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|   |  | Ridicule https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/film_and_history/v034/thumb/34.1adams_c_fig01t.gifDuring the English Revolution in the 1640s, the gap between "court" and "country" symbolized the profound ideological and religious split in that country. In France a similar rift existed between provincial France—"la France profonde"—and the gay decadence of Paris and the court at Versailles. Provincial France—solid, respectable, and rather dull—has always found it difficult to compete with the cultural richness and the elegant wit of the Babylon on the Seine. During the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, this split between the refined and sometimes cruel life of the court and the tedious and often grueling life in the provinces was intensified. Patrice Leconte plays with this contrast in his sparkling film, *Ridicule*, which received great praise when it opened the Cannes Film Festival of 1996. (Miramax released it on video in 1997). Any student of French history will appreciate the film's embeddedness in the milieu of the late Enlightenment in its multiple manifestations. The Enlightenment of the court, with its emphasis on superficial wit, appreciation of the *bon mot*, and growing skepticism about both religion and government, contrasts with the Enlightenment of the *Encyclopédie,* with its appreciation of reason, science and practicality. This contrast provides the backdrop for the story of the young Baron Grégoire Ponceludon de Malavoy (played by Charles Berling), who in 1783 makes the journey from his estates in the Dombes in southwest France to Versailles. Ponceludon is a man with both a knowledge of engineering and a highly developed sense of noblesse oblige. The unhealthy atmosphere of his estates—mosquito-infested swamplands—is killing his peasants. He has a plan to drain the swamps by building dikes and canals, but lacks the funds to carry out his idea. So, he heads to Versailles to seek assistance from the king, Louis XVI, who he hopes will show an interest in helping his people. Ponceludon fortuitously finds a friend, the Marquis de Bellgarde (Jean Rochefort). The Marquis is a doctor and scientist, and he has an attractive daughter, Mathilde (Judith Godrèche), who is an amateur scientist as well. Mathilde is raised by her father "in the Age of Rousseau," with no constraints on her desires and ambitions. (Apparently, the Marquis meant to raise Mathilde as an Emile rather than a Sophie.) The Marquis, recognizing that this provincial gentleman possesses both wit and character, lets his young friend know that if he wants the ear of the king, he will need to gain both a reputation for his wit and a sparkling repartee, the only currency accepted at the court. The opening lines of the film stress this very theme: "Six years before the French Revolution, Louis XVI still ruled. But wit was king." The young baron will also need a protector, which Ponceludon finds in the person of the Comtesse de Blayac (Fanny Ardant). Yet even with his natural gifts—a handsome face, an attractive figure, a clever wit enhanced by a good education (Voltaire is "his bible," the baron proclaims)—Ponceludon stumbles on the shoals of the court. He provokes the enmity of the Abbé de Vilecourt (Bernard Giraudeau), the stereotype of the hypocritical and worldly cleric, who is also the lover of Madame de Blayac. Only after the Abbé loses his standing at court because of an unwise religious jest in front of the King, does the Comtesse take Ponceludon under her wing (and into her bed) and thereby help to insinuate him into court society. As his star rises at the court, complications ensue for the Baron. His relationship with the Comtesse complicates his budding romance with the earnest Mathilde, who is herself on the verge of marrying a decrepit nobleman to gain financial backing for her scientific experiments. Eventually, the Comtesse's jealousy of the younger and fresher Mathilde leads her to sabotage Ponceludon at a masked ball. Mortified, he spits at the assembled masked guests, "Children will die tomorrow because you ridicule me today...Who will be the next victim?" The film is ultimately richer in historical allusion than in historical detail. For the scholar of French history, the references to the religiosity of Louis XVI versus the budding skepticism of the court, the intrigues at Versailles, the frustrations of dealing with the French bureaucracy, the obsession with genealogy among the aristocracy, and the myriad aspects of Enlightenment culture (including the introduction of a deaf character who obtains an education under the sympathetic tutelage of the Abbé de l'Epée) all greatly enrich the viewing experience. However, even though it is only mentioned in an epilogue of sorts to the movie, the coming of the French Revolution looms large over the film. The heedlessness of the king and his careless treatment of the provincial nobility (dramatized in the humiliation and suicide of the Baron de Guéret); the self-centered pleasure-seeking court with its casual cruelty, fueling class conflict on a number of levels; the growing awareness of the possibilities of science and Enlightened thinking to ameliorate the condition of the masses, coupled with the unwillingness of the government to address the problems of the people who live in poverty and squalor beyond the eyesight of those at Versailles—all these factors point to a country ripe for explosion, and give insight to the events of 1789. Nevertheless, this focus on the neglectful government and out-of-touch court provides only one interpretation, among many, of the causes of the French Revolution. The film ignores, or only **[End Page 73]** alludes to many others, such as the financial crisis of the regime, the failure of governmental reforms, the growing importance of public opinion, and the changing political culture that fostered dissatisfaction with the absolutist form of government. Still it is an interpretation that resonates powerfully in the context of such a satisfying film as *Ridicule.* Christine Adams St. Mary's College of Maryland cmadams@smcm.edu  |   |