearly only included to give rise to spectacle contain many implicit references to the Affair. For example, many *devineresses* helped people to find lost objects, just as Mme Jobin helps La Giraudière locate lost pistols and identify their thief (I, 14). Glasses of water and mirrors were used as crystal balls, and, in the play, a marquise is shown her supposedly far-off lover in a mirror. He instantly receives a letter from her and replies (II, 6-8, 10, 13). Perhaps more sinister, though, is the passing of a swelling from the body of Dame Françoise to that of Du Clos. She first suggests Mathurine as the recipient, but the latter protests: 'Qu'est-ce qu'on croiroit si on me voyoit un ventre comme le vostre. On ne diroit pas que ce seroit vostre enflure' (II, 11). The primary allusion is clearly to the *devineresses'* activities as abortionists, but there may also be a secondary reference to their supposed ability to cure gout (Rav., V, 169, 274).

A scene in which a client is forced to caress and address a speaking head on a table is still more intimately linked to the Affair. The woman's situation is explained by Du Clos:

Elle a un Amant en tout bien & en tout honneur, comme beaucoup d'autres; mais elle ne laisse pas de luy donner pension. Cela accommode le Cavalier, qui a cependant une petite amourette ailleurs. La Dame s'est apperçu de quelques visites, le chagrin l'a prise [...]. [S]i vous luy dites, mais d'une manière où il entre un peu de Diableries, que son Amant ne la trompe point, elle vous croira, & laissera le Cavalier en repos. (III, 8)

Given that both the lady and her lover are paying Mme Jobin, the latter cannot lose. This is similar to the case of Mme Leféron, who, as we have seen, was 'charmed' into accepting a new husband, de Prade, after her old one's suspicious death. The suitor offered La Voisin 20,000 *livres* to bring about the marriage, which sum, of course, was never paid. Mme Leféron, who married de Prade in 1672 at the age of fifty-eight, later complained that she and her new husband only lived together for ten months and that all he wanted was her money (Rav., V, 314, 316, 336).

The climax of *La Devineresse* comes when the marquis persuades Mme Jobin to conjure up the devil. Amongst those courtiers who expressed a similar wish were the marquis de Feuquières, the chevalier d'Hannyvel and even the duchesse de Bouillon (Rav., V, 176, 219, 310, 349, 361, 391). The game is up when the marquis grabs Mme Jobin's brother, who is playing the part, causing him to exclaim: 'Quartier, Monsieur, je suis un bon Diable' (V, 5). Mme Jobin offers to pay back the money she has taken and honourably refuses to reveal the identity of the person seeking to prevent the marquis's marriage. The play ends, though, with a degree of menace, given La Voisin's current situation,

when the marquis comments: 'Je prendray mon temps. On sçait comment la faire parler' (V, 6).

Much has been written about La Voisin's accusations regarding Racine's involvement in the death of Mlle Du Parc.²² These were made on 21 November and so do not concern us here. There does, though, seem to have been a concerted effort to link members of the acting profession with the Affair. For example, on that occasion, La Voisin was asked if she knew an actor who limped. She replied that she did and that it was Louis Béjart, but that she had only seen him twice (Rav., VI, 50-53).²³ She had earlier, in August 1679, been asked if she knew Mlle de Brie, and replied that she did not, but that the actress may have been to see her incognito.²⁴ She was more forthcoming, though, about Mlle Dupin, who, like Mlle de Brie, was a member of the Guénégaud company at this time. Apparently, two years before (i.e. in 1677), La Lepère, in the presence of La Voisin, had performed an abortion on the actress, who was separated from her husband, but when La Voisin was asked if Mlle Dupin had tried to do away with him, she replied in the negative. She did say that the actress 'l'a fait travailler plusieurs fois sur le nom de son mari', and that she wanted to be free to marry someone else, but concluded that: 'La Dupin lui a dit qu'elle eût bien voulu que son mari fût mort, mais elle ne lui a fait aucune proposition' (Rav., V, 445-46). La Voisin confirmed, during her final interrogation, that everything she had said about Mlles Du Parc and Dupin was true (Rav., VI, 170). However, La Voisin's daughter alleged that her mother had used her to send powder to the actress concealed in a black taffeta band 'qu'elle lui mit au haut de son bras', and that she had seen her mother give other powders to Mlle Dupin, 'qui a donné plusieurs fois de l'argent à sa mère, en sa présence' (Rav., V, 304). The question of Mlle Dupin's payment for La Voisin's services is one to which we will return.

Lesage provided more details in July 1680, claiming that the priest Guibourg had performed a black mass on the actress's naked belly. His next allegation is, though, still more astonishing:

A vu aussi donner par la Voisin, à Pelletier, un placet qui devait être présenté au Roi et qui avait été mis entre les mains de la Voisin par Dupin, comédienne, et c'était pour

²² See, for example, André Chagny, *Marquise Du Parc: créatrice du rôle d'Andromaque* (Paris: La Nef de Paris, 1961), pp. 134-71; Claude Dulong, 'L'Assassinat de la Du Parc', *Revue des deux mondes* (1 April 1965), pp. 334-44.

²³ Louis Béjart had been an actor with Molière's troupe. He retired in 1670, receiving a pension first from Molière's troupe and then from the Guénégaud company until his death in 1678 (Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris. Volume One*, p. 120).

²⁴ Mlle De Brie was also a former member of Molière's troupe.

obtenir du Roi que la troupe où était la Dupin pût avoir quelque préférence, dont il s'agissait lors sur une autre troupe de comédiens, et pour raison de quoi la troupe de Dupin avait déjà fait une dépense considérable [...] (Rav., VI, 257-58)

La Voisin gave the *placet* to La Pelletier, who carried it to Guibourg, who was to do the necessary, and Mlle Dupin came back to collect it a few days later (Rav., VI, 256-57).

According to Ravaisson, these events took place between 1674 and 1676. A very important *placet* was, in fact, delivered to the King by La Grange and Dauvilliers in July 1676, by which the company requested permission to include instrumental and vocal music in its production of *Le Triomphe des dames* – a request that was ultimately refused.²⁵ In which case, the company over which the Guénégaud wished to gain advantage was Lully's Opera. If this was, indeed, the enchanted *placet*, the question remains whether its two deliverers knew that the item they were carrying was bewitched (if indeed it was). Mlle Dupin may after all have been acting alone without the knowledge of her comrades. However, Lesage says that the troupe had already spent a great deal of money, whereas La Voisin had earlier reported that Mlle Dupin had next to nothing and could only pay her a few *écus* at a time.²⁶ To my mind, therefore, it is more likely that the two actors were aware of the magic and that this was a last desperate attempt on the part of the company to ensure its livelihood by any means possible. The risks were incalculable and ultimately proved unnecessary, since, as we have seen, in just a few years the troupe had strengthened its position considerably and even triumphed over its rivals at the Hôtel de Bourgogne by dint of its own merits and a highly competitive production policy.

If the *placet* had, indeed, been charmed with the full consent of the troupe, the implications make the mind boggle. It is already difficult to imagine the position of Mlle Dupin: performing in a play denouncing (albeit in a watered down form) the very crimes of which she was guilty, and no doubt expecting to find herself named and dragged off to prison at any moment. But now we find that the whole troupe may have been in a similar position. Moreover, the insistence of the interrogators regarding the actors and their associates would suggest that there may have been some suspicions where they were concerned. In any event, the marquis's

²⁵ Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume Two*, p. 268.

²⁶ La Voisin described how Mlle Dupin had paid for her abortion: 'La Dupin lui a donné pour cela de l'argent en plusieurs fois, dont elle a donné à la Lepère environ 40 fr., aussi en différents temps, et il en est resté autant ou environ pour elle, et elle donna d'abord à la Lepère 2 pistoles'. La Voisin's additional services were financed as follows: 'Elle lui a donné une fois quelques écus, une autre fois moins, et elle n'avait guère d'argent' (Rav., V, 446).

exclamation that there is nothing more ridiculous than the idea of charmed paper is ironic on all sorts of levels. The King received full reports of interrogations and was aware of the talk about *placets*. Might this go some way to explaining his increasing withdrawal from the theatre and theatre folk after 1679? We will never know. In any case, these events would seem to shed more light on why the company should have pitched the idea of *La Devineresse* to Corneille and De Visé in the first place: what better way for the troupe to camouflage past sins than by a visible demonstration of its desire to serve the public good in the very same domain.

There is, though, one further intriguing feature relating to performances of *La Devineresse*. I have noted elsewhere that the records of audience attendances for this production at the Hôtel Guénégaud provide some fascinating footnotes to history. For example, the marquis d'Alluye attended a performance on 26 November, just two months before his wife fled France with her friend, the comtesse de Soissons, and the duchesse de Bouillon saw the play on 9 January and then appeared before the *Chambre Ardente* on the 29th.²⁷ Still more curious, though, is the fact that just over a year later, on 6 February 1681, a performance of *La Devineresse* was given in the Salle des ballets at Saint-Germain in the presence of the King. Indeed, W. S. Brooks and P. J. Yarrow note that this was the only play he saw during this period.²⁸ At this point, the *Chambre Ardente* had been suspended for just over four months, and discussions were under way as to whether it might be allowed to sit once more. The King was undecided, as is shown by a letter from Louvois to La Reynie dated 29 January 1681:

Monsieur, j'ai lu au Roi votre mémoire du 26 de ce mois, sur lequel S. M. a changé la résolution qu'elle avait prise la veille de faire assembler incessamment la chambre; elle attendra de vos nouvelles auparavant que de donner aucun ordre sur cela, et donnera ordre dès aujourd'hui à M. le chancelier et à M. Colbert de lire avec attention tous les actes que je leur enverrai, à mesure que je les recevrai par vos soins [...]. (Rav., VI, 419)

La Reynie accordingly despatched the documents to Louvois, accompanied by a long memorandum outlining the details of the case and his conclusions thus far. Then, he, Le Tellier, Louvois, Colbert and the King discussed the matter during four four-hour meetings, the dates of

²⁷ Clarke, *The Guénégaud Theatre in Paris (1673-1680). Volume One*, p. 242.

²⁸ W. S. Brooks and P. J. Yarrow, *The Dramatic Criticism of Elizabeth Charlotte, duchesse d'Orléans* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), p. 90. I am grateful to Professor Brooks for providing me with additional documentary evidence regarding this performance.

which are unfortunately unknown (Rav., VI, 347, 419-36).²⁹ La Reynie himself later described how an 'expédient' had been sought and how the King 'eût encore différé à prendre une dernière résolution' (Rav., VI, 455). The solution they finally found was to have the Chamber reconvene but to suppress the evidence implicating Mme de Montespan, which decision was given effect in May.³⁰ This was, then, a critical moment in the history of the Affair and it is clearly significant that the King should have watched a performance of *La Devineresse* at this time. Given the involvement not only of members of the court but also of the Guénégaud company, the atmosphere in the Salle des ballets must have been tense to say the least, and La Reynie writes feelingly of the sufferings of those with guilty consciences and the consequences that might ensue:

Si ces mêmes personnes se sentent coupables, si elles avaient connaissance qu'il y eût quelque chose de découvert à leur égard, dans quelles inquiétudes et dans quelles agitations d'esprit ne devraient-ils pas être au milieu de la liberté dont elles jouissent? Aucun parti leur semblerait-il plus à craindre que celui d'attendre un entier éclaircissement de ces crimes abominables? et dans ces cas de crainte et de désespoir, que ne peut-il point tomber dans l'esprit des personnes qui auroient été déjà capables de se porter à d'autres pensées si étranges et si criminelles, et pendant qu'on les examine, peut-être est-ce le temps du danger? (Rav., VI, 402)

In the event, La Reynie's fears proved to be unfounded. Moreover, if it was indeed he who provided the initial impetus for the composition of *La Devineresse*, he would have had every reason to congratulate himself, since the outcomes of this performance and the production generally were successful for all concerned. For, not only did the company escape the consequences of criminal association with *devinereuses*, but also the king's attendance at the play seems to have helped him come to the decision that the various cases should be pursued (within limits). Thus, Corneille and De Visé can truly be said to have achieved the didactic objective they claim as having been the primary motive behind their play's creation.

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²⁹ Colbert also sought legal advice from the lawyer Claude Duplessis (see Pierre Clément, *Lettre instructions et mémoires de Colbert*, 8 vols (Paris: n. publ., 1868), VI, 67-68, 407-30).

³⁰ Such a strategy was possible because, according to La Reynie, and in contrast to the earlier state of affairs, members of the general public were unaware of the accusations against Mme de Montespan (Rav., VI, 402).