THE UNKNOWN ROLE OF MADAME IN GENET’S LES BONNES
BRIAN GORDON KENNELLY

“«Madame», il ne faut pas l’outrer dans la caricature. Elle ne sait pas jusqu’à quel point elle est bête, à quel point elle joue un rôle, mais quelle actrice le sait davantage, même quand elle se tourne le cul?”
“Comment jouer Les Bonnes”

The text of Jean Genet’s Les Bonnes that is taught and performed most regularly is the shorter of the two versions of the play published side by side by Jean-Jacques Pauvert in 1954. It is considered the third and final acting script used in the first production of the play. Material from the earlier versions of the play, unused by Louis Jouvet who first directed it at the Théâtre de l’Athénée in Paris in 1947, went unperformed and is, some fifty years after the premiere of Les Bonnes, essentially unknown. The first version of the play dates from 1943 and includes the roles of the milkman Mario and Monsieur in addition to those of the sister-maids Claire, Solange, and their mistress, Madame. It is jealously guarded by a private collector. The longer version of the play published by Pauvert is considered the second acting script used during rehearsals for Jouvet’s production.

1 The second version was performed at the Théâtre de la Hachette in 1954.
2 Actress Monique Mélinand, who played Solange in Jouvet’s production of Les Bonnes, confirms this in an interview with Alain Ollivier. After he tells her “Je crois qu’il y avait trois versions: un premier manuscrit dont le propriétaire ne veut pas qu’il soit mis à la disposition de quiconque, et dans ce premier manuscrit, on pouvait lire le rôle de Monsieur et celui du laitier Mario,” Mélinand responds: “Oui, je m’en souviens très bien. Je sais que c’est certainement Jouvet qui a convaincu Genet de supprimer le rôle de Monsieur et celui du laitier, Mario.” (“Les Premières ‘Bonnes’” 61) However, in his “Jean Genet’s Mentor: Jean Cocteau,” Gene Plunka notes that the first version included eight characters instead of five. (54)
Housed at the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal in Paris, the Jouvet typescripts of the play shed light on how Genet’s first performed drama evolved during rehearsals and especially on how Genet earlier conceived of the ending to his play. Catalogued with the call number LJMS 22, there are seven available for consultation, the eighth being only a recent acquisition. They include: the second version of the play, which is actually the first version received by Jouvet (typescript one); the second-last version of the play (typescript two); the first “Relevé de la mise en scène” of Marthe Herlin (typescript three); a version incorporating those changes noted in typescripts two and three (typescript four); the second “Relevé de la mise en scène” of Marthe Herlin (typescript four bis); the “livre de conduite” of the stage manager René Besson (typescript five); the text of the prompter Suzanne Pougaud (typescript six); and the last uncorrected text prepared for the staging of Les Bonnes (unnumbered). These typescripts – in particular typescripts two and three – contain material not published by Pauvert and thus represent two different unpublished and unperformed stages of the play.

In his *From Writer to Reader: Studies in Editorial Method*, Philip Gaskell points out that any work of literature intended to be communicated primarily by spoken performance rather than by a written text characteristically goes through three textual stages. (245) The first might be called the “script,” or the written version of what was originally intended to be “said.” The second could be considered the “performance text,” or what was actually said in one or more performances. The third, one could call the “reading text,” or the version subsequently

---


4 Typescript 3 is a carbon copy of typescript 2, but the annotated changes made in one were not always duplicated in the other. Where in typescript 2 (the original) there is nothing marked, for example, in typescript 3 (the carbon copy) there is an annotation in ink by Genet on the back of page 48 62. Moreover, in typescript 2 (the original) there is again nothing marked, where in typescript 3 (the carbon copy) there is an annotation in pencil on the back of an unnumbered page that is stuck between pages 57 71 and 58 72.
published by the author or the author’s publisher as a record of what might have or what should have been said. Of the unpublished sequences of the Jouvet typescripts of Les Bonnes, or the “scripts” of the play – the written version of what was originally intended to be said –, a sequence at the end of the third typescript of the play in which Madame returns (unnoticed by Solange and Claire?) to witness their/her demise and that shows how the play once ended has to-date been ignored by critics. Just as her two maids role-play in her absence without her knowledge (they think), in one of these sequences (unknown to Claire and Solange) Madame appears to take on a role herself: as gatekeeper to the crowds, as witness, and guarantor of their/her suicide/murder. “Que personne n’approche d’elles,” she warns the crowds that she imagines are gathering to witness the climax to Solange and Claire’s ritual of hatred, “Restez. Je vous redirai tous les détails.” (footnote on back of page 59 73) Because of cuts made during rehearsals, these details remained, as they still do today, untold, “unsaid,” as Madame’s final role – like those of Monsieur and Mario – was eliminated from the play. It is our intention to give Madame her say at last.

Marcel Oddon has carefully detailed in his “Essai d’analyse de l’oeuvre dramatique” how in the published versions of Les Bonnes, the second person singular and plural personal pronouns “tu” and “vous” measure the confusion of roles, indeed of the identities of Solange and Claire – where their identity is in large part determined by role. One of the values of the Jouvet typescripts of the play is that they further

---


6 How much was Genet influenced by Jouvet? While to consider the question of whether Les Bonnes – as we know the play – was more Jouvet’s than Genet’s play is beyond the scope of this article (note), it is certainly a relevant question worth further consideration. Actress Yvette Étiévant, who played Claire in Jouvet’s production notes that Genet (then unknown as a dramatist) was at the same time most happy to have his play produced by the famous director but also found much of what Jouvet made of the play – or turned the play into – disagreeable. She tells Ollivier: “[Genet] avait écrit une pièce en trois actes enfin, je crois que c’était trois actes, en tout cas, quelque chose de vraiment tout à fait différent [....] je crois qu’il n’était pas content. Il n’avait pas vu ça comme ça [....] je crois qu’il n’était pas content et en même temps, c’était compliqué. En même temps, il était aussi fasciné par Jouvet. Et puis Jouvet avait une autorité formidable...alors il était persuadé. Mais je n’ai jamais eu le sentiment d’un vrai accord, non jamais.” (“Les Premières ‘Bonnes’” 66)
demonstrate the absolute interchangeability of Solange and Claire and thus amply justify what is to be Madame’s confusion of her two maids. On page 52 of the third typescript, for example, second person singular personal pronouns become second person plural pronouns, at the same time that “Claire” becomes “Madame”:

CLAIRE: Je suis malade...
SOLANGE: On te soignera là-bas.
CLAIRE: Je suis malade... je vais mourir (elle semble avoir des nausées).
SOLANGE (elle s’approche et, avec compassion): Vraiment? Tu es vous êtes très mal?
CLAIRE: Je suis au bord...

Similarly, on page 9 of the first typescript, the words of Claire become those of Solange and then those of Claire again. Likewise, Solange’s words become Claire’s and then those of Solange again:

CLAIRE (ironique): [...] Sans moi, sans ma lettre de dénonciation tu n’aurais pas eu ce spectacle: l’amant avec les menottes et Madame en larmes.
CLAIRE-SOLANGE CLAIRES: Elle peut en mourir. Ce matin elle ne tenait plus debout.
SOLANGE-CLAIRE SOLANGE: Tant mieux. Qu’elle en claque! Et que j’hérite, à la fin! Ne plus remettre les pieds dans cette mansarde sordide, entre ces imbéciles, entre cette cuisinière et ce valet de chambre.
CLAIRE-SOLANGE CLAIRES: Moi je l’aimais notre mansarde.
SOLANGE-CLAIRE SOLANGE: Ne t’attendris pas sur elle. Et surtout pour me contredire. Moi qui la hais, je la vois telle qu’elle est, sordide et nue. Dépourvue. Mais quoi, nous sommes des pouilleuses.

And in the fourth typescript, on pages 31 and 32, Solange’s words become Claire’s words:

CLAIRE: Le gardérai! Ne fais pas cette tête [...]. (En riant, Solange ferme la fenêtre).
SOLANGE: Chantons!
CLAIRE: Nous l’emporterons dans un bois.
SOLANGE: Et sous les sapins, au clair de lune.
CLAIRE: Nous la découperons en morceaux.
SOLANGE: Nous chanterons! [....]
Besides the changes of pronouns and names that are clearly evident in the typescripts and that show how Claire and Solange were, in Genet's mind at least, interchangeable while he was still writing the play, the combination of a second person singular pronoun with a second person plural verb that Genet uses in the definitive published version of his play (or what we will call the "dysfunctional" verb form of this version) underlines Madame’s confusion of her two maids. Because such a combination is twice rehearsed in the Jouvet typescripts, it also merits attention. Madame’s “Et vous ne disiez rien! Une voiture. Solange, vite, vite, une voiture. Mais dépêchez-toi. (Le lapsus est supposé.) Cours, voyons. (Elle pousse Solange hors de la chambre)” from the definitive published version of the play (165) is echoed in an unpublished sequence from the typescripts where Solange is playing Claire and where Claire is playing Madame. This sequence, changed in the definitive edition of the play to

SOLANGE: Madame me comprend à merveille. Madame me devine.
CLAIRE: Tu sens approcher l’instant où tu ne seras plus la bonne. Tu vas te venger. Tu t’apprêtes? Tu aiguisez tes ongles? La haine te réveille? Claire n’oublie pas. Claire, tu m’écoutes? Mais Claire, tu ne m’écoutes pas? (143-4)

contains another dysfunctional verb form, “tu aiguisez,” on page 7bis of the second typescript:

SOLANGE: Madame me comprend à merveille. Madame me devine.
CLAIRE: ...m’approcher l’instant où cessent d’être une bonne tu deviens la vengeance elle-même. Tu t’apprêtes? Tu aiguisez tes ongles. La haine te réveille? [...] 

Likewise, a sequence published in the definitive edition of Les Bonnes as

SOLANGE: Je vous écoute.
CLAIRE, elle hurle: C’est grâce à moi que tu es, et tu me nargues! Tu ne peux savoir comme il est pénible d’être Madame, Claire, d’être le prétexte à vos simagrées! Il me suffirait de si peu et tu n’existerais plus. Mais je suis bonne, mais je suis belle et je te défie. Mon désespoir d’amante m’embellit encore! (144)

---

7 Here, we refer to the definitive version published in his complete works, for all dysfunctional verb forms have been cut from both versions of the play published in the Pauvert edition of Les Bonnes.

8 Within this same typescript Claire (playing “Madame”)’s words are changed by hand to: “Tu sens approcher l’instant où tu ne seras plus la bonne. Tu vas te venger. Tu t’apprêtes? Tu aiguisez tes ongles? La haine te réveille?”
retains the dysfunctional form of the verb "narguer" on page 8 of the second typescript:

**SOLANGE:** Je vous écoute.

**CLAIRE (elle hurle):** Tu existes grâce à moi. Chacun de mes gestes t’accomplit. Je porte la responsabilité de ton existence. Et tu me nargues. Claire, si tu pouvais savoir comme c’est pénible d’être Madame [....]¹

By cutting these two dysfunctional verb forms from the play, Genet must have felt that he could draw attention in the definitive published version of *Les Bonnes* to the one moment when the “real” Madame couples a second person singular pronoun with a second person plural verb. Had he retained the additional two dysfunctional verb forms, he would have reduced the dramatic impact of Madame’s “dépêchez-toi.” Moreover, because neither the transitional verb “aiguiser” nor “narguer” are reflexive, to have “normalized” their verb form was to rely only on the verb meaning “to hurry up” to dramatize how Madame, in her haste to rejoin Monsieur at the *Bilboquet*, gets ahead of herself and fuses her two maids as one before the gardenal is consumed.

If changes of pronouns and names underscore the interchangeability of the two maids for Genet and changes in verb form anticipate the fusion of the two maids by Madame, in *all* versions of the play (including the published versions) Claire (playing “Claire”)’s promise to Solange (playing “Solange”) that “Ce soir, Madame assistera à notre confusion” (156) remains unchanged. As a result, it leaves a fundamental and to-date overlooked question unresolved in the play: when or where in the play does this occur?

There is certainly little doubt that Madame confuses or interchanges her two domestics. Besides the dysfunctional “dépêchez-toi” to Solange that we have noted, she slips, for example, from a second person singular to a second person plural pronoun when she donates a dress to Claire. “Ma belle «Fascination»”, she says, “La plus belle. Pauvre belle. C’est Lanvin qui l’avait dessinée pour moi. Spécialement. Tiens! Je vous la donne. Je t’en fais cadeau, Claire!” Her seemingly out-of-place “vous” is confirmed when Claire reacts by asking: “Madame me la

¹ Like the previously cited sequence, however, it also undergoes a handwritten change by Genet. Claire’s words thus shorten to: “Et tu me nargues. Claire, si tu pouvais savoir comme c’est pénible d’être Madame [....]”
donne vraiment?” (163, emphasis added) Furthermore, when Madame leaves the room, Claire bitterly remarks: “Madame nous a vêtues comme des princesses. Madame a soigné Claire ou Solange, car Madame nous confondait toujours” (167).

But if Madame has confused her two maids in the past and continues to do so, is she ever present to witness the role-playing, or confusion, of her two maids—a confusion in which she herself is indicted?

By the end of the final tirade by “Solange,” when Solange and Claire become—or “lose”—themselves as—the singular “mademoiselle Solange Lemercier,” “la femme Lemercier,” “la Lemercier,” “la fameuse criminelle” (175), Madame has, one assumes, long since left in a taxi to rejoin the recently liberated Monsieur at the Bilboquet and thus cannot possibly witness this so-called confusion of her two maids. During the tirade of “Solange,” just as after it when the gardenal is consumed, Madame is surely at the Bilboquet plotting with Monsieur over how best to punish or avenge her maids, as she will have learned from him of their role in the handwritten denunciation of him to the police.

This is at least what the published versions of Les Bonnes lead us to assume. To fully understand Claire (playing “Claire”)’s promise that Madame will witness, or be present for the confusion that we have described, we must turn to the third typescript of the play where Madame does indeed witness the confusion of her two maids with herself.

In this third typescript, after Solange’s final tirade, in the final sequence of role-playing between the two maids Madame reappears and thus shows how radically different an ending Genet had envisioned for his play. On page 57-71, after Claire (or Claire as “Madame”) warns, “Solange, tu me garderas en toi. Fais bien attention;” Genet writes in blue ink: “(Madame apparaît à la porte par où elle est sortie. Elle reste immobile. Très visible du public.).” On an unnumbered page that is inserted between page 57-71 and page 58-72 after Claire (still as “Madame”) points out, “Nous sommes au bord. Solange, il y a une heure que les fenêtres sont ouvertes et que les voisins sont attentifs. Nous ne pouvons plus reculer,” again in blue ink Genet adds the stage direction: “(Madame fait le geste d’arrêter une foule de gens qui voulaient assister au spectacle.).” With Madame’s presence apparently unnoticed by her two maids, Solange then asks “Alors?”, Claire reacts “Nous irons jusqu’à la fin”, and Solange declares “Ils vont venir...” At this point in the drama Genet crosses out in pencil Madame’s imperative

In this unperformed early version of the play, Solange (still playing “Claire”?) is wrong, then, in assuming that the real Madame is at this time celebrating Monsieur’s release at the Bilboquet and in believing that Madame has been permitted to escape in a taxi. Rather than celebrate the liberation of Monsieur, as she is assumed to in the later versions of the play, in this typescript version Madame plays the role of gatekeeper to the crowds, guarantor of the suicide of her maid/s and the end of their ceremony of hatred. In playing this role, she moreover takes on one final role: as spokesperson, witness, reporter – possibly even as manipulator – of the truth.

Her sudden return to witness the demise of her maids raises troubling questions, however: Has she abandoned Monsieur at the Bilboquet? Was her excitement at learning that he had telephoned during her absence merely play-acting on her part too, so that she could convince her maids that it was safe for them to continue their ritual to its end for once and for all? Did she plan her return in order to witness it? Or did she never really take the taxi to the Bilboquet at all? In her final

10 The text of the footnote is on the back of page 59–73. Besides the sequences by Madame that we have noted, on page 59–73 after Claire’s prompting of Solange (“Madame prendra son tilleul”), Genet pencils in the words of the “real” Madame: “Ni pour moi-même.”

11 She has told Claire (playing “Madame” – but who tries to drop this role and be herself again): “Ne bougez pas! Que Madame m’écoute. Vous avez permis qu’elle s’échappe. Vous! Ah! quel dommage que je ne puisse lui dire toute ma haine! que je ne puisse lui raconter toutes nos grimaces. Mais, toi si lâche, si sotte, tu l’as laissée s’enfuir. En ce moment, elle sable le champagne!” (172)
role as witness to a tragedy, does she really enjoy alone the spectacle of the true confusion of roles that goes beyond Claire (as “Madame”) drinking the gardenal and killing herself, beyond Solange as surviving maid carrying her sister within her to prison, beyond her being the unsuspecting dupe of her domestics to where they are the duped, the pawns, and Madame the true queen?

Perhaps Genet felt that the questions raised by Madame’s return at the end of the play were so numerous that they warranted his elimination of her final and seemingly ambiguous role from the play altogether. Whatever the reason, he seems to have overlooked Claire (playing “Claire”)’s promise of Madame’s return. A footnote that he added to the definitive version of Les Bonnes suggests that he might have been preoccupied with the large number of cuts that he had already made. In this footnote he writes:

Il est possible que la pièce paraisse réduite à un squelette de pièce. En effet, tout y est trop vite dit, et trop explicite, je suggère donc que les metteurs en scène éventuels remplacent les expressions trop précises, celles qui rendent la situation trop explicite par d’autres plus ambiguës. Que les comédiennes jouent. Excessivement. (158)

Future directors hoping to flesh out the version of Les Bonnes that Genet left us with before his death in 1986 might be wise not to replace Genet’s words with their own but rather to add to Genet’s words, or those he originally gave to Madame at the end of the play. Should they in such a way restore Madame’s final role, they would revest this play so intensely concerned with its own theatricality with all of its earlier ambiguity and that, some twenty years after its first performance when preparing his play for publication in his complete works, Genet appears to have yearned for once more. After all, if Madame’s return is anticipated, as Claire (playing “Claire”)’s promise would suggest, the two maids surely expect her to spy on them. By pretending not to notice her when she reappears at the doorway, they (as Madame thinks only she does) most surely push their own role-playing to its excessive limit. 12

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

12 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1995 NEMLA conference in Boston in the session entitled “The Silence of the Text: the ‘Unsaid.’”
WORKS CITED


