

Preface

"When [the Minister] learned that I had rushed into print, he ... had me removed from his employ, on the pretext that a love for letters is incompatible with a mind for business.... When I returned to Madrid, I wanted to try again my literary talents, and the theater appeared to me a field of honor."

— Figaro in Beaumarchais, *Barbier de Séville* (I.ii)

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This is a history book. ¹ Given its subject and format, this statement may require some explanation.

First, this is a work of history. Its questions, sources, methods, and conclusions are drawn from and intended for, first and foremost, the discipline of History. Though it discusses literary artifacts and deploys concepts borrowed from both literary criticism and sociology, the goal is to describe changes over time in writers' experience, status, and identity in eighteenth-century France. The literary interpretation of eighteenth-century plays, and the historical applicability of such concepts as "self-fashioning," "literary field," or "established outsiders" will, I hope, be advanced by this book, but this study is neither literary criticism nor historical sociology.

Secondly, this is a book. Historians of the book have shown that the concept did not begin with the printing press, nor will it end as printed sheets of paper bound together cease to constitute the dominant carrier medium. Indeed, the work of Roger Chartier and others has shown how the primary consequences of the printing press in the period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were social and cultural rather than technological. Print did not replace oral or manuscript communication outright, but the material form of the printed book did become socially accepted as the guarantor of the integrity, fidelity, and singularity of the work that it carried. ² Of the present, Jason Epstein has written similarly that the primary transition from printed to electronic books is taking place less in the application of innovative technologies for the material reproduction of books than in the institutions and practices surrounding that process—authorship, distribution, and bookselling. ³ Chartier's proposition has been at the center of this project since I began it over ten years ago, first as a seminar paper, then as a doctoral dissertation; Epstein's has become an equally important preoccupation for me in the last two years, as I prepared this book for electronic publication in the Gutenberg-e series. Thus, in both its content and form, this book strives toward a better understanding of the unexpected consequences of social and cultural change on authors, literary institutions, and publics.

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The history of "intellectuals" and "the state" has been an enduring topic in our understanding of French culture from Louis XIV to the present, and the interdisciplinary study of the *histoire du livre* has taught us much about patronage, literary property, and censorship, especially under the Old Regime and Revolution. Research in the Comédie Française archives convinced me that this literature had not considered adequately the particularities of theater, resulting in an incomplete, sometimes skewed, and often anachronistic view of the role, status, and identity of writers in the age of the Enlightenment. Scholars of literary history have sought, implicitly or explicitly, for the origins of the role of autonomous intellectuals in modern civil society in the experiences of eighteenth-century writers; moreover, their work has focused thoroughly on canonical writers and the commercial book trade. Consequently, they have not appreciated the centrality in eighteenth-century French intellectual life of such institutions as the Comédie Française, which reproduced the norms and hierarchies of "court society" even as they supported an increasingly commercial and autonomous "public sphere in the world of letters." ⁴

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This book explores how writers negotiated the explicit rules and implicit expectations that governed the Comédie Française, how they both adhered to and sought to circumvent its hierarchies, and how they engaged in conflicts over the money, status, and legitimacy it generated—in short, its cultural capital. I use this institution and the writers arrayed around it to write a history of the politics of intellectual culture rather than an intellectual history of political culture, to examine how the political institutions and social relations of literary life constituted not merely context to the Enlightenment but its essence.

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Readers may wonder how to approach this book. On one level, it is a single monograph, which develops its argument across six largely chronological chapters. The first chapter traces how the Comédie Française, established in 1680, became the locus of efforts by late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers seeking to fashion public identities for themselves as honorable men of letters. It then examines both the potential and the limitations of self-fashioning through playwriting in the first half of the eighteenth century by following three trajectories exemplifying success, disappointment, and utter failure. The second chapter considers reforms, enacted between 1757 and 1765, to the royal regulations that governed the Comédie Française, and concomitant changes in the unwritten "rules of the game" for playwrights; thus, its focus is on the conjuncture between the bureaucratizing and modernizing tendency of the absolutist government and the dissolution of a system of court patronage and protection. Chapter 3

shows how many aspiring writers, seeking to become identified as playwrights for the royal theater in the 1760s and 1770s, approached the Comédie without any pre-existing personal legitimacy in literary life or social capital among court and urban elites. Consequently, these writers turned to the medium of print—writing prefaces to plays, treatises, *mémoires judiciaires*, and journalistic criticism—to claim to speak to and for a much broader audience, as "patriots." After a brief "Intermission" that summarizes the history of the Society of Dramatic Authors from 1777 to 1780, Chapter 4 shows how literary property and censorship in the 1760s through the 1780s provided aspiring authors a means to establish personal legitimacy. Chapter 5 offers two extended case studies of aspiring playwrights' self-fashionings from the 1780s, those of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais and Olympe de Gouges, both of whom embodied the tensions between the ideals of *honnêtes gens de lettres* and of "patriot" playwrights. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the early years of the Revolution, when new writers, and a new identity for writers, based on a rhetoric of personal "liberty," emerged amidst significant institutional changes to the theater and literary life more broadly.

Within and across these chapters, there are also many subordinate themes and stories. In preparing this work for publication as an electronic book, I have tried to make the sections into discrete *lexias*, so readers interested in a particular writer or topic may select sections that tell a particular story. ⁵ Each section leads logically into the next section, but each also contains one or more internal links that allow readers to jump back or ahead to relevant discussions elsewhere in the book. Within each section, the text is supplemented not only by conventional footnotes but also appendix entries relevant to that section: a glossary of terms, primary documents (in the original French), external web resources, and images. Readers of the electronic version will be able to consult this material by following the links indicated in the text or by selecting the icons on the top-frame menu. Those who read it in print form are of course encouraged to consult the electronic version for the appendices.

Notes:

Note 1: Christian Jouhaud begins his book, *Les pouvoirs de la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), with this statement: "Ce livre est un livre d'histoire"(9). [Back.](#)

Note 2: Chartier, "[Death of the Reader?](#)" *The Book & The Computer: An On-line Journal* 2:2 (May 31, 2000) February 6, 2002. A longer version of this essay, in French, was presented in an on-line colloquium about electronic books, "[E-texte: Écrans et réseaux, vers une transformation du rapport à l'écrit?](#)"; February 6, 2002. [Back.](#)

Note 3: Jason Epstein, "[Reading: The Digital Future,](#)" *New York*

Review of Books (July 5, 2001) February 6, 2002. [Back.](#)

Note 4: These concepts, drawn from Norbert Elias, *Court Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) and Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), are discussed at length in the Introduction. [Back.](#)

Note 5: On hypertext books as networks of *lexias*—and the consequences for authors, publication, readers, and the text, see George Landow, *Hypertext 2.0* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). [Back.](#)

[A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture and Public Theater
in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution](#)