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Virginie Ancelot

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Editor's note: footnotes appear at the very end of the newsletter.

A talented playwright, artist, novelist, and memorialist, Virginie Ancelot (1792-1875) offered keen observations of the French literary and cultural scene throughout the nineteenth century while contributing to its very fabric. From 1824 to 1875, she hosted one of Paris's most influential literary salons hosting writers and artists such as Victor Hugo, Stendhal, Prosper Mérimée, Alfred Vigny, Honoré de Balzac, Eugène Delacroix, Hector Berlioz, and Franz Liszt. From the late 1820s through the 1840s, Ancelot produced an impressive corpus of plays, twenty-one of which were staged at Paris's premier theaters, making her the most prolific woman dramatist of her time. Her influence on the Paris theater industry extended beyond her contributions as a writer in that from 1842 to 1846, in collaboration with her husband, she managed the Théâtre du Vaudeville. Ancelot also penned popular novels and memoirs, published a column in the *Gazette des femmes* in 1845,

and was an accomplished artist, creating her own engravings for the plays included in her 1848 *Théâtre Complet*. Despite the diversity and quality of her work, the bulk of her literary production remains overlooked by today's scholars. Her plays, novels, and memoirs focus on everyday, bourgeois women and bring to light the tribulations they endured. Images of the inequities that women faced within a society that failed to acknowledge their contributions permeate Ancelot's varied corpus.

Virginie Ancelot's upbringing certainly influenced her willingness to brave the Paris literary scene as well as her political views. Her mother Barbe-Edmée Vermissy cast her noble origins aside to marry a "petit bourgeois" businessman, Thomas Chardon. Virginie Ancelot's works offered harsh criticisms of those who seek to limit women's choices regarding marriage. Despite the tumultuous events of the Revolution, Virginie's parents provided her a stable childhood as she spent her younger years in Dijon mingling with her mother's noble friends at the popular salon she hosted there. Although her father was often away on business, Virginie learned much from her mother's reception and treatment of those who frequented her salon. Barbe-Edmée, herself a talented painter, welcomed both nobles and bourgeois intellectuals to her salon, and also offered a safe haven to those in need during France's time of political upheaval. These egalitarian principles influenced Virginie who developed a strong distaste for class segregation and whose own salon years later emphasized talent over wealth or pedigree. Virginie also frequented the salons of the Duchesse de Duras and the Marquise de Montcalm and thus developed a respect for these patronesses of the arts. Later, her education at the hands of the Ursulines, an order protected by Napoléon's mother herself, furthered her knowledge of arts and literature.

Like her mother, Virginie married for love. Jacques Ancelot, two years her younger, would also make his mark on French literature as a member of the Académie Française and as a playwright whose monarchist leanings were evident in his theater. Virginie Ancelot's politics very often mirrored those of her husband although her mother's year-long imprisonment during the Reign of Terror no doubt also contributed to her legitimist politics during her early adulthood. Her writings often reveal scorn for those who capitalized upon the Revolution for financial gain. While she supported the Restoration, Ancelot's salon, represented a sort of political neutral ground for all of its attendees. Much like Delphine Gay de Girardin, Virginie Ancelot welcomed political rivals to her salon and managed to foster an atmosphere of respect. Her salon accentuated political, social, and moral progress in a new political era while also attempting to revive the glory associated with the Ancien Régime. During the July Monarchy, Ancelot, within her salon, redoubled her efforts to reclaim some of the lost grandeur and noble aura she felt had disappeared under the new bourgeois king. Significantly, Ancelot fashioned her salon as a vehicle for education for women within a terrain where intellectual equality rather than gender or wealth reigned. Virginie Ancelot was also a gifted painter and the salon provided her a venue to display her works.

THEATRICAL WORKS:

Virginie Ancelot selected theater as her first literary venue, a bold move considering that the field did not always welcome women dramatists. Described in the *Gazette des femmes* in 1844 as "la seule femme qui soit bien en possession de la scène française et qui mérite, au XIXe siècle, le titre d'auteur dramatique,"¹ Ancelot posited women as central characters and typically depicted a female protagonist facing an obstacle widely

encountered by women of Ancelot's day. Whether the heroine triumphs over adversity or not, in all cases, what unfolded on stage prompted audiences to rethink what it meant to be a woman and demonstrated that women's tribulations deserved to be taken as seriously as those encountered by politicians or businessmen. She presents her femino-centric goals in writing for the theater in the introduction to her *Théâtre complet* as follows:

Mes réflexions se sont naturellement portées sur la situation des femmes. C'est particulièrement ce qui les regarde, leurs caractères, leurs idées, leurs impressions dans les différentes circonstances de leur existence, que je me suis plu à retracer dans mes comédies. (I : 5)

In an era of constantly shifting tastes and aesthetics, Ancelot offered theater that specifically deviated from the norm by painting women as in-depth characters while male characters generally serve only to highlight the predicaments of female protagonists.

Despite her bold aim to call attention to women's concerns within an industry dominated by men, Virginie Ancelot began her theatrical career with much trepidation. So great was her fear of criticism in the press, Virginie Ancelot staged all of her plays until 1836 under her husband's name. Her debut work was, unfortunately, a commercial and critical flop. *Un Divorce* (1831), a one-act *drame* performed at the Théâtre du Vaudeville, presented a woman's ruin as a result of divorce. The protagonist, Émeline realizes that she abandoned a good husband for a poor one as her second husband abandons her for the army. With no man to offer financial security, Émeline suffers a dismal fate facing a most uncertain future. Ancelot demonstrates that women who divorce risk utter ruin. However, as Alison Finch points out, through English characters such as Émeline's kind-hearted first husband, Lord Clifford, Ancelot points to

England – where divorce is legal - as offering a preferable treatment of women (220).

1835 marked an upturn in Ancelot's theatrical career when she staged *Reine, cardinal et page* at the Théâtre du Vaudeville and the very funny *Un Mariage raisonnable* at the Théâtre Français, both still under husband's name. *Reine, cardinal et page*, described in *Le Corsaire* as “Une comédie fort bien faite, fort bien écrite, fort bien jouée ; un ouvrage d'un homme d'un grand talent”ⁱⁱ focuses on the intelligence and restraint of Anne d'Autriche who, while infatuated with the Duke of Buckingham, remains faithful to her husband and manages to outwit the Cardinal Richelieu who attempts to disgrace her before the king. Notably, Ancelot's recounting of this love triangle was staged nine years prior to Alexandre Dumas's publication of *Les Trois Mousquetaires* in 1844. An exceptionally clever woman again takes center stage in *Un Mariage raisonnable* in which Ancelot's splendid use of humor to highlight the feminine condition truly shines. Lady Nelmoor, a widow whose first husband left her in bleak financial straits, is engaged to the stodgy Baron de Normont, who prefers a sensible bride to a pretty one. Determined to secure her financial future, Lady Nelmoor resorts to drastic – and comical – measures to conceal her beauty from her fiancé, staging a sort of “anti-toilette”. In reality she is in love with Arthur de la Vilette who admires both her intelligence and her beauty. The mechanical baron offers many laughs and eventually love conquers all as Lady Nelmoor agrees to marry Arthur. Although these plays were still staged under Jacques Ancelot's name, audiences began to perceive the woman behind the mask.

Ancelot knew her greatest success in 1836 with *Marie ou trois époques*. Due to the success of this three act comedy, Ancelot was no longer able to conceal her authorship. *Marie* received rave reviews and was a hit among theatergoers. Each act of *Marie* depicts a different stage in the eponymous heroine's

life in which she is forced to make a sacrifice. The nobility of a woman's actions for the good of her family guides the play as each of the three acts in turn demonstrates Marie's devotion as daughter, wife and mother. Ancelot bestows her heroine a happy ending yet problematizes it: In the third and final act a widowed Marie calls off her marriage to a man she has loved for decades when she discovers that her daughter is in love with the same man. She will spare her daughter the sorrow she endured when she married only to save her father from financial ruin, but she herself will be deprived of any personal happiness.

Ancelot staged two more plays at the Théâtre Français, *Le Château de ma nièce* (1837) and *Isabelle ou deux jours d'expérience* (1838). *Le Château de ma nièce* owes its success to a finely constructed comedic plot involving mistaken identity. The play is a fine example of how Ancelot constructs intelligent women such as the widow, la Présidente de Lamornière, who takes control of chaos and ensures that all characters in the play, both men and women, receive happy endings.

Following production squabbles over *Isabelle*, Ancelot ceased to seek her works' performance at the Théâtre Français. However, in 1842, she and her husband purchased the Théâtre du Vaudeville and for a period her works were intertwined with the success of the venue. Ancelot's *L'Hôtel de Rambouillet* heralded a new beginning for the theater that same year. The play focuses on the intellectual superiority of Catherine de Vivonne who, through her perseverance and impeccable moral character, single-handedly revives French culture and literature through her patronage. The Marquise de Rambouillet bears an uncanny resemblance to Virginie Ancelot herself who sought to do the same in her own century.

The remainder of her theatrical corpus, like *Un Mariage raisonnable* and *Le Château de ma nièce*, very often demonstrates Ancelot's talent as a humorist. *Folette* (1844), a wildly

funny one-act play capitalizes upon mistaken identity to create laughs as a bold bride-to-be undermines the power of her idiotic brother-in-law. Ancelot possessed a keen ability to create humorous spectacles which effectively transmitted subversive messages of female empowerment.

When Ancelot was not displaying her gift for comedy, she nonetheless still focused on the situation of women. The historical drama *Madame Roland* premiered 1843 to mixed reviews yet paid tribute to an exceptional French woman through a quite somber plot. Virginie also staged a series of plays which showcased male protagonists yet never abandoned her goal of creating theater focused on women. In *Georges ou le même homme* (1840ⁱⁱⁱ), *Pierre le millionnaire* (1844), and *Une année à Paris* (1847), the virtually flawless and intelligent heroine is replaced by morally ambiguous men who teeter on the brink of destruction as a result of their own selfish and foolish decisions. Notably, in all three theatrical works the male protagonist avoids utter chaos after heeding wise counsel from female characters. These plays aside, Ancelot's theatrical corpus generally displays exceptional women who are completely underestimated by the men around them.

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Tome 2: *Les Deux Impératrices, ou une petite guerre, L'Hôtel de Rambouillet, Hernance, ou un an trop tard, Marguerite.*

Tome 3: *Georges ou le même homme, Madame Roland, Pierre le millionnaire, Deux Jours ou la Nouvelle Mariée, Loisa.*

Tome 4: *Reine, cardinal et page, Un Jour de Liberté, Une Année à Paris, Le Père Marcel, Juana, Un Divorce.*

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NOVELS AND NOVELLAS:

Until 1851, Ancelot's primary field of literary production was the theater. However, she also produced successful novels from 1839-1843 and from 1853 until a few years before her death. Her novels resemble her theater in that they take as their focus women's lives, showcasing their often overlooked intelligence and perseverance. The bulk of her novels, aptly described by Yves Olivier-Martin as "grave et psychologique" (137), much like her theater cast men into secondary roles, as antagonists or obstacles to the heroine's happiness. Her effective use of *coups de théâtre* adds interest to plots which revolve around mistaken identity, long lost relatives, and unlikely disappearances. Her first novel, 1839's *Gabrielle* published with Ambroise Dupont was a great success, and was continually translated and republished until 1872 including in the format of a *roman feuilleton* in 1857. It opens with an aged marquise proclaiming: "Il n'y a plus de femmes..." a commentary on the changing roles of women in society. The plot itself recalls her play *Clémence ou la fille de l'avocat* from the same year in which a low-born but virtuous and intelligent young woman secretly marries the noble man she loves. Eventually the young woman – Gabrielle or Clémence – is recognized by the family as worthy of marriage to the young man in question.

In her novels Ancelot often wove two plotlines together, such as in 1843's *Médérine* which displays two letters from two different individuals, both sent the same day, both offering different views of interlinked events. Similarly *La Nièce du banquier* (1853) offers two stories of young lovers, Métella and Émilien, who discover their true identities and previously unknown, noble family origins.

After her husband Jacques's death in 1854, Virginie Ancelot, having abandoned her theatrical pursuits, returned to writing novels largely for financial survival. In this second phase, her novels often reveal the plight of women of lower classes within *romans de mœurs* which also at times offer poignant arguments for women's education and work. Her penultimate novel demonstrates increasingly progressive, quite feminist views of women in society. *Antonia Vernon ou les jeunes filles pauvres* tells the story of a handful of women, young and old, but all once beautiful, who fail to survive within *le monde* through no fault of their own. Talented women artists are restricted from making a living because of their gender and young girls, deprived of both education and dowry, find themselves pursuing lives as courtesans knowing that their comfortable lifestyle will last only as long as their beauty. Much as she did in her plays in which men make selfish and foolish choices, men in this novel, through their constant seductions and abandonments, serve as obstacles to the women's simple attempts to make a living. It seems that at the end of her long life, Ancelot more boldly asserted messages of gender equality, ideals she had hinted at in her theater years prior. If her first work *Un Divorce* painted a grave picture of what a divorced woman suffered, in her later years, Ancelot accentuates the importance of women's education so that women may marry, divorce, or remain single, yet still be able to make a living.

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OTHER WORKS :

In addition to her theater and novels, Ancelot penned two perceptive memoirs, *Salons de Paris: Foyers éteints* (1858) and *Un Salon de Paris* (1866). In the former Ancelot describes the salons of Madame Lebrun, Baron Gérard, the Duchess d'Abrantes, Charles Nodier, M. de Lancy, Madame Récamier, the Viscount d'Arlincourt, and the Marquise de Custine, lauding these individuals for their contributions to the preservation and promotion of the French arts. She laments that

refined salon culture is vanishing before her very eyes and recalls the specifically French distinction and sophistication these entities fostered with great fondness. *Un Salon de Paris* offers reflections upon her own salon. Perhaps more interesting than her anecdotal presentations involving Parisian elite are her proclamations within regarding women and their participation in theater and other arts. Although during the time she wrote for the theater she did not overtly protest the inherent gender inequity, here, years after abandoning her theatrical pursuits, she published the following observation regarding gender constraints and a career as a playwright:

Qu'un homme montre son intelligence dans des œuvres de théâtre, comme dans autre chose, toutes les routes sont ouvertes à ses désirs : l'Institut, la Chambre des députés, le Sénat, etc., etc. ... peuvent lui donner l'occasion d'émettre des idées utiles, et de servir son pays dans les meilleures et les plus honorables conditions. Tous les avantages de ce monde sont à la disposition des hommes d'esprit, mais à eux seuls, et les femmes ne peuvent donc pas mettre une grande importance à ce qu'elles font... (*Un Salon de Paris* 156)

Whether carefully staging the plight of everyday women in her theater or making a bold case for women's equality in her novels and memoirs, Ancelot's works depict a variety of women in a sympathetic light as she highlights injustices they suffer. What may trouble the modern reader – particularly with her theater – is that in doing so she limits herself to creating heroines who are models of moral perfection associated with patriarchal values of the period. Nonetheless, Virginia Ancelot successfully capitalized upon her talents as a writer and salon hostess to suggest that doors be open for women where they had traditionally been closed.

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ABOUT VIRGINIE ANCELOT:

Although only a limited number of scholarly publications exist which seriously treat Virginie Ancelot's work, Sophie Marchal's meticulously researched doctoral dissertation *Virginie Ancelot, femme de lettres au XIXe siècle* is essential for anyone seeking in-depth knowledge of Ancelot's life and career. Below I offer sources useful to those who would undertake further exploration of this important writer.

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